

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 6, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #4:
PATIENCE
James 5:7-11**

“The fruit of the Spirit,” say it with me, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). As we continue our countdown of these nine varieties of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we come today to the one that may be the spiritual Achilles’ heel for the greatest number of us: patience.

For some biblical perspective on it, let’s look together at James 5:7-11. Remember that the author of this letter is not James the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee, one of the 12 disciples Jesus chose to be with Him, to learn from Him, and to carry out His ministry in the world following His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. James was the first of the original 12 to be martyred for his faith, which you can read about in Acts 12:1-2. The James who wrote this letter was the (half) brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. James came to faith in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of sinners and went on to become one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, playing a significant role in the first Church Council at Jerusalem, which you can read about in Acts 15.

Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word from James 5:7-11.

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I need to begin this message with several caveats. First, in case it is not already obvious to you, I am no expert in patience. I’ve had a lifetime in which to learn it or acquire it, but my spirit of impatience too often and too easily rears its ugly head. I have not mastered the “art” of patience. So, I speak to you today not from a perch of superiority but from a position of inferiority.

Second, please don’t assume that you will learn everything you need to know about patience by listening to this message and taking it to heart. I hope the Lord will use this message. I trust that He will use it for good in your life. But it is not the final word on patience. If you think that simply by listening to this message, you will master the virtue of patience (finally!) and reap a never-ending harvest of this fruit, you are bound to be disappointed. Perhaps, though, God will use it for good in some way to help you cultivate this fruit that seems to be in short supply in so many lives.

Third, praying for patience – praying, “Lord, give me patience” – is one of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray. Why? Because God doesn’t usually just *give* patience. God usually *teaches* patience. Which means that patience is not so much *received* as it is *learned*. And how is patience learned? Through *practice*. God teaches us patience by putting us in situations that challenge us or stretch us or test us that give us opportunities to *exercise* patience. That’s why the prayer for patience is such a dangerous prayer: Because to grow the

fruit of patience in your life, God will force you (and me) to exercise patience with others, with your circumstances, and with yourself.

Should you pray for patience? I'd say yes. But understand that you are inviting God to put you in uncomfortable situations in order to learn it.

The fourth caveat is this: I recognize that this message is not for everybody. It may or may not be for you. If patience is not a problem for you – if you don't struggle with impatience in your spirit, in your voice, in your body language or actions; if waiting is one of your favorite things to do in life, if you never feel the urge to pray: "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me right now!" – then you can go ahead and tune me out. You probably don't need to hear this message. In fact, you and I should probably trade places this morning. You should be the one up here giving this message!

But if, like me, you struggle with the problem of impatience – if you know this is one area of life where your sanctification is not yet complete, if the fruit of patience is sometimes (often?) in short supply in your life, if this is an area where you know God wants you to grow, an area in which you have plenty of room to grow – then maybe this message really is for you. And not just for me.

Waiting is not my favorite thing. I'm not very good at it sometimes. I *hate* to *wait*. *Hate* is a strong word. Maybe I don't literally *hate* to *wait*. But I have an extremely strong dislike for it. Maybe you do, too.

I don't enjoy sitting in traffic or doing the stop-and-go routine on 95, 395, the Beltway, or Old Keene Mill Road. I'm sure I'm not alone (in more ways than one). Nor do I enjoy waiting in a checkout line at Walmart or the supermarket. Let's not even talk about the DMV.

When you're in the hospital, you spend a lot of time waiting, don't you? I wonder if that's why we call people who are hospitalized "patients." Because waiting seems to be a patient's main occupation:

- Waiting for the next test or procedure
- Waiting for test results
- Waiting for the doctor
- Waiting for medication or treatment to take effect
- Waiting to hear those five beautiful words: "You can go home now."

Waiting is part of the fabric of our lives. Our circumstances may be different, and the thing we are waiting for may not be the same, but the experience of waiting is one we all share in common.

Maybe you're waiting for a baby to be born. Maybe you're waiting to be old enough to get your driver's license. Or to graduate from high school or college. Or for your wedding day. Maybe you're waiting to hear about a promotion or a new job you've been praying for. Maybe you're waiting for news of a loved one who is stationed in a dangerous part of the world. Maybe you're waiting for a ray of hope amid a chronic illness. Or for a cure for cancer.

Maybe you're eagerly waiting for a new pastor when the old one retires. Maybe you're waiting for a wayward son or daughter to come to his/her senses and come home to God the Father. Maybe, like James and the church of the New Testament, you're waiting (as we should all be) for the Lord Jesus to come again and establish His kingdom in all its fullness.

The promised coming again of Jesus is the context in which James urges us to exercise patience. But the exhortation to patience applies to all of life, not just to the hope and expectation of Jesus' return. There is never a time when it is not time to be patient or to wait patiently for the Lord to act. Never a time.

