



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SPIRITUAL PATIENCE

If we could be made holy and perfect in one day, we would do almost anything to accomplish it. To be delivered from the toil of our daily struggles with temptation, the difficulties we have keeping our rule of prayer, our constant distractions and weaknesses -- were there a quick alternative, we would jump at the chance. Even if it meant a day of pure misery, it would be preferable, since it would soon be over and then we would be finished.

This tells us that we resist the reality of the life-long trials of Christian life. We crave an easier alternative, preferably something quick. Our temptations which keep coming back -- for years! -- are certainly tiresome. We think we ought to have gotten past them by now. Yet there they are. When we start a serious life of Christian discipline, we know intellectually that it must last until we die and go to heaven, and yet, we expect that it will get easier in a short time. After a few months or a year, we find ourselves just as beset with temptation, and we get impatient. We say to God, "Here I've been putting all this effort into my Christian life, and You haven't made things any easier for me. It's not fair! I need to see some results or I can't go on."

Or we approach it with the expectation of delayed if not immediate gratification. This is a Christian version of the retiree who thinks that since he worked hard all his life he should have no difficulties in retirement -- that is his reward for working all those years. Christians sometimes hold the unspoken expectation that if we work hard on our Christian lives for five years (say) then after that God will reward us by making life easy for us. Needless to say, this is not usually put quite so directly, for then we could see our folly. Instead, it remains tucked away in a dark corner of our mind, until the five years are up and things do not seem to be getting any easier. Then we remonstrate with God, and feel that He is not keeping His part of the bargain as we have kept ours.

The problem is that we expect immediate and visible results. We lack the patience to wait upon God, and to allow Him to produce the fruit of spiritual discipline in His good time rather than according to our schedule. We live in an age of instant gratification, and this seeps into our understanding of the spiritual life. We may not expect spiritual results immediately, but we do look for them before very long. We have trouble with the long-term work of Christian life. This includes those temptations which seem to have no end. If we knew that they would go away on a certain date in the not so distant future, we could persevere. But we don't know how long they will last, and so we succumb. Or the temptation keeps coming back week after week, month after month, until we think it will never go away.

Our long-term problems also include distractions and other such obstacles to our prayer. These get very tiresome, especially after we are thoroughly familiar with them. Having fought with distractions during our time of quiet prayer for a year or two, we think enough is enough. We have done our bit, now is the time for our efforts to be rewarded. When the distractions continue, we get frustrated and impatient. We will be tempted to give up our efforts altogether. Our foe suggests to us that all our efforts are futile, to say, "I tried that and it doesn't work."

This is a real and serious problem, since Christian life is inherently long-term. God gives each of us exactly enough time on earth to become a saint. We do not know how many days that is. But if our commitment as Christians is to love God above all, and so to set our course for heaven, then we have made a commitment for the rest of life on earth -- and in heaven. The earthly part includes the trials which form the way of the Cross. And that is where spiritual patience is needed.

Christian life is to run with patience the race that is set before us. (Hebrews 12:1) This has two sides. On the one hand, we live Christian life only in the present moment. We cannot do anything directly about the past or future, but only the present. On the other hand, it is the end and goal of our lives that gives meaning to each moment. We understand our present trials and triumphs in relation to heaven. We accept the temptations, the distractions, the disciplines of Christian life, because they are our means to the fullness of life with God in heaven: in short, because we love God.

So Christian life has this two-fold aspect. It is both immediate and long-term. We get impatient when we lose our sense that the immediate trial is related to the final end. Then we begin to think about the trials that may lie ahead (with all their difficulties, etc.) rather than devoting ourselves to the one that lies in front of us. It is a double temptation: to despair, and to ignore the immediate battle. If we despair, we are in danger of giving up on Christian life. If we are turned from the immediate temptation, we are bound to fall.

Spiritual patience is learned only by being patient. This is a long-term project, but also one that is accomplished one day at a time. It requires that we give ourselves into God's hands day by day, trusting that He will always give us what is best for us. If that means a temptation continues, so be it. He knows that we need the trial to strengthen us in our love for Him. We are absolutely safe in His hands: this is the basis for our patience.

