

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT – PATIENCE

Text: Exodus 34:1-7; Ecclesiastes 7:1-9; 2 Peter 3:3-10; Galatians 5:22&23

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A pet hate for anyone living in a large city like Melbourne is peak hour traffic, like being on the Monash Freeway at the wrong time. How do you cope when you are stuck yet again, getting nowhere fast? Does your blood pressure rise and your fuse shorten? I read the story of a man whose car stalled in heavy traffic just as the light turned green. All his efforts to start the engine failed. A chorus of honking and yelling behind him only made things worse. He finally got out of his car and walked back to the first driver. He said, 'I'm sorry but I can't seem to get my car started. If you'll go up there and give it a try, I'll stay here and blow your horn for you.' Wouldn't it be great if the roads were just for us? Wouldn't it be good if there were no other people to annoy us, or bother us, or frustrate us or...? But life cannot be lived in isolation. There are always people or situations or events that need to be handled. Also in our own homes where we most easily fly off the handle. The most common reaction to unpleasant people or difficult situations is frustration and anger. Which is interesting because the Greek word for 'patience', 'makrothumia' literally means 'slow anger'. 'Makro' is Greek for 'long'. In other words, half the Greek word for 'patience' is 'anger' and the other half is 'long' or 'slow'. So patience is handling anger slowly. We are to be 'long tempered' instead of 'short tempered'. The Old Testament reminds us that 'slow anger' is a characteristic of God. In Exodus 34:6 God describes himself to Moses: "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*"

So being patient is not just about promoting a let's-all-try-to-get-along moralism. When Paul writes in Ephesians 4:2 "*Be completely humble and gentle, be patient bearing with one another in love*" he means act this way because that is what God is like and wants from us. He gave his Spirit to produce in us the fruit of the Spirit, which is God's character. So we should strive to be patient not only to get along together, but

to reveal something of what God is like. In fact, how he is dealing with the world right now. The world continues to exist because God is patient. It doesn't take much to realise there is an awful lot wrong in the world. If we are really honest there is plenty in our own lives that is sinful and rebellious. Right? Why doesn't God grab us by the scruff of the neck and just deal with us? Because he is patient. In Romans 9:22 we read, *"What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath- prepared for destruction."* Paul is saying God is incredibly patient with those who he will punish. For the time being he bears with those who reject him. God is justly angry with what the human race is doing to his creation. That anger is not a sudden outburst of frustration, like often happens with us. He is completely just. But God is slow in his anger. He is patient. However in time his anger will be expressed.

Now God is not only patient in how he deals with the unbelieving world that will face destruction. His patience is even more clearly seen in how he deals with his own people. Take Nehemiah 9:16,17 where we read about how God was patient with Israel when they were in the desert after having been delivered from Egypt: *"But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them."* God put up with the Israelites' complaining and whinging and brought them to the promised land. That's patience for you. It's also the reason why we who trust in Jesus will reach the new earth. We will get there not because we so faithfully hang on. Despite our daily failures God sees us forgiven in Christ and is patient, very patient.

Let's explore a little further what it means to be patient. Does it mean we turn a blind eye to wrong? Or we tolerate all sorts of failure or nonsense. Or that we suppress everything, while seething inside? It has been said 'Patience is not an absence of action; rather it is timing. It waits for the right time to act, for the right principles, in the right way.' We get the idea by looking at God being patient. It's his character we are to emulate. We read in Nahum 1:3 *"The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished."* Now at first it may seem that these statements contradict each other. *"Slow to anger... not leave the guilty unpunished."* We

have to understand why God is patient. In 1 Timothy 1:15,16 Paul writes *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who believe on him and receive eternal life."* There you see the point of patience. It runs hand in hand with grace. Paul was a terrible person, who hounded down, persecuted and killed believers. He resisted Jesus with all he had. But Jesus patiently brought him round and saved him. Paul says if he did that for me, the worst of sinners, imagine then what he will do for you. In 2 Peter 3:15 we read: *"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation"*. This is the key to God's patience. This is what it is all about. Earlier in that chapter Peter had taken up the point of scoffers who mocked the Christians. They said 'If Jesus rose from the dead and promised to return, where is he then!'. We now 2000 years later can still feel the taunt in the mockery. Jesus risen from the dead and coming to judge the world can seem like a joke. But Peter reminds us *"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire..."* Judgement for sin will come, suddenly, swiftly and completely. God's anger for sin will be justly expressed. But God is patient so there is time for witnessing and repentance and faith. Note it again: *"Our Lord's patience means salvation."* That is the attitude we should take in being patient. There are times we get frustrated and angry because of our own hang-ups and issues. We need to deal with those. Other times we get angry with others rightly. They have indeed done wrong. We don't turn a blind eye to failure or injustice. But we get angry slowly. We deal with the frustration, the wrong, the failure, the injustice, in such a way that we move the other person forward in their growth and learning and maturity. *"Patience means salvation"*. A temper flair up and a swift back hander to our big mouthing 16year old may be what we feel like doing. But slow anger says spend time with your teenager. Talk about what their struggles are and what yours are. Help them see why they are mouthing of and how it doesn't help. Help them learn and mature. Isn't that what God is doing with us? Aren't we supposed to reveal God's character so people get what he is like?

