

## **Introduction**

John Ortberg tells about a young woman whose car stalled at a stoplight. She tried and tried to get it started but couldn't. The light then turned green and there she sat, frustrated and holding up traffic. It got worse though when the driver behind her, instead of going around her, began laying on his horn. Finally, after another desperate attempt to start her car failed, she got out, walked back to that driver, who was still honking at her, and said, **"Tell you what, you go try to start my car and I'll sit back here and honk your horn for you."**

Note something. It wasn't either logical or beneficial for him to honk his horn at her. So, why did he? It's because he lacked a cardinal virtue that all of us desperately need and that James identifies in 5:7-11.

## **The Timetables of Life and God**

The word **"Therefore"** in verse 7 connects our text with the verses before it. In verses 1-6, James discusses rich and powerful people oppressing poor and weak Christians. He goes on in verse 7 to exhort those Christians to **"be patient until the coming of the Lord."** He then uses an analogy in that same verse to explain what he means. It's the farmer waiting for the early and late rains that make his crops grow. Christians should wait patiently for the Second Coming of Jesus, James asserts, just as the farmer waits patiently for the early and late rains.

What James observes about the farmer implies a fundamental fact of our existence. It takes a season of months filled with lots of hard work, sunshine, and rain for the farmer eventually to harvest crops. That illustrates that life has its own timetable and that timetable is usually later not now. It's what we call life's **"delays."** Things usually take time and the more worthwhile they are the more time they usually take. So, it takes time to check out of a grocery store on Saturday morning. It takes time to lose weight. It takes time to recover from surgery. It takes time to build a successful business. It takes time to earn a college

degree. It takes time to become like Jesus. And on it goes. Life has its own timetable and it's usually later not now.

But it isn't just life. The Second Coming of Jesus also implies a fundamental fact of our existence. In Acts 1:11, God promised that Jesus would come back again to right all wrongs and establish His eternal kingdom. For James' readers, it had been 20 years since He promised that. For us, it's been 2000 years. That illustrates that God has His own timetable and that timetable is often later not now. It's what we call God's "**delays.**" Fulfilling His promises or granting our requests often takes time.

The acclaimed preacher Phillips Brookes, who wrote the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was noted for his patience and poise. But one day, a friend observed him pacing the floor feverishly like a caged lion, prompting him to ask, "**What's the trouble Phillips?**" To which he replied, "**The trouble is that I'm in a hurry and God isn't.**" That's often the case isn't it. God isn't in a hurry. He has His own timetable and it's often later not now.

We see then that two timetables are a defining part of our everyday lives. One is life's. The other is God's.

## **Patience**

It's imperative, therefore, that you and I interact beneficially with them. And James reveals what that beneficial interaction is in verse 8. It's the cardinal virtue of patience. Patience is a "**cardinal**" virtue for two reasons. It pleases God and is absolutely essential to living well.

The Greek word translated "**patience,**" is *makrothumia*. I only mention that because it's a compound word that's loaded with meaning. The word *macro* means "**long**" or "**far.**" The word *thumia* means "**anger**" or "**wrath.**" Putting the words together, the literal meaning is "**long anger.**" You all know the English term "**short-tempered.**" That term, by way of contrast, helps us define *makrothumia*. It means "**long-tempered.**" In our context today, life's delays and God's, it means that

they don't make us angry or upset. We don't strive inwardly as a result of them. Emotionally, we're at rest. We also don't strive outwardly. Behaviorally, we act clear-headedly and calmly.

That's patience and as I pointed out it's a cardinal virtue. Unfortunately it isn't an inherent virtue. People, in their natural state, aren't long-tempered, patient. They're short-tempered, impatient, instead. Delays make them angry or upset. They cause them to strive inwardly and outwardly. The anecdotal evidence is endless.

Take running red lights, for instance. Two weeks ago, my little compact car was almost hit by a huge semi that ran the main red light in Poland. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety issued a report that revealed the following data. Motorists running red lights cause \$7 billion in property damage and medical bills and kill at least 800 people every year. Consider that staggering cost in comparison to the gain. According to the Institute, the average amount of time saved by running red lights is 50 seconds per incident. It's illogical, in other words, to do it. Why then do people do it? It's because they're impatient.

Let's face it. Running red lights is just the tip of the ice berg. Red lights are one of life's shortest delays. If they make people impatient, imagine what its longer delays do. For a week, carefully observe how others and you react inwardly and outwardly to delays. You'll find if you do that human beings are naturally and prevailingly impatient.

But according to James, you and I, as followers of Jesus, must not be. Do we want to please God? Do we want to live abundantly and well? If so, we need to be patient in the face of delays just as the prophets and Job, according to verses 10-11, were. Remember, however, what I said. Patience isn't a natural virtue, which implies we have to acquire it. We have to acquire it and we can – by doing three things.

### **Be Sane**

First, be sane. To be sane means to be in touch with reality. It means to perceive things as they really are. Let's be sane by getting two

things in perspective.

One is delays themselves. See them as normal.

