

## COLLECTIVE

# Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 12)

## Fruit of the Spirit – Patience

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In our previous lessons, we learnt about Love, Joy and Peace. In this lesson, we begin our study on the 4<sup>th</sup> Fruit of the Spirit – Patience.

### Read: Galatians 5:16-25

These first three items in the fruit of the Spirit sound very spiritual. Heavenly almost. Very nice for Sundays, at least. But his next one – patience - brings us back down to earth on a Monday. What are we like to live with the rest of the week? How do we cope with all that presses in on us in the hustle and hassle of life?

The word Paul uses literally means “long-tempered.” In older English translations, patience was translated “long-suffering”. More recently, it is translated “forbearance.” Actually, both meanings are needed to get the full flavour of Paul’s term. Patience as fruit of the Spirit means:

- The ability to endure for a long-time whatever opposition and suffering may come our way, and to show perseverance without wanting retaliation or revenge.
- The ability to put up with the weaknesses and foibles of others (including other believers), and to show forbearance toward them, without getting quickly irritated or angry enough to want to fight back.

Patience is a tough word. It demands strength and stamina, and it depends on being able to exercise control over our reactions to others. None of that is easy. It does not come naturally to us, which is why we need the Spirit of God to make it grow in our lives. Before we think about how we should behave, we should start by thinking about the patience of God himself. Remember, when we talk about the fruit of the Spirit, it means that God’s own character is bearing fruit in our character. The life of God is at work within our life.

### The Patience of God in the Old Testament

Maybe you would not think of the patience of God in the Old Testament. Many people think that the Old Testament God was always angry or suddenly angry. Well, there are certainly some examples of God’s anger against people’s sin or presumption. In fact, when God identified and described himself to Moses, this is what he said: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

“Slow to anger” is a good way of expressing what we mean by patience. Now, that definitive statement comes in the context of a great sin by the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. It was their apostasy and idolatry with the golden calf (Exodus 32).

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God certainly exercised judgment on that occasion. But whereas he had threatened to destroy them completely, God's response to Moses' intercession was to spare the nation as a whole and continue to lead them forward (Exodus 33:12-17).

Even when judgment is clearly deserved, God is patient, especially when there is a chance of repentance. That's what Jonah discovered. Actually, Jonah knew it already, and so he criticizes God for being so patient and forgiving! Jonah was embarrassed and angry by the very quality that God had so often shown to Israel when it was for the benefit of hated foreigners (Jonah 3:10-4:4).

And even when God's anger is rightly and necessarily aroused by human wickedness and sin, his anger does not last forever. Micah saw that aspect of God's character (that he does not stay angry forever) as something unique about Yahweh the God of Israel, something that was not true of other alleged gods.

In the history of Israel in the Old Testament, yes there were times of God's anger, but they need to be seen in the light of the long story of God's patience over many centuries and generations. Often, God's judgment fell only after many years of warnings and appeals through prophet after prophet.

Patience has a lot to do with how much you are able to bear or carry. That's why, when we run out of patience, we say "I can't bear it anymore." Isaiah pictures an argument between God and Israel, in which God says that he had not laid a burden on them, but on the contrary, they had constantly wearied him with their sins.

This does not mean that God literally gets tired. What it means is that when God is being patient it is because he is carrying the heavy load of human sin. Indeed, one of the Hebrew words that is translated "to forgive" literally means "to bear or carry." So, when God is patient, when God forgives, it is only because God chooses to carry our sins himself, to bear the weight and cost of them on his own shoulders. And that, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us on the cross.

### **The Patience of Jesus**

The patience of Jesus was tested a lot with his disciples, as they were so often slow to understand what he was saying and doing (but I do not think any of us would have done any better). Nevertheless, Jesus persevered with them. Indeed, John begins his account of Jesus' final meal with his disciples like this: "Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). And on that same occasion, after he had washed their feet, and they had finished the meal, Jesus prayed to his Father, "While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled" (John 17:12). Jesus had persevered with them patiently through all their faults and failings.

