

The Ripe Stuff sermon series  
#4 – Patience – James 5:6-11  
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James says, “Be patient, beloved.” Oh, James. Sweet, naive James. Has he seen the world we live in? Has he been on Nicholasville Road at rush hour? As I was preparing to write this sermon on Thursday, my computer started acting up, so I had the joy of spending time with my new friend Julio, a Microsoft tech support super-hero. As he was helping me fix my problem, he would put me on hold for long stretches of time. At one point, I said to on-hold generic jazz music, “C’mon, Julio! I have a sermon on patience I need to write!” I love God, but I don’t always like God’s sense of humor.

The fruit of the spirit we are spending time with today is patience. I want to disagree with Paul about including this one on the list. Kindness? Yes, Lord. Gentleness? Of course, Lord. worship. Faithfulness...goodness...yes, yes, yes. Patience. Say what? That’s not a Sunday word. That’s a Thursday afternoon generic-jazz-music on-hold word. It’s a challenging word that feels like it belongs on a New Year’s resolution list, not a list of spiritual fruits. And yet, Paul says one of the fruit of the spirit is patience.

We need to clarify what Paul is talking about here, because there are different kinds of patience, and the word is used in differing contexts in the Bible. One of the ways is better translated “long suffering,” meaning people who are enduring hardships or suffering. They are called to be patient because God is working through those difficult situations to bring about something good. That’s the kind of patience James talks about in our passage today, being patient while God does God’s work, like a farmer waiting on a crop to yield a harvest.

This version of patience doesn’t really apply to us, does it? When Paul talks about “long suffering,” I don’t think he means the traffic on Nicholasville Road. He means real suffering, the kind we can only imagine and are blessed not to endure. So, while this is one definition of patience, we’re going to spend some time on the other definitions that more directly apply to us.

I have two clocks in my car. One is on my car’s dashboard and the other is on my car radio. And they NEVER match. Ever. About once a week, I set them to the exact same time, and then within a day or so, one will read 2:02 p.m. and the other will read 2:04 p.m.

That’s only one reason that I think the clock is the most evil invention in the history of the world. Now, I know the clock has plenty of good uses, like telling time and stuff, but when it was created as a way to measure time, we became captive to it. The irony is that the mechanical clock was invented by Benedictine monks to keep them on schedule for their prayers! And yet, we are slaves to the way we measure time.

Time is a gift from God, and yet think about how we humans try to control it. Did you know that the concept of a second wasn’t invented until the 17<sup>th</sup> century? After all, why in the world would we need to measure time in such a small segment? Nothing happens that fast! When I Googled “When was the second invented?” I got 115 million results in .74 seconds. We’ve turned time into a commodity. We spend time, buy time, save time, waste time, manage time, and invest time. Time is no longer a seamless, endless flow. It’s a resource, something to be chopped up into segments, regulated, scheduled, and managed. After all, time is money.

Therefore, our value as humans is determined by how effectively we use our time. The more work we can get done in the shortest amount of time, the more productive we are. And we are conditioned to value productivity. After all, who wants to be thought of as wasting time?

That's why we have to-do lists and computers in our pockets. That's why we get frustrated when we sit in traffic, even if we're hurrying home to do nothing. Because we think we can control time, we get angry when life keeps us from using our time in the most productive ways. That's called impatience.

Do you know someone you would describe as short-tempered? Don't look directly at them right now, they may get mad at you! We all know someone like that. Well, one of the ways you can translate the biblical word for "patience" is "long-tempered." Isn't that a great adjective? I want to be known as long-tempered. Someone who is long-tempered is more concerned with how they treat another person than whether or not that person is wasting their time.

That's one of the curses of the clock, the problem with productivity. When we expect ourselves to be productive, anything – or anyone – who stands in our way becomes an obstacle, and we lose our patience. The Bible also translates "patience" as "forebearance." But rather than bear with that person, we succumb to the tyranny of the urgent, believing that in our instant gratification world, waiting for something violates our right to have what we want right now. Thomas Friedman, in his fabulous book Thanks for Being Late, says that we have made waiting technologically obsolete. When we can have what we want when we want it, who needs patience anymore?

