

The Fruit Of The Spirit: Patience

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When the apostle Paul penned the nine qualities we call "the fruit of the Spirit," he neatly divided them into three general groups, though some overlapping of application occurs between them. The first group—love, joy and peace—portrays a Christian's mind in its most general form, with special emphasis on his relationship with God. The second group, beginning with patience ("longsuffering" in the KJV and NKJV), contains social virtues relating to our thoughts and actions toward fellow man and our attitude during trials.

The quality of patience evokes images of stoicism, tolerance and passivity in most people's mind. Though some of these elements are contained within the scope of what the Bible reveals of this very important character trait, it is far too rich in meaning to be limited to them.

We all know people who are easily irritated. They invariably let others know it, either by a steady stream of grumbling, carping and griping accompanied by a face painted with the pain of having to suffer the fools surrounding them, or they "blow up" in red-faced fury, shouting a torrent of invective intended to let everyone within hearing distance know they have been put upon and have "had it." The great bulk of us are in between. We may not show much agitation on the outside, but inwardly we are churning with varying degrees of stress, wishing that people would "just get on with it" so we can do our thing.

Jesus and Persecution

Undoubtedly, other qualities—or their lack—play into these situations, but would Jesus ever act or react like this? He certainly became justifiably angry on occasion, but the Bible never illustrates Him even remotely losing control—even while under intense pressure from blinded and stubborn fools, some of whom were intentionally baiting Him. Nor does the Bible ever indicate He fell into a self-pitying pout to draw attention to His irritation.

God clearly holds Jesus up to us as the example we must strive to follow.

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (I Peter 2:20-24)

Here we see patience in direct connection to our calling! Can patience possibly be that important? It is when we understand it in light of Christ's suffering *for us*, leaving us an example of how we are to live. We, too, are called to suffer for righteousness' sake, though Peter does not limit our calling to suffering patiently.

The issue revolves around the answer to the question, "What did Christ's patient suffering produce?" Does it not follow that if Christ's life produced good things because He lived this way, our lives will

too? Did not Christ finish what God gave Him to do and glorify God in the way He did it? Does God ever counsel or command anything that does not show love and produce good?

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous," the psalmist writes (Psalm 34:19). Peter supplies a partial answer to this, as does Paul's statement in II Timothy 3:12: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." The psalmist, Peter and Paul are all saying that persecution is a common lot—a calling—of all who strive to serve Christ faithfully.

The essence of persecution lies in subjecting the Christian to injury or disadvantage because of his beliefs. Persecution may take many forms, but it is more than someone merely presenting counter-arguments to the Christian's convictions. It is inflicting some injury on him, putting him to some disadvantage or placing him in unfavorable circumstances.

Persecution can take on many forms within these broad areas. The injury can be to the Christian's feelings or to his family, reputation, property, liberty or influence. It may deprive him of an office or position he held or prevent him from obtaining one for which he is qualified. He could be subjected to a fine, imprisonment, banishment, torture or death.

It follows, then, that both Peter and Paul warn us that we who make a profession of Christianity must be prepared for persecution. It "goes with the territory." We are not to shrink to avoid it, but bear it patiently as Christ did.

God as Our Example

None of us has ever come close to exhibiting patience like God. Although one could not say we persecute Him as men persecute each other, yet in our own way we do bring a form of persecution on Him by our attitudes and way of life. We often live without care for His feelings about us and His creation, behaving as much of this world does, as though neither He nor His law exists.

The Bible reveals God's patience as a quality of His character that deters Him for long periods from retaliating against those who sin against Him. This fits neatly with what Peter says regarding Christ's example:

Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (I Peter 2:23)

As a man, Christ did not strike back, but wisely and patiently left any retaliation due in the matter to God's judgment. This is also an example to us.

Exodus 32 contains the story of the Israelites worshipping the infamous golden calf shortly after entering into the Old Covenant with God. Soon thereafter, Moses met with God in the tent of meeting outside the camp, where he appealed to God to show him His glory. He wanted to see God with his eyes. Instead, God replied that He would make His goodness pass before him and proclaim His name.

In Exodus 34:6, when God passes before Moses, He preaches him a sermon on His attributes, fulfilling the proclamation of His name:

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering [patient], and abounding in goodness and truth."

