

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Patience

1 Peter 4:12-19
Colossians 3:12-15

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So, I couldn't wait to write this sermon on patience...

Of all the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit, I'd be willing to bet that patience is among the most challenging for most of us. In an instant-reaction world, it takes discipline and strength of character to bite our tongue or to restrain ourselves. As I was preparing for this sermon, I came across some interesting thoughts about patience. For example:

Patience... is what parents display when witnesses are present...

John Updike once noted that 1 out of every 312 Americans is a real bore; and a healthy bore consumes each year one and a half times its own weight in other people's patience...

Patience is the quality you admire in the driver behind you, but the quality you can't stand in the driver who's in front of you...

Or here's one that I'm going to start using in my premarital counseling sessions – Before you marry a person you should first make them use a computer with a dial-up internet service and then you will discover who they really are...

As we explore the fruit of the Spirit – which Paul describes in Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – today I want to focus on patience. When I went to Webster for a definition of patience, I found this: “the capacity, habit, or fact of being patient.”

Well, that was helpful. To find the definition of patience, you have to have enough patience to go to the word “patient.” An exercise that helps one understand the meaning of the word, I suppose.

To be patient, again according to Webster, is to bear pains or trials without complaint; to manifest forbearance under provocation or strain.

That's very similar to the way the Bible defines patience. The modern word “patience” replaces two older words that are much more descriptive: long-suffering, and forbearance. In my studies this week, virtually every author I read used those two terms in their definitions of patience. Phillip Keller says that “Patience is the powerful capacity of selfless love to suffer long under adversity. It is that noble ability to bear with either difficult people or adverse circumstances without breaking down.”¹ Billy Graham says that patience is “the transcendent radiance of a loving and tender heart which, in its dealings with those around it, looks kindly and graciously upon them.”² British theologian Christopher Wright says that the patience we find in the fruit of the Spirit comprises both of “the ability to endure for a long time whatever opposition and suffering may come our way, and to show perseverance without wanting retaliation or revenge,” and “the ability to put up with the weaknesses and foibles of others...,”

1 Phillip Keller, *A Gardener Looks at the Fruits of the Spirit*, in *Phillip Keller: The Inspirational Works* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1993), p. 512.

2 Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit: Activating God's Power in Your Life* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), p. 195.

and to show forbearance toward them, without getting quickly irritated or angry enough to want to fight back.”³

No matter how simple or complex the definition of patience, or how beautiful a thing someone may paint it, one thing is clear: patience requires hard work and self-discipline.

It's one thing to know what patience is, as a definition. It's another thing altogether to understand what it might look like in practice. For us to understand patience as the Bible commends it of us, we should first look to the model of true patience and the source of patience in our own lives: to God. For if the goal of bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is to manifest the character of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ, then we need to define and understand all facets of the fruit of the Spirit – including patience – as God models them for us.

One of the phrases that God uses to describe himself in the Old Testament, and a phrase which is then used again and again, is that God is “slow to anger.” It's a phrase that may catch some by surprise, because it is often said that the God who is revealed in the Old Testament is always angry, lashing out at his people. But the truth is, God's anger is only expressed after an accumulation of sin and rebellion over years, generations even. “In the history of Israel in the Old Testament, yes there were times of God's anger, but they need to be seen in light of the long story of God's patience over many centuries and generations. Often, God's judgment fell only after many years of warnings and appeals.”⁴

If you will read through the prophets, the majority of those writings span decades of the life of Israel and Judah and Jerusalem, over multiple generations. Only after the prophets had cried out to the people for twenty, thirty, forty or more years did the accumulation of the people's sins fall upon them.

Indeed, “slow to anger” is entirely appropriate to define the patience of God toward a sinful and rebellious humanity. One of my favorite scriptures comes from the 103rd Psalm, where David declares of God, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities.”⁵ God's refusal to deal with us as we deserve and instead deal with us in grace and mercy – that is patience. God's determination to love us despite our shortcomings and even our rebellion – that is patience.

God's patience is one of the things that is part of our Prayer of Great Thanksgiving whenever we celebrate communion, because the grace of God is beautifully manifest in God's patience toward us. Next time we celebrate the sacrament, listen to the prayer, and you will likely hear something like this: “You made us in your image and called us to be your people, but we turned from you, leaving sin and death to reign. *Still you loved us and sought us...*” or “when we rebelled against you refusing to trust and obey you, *you did not reject us*, but still claimed us as your own...”⁶

Now, God's patience is not the same as permissiveness. God's patience does not mean he overlooks our wrongdoing. But God's patience is an exercise of God's love, because God knows our frailty and so God's patience grants us time to repent and return to him. God's patience is borne out of the hope that we will return to him. We are too precious for God to

3 Christopher J. H. Wright, Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness (InterVarsity Press, Kindle Edition), Kindle locations 857-860.

4 Wright, Kindle Locations 889-891.

5 Psalm 103:8-10

6 From the Book of Common Worship (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

summarily wipe us out; he patiently waits for us to come to our senses and return to him.

