

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 13, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #4:
WAITING FOR PATIENCE
Ephesians 4:1-6**

Let's say it together: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

So far in our countdown we have looked at godly self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, and kindness. Last Sunday we began to think together about patience. There is more to say, more to learn, and (in my life, at least) more of patience to put into practice in daily life.

Once again, if you have mastered the art of patience, if the spiritual fruit of patience is overflowing in your life, you probably don't need this message. This is for the rest of us. Last Sunday we considered what the Bible says about patience in James 5. Today I invite you to turn with me to Ephesians 4:1-6, where Paul begins to lay out the practical implications of the message of the gospel of God's amazing grace he has proclaimed in Ephesians 1-3. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word from Ephesians 4:1-6.

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THE BIBLE ON PATIENCE

There are other Bible verses or passages I could have chosen to focus our attention on the spiritual fruit of patience. For example, in Colossians 3:12-14, Paul uses a different word-picture to make the same point. Instead of the fruit of the Spirit, he uses the analogy of clothing. The wardrobe of the followers of Jesus, he says, includes a spirit of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, *patience*, forbearance (which is a product of patience), forgiveness, and, above all, love, which holds them all together in perfect unity.

Elsewhere, in his instructions to the believers in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says: "Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, *be patient with everyone*" (5:13b-14). Paul then goes on to give his famous three-fold exhortation in verses 16-18 to "rejoice always, pray continually" [or, "without ceasing"], "and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." But right there, amid all these instructions for Christian living is the reminder to *be patient with ... Whom? Everyone.*

There is an undeniable relational component to patience. You can't learn patience with others unless someone puts your patience to the test. Patience, like other varieties of the fruit of the Spirit, and especially love, must be expressed in relationships with ordinary people, some of whom can be ornery at times. (Marshall Shelley, "Developing spiritual fruit ...," *Leadership*

Journal, Spring 1993; www.preachingtoday.com, “Ascetic *Koinonia*.”) You can probably think of an ornery person or two in your life.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4, Paul says that “love is patient.” Patience, in fact, is the first quality of love he names in his magnum opus on love in 1 Corinthians 13. Patience with others is an indicator of the maturity of your love. Likewise, impatience is a sign, not necessarily of the shallowness of your love, but of its immaturity and the need for it to grow – or grow up.

Be patient with everyone (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Easy to say, right? But patience is needed not just with people. We need it in and for all the varied seasons and circumstances we encounter in life. One of my “go-to” verses in the New Testament is Romans 12:12, where Paul says: “Be joyful in hope, *patient in affliction*, faithful in prayer.” Putting these three things into practice in our lives would benefit us all. But let’s just focus on the second: *Be patient in affliction*. Think of affliction not just as a particular illness or injury, a chronic condition or a disability that limits you in some way. All of these come under the umbrella of “affliction.” But more broadly, think of any situation or circumstance in your life that is less than desirable and calls for patience to put up with it.

One dictionary defines patience as the capacity to remain self-controlled [another fruit of the Spirit] despite difficult circumstances or actions that might be expected to cause anger or upset (Revell Bible Dictionary, 758). Another defines it as the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset (Oxford Languages). Still another says it is the will or ability to wait or endure without complaint (www.yourdictionary.com). Whichever definition you prefer, it’s no wonder the fruit of patience is in such short supply. It calls for attitudes and resources that don’t come naturally to most of us.

In James 1:19 we are told to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” This has everything to do with our penchant to speak and/or act impatiently in all kinds of situations. This penchant for impatience is one reason it is helpful to live by the rule: *Quick. Slow. Slow*: Be quick to listen. Make sure you hear what is being said (or not said). Don’t fly off the handle. Lead with your ears, not with your mouth or emotions. Think before you speak. Pray before you speak. And, like God, who is always compassionate and gracious, *slow to anger* and abounding in love, don’t let anger control you. Don’t let your anger get out of control. Remember, as James goes on to say, anger doesn’t bring about the kind of righteous life God desires (1:20).

Anger itself is not a sin, as Paul points out in Ephesians 4:26. You can be angry and not sin. It depends on what you’re angry about and what you do with your anger. You can be angry about something and not be an angry person. But ... if anger is one of the distinctive “fruits” of your life, you can be sure that patience is not. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that pleases God. Anger is not.

