

The Fruit of Patience

SCOTT HOEZEE

Are we there yet? How many parents have not heard this question from the back seat of the car a thousand times over from children who feel like the drive to the amusement park is taking forever. Children can be notoriously impatient, jumping up and down in frustration for having to wait a whole minute to get that ice cream cone they want; but we grownups are often not a whole lot better. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, but many of us have a pretty hard time cultivating this particular fruit. For all of us, then, what does it mean to be patient? Today on *Groundwork*, we will wonder about the spiritual fruit and virtue of patience. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are nearing the middle of what is for us on *Groundwork* a pretty big series on the fruit of the Spirit. We have already looked at love, joy, peace, and today we are up to patience, and just as a reminder, here is the classic list in Galatians 5:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we are especially excited today because we are welcoming a guest to the program; a wise and valued mentor for both of us, and a friend: Neal Plantinga. Neal has been Professor of Theology and also President of Calvin Seminary. He has been the Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College. He is a prolific writer, a wonderful preacher, and Neal, we are delighted to have you here to help us talk about patience.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Thank you, Dave and Scott. I am absolutely delighted to be with you, too; and I look forward to our conversation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thinking about patience...or sometimes it is called forbearance...but thinking about patience, I am reminded of a prayer...maybe nobody has ever really said it...but a prayer we have heard: Dear God, give me patience...quickly! Sometimes we all feel that way, but we also know that sort of on the pop level, we know that we perceive patience just sort of in everyday situations, and a lot of the time in everyday situations, we live in kind of an impatient culture; and in fact, I saw a while back that the definition of a nanosecond is in New York City, when a traffic light goes from red to green, a nanosecond is how long it takes for the person to honk their horn at the first person in line to get moving.

DAVE BAST

The guy right behind you, right. It is true, though, Neal, isn't it; that in a sense, with all the hustle and bustle and impatience around us, many people, not just Christians, would pay lip service to the idea of patience, but it is in rather short supply?

NEAL PLANTINGA

It is in short supply. It is generally admired when you see it in somebody else.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; admired more than practiced.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are so many things, I think, in our culture that just have been inspiring us to lose patience: we have microwave ovens now that can cook food in a fraction of the time it used to take, and yet, we still pace in front of the microwave. Why is it taking so long for my one-minute popcorn to pop, and so forth? Or our computers are incredibly fast now, but if they freeze, we kind of pull our hair out. So, those are some of the things we think about in terms of patience, and some of the things that work against patience at sort of a surface level; but Neal, as we think about the New Testament, and particularly Galatians 5, the classic list of the fruit of the Spirit I just read, the Greek word for patience is *makrothymia*, which is an interesting word.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, it is a very interesting word. It literally means having a very large passion. I like to think of it as have a very large capacity for absorbing irritants without being paralyzed by them. You could think of it like this, that in a motor oil...good motor oil does not remove contaminants; what it does is to put them into suspension. So, *makrothymia* is a lot like good motor oil; it puts irritants into suspension so that they do not end up wrecking us.

DAVE BAST

Just to follow that image, which is really wonderful. It has me kind of thinking. You have these little pieces of grit that daily life throws at you: Other people's behavior, waiting in line too long, or the car at the red light that does not immediately get going, or whatever it may be; if you have the oil of patience working, you can sort of take that in and not let it trigger your reaction or your response.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Exactly; in Colossians 3, *makrothymia* is a sign to us as our calling, and it appears in a sequence of three anger management words: Patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. So, Paul is talking about anger management, not saying that we all need to be stoics as Christians, or to overlook, especially big injustices, but we need to manage the anger that arises in us, either legitimately or not.

