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James #16

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What to do when Patience Doesn't Come Naturally

James 5:1-11

I'd like to see a show of hands. How many of you here today are by nature patient? Is there anyone who finds patience as natural as breathing? Anyone? Anyone? I'm looking for that man or woman, young or old, who instinctively responds to irritating people and aggravating circumstances with a calm and controlled spirit. Anyone? Anyone? Hmmm. I didn't think so.

Well, that sort of ruins things for me today. I had hoped to bring that person on stage and parade them before you, first as the only altogether patient person on the planet, and then second, as the most naïve, out-of-touch, un-self-aware, dishonest person on the planet. But lacking my flesh-and-blood illustration, I will proceed with my point.

No one comes by patience naturally. No one instinctively responds to adversity and interruptions without at least some measure of irritation and anger. No one encounters opposition to one's plans without some degree of agitation and frustration. Patience, to put it simply, is *counter-intuitive*. It is not something with which we are born. It is, instead, a work of God's grace in the human heart, a fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Let me begin with a confession. I'm an impatient man. I hate it, but it's true. I get frustrated when a train stops on the tracks and I'm delayed 15 minutes or more for an appointment. I get angry when my computer won't function or when I struggle to connect with the Internet. It happens when I drive and someone won't get out of my way. It happens when I'm waiting in line and can't understand why it doesn't move faster than a snail's pace. When *what* I want doesn't happen *when* I want, I get irritated. I wish it weren't true, but it is. Patience seems so unproductive. I often wonder what it's good for. But then I see the damage it does to others, the hurt it inflicts, and the bad testimony it bears for the Lord Jesus Christ.

So why is impatience such a problem with me, and perhaps with you? I suppose we could analyze it until we grow impatient with not arriving at an exhaustive answer, but let me reduce the problem to two factors.

First, impatience is the product of selfish entitlement in the human soul. I get impatient because I actually believe I deserve better. I *ought not* to be delayed by the mistakes others make. I *ought not* be interrupted or interfered with. It's *not right* that things don't go my way. Who do these people think they are that fail to come through when I'm expecting them to produce? It's *my right* to have everything happen when I want it to happen and in the precise manner in which I believe it should happen. ***"My right."*** Did you hear that? Do you feel the spirit of entitlement in it? ***I'm impatient because I'm selfish and entitled.*** That's the first factor.

The second contributing cause to impatience is a failure to truly believe in and trust the sovereignty of God. I say I believe Romans 8:28. I say that I believe God causes all things to work together for my good and for his glory. I say that I believe everything, even suffering and disappointment and tragedy and delays and interference from others, ultimately are under God's sovereign control and that he knows what he's doing. But sometimes the simple fact is that what I say I believe doesn't change the way I behave. And that grieves me.

It grieves my heart that I'm as selfish as I am. It grieves me even more that I don't have enough confidence in the goodness of God and the truth of his Word that I would trust him when things don't go my way. So that's why I'm impatient. I suppose there are other reasons, but those two stick out painfully and are most obvious to me.

That James is concerned about our struggle with impatience is clear from this passage. He mentions "patience" no fewer than four times in this short passage. He also speaks of the need for "steadfastness" and "endurance." But the reason for this is somewhat unique in terms of the experience of people in the first century to whom he writes.

The Ungodly Ways of the Unbelieving Wealthy (vv. 1-6)

One can clearly see from vv. 1-6 that James is outraged by the behavior of ***wealthy, non-Christian landowners who continuously exploit and oppress the less well-off Christians who work for them.*** These rich non-believers have defrauded Christians of their wages and perhaps even used the court system of that day and time to deprive them of their rights.

In any case, it doesn't take much to figure out what James is saying in these opening six verses of the fifth chapter. He warns the wealthy about the dangers of putting their trust in riches. He warns them that whatever comfort their possessions may bring them in the present, they will not avail to ward off judgment in the future when Christ returns. But our concern is with how James then turns to address believers in vv. 7-11.

