

James 5:7-20

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- [0 : 00] I will indeed meditate on thy precepts and fix my eyes on thy ways. I will delight in thy statutes.
- I will not forget thy word. Greatest God, give us grace now to hear what you have to say to us. Make our hearts receptive, quicken our wills, fill us with love of your truth.
- And send us out to walk in your ways. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. From Galatians 5.22, the fruit of the Spirit is patience.
- And from that reading from James 5 we heard earlier. Be patient until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth.
- Being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts. For the coming of the Lord is at hand.
- [1 : 10] Well this morning we were looking at Galatians 5 and what Paul teaches us there about the fruit of the Spirit. And this evening we spent a little time reflecting on one element of the Spirit's fruit.
- Which is that of patience. Let's begin with this. It's basically I think in our Christian experience that our new life in Christ, the life which we've been given at our conversion and which has been settled on us in our baptism, that that life is not finished.
- That we're in an incomplete and mixed state. So much has happened to us by virtue of God in Christ. We've been reconciled to God by the work of Christ our Saviour.
- We've been made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. We've been empowered by the same Spirit to live the Christian life. We've been made members of the people of God.
- And yet, we remain in some measure incomplete. God's work in us, though it's begun, is not yet at an end.
- [2 : 24] We are imperfect. Not yet finished off. Now this incompleteness, this imperfection, which is part of our experience now, doesn't mean that our present situation as believers is somehow fragile.
- Or that our Christian lives are always in danger of disintegrating. Still less does it mean that God's provision for us is somehow lacking.
- That God's presence with us is in some way insecure. That God will not prove fully reliable. No, what it does mean is that we live out our Christian lives now in a condition of promise and not full possession.
- That is, built into the fabric of our Christian experience now is the fact that the most important things to us, the great gifts of God of which we are assured, are not yet ours in full measure.
- Life before God. The knowledge of God in his absolute glory. The enjoyment of God's full presence. Our complete sanctification.
- [3 : 38] For all these things, we wait. We have a foretaste, but we do not have full possession. And because we wait, we experience in our Christian lives a measure of pain.

That is, however assured our hope may be, however complete our trust in God the Father, however much we may have experienced of God's consolation now, still, for each of us, there is an absence, a lack of completeness.

There is something which we have not yet attained. Our lives are built, that is, not on things already possessed, but on things hoped for. Not on things that are seen, but on things that are at present unseen.

Because of this, Paul tells us in Romans 8, we groan inwardly. Now, who among us has not in some way groaned like that?

Who indeed among us has not felt that lack? Indeed, is it not a sign of our spiritual progress that we do feel this pain? That we are aware of this lack?

[4 : 57] That we have a longing for the fulfilment which comes with the full possession of what, at the moment, we do not possess. What do we do in this situation?

What do we do with the fact that our lives are not yet completed? How do we handle it? Well, as in all situations of perplexity and distress in the Christian life, we have to do what we always have to do, which is to turn again to the Gospel for instruction.

That is, face with some difficulty. Face with the need to handle a situation in our lives that we find hard, we are to look to God the teacher, so that God the teacher can show us the way we should go.

That means, therefore, that faced with the painfulness of our hope which is deferred, faced with the fact that fulfilment is promised but not yet achieved, we aren't to fall back into that brooding introspection which can often afflict the Christian.

We aren't simply to give ourselves up to a sense of loss and deprivation. Instead, we're to do one of the basic things that Christians do in all situations, which is very simply to listen.

[6 : 16] To listen to the Gospel, and in listening to the Gospel, to listen to the Lord of the Gospel. And as we do that, as we turn our lives towards him in listening, we can do so, I think, with a measure of confidence.

And we can be confident, because the Lord of the Gospel does indeed speak to us. He's not silent. He's eloquent. He's not remote. He's with us.

And he's with us as someone who speaks his word and speaks it to us that we may begin to know how to live our lives well. He does not leave us without help.