DAVE BAST

Talk a little bit about the difference between forbearance and forgiveness, because I think that is such an important distinction for us on a practical level.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; well, forbearance may be a synonym for patience, but if so, it has a certain twist to it. What it really means is putting up with people. It means bearing with people. You go to a Thanksgiving dinner and you have an in-law who smacks when he eats his food...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

NEAL PLANTINGA

You put up with that. You put up with people who annoy you, who irritate you. A famous place in C. S. Lewis, where he says when two people have lived together for a certain time, it usually happens that each of

them has tones of voice and facial expressions that drive the other person crazy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know that; that is why you do that. So, what is interesting, Neal, about your image about irritants and so forth is that the idea is there are things that come our way that are legitimately vexing.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not as though...I mean, sometimes we are impatient for things that really are a trifle, but sometimes they are genuinely vexing; and yet, we are able to hold those in suspension, like good motor oil in an engine, which is probably also a good segue to recognizing that in the New Testament, interestingly enough, very often it is God's patience which is held up as the root of our salvation. So, here is a classic passage from Romans 2, where Paul writes:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (And then this) ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of God's kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

So, Paul is saying...and he says it elsewhere...good thing for you God is patient, or he would have had it up to here with you a very long time ago.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; the story of God with God's own people is very largely the story of God's forbearance. God is good to people; they are not necessarily good back to him. He is faithful to people; they are not necessarily faithful back to him. So, the story of God's dealing with covenant people is one of enormous patience. You might say God has a crankcase that is infinitely large.

DAVE BAST

Yes, full of oil. I just now am reminded of a comment of Dorothy Sayers, talking about people who are troubled by the fact that God does not deal with evil: Why does he allow this to happen? Why does he let evil go on? And she says something to the effect of, well, do you realize if he started eradicating evil, what that would mean for you?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Where would *you* be? Or where would I be?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, that is a huge part of the biblical story. If you think the metamessage of scripture is that sinners do not get what they deserve, the reason is, of course, God's grace and God's patience.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, God is our primary role model when it comes to patience. That is why it is a fruit of the Spirit. I think all of the fruit of the Spirit when we bear them make us more Godlike, and we are going to want to think about how we can apply that to different areas of our lives; and so, we are going to ponder that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today Neal Plantinga is joining our conversation. So once again, welcome, Neal.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Thank you, Dave and Scott. I am very glad to be with you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we were just noting that patience is a fruit of the Spirit because God, in scripture, is the supremely patient one; and again, good thing, because that was the source of our very salvation; and I think one of the things that God was able to do, Neal and Dave, is that one of the reasons God was able to be so patient and absorb all those irritants from sinful humanity is that God kind of took the long look, right? So, when we wait, we need to be patient to be waiting, but we almost always wait *for* something, and ultimately we wait for the full in-breaking of God's kingdom, but that requires the long look; and I think God was always good at that, which sometimes feels slow to us.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; I am reminded that in Colossians 3, where we get the list of the virtues that we are to clothe ourselves with, including patience, that chapter begins: Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth, ³because you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

So, the patient believer enlarges the frame in which to see the irritants—the injustices—the annoyances—the medium level difficulties that have to be faced every day, and reminds herself or himself that one day the kingdom of God is going to come.

DAVE BAST

Right.

NEAL PLANTINGA

One day the will of God is going to be done on earth, and in that big frame, a traffic delay just simply does not matter.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, that passage goes on. The last verse, verse 4, just after the part you quoted, says: And when Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Will appear with him in glory, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, there is the long view. Christ is coming. He is coming again. He is coming back; and if we can only live our lives in that framework.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; God knew before creation that there was going to be all this trouble; and that there would need to be a dramatic work of God to put things back on their foundations; and yet, God went through with it anyway, because God could see the end from the beginning, and judged that all this trouble was worth it for what can be achieved at the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think...you know, Neal, you were quoting Colossians 3, and that need to fix our minds on things that are above, and that is the challenge, I think, that most of us have, because the things that are in front of our

eyeballs most days are harder to take, and we wonder what God is up to. It reminds me of the book of Habakkuk, one of the minor prophets; and Habakkuk opens his book surveying the landscape of Judah in his day, and all he could see was injustice and abuse and idolatry, and God seemed to be sitting on his hands; and so, you get the classic kind of lament from Habakkuk Chapter 1:

²How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen; or cry out to you and say, “Violence,” but you do not save? ³Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing (and so forth)? ¹³ Why do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

In other words, dear God, why is it such a mess here on earth and you are not doing anything quickly enough to satisfy me?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Habakkuk sounds a lot like Larry David at times.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; what is wrong with all of this society that God is just apparently...seems to us slow to act?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; that is, of course, a principle theme in the psalms of lament. All this stuff is going on; where are you?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Have you not seen that the Midianites are across the border again? Where are you?

