

The Fruit of the Spirit: Patience

4/9

Galatians 5:16-26; Colossians 3:12-17

06 19 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

The Miracle Worker (2000) Begin: 1:21:20 (Hand in Water) End: 1:23:26 (Hug)

Fruit of the Spirit Series

(Wait one minute before going to the pulpit.)

Today we are continuing our series entitled *The Fruit of the Spirit*. We are focusing on **patience**—the same quality that you were losing while waiting for me to preach! All it took was a minute of silence.

Patience is a precious substance in short supply within our society. The attribute is a challenge to gain and maintain in the Christian life. Today we are invited to “*clothe ourselves in patience.*” Today’s Scripture lesson is Colossians 3:12-17.

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

Introduction

I Want it All—and I Want it Now by the band, *Black ‘n Blue*, could serve as the anthem for our culture. We live in a fast-paced society that demands instant gratification. No one wants to hesitate, much less wait.

Motorists rant with road rage behind slow-pokes going the speed limit. Consumers wait impatiently in line. We expect Internet sites to load instantly. People can barely spare two minutes to make microwave popcorn. And don’t get me started on dead space in worship services! After 5 seconds of silence, someone missed a cue!

The same attitude of impatience infects our **spiritual lives**. We practice one minute devotions and drive-by prayers. We multitask during worship. If a sermon goes past 20 minutes, we start checking the time. We pray, “Lord give me patience and give it to me NOW;” and we don’t even notice the disconnect in this request.

It turns out that cultivating patience requires . . . patience! The Fruit of the Spirit does not appear over night in our lives. It takes time, preparation, and cultivation. However, the eventual harvest is well worth the precious investment of time.

Put on Patience

In the Scripture lesson from Colossians, Paul compares the process of Christian growth to **changing clothes**. We are called to take off the old, outgrown clothes of the world and to put on the new, fitted clothes of the Spirit.

We could all use a wardrobe intervention! Maybe the church should produce a TV program entitled *God’s Eye for the Holy Guy!* There are items in our closets that need to be thrown out. They are out of style and no longer fit. However, we tend to cling to our outgrown attire.

Paul writes the sinful, worldly life includes “*anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language.*” (Colossians 3:8) The apostle often describes existence outside of Christ

as an **impatient, angry life**. We all know people with quick tempers and short fuses. Truth to tell, we may be them! People make all sorts of excuses for their ill behavior. They blame it on being red-headed, Italian, high-strung, Type-A personality, etc. They say, “I can’t help it—it’s just how I am.”

PTTTTTHHHH! Really? The apostle encourages the church to get rid of these things—take them off like soiled clothing. They do not fit the Christian life.

Paul then writes: “*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*” (Colossians 3:12) **Clothe yourselves with patience.**

The Greek word for patience used in Colossians and Galatians is *makrothumia*. The compound word means “*long-suffering*” or “*even-tempered*.” This is “*the ability not to become frustrated and enraged but to make allowances for others’ shortcomings and to tolerate their exasperating behavior.*” (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume XI, pp. 647-648)

Though the exercise of patience, the Holy Spirit teaches us how to hold our temper. We cultivate a long fuse and a short memory. We become self-controlled because we are God-controlled. We learn to manage our tongues and our anger.

A Crankcase Full of Oil

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (the Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan) wrote an article for *Christianity Today* entitled *Trying Patience on for Size*. (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/february8/9t2056.html>) The author compared patience to a high quality **motor oil**.

In an engine, moving parts naturally cause friction and heat. Oil serves as a lubricant to keep the motor from breaking down. Even the best oil does not eliminate contaminants. Instead, it puts them into **suspension** so that they don’t cause any damage.

To stretch the analogy, cranky Christians need a bigger crankcase! Through the Spirit’s tutelage, we learn how to put the ongoing irritants of life into suspension. Patient people still get annoyed, but they have a way of dealing with the annoyances of daily life.

- ✓ There are five lines at the supermarket, and it’s a natural law that you will pick the slowest of the five. You could fuss and fret. Or you could put the delay in suspension and spend the time in meditation and prayer.
- ✓ Your child leaves a bicycle outside . . . again . . . overnight . . . in the rain . . . in the driveway . . . and you have to move it . . . again . . . in the rain . . . before going to work. You could fuss the child out for his irresponsibility. Or you could put it in suspension and later use it as a teaching moment about responsibility.

