

The Fruit of the Spirit is...Patience

James 5:7-11 and Col. 3:1-4; 12-15

Of all the fruit of the Spirit, this one (patience) is probably the one many of us would say that we struggle with the most—a close second might be self-control (or the other way around). The word “patience” in the Bible is also translated as, and appears in other places as: forbearance, longsuffering, perseverance. And one other way it can be understood, which we’ll get to in a moment. It’s a versatile word!

James 5:7-11

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Colossians 3:1-4, 12-14

³ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When

Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (skipping down to verse 12...)

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

God is never in a hurry. That's a phrase that I'll be repeating a few times during this message. God is never in a hurry. That's important to keep in mind when *we're* trying to exercise patience... whether with other human beings, or with ourselves, and when we're waiting on God for an answer to prayer or resolution to a problem—or... for God to resolve our country's problems and pandemics. God is never in a hurry. This is true historically, and theologically.

Another way of saying this is: God is patient—God is patient with us in our foibles and follies; God is ever so gentle and consistent in his care for us. And, God is patient in working out his purposes in our lives and in the world. God is patient; God is never in a hurry. Perhaps that feels like both good news and bad news. The good news is, God is patient with us in our weakness. Yay! The bad news is, God is patient in working his purposes out, and that takes time.

Now...

What types of everyday situations test your patience?

- Long sermons on a sunny summer Sunday!
- Waiting in line somewhere (you fill in the blank where)
- Your online order taking longer to be delivered than promised/expected
- Waiting at the Dr.'s office
- Stuck in traffic
- The opinionated person who endlessly talks but doesn't listen

These are mostly mildly difficult or annoying situations, perhaps some of them an issue of delayed gratification. But what does patience look like in these other situations:

- A loved one has an illness, has been to the doctor, had tests, and now is waiting for results; or, the test results have come in and the physicians can't seem to figure out exactly what's wrong.
- A grown or growing child who has become prodigal and gone astray; perhaps left home and the parents have lost contact.
- A person is unemployed and looking for a job, and it's taking a long time to find a job.
- You're sheltering in place and practicing safe social distancing and wondering when it will be ok to go out and get back to routines and some semblance of a normal life. Or will there even be a normal again?
- It's an election year, and... need I say more?

What does patience look like in *all* of these situations—the everyday annoyances, *and* the longer-term difficulties and challenges—and why does God want us to be patient? What about black Americans and their struggles, and black lives matter efforts? What does patience look like there? These are hard questions.

Before we try to answer these, let's be clear about what patience is not. Patience is not *passively* waiting, until something happens to relieve the situation. If all we're doing is passively waiting for something, we usually end up becoming antsy, irritated, fretful, or even angry. Patience is not passive waiting. It *involves* waiting, but not passively.

Waiting in line at the post office, as the line got longer and the workers at the counter got fewer. That didn't fit my best efficiency practices mind! I tried to be curious ("It's better to be curious than furious") but curiosity soon went out the window and I became inwardly agitated. One customer couldn't contain himself and was grumbling to anyone who would listen. Then, when he got to the counter he said, "I've been waiting very patiently!" Well, not really... However, that was me! He just verbalized how I was feeling and what I had been thinking. I, too, had been waiting, but not with patience.

Yes, patience *includes* waiting, but it's more than that. Patience is not just something we call upon to steel ourselves when we are subjected to a situation that's out of our control. And, it's not passive; passivity is not patience. Patience is an attitude and disposition, it's a state of heart and mind; it's part of the character of Christ being formed in us by the loving (and patient!) work of the Holy Spirit. And out of that character, patience becomes something we exercise and practice, in an active sort of way, even in situations that are out of our control. Or, *especially* in situations that are out of our control.

