

“Cultivating Patience”

Introduction: As many of you know, a couple of weeks ago Thais and Luke moved to Jackson, MS to begin new jobs. They had a safe journey, but it has been a challenging beginning as they arrived a week ago Friday, but as we speak, the moving truck has yet to arrive, and may still be a week away from delivering all of their stuff! They are managing, having bought a couple of air mattress, towels, a frying pan, and some plastic cutlery. And the hospitality of everyone from co-workers to landlord has been wonderful. But as Thais put it to us a few days ago, it would be nice not to have to come home to an empty apartment every night. To which I gave her that wonderful, parental advice, “just be patient, my love.” To which I added this pastoral reflection: “Consider that the emptiness you feel in your apartment right now is a little like the emptiness or incompleteness we all feel in this present age, while awaiting the return of Jesus in the age to come. When your stuff finally arrives and fills the space, it will be like the arrival of God’s new creation!” Fun to grow up in my house, huh? She’s still pondering that one!

Patience is, of course, part of the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit that we are exploring this summer, that wonderfully challenging description of Christian character, grown in us by the Spirit, that Paul spells out for us in Galatians 5. Not only that – it is the very first adjective Paul uses to describe love: “Love is patient . . .” (1 Cor. 13:4). So, patience has to do not only with coping with challenging circumstances, but also how we are to love our neighbor.

Our struggle with patience can come because we are a culture driven by time and productivity, one that counts only tangible, measurable results. So we like one-minute devotions and instant oatmeal to get us going to work quickly, a fast commute on the way, and high-speed internet when we get there. How many of us like to wait in line at the toll booth, supermarket, or airport? How many of us like it when, at a restaurant, the table that arrived after us gets served before us? How many of us like it when the Scripture reading on Sunday leaks onto a second page, or when worship goes over the hallowed one-hour mark? How many of us like it when the character of a loved one, or of ourselves, doesn’t change fast enough? How many of us like it when it seems that the trials of life just don’t get resolved? How many of us are willing to yield control over people and circumstances in our lives to Jesus? How do we cultivate patience, anyway?

I. God’s Patience with Us

A. The best place for us to begin is with understanding that the foundation of our patience is the character of God and the way God has been, and is, patient with us. One of the reasons I chose a portion of Nehemiah 9 is because this prayer by this Israelite leader on behalf of his nation, upon their return from exile, highlights God’s great patience with his people. It begins by praising God for his role as the creator and the wonder of his creation. It then zeroes in on the Israelites by recalling how God rescued this people from slavery in Egypt, gave them a new sense of purpose and the very best way to live, then miraculously provided for them as they journeyed along. Sadly, God’s people rebelled against him, all along the way, even exchanging God for an idol they made of a calf. Yet, despite this, God remained forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love (v. 17). This is a repeated and characteristic description of God in the OT (one which should enable us to put aside the idea that the God of the OT is one of wrath and the God of the NT is one of love. We see God’s justice and mercy in both).

B. “Slow to anger,” then, is the phrase that is used to describe God’s patience. Sometimes translated long-suffering, literally, it means “long of the nostrils,” giving us this visual that God’s wrath takes a long time to build up! Nehemiah sums it all up with the statement: “For many years you were patient with them.” So why would God be so patient with his people? Why so patient with us? Peter, in his second letter, gives us a glimpse into this aspect of God’s heart:

But do not forget one thing dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. . . Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our brother Paul wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. [2 Pe. 3:8-9, 15; cf. Ro. 2:4]

God is patient with the human race because he wants what’s best for us. He longs for us to turn from our arrogant, stiff-necked, and rebellious ways, to begin to live according to his purposes, and to enjoy the life that is truly life, beginning now and lasting on into eternity.

