

The Fruit of the Spirit (5): Patience

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Date: 02 August 2020

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[0 : 00] Please turn again with me to Galatians 5.22, where we read the words, but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience. Patience.

Have you ever prayed the words, Lord, give me patience and give it to me now? As well as being more loving, peaceful and joyful, I'm sure we'd all love to be more patient.

I used to think that patience, impatience rather, impatience was the exclusive preserve of the young. But the older I'm getting, I realize that I'm just as impatient now as I've ever been.

Why is patience so important in the Christian life? They used to say that cleanliness is next to godliness. But why is it actually that patience is next to godliness?

Well, if you turn to Galatians 5 and the so-called works of the sinful nature between verses 19 through 21, many of them are caused by or worsened by impatience.

[1 : 16] I want what I want now. And I don't want to wait for God's good time to give it to me. So I'll snatch from others. And I'll satisfy it myself.

And I'll do whatever it takes to get it now. Supposing the whole world burns with the flames of war. I want it. And I'll get it now.

Time keeps me from proving the point, of course. But as I say, many of the works of the sinful nature are caused by and worsened by impatience.

Impatience with God. Impatience with others. Impatience with self. By contrast, patience has well earned its place among the fruit of the Spirit.

Love is patient. Joy is patient. Peace is patient. Kindness is patient. Goodness is patient.

[2 : 19] Faithfulness is patient. Gentleness is patient. Self-control is patient. We read in 2 Peter 3 verse 9 that the Lord is patient with you.

And a spirit at work in us and through us works patience. Impatience does not belong in the Christian life. And to go back to the very beginning, if you're anything like me, of all our sins, it is one of the hardest to put to death.

Well, as I read and thought through patience from a biblical perspective, one of the aspects that I thought was rather ignored by commentators is being patient with ourselves.

Commentators tend to focus on being patient with God and with others. But I want to suggest to you that being patient with yourself is of vital importance in the Christian life.

Recently, I saw a sign at the construction site which read, Caution. Work in progress. We are all works in progress.

[3 : 33] And if we are not patient with ourselves, in the same way God is patient with us, we'll drive ourselves into the insanity of a perfectionist or the deadness of a legalist.

Be patient with yourself. You cannot yet boast of a strong faith in Christ. But what's important is the Christ in whom you have faith.

And like an expert craftsman, he is forming you piece by piece by piece. Give him time to complete his work.

And give yourself time for him to complete his work in you. Maybe we'll come back to this important truth in a later sermon.

But what I want you to notice is that the patience of which Paul speaks as being the fruit of the Spirit is composed of five elements. Enduring, responding, tolerating, waiting, and persevering.

[4 : 38] The blessed Christian is a patient Christian. So will you pursue patience with me today? First of all then, patience is enduring.

Enduring. If you're using an older version of the Bible, you will notice that this virtue is not called patience, but long-suffering. And these represent two ways of translating the same Greek word.

You can take your pick of the word you might prefer. One of the aspects of long-suffering which is helpful is that it reminds us that patience suffers long.

We say of a wife who has an argumentative husband that she's long-suffering. In other words, she's got a lot to put up with in that man. She sticks with him, even though he's hard work.

The idea is here that patience involves enduring mistreatment. We're treated harshly by others, but we put up with it. Now for many of us, this aspect of patience isn't perhaps one which would readily spring to mind.

[5 : 52] After all, let's face it, very few of us suffer mistreatment. The dominant idea here being that we are treated harshly by others because we are Christians.

But for Christians in Paul's day, being mistreated because of one's faith was almost a daily occurrence. I guess that most of us here have never been treated harshly because we've chosen to follow Jesus and call ourselves Christians.

For the Christians of Paul's day, to take up one's cross was not a metaphor. It was a reality. Daily, they were mistreated by their non-Christian families and communities.

In our society, thankfully, we have equality laws enshrined into our constitution which make mistreatment of Christians a crime. But in Paul's day, the state was the primary persecutor of Christians.

