

12 July 2009

Patience: Waiting and *Waiting*

James 5:7-11

Samsung has a new handheld device on the market, and they're pushing it with a splashy marketing campaign. The tag in the commercials and on the billboards is simple: "Impatience is a virtue." Now we know that Samsung's sales pitch is a twisting around of an old saying: "Patience is a virtue." That saying is one of a handful that seem as though they came from the Bible, but really didn't. Like "God helps those who help themselves", or "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Neither of those is in the Bible...sorry.

But what about the saying, "patience is a virtue"? Does that mean anything for us? Isn't the idea of 'virtue' a little outdated? And patience. Do we think of patience as an important behavior or has it lived out its usefulness for us? Samsung didn't start their campaign without expecting to tap into a feeling out there—or in here—that will help them sell some phones. So what about it? Is patience a virtue?

One definition of patience reads like this: "Patience is the ability to endure waiting, delay, or provocation without becoming annoyed or upset, or to persevere calmly when faced with difficulties."

But patience is a lot more than just being able to do the Zen thing when we're faced with a long line at the grocery store, or too much traffic on the roads. It's more than just mindlessly waiting.

Patience is central to what it means to be a mature Christian—a follower of Jesus Christ who seeks to be an agent of his Kingdom. Let's see what our text teaches about that.

7Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. 8You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The

Judge is standing at the door!

10Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

On the front of your bulletin you'll find the text that is guiding us through this summer series. The fruit of the Spirit is a new way of life, redeemed through Christ's work and empowered to live in a new way through the Holy Spirit. The 'fruit' here is singular—it's a list of nine qualities or behaviors that work together as an expression of what the Holy Spirit does in our lives—how God's spirit shows in us as we grow in faith and service.

Notice that these are relational qualities—the Spirit's fruit teach us how to live with God and with each other—with family and friends and even strangers. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—all of these together describe a radically different way of relating to each other.

But it's still important to remember that these are a package deal—there's no picking and choosing here. It's all or nothing. The fruit of the Spirit—shown in all nine of these qualities—is the result of us allowing God to show us how to live in a different way.

The James who wrote our text is considered to be the brother of Jesus himself. He's also the head of the Jerusalem Council, one of the earliest organizations of the Christian movement. It's a pretty early letter—he describes a fairly simple order for leading a church, and he still refers to local congregations as synagogues instead of churches. The audience for the letter is clearly Jewish—the Christians who started out in Judaism before converting to Christianity.

The best known part of James' letter is his teaching about the relationship between faith and action. Where most of the New Testament seems to place a higher value on what we believe over what we do, James pretty bluntly shifts

the balance the other way. In the first chapter he says: “Don’t just listen to the word—do what it says.” He says in chapter 2 that “faith without deeds is dead.”

By the time we get to our passage, James has made a case for what life in the community of faith is supposed to be like. He makes a strong case against discrimination in the church, and sets faith and action as the only measures of value or status among the followers of Christ.

Right before our text James has some strong words for rich people who oppress the poor—people who hoard their wealth but neglect to treat their employees fairly. We won’t go into that part of the letter right now, but trust me, you don’t want to be that person.

The point here is that our passage was written in the context of a longer discussion about how we’re supposed to live and behave as people who enjoy God’s love and grace and forgiveness.

In our passage we see patience tied to the natural progression of things. James says: “See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its crop...and how patient he is?” It’s like the quote from Fred Brooks, a famous project manager, who reminds his clients that “the bearing of a child takes nine months...no matter how many women are assigned.”

The word that James uses for patience has a special meaning in the Bible. It doesn’t have anything to do with being passive, in fact, the root of the word is actually ‘wrath.’ That’s right. As strange as it sounds, the root of the word used to describe ‘patience’ as an expression of the fruit of the Spirit—that root is ‘wrath’ or ‘anger.’

But in the form we find it, the word that describes this special kind of patience in the New Testament actually means to restrain wrath, to put it off for a later date, to endure present troubles and sufferings and debts, and to hold off on claiming our right to punish—to show our wrath.

So the opposite of patience isn't *impatience* or hastiness. The opposite of patience as a fruit of the Spirit is wrath—it's retribution, it's demanding a price for sin.

The other place we see this same word is in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18. This is one of the parables of Jesus that focuses on forgiveness. A king is checking over his accounts and finds that one of his servants owes him 10,000 talents—an absurd amount of money—something like a billion pounds today—an amount he could never pay back. When he can't pay and is about to lose everything, he begs the king: "Be patient with me!" Literally: postpone your wrath.

The king says yes, but the servant goes out immediately and demands payment from someone who owes him a hundred denarii—maybe just a few pounds. When the man can't pay and is about to be punished, he says the same thing.

In both cases the one who owes the debt says: "Be patient with me." Postpone giving me what I deserve. Let me have more time. Hold back from taking out your wrath on me.

The point is that all of us have had a debt forgiven that we never could have paid back on our own. All of us have experienced the mercy of that servant who owed a billion pounds, only to have his debt forgiven. The point is that being a recipient of that kind of grace—that kind of patience—calls us to be generous and forgiving—to restrain our own wrath—to be patient—in our dealings with each other and with strangers.

Last night I watched *Dr. Strangelove*, one of the great dark comedies to come out of the Cold War era. A character in the film played by George C. Scott wanted to destroy the Soviet Union so bad he could taste it. In one scene he's in such a rush to make his point that he falls down as he crossed from one side of the room to another. It was really an accident—George C. Scott was so into his character, so hell-bent on pushing the button, that he slipped and fell, and then he got up and kept going with the scene. Stanley Kubrick left the fall in the movie because it fit the point he was trying to make.

Patience isn't just sitting serenely by, passively doing nothing in our relationships with God and each other and the world. Patience is the disciplined restraint we show to people who delay us or hurt us or wrong us. It's the foundation for the line in the Lord's Prayer where we say 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'

The implications of this are limitless. If true patience is holding off on claiming our rights or the claiming of a debt from someone who's done something to us, then that has an impact on the way we treat people close to us—the way we treat strangers on the street or the bus—it even affects the values we choose in the people we elect to lead us.

Patience is so much more than just waiting. Patience is extending the same mercy and love and forgiveness to people around us as God has shown to us. It's forgiving and withholding punishment, instead of being in such a rush to destroy that we fall all over ourselves in the process. That's a huge thing. That's a radical way to live and interact with our families and friends and communities. That's what living life in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like and feels like and tastes like.

It may not make sense in the values of a world that's rejected God—a world that thinks it might be too smart to believe in a God. But for those who have received mercy—for those who have experienced the forgiveness that comes from Christ's atoning work for us—and for those who have allowed the Holy Spirit to work in and through their lives, this kind of patience is truly life-changing.

How would this kind of patience—this kind of waiting—change your life? How would it change your job? Your family? How would it transform the way you live and act in this city or anywhere?

My prayer for all of us as we make this journey together through the fruit of the Spirit, is that God will reach into each one of our lives, that he'd fill us with his Spirit, and make us into the people he made us to be. Amen.