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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 83

On Patience

"Let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." James 1:4.

1. "My brethren," says the Apostle in the preceding verse, "count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." At first view, this may appear a strange direction; seeing most temptations are, "for the present, not joyous, but grievous." Nevertheless ye know by your own experience, that "the trial of your faith worketh patience:" And if "patience have its perfect work, ye shall be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

2. It is not to any particular person, or Church, that the Apostle gives this instruction; but to all who are partakers of like precious faith, and are seeking after that common salvation. For as long as any of us are upon earth, we are in the region of temptation. He who came into the world to save his people from their sins, did not come to save them from temptation. He himself "knew no sin;" yet while he was in this vale of tears, "he suffered being tempted;" and herein also "left us an example, that we should tread in his steps." We are liable to a thousand temptations, from the corruptible body variously affecting the soul. The soul itself, encompassed as it is with infirmities, exposes us to ten thousand more. And how many are the temptations which we meet with even from the good men (such, at least, they are in part, in their general character) with whom we are called to converse from day to day! Yet what are these to the temptations we may expect to meet with from an evil world seeing we all, in effect, "dwell with Mesech, and have our habitation in the tents of Kedar." Add to this, that the most dangerous of our enemies are not those that assault us openly. No:

Angels our march oppose, Who still in strength excel: Our secret, sworn, eternal foes, Countless, invisible!

For is not our "adversary the devil, as a roaring lion," with all his infernal legions, still going "about seeking whom he may devour" This is the case with all the children of men; yea, and with all the children of God, as long as they sojourn in this strange land. Therefore, if we do not wilfully and carelessly rush into them, yet we shall surely "fall into divers temptations;" temptations innumerable as the stars of heaven; and those varied and complicated a thousand ways. But, instead of counting this a loss, as unbelievers would do, "count it all joy; knowing that the trial of your faith," even when it is "tried as by fire," "worketh patience." But "let patience have its perfect work, and ye shall be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

3. But what is Patience We do not now speak of a heathen virtue; neither of a natural indolence; but of a gracious temper, wrought in the heart of a believer, by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is a disposition to suffer whatever pleases God, in the manner and for the time that pleases him. We thereby hold the middle way, neither oligvrountes, despising our sufferings, making little of them, passing over them lightly, as if they were owing to chance, or second causes; nor, on the other hand, ekloumenoi, affected too much, unnerved, dissolved, sinking under them. We may observe, the proper object of patience is suffering, either in body or mind. Patience does not imply the not feeling this: It is not apathy or insensibility. It is at the utmost distance from stoical stupidity; yea, at an equal distance from fretfulness or dejection. The patient believer is preserved from falling into either of these extremes, by considering, -- Who is the Author of all his suffering Even God his Father; -- What is the motive of his giving us to suffer Not so properly his justice as his love; -- and, What is the end of it Our "profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness."

4. Very nearly related to patience is meekness, if it be not rather a species of it. For may it not be defined, patience of injuries; particularly affronts, reproach, or unjust censure This teaches not to return evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise blessing. Our blessed Lord himself seems to place a peculiar value upon this temper. This he peculiarly calls us to learn of him, if we would find rest for our souls.

5. But what may we understand by the work of patience "Let patience have its perfect work." It seems to mean, let it have its full fruit or effect. And what is the fruit which the Spirit of God is accustomed to produce hereby, in the heart of a believer One immediate fruit of patience is peace: A sweet tranquillity of mind; a serenity of spirit, which can never be found, unless where patience reigns. And this peace often rises into joy. Even in the midst of various temptations, those that are enabled "in patience to possess their souls," can witness, not only quietness of spirit, but triumph and exultation. This both

Lays the rough paths of peevish nature even, And opens in each breast a little heaven.

6. How lively is the account which the Apostle Peter gives not only of the peace and joy, but of the hope and love, which God works in those patient sufferers "who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation!" Indeed he appears herein to have an eye to this very passage of St. James: "Though ye are grieved for a season, with manifold temptations," (the very word *poikilois peirasmois*;) "that the trial of your faith" (the same expression which was used by St. James) "may be found to praise, and honour, and glory, at the revelation of Jesus Christ; whom, having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." See here the peace, the joy, and the love, which, through the mighty power of God, are the fruit or "work of patience!"

7. And as peace, hope, joy, and love are the fruits of patience, both springing from, and confirmed by it, so is also rational, genuine courage, which indeed cannot subsist without patience. The brutal courage, or rather fierceness, of a lion may probably spring from impatience; but true fortitude, the courage of a man, springs from just the contrary temper. Christian zeal is likewise confirmed and increased by patience, and so is activity in every good work; the same Spirit inciting us to be

Patient in bearing ill, and doing well;

making us equally willing to do and suffer the whole will of God.

