

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: PATIENCE

SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



Catalog No. 20220717
Galatians 5:22-23
Fifth Message
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July 17, 2022

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Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political theorist and historian, made this observation in 1835 in his famous work *Democracy in America*: “It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.”

What do you think de Tocqueville would say if he were alive today about the “vague dread” that torments us in the digital age?

How do you like waiting on hold? How do you like it when the internet connection is slow? How do you like waiting a long time for fast food? How do you like it when you get stuck behind one of those self-driving cars that has the temerity to go the speed limit?

To each of those questions, I answer, “I hate it!”

By contrast, consider Jesus. He undertook the most important tasks in history and had a limited time to accomplish them. Think about what you see of Jesus in the gospels. Does he strike you as someone who’s ever in a hurry?

“Patience is a virtue,” the old saying goes, and some of us would respond, “It’s not a virtue of mine.” However, patience is also a fruit of the Spirit. Would you like a little more of it?

The Spirit enables us to bear the fruit of the Spirit as we learn to walk by the Spirit—that is, as we step by step open to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

God is patient with us

The first thing to be said about patience is that God is patient with us. Really, when you think about it, in view of our sins, none of us even deserves to be alive, and none of us has any right to complain (Lamentations 3:39). Nevertheless, here we are.

Remember the Eugene Peterson quote I shared two weeks ago? I’m going to double-down on it:

Every time I move to a new community, I find a church close by and join it—committing myself to worship and work with that company of God’s people. I’ve never been anything other than disappointed: every one turns out to be biblical, through and through: murmurers, complainers, the faithless, the inconstant, those plagued with doubt and riddled with sin, boring moralizers, glamorous secularizers.¹

Well, that’s us, isn’t it? Certainly, all of us can find ourselves somewhere in Peterson’s list. Nevertheless, here we are.

Or listen to Paul, who says that in view of the righteousness of God:

None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they
have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

Nevertheless, here we are.

As the “foremost” of sinners, Paul, who was formerly a “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent,” especially appreciated the patience of God: “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16).

God is patient with us.

Wait for the Lord

Appreciating God's patience with us helps us to be patient with him. We can wait for him to act. Although he's always acting in ways we don't notice, sometimes, as we wait for him, he acts ways in ways that get our attention. Listen to David:

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure. (Psalm 40:1-2)

Perhaps the Lord has done something similar for you: you cried, you waited, and he rescued you from the miry bog and set your feet upon a rock so to speak, perhaps not instantaneously but over time.

How the story ends

Even when God doesn't act in ways we notice as we wait for him, we know that he will act consummately when Christ comes again, gives us new and eternal bodies, and brings with him the new and eternal creation:

—“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

—“But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

We know how the story ends. Of course, when the story ends, it begins again—this time without the prospect of Satan, sin, and death. Therefore, in the present, no matter how troubled the times, we can take heart: Wait for the Lord; / be strong, and let your heart take courage; / wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27:14). The new creation is worth waiting for.

James puts it this way: “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:7-8).

Reward for waiting

The final rewards for waiting for the Lord are new and eternal bodies and the new and eternal creation, but there is also a reward for waiting for him as we wait for him: “[B]ut they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

What's the reward for waiting for the Lord? Strength. God strengthens us spiritually not after he acts but while we wait for him to act. In the process of waiting for the Lord, we are exercising spiritual muscles, if you will.

David Roper, a former pastor of our church, writes, “But we must not hurry God unduly lest we force Him to forgo His best work. Delay is his primary tool for soul-making and especially for developing that quality we find hardest to achieve—patience.”²

I was teaching a group of people training for ministry not long ago and one of them said to me, “You seem like an encouraged person.” If that's true, I said it's in part because I've immersed myself in the biblical story for decades and I know how the story ends.

Be patient with one another

Appreciating God's patience with us not only helps us to be patient with him; it also helps us to be patient with each other.

Among the fruits of the Spirit, love occupies pride of place. Other fruit can be seen as an expression of love. Paul says, quite simply, “Love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4). One of the ways we love others is by being patient with them.

Paul urges us to be patient with one another:

—“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

—“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

We can give each other a great gift by being patient with each another.

A story

According to a traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So, Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god." When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

If you meet someone who hasn't died yet, there's a good chance God hasn't given up on that person.

The patience of Jesus

Again, consider Jesus. Among his tasks was to teach twelve men to follow him and to make disciples. Rarely did it seem to be going well. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus told his disciples three times that he would be killed and rise again (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34).

Immediately after informing his disciples of his impending death and resurrection for the third time, two of them told Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mark 10:35). Huh? When Jesus was crucified, the disciples were shocked. When Jesus rose from the dead, they were shocked again. Jesus was patient with his disciples.

In one sense, it can be said that we today who follow Jesus are the result of his patience with his disciples. Who knows what the result will be of our patience with someone else?

He is patient with us also. Can we be patient with others—or, maybe a little more patient with others?

Rough start

From time to time through the years here at PBC people have told me that I've grown, which is for the most part was encouraging except when they used the word "so": "You've grown so much." Which makes me think, "How bad was it?"

Well, I got off to a rocky start here. It took me a long time to find my way (which is not to say that everything is smooth sailing now!). But the elders were patient with me, even when it was not evident that I was growing in much of any way.

Drive by the Spirit

God is patient with us. Therefore, wait for him and be patient with others.

To practice patience, here's a suggestion: Pick one day this week when you know you're going to be driving and commit to driving the speed limit. See how it makes you feel. See if you can respond by being patient. If you pick today, be forewarned: the speed limit on Middlefield Road is 25 miles an hour!

If we walk by the Spirit, maybe we can also drive by the Spirit!

Endnotes

1. Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 101.
2. David Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise: Building a Faith that Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2000), 163.