Nowhere was God's patience better manifest than in his Son, Jesus of Nazareth. The terms “forbearance” and “long-suffering” are vividly portrayed in his dealings with his disciples and with those who were opposed to him. We chuckle at the thick-headedness of the disciples, but really we should be amazed at the patience that Jesus showed them during their three years together. Instead of firing them because of their selfish behavior or their lack of understanding, he patiently corrected them and kept them by his side.

And of course, Jesus showed us the ultimate long-suffering as he was arrested, tried, beaten, scourged, and crucified. For Jesus to pray, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing,”⁷ gives us the ideal model of long-suffering and forbearance. Just prior to this morning's lesson, Peter says this about Jesus' attitude and demeanor when he was persecuted: “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the One who judges justly[, God].”⁸

Friends, God's patience toward us summons us to exercise similar patience toward others, to the point that “the fruit of the Spirit will include the quality of patience that reflects how Christ bore the suffering he endured for our salvation.”⁹ This means exercising patience not only with those who oppose Christ, but also (and sometimes even more) exercising patience with our fellow followers of Christ.

In his letter to the first-century Christians, Peter addresses the persecution that the Christians are experiencing. This likely would have been prior to the deadly persecutions spurred on by the Roman emperor. It was probably some form of economic exclusion, social ostracism and ridicule. But it was serious, nonetheless. To those who face persecution, Peter advises patience. Patience, as Peter paints the picture, comprises of a posture of non-retaliation, and perseverance. Non-retaliation, because Jesus did not fight back, even when he could've called on an army of angels. And perseverance, because we are not to let the persecution cause us to lose our focus—which is to share the gospel of God's love and to do good.

Patience in this instance is a manifestation of trusting God. As Peter says, “let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator...” To exercise patience when we find ourselves facing adversity communicates the message that we trust that God will see us through, and that God's righteousness will prevail. Patience places us in God's hands, that we might be instruments by whom God's goodness and truth might be proclaimed.

Christians don't face much persecution in our nation. We might think that we do, because some biblical values are being challenged by society. But that's not really persecution; it's more like someone actually questioning our values, which for two centuries really hasn't happened to Christianity in America. But when we face resistance, when we feel under attack for our faith, the advice of Peter rings true for us: exercise patience – the kind of patience that might be accurately described as long-suffering. We are to persist in doing right. We are to entrust ourselves to God.

Now, the more common and mundane form of patience is probably also the more challenging, because it's something we have to exercise every day. This is the patience that will find its expression in forbearance – bearing with the faults of others, offering forgiveness,

7 Luke 23:34

8 1 Peter 2:23

9 Wright, Kindle location 962.

biting our tongues. Paul shares this beautifully in Colossians, where he prefaces his exhortation for us to bear with one another and forgive each other with the words, “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved...”¹⁰ It is because we represent the name and the person of Jesus Christ, that we are to exhibit the character and personality of Jesus Christ. The command to bear with each other and to forgive each other stems from the fact that we are re-fashioned into the image of Christ, and Christ bore our sins and forgave us.

This can be hard. Strike the “can-be”. It IS hard to exercise this kind of patience. I'm not really sure why it should be so hard, especially in the church. Christians do love each other, don't we? But the truth is, harsh words or name-calling hurt more when they come from within a community defined by love.

We are relatively blessed in this congregation, for I have witnessed far more love and mutual respect than I have of the kind of behavior or words that would strain or destroy relationships. But I have witnessed the damaging effects of hurtful words in other churches through my work in the Presbytery, and over my career at different churches.

The first church I served was full of wonderful, kind-hearted people. At least, that's the way they received me and my family. But there had been some conflict, some heated power struggles during the prior pastorate. And so many of those wonderful, kind-hearted people who welcomed my family warmly wanted nothing to do with each other.

It was sad. And it was wearying to be a pastor of, essentially, two congregations who gathered under the same roof. To watch people avoid eye contact or go in and out through different doors to avoid one another, was spiritually and emotionally draining. I loved them all. But the burden of living in the midst of their un-forgiveness was heartbreaking.

I can appreciate the adage that goes like this:

“To dwell in love with saints above – Oh that will be glory!

But to dwell below with saints we know – Ah! That's a different story!”

I can appreciate that, but I wish it wasn't from real-life experience.

You see, patience cannot be separated from forbearance and forgiveness. I'm convinced that one of the reasons you don't find the word “forgiveness” as part of the fruit of the Spirit is because forgiveness is rolled into the other traits like love and patience and kindness.

People jokingly pray, “Lord, give me patience.” I say, you'd better be careful what you pray. Because if you pray for patience, what God is likely to do is put you in situations or put people in your lives that will make you grow into patience.

Then again, maybe that's not such a bad idea.

“Therefore, as God chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you...

Or, in other words, be patient. For Christ's sake, be patient.

Amen.

¹⁰ Colossians 3:12