That vv. 7-11 are directly connected with vv. 1-6 is evident from the word *“therefore”* in v. 7a. “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.” The temptation these believers faced was one we all experience: lash out at those who mistreat you; return evil for evil; seek revenge; get even; ignore God's will and vent your anger at these people who obviously are breaking the law and taking advantage of you.

James's counsel is counter-intuitive and difficult to hear: “Be patient!” On first hearing, that doesn't appear to make any sense at all.

But first, how do we know these people in vv. 1-6 who are the objects of James's angry denunciation are unbelievers? Three things tell us this. First, there is the absence in vv. 1-6 of the word “brothers”. But in vv. 7-11 the word “brothers” appears three times. This alone indicates that James shifts his focus or his audience from vv. 1-6 to vv. 7-11. Second, there is no call to repentance in vv. 1-6. Instead, there is a stern warning of impending and inevitable judgment. Third, there is no rebuke to the rich for living inconsistently with their faith, for they had none. If James regarded them as believers he would surely have pointed out the incongruity of their profession with their practice.

But if vv. 1-6 aren't directly addressed to Christians, what's the point of including them in his letter? For one thing, I think James wants to dissuade hesitant or timid Christians from falling into the foolish trap of trusting in riches or earthly possessions. In other words, James is speaking *about* the unbeliever in vv. 1-6 but he is also speaking *to* Christians. He is saying, “Followers of Jesus, don't be enamored with or in awe of the pleasures and comfort that come with great wealth. All who put their trust in earthly achievement to the exclusion of devotion to Jesus will face certain destruction and judgment.” In a word, he writes vv. 1-6 so that Christians won't be duped or taken in by the apparent benefits of ill-gotten gain.

Our concern is with vv. 7-11 and what James says to Christians who are the victims of injustice and exploitation and the evil actions of others.

Patience and the Parousia (vv. 7-9)

Three times in vv. 7-9 James calls for them to be “patient” in light of the impending return of Jesus Christ. But before I try to account for its significance, I need to address a problem.

James appears to believe that the second coming of Christ would happen in the lifetime of his readers. Although in v. 7 he merely states the “fact” of Christ’s return, in v. 8 he declares that it is “near” or “at hand” (v. 8b). Was he mistaken? And if so, how can we continue to affirm that the Bible is inerrant, or free from error?

No, he was not mistaken. We must remember that ***we have been living in the “last days” ever since Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven.*** Several texts confirm this. In preaching on the day of Pentecost Peter referred to the present church age as “the last days” when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17). Paul uses the language of the “last days” in a similar fashion in 2 Timothy 3:1. The Apostle John boldly declared that he and his fellow believers were living in the “last hour” (1 John 2:18; see also Jude 18; 2 Peter 3:3).

But no one knew how long the “last days” would last. It may well be that we are living in the “last days” of the “last days,” but no one can be certain. What we do know for sure is that every generation of Christians should understand that the “last days” are already here and have been ever since Christ ascended into heaven. Therefore, it is entirely legitimate for every generation of Christians, including that of James, to live knowing that the next great event in God’s saving purposes is the return of Christ to the earth. ***All believers should live conscious of the fact that Christ could appear at any time. And that knowledge ought to serve as an incentive to obedience and holiness and trust.***

So James says in v. 7, “be patient . . . until the coming of the Lord.” And in v. 8 he again says, “be patient . . . for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” And in v. 9 he reminds them again that “the Judge [i.e., Jesus] is standing at the door.” All of us should wake up each day with that possibility firmly settled in our hearts as well. And not for the purpose of fueling end-time speculation or a reason to run and hide in fear and panic. ***The prophetic certainty of Christ’s coming is designed to stir our hearts and move our hands in the pursuit of holiness!*** As John said, “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him ***purifies*** himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2b-3).

