



## **FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT**

### **15 August - PATIENCE & SELF-CONTROL**

#### **PATIENCE**

##### **Matthew 13:3-9**

<sup>3</sup> Jesus told the crowd many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.'

Patience is not just waiting, though normally waiting pays an important part. Perhaps that's why patience is such an uncomfortable characteristic - we don't like to have to wait. Nearly 50 years ago one of the original credit cards came with the inducement *Takes the waiting out of wanting*. But, looked at positively patience may involve lots of things not only that are good for us but are satisfying - resting, seeking and discerning, anticipation, hope.

Patience is not just a personal attribute - it's almost certain that Paul saw patience, along with the other fruits, reflecting the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community. In this context *forbearance* might be a better translation of the Greek word, even if it sounds rather quaint. It reminds us to think as highly of other people's opinions as of our own, to recognise that they may be right, and to realise that, even if they aren't, they may need time to change their minds.

One way or another we shouldn't underestimate the significance of patience - Paul certainly didn't, putting it as the first characteristic of love in the passage from 1 Corinthians 13 that is often read at weddings.

- In what ways do we need to be more patient?
- How could we make patience a positive virtue rather than simply the opposite of impatience?
- In what ways could the church provide better models of patience?

## **SELF-CONTROL**

### **James 3:1-5 & 13-17**

<sup>1</sup> Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. <sup>3</sup> When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup> Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. <sup>5</sup> Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. <sup>15</sup> Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Last in the list, but certainly not least in the difficulty rankings, self-control has several aspects that distinguish it from the other fruits: (a) it's never applied in the Bible to God; (b) it is exclusively a personal attribute, not a community one; (c) it is aimed at physical excesses in the list of vices and only indirectly at relational breakdowns which are the ethical imperatives of the other fruits.

Self-control is not the same as abstinence - 'one is free to abstain from any and everything for the sake of others; but one may never turn the freely giving up of food or drink or whatever into some kind of virtue on its own' (Fee p452-3). These ideas are extensively unpacked by Paul in Romans 14.

In the letter of James, self-control seems to be based on three elements: (a) self-understanding and in particular recognising our weaknesses; (b) recognising the way the world works - that an unconsidered remark has the potential to do great mischief; (c) a focus on God (this is not immediately apparent from today's reading until we remember that Jewish writing about *wisdom* immediately conjures up *the Wisdom of God*, the first of his works (Proverbs 8:22)).

- What are the ways in which self-control features in your own life?
- How might we distinguish 'fruitful' abstinence from unfruitful?
- How good is the church at identifying, and teaching, the three elements of self-control in the final paragraph above?

Quotation from Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.