He himself comes to us as our instructor and our guide. He himself shows us how to conduct our lives. And at the heart of his instruction in this situation is that word from the letter of James, be patient.

What do we make of patience? What is it that the Lord of the Gospel is telling us through that simple command, be patient? Well, we know first of all, don't we, that patience is part of the fruit of the Spirit.

[7 : 32] It's one of the marks, that is, of human nature, which has been reconciled to God the Father, which has been made new by God the Son, and which is now empowered to live and move before God by God the Holy Spirit.

And patient Christian people, Christian people in whom those things have taken place, can begin to face difficulties and obstacles and to tolerate hard things with a certain calm and steady frame.

As James puts it, they establish their hearts. That is, what we'd call settled or composed people. People who are well-grounded and therefore are ready to wait.

And patient people are settled in that way. Their lives are firm and well-established and steadfast because they know something. They know that whatever their hearts may tell them, however hard their external circumstances may be, whatever accusations there may be within themselves, they know that they are chosen and called and justified and sanctified by God.

They know that day by day, their lives are not left to whatever chance happens to be around. No, their lives are governed and guided and preserved by God.

[9 : 02] And they know that the future will not be whatever happens to them. No, their future is surely a great and glorious inheritance promised to us by Jesus Christ.

Patient Christian people are those who know those things. And because they know those things, they've received an answer to Paul's prayer there in Colossians 1, you may remember.

Paul prays, May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy. Notice what he says there about patience.

All endurance and patience. Not just a little measure of it, but endurance in good measure. And not just grim endurance and patience, but endurance and patience with joy.

[10 : 03] Why? Because that's something for which God strengthens us. And how does God strengthen us? Not in small measure, but according to his glorious might.

These are the things which the patient Christian begins to know. Now what all that means, therefore, is there's something distinctive about Christian patience.

It's what the book of Revelation calls the patience of the saints. That is, the patience of those who've been set apart by God to be his people. Christian patience is the patience of the saints.

Now, of course, those outside the church also demonstrate patience. Sometimes they demonstrate it much more clearly than those inside the church.

But Christian patience has a specific character. For what gives Christian patience its special mark? What marks it out as Christian patience, rather than anything else, is the fact that Christians see themselves and their lives differently.

[11 : 10] They see themselves not simply as those who happen to have a particular disposition of character which makes them calm in situations, which makes them able to be patient. No. They see themselves as those who've been made new by Christ and the Spirit, and they see their lives as going in a particular direction, as on the way to full fellowship with God in heaven.

Not all patience is Christian patience. Christian patience is distinctive. It's patience in view of the gospel. Gospel patience. Gospel wisdom, which comes from God.

How do we say more about this patience? What more is there about this patience that's required of us and that is indeed the gift of God's Spirit? Well, first of all, if we're to understand this Christian patience and to enact it well, we need to remember that we need to talk about God.

We need to talk about Christian patience by first of all talking about God. And there are two things we need to remember about God when we think about Christian patience. The first is that God himself is entirely composed and steady.

that is, there is in God no trace of impatience. There is in God no fretfulness or anxiety or insecurity.

[12 : 38] No need to rush in order to miss some opportunity or something like that. No. God is the Lord of all things. Nothing opposes him. God is not subject to any threat.

His will is in no way inhibited by some other thing acting upon him. Now what God wills will come to be at the time when God wills then it will pass.

So God is in himself infinitely stable, infinitely steady, infinitely at rest. And moreover, this God, this God who is utterly steady in himself is patient in his dealings with us.

God has made us in such a way that our lives take time to unfold, don't they? We aren't complete in an instant all at once.

Rather, we come to be complete as we change and develop over time. We move each of us from infancy to childhood, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood to middle age and old age.

[13 : 46] In other words, our lives unfold over time. And God exercises his patience by allowing us to be this kind of creature.

God gives us time. That is, he lets us take time for our lives to unfold. He waits for us. That doesn't mean that God, as it were, stands by passively, that God waits around to see what we'll make of ourselves and then tries to figure out what to do next with us.

