

Patience

Kleefeld Christian Community

James 5:7-11

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Good morning.

I'd like to begin by clearing up any misconceptions one might have when listening to a preacher. You may think that the preacher has "arrived," has tackled and mastered the topic at hand, and may even be some sort of authority on a matter. You've been spoiled, cause that's usually the case with Ed preaching, but today, I stand before you as one aspires to patience as a virtue, but that seems to be about it. I offer the following as cases in point.

I begin with confession. I have been cheering for the Toronto Maple Leafs for about 50 years now. 50. I was born 2 years after they won their last cup. Till recently, I might well be watching the leafs on Saturday nights. And I say this because it's hard to be a leafs fan. The amount of fodder for jokes at my expense is endless. I used to think that they might win the cup during my lifetime. But I can see from my basement that they don't have a chance for a long time yet. My belief is fading, and so is my patience. Trade them all, I'd suggest. Don't pay them until they win. Now, my wife Mary has me cheering for the Jets as our team of choice. I don't think I have another 50 years in me, but at least I can cheer for a local team.

You may wish to give me some credit, thinking I'm only impatient because of this long-term disappointment and because I'm usually tired in the evenings when I'm watching. Nope. This past Wednesday, after our first serious snow fall, I had to head to Calgary for some meetings. I was up at 5 and headed to the airport shortly thereafter. The roads didn't have much traffic, and I've been in taxi's enough to know that they like to take Broadway to Portage to get to the airport from our place. I was, however, dumbfounded that there were red lights on that major artery at that time of day. On one occasion, I pulled up to a red light and there were no cars to be seen, and I wasn't even at a four-way intersection. It was a three-way intersection, and I find myself saying stuff outloud these days as I get older. I audibly uttered "for crying outloud," and was reminded again of my lack of patience, even during the early hours of the morning. Turns out I can be impatient anytime.

Our text, of course, is timely, in that it talks about patience around the truly important things in life, and it does so as we are in the season of Advent, a time of anticipation of Jesus' second coming. My trite examples of impatience pale in

comparison to what James calls us to; patience as we await the Lord's return. But here's the thing; I'm kind of getting impatient about that too. I have the audacity to think that maybe the Lord's return should have happened already; in fact, I've got some suggestions in retrospect that might've been good timing. Before any of the world wars, I think, would've been good, and there are other times in history too, *from my perspective*. I certainly identify with the Psalmist who laments, "How long, O Lord?" Thankfully, I am reminded by passages in Job and Daniel to stay in my own lane on these matters. Daniel 4:35 says, "All peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He (God) does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" *Turns out having an opinion about the timing of Jesus' second coming is above my pay grade.*

So what shall we do in the meantime? James, I think, gives us a pretty good framework in terms of what we need to do, or attempt to do, and he does so succinctly in verses 7-11 of chapter 5. I'd like to make some observations of the book as whole before we get to those verses specifically.

The author of the book is James, and his audience is rather vague, in that he's not writing to a particular church community. Instead, he writes to the 12 tribes scattered abroad, and this entails Jewish believers. It's one of the earliest New Testament books, and it's interesting because it deals with ethics, about how to treat other people as one attempts to live out one's faith in Jesus. A lot of those instructions are couched in wisdom. He certainly has his eye on rich people and is concerned with their behavior. But he also has some words for those who are not wealthy, and writes about various topics from a pastoral perspective. He is remarkably pragmatic, and the famous line about faith without works occurs at the end of chapter 2. You can see some similarities to the book of 1 Peter in this book, and one of the key features of James' writing is his use of the Old Testament. He relied on the Old Testament for faith expressed in his day, and I think this serves as a serious model for us.

And so when we come to chapter 5, we actually see some repetition of themes that he has already addressed in his book. Rich and poor, patient endurance, warnings against prejudice, warnings about judgement, have all been broached early, and in this chapter he seems to circle back to emphasize some earlier points. The first 6 verses of chapter 5 take aim at the rich, and though there isn't much nuance here, he generalizes somewhat about rich people who have come to wealth because of their mistreatment of others. He has serious warnings for them, and his indictment in verses 5 and 6 is severe: *You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you.*

Given all this, how do our verses fit into his letter, and how do they fit into Advent? Well, a clue happens for us as James uses the phrase “brothers and sisters” as he pens verses 7 and following. In fact, this phrase is used quite a bit by James, 13 times by my count throughout his short book. When he uses it, he seems to address believers who were attempting to live their faith in the midst of a society that oppressed them economically and abused them for their faith in Christ (NLT Notes, p. 2112). His audience, then, was not those who belonged to the dominant culture, but those who were attempting to live for Jesus in the midst of a society that was not. Sound familiar?

So how were those believers to live? It seems to me by context that the believers were actually getting pretty tired of their situation. Turns out it’s not fun to live in a place where one is oppressed economically, and where people slander the name of Jesus (ch 2:6 & 7). And in verse 7, James essentially writes that believers in such a situation were to take the long view. Be patient *as you await* the Lord’s return is what he writes specifically, and let’s note that James is making no promises about their current situation. In other words, he’s not promising that their context will change, and that the oppressors were suddenly going to change their ways. No, sometimes our only recourse is to take the long view, and to be patient in the midst of it. The believers were to wait and look forward to the Lord’s return, in terms of perspective.