Patience is a major characteristic of our God, and that should fill us with gratitude.

God's patience delays His wrath, allowing time for good to occur. Jonah 4:2 expresses this:

So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm."

We should also note the other qualities patience is combined with in these last two references. In combination with patience, the qualities of grace, mercy, lovingkindness, goodness and truth allow God to work with people so they can remain alive and eventually transform into His image. If God struck out at people just as short-fused humans frequently do, no one would be alive today. Jonah, in a typically human reaction, wanted God to wipe the sinners of Nineveh, Israel's enemy, off the face of the earth!

Nineveh was undoubtedly just as full of sinners as Israel. But God, bearing patiently with them in their ignorance, sent Jonah to proclaim His warning message to them: Destruction would fall on them in forty days. They, however, believed the message, proclaimed a fast, prayed mightily to God, repented and turned from their evil ways. Their repentance may not have been Davidic, but under the circumstances God was pleased. So Jonah 3:10 records,

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

II Peter 3:9 affirms that God still operates in the same manner:

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Romans 2:3-6 discusses the same theme on a more personal basis, warning us that we should not abuse God's patience by viewing it as inattention, indulgence or mere tolerance:

And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds."

Solomon warns of the same perversity of nature that reveals itself in those lacking faith:

Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he does not fear before God. (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13)

Clearly, God's patience is exercised so He can work on the situation and produce repentance. All too frequently, though, His goodness and patience are abused through stubbornness or neglect. Be assured, God is aware, and there comes a time when His patience is exhausted and His judgment falls if the change God expected does not occur.

An Unbroken Link

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus gives an interesting twist to the importance of God's patience by connecting it to our forgiveness.

The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay me what you owe!" So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses. (Matthew 18:26-34)

We desire others—especially God—to be patient and forgiving toward us in our faults, but do we practice the same attitude and conduct toward those whose faults offend us? Patience is a two-way street, and God clearly demands reciprocity. He expects us to pass His patience and forgiveness toward us on to others even as Christ did.

I Timothy 1:12-16 vividly shows Christ's example:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

Paul uses himself to exemplify the great magnitude of Christ's patience toward us. "Longsuffering" strongly implies forbearance under great duress. As Paul describes it, he had not just sinned in blaspheming and inflicting injury on the saints, but he had done his deeds with a proud, haughty, arrogant and insolent spirit. He acted in a wicked, malicious, violent way—a spirit of tyranny that greatly aggravated the wrong he did. Other translations render *insolent* as "insulter," "insolent foe," "oppressor," "wanton aggressor," "doer of outrage" and "wanton outrage."

Paul's aim is to magnify Christ's patience and forgiveness as an example to himself and his audience. The apostle followed Christ's example by in turn exercising patience toward the church. Considering his own circumstance, he undoubtedly felt strongly about this because Christ's forbearance with him opened salvation to him. In response, he passes it on to Timothy and so to us.

In II Timothy 4:2-3, Paul exhorts the evangelist to use this virtue that means so much to our salvation:

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

In II Corinthians 6:3-6, the apostle carries this thought into action, as he reflects upon his ministry and those with him.

We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love.

Twice in this listing he mentions forms of patience exercised for Christ and His people. Paul's travelling companions may very well have included Timothy, as Paul mentions him in close connection with the Corinthian church (I Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; II Corinthians 1:1, 19).

In II Timothy 3:10 he reminds Timothy,

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me.

Notice that Timothy carefully followed Paul's example of patience. In Philippians 2:19-20 Paul says of him,

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no man like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state.

Paul knew Timothy would regard the Philippians' interests with the same sincere tenderness and patient concern as Paul would if he were there.

Timothy followed Paul's example, Paul followed Christ's example, and Christ was One with the Father in His example. An unbroken chain of patience appears, beginning with the Father, continuing through His agent, Christ Jesus, then to His agent, the apostle Paul, and finally to his agent, Timothy. How are we doing in continuing the chain unbroken in our relationships with others?

