



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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PATIENCE

When we start living the Christian life in an intentional way, we expect things to happen. We are excited at the prospects. We are pleased to be over the hump of having made the decision to live as much as possible as a Christian. In the midst of this excitement, we want to see some progress: some clear signs of a new holiness, some exciting experiences in our prayer, some instances of our new found love and selflessness. When we find instead the same old self, with all its petty sins and pride and selfishness, we get a little impatient with ourselves and with God. This is our first encounter with impatience in the spiritual life: our impatience with our lack of progress.

This impatience is rooted in a feeling of, "I did my part: I accepted You into my life. Now all spiritual blessings should follow, if not immediately, at least soon." Quid pro quo: we are making a deal with God. We are telling Him that since we went out and made the decision to live as He tells us we should, then He should come across with the results. We feel as though He owes us that much.

The root of the problem is that we have not recognized our dependence upon God: that even our decision is the result of His hand at work within us. Instead, we are operating as if our relationship with Him was one of a business transaction: we do this for Him and He will do that for us. We believe in Him and try to live it out, and He owes us holiness in return. But even if we are not out to make a bargain with God, we still expect results. And if they do not come, we get impatient. We try to become holy by the sheer effort of our will. When we are not trying to earn His favor, we are trying to accomplish everything without it. We try to get by on our own.

That doesn't work, of course. We are always and everywhere dependent upon God. We are dependent upon Him for our conversion, for the decision to try to love Him, for everything that gets accomplished in us spiritually. We need to learn that dependence. We need to learn how to live it out day by day in our spiritual lives. We need to learn that He gives us our blessings in the spiritual life (as well as the material) -- they are pure gifts, which we have not earned or deserved. The way we learn this is by waiting upon Him.

If we are made to wait for our spiritual progress, we realize that it is not our doing, but God's. We must learn to wait like a beggar at the King's gate. That is our true position, a position of complete dependence. We live off what He has to give us. That is our entire sustenance. We have no control over when the King might come, or what He might give us when he does come. But we do know that He will give us only what is best for us. That is His nature.

It is hard for us to get used to being the beggar. A big part of us wants to be the great, strong, independent type. But that's simply not how it is with our relationship with God. We need Him for everything. Being willing to ask, and to accept from Him, is one of the hardest things to get used to. But we must. Having to wait for our spiritual blessings is an opportunity for us to learn it. Then we are truly in the position of the beggar waiting upon the King.

Eventually, we should come to enjoy our complete dependence upon God, for He does for us only what is good for us. It is a liberating dependence, which frees us from the burdens of trying to do it all ourselves (in which we inevitably fail anyway). It is our true position as His creatures.

Our impatience with ourselves is an impatience with God. We feel He has not done enough in making us perfect. Normally, it is couched in considerably more pious terms, but that is what it amounts to. We want to become holy in our own way and on our own terms. We do not always want to wait upon God's wisdom and action. But that waiting is the only way we will finally learn that we do not save ourselves -- He does. It is in the waiting that we learn to receive.

In our prayers, especially in the prayer of quiet, we can learn this waiting. It is the attentive waiting of the beggar, whose eyes follow the King in His every move. When we go into church, then is the time to kneel down and wait upon the Lord. This is especially true if you are burdened with some particular problem or decision. Then you must wait upon Him, and He will raise you up in due season. In waiting, you admit that you need Him, and thus put yourself in a position to receive what He has to give.

Similarly, after we've been at the spiritual life for a while, we begin to get impatient with our sins. This is the other side of being

impatient with our progress. There is usually some habit that is a problem -- not usually terribly major in itself, but something that is frequent and proves hard to shake off. We get impatient with it because it interferes with our self-image of goodness. After all, we are now intentional about the spiritual life, and such habits are unworthy of us. They offend our pride.