DAVE BAST

Or look at your Temple, don't you see what they did? They took axes and smashed it up; and take your hands out of your pockets—I love that line in, I don't know, Psalm 73 or 4, somewhere in there: Take your hands out of the folds of your garment, the Psalmist says.

NEAL PLANTINGA

It often strikes me that a major exhibit of God's patience is that God makes room for human complaint—human lament—human impatience. It is okay, and God understands that lament at injustice, real or imagined, comes from faith. These are people who are believers. They think God is there, and that God should have answered the bell.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is interesting is, though, in the psalms of lament very often...and certainly in Habakkuk that we were just looking at, God again and again comes and reassures: Look, I've got this; I've got this. I am not blind. I am not deaf. I see. I've got this and I am going to deal with it in my own way and in my own time; and there is something about that in both the Old and the New Testament, and in the New Testament when the Son of God comes here in person and he wants to talk about how the kingdom is coming and how it is growing, the images Jesus always reached for were seeds that disappear into the soil, and for the longest time you cannot see a blessed thing happening, but the kingdom is growing; and so, you know, you have to have faith that God knows what he is doing. It seems slow to us, but God and Jesus keep saying: Stick with my way of doing things. I've got this. Do not despair. Patience sometimes is sort of a strength that adds steel to our spine that keeps us from despairing even though things sometimes seem to be going unchecked.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Well, it is so wonderful that, yes, the seed disappears under the soil and you have to wait and you have to wait, and then what finally emerges looks nothing like the seed at all...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

NEAL PLANTINGA

It is new life, it is new growth, it is green with promise; God's seed is going to germinate, and one day we will see it emerge.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and meanwhile, do not dig it up to check it...

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Because that is just going to ruin things...you have got to keep it going.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I remember somebody saying: Trying to hurry God up is sort of like a little girl who sees the zinnia flower growing in her mommy's garden and wants to help it along, so she gives it a tug. That tends to uproot it. You have to let the flower grow at its own pace. We have to let the kingdom grow at its own pace; and that is something we will talk about a little bit in the final segment, too, in a minute, because we, like Habakkuk and others, are tempted to try to run ahead of God.

DAVE BAST

But then the challenge for us is to be people of faith, right? I mean, patience is related to faith. You are able to be patient because you do believe that something is happening; that God is at work; that the end is coming; the victory will be won.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; in the New Testament, faith is so often connected to the kingdom, that the kingdom is going to come; that God is going to prevail; that you do not know it, but you are actually more than conquerors through him who loved us. So, the promise is always out there, and people hang in there because of the promise they believe.

DAVE BAST

I have been thinking a lot the last little while; I guess maybe it has been a year or two or three, but as I reach the end of my career, sort of a melancholic...you know, Neal; you are kind of there, too, in some sense; a transitional phase. Thinking about that verse in Luke 18, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth...

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And almost as though he had his doubts at times, but the answer is yes, I think.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it does take patience, both in the long run and in the short run; and we want, I think, to be known as people of patience if we are Christians; and so, that has some practical considerations that we are going to look at in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And I am Neal Plantinga.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are in this fourth program of a nine-part series on the fruit of the Spirit. Today we have been looking at patience, and we have been saying that we ground our patience, we locate the source of our patience and our inspiration to be patient in God himself; that we trust God's way of doing things even though the kingdom grows slowly, like a seed; but we want to trust God's way to do it; and so, we want to be people of patience. So we want to think about that. The theologian Robert C. Roberts once wrote something interesting. He wrote: Patience is the ability to dwell gladly in the present moment even when we have some desire to depart from it. So, it is the ability to dwell gladly...and one of the things Roberts talks about is that one of the ways you do that is how you look at your present circumstances...how you construe things.