Let me try to explain this by way of sharing an observation that many commentators and students of the Scripture have made about all of the fruit of the Spirit:

That is, when Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit he begins with love, and that's really the primary and perhaps the only fruit he means to put forth. Everything else after that—joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—flows out of love. This makes sense because Paul puts the word 'fruit' in the singular: fruit of the Spirit, not fruits. He doesn't say, "all of the fruit (plural) of the Spirit *are*..." but "THE fruit of the Spirit IS...love." And then he gets on a roll: "...while I'm at it... out of love flows joy, peace, patience" and so forth.

This makes even more sense when we look at our text for today from Colossians. Paul loves lists—his letters are full of lists—and he makes another list here of the virtues that Christians are to put on, like clothing—and it’s a very similar list to the fruit of the Spirit list: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. And then at the end he says (practically in reverse order from the fruit of the Spirit)—at the end he says, “over all of these, put on love, which binds all of them together in perfect harmony.”

Love is the golden thread running through each piece of clothing that makes the whole ensemble, it’s the scarf or the belt that makes it fit together. It’s the same thing in the famous 1Corinthians 13 passage, where Paul, in another long list, describes love: “love is... patient (interesting that it’s first in this list), love is kind,” and so forth. Sounds just like Colossians 3 and just like the list of the fruit of the Spirit with each of the attributes clearly explained as flowing out of love. Love is *this*, love does *this*, love doesn’t do *that*...

So what’s the point? The point is, if patience is an outgrowth of love in our lives, then it is not just a sitting back and waiting, passively, looking at our watch or passing time. And then saying “Well, finally!” when something happens. Patience is proactive; it’s an ability to seek what’s best in a particular situation. Because that’s what love does; love seeks what’s best for others. As we talked

about three weeks ago, love is proactive. Love is proactive in seeking what's best, and patience is one manifestation of that love.

I go back in my mind and try to imagine that post office situation and what patience (love) would have looked like, for me, in that case. Patience could have looked like praying for the postal workers, or anyone for that matter! It could've looked like singing (inwardly), making a joyful noise, or creating a gratitude list. Instead of trying to fix government inefficiencies, or worrying about what I wasn't getting done at work.

And again... God is never in a hurry. God is always present; God lives in the present moment. Not in the future or somewhere else. And, God is *doing something* to work out what's best for us or others in a given situation—whether that situation is a one-time irritant or delay of gratification, or whether it's a longer-haul struggle or suffering of some kind. God is not twiddling his thumbs, or watching us like someone watching television (“I wonder what's happening at the post office in Edmonds...” then changing the channel to Capitol Hill—“another shooting at CHOP; what are these people going to do???”). No, God is working out his purposes—maybe not visibly at the moment, and probably not on our timeline; but working things out nonetheless.

Patience, then, sometimes means the endurance of difficulty, or even pain, over a period of time. This is why the word “longsuffering” is a very good translation of this word in the New Testament. Sometimes we have to “suffer long” with a situation in our lives or the life of someone we care about or some other circumstance that is out of our control.

I think of black Americans suffering long, exercising true patience, and it reminds me of the saints in the book of Revelation, enduring suffering and asking, “How long, O Lord?!?” And they are assured that God is present with them, in love, and that God will redeem their suffering, and transform it, and ultimately relieve them of it.

In our first reading from James, he goes so far as to say that those who suffer long and endure are to be considered as heroes, and he uses Job as an example, and then affirms that... God is never in a hurry. That God is gracious and compassionate when we suffer long, and that God has a purpose, and knows what is best for us.

The apostle Paul affirms this in Romans 5:3-4 when he says that “suffering produces *endurance*, and *endurance* produces character, and character produces hope; and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love is being poured into us by the Holy Spirit.”

I hear these words as another good news—bad news deal. Good news: God is at work! There is purpose, as God is developing our character! Bad news: this doesn't sound like any fun! And, why suffering? And, even more, it sounds like it takes time! But in the grand scheme of things I'll take the good news of having God's love poured into my life with an unending Holy Spirit fill-up, over having all of my wants gratified when I want them.