8. But what is the perfect work of patience Is it anything less than the "perfect love of God," constraining us to love every soul of man, "even as Christ loved us" Is it not the whole of religion, the whole "mind which was also in Christ Jesus" Is it not "the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of him that created us" And is not the fruit of this, the constant resignation of ourselves, body and spirit, to God; entirely giving up all we are, all we have, and all we love, as a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God through the Son of his love It seems this is "the perfect work of patience," consequent upon the trial of our faith.

9. But how does this work differ from that gracious work which is wrought in every believer, when he first finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the remission of his sins Many persons that are not only upright of heart, but that fear, nay, and love God, have not spoken warily upon this head, not according to the oracles of God. They have spoken of the work of sanctification, taking the word in its

full sense, as if it were quite of another kind, as if it differed entirely from that which is wrought in justification. But this is a great and dangerous mistake, and has a natural tendency to make us undervalue that glorious work of God which was wrought in us when we were justified: Whereas in that moment when we are justified freely by his grace, when we are accepted through the Beloved, we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit. And there is as great a change wrought in our souls when we are born of the Spirit, as was wrought in our bodies when we are born of a woman. There is, in that hour, a general change from inward sinfulness, to inward holiness. The love of the creature is changed to the love of the Creator; the love of the world into the love of God. Earthly desires, the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life, are, in that instant, changed, by the mighty power of God, into heavenly desires. The whirlwind of our will is stopped in its mid career, and sinks down into the will of God. Pride and haughtiness subside into lowliness of heart; as do anger, with all turbulent and unruly passions, into calmness, meekness, and gentleness. In a word, the earthly, sensual, devilish mind, gives place to "the mind that was in Christ Jesus."

10. "Well, but what more than this can be implied in entire sanctification" It does not imply any new kind of holiness: Let no man imagine this. From the moment we are justified, till we give up our spirits to God, love is the fulfilling of the law; of the whole evangelical law, which took place of the Adamic law, when the first promise of "the seed of the woman" was made. Love is the sum of Christian sanctification; it is the one kind of holiness, which is found, only in various degrees, in the believers who are distinguished by St. John into "little children, young men, and fathers." The difference between one and the other properly lies in the degree of love. And herein there is as great a difference in the spiritual, as in the natural sense, between fathers, young men, and babes.

Every one that is born of God, though he be as yet only a "babe in Christ," has the love of God in his heart; the love of his neighbour; together with lowliness, meekness, and resignation. But all of these are then in a low degree, in proportion to the degree of his faith. The faith of a babe in Christ is weak, generally mingled with doubts or fears; with doubts, whether he has not deceived himself; or fear, that he shall not endure to the end. And if, in order to prevent those perplexing doubts, or to remove those tormenting fears, he catches hold of the opinion that a true believer cannot make shipwreck of the faith, experience will sooner or later show that it is merely the staff of a broken reed, which will be so far from sustaining him, that it will only enter into his hand and pierce it. But to return: In the same proportion as he grows in faith, he grows in holiness; he increases in love, lowliness, meekness, in every part of the image of God; till it pleases God, after he is thoroughly convinced of inbred sin, of the total corruption of his nature, to take it all away; to purify his heart and cleanse him from all unrighteousness; to fulfil that promise which he made first to his ancient people, and in them to the Israel of God in all ages: "I will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul."

It is not easy to conceive what a difference there is, between that which he experiences now, and that which he experienced before. Till this universal change was wrought in his soul, all his holiness was mixed. He was humble, but not entirely; his humility was mixed with pride: He was meek; but his meekness was frequently interrupted by anger, or some uneasy and turbulent passion. His love of God was frequently damped, by the love of some creature; the love of his neighbour, by evil surmising, or some thought, if not temper, contrary to love. His will was not wholly melted down into the will of God: But although in general he could say, "I come 'not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me;'" yet now and then nature rebelled, and he could not clearly say, "Lord, not as I will, but as thou wilt." His whole soul is now consistent with itself; there is no jarring string. All his passions flow

in a continual stream, with an even tenor to God. To him that is entered into this rest, you may truly say,

Calm thou ever art within, All unruffled, all serene!

There is no mixture of any contrary affections: All is peace and harmony after. Being filled with love, there is no more interruption of it, than of the beating of his heart; and continual love bringing continual joy in the Lord, he rejoices evermore. He converses continually with the God whom he loves, unto whom in everything he gives thanks. And as he now loves God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength; so Jesus now reigns alone in his heart, the Lord of every motion there.