II. Bearing with Our Neighbor

A. Given, then, God’s patience with us, Jesus calls us to extend that patience to others. The parable of the unmerciful servant, which Jesus tells in response to a question Peter asks about how many times he should forgive someone who’s sinned against him, brings this home. It’s about a servant who had amassed a load of debt. It was so great—ten thousand bags of gold—that he had no hope of paying the king back. The king ordered that the servant, his wife and children, and all of their goods, be sold as a beginning to the fellow’s repayment plan. But the servant got on his knees and pleaded: “Be patient with me and I will pay back everything.” In response the king’s patience was astounding. He took pity on his servant and forgave the entire debt. The servant then went out and bumped into someone who owed him one hundred silver coins. However, when this fellow servant fell on his knees and pleaded for patience, the first servant not only refused, but had the man thrown into prison (Ma. 18:21-35). Not surprisingly, Jesus didn’t take too kindly to this response as he drew the parable to a close. He calls us to extend to others the patience from God that we have received.

As Paul writes to the church: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with each other and forgiving one another . . . as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:12-13). The way we are to cultivate patience with others, a patience that may even lead to forgiveness (even to a moving company that seems to have wronged us by taking its sweet time!), is to constantly reflect on God’s patience with us.

B. The discipline of sabbath might be helpful here. On the sabbath we intentionally put aside our push for productivity and enter another reckoning of time. We put aside our work, trusting that as we do so, God is still at work and will meet our needs. We set apart time to worship, putting ourselves in the presence of a holy God and his set apart people, in order to remember and reflect on his incredible love for us, how at the center of the Christian story is a God who is patient, not in a hurry, and slowly yet diligently over many generations working his purposes out. We engage in activities to help us rest and recuperate, experiencing time as a gift to enjoy, not a scarce commodity to make the most of. We might even consider unplugging from all those high-speed devices in our lives that so easily direct our sense of time. All of the above can help us develop a rhythm of patience as we head into the week, with others and even with ourselves.

III. Bearing with Our Circumstances

A. But what about, not just the people in our lives that call for our patience, but circumstances, especially the hard ones, that just don't seem to be changing for the good. With the arrival of Jesus, the plan of God to deal with the sin and suffering in the world was put into high gear. But still we wait, and not always patiently. So we pray that God's will might be done on earth as in heaven. James addresses this waiting head on as he writes to encourage Christians who are in the midst of trials. Specifically, they're being oppressed by both greedy landlords and abusive bosses.

He begins: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (1:12).

And he ends: "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (5:8). "Near," in this context means next. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, his ascension, and the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit, the return of Jesus is the next major event that we are waiting for in what is called redemptive history. It will be the climactic event and it will be a restorative event such that all the bad that has happened will be washed away and made new.

Illustration: A missionary in Liberia named Greg Fisher was sharing this promise with his African listeners. He was preaching on the text, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command" (1 Thess. 4:16). One of them asked, "What will he command? When Jesus comes with a loud shout, I want to know!" Fisher wanted to leave the question unanswered because the Bible doesn't really say and he didn't want to presume. Then, his mind began to wander to scenes he had witnessed during the years of the Liberian civil war, scenes of whole villages slaughtered, scenes of torture, of beggars in the streets, of people forced to live like animals in order to survive. The voice of the man broke into his thoughts: "Reverend Fisher, what will Jesus command?" And he heard himself say, "Enough! Enough!" The man, thinking he was being told to be quiet said, "What do you mean?" Fisher continued, "Jesus will shout enough suffering, enough terror, enough abuse and injustice, enough sickness and disease, enough death...enough!"

God, in his wisdom, wants as many folk as possible to experience that joy, so, like good farmers awaiting their crop, God calls us to be patient, to live faithfully, to yield control to him, to have the patient confidence that one day he will say "Enough" and restore all things, and as we wait, to know his presence with us.

As silly as it might seem, the experiences of life, like waiting for a mover to come, can be helpful tools for cultivating patience. They can be days for recognizing the presence of God through the care provided by others. They can be days of realizing how little of our stuff we actually need. They can be days of anticipating the blessing of God's new creation, when God will say "enough" to our emptiness and fill us with his goodness.

The ultimate declaration of such patience is found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, declaring that our trials do not have the last word, revealing the incredible patience of Jesus for us as he gave us his life, and learning from him how to trust and yield control to the gracious Creator who holds the whole world in his hand. Let us go there now as we share at the table.