The spiritual gift of patience enables us to put the irritants and contaminants of life in suspension. A Christian is not a Pollyanna that lives in denial, refusing to recognize the challenges of life. Instead, we learn how to act in patience rather than react in anger. We control ourselves rather than allowing outside events to control us. We learn to be patient with things, situations, people, and . . . even ourselves.

Patience with Things

God created us as unique individuals. Some people have extreme patience with **things**—dealing with the minutia of tedious tasks. Other folk—like me—have patience with people but could never spend hours assembling a jigsaw puzzle, knitting a sweater, assembling a motor, or writing computer code.

I am the world's worst handy-man. The last time I repaired a toilet, I spent \$125 on a service call for a plumber to un-do what I had done.

Those who cultivate patience in their lives learn to step back from a project and not get so upset. It's an inanimate object—calling it names or slamming it to the floor doesn't help. Look at it as a training ground for patience.

Patience with Situations

We also need to learn patience with **situations**. When we face difficult circumstances, we are called to prayer. Sometimes prayer changes things—other times prayer changes the person who prays. James (see 1:2-8) wrote that trials and tribulations are designed to develop perseverance. Perseverance in turn leads to Christian maturity.

Consider another practical example. Wise stewardship of money is an exercise in patience. If you are in debt, it takes time, discipline, and patience to get out of debt. It also takes time, discipline, and patience to accumulate wealth. It simply does not happen overnight. With patience, however, your financial situation can be transformed.

Patience with People

A third area is patience with **people**. I have come to this conclusion: if everyone was just like me, then this world would be a much better place! Well, maybe not! My sinful egotism can make me think this is the case.

People who are different from me—which means everyone else—are frustrating! Why can't they see that my way is the right way?!? In my more mature moments, however, I realize that it is not always a question of right or wrong—just different. Patience with people helps us recognize that each person is a child of God with weaknesses and strengths. When asked how she dealt with difficult Christians, Mother Teresa replied, *"I let the God in me love the God in them."*

All of us are blessed by people who annoy us! I am convinced that others watch how we deal with these difficult people in our lives. Our inward attitude leads to an outward witness. We can affirm or undermine our testimony by how we exercise patience with others.

Patience with Self

Walking with the Spirit also teaches us how to be patient with ourselves. The Methodist tradition emphasizes God's call to Christian perfection; but we are also clear that most of us have not reached that blessed state yet! We are not perfect—just forgiven. When we sin, we can spend time in self-remorse and self-recrimination, OR we can

accept God's grace in our lives. Like a toddler learning to walk, children of God learn to get up after they fall.

Patient Anger

Hear clearly—this doesn't mean that patient Christians don't get **angry** sometimes. Jesus himself became infuriated with the hypocrisy and callousness of the religious leaders. There are some things in life we should get angry about. However, we learn how to deal with the anger in a creative way that is constructive rather than destructive—both to others and us.

It also does not mean that we serve as the world's **doormat**. The command to love your neighbor as yourself carries the implicit command to love yourself! We have to set appropriate boundaries that keep us from being victims. The ability to act rather than react to others marks the mature Christian's life.

How To

The Fruit of the Spirit is both a **gift and goal** in our lives. It is a gift of grace. The organic image reminds us that the fruit naturally appears in our lives when we live and walk in the Holy Spirit. It is also a goal. We have our part to play. To borrow from gardening, it is our responsibility to provide the proper conditions for the Spirit to work. However, it is God's power that ultimately provides the growth.

I would suggest four strategies for providing the proper conditions for the Holy Spirit to produce patience in our lives.

Remember God's Patience with Us

Scripture testifies that patience is part of **God's nature**. The Lord knows how patient he is with you and me. Think back over your own spiritual journey. How many times has the Spirit been long suffering in our lives?

I've often experienced God's patience with me through the lives of others. During seminary, I worked on staff at Kennesaw UMC and preached weekly on Sunday nights. You should PROBABLY spell "weekly" as "weakly!" At the time, I thought I was the greatest thing for the ordained ministry since Billy Graham. Looking back, I realize just how patient those good people were to listen to me week after week after week.

