

**ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
SANTA BARBARA, CA  
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**JOHN 11: 1-44; GALATIANS 5: 22-23**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT  
IV. "PATIENCE"  
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I once heard it said that the definition of longsuffering is "waiting on something that may never change," whereas patience is "waiting on something that eventually will change." An example of longsuffering is accepting the habits of a spouse, a friend, a son or daughter, or a parent that will most likely always be a part of that person's character. An example of patience, on the other hand, would be waiting for that son or daughter to finally give you your turn in the bathroom that morning! Concerning patience, then, the situation will eventually change; in regards to longsuffering, it may not.

When we become impatient, it is usually with a situation that will change if we could but wait. It is like the account of the young woman whose car stalled at a stoplight. She tried and tried to get it started, but nothing. The light turned green and there she sat, angry and a little bit embarrassed, holding up traffic. The car behind her could have gone around her, but instead the driver impatiently laid on his horn, adding to the young woman's anger. After another desperate attempt to get the car started, and with the guy behind her still laying on his horn, the woman got out and walked back to the honker. The rolled down his window in surprise. "I'll make your job easier," she said. "You go up there and start my car, and I'll sit back here and honk the horn for you."

Or, it's like the story of the impatient photographer for a national magazine who was assigned to shoot a great forest fire. He was told that a small plane would be waiting to take him over the fire. He arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough, the Cessna was waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, "Let's go!" The young pilot swung the plane into the wind and soon they were in the air. "Fly over the north side of the fire," commanded the photographer, "and make several low-level passes."

"Why?" asked the nervous pilot.

"Because I'm going to take pictures!" retorted the photographer. "I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures!"

After a long pause, the pilot replied. “You mean you’re not the instructor?”

So, why is it that we get impatient with situations that we know will eventually change? And what are we to do about it?

I think there are several reasons why we become impatient with persons and situations from time to time, even when we are certain that they will eventually change.

First, we can become impatient when we are feeling tired or ill. How many of us have ever had to wait an inordinately long amount of time in the waiting room of a doctor’s office or an emergency room? Did we wait patiently? Or who, after a long and tiring day, hasn’t been in the checkout line at a supermarket and impatiently watched as the line you got in stood still, while the line you could have gotten in moved along at lightning speed? If we weren’t so tired, we tell ourselves, we wouldn’t be so impatient.

Second, we can become impatient when we are in a hurry. You’ve just left home or the office for an important meeting. If you could only hit all the green lights, you won’t be too late. But what’s this up ahead – a detour? Cars crawling at a snail’s pace? You slam your fist on the steering wheel, perhaps utter a few choice words, and realize that you are sunk. Feeling rushed does not help our patience level. When we’re in a hurry, we can become impatient.

Third, we can become impatient when we get scared. For instance, what single adult, on turning the dreaded 3-0 in age, and afraid that he or she will never get married, has not felt the urge to jump into the next available relationship, good or bad, to avoid what they perceive as lifelong loneliness? Or what elderly person, having recently lost a spouse and feeling frightened and alone, has not for a moment contemplated hurriedly ending it all in order to avoid the daunting future? We all can become impatient when we get scared.

Fourth and finally, we can become impatient when impatience has been our model. When parents have not been patient with us, when teachers or bosses have been demanding, when churches have been unforgiving, we may find ourselves demonstrating precious little patience toward others. Or when we have been impatient with ourselves for a long time, it is very, very difficult to exercise patience with anyone else. “Why let someone else off the hook,” we tell ourselves, “if we never let ourselves off the hook?”

I speak to myself on this one. For the longest time, I had extremely high expectations of the people around me. I would use the excuse that “I’m not expecting anything of you that I am not expecting of myself.” But the fact is: they are not me. They are *them*. I

am just now in my life getting good at allowing others to be themselves, instead of expecting them to be exactly like me. Many of us struggle with this, I think. If *you* do, I encourage you to examine why you demand so much of others and why you get impatient when they don't deliver. Demanding a lot from yourself and even getting impatient with yourself is no excuse for doing something similar to others. As your brother in Christ, let me encourage us all to find other, more loving ways to relate to those nearest to us. It is a problem to be solved. The great Booker T. Washington said:

No person should be pitied because every day of his life he faces a hard, stubborn problem...It is the person who has no problems to solve, no hardships to face, who is to be pitied...He has nothing in his life which will strengthen and form his character, nothing to call out his latent powers and deepen and widen his hold on life.

The answer to impatience in our own lives, therefore, is not to demand more of others. Neither is it to avoid confronting situations when we are feeling tired, in a hurry, or scared. The answer must come from the inside – from God-in-us – not from outwardly manipulating our circumstances.