Another area of life in which the spiritual fruit of patience is needed is your relationship with God. Learning to wait for God is one of the most critical life-lessons you can ever learn. David says in Psalm 5:3 that he would bring his requests to God in prayer and then “wait expectantly” for God to answer. What this tells me is that David took prayer – and God –

seriously. He *expected* God to answer his prayers. So, he waited in expectation. It doesn't mean that David got immediate answers every time he prayed. In some cases, I imagine, he did. But he believed God would answer his prayers, and so, having brought his requests to God, he waited for God to answer. In His time.

When life is hard and God's answers don't come on our timetable, David urges us (and himself) in Psalm 27:14 to "wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD." In Psalm 37:7, David says: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for Him." God's thoughts are not the same as ours; our ways are not His ways (Isaiah 55:8-9); His schedule is not the same as ours. But He does everything right on time. In *His* time. For *His* purposes.

Jeremiah, in Lamentations 3, gives this testimony:

"I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion;
 Therefore I will wait for Him.'
 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in Him,
 To those who seek Him.
 It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD."
 (Lamentations 3:24-26)

It *is* good to learn to wait for God and what He has promised to do. The answer may not come at the moment you hope, but it will come. As the Lord said to the prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:3): "Though (the answer) linger(s), wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."

Because God is sovereign and loving and good and faithful, we can trust Him and wait patiently for Him to act in response to our prayers, in our lives, in the lives of people we love, and in the world.

Sometimes you don't have a choice but to wait patiently for the Lord. I suppose you *do* have a choice; you can choose to wait *impatiently* for the Lord. Or you can act on impulse without waiting for the Lord.

LEARNING TO WAIT

Let me tell you about one of my own experiences of waiting for the Lord. I've been the pastor of Faith for almost 25 years now. As just about all of you know, I was the pastor of Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church, a PCUSA congregation in Altoona, PA, for 11 years before being called as the pastor of Faith and being delivered by God from the PCUSA into the EPC.

After I graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1983 (please don't hold it against me!), I served on the staff of a church in suburban Philadelphia for three years before we moved to Altoona. I knew there were problems in the PCUSA when I went to seminary. Mary Sue and I sensed God leading us to Princeton, believing it could give us the opportunity to have more influence for biblical and spiritual renewal in the PCUSA than if I went to a more conservative,

evangelical, non-Presbyterian seminary. My hope was that God could and would use me and other like-minded young pastors to help turn the PCUSA around. (That, I'm sad to say, didn't happen.)

When we went to Altoona in 1986, we didn't know how long the Lord would want us to stay there, or in the PCUSA. We didn't have our future all mapped out. We didn't have a timetable for professional pastoral advancement – you know, strategically serving successively larger churches until I became the pastor of a big church.

In 1992, when we had been in Altoona for about six years, our church celebrated its 100th anniversary. There were some wonderful things to celebrate in the life and history of Broad Avenue. But I found myself feeling unsettled in the midst of it all, to the point of confiding to a close friend that summer that I sensed it was time for me to go.

It wasn't so much that I wanted to leave Broad Avenue. The people of that church were precious to me. I still have a fond affection for them. It was more a realization that my days in the PCUSA were numbered due to the direction it was going, and that, for our spiritual well-being and fruitfulness as followers of the Lord Jesus, we really needed to be connected to a fellowship – a denomination – of like-minded believers.

So, in the fall of 1992, just after our centennial celebration at Broad Avenue, I began to explore the possibility of a move to the EPC because my heart was drawn like a magnet to this denomination. Early in 1993 I began to pursue opportunities in the EPC as aggressively as I could. Along the way, I had some serious conversations with a few churches. But we didn't find the right fit.

It was not until the spring of 1997, more than four years later, that God opened the door for me to become the second pastor (and the second pastor named Smith!) of this church we all love so much.

I thought I was ready to go way back in 1992. But God knew better. He knew it wasn't time yet. When I reflect on it, I can see that God used the challenges and struggles and experiences of those intervening years to refine me in order to prepare me for what He was preparing for me in this place of grace, in the Presbytery of the East and the EPC. And besides, we had to wait for the first Dr. Smith to retire!

For us, it was nearly five years of waiting, five years of wondering what God was up to. Sometimes it felt very uncomfortable to be in a denomination where we didn't fit and sometimes felt ostracized. But I can tell you, it was worth the wait!