Imaginative Love

A second strategy for developing patience is based upon some advice from Carolyn Simon: "*We can look at annoying people with the eye of **imaginative love**.*" (Plantinga, see reference above) For example, suppose someone is driving very slowly in the left hand lane. Rather than punish them by tailgating, imagine this person as somebody's grandparent—a really nice grandparent. You don't tailgate somebody's grandmother or grandfather. You treat them with patience and kindness.

A fellow pastor tells the story of visiting someone at Emory Hospital. Suddenly this car in front of him just stopped in the middle of the road. His first inclination was to

blow the horn to make the moronic motorist move. Then he noticed the car was stopped in front of the new side entrance at Egleston Children’s Hospital. The car tag had a Houston County sticker on it. And my friend imagined that this might be a terrified parent bringing their critically ill child to Egleston for the first time. He didn’t honk his horn; instead, he chose to wait patiently.

Triggers and Signs

Another key to cultivating patience is to learn the **triggers and signs** of impatience or anger. What tests you in this area of your Christian walk? It could be driving the car, dealing with teenagers, waiting in line, dealing with paperwork, etc. Practice situational awareness about the areas that test your temper and patience.

Also note the signs that you are growing impatient and angry. For example, I tend to grit my teeth when reaching my limit. Other signs include clenched fists, tight stomachs, tense necks, red faces, etc. Let these signs warn you to step back and relax.

Counting to Ten

Another concept related to patience is **time**. Impatience is in a hurry. Patience takes its time. Sometimes the best thing we can say and do is NOTHING. Remember the old advice about counting to 10 before you lose your temper? This isn’t bad advice. Creating a buffer zone between action and reaction is almost always a good thing.

Live radio programs have a time delay before broadcasting. Wouldn’t it be great if our minds and tongues had a similar delay? Just a chance to think it over before we actually acted. Over the years, I’ve seldom gotten into trouble for the things I did NOT say and do. I’ve gotten into a fair amount of well-deserved trouble for the things I did say and do without thinking.

I’ve also discovered a useful feature in email called the “Draft” file. You can write an email and put it in this file. And it just sits there. Then you can delete, edit, or send it. OR it can go back in the “Draft” file again. I’ve written some emails that sat in the “Draft” file for days before sending. I never once regretted the delay.

Counting to ten creates space for the Holy Spirit to intervene with our spirits. We might be surprised what a difference this simply discipline can make.

Eternal Perspective

A fourth discipline of patience is to cultivate an **eternal perspective**. Most of what upsets us truly does not matter. Dr. Richard Carlson put it this way with his two rules for worry and impatience: *“Don’t sweat the small stuff”* and *“It’s all small stuff!”* Of course, there is some big stuff—but not near as much as we think.

Viewing our lives from God’s viewpoint can help us gain an eternal perspective. And when you are looking at time from the perspective of eternity, it’s much easier to exercise patience in life.

Conclusion

For the gardeners among us, there is an intriguing plant called the **Chinese bamboo tree**. It has an unusual and unique growth pattern. You take a little seed, plant it, water it, and fertilize it. For a whole year, nothing happens. The second year you water and fertilize it again. Nothing happens. The third year you water and fertilize it some more. Nothing happens. The fourth year you water and fertilize it again. Nothing happens. During the fifth year, you water and fertilize it some more. Then something amazing happens. The Chinese bamboo tree sprouts and grows—up to ninety feet in six weeks! (Dan Miller, <http://bambootree.homestead.com>)

So here's the question: did it grow ninety feet in six weeks? Or did it grow ninety feet in five years?

Perhaps you could ask a parent who has been praying for years for a child who has now come back home. Or a wife who prayed for a husband over the course of their marriage, and he is now involved in church. Or a Christian who witnessed to his neighbor for years before the person showed any interest. Or the pastor who laid a foundation that another minister now builds upon.

The Fruit of the Spirit grows slowly but surely in the lives of those who live and walk by the Holy Spirit. Patience requires patience, but the harvest it creates in our lives is well worth the wait.