In the case of James's original audience, they were suffering economic exploitation and injustice at the hands of wealthy non-Christians. James does not tell them to get even. He does not encourage them to exact vengeance or to hate their oppressors. He tells them to be patient; to endure in the face of trial; to remain steadfast; to strengthen their hearts. James is not suggesting that they should not avail themselves of the appropriate legal system to seek justice. If that proves to be a possibility then they should surely pursue it. But the problem is that the wealthy controlled the courts through bribery and blackmail.

In such cases, the one thing that will sustain you and protect your heart from growing bitter and angry is ***the rock-solid assurance that Jesus is coming back***. And when he does he will judge the wicked who take advantage of you and will lead you into the indescribable blessings and joy of life with Christ in the new heavens and new earth. Some of you may be inclined to say, "That's not good enough! I need relief now! I need for my enemies to be held accountable now! I want to see them judged now!"

If that is the attitude of your heart, I have nothing else to give you. I have nothing more to say. ***The only comfort that God gives us in the present day is the reassurance that he will deal righteously with those who have dealt unrighteously with you.***

Let me interrupt my flow of thought to say something at this point, because if I don't some of you will undoubtedly ask me about this later.

James gives an illustration in v. 7 of what our patience should be like. He compares it to the farmer who, after planting his seed, waits patiently for ***"the early and the late rains"*** and the fruit of the harvest that it will bring. Many Christians have argued that the "early" rain is a prophetic reference to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in the first century and that the "late" or "latter" rain refers prophetically to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at the end of this present church age.

In ancient Palestine there were ***two customary periods of rain*** on which the success of crops depended. The "early" rain was expected in the Fall, around the end of October, and the "late" rain usually fell in the Spring, in late April or early May (see Deut. 11:14). We read of this, for example, in Joel 2. The prophet reminds the people how God has blessed them agriculturally:

“Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before” (Joel 2:23).

Now, note carefully. The coming of the “late” or “latter” rain is not connected with the ministry of the Holy Spirit but with the second coming of Jesus. James’s point is that “just as the patience of the farmer . . . is motivated by the sure coming of rain, so also the patience of the Christian . . . is motivated by the sure coming of Christ” (D. K. Johnson, *James’s Use of the OT*, 306).

Unfortunately, this illegitimate appeal to the “early” and “latter” rain and its alleged connection to the Holy Spirit has led many into fanaticism and error. One example is the so-called “**Latter Rain Movement**” that first emerged in November, 1947, at Sharon Orphanage and Schools in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada.

About 70 students had gathered to fast, pray, and study the Word of God. Key figures were brothers George and Ern Hawtin, P. G. Hunt, Herrick Holt, and Milford Kirkpatrick. What brought attention to the movement was the fact that for years following the Azusa Street revival (1906-09) there had been little power and minimal evidence of the gifts of the Spirit among Pentecostals. Now suddenly people were “falling under the power” of God, kneeling in adoration and worship, together with the impartation of spiritual gifts through the laying on of hands. Thousands from both Canada and the U.S. attended the Sharon Camp Meeting in North Battleford on July 7-18, 1948, where reports of healings and the power of God were plentiful. Opposition soon arose in response to what were perceived to be doctrinal errors and extremes in the movement. Richard Riss explains:

“After this time, many people were dropped from or pressured to resign from various denominations for their involvement in the Latter Rain. This was particularly true with regard to the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Assemblies of God in the U.S., and the Pentecostal Holiness Church, all of which officially disapproved of the beliefs and practices of the ‘New Order of the Latter Rain,’ as it was called by these denominations. The Latter Rain movement quickly became anathema among most major Pentecostal denominational bodies, and every effort was made by people within them to remain as far removed from any association with the movement as possible” (*A Survey of 20th Century Revival Movements*, 121).

Some of the more controversial doctrines that were associated with the Latter Rain movement include:

(1) ***Restorationism*** - They argued that God had been progressively "restoring" to the church NT truths that had been lost for centuries and that complete restoration of the NT ideal would be consummated in their movement.