Back then, Christians were treated harshly by everyone. So they needed patience to put up with it. In a society where Christians are being mistreated, they desperately need the Holy Spirit to give them patience.

[7 : 11] And at this stage, let me suggest that the Psalms of imprecation, the so-called nasty Psalms, are the Holy Spirit's gift to his people.

Because they provide a forum for us to air our grievances to God and to leave judgment in his hands. We're being pushed from pillar to post.

And so we turn to God and we tell him how painful the pillar is and how sharp the post is. We pray for him to soften the blows, to right the wrongs, and to give us patience to endure.

We pray for God to help us suffer long at the hands of our persecutors. And even though it may be that our society treats us with respect and does us no harm, Satan himself will accuse us and fill us with the darkness of hell's night.

How we need patience. For whereas our family and friends may speak only into our ears, Satan accesses our mind and places thoughts there they cannot.

[8 : 24] He knows the gaps in our armor. He knows the bruises that he can press. The sore points in our psyches. He knows what we're afraid of.

And he knows what terrifies our hearts. And he knows how to weary us with oppressive thoughts. Even if no one else should harm us. Satan most definitely will.

For the darkness comes, it takes time for the day to break once more. We need patience to wait for the son of God's presence to return.

But return it shall. And Satan shall not have the victory over us. God's spirit shall give us the patience we so desperately need to keep going.

To endure. To cling to him through the winds of mistreatment. So let me apply this to the kind of person who is interested in following Jesus because you genuinely believe that the Christian gospel is true.

[9 : 38] For you thus far, the search for Jesus has been almost purely intellectual. And it's good that you're using your mind in this way. Yet you've run into the kind of difficulties to which I'm referring.

You've realized that you live in a society which is post-truth. And when it comes to the Christian gospel is hostile at best. Apathetic.

At worst. So you're being tempted to give up your search for Jesus Christ by virtue of the sheer deadness of the society in which you live. Let me urge you today to add to your intellectual search the heartfelt prayer for God to give you patience to keep asking.

To keep seeking. To keep knocking. Whoever you are, your mind isn't strong enough to deal with this kind of opposition by itself.

You need the long-suffering and patience only God can give you. So pray for it. And keep searching. Enduring.

[10 : 52] Secondly, patience involves responding. Responding. While as Christians in our society, we may not suffer the same kind of persecution that Paul and his contemporaries did in theirs, we do suffer provocation on an almost daily basis.

It doesn't necessarily have to do, have anything to do with us being Christians. Rather, it has to do with us being human beings who live in community with other human beings.

We clash with others and they provoke us and we provoke them. They say mean things to us and about us and we reciprocate in kind. And whereas with persecution, there isn't much we can do about it, when it comes to those who are provoking us, the responsibility to respond is ours.

We can respond to their meanness with meanness of our own, to their provocation with provocation of our own. I've been in situations like this where someone has said something desperately cruel to me or has done something which has hurt me deeply and sometimes that person doesn't know how much he's hurt me and at other times, he's said it and done it because he knows it hurts me and he wants to see how I'm going to respond.

When I was a student, I played football for the Christian Union we were by far the best football team in Aberdeen University. But one of the things that we often had to put up with was being kicked by opposing teams who just wanted to see how Christians would react to being kicked, punched and battered.

[12 : 45] And you know sometimes it was really hard to get up off the ground after having been poleaxed to within an inch of your life and not punch the guy that banjoed you.

So we weren't perfect and sometimes the game got heated. However, we had prayed as a team before the match began that we'd be witnesses for Jesus both in the way we played our football and the way we treated our opponents.

And so we responded to their provocation, I trust, with grace. And instead of kicking them off the park in return, we played them off the park, we were man enough to shake their hands afterwards. Now this is a very trivial example indeed, but I'm sure we can think at least of one person in our lives who tries to kick us off the park and often only because they want to see how we're respond. I know I do. Perhaps this is a person in your workplace who by their working practices makes you look bad. Perhaps this is a person in your circle of friends who is insensitive, makes you feel bad about yourself.

