

“Patience”
James 5:7-11
July 23, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The fourth fruit of the Spirit is patience. The original word in the Galatians 5 list of the fruit is sometimes translated “long-suffering.” Patience is a good translation of this word, but it is helpful to know that it is a combination of two Greek words that mean more literally “long-tempered.” Perhaps it helps us understand this word by considering its opposite. We sometimes speak of people being “short-tempered.” We mean by that phrase that a person has a short fuse between some provocation and an outburst of irritation or anger. We could think about the opposite of that as a “long-tempered” person. Such a person would have a long fuse in response to provocation. That is what the Bible means by a patient person.

Consider your response when driving your car and another driver does something foolish or inconsiderate. A short-tempered, impatient person will immediately experience some flare-up of anger. A patient driver will suffer such foolish behavior by the other driver without getting overly bothered by it all. There are marriages where each spouse learns the buttons to push that will bring about a short-tempered response from that spouse. Each spouse then seems to derive some pleasure out of pushing such buttons. That is not the path to a happy marriage. Patience is required for good relationships in life, whether it be a marriage, a church relationship, or any other kind of personal relationship.

Today’s passage from James 5 talks a great deal about patience. It describes two arenas where patience is needed. We are called to be patient by submitting to difficult events in life, and we are also called to be patient as we submit without complaint to difficult people. Both of these ideas are present in our passage from James 5.

I. Patience with Events – v. 7-8

To understand what James is teaching about patience, it is important that we understand the connecting word of verse 7, the word “therefore.” **“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.”** It’s a word that indicates a conclusion from what has preceded. And what has preceded is a warning to rich people whose riches have been gained through injustice. **“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”** (5:4). Note that the very thing

these rich landowners had regarded as most precious becomes the cause of their downfall. The withheld wages cry out against them and come to the ears of the Lord, who will certainly hear and respond with judgment. The same idea is present in verse 3. **“Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.”** The injustice that has enriched them has been perpetrated, at least in part, against God’s people. **“You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you”** (5:6). The lack of resistance stems from the powerlessness of those who are oppressed. They are poor, and they are without power. There is no small claims court where they can go to secure the wages owed them. They cannot seek employment elsewhere because no other such opportunities are available. What are they to do?

James answers that question in this command of verse 7 to be patient. Twice in these verses James mentions the coming of the Lord. They are to be patient **“until the coming of the Lord.”** Then, in verse 8, they are to **“establish [their] hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.”** What will happen at the return of Jesus that will mean the end of their patient waiting? Two things will occur. There will be an end to their suffering, and there will be perfect justice against those who have wronged them. They are to wait for this, but their waiting needs to be filled with hope and not despair. That’s why he says “establish your hearts.” The word has the idea of being strengthened, so that the person with such a strengthened heart meets the challenges before him with hope and confidence in the Lord.

James’ illustration of this is the farmer. **“See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains”** (v. 7). Israel had an arid climate, with long seasons of little rain between heavy seasonal rains. The early rains were the ones that came shortly after the seeds had been planted, and the late rains during the time when the crops were ripening. But between those times there was often very little rain. But farmers don’t despair during the dry times before those rains come, because they have learned to expect the rains. Far more certain is the coming of the Lord, and our expectation of that coming strengthens the heart and delivers us from despair.

An important qualification is needed in our discussion of patience. Is this command to patience the same thing as requiring us to accept passively whatever comes our way? Does the command mean that we are wrong to try to deliver ourselves from the source of the suffering or the injustice? Do we just tell the abused wife to be patient as she awaits the coming of the Lord while staying with her abusive husband? If patience means “long-suffering,” does that mean that we are wrong to try to shorten our suffering?

The answer to this question is found in the emphasis given throughout these verses on justice and judgment. Such language is explicit in the first six

verses of the chapter where the unjust landowners are warned. It is also implicitly present in the repeated reminders of the coming of the Lord, which will include Judgment Day. Our God is a God of justice. His heart opposes injustice and oppression of all kinds. His justice will be perfectly executed at the final judgment, but even prior to that he has given appropriate ways for justice to be pursued. Such institutions as civil government (Romans 13:3) and church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20) are God's approved means to pursue justice in this world prior to the final judgment.

The clear implication of these passages is that patience is not equivalent to passivity. If wrongs are being done, it is appropriate, commendable, and even godly to pursue justice as much as human means allow. The call to patience kicks in only when all such means have been exhausted and still relief has not come. The abused wife should seek justice from civil authorities. If she is a Christian, she should also seek the help of the church in exercising church discipline against her abuser, provided he is also a member of the church. The worker in an unjust or toxic work environment should seek a different employer. The person suffering with poor health should seek all the help possible through local health care providers. It is only when all such means for relief have been exhausted that the call to patience is in play. The Christian is never without resources. When human resources have petered out with no relief given, we still have a resource in God's justice at the coming of Christ. Relief and vindication will come, though we are called to wait patiently for its arrival.

