

LIVING BEYOND YOURSELF – WEEK #5

The Fruit of the Spirit is Patience (Longsuffering)

Romans 12:10–21

PATTI

The Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 describes the characteristics of a supernaturally changed heart - love, joy, peace, patience, and 5 more.

Each of these traits helps us overcome negative, destructive emotions.

Love overcomes fear, and joy overcomes despair.

Peace overcomes anxiety. And tonight, we come to

PATIENCE, which overcomes anger.

The King James version translates patience as “**longsuffering**”,

which means to “have a long fuse” rather than a short one.

It is a trait that enables you to bear up under difficulty without giving up or giving in to bitterness.

Essentially there are two kinds of patience.

There’s patience under **difficult circumstances**, which we described last week as peace in suffering.

But the other kind of patience has to do with

difficult people or difficult relationships.

It’s the ability to have a long fuwe, even with people who are **annoying** or **frustrating** or even **opposing** you.

1. The Principle of Patience

There’s a spectrum of difficult people we’re talking about here.

At one end are folks who just don’t like you.

They’re not mean, just not friendly or cooperative.

In the middle of the spectrum are folks who have wronged or hurt you; people who have lied to you or cheated you in some way.

And at the far end of the spectrum are persecutors - people who have it in for you – who want to see you hurt or diminished.

What should our Christian response be to the people on this spectrum?

The default mode is retaliation, and it is involuntary.

Sigmund Freud once quipped, *“One must forgive one’s enemies—but not before they have been hanged.”*

That’s how the human heart works, but verses

17 and 21 show us a better way.

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V. 17 says, **“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”**

This is where Christianity differs from every other religion or ethical system.

Verse 21 says, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

Let’s look at them together.

The word “overcome” is a military term meaning, “to overpower or defeat.” When someone hurts you and you hurt them back, then you have been overpowered by evil and defeated by the devil. You’ve lost. And you’re now part of the problem because you’ve become evil yourself.

The only way to defeat evil is to overcome it with good.

To repay evil for evil means, “I want to see them hurt.

I want them to suffer like I have suffered.”

There are really two ways to repay evil for evil:

One is to bring about the painful situation yourself.

The other is to root against them, hoping for something bad to befall them, and cheering inwardly when it does.

But if you stay angry - if you stay in retaliation mode, or even if you just stay bitter, it will taint all your relationships.

If you’re a man and a woman hurt you, and if

you stay angry at her, it will distort

all of your other relationships with women and

vice versa. The same is true of a person of another

race or nationality. Or even people in general.

If people wrong you and you hate them, then you stop trusting people. And you become suspicious of everyone.

Second, returning evil for evil harms, not just your relationships, but it harms you. It pushes you toward the kind of self-centeredness and self-righteousness that the Gospel opposes.

Self-righteousness says, *"I'm better than other people."*

Self-centeredness says, *"I'm more important than anybody else."*

This is where conflict originates.

But the Gospel is out to destroy your self-righteousness.

The Gospel says you're a sinner saved by grace.

But if you stay angry at somebody, you're harboring self-righteousness in your heart.

And it will turn into self-pity that will make you capable of cruelty.

And then evil wins.

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The bottom line is that you can't be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

That reminds me of the Christian who had been a believer for 22 years who said that in truth he had simply been a one-year old Christian 22 times because he was stuck in the same ruts and doing the same things over and over again.

It doesn't work to worship and hear the Word and receive the sacraments and have your daily devotions while nursing a grudge that feeds your self-righteousness. Instead that sin needs to be confronted, confessed, forgiven, crucified.

Not only do retaliation and bitterness hurt your relationships and your heart, but they also destroy the perpetrator.

If a person wrongs you and you pay them back, you're just reinforcing their bad behavior.

If someone harms you and you retaliate, do they say, "I've seen the error of my ways"? No. They say, "See, I was right to do it." Not only do you

create this cycle of insult for insult, but you also alienate their friends. And evil wins.

If you don't forgive, if you don't respond by willing the good of that person, evil wins.