For the most part, he's right. We don't have to be patient. But at what cost? A few years ago Leigh was making a pot of her world-famous beer chili – one of my all-time favorites – but she forgot an ingredient, so she sent me to Kroger to get it. I was planning a quick in-and-out – after all, time is chili! I grabbed the ingredient and jumped in the first line I came upon. In front of me was a little elderly lady unloading her grocery cart. She didn't have many items, but she handled each one like it was a Faberge egg, gently placing it on the conveyor belt. The more time she took, the more impatient I got. She was standing in between me and beer chili! She finally unloaded her cart and stepped forward to pay. She looked around for her purse – it was in her cart but it took her a couple hours to find it – and pulled out...a checkbook. I'm sure this lady was someone's sweet grandma, but at that moment I was about to knock her out of the way and pay for her groceries myself just to get out of there. She slowly started filling out the check, ignoring my foot-tapping and throat-clearing. Finally, she finished writing, slowly tore out the check, and handed it to the cashier. Then she turned to me and said, "I'm sorry I'm taking so long." She paused and looked down. "My husband used to do this for me."

In our effort to maximize our time, we sacrifice some of the most important things in life. Rather than practicing forbearance, we see others as commodities who contribute to our productivity or as obstacles who impede it. Time does not heal us, time wounds us, because we let it determine our worth. As one commentator asked, "In this impatient age, do we really have time for each other?"

Granted, some people make it hard to be patient. I said don't look at them! Some people are easily upset. Some people were born upset. Some people have no respect for your schedule, freely interrupting and wasting your time. And yet, in Ephesians, Paul urges us to live a life "of patience, bearing with one another in love." Some people need more bearing than others, don't they? And yet, we need to remember that someone out there or in here has to bear with us. We forget that, don't we? That's pride at work, the unconscious belief that others exist to serve us, that the traffic should part before us when we're in a hurry. Our lack of patience turns people into objects and obstacles. Do we really have time for each other?

I think we can even ask that question about God. Do we really have time for God? We desire to grow as Christians, which we know intuitively will take the rest of our lives and will

happen slowly, sometimes imperceptibly. But that doesn't fit into our culture that only counts results that are tangible, measurable, and instantaneous. We know in our hearts that fruit doesn't grow overnight, and yet when we God doesn't work on our timetable, we get impatient.

A good example of this is the time we spend in worship. This is not productive time, at least for those of us not making out our groceries list on the bulletin. We sit here, we listen, we sing, we pray, all activities that don't produce any tangible results. Many folks would argue we're wasting time, engaging in what Henri Nouwen called "strange periods of uselessness." And that may make us antsy to get out of here and back to doing things. How can we truly worship if we are continually mindful of all the other things we could be doing right now? How can we be fully present with God and open to what God has to say to us when we have one eye on the hymnal and the other on our watches? One could say that a person concerned about the length of the sermon isn't really worship. I didn't say that, but one could.

We are so blessed that God doesn't treat us with the same impatience with which we treat God and each other. God forebears us far beyond what we deserve. In fact, it's a primary characteristic of God. God is often described as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." One writer said we worship a three-mile-an-hour God. I think I've been behind God on Nicholasville Road before! God is long-tempered, and to be honest, I don't really think God cares much about our desire to be on time and productive. As one writer said, "God is under no obligation to speed up God's timetable to accommodate our urgency." Forty-three times in the Bible we are encouraged to "wait on the Lord." Do we have time for God? Do we have time for each other? Are those two different things, or one in the same?

We are so conditioned to be productive, to use our time wisely, not to waste or squander it. It goes so fast, or at least that's what our clocks tell us. I wonder how life would be different if we were freed from the tyranny of believing that our ultimate worth is tied directly to how we spend our time. I wonder what would happen if, instead of letting impatience get the best of us, we counted to ten...or 100...and realized that the Bible's call for us to forbear others is predicated on the fact God forebears us each and every time we become an obstacle to God's love in this world. Jesus Christ died so that we might be forgiven, but he also died so that we might be forgivers, so that we might see others, not as roadblocks between us and our productivity, but as real people with real challenges and a real need to be seen and heard. Every time I forget this, I hear a little old lady with a checkbook say, "My husband used to do this for me." I've got bad news for all of us with to-do lists. God doesn't care how productive we are, but God does care about how we treat other people, how we bear one another in love. May we be reminded each day that we are called to value people over productivity, and until that day when time no longer matters to us, may we live a life of patience, bearing with each other in love.