

The Patience of a Saint

Not long ago, I observed a young mother and her wayward toddler. I encountered them during a quick trip to a local grocery store.

I tried to keep my distance from this dynamic duo. But throughout the store, I could hear the child's screams and wails.

What I didn't hear, though, was an angry mother. Smiling and whispering words of reassurance, she kept shopping as though her son weren't having a rude, raucous and very public meltdown. No one who saw her face would have known anything was wrong.

I finished my shopping and witnessed her buckling the still-screaming offspring into his car seat. I knew I had seen a supreme example of patience. If I had been wearing a hat, I would have removed it in her honor. I wanted to suggest that before their next outing, she dress him in a T-shirt emblazoned with "CAUTION: SUDDEN EXPLOSIONS OF ANGER MAY OCCUR."

Some define patience as "long-suffering," and because the King James Version of the Bible uses that word, most people think of patience this way. But I believe in a broader definition that includes what this young mother demonstrated: peaceful overcoming of a circumstance or situation. It's the ability not to suffer in that circumstance but to peacefully endure, to press through it with grace.

We admire this quality. But we can't go to the gym to pump up our patience or pop a patience pill. True and lasting patience comes only as an outflow of the Holy Spirit's work. It's the result of the Spirit's indwelling, so none of us has the ability to "do patience" on our own.

Please don't think of patience as merely the opposite of impatience. What kept the young mother smiling and speaking calmly while her offspring pitched a fit must have been Spirit-energized restraint. Patience includes the ability to tolerate delay and deal with obstacles without losing focus. The mother continued her shopping expedition. Her groceries reached the cart and, ultimately, her car.

When we think about exhibiting patience, we must remember that God created His children to "walk worthy": "That you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing to all, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10).

Jesus' hot-blooded disciples James and John could have used this reminder. In the story of the Samaritan village that refused to receive Jesus (Luke 9:51-56), the brothers went straight to Jesus, eager to administer what they saw as righteous judgment. We see their lack of patience and compassion in their question about the villagers. "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elijah did?" (v. 55).

Jesus' response both rebukes and instructs. "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (v. 56). Our Lord, baptized in water and the Spirit, understood His purpose. These too-eager "sons of thunder" had no such advantage, and Jesus knew it.

We may not have James and John with us today, but we do have an ever-present "Christian police." These linear thinkers judge our every move, in person and online. "I didn't think Christians acted like that," they say. "A real Christian wouldn't (fill in the blank)." "If you really followed Jesus, you would (fill in the blank)."

Instead of becoming spiritual police or pseudo-fruit

inspectors who criticize fellow believers' words and actions or point out specks in others' eyes without removing the logs from our own (see Matt. 7:4), we should become inspectors of our own fruit. Our questions might look like this:

Where is the long-term fruit of the Spirit in my life?

When others look at me in the midst of a difficult situation, do they see someone fighting for control or someone controlled by the Spirit?

Is my life ruled by the flesh or by the Father, by social norms or by the Spirit?

The only way I can calm myself in the middle of a crowded grocery store, a hazard-filled golf course or a challenging business meeting is by the impartation of the Holy Spirit.

No one will need to inspect our fruit if we do the first inspection. When we display the patience of a saint, the indwelling of the Spirit will be obvious.

It's better to pitch patience than to pitch a fit.

STEVE GREENE is the publisher and executive vice president of the multimedia group at Charisma Media and executive producer of the Charisma Podcast Network. Find his book, Love Leads: The Spiritual Connection Between Your Relationships and Productivity, at [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), or at your local bookstore.

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