The Lord of the Rings movies and books tell of a ring that was made by an evil lord. Whoever wears the ring can rule the world. But if you use the ring against the evil lord, then you become an evil lord yourself. The only way to kill and destroy the evil lord is not with power but with weakness and sacrifice. This is why Jesus came... not to bring judgment; but to bear judgment.

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2. The Practice of Patience

You may say, "When someone wrongs me, what am I supposed to do? How can I overcome evil with good?" Here are five practical ideas from the text...

First, bless them.

Verse 14 says, "Bless those who persecute you ..."

In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "... pray for those who persecute you ..."

Jesus says that you should pray God's blessings down on the persecutors at the far end of the spectrum.

One of our pastor friends says, "You care about what you pray about." Which means you can't hate someone and pray for them at the same time. Even if you say, "Oh Lord, open the eyes of those idiots," you have turned a corner by willing their good.

Second, forgive them.

Verses 17 and 19 say, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. [...]"

Do not take revenge, my friends ..."

Revenge can be outward or inward.

Some people say, "I've forgiven them, but I won't forget."

Usually that means is, "I'm not trying to harm them outwardly but I'm holding a bitter grudge inwardly."

But as someone has said, "Bitterness is the poison that we take ourselves, hoping that it will hurt someone else."

So how can we forgive? Forgiveness has to be granted before it's felt. Some people say, "I can't forgive them because I'm angry." But the Bible says you're angry because you won't forgive."

Overcoming anger starts with **refraining**.

Refrain from sticking pins in them.

Refrain from dwelling on the awful things they did to you.

Refrain from outward retaliation.

But also put a stop to inward fantasies of revenge...

of what you'd like to see happen to them.

Grant forgiveness before you feel it.

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Third, don't avoid them.

I love verse 18. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." They may not want to see you. They may stay away.

You can't control that. But as far as it depends on you, try to stay in relationship with them.

Have you ever said, "I've forgiven them and I'm praying for them, but I want nothing to do with them?" That may indicate a deserved lack of trust. But more likely, you're punishing the other person by withdrawing your friendship." That's punishment and retaliation. If they don't want to stay away from you, you probably shouldn't stay away from them.

Fourth, will their good.

V. 12 says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink."

In other words, do what you can for their good.

I've had people say to me, "If someone has wronged me, do I have to trust them?" I would say it depends on why.

If you have a friend who is an alcoholic or addict and you're trying to help them stay sober, should you trust them? No. If you know about addiction, of course, you don't trust them. You know how easy it is for them to begin to lie, and lapse.

If you love your alcoholic friend, you probably won't trust them all the way, but the withholding of trust is a way you're helping them.

It's also possible that withholding trust from somebody is a way of hurting them, by refusing to see they might be changing or growing.

On the other hand, trusting someone again too quickly after they've hurt us makes it easy for them to keep on sinning." Which brings us to a fifth point.

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(Fifth), oppose them humbly.

Paul says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." So far, so good. But look what comes next... "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head"! That's a sweet image, isn't it? What does that mean?

If you were in a walled city and an attacking army was trying to scale the city walls, one way to defend yourself would be to pour flaming coals on their head. After all it's hard to wield your sword when your hair's on fire!

But look at the paradox here. If a person is wronging you, you stop them decisively. But the context is, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." In other words, you're opposing and stopping them for their own good, not yours.

Proverbs 15 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." You might think that means, "Just don't talk back or confront them." But Proverbs 25:15 says, "... a gentle tongue can break a bone."

Taken together, these verses mean if you really want to persuade people and see them change – then you must oppose them when they sin against you. After all it's unloving to let them continue in sin.

So you try to stop them, but softly, graciously, and humbly. They may not like what you're saying or agree with it, but if it's clear that you care about them, there's a 50-50

chance they might actually move toward change.

However, if you confront them and it's clear to that you're enjoying the confrontation... if you're putting them down or punishing them, you're not doing it for truth's sake, or for their sake, or even for God's sake. You're doing it for your sake.

If you oppose without first forgiving, blessing, praying, loving, and being humble, you'll never see evil recede. You'll never get that person to really see the error of their ways.

