

## *Patience • Galatians 5:22*

The plane was full, which can be enough to bring the worst out of people without anything going wrong. I had boarded early and settled into my usual aisle seat. Instead of taking out some work to do or something to read, I decided to watch the people find their way to their seats. The last seats to fill up were the center seats. The overhead racks were more than full.

Then came a mother and baby down the aisle. It was hard for her to manage her carry-on luggage and hold her son at the same time. The boy, about 10 or 11 months old, was already trying to wiggle free.

No one said anything, but I could read the minds of all the passengers in front of me who were next to empty seats. Everyone was thinking (if not praying), “Not me! Not here! Just keep moving!”

She stopped at the seat in front of me. She looked at the seat number overhead and at the empty middle seat reserved for her and junior to share for the next few hours. Then she looked at the businessman in the aisle seat and said, “Lucky you!” (I silently said, “Lucky me!”)

The man in the aisle seat quickly stood up to let them in and offered to help her stow her carry-on baggage. He was kind from take-off to landing. He didn’t complain when the baby cried and even offered to hold him while the mother went to the bathroom. Through his sleeping, wiggling, eating and crawling, the man in the aisle seat was invariably gracious.

The man in the isle seat was flavored with patience.

Wherever we are seated in the various situations of life, God has called us to have a marvelous flavor added to the recipe of our lives. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, PATIENCE, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Patience always assumes provocation. Someone or something has to bother me or antagonize me or otherwise test me or there is no opportunity for patience. If everything goes the way I like it and I get everything exactly when I want it, there is no way for me to be patient.

When I was a boy my mother would often say that something was enough to “try the patience of Job.” Like many things mothers say, I had no idea what that meant when I was a boy. She just said it so often that I acted like it made sense. Now that I’m older, I understand.

Job was an Old Testament character who had it made and lost almost everything. Disaster stole his fortune, death took his children away and disease stole his health. Even his best

friends turned against him. But Job was patient, even though he had plenty of reasons not to be.

The Greek word used to describe this particular flavor of the fruit of the Spirit means “tolerance” as much as it means

patience. And, it refers to tolerance and patience in relationship to people rather than things or events.

The old King James Version of the Bible translated the word as “longsuffering”. “Suffering” refers to putting up with people who provoke us, and the “long” refers to the patience

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of putting up with the provocation for a long time.

My guess is that every one of us knows what this provocation is all about. We all have people in our lives who are hard for us to tolerate. Maybe it's your children; maybe it's your parents. (Have you seen that sign that says that the reason that grandparents and grandchildren get along so well is because they have a common enemy?) It may be a husband or wife, a co-worker, the neighbor down the street, a fellow Christian at church. It may be the guy at the lake who has both a loud boat and a loud mouth.

It may be the trivial, but it may also be the tragic. You may be the victim of some unjust laws, deep prejudice or other provocations that simply should not be.

Who provokes you? Who gets under your skin? Who brings out the worst in you? Consider that person as the catalyst to bring out that Spirit-flavor of patience in your life.

There are two different responses to provocation.

Galatians 5:20 says that the sinful response is "fits of rage". In other words, if someone irritates me, I blow up and let them have it. If they're not available to blast, then I must vent the rage at whoever is near. It's a sad way to live, but it is also a sinful way to live. Patience is the better way.

Patience could rage, but it doesn't. Patience demonstrates restraint. Some people think that patience shows weakness. Far to the contrary, patience is very strong. Strong people are patient and weak people are impatient. Patience means that there is the capability to punish but the decision to be tolerant.

Patience is the employer who could fire the new employee who for learning so slowly, but gives a few more weeks. Patience is the dad who fulfills his promise to help his daughter learn to ride a bike. After three hours and she still can't do it, he has every right to go wash

the car, but he says, "Let's try it one more time." Patience is deciding not to divorce or sue or evict or break up or hang up even though you have every right.

Patience could do the other person in, but doesn't.

This raises a legitimate issue. Isn't it wrong to let someone else get away with wrong? You see, I can list generalities, but most people think in specifics. Patience is a nice principle, but it is something else to live with his mess or her mouth or their rip-offs or another person's stupidities.

The answer is really rather simple. It comes by asking the question, "What is best for the other guy?" Is it best for him to be fired or for her to fail the course? Sometimes it is, but often another chance is better. You see, patience isn't really a character trait so much as it is an action of love. Patience is the way love happens.