No, God's patience means that in every moment of our lives, from cradle to grave, he directs and holds our lives unceasingly.

He governs us. Every moment of our time is before God. Everything is held by him. Nothing escapes his grasp. God takes time with us.

He allows his purpose for us to take its time. And he does this because he loves us. That is, he allows us to become the creatures that he's made us to be because that is what he wants for us.

[14 : 56] That is what he wants of us. And so he is patient. So God is patient with us. There's something more about God's patience directed towards us.

It's that God's patience is supremely manifest in his dealings with sinners. Sin is impatient, isn't it?

Sin doesn't want to wait for good things to come from God. No. Sin decides it wants what it wants and it wants it now without delay.

That is, it simply refuses to allow God to take his time with us and instead decides that we will be the governors of our own life and our own time. We will decide what we want and we want it now.

In the midst of that, God is patient, God is forbearing. God doesn't destroy the sinner. He doesn't rush to judgment immediately.

[15 : 57] Rather, God's love endures with us. Why? Again, because he loves us. Because he loves us, he's forbearing.

And we see that forbearance, don't we, supremely in the work of God the Son. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God himself standing by us sinners.

God not allowing our offenses against him to end his fellowship with us. God is patient in ensuring that in Jesus Christ, his loving purpose for us is fulfilled.

That means therefore that what we see in Jesus Christ is what Paul calls the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience.

The riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience. Riches, the full measure, not a niggardly amount, but the full measure of God's forbearance and patience in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 04] Christ. And that divine forbearance and patience bears fruit. And the fruit which it bears is the life of the people of God.

That is, out of that kindness of God, out of that forbearance and that patience, out of the fact that God is determined that his will for us will be fulfilled, there arises this strange reality of a body of Christian believers.

And this body of believers is characterised by the fact that its life now, though it's begun, is not yet complete. We've been remade, we've been set in a new direction, we've been given the gifts of the Spirit to enable us to live, but it's not yet finished.

Much of it remains in prospect, much of it is still a matter of hope. hope. So we're required to exercise long suffering and endurance and forbearance like that of God himself.

We, in our turn, are to exercise that patience which is the fruit of the Spirit. Now what more should we say of this fruit of the Spirit which is to characterise our Christian lives, the fruit of patience?

[18 : 23] patience. Well as we read the New Testament it seems to me we find two forms of this patience that are particularly commended to us. There is Christian endurance in the face of difficult circumstances and there is Christian forbearance in our relations with others.

Let's look at each of those in turn. First of all, Christian endurance in the face of difficult circumstances. You can't read through the New Testament, can you, without realising that Christians face difficulty in the Christian life.

The Christian life does not introduce us into heaven immediately. No, the Christian life means, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, we are afflicted in every way. There are two kinds of affliction that occur for Christian believers in the New Testament.

The first affliction is that sin is still a present reality. Of course, it's been set aside at the cross, its power has been destroyed, it's no longer got the upper hand in human life, and yet somehow we know in our day-to-day experience it lingers.

Our new holy nature is incomplete. And so we're still in some measure harassed by sin. And so, however much we may long for and try to enjoy the good things of God, sin lies crouching at the door, and often we are defeated by it.

[20 : 02] So there's that first affliction, the affliction of the ongoing presence of sin. The second affliction is this, that we endure as Christian believers the hostility of the world.

Christians are different, and because they're different, they often face opposition and resistance and conflict. That opposition takes many forms, many of us will have experienced some of it in our lives.

For some, that opposition can mean active persecution. For others, more often, it can be a matter of public or private contempt.

Christians dismissed as foolish or as naive or as irrational. Christians made into objects of amusement as those who stand out and for whom the world has no good thing to say.

Christians are treated with a measure of dishonour. In other words, the Christian believer, the disciple of Jesus Christ, suffers a measure of disgrace for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

[21 : 15] Those things, the affliction which comes from the ongoing presence of sin and the affliction which comes from the hostility of the world, they hurt. They make it hard sometimes to live the Christian life and to make the Christian confession.