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Right, but you can't make it easy for people to sin against you, either. That's the worst thing for them and you. There's a balance here. But almost everybody I know either resentfully confronts others or excuses bad behavior and just keeps their mouth shut, to avoid making waves.

Loving and keeping your mouth shut.
Or resenting and keeping your mouth open.
Most Christians choose one or the other.
But we're supposed to love and keep our mouths open.
And lots of us struggle with that, which brings us to one last point...

3. The Power to be Patient

Paul says in v. 19, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

God is saying here, "Get out of my chair. Only I have the right and the ability to sit in the judgment. As human beings, we can't really measure what another person deserves.

When somebody lies to you, you may angry.
But what about when you lie? When it comes

to our own untruthfulness, it's always complicated, and there are extenuating circumstances and good reasons.

But you never know what someone who opposes or offends you has gone through. You don't know their whole story or what they've been through or what kind of day they've had. Only God knows what that person deserves. Which is why God says, "leave room" for His judgment.

Last, we see in v. 12 where the power to overcome evil with good originates. Patience in the face of opposition **comes from the mercies of God.**

Romans 12 begins this way;

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy ..."

and the rest of the chapter is various exhortations about how we should live. But everything Paul urges can only be accomplished in view of God's mercies.

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In other words, if you want to overcome evil with good, you have to have a panoramic, breathtaking view of God's mercy toward you." That's the only thing that will soften your heart and empower you to forgive.

In closing, let's think about a parable Jesus told in Matthew 18.

A king had a servant who owed him 10,000 talents, which meant billions and trillions of dollars.

So it couldn't have been a loan, because no king would have that much to loan a servant.

So the servant was likely a high official in the kingdom who lost the vast sum of money through mismanagement or malfeasance, thus jeopardizing the entire economy of the kingdom.

The king says to the servant, "Pay me." And the servant says, "I can't. Please forgive me." And the king, though he has every right to sit in judgment, forgives the servant and shows him mercy.

But then the servant walks along and sees someone who owes him a few dollars. The servant says, "Pay me."

But the man says, "I don't have it. Please forgive me."

Finally, the first servant says, "No," and throws the man in prison.

When the king hears this, he grabs the ungrateful servant, and says,
 “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant as
 I had mercy on you? Didn’t you see my mercy?”

Didn’t you view my mercy?

How can anyone who has experienced my mercy
 hold a grudge and fail to forgive a fellow servant?

At the end of the parable, the king throws the first servant into prison.

And Jesus ends the parable with this chilling line:

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,
 if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

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So according to Scripture, it seems the only way you can
 be spiritually lost is through pride. By thinking, “I don’t need charity.”
 You can only be lost if you refuse to believe that you are
 a sinner in need of grace.

If you hold a grudge or retaliate against somebody,
 then even though you claim to be a sinner
 saved by grace, you don’t really believe it.

In Jesus’ story you have a servant acting like a king.
 We have a servant acting like a judge.
 And when servants of God act like that, we are
 effectively taking God’s chair.

This is the reason for all the strife we see around us.
 And the only thing that will change a servant from acting
 like a king is by getting a view of the mercy of the King
 who became a Servant and went to the cross for us.
 The judge of all the earth was judged there and he
 took the punishment we deserve for all the ways we harm each other.

This is what empowers us to forgive.
 When you glimpse the Lord’s mercy
 it humbles you, and in view of the cross
 you can’t stay angry at somebody unless
 you feel superior to them.

The gospel humbles you out of bitterness,
but also affirms you out of bitterness.
Because if Jesus has justified you,
you don't have anything to prove to anyone else,
or anything to protect either.

And you can forgive like Jesus. In Luke 23:34, Christ says,
"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
What they're doing is wrong and needs to be forgiven.
They are guilty, and he's dying for their guilt."

But instead of screaming at his executioners, he prays,
"Father, they really don't understand the implications of
their actions." And if Jesus has something good to say
even about his executioners, how much more should we
have patience with those who
hurt or oppose or offend US?

PRAYER:

Lord, give us the grace and patience that can grow only out of a great view of your dying, saving mercy. Help us always to keep our need of that mercy in view so we can overcome evil with good and let anger give way to forgiveness. In Jesus' name. Amen.