

Spirit of Patience

Patience, what is it? When understanding a word used both in our cultural and spiritual lexicon, it is important to have biblical definitions and descriptions for biblical words. Biblically, patience is the fruit of God's Spirit (Gal. 5:22); a garment of God's wardrobe (Col. 3:12); an aspect our spiritual calling (Eph. 4:1-2); and thankfully an attribute of God (Psalm 103:8). In James 5:7-11, two illustrations and two words are employed to teach God's word on patience.

Farmers illustrate "patience". The Greek word translated "patience" literally means "long to become angry or frustrated" (James 5:7). Farmers learn patience by waiting on the autumn and spring rains and the harvest (James 5:7). A person with a high patience quotient is slow to become angry, longsuffering, and learns to live by the principle of delayed gratification. The second illustration is the OT character of Job and the OT prophets. In James 5, the Greek word to describe both Job and the OT prophets can be translated "patience" or "perseverance". The word literally means "to stand in place or stand strong". James in two illustrations and words depicts patience. Patient people learn to trust or wait on God, are slow to become angry, live by the principle of delayed gratification, and with a spirit of courage and endurance.

The more spiritually challenging question is, how do we cultivate patience? As recipients of the riches of God's kindness (Romans 2:4), we learn to spiritually struggle for patience. Patience does not come naturally for most of us. We choose to "keep in step" (Gal. 5:25) or "set our spiritual sails" in the direction of the wind and power of God's Spirit. Committing to daily time with God in Bible reading, prayer, meditation and struggling to think rightly throughout our day are the spiritual catalyst for growing spiritual patience.

As those sustained by God's patience, we learn to trust God has His good purposes in the difficult circumstances and people of our lives. *"Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered"* (James 5:10-11). In Dallas Willard's excellent book, "The Great Omission", he speaks of a "golden triangle" of spiritual transformation. He says, "One aspect or side of our triangle is the faithful acceptance of everyday problems. By enduring trials with patience, we can reach an assurance of the fullness of heaven's rule in our lives."

To cultivate patience, as beneficiaries of the riches of God's forbearance (Romans 2:4), we battle against a spirit of revenge. Our natural tendency is to seek vindication and even vengeance when treated unfairly and unjustly. Jeremiah, the prophet, asked God, *"Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?"* (Jeremiah 12:1). How do we respond to injustice? In the Lord's strength, we speak the truth in love and to power and pursue what is just and right, especially for those who have no voice or

power. And we must struggle against internalizing anger and becoming embittered. Becoming an embittered person mad at the world is spiritually dishonoring and emotionally unhealthy.

Justice and righteousness will prevail yet not always in our time. One day, *“The Lord will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts”* (I Corinthians 4:5). *“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’”* (Romans 12:19). One day, The Lord will say, *“let justice roll on like a river; righteousness like a never-failing stream!”* (Amos 5:20) The confidence of God’s justice protects us from not being *“overcome by evil but overcome evil with good”* (Romans 12:21).

If we do not trust God, the temptation is to impatiently lash out and seek our own vindication and vengeance. We can lash out with the hand. The seeds of anger, bitterness and hopelessness can grow a harvest of violence. Most of us do not lash out with the hand but with the tongue. The legacy of wounds from the tongue can endure long after the words are spoken. Some lash out with the heart, internalizing anger, resulting in self-pity. On the surface, self-pity doesn’t seem very destructive. A pity-party usually feels pretty good. But warning! Few sins create the potential to bring out the seeds of darkness in our hearts like self-pity. Lastly, we can lash out with the will. We become tired of waiting on God which can grow a spirit of doubt and unbelief.

Why do we become impatient and lash out? Other people and circumstances do not make us angry and impatient. You and I emotionally choose anger and impatient. It is a spiritual struggle but keeping in step with the Spirit, we can learn more and more to choose patience. Ask God and spiritually wise friends to examine your heart and reveal to you the root of destructive anger.

Lastly, the spirit of patience is the fruit of an eternal perspective. In the first church I served, I had a secretary who was more like a mom. When I would become unduly frustrated by someone or something, she would say, “Eddie, in a hundred years, will it matter?” There is a time for anger; a “righteous anger”. However, much of what we become angry about doesn’t matter the next day, much less for eternity. *“Therefore, we do not lose heart”* and patience... *“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”* (II Corinthians 4:16-18).