

Sermon for Sunday, October 9, 2011
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Patient Endurance
James 5:7-11

James 5 commends patience four times. He also says disciples should wait and persevere and remain steadfast. Patience and perseverance may not lead our list of desired virtues. Yet James says patience is essential to godly life. Listen:

7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we consider those remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

1. The need for patience - we need patience

Steve Jobs founded Apple in 1976, at the age of twenty-one, and was ousted in 1985 at age thirty. He was exiled twelve years, until age forty-two, while he watched traditional CEOs slowly destroy the company he founded. After the Pixar/Toy Story success, he returned to Apple in 1997 and the rest is history. But imagine those twelve years of exile and the patience he needed as he watched Apple falter.

Everyone needs patience. Parents need to be patient with crying, whining children. They must endure the spasms of rebellion, major or minor, from teenagers. Godly parents try to tame rambunctious boys, still they play rough enough to break things. As much as mothers proclaim the virtue of modesty, they still want to wear clothes that owe more to Hollywood than the Bible.

Wives must be patient with husbands who arrive home late from work or sporting events. Husbands should bear with patience wives who never want to leave a party. And everyone remembers some things and forgets others: one forgets names and dates, another forgets facts and principles. Assistants forget to prepare the documents for meetings; leaders forget the meeting completely. We all need patience.

But we really need patience when we face significant evils. Petty irritations can be challenging, but it can be agony to bear with wickedness or genuine enemies. Patience in big things is James' concern. Our passage begins "Be patient, therefore, brothers" (5:7, English Standard Version (ESV)). He says "therefore" because the need for patience follows what James just said in 5:1-6. He accosted the rich who hoard wealth, defraud laborers of their wages, live in self-indulgent luxury, and rob and kill the poor (5:1-6).

James told the rich to weep, since God hears the cries of the oppressed and brings the wicked to account (5:1-5). Now he tells poor Christians to be patient, for the Lord will judge the wicked in his time and his time may be later than ours. Here James draws upon the wisdom of the Psalms. For example, Psalm 37 says: "Do not fret because of evil men, for like the grass they will soon wither. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will make your righteousness shine like the dawn. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways. A little while, and the wicked will be no more (Ps 37:1-10.)" So be patient; wait on God.

Solomon makes the point more briskly, "Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!' Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you" (Prov 20:22). Likewise, Job tells the righteous to wait on the Lord for vindication (Job 1:21, 2:10). Our passage says we should be patient and stay strong because the Lord's coming is near (James 5:7-8).

The nature of patience

I've been loose so far, using patience, endurance, forbearance interchangeably. Yet, to follow James, we should define and distinguish the terms. In fact, we need a cluster of three related virtues in order to endure.

First, "be patient" translates the Greek verb *makrothymeo*, which James uses three times in 5:7-8 (and *makrothymia* 5:10). Patience is a passive virtue; it waits. We are patient when we wait for a wound to heal. Sometimes we can do nothing but wait. Patience, in this sense, is equivalent to forbearance or longsuffering.

Second, James tells his brothers to "stand firm" (5:8). More literally, "strengthen your hearts" (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)). This term is a more active (Greek *sterizo*). It has the sense of steely resolve. Luke 9:51 uses it to describe Jesus who "*set his face* to go to Jerusalem" (ESV). Soldiers stand firm when they stay ready for battle. We stand firm when someone voices a passionate or angry opinion in our direction and we neither succumb to their bluster nor return anger for anger.

Third, James blesses those who persevere in 5:11. Perseverance is the active side of patience. It's the resolve or determination to continue on the right course, despite difficulty. Runners persevere to finish a marathon. Businessmen persevere when they conceive, finance, staff, execute a business plan. Lindbergh persevered when he flew 3,600 miles across the Atlantic Ocean at 109 mph for thirty-three and a half hours in a plane that had none of the instruments or amenities we associate with flight today. At night his sole illumination was a flashlight. We persevere when we maintain the right course to the end, no matter how difficult that may be.

Patience in James

James has praised patience before: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial" (1:12). Now "We consider blessed those who have persevered" (5:11). Earlier, James said trials develop perseverance and maturity (1:2-4). Now he instructs believers to be patient and persevere "because the Lord's coming is near. The Judge is standing at the door" (5:8-9). So we persevere, whether we see results or not, because the Lord is near.

