

Prepare by Practicing Patience!

A sermon based on James 5:7-11 - ***Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!***

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as 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.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

***Be patient, be patient don't be in such a hurry
When you are impatient you only start to worry.
Remember, remember that God is patient, too.
Think of all the times that others had to wait on you.***

Now, I didn't sing this. I couldn't quite get the tune. But have you ever heard these lyrics before? It's a song one of my pastor friends frequently sings around the house with his children – I think you could probably guess why. If only I had a nickel for every time we've had to tell Mara to be patient...and I know we're not alone.

Those lyrics are part of a song which tells the story of a snail, named Herbert, who caused a lot of frustrations amongst other animals because of what seemed like him always taking his sweet time going places, doing activities, yet slowing everyone else down. But, that was his song to them ("Be patient, be patient, don't be in such a hurry!") because he had to learn a lesson the hard way growing up...impatience caused worrying...impatience got him into trouble.

I think you know well. Patience is a hard lesson to teach. It's a hard lesson to learn. It takes patience to teach patience, doesn't it? But when the lesson finally takes, the student will thank the teacher, because patience is a necessary social skill. Without it, associating with adults will become quite difficult.

Patience is a lesson is learned when we're young, but when does it completely set in? Who here would say they have mastered patience? Who here will say "I am always completely patient about everything"? I don't see any hands being raised, including mine.

Patience is a lesson for children and grown-up alike. We're not always as patient as we should be. So, we need a refresher on that lesson, and, wouldn't you know, God provides a teacher today, a man by the name of James, who wrote as he was moved by the Holy Spirit. So, God, through James, encourages us today to practice patience. In fact, God has two specific times and places in life in mind where he wants us to be prepared to do so...1) when waiting for the Lord's return and 2) when enduring persecution in the meantime.

So, maybe a quick prayer to start us off? *“Lord, make us students of your Word today and cause your lesson to sink in and impact our lives today as we seek to prepare for you by practicing patience.”*

Perfect time for that lesson, too, right, with Christmas 10 days away? I’m guessing you’re waiting for that...in some way. Kids, you’re waiting to open your presents, especially if you might know something specific you’re getting. Students, you’re waiting for Christmas break when you can put down the books and pick up the video game controllers or sleep in or go hang out with friends. Adults, you’re waiting for some, hopefully, well-earned time off of work. Some of you might even be counting down the days till you’ll see family or friends again. Christmas season is a time of waiting.

Well, as believers, we live in a time of waiting, and it has nothing to do with the month. God’s children are constantly in a waiting period. We talked about it last month. God’s Word calls it...we call it the End Times. We’re living in the End Times right now. The prophecies about the Lord’s return are waiting to be fulfilled. We know Jesus is coming and so we wait.

And that’s hard. Because, like a million Christmases wrapped into one is that Day when Jesus takes us home. Like a million Christmas presents is the crown of glory Jesus has waiting on our heavenly pillow. And we can’t wait to try it on! I know I want to see my corner of God’s heavenly kingdom. I want to see what gold-paved streets look like and a city gate made of a single pearl. I want to see heaven. I want to live there with my 155 pound finely chiseled frame and perfect mind and my stellar good looks...or whatever perfect body God has in store for me. I’m excited for that place, and to have you - my family here - as next door neighbors – I can’t wait. I don’t want to wait. And I hope that’s you, too!

We are eager. We are excited. We are geared up for glory, but God steps in and sings us a song. “Be patient” he says. ***“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, 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. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”***

This is an important thought. You see, the autumn and spring rains played a vital role in the growing season in Palestine. Without either, the crops wouldn’t grow. Their growing season was during what their warmer winter months, so the fall rains would soften the hard and crusty soil enough for the farmer to plant his seeds. And the spring rains came just as the crops were blooming. Those rains would provide enough moisture for the crops to produce even as the dry season began. If either rain were gone, the crops would be, too.

So the farmer was patient. He knew his livelihood was in God’s hands. He knew the rain would come when God was ready and not a minute before. He knew stressing and being anxious over the rain wouldn’t cause a single crop to grow and so he patiently waited on the Lord.

Well, we know Jesus is coming. Worrying about it or trying to plot out the exact day isn’t going to impact his coming at all, and so we have to be patient. So, what better example than for us to take a page out of this farmer’s almanac and put our lives in God’s hands. We can trust that his plan is the best plan and we wait for that to unfold. And while we wait patiently for him, that’s when we seek to bring glory to his name.

Ideally...

Perhaps you've heard the phrase "idle hands are the devil's workshop!" God's patience lesson here isn't an encouragement to sit around. Earth is not just heaven's waiting room where Christians sit and wait for their name to be called.