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Of course, the supreme patience of Jesus is demonstrated as he endured the violence, cruelty, and injustice of the cross. And he did that to “bear/carry” our sins—without retaliation but trusting in his Father God.

We have seen something of the patience of God in the Old Testament and the patience of Christ in the New Testament. What will it look like when that God-like patience grows like fruit in our own lives?

### Patience in Christian Living

Patience means both long-suffering (endurance of persecution) and forbearance (forgiveness of one another), and the word is used in both ways in the New Testament.

Endurance of suffering. The Bible teaches us very clearly that God’s people will suffer from the hostility of those who are enemies of God and God’s people—enemies that may be human or satanic. So, Christ’s example becomes crucial for us. When we think about Christ’s suffering, what matters is not just the fact that he suffered, but the way he endured that suffering.

**1 Peter 4:12-14, 16, 19:** Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name... So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

The message from these verses is clear. When Christians suffer, there should be:

- No surprise (we have been warned by Jesus and the apostles again and again to expect it).
- No retaliation (because we follow the example of Christ, who did not fight back, not even in words, when he could have called on an army of angels).
- No quitting (when we commit our cause to God, we do not then sit back and wait; we carry on doing what we are called to, doing good).

Patience also means forbearance with others. It means putting up with the things other people do (or do not do when you wish they would). It means that you make the effort to “bear with” other people, even when they irritate and annoy you, or worse. Forbearance is when you choose to forgive people, rather than hold a grudge against them. Forbearance is when you choose to overlook something that was hurtful or unkind, rather than fighting back with harsh words or making sure you get even with the one who did you wrong. Forbearance is when you learn to be patient with others, mainly because you are well aware of your own shortcomings and weaknesses. It means you remember that other people are probably also having to be forbearing with you!

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That kind of patience is needed more than ever in Christian churches—and even (maybe especially) among Christian leaders. In this world of instant blogging and commenting (and comments on comments), patience seems to be a very neglected virtue. Some people simply cannot wait to put their word in, get their point across, speak their mind—however harmful and hurtful it may be. We have become very impatient—in attitudes, communication, and expectations.

You may be a pastor or church leader of some kind. And you know that the work involved in pastoring God's people calls for limitless, supernatural patience. That's simply because people are what they are—all different. We have different personalities and preferences, different likes and dislikes, different visions and ambitions. And just because we are Christians, it does not make those things all blend into nice warm fudge. Some people are very easily upset. Some seem to have been born upset. Jesus had a hard enough time with his twelve disciples. Leading even larger groups of his followers can be a tough challenge.

And even among the rest of us in the church, not leaders but just the so-called ordinary Christians, how easily we get annoyed and upset with each other. We need so much patience to put up with all the people God has brought together in the church. But then we have to remember the patience they need to put up with us in return!

It can be very hard to exercise this kind of patience with others. It's hard to be like Christ in this way, to let this fruit of his Spirit ripen in our lives. It is fruit, but at the same time we need to work at it. There is effort and struggle involved. Especially if you've been misunderstood, or misinterpreted, or falsely accused, or if you find out that other people are gossiping about you and spreading rumours. That's when our patience is really tested. But that's also when it counts.

Paul, the apostle and leader that he was, knew all about such things, even from the churches he had founded. And yet he urges us to somehow carry the load, to be the blotting paper for other people's spilt ink, to resist the temptation to fight back and become defensive, bitter, and resentful, or to react with angry threats of resignation. His words to several of his churches provide some basic instructions for both church members and their leaders.

**1 Thessalonians 5:12-15:** "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. 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. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else."

**Ephesians 4:1-2:** I urge you... be completely humble and gentle; **be patient**, bearing with one another in love.

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**Colossians 3:13:** Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

**Reflection/discussion:**

- 1) In what ways has God been patient with you in your life?**
- 2) In what ways do other people have to be patient with you?**
- 3) What situations make you most likely to be impatient with others? At such times, how can you show the fruit of the Spirit in your life in patience?**