We must still run the race, of course. Our patience must not be a smokescreen for sloth or negligence. Running with patience is not running slowly but running with confidence, knowing that there may well be a long road ahead, but that the prize is nevertheless sure.

Our perseverance is sometimes threatened by the natural rhythm of Christian life, what C.S. Lewis calls the Law of Undulation. There are natural ups and downs in Christian life. Sometimes we feel very close to God in our prayer; at other times we feel that something must be terribly wrong, for God does not seem to be with us at all. What is usually happening is that God draws us into prayer by giving us some spiritual sweetness -- and this makes us feel close to Him and happy with our prayer. Then He will withdraw the sweetness lest we become addicted to it, lest we pray because it makes us feel good spiritually rather than because we love God. We sometimes give children sweets to reward them for doing the right thing, and as they grow older we teach them to do it even without the sweet, so that they do right for its own sake. God does the same with us, so that we will grow into adult Christians and not remain as babes.

When things get difficult, then we will need patience in order to persevere. Otherwise we will scurry around trying to recapture the sweetness we once had, and refusing to accept prayer as God then offers it. Our will will not be trained to persevere in purer love for God, since we try for sweetness instead of Him.

By ourselves we could never run the race with patience. It is only as we rely upon God in our Christian lives, and especially in our trials, that we can be patient. Doing it ourselves, we would want to get it done and over with as quickly as possible. This means that whenever we are impatient with our spiritual lives we are depending too much on ourselves and not enough on God. In our impatience, we define for ourselves what should have been accomplished, and how things should be going spiritually. Implicitly we take control -- taking it away from God where control of our spiritual lives properly belongs.

It is all too easy to fall into this trap when we make use of rule and structure in our Christian life -- church on Sunday, daily prayers, regular fasting and so on. Our good habits can come to take the place of grace: we think that if we just obey the rules we will become holy. In reality, the rules and habits are meant to serve grace. They are meant to keep God central in our lives, and to help us to live ever more and more in Him. If we lose sight of the grace

which is served by the structures, then the structures themselves become rote and empty. Then we get impatient with Christian life.

Sometimes false expectations lead us to impatience: we may expect that our intentional work at Christian life will at some point make things magically easy, or that our temptations will disappear in response to our efforts. These expectations are false and inhibit spiritual patience. Jesus Himself was tempted to the very end -- and His temptations became more acute not less as time went on. Ours are bound to continue as well. Such expectations also betray a dependence on ourselves and our works at the expense of God's grace.

We also make life difficult for ourselves when we try to judge our own progress -- and make ourselves impatient about its slowness. Our progress is properly God's concern. He can see us far better than we can see ourselves. Sometimes when we are sorely tempted or vastly distracted, we feel that we are moving rapidly in the wrong direction. It is not a pleasant condition, certainly. But the spiritual reality may be far different. The trial may be working in us the vital purification of the will, and thus drawing us closer to God. We cannot see this at the time, for all we can see is the trial. Only afterwards (and fully, only in heaven) will we see what God has actually been working in us.

Thus we should not get impatient when progress seems slow. We should rather give ourselves that much more to God, trusting that He will do for us exactly what needs to be done at the time. He will get us into heaven, not we ourselves.

The way to cultivate spiritual patience is to resign ourselves into His hands. We must trust Him. There is no other way to be patient. We must do what we must do, fulfilling the Christian work that is ours this day: battling with sin, saying our prayers, cultivating virtuous habits. But we must see this as the work of grace within us, operating through our efforts. And we must leave all worry about spiritual progress to God. Our part is to trust that He will accomplish in us that which He has begun.

In all of this, we must remember that our sanctification (our being made holy and thus fit for our place in heaven) is not just a matter of doing things. It is primarily a matter of being. The two are not unrelated, of course: our deeds express who we are, and in turn help to shape our being. But to be in heaven is to be holy as God is holy. This requires that God remake us in holiness, in His image. There is no other way. There is nothing that we can do in this world that will accomplish it. So we must give ourselves to Him to work in us the sanctification which we desire. Spiritual patience is a sign that we are doing this.