How does Christian patience handle those things? Well, first of all, in facing those things, we remember that we are given patience by the good grace of the Holy Spirit.

It's not innate. It doesn't simply arise from our own resources. We don't, of ourselves, have the capacity to be patient.

No, God the Holy Spirit supplies it. God the Son bestows upon us that new nature. And God the Holy Spirit brings that new nature into effect.

He makes it, in Paul's, in Galatians 5, fruitful. He makes it bear fruit. And part of the fruit of that work of his is patience.

[22 : 19] How does that work? Well, true Christian patience, first of all, I think, keeps the example of Christ before its eyes.

Remember from 2 Thessalonians 3. May the Lord God, Paul prays, may the Lord God direct your hearts to the steadfastness of Christ.

May the Lord God direct your hearts to the steadfastness of Christ. That is, the Lord God directs our eyes to see Jesus Christ.

What do we see in him? Well, we see the perfection of patience. He didn't lash out in the midst of suffering. He didn't rail against his situation.

He didn't cease to trust in his heavenly Father and to wait for his help. And so he exemplified patience. Listen to what 1 Peter says about the example of Christ.

[23 : 18] He says, if when you do right and suffer for it, you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, this is the key bit, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

When he was reviled, he didn't revile in return. When he suffered, he didn't threaten, but he trusted to him who judges justly.

And that's why Peter says we can take it patiently, because we have the example of Christ before our eyes. And if we keep that example before our eyes, if we keep our eyes fixed on him, then we can begin to understand that a Christian can take up a different attitude to the affliction by which we're troubled.

When we're troubled, we experience sorrow, don't we? And sorrow can overwhelm us. It can push us into thinking that our lives have gone wrong somehow, that there's perhaps no real order or stability or direction in our lives.

Perhaps there's not help available to us. Sorrow can be pain so intense that it just overwhelms us and takes away all other thinking. Patience sees things differently.

[24 : 49] Of course, there is genuine Christian sorrow, sometimes deep, for some Christians persistent. But Patience understands that the things that give rise to sorrow, though they may be real, are not beyond God's control.

God counters them. They are within the good providence of our Heavenly Father. And not only that, Patience knows that those things which cause us sorrow, those afflictions that we face, do not separate us from the love of God, and they cannot separate us from the love of God, quite the opposite.

Affliction is a place where God particularly encounters us. Affliction is a place where we know God's care and God's goodness and God's consolation.

For the Christian, therefore, whatever hard things we may face, we are never in a situation of calamity. We are never in a situation where we are entirely overwhelmed and there is no help.

There is always God's good order. There is always God's good protection. There is always God's dedication to our well-being. And so we can indeed begin to learn how to be patient.

[26 : 08] And because all this is so, then Christians can begin to learn to endure in the midst of affliction.

There is one particular thing that the Christian needs to bear in mind to exercise that endurance, and it is that. It is this. We can learn to fix our eyes on, as James says, the coming of the Lord.

We can learn to fix our eyes on the coming of the Lord. Why the coming of the Lord? Well, because that coming, the return of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory, will bring with it the things which we do not now enjoy, but for which we hope.

It will bring future glory. It will bring rest. It will bring delight in his presence. It will bring fulfillment. It will mean completion.

In other words, Christian patience can look forward to the coming of the Lord and keep its eye on heaven. We can be patient, therefore, because we know that in the future, tribulation will indeed be at an end, that our incomplete nature will be completed, that the good things which we don't at present see will become vividly and gloriously visible to us.

[27 : 31] Patience knows and trusts in a future happiness, and a future happiness which is not just fantasy to see us through the day. It is the secure promise of God.

And because it's secure, then patience can endure. It is through faith and patience, Hebrews tells us, that we inherit the promises. Well, that's endurance, the first fruit, first form of the fruit of Christian patience.

But there's a second form, which we can call forbearance. Forbearance is patience exercised in relation to other people. Why do we need it?