That God Himself is patient with sinners who justly deserve His displeasure and judgment is self-evident in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. As we saw last Sunday, when the Lord revealed Himself to Moses up on the mountain, He said that He is "slow to anger and abounding in love (*hesed*)" (Exodus 34:6-7).

That God is "slow to anger" is another way of saying that He is patient or long-suffering. Someone (Manfred George Gutzke) has said that "to become long-suffering one has to be long-bothered." If anyone has ever been "long-bothered" by stubborn, rebellious, self-centered, unbelieving, hard-hearted sinners, it is God.

Again, as we saw last Sunday, Paul warns us in Romans 2:4 not to "show contempt for the riches of (God's) kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that (His) kindness is intended to lead you to repentance". Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:20 that "God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built." God could have zapped the world with His righteous judgment in an instant. But He waited – patiently – to give people time to repent and turn to Him. But they did not.

Paul tells of his own experience of God's patience in 1 Timothy 1:15-17, where he writes: "This is a trustworthy saying" – we saw another of these "trustworthy sayings" in Titus 3:8 last Sunday – "that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life." Including unworthy sinners like me. And you. All of which leads Paul to sing this Doxology: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." Just as God demonstrated His patience to Paul, He has shown patience to me and to all of us who have put our hope in Him.

Peter speaks of God's patience with sinners again in 2 Peter 3, in writing about the seemingly delayed fulfillment of the promise of Jesus' return. He says: "You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires." (Sounds like today, doesn't it?) "They will say: "Where is this 'coming' He promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not forget this 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 promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:3-9, emphasis added).

Just as God has shown His patience to sinners like me and you, He will continue to show His patience to sinners, giving time and opportunity to repent, until the moment of Christ's return. Which, as the Bible teaches and as we believe, is a sure thing. Jesus. Will. Return. His coming again is as certain – more certain, in fact, than the sunrise in the east every morning. Neither James nor Peter knew when Jesus would return. Jesus said that no one knows the day or time of His return. Only God. But Jesus. Will. Return. Our task, as James points out, is to wait patiently for that day to come, in the same way that farmers have to wait for their crops to mature, letting both the spring and autumn rains do their slow but sure work (James 5:7, *MSG*).

It takes patience to wait. (How is that for a profound statement?) You could also say: "I wouldn't be so impatient if I didn't have to wait so much!"

In the context of James 5, what we must wait for patiently is the coming again of the Lord Jesus who, as we are told in Hebrews 9:28, "will appear a second time, not to bear sin" – which He has done once-for-all in His suffering and death on the cross – "but to bring salvation to those who are" – what? – "waiting for Him."

The spiritual fruit of patience is evidenced in our faithful, unwavering waiting for the coming again of Jesus our Savior. We don't know *when* it will be. But we know *that* it will be. It may or may not be in our lifetimes. The signs of the times, with wars and rumors of wars and natural disasters and the prevalence of evil and false teachings, suggest that we are living in what the Bible calls "the last days." But we don't know how long "the last days" will last before Jesus returns. What we do know is that every day brings us one day closer to the day of the Lord's coming.

Which means, as James says in verse 7, that we must be patient. He says it again with emphasis in verse 8: "You also, be patient and stand firm."

Farmers have to wait until their crops are ready to be harvested. You can't hurry the process or germination and growth. You can't speed it up (unless, I guess, you use "Miracle Grow"). Trying to hurry up the process accomplishes nothing, because the timing is beyond our control.

Phillips Brooks was a well-known pastor in New England in the 19th century. He is most famous for having written the Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." One day a friend found him pacing back and forth in his study, obviously agitated. "Dr. Brooks," he said, "what on earth is the matter?"

"What is the matter?" Brooks replied. "I'll tell you what is the matter: I'm in a hurry, but God is not."

Do you ever feel like that? Don't we all? We are in a hurry, but God is not.

Whether it is for the coming again of the Lord Jesus, dealing with traffic congestion, longing for the answer to a prayer, or any of a thousand other things, waiting can be just about the hardest thing in the world to do. And patience, one of the rarest varieties of the fruit of the Spirit.

There is more I want to talk about regarding the fruit of patience. So, I'm sorry, you're just going to have to wait until next Sunday to hear the rest. I promise, God willing, to tell you at least one story of my own experience of waiting for God.

Until then, think about the example of the prophets, like Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet," as he was known, who was beaten, put in stocks, imprisoned, and thrown in a cistern while doing the work God called him to do. Along with others like Elijah, Daniel, and Ezekiel, he demonstrated patience in the face of suffering.

Think, too, about Job, the preeminent example in the Old Testament of patience and resilient faith in the midst of overwhelming suffering and loss. Learn from his example.

What the prophets and Job found was that "the Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11). In other words, God's grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). It really is. Even in our times of waiting.

So, we must learn to trust God as we sit in His waiting room.

Lord, let it be so in us, and let the fruit of patience abound in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.