

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 5
June 24, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Just wait!

—Galatians 5:22,23
—James 5:7-11

[Pause to take a selfie.] Do you remember the days before selfies, when “selfie” wasn’t even a word? Some of us remember when we would take a picture with our camera, it would sit in the camera until the roll of film was used up, then we would drop off the roll of film and wait a week for our pictures to come back. You could set up a tripod and take a “self-portrait,” but chances are that by the time the film was developed you might have aged considerably. Just wait! In today’s world, in today’s fast-paced, instant-gratification society, those two words can be among the most difficult words to hear. What do you mean, wait? Why should I wait patiently for a good meal at a well-laid table, when in one minute and thirty seconds I can microwave something quick and easy and eat it in front of the television? Or I can go through the drive-through and pick up fast food in a couple of minutes. Why should I send a letter in the mail and wait days for it to arrive, when I can type an e-mail, press “send,” and have it arrive virtually instantaneously? How often have we fumed, wishing for a faster computer or more network speed? Why should I save up and wait to make a special purchase when I could just charge it on my credit card and pay for it later? In a world of instant oatmeal, instant potatoes, Instagram and instant gratification, what do you mean, just wait?

It’s ironic that it’s my turn to preach on this fruit of the Spirit called patience, because patience is an area where I have always struggled. Since one must preach to himself before preaching to others, suffice to say that it has been good for me to reflect on the Lord’s words here, reminding me that the fruit of the Spirit is patience. The word translated “patience” here in James is the Greek word μακροθυμία (makrothymia). The word is used in a couple of contexts. First, the word is used to describe patience in the face of a situation. It describes perseverance, endurance, bearing up in the face of affliction. In the King James version of the Bible a translation we often find is “longsuffering.” The other context in which the word μακροθυμία is used is in our relationships with one another. Bearing up with one another’s faults, not grumbling against one another, being patient with each others’ weaknesses. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

The first use of the word is patience in the face of suffering and hardship. Once again, our culture does not serve us well in this area. The world around us tells us that life should always be good, fun, happy, enjoyable. After all, that’s the American Way. Madison Avenue marketing executives would have us believe that if we purchase their products, if we can have this or do that, then all of our problems will be solved. There’s a huge problem with this: It’s not real! Life is a struggle on many levels; we *will* face challenges, stress, hardships. But if we’re living in the delusional fantasyland that life is always going to be a piece of cake, we find ourselves ill-equipped to deal with problems that surface in our lives. When the going gets tough we whine, “Why me? This is so unfair. I deserve better than this.”

That’s why we have to remember that God does not owe us the good life. In fact, Scripture says very clearly that what we deserve from God is his wrath and punishment. We confess in one of the Confessions of Sins that we use in our worship service that we have sinned against God and deserved his punishment both now and in eternity. But that’s not what God gives us. The reason our lives are not full of more misery and suffering is because God does not treat us as our sins deserve. Instead of retribution God pours out mercy upon mercy and blessing upon blessing upon the just and the unjust, upon the wicked and on the righteous. Instead of wrath, he crowns us with his love. He pours out so many material and spiritual blessings into our lives that we can’t begin to count them. Instead of leaving us to suffer for our sins, God himself suffered for us on the cross. He daily forgives our sins, for the sake of Jesus his dear Son. And he even gives us patience to bear up under the afflictions that come into our lives because of our existence in this sad, sinful world.

So two people struggling with challenges in life meet those challenges in very different ways. The first whines and complains and becomes bitter and resentful and angry at God, asking, “Why me?” The second bears up under life’s burdens and says, “Thank you, Lord! Thank you for testing me and strengthening me!” With penitent and humble hearts that recognize God’s mercy, we produce the fruit of the Spirit that is patience.