Our passage also concludes the great discussion on the two ways of life that began in 3:13. There are two philosophies of life. One is ambitious and self-promoting and, apart from grace, it's the norm for humans (3:14-4:5). Yet there is another approach to life. God "gives grace to the humble" (4:6). Therefore James says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:6, 10). If we humble ourselves, we will know his grace.

The gospel solves the problems of pride and selfish ambition in principle, but James knows we need help to root out the last traces of pride. Therefore, the next passage warns against sins of pride - sins against gospel humility: slander and judgment; boastful planning; hoarding wealth and abusing power.

But James doesn't just condemn sin. He tells us three great truths about God we serve. The truth about the Lord preserves us from sin:

- We must not slander and judge our brothers, for God is the one Judge (4:11-12).
- We must not boast about plans to become wealthy, for God is sovereign (4:13-17).
- We must not hoard wealth, abuse power, for God hears the cries of the poor (5:1-6).

The last segment of James touches on an array of topics: patience, judgment, oaths, prayer, illness, restoration of sinners. Yet a thread unifies them all. In response to three sins of arrogance, James offers three antidotes, in reverse order (It goes 1 – 2 – 3 - 3 – 2 – 1. This is called a chiasm).

- 1 If a brother errs, we do not use words to judge them (4:11-12).
- 2 We don't plan our future as if we master our destiny (4:13-16).
- 3 If the rich abuse their power, remember that their misery is coming (5:1-6).
- 3 If we suffer, we remember our Lord is coming, in judgment and mercy (5:7-11).
- 2 Since we can't ordain our destiny, we take every joy and sorrow to God (5:13-18).
- 1 If a brother strays, we use words to restore them (5:19-20).

After James describes the arrogance of the rich and self-indulgent oppressors, he names their fate at the hands of the Judge. When the family of God faces oppression, we neither grumble nor seek vengeance. We remain patient until the Lord comes. We will remember the lessons that the proud forget: God, the Judge and Sovereign, hears the cry of the oppressed.

2. Be patient, for the Lord is near (5:7-9)

As James urges patience until the Lord comes, he commends farmers who wait for rain and wait for the land to yield crops (5:7). Disciples, similarly, must be patient and firm, because the Lord's coming is near; the Judge is at the door (5:8-9).

James condemned rich oppressors (5:1-6), but now he tells his brothers how to endure oppression. He says, "we consider blessed those who persevere" (5:11). He also mentions the first step toward perseverance: "Be patient" (5:7). To be patient is to forbear, to suffer through the oppression.

The patient wait for "the Lord's coming." The Lord's "coming" is his "arrival." In the New Testament, "the Lord's coming" (New International Version (NIV)) or "the coming of the Lord" (ESV) means the return of Jesus Christ to end history as we know it, to judge mankind, and to make a new heaven and earth. James says this coming is "near" (5:8-9).

James says "the Lord is coming." He is "near." And "the Judge is standing at the door." James is steeped in teaching of Jesus and he is restating Jesus' teaching. In Matthew, Jesus makes these essential points about his return: ¹

- ❑ No one knows the day or hour of his coming (24:36, 42, 50).
- ❑ He will come personally, with a host of angels. His return will be visible and unmistakable to all (25:26-27, 30-31).
- ❑ His coming brings the final judgment of mankind (24:37-40, 25:31-46).
- ❑ Believers should always be prepared for his return (25:42-25:13).
- ❑ Believers will have great joy in Jesus' presence when he comes (25:14-46).

How the Lord is "near"

When James says Jesus is "at the door" it puzzles us, since we think "at the door" means "ready to enter." We wonder how Jesus can be ready to enter for 2,000 years without actually entering. 2 Peter answers this question.

First, God's scale of time is not the same as ours. For him, "a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet 3:8). We think of little children who cannot understand long trips. They start asking, "Are we there yet" ten minutes into a ten hour journey. Second, if the Lord delays, from our perspective, he delays to grant sinners time to repent (3:9).

Third, the Lord will come suddenly, like a thief in the night (Matt 24:43-44, 2 Pet 3:10). There is no trigger, no line of events that must occur before Christ returns. James says that his churches were already "in the last days" (5:3). Ever since the death and resurrection of Christ, we live in what the New Testament calls "the last days." Listen to Hebrews 1:2: "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." That is we are in the last days, when God has spoken to us by his Son, Jesus.

