

"THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS...PATIENCE..."

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We have been thinking in these sermons about those special qualities of Christian living that are called in the letter to the Galatians "fruits of the Spirit." It is good to think about these qualities at any time. But there is a special reason for doing so at this time. For we hear a good deal today about people whose lives are touched by the Holy Spirit. It is important that we be able to "discern the spirits," and in trying to do that it is useful to know what the first followers of Jesus looked upon as the most important signs of the spirit in a person's life.

By now we have looked at three such signs listed by the apostle Paul: love, joy, peace. Those are the big shining ones. We might even call them the glamorous ones. But now as the list continues we begin to come to some qualities of life that sound far less exciting. Maybe for that very reason it is especially important that we pay attention to them.

Patience is not a very exciting quality. At least, I have never found it so. That goes for the particular kind of patience that Paul has in mind here. The word he uses means literally "long-temperedness." He is referring to the capacity to suffer the aggravation and folly committed by others without exploding prematurely into anger.

In a broader sense the word seems to have meant a reluctance to take harsh action against others. Jesus uses this word in his parable about the unforgiving servant. In this story the servant fails to pay a large debt owed to his king. The king is about to sell the servant and his family into slavery when the servant cries out, "Be patient with me." So the king takes pity on the servant and declares the debt to be paid in full. Immediately the forgiven servant goes out and grabs a fellow servant by the throat, demanding payment of a small debt owed to himself. The fellow servant and also asks for patience, but the first servant throws his fellow into jail. Hearing about this inconsistent behavior from a man he had shown mercy, the king loses patience and throws the first servant into jail as well.

Patience here means "to be slow to anger and plenteous in mercy." It was an element in the Christian lifestyle frequently mentioned in Paul's letters, possibly because Paul had a hard time coming by it himself. His rows with Barnabas and Peter as well as certain passages in his letters indicate that by nature he was more inclined to be short-tempered than long-tempered.

But despite his own weakness, or possibly because of it, Paul valued the gift of a long temper. As in the case of other qualities he called fruits of the Spirit, he valued this kind of patience because he found it in God. He could think of no better way of illustrating what such patience meant than to point to the patience God has showed in dealing with him. Many scholars believe that some later writer wrote the little book in our Bibles known as the Letter of Paul to Timothy. But it is quite consistent with Paul's thinking that the writer should picture Paul as describing himself in this way:

"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience..."

Once again the word rendered "patience" is the one that means long-tempered.

The notion that God might have to hold his temper is a strange one to us. That is partly because we resist thinking of the Deity at all in terms of human psychology. But it is also true because we wish to dissociate God from any sort of unpleasantness. A loving God we can accept. That's nice. An angry God we don't want. We think the only proper God for liberal Christians is a God who thinks positively all the time.

Maybe we are correct in banishing all negative feelings from our image of God. But doing that does make it a little harder to appreciate how grateful Paul and the other early Christians were for God's patience. They knew that they were pretty hard cases. It was a continual source of amazement to them that God should keep them around. They were astonished that a God so righteous and so holy was able to hold back his wrath in the face of such unfaithfulness as they themselves showed every day of their lives.

The wonder of God's patience was a continual source of joy to the first Christians. It made them want to show something of the same kind of patience to one another. If God was able to take so much aggravation from them and still forgive, perhaps they could take a little aggravation from each other and still maintain those shining qualities of love, joy and peace. To do that is to possess patience.