NEAL PLANTINGA

It is very important, Roberts' insight; and it reminds me that when a person, for example, is behind a pokey driver in the left lane, well, what we want to do is to tailgate this person and to let them know that it is the will of God that they move over, but what if a patient Christian has a third eye, the eye of imaginative love. Love is patient, love is kind; what if we deliberately imagine the driver of this other car as somebody's grandparent, if not now then eventually; and of course, we do not push on grandparents, we give them a little room. Love is patient, love is kind, and one reason is, that love is imaginative.

DAVE BAST

Yes; wonderful idea. We talked quite a bit about patience in terms of time. We all feel like our time is too valuable to be wasted waiting for this or that, but there are other spheres in which patience needs to be exercised; and I think, Neal, you just brought up one of the major ones, and that is patience toward people in general—toward the other—toward another person.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Exactly; you think, for example, of marriages you know that are highly successful. One of the reasons is that both parties are patient. They know how to forbear; they know how to put up with eccentricities of their partner...

DAVE BAST

Right.

NEAL PLANTINGA

They may even love their spouse for eccentricities; but they treat each other with great decency; and that is not a small matter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it reminds me, too, that you know, most of those successful marriages we tend to call those happy marriages, not because every moment is happy, but because in the long run, right, they have that patience; and patience becomes, then, a precondition for happiness. Impatient people are often unhappy people because

they keep moving on from one thing to the next, thinking that they will find a situation where they will never need to be patient, and then they will be happy, but it does not work that way; and so, patience is also that precondition to happiness.

DAVE BAST

They are also often...I think impatient people are angry, aren't they?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; there is a reason why Paul, in Colossians 3, treats those three virtues right side by side: Patience, forbearance, and forgiveness; they all have to do with managing anger.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, obviously we do not want to be impatient people, we do not want to be angry people, because again, they tend to be unhappy people; but the other thing I think we can think about: All of this ties in with God's way of doing things, with Jesus Christ's way of doing things; and I think in the Church today... So, sometimes it is, as you said, Dave, a moment ago, patience is often tied in with time, and my time and making the most of my time, and I deserve to...anything would be better than waiting in this line...but also, it has to do with kingdom and church tactics; and sometimes in our impatience in the Church, we try to force people into belief, or we try to force them to behave, or we try to hit the gas pedal so that the church can have a greater influence in society; and that ends up...historically anyway, that has ended up kind of tainting our witness to Jesus.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Well, it is because we forget during those times that the Church belongs to Jesus Christ and not to us; and that, whether the Church at this particular time and in this particular location thrives or not is only very partially under our control. So, allowing the Church to be the Church of Christ, and being faithful inside it, patient for whatever outcome the Lord may have in mind, that is a hallmark of a serious Christian.

DAVE BAST

But you know, Scott, you mentioned the phrase, God says: I've got this, in effect, in Habakkuk. If we were more robustly confident of that, it is not really ultimately dependent on our efforts or our skills or our expertise, but that this is the work of God, we might be able to relax a little bit more and enjoy the journey...take it a little easier along the way.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And I think that a lot depends on who our traveling companions along the way end up being. Every church has in it some people who are marvelously patient, and for those of us who are struggling a little with this virtue, one of the things we can do is to apprentice ourselves to really patient people. See how they do things; listen to their tone of voice; see how they approach vexing situations. You know, learning a virtue is a lot like learning a musical instrument. You need a good teacher, and you need to practice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think one thing, too, that occurs to me, Dave, from what you were saying, and from what you just said there, Neal, when I think about the people I know who are really, really patient, they are not angry people, right? We said the impatient people tend to be angry people. But the other thing I think is that they are not fearful people, right? Perfect love casts out fear, and I think with patience, often when we in the Church lash out and try to force the kingdom, we do it out of fear; but God's got this, as you said, Dave; God's got this, and so we have no reason to fear; we have no reason to be impatient, because God has this thing.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God; and thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with us on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and our guest today was Neal Plantinga. We hope you will join us again next time as we study scripture to find out why the fruit of kindness is more than just being nice, and

why the Bible says that we as Christians should want to practice kindness. So connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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