Most of us don't. The watchword of our **"popular culture"** is **"Instant Everything."** We have instant coffee, instant banking, instant food, instant credit, instant information, instant communication, and much more. Technology has enabled us to shorten or eliminate many of life's delays. We're so instantly gratified in so many things that we expect it in all things. And we get impatient when we aren't.

Get delays in perspective. They aren't exceptions. They're the rule. They're a normal part of life in a fallen world. Technology will never shorten or eliminate them all or even most of them. Let's wake up to waiting. It lowers expectations and makes patience possible when we do.

We need to get a second thing in perspective – ourselves. Many of us are vain. Yes, delays are a normal part of life, we think, but for others not us. The world was made for our convenience and while others have to wait, we shouldn't. That's nonsense of course and we need to get ourselves in perspective. We aren't special. The world wasn't made for our convenience. Others have to wait and so do we. Even the prophets and Job, the most righteous man on earth, weren't immune to the delays of life? So why we do think we should be?

Jill's colon cancer surgery illustrates what I mean. Colon cancer raises the issue of chemotherapy treatment. People want to know if they have to have it or not and they want to know now. Jill's surgery was seven weeks ago and we still don't know. But I'm not striving inwardly or outwardly about that because I'm sane and expected it. I know the wheels of treatment in medicine often grind as slowly as the wheels of justice in law do, for everyone including me. I have the delays of medicine and myself in perspective, which makes patience possible.

### **Approach Life by the Inch**

There's a second thing we can do to acquire patience. Approach life by the inch. Life is hard by the yard but a cinch by the inch. Most of

you have heard that before and it's true.

A lot of things are hard by the yard. Looked at in their entirety, they appear too long or difficult to accomplish or do. I can't lose 75 pounds. I can't complete five years of college classes. I can't take a year of chemotherapy treatments. I can't paint the whole house. I can't make a whole quilt. I can't make disciples of all the nations. I can't become like Jesus in all things. Life is discouraging, hard, by the yard.

But it's a cinch by the inch. Most of you know the old story. Two men were having a conversation. **"I'm hungry enough to eat an elephant,"** the first man declared. **"How could you possibly eat an elephant?"** the second man asked. To which the first man replied, **"One bite at a time."** That's the way we should usually live our lives – one bite, one inch, at a time. As Robert Schuller said it, **"Inch by inch, anything's a cinch"** and that's usually true.

When something seems insurmountable, break it down. Take one small step or part and accomplish it. Then move on to the next small step or part and accomplish it. Do that for a long enough period of time and we'll be surprised at what we're able to accomplish or achieve.

A man gave this weight loss testimony on TV. His physician told him to lose 75 pounds, which he rejected at first as impossible. But he finally relented and did what he could. He lost one pound. That didn't seem so bad and he lost another. That didn't seem so bad either and he lost still another. And on it went until he lost 75 pounds. What was revealing was how he described what he did: **"I didn't lose 75 pounds. I knew I couldn't do that. I lost one pound – 75 times."**

His testimony unveils a patience generating approach to life. Live it inch by inch, pound by pound, section by section, block by block, semester by semester, customer by customer, paragraph by paragraph, and so on. It's a fact of human life called praxis. What we do conditions how we think and feel. Approaching life inch by inch conditions our minds so that the mental and emotional components of patience are able to be cultivated within us.

## **Walk by the Holy Spirit**

We can and must acquire patience by doing a third thing. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul identifies what he calls "**the fruit of the Spirit.**" The word "**fruit**" refers to internal conditions that the Holy Spirit creates in us. One of those, in verse 22, is patience. In the end, patience is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in us.

But we have a part to play in that work. Paul tells us what that part is in Galatians 5:16. We must "**walk by the Spirit.**" To walk by the Spirit means to place ourselves before Him in such a way that He's able to produce "**fruit**" generally and "**patience**" more particularly in us. We do that, as a practical matter, by practicing certain activities.

I've identified those activities and explained them in detail before. They include solitude, silence, fasting, study, prayer, worship, conversation with God, lectio divina, Bible memorization, practicing the presence of God, interacting with the ordinary trials of life, and more. We practice those activities routinely and with intensity. That in turn frees up the Holy Spirit to do what He wills to do in us. One of the things He wills to do is make us patient and over time does just that.

If I had gone through my wife's colon cancer treatment 15 years ago, I would have been striving inwardly and outwardly. I would have been impatient, short-tempered, in at least three of her experiences in the process of that. But I was patient instead because I learned how to walk by the Spirit 15 years ago and have been doing just that. I know it's true by experience. If we walk by the Spirit, He will produce His fruit generally and patience particularly in us.

## **Conclusion**

Listen to a poem in closing: "**Patience is a virtue. Possess it if you can. Seldom found in woman. Never found in man.**" I'd change it: "**Patience is a virtue. Possess it *because* you can. If you're woman or even a man.**" Be sane, approach life inch by inch, and walk by the Spirit. You'll have a cardinal virtue if you do - patience.