

INTRODUCTION

We've come now to the fourth fruit of the Spirit, Patience. Remember, there is one fruit, and it has nine flavors. We read about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 which says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

How patient are you? Let's take a little test. I'm going to ask you four questions, and you write down a number between one and ten, ten meaning you have LOTS of patience, and one or zero meaning you have very little patience.

First, how well do you handle interruptions? Let's say you're finishing a project at work and someone comes into your office and just wants to chat, and when they leave you're behind schedule. Or you're rushing to get ready to leave home because you're already late, and the doorbell rings and someone wants to sell you something.

Second, how do you handle inconveniences? Someone sits in "your seat" at church? Or you're driving somewhere and there's a detour or a delay? Are you a person like me, who will back up and go a different way, even though it's longer, but at least you're moving? Or you call a service number and there are about fifty automated choices, and all you want to do is talk to a person?

Third, how do you handle irritations? How do you handle irritations like lost keys, or computers that decide to stop working? How about the little things that people do that just bug you? Vance Havner said he wouldn't mind being swallowed by a whale, but he hated to be nibbled to death by minnows.

Fourth, how do you handle inactivity? Are you a person who can't stand doing nothing? You hate to wait? I read a statistic not long ago that says in the course of an average lifetime we will spend approximately six months sitting at red lights waiting for them to turn green. Of course, that statistic didn't take into account Loop 323 in Tyler with a traffic light every two hundred yards. For us, it's probably more like six years than six months of waiting on traffic lights.

You can tell a lot about a person when they're waiting for an elevator to arrive. Some punch the button and see that the elevator is not coming immediately, so they take the stairs. Other people stand there swaying back and forth watching the progress of the elevator. And sometimes you'll see someone keep punching the button as if that will make the elevator arrive sooner.

How patient are you? Add up your score. If you scored less than twenty you probably need some more patience in your life. If you scored around 30, congratulations, you're a pretty patient person. If you scored 40, then we're so glad to have you here today, Jesus.

I came across a little poem that says: "Patience is a virtue; possess it if you can. Found seldom in a woman, never in a man." Do any of you ladies want to give me an "ah, men" to that?

I need more patience, so I'm preaching to myself today. If you are like me and need to improve

in the area of patience, let's learn three important truths about patience: What it is, why it's so hard to have, and how you can display it.

I. Patience is the ability to accept delay or disappointment graciously

Life can be frustrating and full of situations that try our patience. Sometimes we have experiences like the kindergarten teacher up north. It was the end of a long winter day in class and she was struggling and straining to stuff one her student's feet into his snow boots. When she finally finished the boy said, "They're on the wrong feet." So she worked to get them off and put them on the other feet. Then he said, "These aren't my boots." By now she was sweating, but she took them off again. Then he said, "They're my brother's boots, but my mother told me to wear them today." Almost at the breaking limit, she worked to get them back on his feet again. Then she said, "Finally! Now where are your mittens?" He said, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots." That's when she went screaming out into the hallway.

Our default reaction to delay and disappointment is to respond with anger. Patience is the ability to allow God's grace to control our personality so we can respond like God. And the Bible teaches that God is patient. The Greek word for patience is *makrothumos*, a combination of two words, *makro*, meaning large or long (in computers we have micros and macros) and *thumos*, which means anger, or temper. In other words, patience means having a long fuse on your temper. That's why the King James Version translates the word as "long suffering." The Bible says, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." (Psalm 145:8)

The mother of impatience is anger. When you are delayed or disappointed, you want to get angry. But patience is the long fuse God gives you to not lose your cool. Patience is a powerful virtue. Solomon wrote, "Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city." (Proverbs 16:32 NLT)

I heard the testimony of a successful business owner and a deacon in a Baptist church in Houston. He talked about how he struggled with impatience and anger. One morning he got in his car and discovered the battery was dead. He was already frustrated, so he jumped into his wife's car because she was away on a trip. When he got on the expressway there was a traffic jam and the highway became a parking lot. He was seething about being late, and about the traffic. Then to make matters worse the guy in the car behind him honked his horn at him. He looked in the mirror and thought, "Doesn't that idiot know I can't go anywhere?" So he shook his fist in the air at the guy. But the guy in car behind must have thought he was waving, because he waved back and honked his horn again. That's when he snapped. He rammed the car into park and got out and stomped back to the car behind him. The guy rolled down his window and he reached in and grabbed him by the collar and said, "Can't you see that I can't go anywhere? If you blow your horn one more time I'm coming back here and you're going to eat my fist." The guy was perplexed. He pointed ahead and said, "Man, I was just doing what your bumper sticker said. It says, 'Honk if you love Jesus.'" The businessman jerked his head around and sure enough his wife had added that bumper sticker to her car. He said the Holy Spirit got all over him on that highway. He said to the man in the car, "Sir, I do love Jesus, but I sure didn't act like it to you. Will you please forgive me?" That incident changed his life. He realized that his anger and impatience had threatened his witness. He asked God gave him the strength to be more

patient. And he said that whenever anyone honks at him now, he just imagines they've seen a "Honk if you love Jesus" sticker and he smiles and waves.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "One moment of patience may ward off great disaster. One moment of impatience may ruin a whole life." How short is your fuse when it comes to frustrating people and frustrating situations?