[13 : 54] Perhaps this is a person who bullies you in school, in university, in the workplace, yes, maybe even at home. You cannot change them. You cannot.

But the Bible's teaching here about patience is exactly what you need to hear because in the gospel, though we cannot change their actions, we can change our reactions.

We can change how we respond to their provocation. We can't respond like God does. Being patient with us, slow to anger, overlooking offenses, longing for forgiveness and reconciliation. Let me apply this to those of us who are Christians but who are passing through a time of deep temptation in the morning, deep temptation at the moment. The temptation you're struggling with is that of responding in a tit-for-tat manner, like for like, fight fire with fire.

So someone has been, someone has provoked you by being promoted unfairly to a position higher than you. It should have been you who was promoted and recognized, but perhaps because they've got more charisma, perhaps they've got a better gift of the gab than you, they got the job you wanted.

[15 : 22] You're tempted to retaliate like for like. Start being nasty to them. Start being nasty about them. Miss call them. Undermine them.

Use your words as weapons against them. You wake up in the morning, their provocation rankles you. You're tempted to make life difficult for them. You're really struggling in your workplace. Yeah, I know how that feels. I really, really do. Well, you can't change what they've said and done, but by the grace of the gospel, you can change how you respond to them. Rather than getting all passive-aggressive with them, pray for the grace to be patiently accepting of them, to endure the provocation and to respond with grace.

I know it's hard. It is a constant battle even, but this is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in you.

Patience. Patience. Third, patience means tolerating.

Tolerating. As I said earlier, the word the NIV translates as patience could just as easily be translated as long-suffering, but also as forbearing.

[16 : 44] Forbearance itself is a deeply challenging word, meaning tolerating. Putting up with the restraints of others. We're all more than familiar with the context in which we need forbearance.

Someone has let us down. Someone has shown himself unable to perform the task that we set them, what we expected them to be able to do, or what they themselves said they could do.

Yes, we can all think of situations where someone has let us down, or that we have let someone else down. And we're tempted, are we not, to respond by criticizing and thinking to ourselves, how can they be so utterly useless?

They didn't meet our expectations, so we condemn them out of hand and dismiss them. We say of them, once bitten, twice shy. Well, that's our natural response.

We say of some people that they don't suffer fools gladly. Yes, that's our natural response. But given that God calls us to be patient, and the Holy Spirit gives us patience, is that the right response?

[18 : 01] Most certainly not. What a challenging teaching this is from the Word of God, that we must tolerate and bear with the weaknesses of others, even if those weaknesses have led to us being hurt, or they've led to us being let down.

In Colossians 3.13, the Apostle Paul writes, bear with each other, forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another, forgive as the Lord forgave you.

How often have you let the Lord down? How often have you failed to live up to your calling as a Christian, and yet he bears with you, and he's so patient with you?

Consider Jonah, the Jonah who ran away from the Lord, and from the task God had set him of preaching repentance to the people of Nineveh.

Consider how, rather than letting the sea drown him, or the great fish digest him, God gave Jonah a second chance.

[19 : 08] We serve a God of second chances. Are we slow to give others a second chance with us? Is there someone here this evening who feels rather let down?

Because when you were going through a difficult time, and you needed your friends most, they abandoned you. They let you face your difficulties alone.

be patient with them, even as at times they've been patient with you, and most definitely God has been patient with you.

Pray for the patience to tolerate and to bear with the weaknesses and shortcomings of others.

Patience means tolerating. Fourthly, patience means waiting, waiting.

perhaps, of all the many needs we have for patience, the greatest is in the area of waiting for God. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of godly men and women who had to wait a long time before God answered their prayers.

[20 : 22] So for example, think of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. She had been married for many years, but she was childless. To her, it was a matter of great pain.

And she prayed and she prayed for God to give her a son, but God closed her womb. She had to wait a long time before God answered her prayer.

Or think of godly Simeon, the righteous old man we read of in Luke chapter 2, who spent virtually his whole life in the temple praying for the coming of God's Messiah.