(2) ***Five-Fold Ministry*** - An essential element in this restoration of the NT ideal was the emergence of the 5-fold ministry of Ephesians 4:11, in particular the offices of apostle and prophet.

(3) ***Laying on of Hands*** - The laying on of hands for the purpose of imparting spiritual gifts was an important part of their practice.

(4) ***Prophecy*** - The prophetic gift was strongly emphasized, but often abused when employed to give directional (controlling) guidance to people.

(5) ***Recovery of True Worship*** - The restoration of David's Tabernacle as a model for true worship was stressed.

[There was nothing inherently heretical in the first five of these distinctive beliefs. But things are different with the next three.]

(6) ***Immortalization of the Saints*** - Some in the movement taught that those who fully embraced the restoration would be blessed with immortality *before* the second coming of Christ. Although only a small minority taught this view, the entire movement soon became identified with it in the minds of its critics.

(7) ***Unity of the Church*** - The church will attain an unprecedented unity in the faith before the return of Christ.

(8) ***The Manifested Sons of God*** - Some associated with the movement embraced the idea that the Church on earth is the *ongoing incarnation* of Jesus himself. The

Church is becoming one in nature and essence with Jesus. As it takes shape it will eventually "manifest" the Son of God to such a high degree that there will be no need for a literal, personal second coming of Christ. The Church will have become (will be "manifested" as) the Son of God on earth.

Not everything in the Latter Rain movement was unbiblical. In fact, I applaud their zeal for more power from the Holy Spirit. Their commitment to prayer and fasting and the operation of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit is admirable. We should learn from it. But several of the other doctrines they devised are clearly unbiblical, and whatever it was that they experienced of the Holy Spirit during this season of revival is not what the Bible is talking about when it refers to the "late" or "latter" rain.

As we come back to our passage, look closely at v. 9 and James's exhortation that we "not grumble against one another." Whenever we are going through difficult and challenging times, when we are being taken advantage of and there doesn't seem to be much hope of restitution, we lash out at those closest to us. We impatiently shift our anger from those who are oppressing us to those who have done nothing wrong. Whether it is someone in our own family or in the church we find ways to justify blaming them for our hardship and heartache. Perhaps you've heard the old saying:

"To walk in love with saints above,
will be a wondrous glory.
To walk below with saints we know,
well, that's another story!"

Some Examples for Us (vv. 10-11)

In vv. 10-11 James directs our attention to the OT. He mentions the suffering, patience, and steadfastness of "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" (v. 10b). We don't know whom he had in mind, but certainly Jeremiah would qualify.

The second example he mentions is known to us all: **Job** (v. 11). But wait a minute. Job was a lot of things but "patient" wasn't one of them! At times he could be a little self-righteous as he defended himself and insisted that he had done nothing to deserve such severe suffering. He would impatiently explode when his counselors tried to account for his suffering by telling him it

was all because he had sinned somewhere at some time in his past (see Job 3:1, 11; 16:2). He loudly protested to God as well (Job 7:11-16; 10:18; 23:2; 30:20-23). ***Patience was not something in which Job excelled.***

But he ***was*** steadfast! In spite of the suffering he endured and in spite of the misguided counsel of his friends, ***he steadfastly endured and remained loyal to the Lord.*** When his wife urged him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9) he said to her: “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10a). Then the text says: “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:10b).

One more thing for us to consider. James says that in the story and experience and steadfastness of Job we see “the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (v. 11b). What does this mean?

There are two possibilities, and both may be right. On the one hand, the word translated “purpose” could also be rendered “goal” (*telos*). God’s “goal” or his “purpose” in permitting Job to suffer as he did was to demonstrate that he was worthy of Job’s love and loyalty even if he had nothing else in life to enjoy. Even should he lose all material wealth, and even his family, to know and love God and to see his majesty and greatness was enough for him.