But, too often, our idleness becomes the open door the devil uses to get us to fall. James warns, **"Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"** So, in other words, don't speak words that will hurt another's reputation. Don't say behind someone's back what you wouldn't say to their face. Ask the questions "Is what I am about to say loving?" "Will it build another up?" "Will it help them or others in anyway?" As sinners living around sinners, the temptation to grumble against each other is strong. We're tempted in this and we fall, probably more than we'd like. It's sad to think about how often we open our mouths to tear someone down. It's unfortunate how frequently the words we speak show hatred instead of love. And, ultimately, that kind of talk shows we're not as ready as we might think.

And so we'd have to shake in fear as we acknowledge what James points out – ***The judge-is standing at the door.*** God stands at the door of our lives and hears the words we speak to each other. He hears hurt and the gossip we spread. And as we catch his eye, we know we're caught. We see him opening his mouth and we expect a taste of our own medicine. We expect his words of judgment to cause us hurt and pain. We expect retribution for our sins, and rightly so.

But what words do we hear? "Not guilty!" The judge has heard the case and has chosen to punish his own son instead. Jesus, the one who words are always "love" paid for our hate and shame. He traded his righteous robe for our sin-filled garments. He traded his perfect life for our death sentence. He willingly died on the cross so we could inherit his promised heaven...when this life's wait is finally over.

When this life's wait is finally over. Until then, James encourages us to live in response to that love...to live in the joy of Christ's forgiveness and revel in his mercy. But, here's the rub. Living a joy-filled life doesn't mean we will be surrounded with nothing but joy. In fact as we await Christ's return, we're told the world will be getting worse, not better - more evil and violent, not less. God even tells us Christians will endure hardships in their own lives because of their faith in Jesus. And yet, that joy can still remain...even as now, we patiently endure persecution.

Do you feel persecuted? You might say "yes" to an extent, but the reality is it's somewhat challenging for us 21st Century American Christians to understand real persecution. We live in a place and time where openly worshiping the true God is allowed. We can tell our friends about Jesus, and they probably won't throw rocks at us. We can be open about our faith in Jesus and live to tell about it. But this is not true everywhere and has not been true for all time.

James provides examples of patience in the Old Testament prophets. ***"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."*** The prophets willingly preached God's Word, even though it often made life difficult. Many of them had to hide from angry mobs and angry kings. Many had enemies who tried to take their lives because of their faith in and faithful preaching of Christ. But God turned their patient preaching into eternal good. So, we have those great examples of patiently sharing God's gospel while we wait.

But the example I really want to highlight for you is the other Old Testament example James ends this section with...the poster child for suffering: ***"You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about."***

You heard his story earlier. Job had great suffering as he lost his property, his possessions, his family. His suffering was made worse as, later, his friends and even wife counseled him to "curse God and die!" But, in the midst of seemingly unbearable suffering, Job practiced patience. You remember how he responded to those calamities he endured? ***"The Lord gives and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised"*** (Job 1:21).

I highlight that because we, too, know suffering in this life. It's probably nowhere near the disaster Job endured. But it's just as real and really hard for you. Like, having to wait again if we get to keep our little girl and wanting to love her the best we're able but also having the negative thoughts in the back of our head, "She's not going to stay. What if this was all for nothing?!"

You're waiting on a second opinion, and the pain – either physical or the emotional toil of this whole ordeal – seems too much to bear, and cursing God for all of this seems like the easy way out. We're in the holiday season, when it's all about family, but your support system is leaving you – passing away, moving away or simply moving on and you're not part of their life anymore, and you're left alone, feeling so very alone.

Isn't what Job said a good summary of the hardships we face? Sometimes the Lord gives us challenges to face. Sometimes he takes away comforts we enjoy. But in all of it, he has a reason, and in all of it he has a plan. And our part? We just ask him for the patience to wait for his plan to be fulfilled. We look to him, in his Word, for wisdom when daunting decisions lie before us. We run into his arms and ask him for the might to overcome the painful trial he's allowing in our life. We pray for the strength to carry on even in the hardest of struggles. We pray for help to practice patient in everything.

And then we praise the name of the Lord along the way. Yes, I know many of you tend to be a little more timid when it comes to singing here, but I hope when there's a song God places on your heart – at home, in the car, wherever – when you really need a sense of peace, of comfort, of God-given patience, that you belt that song of praise to Jesus. Like right now, ***"Be near me Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in your tender care, and take us to haven to live with you there"*** (CW 68, v.3). My favorite, for any circumstance, is this: ***"Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes; shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"*** (CW 588, v.7).

Part of patience is keeping perspective. My prayer is for yours, as well as mine, to always be a godly perspective, like what we have here this morning. Job said ***"the name of the Lord be praised,"*** and James added, ***"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."*** They're both right. As we seek patience to await Christ's return and to endure persecution and suffering, Herbert the snail's little ditty, "Be patient, be patient" is good. Theirs – God's Word – is even better: ***"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,"*** may ***"the name of the Lord be praised."*** Amen.

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