Now, how, in practical terms, can we cultivate patience in our lives? Well Ecclesiastes 7:8,9 gives us a few clues: "*The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.*" There is a lot of wisdom here. First consider "*The end of the matter is better than the beginning.*" This refers to achieving the goal. If you want to develop patience keep your eyes on the goal. Think about what God has in store for us. What is the goal of our relationship with Jesus? Is not God doing things in our lives so that we reach perfection and life with Jesus on the new earth? Isn't God's goal to do good for us? Isn't that why he is so patient in the first place? So if things get really tough in life, maybe illness strikes us, or there is death in the family, we struggle in our marriage, we can get angry with God. But we should be slow in our anger. We can be patient because we trust that "*God works all things for good for those who love him*". Keeping our eye on the goal also helps in our relations with each other. If the goal of our relationships in the church is to help each other mature spiritually and become like Jesus, then we will be slow in our anger when we feel wrongly done by. Flying off the handle will not achieve the other's growth in Christ likeness. You might feel better for a short moment having blown your stack. But it won't achieve the goal. It is very easy to focus on the things that bother us in life. It is harder to focus on our reason for existence and the end God has in store for us. It's not easy to keep God and his glory at the forefront of our thinking, as the goal for everything we do. But the more we do that, the more patient we become.

Secondly Ecclesiastes 7 says: "*patience is better than pride.*" Put aside your ego and you will go a long way to becoming patient. Think about it. How much doesn't pride generate anger? Isn't it pride that says; 'What right have you to do that to me, leave me waiting all this time for service?' 'What right have you got to speak to me that way?' We become very shorted tempered when someone has injured our reputation. We don't take it too well when we feel some one puts us down. We think we know better than others, so we become impatient when they don't see things the way we do. We become impatient when things don't go our way. But would we be as impatient if we put aside pride and really thought of others before ourselves. It's no wonder Paul in Ephesians 4 puts humility and patience together: "*Be completely humble and gentle, be patient bearing with one other in love.*"

The passage in Ecclesiastes also tells us "*do not be quickly provoked in spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools.*" That again brings us back to the general definition of patience: 'slow to anger'. Don't react quickly. Take a deep breath and consider what you are doing. If you just respond in anger you may do enormous damage in road rage, psychological damage to your child, broken relations in the family or church, loss of your job. That's why it says: "*anger resides in the lap of fools.*" Don't be a fool. One moment of uncontrolled rage can ruin things, many things, for a long time. Listen to some of these proverbs: (Greek proverb) 'One minute of patience, ten years of peace.' (Dutch proverb) 'A handful of patience is worth more than a bushel of brains.' (Chinese proverb) 'One moment of patience may prevent disaster; one moment of impatience may ruin a life.' (Augustine) 'Patience is the companion of wisdom.'

Patience does not mean we ignore sin, any more than it means God ignores sin. Being patient with your children does not mean you let them get away with all sorts of things. You must discipline them. Why? Because you have lost patience and your cool? No, because you love them and want them to grow in the ways of God. You patiently correct and teach. 'Patience means salvation'. Patience does not mean we do not admonish one another in the church. Lots of churches no longer have a form of discipline. That has nothing to do with patience. It is actually a lack of care. We should love enough to correct each other with humility and patience. It's about timing, doing the right thing in the right way.

The greatest incentive for patience I find in one of Jesus' parables. It seems Peter was having trouble with somebody and trying hard to handle it properly. You know his impulsive character. It seems his patience was running thin. He asked Jesus how many times to forgive. He suggested seven times and thought that rather generous. But Jesus told him seventy times seven was more like it. He then told the story of a man who ran up an enormous debt with his employer. When it became obvious he could not pay he asked his master for 'patience- makrothumia'. He knew the boss was perfectly right to being angry. The servant asked for 'slow anger'. The master went way beyond that request and forgave him everything. An enormous debt simply forgiven. With great relief the servant went off and bumped into a colleague who owed him a couple of dollars. When the second man asked for some 'makrothumia' to give him time to pay, the one forgiven grabbed him by the throat and demanded payment. When the master heard it he was furious and dealt with the first guy. Jesus point is very, very clear. If God

has forgiven us so much through the death and resurrection of Jesus, if God is so very slow to anger, so very patient with what we dish out to him every day again, can't we be patient with those who offend us? As Paul puts it in Colossians 3:12-13 *"Cloth yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive what ever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."*

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What is 'patience' as it is described in the Bible? Explain the word 'makrothumia'. How is patience expressed as a fruit of the Spirit?
- How does the Bible describe the patience of God? Why is God so patient, what are the implications?
- Given what the Bible says about God's patience how can you be more patient in your life? Why should you be more patient? What particular areas will you work on?