Let me briefly remind you of the story of Job and his suffering. Satan was at a loss. Job was a complete puzzle to him. He didn't doubt that Job was obedient and upright. There was no mistaking his godliness. But ***the devil just couldn't bring himself to believe that anyone would want to be holy for nothing.*** He refused to believe that Job worshiped and loved and served God simply for who God is. He must be in it for the benefits God bestows.

So the only thing left was to launch an assault against Job's motives. Whereas he could hardly question Job's righteousness, he did wonder about the reason for it. ***His diabolical conclusion was that Job served God for what he could get out of him. Job's piety, reasoned the devil, must be a calculated effort to milk God of his gifts.*** "Take away the pay and he'll quit the job," he thought. Satan was persuaded that worship must be fundamentally selfish, that it is nothing more than a man-made device to flatter God into generosity. If God's generosity were cut off, thought Satan, Job's praise would turn to cursing.

In sum, ***Satan accuses God of having bought Job's loyalty with health and wealth:*** "Job doesn't serve you for free. Don't flatter yourself, God! No one else does either. You're simply not that big

of a deal!" In effect, he says: "He doesn't love you for who you are but only for what you've given him." In other words, it isn't Job that Satan accuses, but God!

The question that Job will face, the question we all face is this: "Is God worthy to be loved and deserving of our obedience for who he is, irrespective of all other considerations?" Is Job sufficiently dedicated to remain loyal if no benefits are attached? Satan says no. He accuses God of being a deceptive fraud and Job of being a selfish hypocrite.

And James is telling us that the "goal" or "purpose" of God in permitting Satan to inflict Job was to demonstrate conclusively that God is worthy of our hearts and our lives and our faith even when everything imaginable goes south: our health, our families, our wealth and possessions, everything.

But there is another possibility as well. When James describes God as "***compassionate and merciful***" he may be referring to the way in which God restored to Job everything he lost. You will remember that at the conclusion of the book of Job, God multiplied to Job many times over the losses that he had endured (see Job 42:10-16). Now, that doesn't mean that patience and steadfastness in suffering will always be rewarded by material and physical prosperity. If you think otherwise, go read Hebrews 11 once again. But it was true in the case of Job. And we can always be assured that we will be the recipients of God's compassion and mercy, even if it doesn't take on the same form as it did in the life of Job.

Concluding Thoughts on Patience

Let's close by returning to where we began: with the struggle we all face with impatience. I mentioned at the start that in most instances we are impatient for two reasons. **First**, we are selfish and have a spirit of entitlement, thinking that we deserve that people always treat us the way we want and that circumstances should always turn out the way we think they should. ***The solution to this delusion is to remind ourselves constantly that we are all hell-deserving sinners and that the only thing we deserve is damnation.*** And yet because of who Jesus is and what he's done for us, that will never happen. Do you see how incredibly practical and life-changing that is? Not all the formulas and five-step agendas in the world will do for you what a moment of thoughtful, prayerful reflection on the grace of God will do.

Second, I said we struggle because we really don't believe that God is in charge of our lives, not simply in the sense that he gave us life and he is sovereign over when and how we die. He is in

charge of every circumstance, every twist and turn, every up and every down. And the good news about this is that we are told repeatedly in Scripture that he uses each and every aggravation, each and every occasion of suffering, each and every irritating person, each and every twinge of pain and disappointment, each and every train stalled on the tracks, each and every ridiculous driver on the highway, each and every glitch in our computers, to refine us and make us more and more like Jesus!

To these two let me add a **third**. We are also impatient because we do not think enough about the certainty of Christ's second coming and what he will do when he returns.

So, if you struggle with impatience as I do, the solution isn't to take a deep breath and count to ten or any such mumbo-jumbo. The solution is to think deeply about the ***saving grace of God*** that you, a hell-deserving sinner, have received. The solution is to think deeply about the ***sovereignty of God*** and what he is accomplishing in your life through all the adversity you experience. And the solution is also found in meditating often and keeping ever before your eyes the impending ***second coming of Jesus Christ***.