Jesus, as is to be expected, is our perfect model in this arena. In the story read earlier, a man named Lazarus has become ill. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. We are told that the sisters send a message to Jesus: “Lord, your dear friend is sick.” Notice that the sisters did not say, “Lord, our brother is sick,” as they might have. Instead, we sense the impatience in their message to Jesus: “Lord, *your* dear friend is sick.” We can almost hear Mary and Martha conveying between the lines, “There is something wrong, Jesus, if you cannot heal *your* dear friend. Don't let him die!”

To better relate, how might you respond this morning if, during this worship service, an usher were to come down the aisle and whisper into your ear the name of one of your closest friends, with the message that your friend has just been found to be dying of an illness? I seriously doubt, upon hearing such news, that any of us could contain ourselves long enough to sit through the rest of the service. Were we somehow able to, and were the service to begin to run over even a few minutes, how impatient we might become, looking at our watch, counting the minutes, totally preoccupied.

Jesus, on the other hand, responds to the news of his dear friend's illness in a way that we can hardly fathom! We read that when Mary's and Martha's message reaches him, he says, “The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened to bring glory to God.” And if that's not incredible enough, Scripture tells us that Jesus then stays where he is for two more days!

Now let's examine this: not only does Jesus respond in an uncharacteristically unsympathetic way to Mary's and Martha's message. He then refuses to go to them, preferring instead to remain where he is! To be honest with you, this is one of those places in the Bible which, upon encountering it, if we pass over it without being shocked and dumbfounded, something is wrong! How in the world can Jesus feel comfortable letting these women hang there after they have entreated him to help them? Answering that question is the key to discovering the meaning of this passage.

To begin with, we must remember above all else that Jesus was fully God and fully human when he walked on this earth. As the son of God, he must have known somehow that God would raise Lazarus from the dead. But again, Jesus was also completely human. He had all of the same tendencies toward impatience that you and I have. His parents certainly weren't perfect models. Remember how, when he was a boy, he had lagged behind at the temple in Jerusalem and was later found listening to the teachers of the law speak? When his parents found him, were they patient? No! They were near hysterics.

So how did this very human Jesus, prone to impatience like the rest of us, wait for two full days before even leaving to see Lazarus? I believe that what Jesus did – even in his humanity – was to shift his focus away from the *thing on which* he waited to the God on *whom* he waited. For Jesus had earlier said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies."

So when Jesus finally arrives and orders the stone to be taken away from the tomb, he looks up and says, "I thank you, Father, that you listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me." Still focusing on God! Then Jesus calls out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus does! His hand and his feet are still wrapped in grave cloths, as is his face. "Unbind him," Jesus commands, "and let him go."

Are we Mary and Martha, lacking faith and patience? Are we Lazarus, needing to be lifted out of the tomb of sickness and unbelief into which we have fallen?

How shall we be lifted out of that tomb? How shall we be lifted out of our unbelief and impatience? By shifting our focus away from our trying circumstances and onto the God who is with us in those circumstances.

You see, Lazarus needed to hear Jesus' voice before he could ascend from the tomb. But he also had to do some practical things *after* he heard Jesus' voice: he had to wake up, he had to get up, and he had to step out.

We too need to take these three steps where it concerns our impatience. We need to wake up – that is, we need to become aware of and honestly admit that our impatience with ourselves and others is not good. We cannot afford to stay in the dark about it. We need to wake up and do something about it.

But that's not enough. We need to get up. How do we do this? Literally, by getting up in the morning and shifting our mental focus away from the things that are troubling us and onto the God who is with us. By making that mental shift every morning, we will be able to sense God's presence all day long.

But waking up and even getting up are still not enough. We also need to step out. Had Lazarus heard Jesus' voice, woken up and even gotten up, but then stopped at the door of the tomb, reasoning, "Wow, there's probably going to be a lot of people out there looking at me; I'm kinda tired; all these bandages have put me in a pretty bad mood – I don't think I'm ready to go out there; I think I'll just go back in and lie down for awhile" – if Lazarus had reasoned thus, oh what an inspiring story of the Bible we would be without today.

Try these things to help your patience level:

- When you're finished shopping at the supermarket, look for the longest checkout line instead of the shortest; then, go and stand in it. You'll be amazed at how nothing else that happens that day will bother you!
- When you're in the waiting room at the doctor's office and your name is finally called, approach the attendant and tell him or her that you'd like to wait and allow the next person to go before you. If the attendant or the next person, upon hearing this, doesn't die of shock and surprise, I promise you that you will feel great the rest of the day!
- When you feel in a hurry on the road and you're driving your car like a maniac, actively look for a pedestrian who's waiting to cross the street. Stop your car and let them cross. I'm telling you, you'll slow down and feel positively godly the rest of the day.

And that's the point of course. To be able to wake up, get up, and step out, we must maintain our focus on God. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit of God. It can only be developed from the inside-out. "Wait on the Lord," says the Bible. "God will do it."

Amen.