Well, Christians like us find themselves, don't they, in the fellowship of God's people? Very often we come to our life among the people of God with very high expectations of that fellowship.

We think that in contrast to the world, life for the people of God will be a place of good order and righteous and loving relations and where all will be well.

[28 : 38] And you don't need to be a Christian for very long to realise that those expectations are sometimes a bit too high, and sometimes they can be dashed. Sometimes we can find in the Christian community a form of common life which is actually not all that different from the people of God in the world.

There can be the same elements of strife or enmity or jealousy or selfishness, the same conflicts, the same pain, the same sense that we don't live together very well.

How do we face that reality? How do we face the reality of the fact that we and our neighbours are not always very good at living a common life?

Well, we are to meet it with loving forbearance. Here's what Ephesians 4 tells us about this situation, how we are to exercise forbearance.

I beg you, says Paul, to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

[29 : 56] There's one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

What then do we make of Christian forbearance? Well, Christian forbearance arises, as Paul tells us there in Ephesians 4, it arises from knowledge of something about the Christian community to which we belong, this community and all other Christian communities.

And what we know about Christian communities is this. They're not simply one more example of the conflict and selfishness and the like which goes on in the world.

No, the church is to be understood primarily in terms of its basis in God. What matters about the church for Paul? Not the fact that the congregations to which he rises are full of conflict.

No. What matters above all to Paul about the church is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

[31 : 14] It's those things, that oneness which is given by the divine basis of the church, not human conflict which is primary about the people of God.

And that means therefore we ought to look at our fellow Christian believers just in terms of their surface, their outer face. We may not like very much of what we see in some of our fellow Christians but that doesn't matter.

We are to see in our fellow Christians part of that great single reality, the one body gathered together by the one Lord and the one Spirit and the one God and Father of all.

What matters about our fellow believers is not whatever quirks their personalities may have, not whatever conflicts we may entertain between those. What matters is the oneness of God and the oneness which God gives to us.

Of course there is a measure of dissent and conflict in any Christian congregation. But all that is exceeded by the fact of our unity in the Spirit.

[32 : 20] Not a unity that we can create nor a unity that we can destroy but a unity which is given to us by God himself. And because the church is that kind of reality, because despite itself in many ways it possesses the unity of the Spirit, then forbearance is fitting.

How does that get expressed practically? Well, it means first of all, recognizing in all honesty that our fellow Christians are not always very lovable.

It means also recognizing that we ourselves, to our fellow Christians, are not very lovable. But it means more than that, that patience doesn't get distracted by that fact into grumbling or revenge or issuing hard judgments or a quagalist spirit.

No, forbearance waits. Because it knows that retaliation or lashing out isn't going to get us very far. What will get us far is waiting for God to complete his great work in our neighbours and in us.

Waiting for the fact that all of us are in this process of being sanctified. Waiting for the fact that God is making all of us new. Waiting for the fact that God is setting aside the sins in all of us.

[33 : 50] And knowing that each of us is touched by the Spirit's grace so that we can forbear and be patient with one another. Put on, as Paul says in Colossians 3, put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience forbearing one another.

That's a recipe for a good community. For a community in which the fruit of the Spirit really can be seen. Just to close.

Patience is not a popular virtue in our culture, is it? Our culture has its heart set on acquisition. Acquisition of material goods, or of experiences, of other people, of status, all those things.

And not just are we as a culture gripped by acquisition. We're gripped by acquisition now. We're in a culture which doesn't want to wait.

We're in a culture which thinks that to have to wait is a tragedy. And so we find ourselves in a culture which is restless and excitable and distracted, which lacks steadiness of spirit, which doesn't know how to be enduring and how to be patient.

[35 : 19] Here I think we Christian folks have something good and wholesome to offer to our neighbours. We can show them what it is to wait, to endure, to be forbearing.

And as we do that, as we enact our lives in these good ways, then we can bear witness to the good things of the Gospel. May God give us grace to be thankful for his infinite patience, to endure affliction with a steady heart, to forbear one another in love, and so to fulfil the law of Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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