No one knows how long this period will be. Any day could be the very last day (Matt 24:36). So when we hear that the Lord's coming is near, it means: It could happen any day; today or a long time from today. "The Lord is near" does not mean near on the clock, but nothing else has to happen first. All is ready.

Therefore, all people should prepare themselves for Jesus' return. Scripture never promotes the question, "When will Christ return?" It always promotes the question "Will you be ready when he returns?" People who live in self-indulgence are fools because they forget the day of reckoning (Luke 12:13-21). God's family waits patiently for that day.

Farmers illustrate godly patience. A farmer's life has a rhythm of working and waiting. Farmers work hard, plowing and sowing at the right time. We must work hard at times too. Then, after the seed is planted, the farmer awaits the rain - in Israel, it came fall and spring (5:7). We must also know when it's time to stop working and to wait on the Lord.

¹ R Bauckham, "James and Jesus" in The Brother of Jesus: 2001), 116-31.

Does that make sense to you? Are you a busy person who is always planning, always fixing or trying to fix things? Many of us approach life that way.

But there is a time to rest, to meditate, to read a novel, to sleep, to pray. Not passivity, not activity either. Remembering God is our Father. Resting in his loving care. Waiting for his resolution to our problems.

We live in light of Christ's return (5:8)

The Lord is returning, therefore, first, the family of God waits. Like farmers waiting for rain. We are patient (5:8). Second, we "stand firm" or "strengthen our hearts." Nothing should thwart our godly resolutions either. Third, we don't grumble against each other (5:9). "Grumble" *stenazo* ordinarily means to groan or sigh, especially from oppression (Israel groaned in slavery (Exod 2:23)). James forbids that we grumble about "each other," as if they were oppressing us.

James is perceptive. The external pressures that lead James to call for patience (5:7-8) also create internal tension. Sadly, we often speak in anger and haste when we feel pressure. If we're worried, sleepless, and oppressed, we speak against family and friends. We blame them, as if it's their fault, when a great fool or great foe ruins our work. If we're careless, we blame the wrong people. Do you do that? Keep your heart in order, or your tongue will show the disorder.

James says we must not grumble against our brothers "or you will be judged" (5:9). Remember: We have no right to judge, for God is judge (4:11-12). Jesus said it too, "Do not judge or you too will be judged" (Matt 7:1).

But notice a twist. So far, James referred to Christ's return to stir believers to stand firm under duress. Now he bids us to remember the coming judgment when tempted to sin. Why does he warn believers about the judgment? Aren't we forgiven? Some people think they are fabulous. So they don't worry about judgment – although they probably should. Grace is no license to sin.

Others fret because we are prone to condemn ourselves. We see our failings so clearly. Jesus knows our failings, but sees a joyful reunion:

- Like a child united with parents, home after a long journey.
- Like a husband seeing his beloved wife after a two-week trip to Asia.
- Like best college friends who are going to live in the same city after hardly seeing each other for years.
- He will also be like a judge who is happy to say, "Not guilty. Yes, you did it, but you have repented and Someone Else has paid your penalty."

Christians will not face God's wrath on judgment day, but we will face God's assessment of our words and deeds (Matt 12:34-37, 2 Cor 5:10). Jesus says we will give an account for every word. That's why James says, "Don't grumble against each other or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"

In other words, the day of judgment speaks to 'sinners.' But it also warns us to examine our behavior so that when Jesus finally comes we will be ready to meet him and answer to him." ²

There is comfort in knowing that the truth will emerge. It's playoffs, so here is a baseball story that I heard first hand. There is a famous, all-star pitcher, loved by the fans, by his team-mates, but not so much. Why? It's a playoff game and this pitcher is starting on short rest. His manager and catcher watch him closely, to see if he gets tired. In the sixth inning, runners on base, the catcher asks, "Are you OK?" The pitcher say, "I'm gassed. I can finish the inning, but I need to come out. I've got nothing." He finishes the inning, walks to the dugout where the manager wears a mike, all through the game, for broadcasters.