II. Patience is rare (valuable) because it's contrary to our nature and our culture

It's human nature to be impatient. We aren't naturally wired to be patient. For instance, here's a little baby in his crib. He wakes up in the middle of the night and is hungry. He doesn't lie there and think, "I know Mom and Dad are tired. So I'll just wait until the morning to let them know I need something to eat." Nope. He wants to be fed, and he wants to be fed NOW! Children aren't patient. They don't know the difference between "No" and "Not yet." There is a direct correlation between immaturity and impatience. That's also true spiritually. As we mature in Christ, we should become more patient. Is that true in your life?

A mother was driving on a long trip with her 4-year-old son. He kept asking over and over again, "Are we there yet? When are we going to get there? When are we going to get there?" Finally she was so irritated that she said, "We've got over 100 miles to go, so don't ask me again when we're going to get there." There was silence for a few miles then he asked, "Mom, will I still be four when we get there?"

Our culture is all about instant gratification. I want it and I want it NOW! We eat fast food; we drive fast cars and we get upset if the computer takes more than 30 seconds to reboot. We want to do everything quicker these days. There's even a church in Pensacola, Florida that advertises itself as "fast-church." They offer a 22-minute worship service. They have one hymn, one prayer, one scripture reading—but they still make time to take an offering. And then the pastor preaches an 8-minute sermon. I can see some of you thinking, "I like that idea." Well, it's not gonna' happen here, FYI.

A hundred and fifty years ago if you missed the stagecoach you'd say, "No problem. There will be another stagecoach tomorrow." A hundred years ago if you missed the train you'd say, "No problem, there will be another train in a few hours." Today, if we miss our flight, we're angry if we can't get rebooked in a matter of minutes.

We live in a microwave culture—but you'll never eat a gourmet meal from a microwave. And because of our sinful nature and fast-paced culture, we face the challenge of living patiently. It's not easy. Earlier this week I asked my Facebook friends to tell me what experience in life most reveals their impatience, and I got more than 60 responses. As I read them I saw that most of the comments basically fell into three categories. I call these impatience triggers. Let me countdown the top three impatience triggers according to my friends.

#3 Most common impatience trigger is IRRITATING PEOPLE

People can be irritating, and sometimes those closest to us are the most irritating. Jennifer

Jennings wrote: "Answering a million questions from inquisitive children when I'm tired." Allen Paul said, "I'm very impatient when I ask a 'yes' or 'no' question and I get a dissertation as an answer, but I try to remember that God loves them." Robyn Howell wrote, "Trying to get my 5-year-old to eat dinner."

There was a man in a grocery store pushing a shopping cart. There was a little boy in the shopping cart screaming his head off. The man kept saying, "Easy, Albert. Take it easy, Albert. Calm down, Albert." A nearby shopper said, "Sir, I want to commend you on how calm and patient you are with little Albert." He said, "His name is Joe, I'm Albert! Take it easy, Albert."

#2 Most common impatience trigger is WAITING—mostly waiting in line

Several people identified Walmart as the most-impatience-producing store. Connie Lyles wrote: "Walmart when there's only a handful of checkers and the line is looooooooooong! Oh well, I have my Target." Nancy Hart mentioned, "Waiting at a doctor's office after they bring you back to a small room—as if that's going to pacify you for an hour!"

When you get in an express only line at the store do you find yourself counting the items in the cart in front of you? You may be an impatient person.

Two years ago in Saukville, Wisconsin a woman got in the express check-out lane at the local Piggly Wiggly and she had more than ten items. A man behind her said she was in the wrong line. She said, "I'm in a hurry. You have a problem with that?" He said, "Yeah, I do, and the problem is that you're fat and ugly." He continued to verbally harass her so she called the police, and they came and gave the man a ticket for harassment. I've heard of road rage, but now we have express-lane rage!

And the #1 most common impatience trigger is TRAFFIC

Most of those who posted comments listed traffic as the thing that most revealed their impatience. Charlene Forster said, "Cars pulling out in front of you making you slow down." Robin Smith mentioned, "Coming up behind somebody driving 10 mph below the speed limit in the passing lane." Gina Tucker wrote, "Red lights and people in front of me who don't burn rubber as soon as the light turns green." Jeff Boyce mentioned, "The church parking lot on Sunday morning."

There are a lot of crazy drivers out there. A man was driving home from work and his wife called him. She said, "Be careful honey, I heard on the radio that there was an idiot driving in the wrong direction on your road." He said, "There's not just one, there are thousands of them!"

People are impatient drivers. If you don't believe it, try conducting the following experiment. The next time you're the first in line at a red light, wait for three seconds after the light turns green: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi—and see what the car behind you does. But don't try this experience if I'm the one behind you!