[The word translated as "patience" in Greek is another one of those wonderful compound words—a combination of two words in Greek: it's the word *macrothumia*. *Thumia* is one of the two anger words in the New Testament, and it's the one that's used most often; *macro* obviously means big or large. So when you put these two words together, *macrothumia* could be literally translated as "long-tempered." As opposed to... short tempered.

So, patience is the ability to be long-tempered. Patience means that we know how to stretch out, or put into suspension our angry or anxious reflexes. Being long-tempered means that with the Spirit's help we can take the time to calm ourselves down so we can think clearly and act lovingly. The other translations fit this: forbearance, longsuffering, perseverance. I like to think of it as a slowing down. Slowing down (inwardly and outwardly). Because... God is never in a hurry. And when we can slow ourselves down, we move at the speed

of God—Godspeed! In other words, go at the speed of God, which is, not frantic and in a hurry! But blessed, at peace, with peace; which is perhaps why patience follows peace on the list of the fruit of the Spirit.

I wonder how many of us have prayed for God to give us patience? (and give it to me now!). I have. Many times over the years. And I've noticed that when I ask God to give me patience, he then puts me in a situation where I have to exercise it. When I pray for patience God doesn't just wash over me a bunch of warm fuzzies and all of the sudden I'm this calm and relaxed person instead of a madman. No, when I pray for patience I get put in a situation where I have to exercise it!

I used to teach swimming lessons to help pay my way through college, and not once did I instruct kids about swimming using a chalk board, or clever illustrations or a lecture. We got in the water together. Sometimes the kids got water up their nose. Sometime they sank. Some of them were very afraid of the water. Some of them got mad at me or their parents for making them take swimming lessons. One kid got mad at the water, and was cursing the water and punching it with his fist! Eventually, though, they got it. But they had to get in the water.

And if we want to become more patient, sometimes we get thrown in the deep end. But Jesus is always there in the water with us, our patient and gracious instructor, to make sure we don't drown, and to teach us, eventually, that learning to swim is better than just being angry at the water.

“God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy...”

As God works out his purposes in our lives, and in the world, we're invited to enlarge our perspective as we learn patience.

In Paul's words from our Colossians reading, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” This doesn't mean walking around with eyes up in the air and ignoring things around us down here. It means that we try to have a large, even eternal, perspective—macrothumia! A temperament that keeps everything in large perspective.

And in light of heaven, in light of the Kingdom of God, in light of this life God has given us, in light of our lives being “hid with God in Christ” (which means, this inner knowing and being known, being held, being protected, covered in soul and spirit, and being part of something big and eternal)—in light of all this, the petty irritants or annoying situations, or frustrating inconveniences may be seen as not that big of a deal.

When we *lose* our perspective we become impatient and short-tempered, and our world begins to shrink. God invites us to try to keep the big picture. Enlarge our perspective. And that can become a good prayer in the moment: Lord, help me to keep a bigger picture here.

And for those situations where we truly suffer long—with a troubling family situation, or a chronic illness, or an injustice, or if you feel like our current social and political environment is causing you distress, our work in those situations is to keep praying, keep seeking God's presence and guidance, keep doing as much good as we can, take good care of ourselves, and stay active—but active from a place of love. And flowing out of that: joy, peace, patience, and so forth.

My friend Ron—a baby boomer who got into a fair amount of trouble as a younger man, including going to jail. He became a Christian in mid-life. He's a wonderful Christian guy who became a leader in his church. Said his mom never judged him, and was always kind to him. A few years after he started following Jesus, his mom told him that she had prayed for him every day for 30 years. Just lifted him up to God and to his light; gave him to God. For 30 years. Every day. That's longsuffering! That's patience. Not passive, but loving, and active.

As we approach God in prayer and worship, let us recognize that all of the small irritations as well as the large injustices have been died for—absorbed into

Christ on the cross, whose hunger for justice is even greater than ours, who is gracious and compassionate.

The apostle Peter puts it beautifully (2Peter 3:15): “Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for the Lord to act, strive to be found by him at peace; and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation.” As a saving grace. Because, God is never in a hurry.