II. Patience with People – v. 9-11

With verse 9, James returns to a favorite theme, the use of the tongue. **“Do not grumble against one another.”** One lexicon defines the word translated “grumble” as “to complain in an intensive and excessive manner.” He then makes it clear that he is still thinking about patience when he brings up the examples of patience with the prophets and of Job. So James is addressing the need for patience with people, specifically fellow brothers and sisters in Christ within the church. Grumbling is a form of impatience. We get irritated with people's deficiencies, sins, and weaknesses, and we respond not with patience and understanding but with complaints.

Such impatience with others brings great harm to the church. That's why James accompanies this command with such a severe warning. Don't grumble against your fellow Christians, he says, **“so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door”** (v. 9). It would seem by this warning that impatience with people that leads to grumbling is far more serious in the Lord's eyes than it may be in ours. Does this mean that a person can lose his salvation by a failure at this point? Certainly not, because the Scriptures are abundantly clear on that. But the Bible does say that **“we must**

all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). This includes Christians. The outcome of such judgment will not be eternal condemnation, but it will include some measure of loss. Or perhaps what James means here is that Jesus will, out of a love for his church and a desire to protect her, at times step in to bring some form of judgment in this life against those who are disrupting his bride by impatient grumbling.

Examples are always helpful and encouraging, and James offers the prophets as examples of patience. **“As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord”** (v. 10). Jeremiah was likely one of these prophets he had in mind. He was given a message of judgment to proclaim, that Jerusalem would be conquered by the Babylonians as an act of divine judgment against Israel. It was not a popular message, resulting in various trials for Jeremiah, including beatings, being put in the stocks, imprisoned in a dungeon, and thrown into a cistern to die. Yet he patiently endured such sufferings for many years.

Job is offered as an example of such patience and steadfastness. He lost everything but his faith in God. After multiple blows, including the words of his wife that he should “curse God and die” (Job 2:9), he replied, **“Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”** After his first round of losses in which he lost his wealth and his children, he replied in faith, **“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”** (Job 1:21). He believed even when he didn’t understand, and the text tells us the result. By the end of the story, his health, wealth and children are all restored. Even more significantly, he grew in his knowledge of the Lord and his ways.

God calls us to patience, both with events and people. Are you patient with people? One of the reasons to be patient with people is the fact that growth in Christlikeness is measured usually in years and decades rather than in days and weeks. The reason is that the kind of growth we need requires such qualities as humility, and humility is not quickly gained. I have mentioned before something that happened to me shortly after becoming a Christian as a college freshman. I was sitting in my room with my college roommate, who was also a Christian. I said to him, “You know, Randy, it’s really too bad that not all Christians are as mature as we are. The church would be so much stronger if they were.” It was a rather remarkable statement of pride and immaturity. Thankfully, God was patient with me and has brought some humility since then. But it didn’t happen quickly, and I think that’s generally the pattern for all of us. So let’s be patient with one another, envisioning with eyes of faith where a person will be by God’s grace as he sanctifies her rather than where she might be currently.

III. The Patience of God

We have seen in studies of the three previous qualities of the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy and peace—that all of them are anchored in the cross of Christ. The same is the case with patience. But you might look at this passage and wonder where we see the cross. It's not as explicit here as it was in the previous passages we've considered in this series, but it is here nonetheless.

Did you notice that the passage emphasizes both the judgment of God and the mercy of God? The judgment of God is emphasized in the twice-mentioned coming of the Lord, and then again in the command against grumbling. The mercy of God appears in verse 11: **“You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”** Affirmations of God's judgment and God's mercy appear clearly in one short paragraph. Our human tendency is to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Some emphasize the love of God in such a way that the judgment of God is minimized if not denied. That seems to be the common error we see today. Others speak of a terrifying and stern God who seems at odds with a gentle and loving God. The Bible, on the other hand, strongly affirms both God's judgment and God's mercy.

It is in this double affirmation that we see clearly the cross of Christ. The cross is the only way to satisfy both divine justice and divine love. Because of Jesus' death, we can have complete confidence in our salvation. The foundation of our salvation is both God's mercy and God's justice. Because God's justice has been satisfied in the substitutionary death of Christ, God's fairness now anchors our salvation. It would be unjust for God to punish twice for the same offense. So if Jesus has been punished for our offenses, God cannot punish those same offenses twice. To do so would compromise his holiness and justice, and that is an impossibility.

There is one other idea from James 5 that needs to be understood. James keeps mentioning the coming of the Lord when patience will no longer be needed because Jesus will right every wrong and end all suffering for his people. Why doesn't he do so now? Because he is being patient, waiting for people to come to repentance that this salvation by the death of Christ might come to more people.

CONCLUSION:

The conclusion is that when we are being patient, we are joining God in what he is doing. So may God fill you with his Spirit that the fruit of patience might ripen in your heart!