Arek Appayim, Makrothumia and Hupomone

Three words are most frequently translated as either "longsuffering," "endurance," "perseverance" or "patience" in modern English Bibles: *arek appayim* in Hebrew, *makrothumia* and *hupomone* in Greek. When the time came to translate the Old Testament into Greek, the translators used *makrothumia* as the synonym of the Hebrew *arek appayim*. Both words mean essentially the same thing: slow to anger.

In writing the New Testament, the apostles added *hupomone*. Both Greek words generally mean the same thing. However, scholars have noted that each has characteristics that sets it apart. Spiros Zodhiates, in *The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 939, says,

Makrothumia is patience in respect to persons, while *hupomone*, endurance, is putting up with things or circumstances.

The difference does not end there. While both words have positive connotations, *hupomone* tends to be decidedly more upbeat. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 690, says, "As *makrothumia* is especially related to love, so *hupomone* is especially related to hope." The same volume also states the distinction between *hupomone* and *makrothumia* can best be seen in their opposites. The opposite of *hupomone* is cowardice or despondency, whereas the antonym of *makrothumia* is wrath or revenge.

Thus, while *makrothumia* is somewhat more passive in its implications, neither word allows us to be apathetic while enduring affliction. *Makrothumia* is somewhat more passive because, since people are usually involved as persecutors or instruments of our affliction, we should respond with greater caution and wisdom.

People, even those who persecute us, are not things, and we best represent our Father by not being hasty and rash. "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves," Jesus says (Matthew 10:16). It is the soft answer that turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). James writes, "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity" (James 3:6). Jesus left retaliation to the Father.

Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:15,

See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.

Two wrongs do not make a right, and in our irritated or angry impatience, we frequently say or do something just as bad or worse as was done to us! Then where are we? Often, our patience does not delay our wrath as God's does.

The obvious meaning of Paul's advice is that we should not take vengeance. In Romans 12:19, Paul repeats this more plainly:

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

This, in turn, feeds directly into Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:39-45:

But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

The consistent instruction is that we not set ourselves against an evil person who is injuring us, whether verbally, physically or judicially. Rather, Jesus teaches us to be willing to give the offender something that might defuse the immediate situation—and perhaps even provide some small example that will promote his eternal welfare. Patience is of great value in this respect.

This in no way means we are weak, though to them we may at first seem so. Nor does it mean that we approve of their conduct. Though we may hate their conduct and suffer keenly when it affects us, Christ tells us to bless them, meaning we should confer favor upon or give benefits to them. We can do this by wishing the person well, speaking kindly of and to him and seeking to do him good.

Situations like this may be the most difficult test we will ever face. Patiently deferring retaliation and committing the circumstance to God's judgment is indispensable to the best possible solution. But the primary point of Jesus' instruction, however, is not how to resolve these situations, but that we may be children of our Father. By imitating God's pattern, we will resemble Him and take a giant stride toward being in His image.

Patience and Her Work

James addresses his book, "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." Since the breadth of this address does not indicate that the people were enduring any common experience, James is likely giving counsel of timeless and general application that is indispensable to growth in godly character to all sorts of people under every circumstance. At the very beginning he writes,

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Earlier I asked, "Is patience that important?" How important is it that we grow to be perfect and entire? James is clearly saying that patience is a vital ingredient to achieving this. Notice that he does not perceive patience as passive. It works! The fruit of its work can be either another virtue it is producing or in preserving itself, for that, too, is sometimes necessary.

Patience is not merely a fixed determination to hold our place in the teeth of the wind, but to make actual progress in spite of it. A ship may ride out a strong wind with a snug anchor and strong chains, yet another may set the sails to take advantage of the wind to bring it closer to its destination. It is this latter attitude that James is bidding us have and use.

Christ is a good example of this. Luke 9:51 says, "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem." All His life the shadow of His crucifixion hung over Him, yet without faltering, swerving, or resisting, He took every step of His path and nothing turned Him aside because He came into the world for that hour. His resolve never broke. He would not blench from carrying out His duty.

Paul says something to the Ephesian elders that fits this idea:

But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy. (Acts 20:24)

Paul was embattled on every side, yet his active resolution carried him along whatever path God determined he should tread. Paul writes in Philippians 3:13-14,

Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forward to those which are ahead, I press toward the goal.