Manager says, "Way to go, Jack. You gave it your best." Knowing the mike is on, Jack protests, "No, I'm strong. I still want the ball." It's a direct lie, but the audience doesn't know that. When the relief pitcher gives up a run in the next inning, everybody looks bad, except Jack, who did ask to come out. There is comfort in knowing that the whole truth will come out one day.

Yes, but it's frightening too, because some of the hard truths will be about us. That's why we're so glad to know that the Judge and King is also our friend, that the Judge will exonerate the guilty, if we ask. So be patient.

3. Examples of patience (5:10-11)

James tells believers to show patience, even in the face of evil and oppression, because the Lord, the Judge, is near. Like farmers, we endure with patience, waiting on God. Now James cites the prophets and Job as examples of patience and perseverance (5:10-11). Both teach us how to be patient – actively or passively.

The prophets "spoke in the name of the Lord" (5:10). When the prophets had to rebuke Israel for sin, most people didn't want to listen. God told Isaiah, Israel would be "ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." Indeed, they would so fully reject his message. Indeed, the people could hardly stand a prophet. They told God's prophets, 'Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions'" (30:10). Yet they continued.

Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos also saw the people ignore their prophecies. Worse, Israel's leaders were often hostile. Yet the prophets suffered patiently. More than that, they endured - they continued to prophesy. They continued to condemn evil deeds, even if no one repented, even if they never saw the judgment. Still, we count them blessed because they heard and spoke God's very words. They show us how to endure – and not because of results.

James says Job is another model of patience: "You have heard of Job and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11). We wonder if James chose the best example. After all, Job lamented the day of his birth, insisted upon his innocence, disputed with his friends, complained that he deserved none of his woes, and virtually demanded that God explain his suffering. How is Job patient?

² Moo 225-6, Davids, 185.

He persevered. He lost all his wealth, his children perished, and his wife vilified him, but he never deserted the Lord. "Curse God and die," his wife scoffed (Job 2:9). But Job let God be God, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:10). Again, "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Scripture says, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (1:21-22, cf. 42:7).

There is a uncertainty about the precise meaning of James 5:11: "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord." The word "purpose" is literally, "the end of the Lord" which can mean two things:

The end could be the final result – "what the Lord finally brought about" as the NIV says. If James means the result, he thinks of the end of Job's story. The Lord restored Job's health and prosperity and gave him a new family. Like Job, God will vindicate us in the end.

Or the end could mean the mean "the end" or *purpose* of the Lord" – what he wanted to accomplish through Job's life. The Lord's purpose is to demonstrate his power and goodness, despite his adversity.

Both ideas fit the conclusion of Job, both are true, and both comfort and encourage us. The Lord vindicates his people, then and now. As he does, they more clearly see that he is "compassionate and merciful." ³

4. God's patience is more than waiting, it's love and compassion (5:11)

We have hope in adversity because, "The Lord is compassionate and merciful." Compassion and mercy convey visceral feelings, the deep feeling of love.

Perhaps you remember the story of Elizabeth Smart. At fourteen, she was abducted from her home; nine months later police found her, in a disguise on the street of a small town, in the company of the two drifters who kidnapped her. Her recovery was hailed as a miracle, but every parent of older children knew that something had gone wrong with Elizabeth. A teenager who can stroll down a street can call for help. She didn't run to the police officer, the officer spotted her and took her into custody. Why wasn't she trying to escape? When her father appeared in an interview, we could see that he was perplexed, too. Yet joy ruled the day, shone in his face and voice. His daughter was home and he loved her.

So it is with us. God's love is more than a detached interest in our well-being. James uses the language of emotional love to describe the feeling.

James gives us many reasons to persevere in the faith. He points us to the Lord. He is Lord and Judge and he is near. He reminds us of Job and the prophets, who persevered to the end in great adversity. Yet above all, James takes us to the Father heart of God. He is sovereign and he abounds in love. Knowing this, we can endure in our troubles, and can persevere to the end, in the love of Jesus.

Conclusion: The Lord is both sovereign and compassionate. We can be patient because we trust this good and sovereign Lord to fulfill His purposes (even if it's not our purpose). Patience shows who we are – that we do trust God. Like farmers, we work, then trust God to make it bear fruit. So we live our faith.

³ Davids, 188; Johnson, 320-1