So we get impatient with ourselves. We try all the harder to overcome our habits -- to no avail. They seem stronger than we are. Eventually, we get the message, and ask God to do as he sees fit with it all. We let Him take over. All the time, we were trying to save ourselves. We were trying to cure our own sins without much help from God. We needed to learn that that doesn't work. We needed to learn to be patient and wait for God's redemption, for there is no other.

When we finally turn over to Him our sinful habits, He may cure them immediately, or He may leave them with us for a time. For it is possible that we have sought His help merely as a last resort rather than out of any real conviction that that is where we ought to turn for help. It may be that we still need the opportunity to learn patience with ourselves. We may still need to live with our need for redemption (that we cannot produce ourselves), in order to appreciate what God does for us.

Our patience with ourselves depends on our ability to forgive ourselves. All too often, we are harder on ourselves than on anyone else. We expect perfection -- for that is the image of ourselves that we cherish. So we get impatient with our imperfections. We ought rather to regard them as God regards them. He condemns the evil in our sin, but still loves. His love swallows up the evil. That is the message of the Cross. We should aspire to love ourselves as He loves us. His is a forgiving love that does not gloss over the evil that is there and all too real, but redeems it. In learning to forgive ourselves -- which is accepting His forgiveness -- we learn some more of the patience we need as Christians.

It is only by learning patience with ourselves in this way that we will ever learn to be patient with others. As we grow spiritually, we will from time to time find ourselves impatient with others. They seem so slow, and not up to our level of attainment in the spiritual life. It may be that they are afflicted with the same bad habits that we suffered through a while back. It is an unfortunate fact of human nature (and thus of Christian nature) that we are least forgiving of those sins that we see (or have seen) in ourselves. When we know someone in the parish that has a problem with arrogance, just as we used to have, we are tempted to be terribly judgmental of him.

This is an opportunity for us to be patient. For we ought not be more demanding of him than his Lord. God sees his sins, and judges them as such. But His love swallows up the sins, taking their sting

upon Himself. He feels the pain of their sins, but He still loves. He is not judgmental of them, but forgiving. If his Lord forgives, who are we to condemn? We are merely his fellow servants. Forgiveness will deliver us from impatience with another's sin. It will lead us to share God's love for them, a love which is never impatient.

Impatience with other people is selfish. When you get impatient with someone who is delaying you by his incompetence -- another driver, perhaps, or the person in front of you in line at the bank -- you are saying that your time is more important than his. The implication of your attitude is that you really shouldn't have to wait, that you have more important things to do with your time. But then, if what you are doing is what God has given you to do at this particular moment, what could be more important for you to be doing? And if it isn't what He has given you to do, why are you doing it?

In short, impatience with other people (or with circumstances beyond your control) is a failure to receive your time as a gift from God. It is arrogantly assuming that it is yours. It is assuming that your time on earth is your due, your possession, rather than God's gift to you. Once we finally learn that all our time is God's gift to us, then we will finally have no reason to get impatient with other people. We will be able to relax and take things as they come -- as they come from God's hand. We will finally be able to accept what comes in each moment as an occasion which comes from God -- an occasion which is part of our vocation, and part of our redemption.

Once we come to see our time in that way, impatience will be a thing of the past. We will no longer have any occasion for it. That selfish part of us which gets impatient with self and others will no longer assert itself. Our pride will no longer demand a certain sort of progress in the spiritual life. We will be more willing to let God give us whatever He will, and be happy with it. We will try to see His hand in whatever comes (even distraction and adversity) rather than trying to tell Him to give us something else. We will be able that much more to let go of our own control of our lives, and let God take over.

Forgiveness, accepting time as a gift, and waiting on God -- these are the means to patience. Patience is never learned except by being patient. There is no other way. So in His desire for our growth, God will give us the opportunities. They will not always be the ones we would choose. They will be the very things that we are most prone to be impatient with. But they are the opportunities we need in order to learn to forgive. Then with joy we will take our rightful places as beggars in His Court.