This is the temper of patience. It enables a person to plod determinedly on. It may not be spectacular, but such a person will go on toward perfection. This quality will have to be part of the makeup of the Two Witnesses. God has clearly prophesied of three-and-a-half years of their lives being filled with great confrontation, persecution and at its end a shamefully undeserved and public death!

Running With Patience

Regardless of how it is stated—whether as going on to perfection, being entire or growing to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ—it does not come without great effort. Perhaps there are times when we feel "our plate is too full" or that Christ has given us more than we can bear. But the Scripture says:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance [*patience*, KJV] the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. (Hebrews 12:1-4)

We can learn a great deal about why patience is so vital by comparing the process we are going through to an artist sculpting a work from a piece of marble. Chip by chip over a period of time, an artist uses hammer and chisel to shape a conception from a raw slab of rock until the finished figure is revealed. God is doing much the same with us except we are living raw material with mind, emotions and the liberty to allow or disallow the Artist to continue. If we are impatient, not allowing the Creator to complete His artistry by our constant yielding to His tools, we will never be perfect and entire.

It is easy for us to magnify our burdens. Notice, however, what grumbling did for the Israelites in the wilderness when God finally responded. Would we rather have our trial or grumble and receive what the Israelites did? We must begin to cultivate the habit of thinking of life, including all of its trials, as being God's way to shape godly character in us.

James makes what seems to be a paradoxical statement in James 1:2: We should count our various trials as joy. Why? Because verse 3 says that doing so produces patience! We need patience so God can mold us into His likeness. Even God cannot produce godly character by fiat. James is teaching us that we should not measure the experiences of life by their ability to please our ambition or tastes but by their capacity to make us into God's image. If we have any vision—and a zealous desire to live as God does—we can welcome our trials as steps in God's creative process and meet them with patience and hope.

Perfection in this life is to become what God wants us to become. What could be better than that? If we understand that our lives are in God's hands as He molds and shapes us, then the meanings—the eventual outcome—of joy and sorrow are the same. God intends the same result whether He gives or takes. The events of life are merely the scaffolding for shaping us into His image, and we should meet them with patience as He continues His work. This will work to flatten out the emotional extremes we tend to experience.

Patience and Secular Life

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes also address patience, though from a more secular perspective. Nevertheless, Solomon shows it to be a very valuable attribute that brings us success in endeavors and favor in other's eyes. We should not dismiss patience's value because of this more secular perspective because it has definite, overlapping spiritual value as well.

Solomon's approach is not with God in mind as our example, but that patience is prudent in our dealings with others and events. For instance,

The end of a thing is better than its beginning; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. (Ecclesiastes 7:8)

It is interesting that Solomon connects impatience to pride. He observes that the impatient haughtily seize on something before its conclusion is worked out, while the patient see a thing to its end and are rewarded. Does this principle not apply to God working with us?

Proverbs 14:29 holds a similar thought: "He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly." Patience grows from a combination of faith, hope, love and self-control. As these two proverbs and many more reveal, we should cultivate patience because it shows understanding and because it is wise. Wisdom produces success, and being successful in glorifying God is what life is all about.

The Source of Patience

It is not difficult to trace the source of biblical patience in God's children. I Corinthians 13:4 states, "Love suffers long and is kind." As noted above, patience is directly associated with love and hope. Here in the "love chapter," Paul lists patience first among love's works. Romans 5:5 adds that "the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

This makes it evident that God's patience stands behind His children's patience as its source and pattern and as a link in a chain. Because the Bible lists it with the fruit of the Spirit, it is less a virtue achieved than a gift received. It comes with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we reproduce it.

However, since we are beings of free choice, we are still obligated to God to activate it, exercise it and use it as a witness that God lives in us. To this end, Paul writes,

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. (Colossians 3:12-13)

"Put on" is literally a dressing term. Used as an idiom, it can also mean to assume the office, manner, character, disposition or perspective of another. We must "put on" Christ, meaning we must conduct our lives as closely to the way He would were He in our position. We are to practice His way of life because it is eternal life—the way God lives His life. It will help prepare us for His Kingdom, and it enables us to glorify Him here and now.

Patience is a vital part of the process that enables God to work over a long span of time, if needed, to produce in us other important aspects of His image so that we "may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." God is the Source, and His Spirit the means of this very valuable fruit.