Let me illustrate. It's like words. Words are in my head. It takes my voice to express the words and get them out so others can hear them. Otherwise, words don't mean much. The same goes for love. Love is inside of me, but patience is one of the ways it gets out to you. Otherwise, love doesn't mean much.

I Corinthians 13:4 tells us that "love is patient". Patience is holding back when provoked as a tangible expression of love in the best interest of someone else. The best way to understand this Spirit-fruit flavor of patience is not to look at our relationship to others, but to look at God's relationship to us because patience reflects God. God is the patient one! In fact, most of the times the word "patient" is used in the Bible, it is referring to God being patient with us!

A good example is St. Paul. He was mean. He was vicious. His Number One goal in life was to hurt Christians. God went after him. Paul resisted. God went after him. Paul fought back.

God was patient. Rather than zapping Paul and letting him have it, God kept on trying until Paul became a saint.

Paul describes it in I Timothy 1:15-16:

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 would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Who is the most patient of all? God! And those with patience-flavored lives follow Jesus' example and reflect the patience of God.

Okay . . . in St. Paul's case it worked out for good. That's not always the way it is in real life. So, the Bible gives another example. In Noah's time people were really bad. Sin was wild. Just about everyone was mean, violent, corrupt and worse than most of us could imagine. God had the power to judge and destroy (which he eventually did with a terrible flood). But God waited over 100 years! I Peter 3:20 says, "God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built."

Except St. Paul and Noah were a long time ago. So I have a much more modern example - - - me! I know how slow I am to change. I know how often I do wrong when I really know to do good. And I am astounded by God's patience with me. He really loves me. He would have to in order to put up with me. God loves me even when I provoke him. God shows restraint when he could blast me with divine judgment. God is so patient with me . . . and with you!

And as Christians our lives reflect the flavor of God. We are tolerant of others the way God is tolerant with us. We are patient when

provoked and demonstrate restraint because that's the way God is with us.

"Okay," you say, "but how long does this patience stuff have to go on?"

Emerson said, "A man is a hero, not because he is braver than anyone else, but because he is brave 10 minutes longer."

That's what patience is. It's being tolerant longer. How long? The Bible gives two examples, depending on how you want to measure length. One is time. The other is times.

Hebrews 6:13-15 tells about old Abraham. God promised him a son named Isaac. Abraham waited until he was 100 years old (which is a very long time!). Here's what the Bible says in verse 15, "And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised."

How long is patience? In Abraham's case, it was until he was 100 years old.

Matthew 18:21-22 tells about a conversation between Jesus and his friend Peter. Peter wanted to show off how patient he could be when others provoked him: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall

I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"

That's a lot of times.

That's a lot of patience. But, that's exactly what patience is - long in time and long in times.

I suspect that there are some people who are thinking, "This is a dangerous teaching! Someone could take terrible abuse just because they are supposed to be patient." And you're right. There could be a misunderstanding. That's a risk. But for every person who might be too patient, there are a million of us who risk not being patient enough.

Do you recognize the name of Anna Mansfield Sullivan? She fits my understanding of patience.

*Patience is the way  
love happens.*

Anna Mansfield Sullivan was a teacher from the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston who took on a seemingly impossible case. It was a child who had lost sight and hearing at age two from an illness. This little girl was like a wild caged animal.

You know the story, of course, because this is the story of Helen Keller. Anna Sullivan took lots of provocation from that little girl . . . anger, abuse, stubbornness and more. In Helen Keller's own words she was "wild and unruly, giggling and chuckling to express pleasure, kicking, scratching, uttering the choked screams of the deaf-mute to indicate the opposite."

But Anna Sullivan was patient. She kept trying. Over and over she touched messages into her hand until there was a small response. It took many years and eventually included other teachers until finally Helen Keller was able to speak, to go to school, to graduate with honors from Radcliffe College and eventually to become internally famous as a lecturer and writer.

Some of Helen Keller's books were titled SONG OF THE STONE WALL and STORY OF MY LIFE. Perhaps her biography could have been called "Product of Patience".

I know it is not always easy. Sometimes it is very, very hard. But may your life be flavored with patience. May you be like Abraham to age one hundred and beyond. May you be like Job whose patience was tested by Satan himself. May you be like Peter seventy-seven times over. May you be like Anna Sullivan, patient when it seems impossible. But better yet, may you and I be as patient with others as God is with us!

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