11. But it may be inquired, In what manner does God work this entire, this universal change in the soul of a believer this strange work, which so many will not believe, though we declare it unto them Does he work it gradually, by slow degrees; or instantaneously, in a moment How many are the disputes upon this head, even among the children of God! And so there will be, after all that ever was, or ever can be said upon it. For many will still say, with the famous Jew, Non persuadebis, etiamsi persuaseris: That is, "Thou shalt not persuade me, though thou dost persuade me." And they will be the more resolute herein, because the Scriptures are silent upon the subject; because the point is not determined, at least not in express terms, in any part of the oracles of God. Every man therefore may abound in his own sense, provided he will allow the same liberty to his neighbour; provided he will not be angry at those who differ from his opinion, nor entertain hard thoughts concerning them. Permit me likewise to add one thing more: Be the change instantaneous or gradual, see that you never rest till it is wrought in your own soul, if you desire to dwell with God in glory.

12. This premised, in order to throw what light I can upon this interesting question, I will simply relate what I have seen myself in the course of many years. Four or five and forty years ago, when I had no distinct views of what the Apostle meant by exhorting us to "leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on to perfection," two or three persons in London, whom I knew to be truly sincere, desired to give me an account of their experience. It appeared exceeding strange, being different from any that I had heard before; but exactly similar to the preceding account of entire sanctification. The next year, two or three more persons at Bristol, and two or three in Kingswood, coming to me severally, gave me exactly the same account of their experience. A few years after, I desired all those in London who made the same profession, to come to me all together at the Foundery, that I might be thoroughly satisfied. I desired that man of God, Thomas Walsh, to give us the meeting there. When we met, first one of us, and the the other, asked them the most searching questions we could devise. They answered every one without hesitation, and with the utmost simplicity, so that we were fully persuaded, they did not deceive themselves. In the years 1759, 1760, 1761, and 1762, their numbers multiplied exceedingly, not only in London and Bristol, but in various parts of Ireland as well as England. Not trusting to the testimony of others, I carefully examined most of these myself; and in London alone I found six hundred and fifty-two members of our society who were exceedingly clear in their experience, and of whose testimony I could see no reason to doubt. I believe no year has passed since that time wherein God has not wrought the same work in many others; but sometimes in one part of England or Ireland, sometimes in another; -- as "the wind bloweth where it listeth;" -- and every one of these (after the most careful inquiry, I have not found one exception either in Great Britain or Ireland) has declared that his deliverance from sin was instantaneous; that the change was wrought in a moment. Had half of these, or one third, or one in

twenty, declared it was gradually wrought in them, I should have believed this, with regard to them, and thought that some were gradually sanctified and some instantaneously. But as I have not found, in so long a space of time, a single person speaking thus; as all who believe they are sanctified, declare with one voice, that the change was wrought in a moment, I cannot but believe that sanctification is commonly, if not always, an instantaneous work.

13. But however that question be decided, whether sanctification, in the full sense of the word, be wrought instantaneously or gradually, how may we attain to it "What shall we do," said the Jews to our Lord, "that we may work the works of God" His answer will suit those that ask, What shall we do, that this work of God may be wrought in us "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." On this one work all the others depend. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and all his wisdom, and power, and faithfulness are engaged on thy side. In this, as in all other instances, "by grace we are saved through faith." Sanctification too is "not of works, lest any man should boast." "It is the gift of God," and is to be received by plain, simple faith. Suppose you are now labouring to "abstain from all appearance of evil," "zealous of good works," and walking diligently and carefully in all the ordinances of God; there is then only one point remaining: The voice of God to your soul is, "Believe, and be saved." [See the Sermon on "The Scripture Way of Salvation." (editor's note)] First, believe that God has promised to save you from all sin, and to fill you with all holiness. Secondly, believe that he is able thus "to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through him." Thirdly, believe that he is willing, as well as able, to save you to the uttermost; to purify you from all sin, and fill up all your heart with love. Believe, Fourthly, that he is not only able, but willing to do it now. Not when you come to die; not at any distant time; not to-morrow, but to-day. He will then enable you to believe, it is done, according to his word: And then "patience shall have its perfect work; that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

14. Ye shall then be perfect. The Apostle seems to mean by this expression, teleioi, ye shall be wholly delivered from every evil work; from every evil word; from every sinful thought; yea, from every evil desire, passion, temper; from all inbred corruption, from all remains of the carnal mind, from the body of sin; and ye shall be renewed in the spirit of your mind, in every right temper, after the image of Him that created you, in righteousness and true holiness. Ye shall be entire, olokhlroi, (The same word which the Apostle uses to the Christians in Thessalonica: [1 Thess. 5:23]) This seems to refer, not so much to the kind as to the degree of holiness; as if he had said, "Ye shall enjoy as high a degree of holiness as is consistent with your present state of pilgrimage;" -- and ye shall want nothing; the Lord being your Shepherd, your Father, your Redeemer, your Sanctifier, your God, and your all, will feed you with the bread of heaven, and give you meat enough. He will lead you forth beside the waters of comfort, and keep you every moment: So that loving him with all your heart, (which is the sum of all perfection,) you will "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks," till "an abundant entrance is ministered unto you into his everlasting kingdom!"

Edited by Jennifer Luhn with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University.

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