He had prayed and he had prayed, but had to wait a lifetime for God to answer his prayer. Over the years, he had not stopped praying, but he had learned patience to wait on God's time.

Or what about that most famous of Psalms, Psalm 40, I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear. At length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear.

[21 : 25] At length to me he didn't incline. The Psalmist had to wait a long time for God to answer his prayer for deliverance. Our former minister, Douglas McMillan, spent years running away from God, but his mother did not stop praying for him.

She prayed and she prayed and she prayed until finally he stopped running and he came to faith in Jesus Christ. We need such patience in prayer as we ask patiently, we seek patiently and we knock patiently.

When I'm going visiting, if I go unannounced, I will knock on the door once and if there is no reply, I will knock again. If there is no reply the second time, I will not knock a third time.

I figure that either the person isn't in or that person doesn't want to see me. But God calls upon us to keep asking and seeking and knocking.

Not once, not twice, not three times. It may take years, it may take a lifetime, but eventually in his good time the Lord will answer. What about the Christian who's struggling with mental illness and she can't see a way forward?

[22 : 51] Everything is danger and everything is darkness, unsafe to her. She's deceived herself into believing that she will never get better, that she will never see the light again, she'll never smile again, she'll never be happy again.

And sometimes as she prays, she has to wait long for deliverance to come, months, years, decades even. patience in prayer does not mean passivity in prayer.

Rather, we redouble that efforts as the years go on. Patience in this context means that we're waiting on God's good time, God's best time to answer our prayers.

And then lastly this evening, prayer is persevering, persevering. As we close, I want to do so by thinking about what is perhaps the central word involved in patience, namely perseverance.

I bet we all have need of that. And if at present you don't need perseverance, you will at some point in the future. Well, perhaps life for you is going just swimmingly at the moment.

[24 : 09] You're spiritually buoyant. You feel that you're growing in your faith. And that's good. That's great even. You are grasping the truths of the gospel and everything is sweet.

But for others in our fellowship life isn't like that. Everything seems to be going wrong for them. Perhaps their physical health is broken down. Perhaps their mental health is sketchy.

Their relationships are troubled. They aren't sleeping. Their employment is uncertain. They're struggling to read their Bible, struggling to pray. They feel rather like the psalmist in Psalm 13. How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and have sorrow in my heart every day? How long indeed, O Lord? The only two remedies for such a condition, patience and perseverance.

Patience and perseverance. Be patient, things will turn. Persevere through the bad times, the good times will come. Yes, they are ahead.

[25 : 13] Maybe not necessarily in this life, but most certainly in the world to come. It takes patience to persevere and perseverance to be patient, and yet if we would overcome all that is against us, we need them both in equal and full measure.

Clinging by our fingertips to the gospel is sometimes all we can do, but cling we must, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit we shall. Many years ago, the famous Welsh preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones, preached to thousands in Westminster Chapel in London.

He actually preached from this pulpit here back in the 1970s also. But at the end of his services in Westminster Chapel, he would shake hands at the door and he would say to each person, go on. Some became offended because they thought he was just trying to get rid of them by saying, go on. He later explained that in just these two words, go on, he was saying as much to them as he could in the short time he had with them.

Go on. Go on in your Christian life. Go on growing in grace. Go on persevering. Sometimes patience means persevering through the darkness.

[26 : 40] It means going on even when you feel like giving up. Well, that's the easy thing to do. But the right thing to do is to place your situation and your heart and your feelings into God's hands and keep going.

But you say, don't you realize how hard it is to be patient? Never mind persevering. It's hard to respond patiently to provocation, to wait patiently for God's time to answer my prayers, to bear with those who have hurt me and to endure suffering at the hands of others.

Maybe, like me, you're praying for God to give you patience, but give it to me right now. Believe me when I say to you that such patience is miraculous. It is deeply spiritual.

It only comes as the Holy Spirit continues His work of grace in our hearts. Be patient, brother or sister in Christ. God does know what He is doing in your life, and He loves you more than you can ever imagine.

Amen.