Waiting is hard when you're going through it. It is hard when you're the one who is doing it. More than once in those years of waiting, we cried out in our spirits: "How long, O Lord? What is taking so long?"

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Mary Sue and I are hardly the first or only people who have ever had to wait. In the Bible, Abraham and Sarah (their names are Abram and Sarai when you first meet them in Genesis 11-12) knew a lot about waiting. Abraham was already 75 years old. Sarah wasn't much younger. And they were childless, which was a double agony for them. As Ben Patterson writes in his book *Waiting*: "There was a sadness and disappointment of having no soft little baby, no childish laughter, no stories to tell when others talked of their children. Worse, there was the stigma (that came with it) It spoke of emptiness, of shame, of failure to realize one's destiny. Sarah was believed [wrongly] to have failed to do what she was created to do as a woman" (Patterson, *Waiting*, 63).

Enter God, who promises to give them a son. More than this, God promises to make them into a great nation, to be a blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:2-3). Though Abraham and Sarah didn't know it, through their son they would become ancestors of Jesus Himself.

But it would be 24 years, 24 long years, before Abraham and Sarah would receive what God had promised. 24 years! Most of us have a tough time waiting 24 days ... or 24 hours ... or 24 minutes! Isn't 24 years too much to expect, too much for God to ask?

If you know their story, you know that Abraham and Sarah didn't always do well with their waiting. They were not paragons of patience. After ten years, they decided to take matters into their own hands. After all, it didn't seem that God was doing anything. So, Sarah offered to let Abraham try to have a baby with her servant Hagar. As a result, at the age of 86, Abraham became a father. The father of Ishmael.

But that was not God's plan. God had something better, something more surprising in store for Abraham and Sarah. But they had to wait for it, as Patterson points out, with humility and hope. They had to walk by faith and trust God to do what He promised, no matter how impossible it seemed.

HUMILITY AND HOPE

Humility and hope. To wait with grace, Patterson says, requires these two spiritual qualities, which could easily be added to Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. Humility comes from knowing that God is God, and we are not. He is the Creator; we are His creatures. Beloved creatures, yes. And the crown of His creation. But still creatures. Humility does not consist in having a low view of yourself. It is a clear and accurate view of yourself in relation to others and, above all, to God. To wait with grace requires humility. But humility is not held in high esteem today. It is neither prized nor consistently displayed in our public life. It takes humility to wait.

It also takes hope. Hope makes it possible to wait because it gives us the confidence that our waiting is not in vain. It enables us to keep on keeping on in the delays of life, in those times when nothing seems to be happening and God seems silent. It reminds us that God knows exactly what He is doing, just as He knew with Abraham and Sarah.

Paul reminds us of this big-picture truth in Romans 8, where he contrasts the suffering of life in this world with the promise of future glory in the fullness of God's kingdom. He says: "(We) groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption (as God's children), the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Romans 8:23-25).

If God moves quickly in our waiting, it is for our good. If He moves slowly, it is for our good. Hope assures us that in all things, even in the delays of life, God is working for our good.

One of the goods – in some cases, the greatest good – that God is working for us in our waiting is the forging or refining of our character. For, as Patterson says, what we become as we wait is at least as important as the things we wait for. To wait in hope is not just to pass the time until the wait is over. It is to see the time passing as part of the process God is using to make us into the people He created us to be (*Waiting*, 168-169).

Why did God have Abraham and Sarah wait so long? Only God knows. But I know this: In the 24 long years between the promise of a child and the birth of their son Isaac, God was at work in their lives, preparing and purifying, sanctifying and shaping them into the people He designed them to be.

And He does the same in you and me. While we wait, we must walk by faith, trusting in the goodness and love and wisdom and power of God. Spurgeon once said: "When we cannot trace God's hand, we can trust His heart." That, we can. You can. When you cannot see what God is doing, when He seems to be taking forever, you can still trust Him and know that He is working out His good and gracious plan for your life.

Be patient, dear friends. God is not finished with you yet. You can be confident that He who began a good work in you *will* bring it to completion in His perfect time (Philippians 1:6). Nor is God finished with those who test your patience, or those for whose salvation you pray.

"Be patient," the Bible says, "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). Put on the clothing of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience Bear with one another and forgive one another ... as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:12-13).

The fruit of the Spirit is patience. Lord, let it be so in us, the glory of Your name. Amen.