The second use of the word μακροθυμία pertains to our relationships with one another. James tells us, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” We all know what happens when patience is lacking in our interpersonal relationships. Husbands and wives snap at each other. Parents become overly demanding of their children. Children resent their parents. Teachers become impatient

with their students. Coaches rail on their players, and players resent the mistakes of their teammates. Management points the finger at labor; labor thinks management doesn't understand. We become frustrated with one another. Why does so-and-so keep making the same mistake over and over again? I've explained it a million times! Why don't they get it?

And this is where we have to ask the hard question: What is it that makes us impatient with others? It really flows from a personal pride and arrogance, doesn't it? From the idea that I'm better or smarter or more talented or holier than the next person, and if that person were only more like me things would be so much better. And this is where we need to stop, and we need to remember that everything we have is a gift from God, and he's given us the gifts we have only because of his grace and mercy, not because we're so special or have earned or deserved them. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive, and if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" If you understand something that someone else doesn't, it's because God has given you the ability to grasp it. If you possess something that someone else doesn't, it's because God gave you the gift. If you have an ability or a talent or a knowledge or a skill that someone else doesn't, it's because God has placed it into your hands. You are who you are not because of you but because of God who made you.

Jesus' disciples struggled with impatience. Remember Peter's question, "Lord, how many times should I forgive me brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" He thought he was being so patient, so magnanimous. But the Lord's response told him that there is no limit to the number of times we forgive each other. After all, that's exactly what our Lord God has done with us.

How many times haven't you and I turned away from our God and fallen into sin—perhaps the same old sin that has ensnared us a thousand times—and yet every time our gracious heavenly Father receives us back, forgives our sins, enfolds us in his arms, and reassures us of his love for us his children! How many times has he done that for you in your life? How many times did he do it for you today? Where would we be if every time we sinned God simply wrote us off as a lost cause and zapped us? The apostle Peter learned a lesson in patience, and he writes in one of his epistles that the only reason God continues to permit this dark world to exist is because of his patience. "The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." As James writes, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." In the joy of that forgiveness, you and I are privileged to forgive one another and to bear with one another patiently.

Now, there are some areas where patience is *not* appropriate, and we have to make sure we don't extend the meaning of *μακροθυμια* to something that is not intended. "Patience" is not the same as "tolerance," as it is so commonly defined today. God does not want us to *tolerate* sin and simply turn a blind eye. Paul instructed Timothy to use God's word to correct, rebuke and encourage, with great *patience* and careful instruction. We are to call sin what it really is, and we are to gently, patiently call the straying back from the abyss. We are not to ignore sin. But we are always to approach the sins of others in humility, patiently inviting them to repentance.

Another area where patience might be misapplied is when it comes to doing the work of the Lord. When it comes to our zeal and passion for reaching out to the lost, we might describe our attitude as "holy impatience." We don't know when Judgment Day is coming, when the Lord will return, or when our own lives will end, so we want to work while it's day, while there's still time to share Jesus' love and forgiveness. The apostles and the members of the early Christian Church were occupied by a "holy restlessness," a burning eagerness to get the message out as quickly as possible. When it came to Jesus' teaching, his miracles and his resurrection, Peter said, "We cannot help speaking about the things we have heard and seen." We must be patient about the results, of course, because God is the one who brings people to faith, and he does it according to his good time and pleasure. But we are to be chomping at the bit impatiently when it comes to letting our Christian light shine and our eagerness to share the Good News.

For our sins of impatience, and for the strength to persevere in times when patience is called for, we return to the foot of Jesus' cross. There we see the perfect patience of the Lamb of God, as he bore patiently the suffering that was heaped upon him. At Calvary Jesus persevered under the load of sin that was laid upon his back, as he suffered under the wrath of God for our sins. His patient suffering has undone our sins of impatience, and his gracious Spirit enables us to produce the fruit of patience.

You've heard it said that good things come to those who wait. That's especially true when it comes to the life Jesus has earned for us in heaven. The day is coming when our earthly struggles with sin, our hurts, our heartaches, our hardships will come to an end. You will rest from your labors. Then you get to be with Jesus in heaven. That time is coming soon. Just wait! Amen.