Meanwhile, the New Testament makes it clear that a mark of a mature Christian is patience. Paul wrote, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:1-2) Like all the flavors of the fruit of the Spirit, patience is driven by love. In 1 Corinthians 13 we discover that "Love is patient and kind." When we practice patience, we're showing love to others. We've learned what patience is and why it's so hard. Now, let's learn HOW we can have patience.

III. Patience is calm endurance under pressure, knowing that God is in control

Sometimes we try to avoid pressure, but pressure can be good. Without pressure, there would never be diamonds, because diamonds are just coal subjected to great pressure over time. The only way we can endure pressure is to have the calm assurance that whatever happens, God is in control.

I recall a story about a man named Bob who went to see his pastor and asked him to pray that he would have more patience. The pastor began to pray, "Father, I pray that you'll fill Bob's life with trouble. Give him trouble in the morning, trouble in the day, and trouble all through the night." Bob interrupted the pastor and said, "I didn't ask you to pray for me to have trouble, but for me to have patience." The pastor said, "There's no shortcut for patience, only trouble and tribulation produces patience."

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote these powerful words, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1:2-3) The King James Version says, "the testing of your faith produces patience."

Patience and perseverance are twin virtues. Here's how you can distinguish between them. Patience relates to dealing with difficult people and perseverance relates to dealing with difficult situations. The word perseverance literally means to stay on course. The word was used to describe sailors who would "stay under" the North Star when navigating a ship at night. We face the temptation to change course when the waves of life are fierce and the winds of trouble are high. But perseverance keeps us on course, even in the storm.

So let's get practical. How can you develop more patience and perseverance? Here are three things you can intentionally do that will improve your level of patience.

(1) Identify your impatience triggers

If you know traffic issues are one of your stress points, admit it and work to relieve the stress. Try listening to praise music. Tell yourself to take a deep breath and remember life isn't about the destination; it's about the trip. Discipline yourself to leave earlier so you won't have to be in such a hurry. My dad taught me that on time meant 15 minutes early. When you expose your impatience triggers, then you can begin to confront them and deal with them. IF you don't know what your impatience triggers are, just ask your spouse.

(2) Don't sweat the small stuff

Some people say, "All stuff is small stuff." Well, there are some big-issues that matter, like what are you doing in relation to your Creator. That's big stuff. But most everything else is small stuff. When you find yourself losing patience ask yourself, "One year from now will this matter?" "Ten years from now will this matter?" "A thousand years from now will this matter?" Most of the things we lose our patience over don't matter, but the people who are the targets of our impatience DO matter.

(3) Slow down and trust God

In a fast-paced world, we seldom take time to slow down and enjoy the presence of God. Don't try to drag God along with you at your hectic pace. God isn't in a hurry even if we are. The Psalmist described the chaos of life and how God is our refuge. He sang, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." But then God interrupts and says, "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:1-2, 10) When was the last time, you got still and sought the presence of God? No phone, no television, no computer—just you and your Creator?

CONCLUSION

I want to make two final observations about patience. First, patience isn't hard; it's impossible. The sooner you admit that, the sooner you will surrender your personality to Jesus, who lives in you, to express his perfect patience through you. That's the key to living a fruitful life. I can't love the unlovely—but Jesus can. I can't have joy when there's heartache—but Jesus can. I can't have peace in the middle of a storm—but Jesus can. And I can't be patient when I'm surrounded by a world that breeds impatience—but Jesus can. Will you let Him fill you with His patience?

Second, God is being patient with you right now, especially if you've heard the gospel and you haven't yet trusted Christ. The Bible says, "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." (2 Peter 3:9) If you haven't placed your faith in Jesus yet, God is waiting patiently. That's why Jesus hasn't returned. That's why you're still alive. God is patient.

After the Civil War, the main form of entertainment in America was public speaking. People filled large halls to listen to great orators speak for two or three hours without a microphone. Sounds like fun, huh? Remember, this was before radio or television.

One of the most popular speakers was an atheist named Robert Ingersoll. He loved to blaspheme God and poke fun at Christians and the Bible. His favorite speech was "Why I am an agnostic." Once while speaking in Boston he ended his speech with a challenge to prove the existence of God. He said, "If there is a God, I challenge Him to PROVE His existence. If God exists I invite Him to strike me dead in the next minute." Then he counted down the seconds from sixty. There were reports of women fainting and grown men running for the exits out of their belief that a bolt of lightning would strike down this blasphemer. But at the end of 60 seconds he was still standing. He concluded, "So you see, ladies and gentlemen, there is no proof that God exists."

The next day a reporter asked Pastor A.J. Gordon what he thought about Robert Ingersoll's challenge to God. Dr. Gordon chuckled and said, "Does Mr. Ingersoll believe he can exhaust God's marvelous patience in just sixty seconds?"

And if you haven't trusted Christ yet, God is still patient with you. There is no end to His patience, but there will be an end to your life, and to your opportunity to accept His free offer of eternal life. Will you trust Him today?

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Pastor David Dykes