But what does James mean by being patient? As I mentioned earlier, he had already spoken about this topic earlier, and in chapter 1 he wrote that when faith is tested, endurance has a chance to grow. Along those same lines, he wrote a little later on in the same chapter that God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptations. *Patience as understood here is that of a prolonged restraint of anger or agitation.* (NIDNTT vol 2 p.769). Patience and endurance are often coupled together, and one author writes nicely that we’re talking about active steadfastness, staying power, constancy, and a determination under adversity, colored by the idea of hope (David Nystrom, James, NIVAC, p. 48). In the midst of the trials they faced, James instructs his readers to restrain from agitation and maintain larger perspective.

The thing with James, though, is that he applies the concept of patience to two aspects of Christian living. The first, as we see in verse 7, is that of a call to patience as we await the Lord’s return. He then cites farmers in his situation, suggesting that their patience is rewarded by a harvest in the end. A good crop is not harvested early, but at the right time. Just as the farmer has little control as to when the harvest should happen exactly, so too believers have little control when it comes to the coming of the Lord. Don’t get agitated because the Lord hasn’t returned yet.

But there is also a human element to patience, and we can see James articulate this in verse 9. When we talk about patience from a New Testament perspective, we must attempt to understand both its divine and human aspects. Certainly God is patient with us, and we need to be patient as we await the Lord's return. But the human relationship part of the equation is that James was instructing his readers to not grumble and complain about each other. That means practically that they were not to become easily agitated with the other. James includes a consequence for not treating the next believer well; there is a judge standing at the door. He had already written about this in chapter 4 at verse 12. There he wrote that if believers judge each other, they are criticizing God's law. God alone is judge, James wrote, and when people judge others, they claim for themselves something that does not rightfully belong to them. So here James reminds his readers that when we are impatient with other believers, when we are easily agitated with the other, we must remember that we too exist underneath the jurisdiction of the ultimate judge.

At verse 10, James cites examples of patience to encourage his readers to stay the course. He assumes that his readers are familiar with the prophets of the Lord, and when I read this passage, I immediately think of prophets like Jeremiah. He endured much as he looked towards God's purposes and promises for his people. I'm sure James had other folks in mind too, but he does specify Job as an example of the kind of patience he was intending. His writing alludes to chapter 2 of Job, that scene where he was picking his scabs, and responding to his wife by saying, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" The sort of patience that James had in mind would endure trials, and he used the story of Job to encourage his people to have the same sort of mindset.

I wish now to take some time to think about some implications from this text. The first three implications have to do with us humans, and second two implications have to do with God. We end with God because the best news is always about God.

This text reminds us that suffering is not some sort of hiccup for those who follow Christ. More likely, it seems as though we should expect it in a society where many have no apparent use for God. We will not get a free pass to avoid trouble just because we call Jesus Lord. Instead, as suffering and oppression comes our way, we are called to patience, to longsuffering, to a lack of agitation towards others and our circumstances, to the long view. Our attitude as we endure suffering is of paramount importance.

The second implication for us humans is to think about how we treat people, and perhaps especially other believers in the midst of suffering and oppression. Some

commentators suggest that James is clearly telling his readers to be patient to the oppressors, and towards each other. I can see that, and I think that fits within the rest of Scripture, but one of his main targets is those that call Jesus Lord and how they relate to each other. James reminds us that as we attempt to do life together as a community of faith, we may well have occasion to grumble and complain about the other, especially when we think about being a part of a community for a long time. And yet, this gives us no excuse for agitation with the other. Perhaps we all need a reminder of this from time to time.

Third, and I don't know how else to say this, but we have to get used to waiting. I don't particularly like this myself, especially in a world where the average amount of time a person stays on a website is less than 60 seconds, and fast food had better be fast, or else. I find I need reminding sometimes from the Scripture that God's timetable is widely different than mine. In Genesis 15, for example, Abram is told his people will be enslaved for 400 years in a country not their own, but that his people would come out of that land with great possessions. 400 years! I don't like that timing either, but it reminds me that these things take time, and that God is up to something during that time.

Speaking of God, we turn now to the 4th implication from the text. Let us be reminded in the most positive of senses that God is patient. And this needs to be seen as valuable, a virtue. Another way to say this is that God is not in a hurry. And this is good news on so many different levels. Elsewhere the New Testament reminds us that God is patient because he wants no one to perish. The Old Testament reminds us that God is patient as he forms his people, and continues to work on them. This patience reminds us of God's faithfulness and steadfastness, descriptions that God uses of Himself at Exodus 34:6. There, he self describes as *Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations.* God is patient because He wants to lavish his unfailing love on people like you and me. Let us especially remind ourselves of people that we love who do not yet follow Jesus. God is being patient with them, thankfully and mercifully.

A final implication from the text is that we are reminded that God keeps his promises. I don't know about you, but I am banking on this. The story of God sending His Son via the incarnation is a story that has threads back to Genesis, if we allow the gospel of John to be our guide. This sort of promise-keeping ought to inform our faith and encourage us, reminding us of God's steadfastness as He works to make all things right. We can know it's true because of how He has acted in the past, being true to His word. The next coming of Jesus will be the next glorious step in God's plan, and we can look forward to every knee bowing and every

tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. I know we're supposed be patient about that, but I wish to sneak in the New Testament prayer here anyway. Marantha, Come Lord Jesus! Amen.