

Find Course Between Impatience and Passivity

The other threat to patience is the tyranny of time. We want to get a thing done and settled, so we can get on to other important matters. Fleeing passivity, we embrace impatience. The rural folk of West Alabama are teaching me to “wait on God.”

My initial thought, based on more than a decade of dealing with Atlanta traffic, was that patience, while a much revered Christian virtue, is more often treated as a vice in our metropolitan settings than it is as a virtue. A patient person will be ridiculed and run over. The social disease, Road Rage, is caught on metro freeways.

Secondly, I recalled the bit of folk wisdom that warns a person not to pray for patience, because God will bring people, places and events into his or her life that will instruct one in patience. True. I believe that this is why God sent me to rural West Alabama five years ago. These are a patient people.

Here, by age seven, boys, and even some girls, are taken by their fathers out before sunrise to a deer stand. Cold and shivering, they learn to patiently wait for a buck deer, well appointed with a nice rack of antlers, to appear. Then they have opportunity to harvest it.

Later, turkey and raccoon will be added to the list of prey. And on summer mornings the boys will be taken to the river to fish. Again, patience is required and learned. Rural folk are patient folk.

I see the virtue of patience lived out in our town and country churches. They seldom start services at the scheduled time. The members will go the “second mile” in forgiving one another. They will put up with a lot from their pastor (and from the associational missionary). These are a patient people.

Patience, as with all virtues, can become a vice. It often degenerates into passivity. People accept unjust conduct and social structures. They come to focus on getting by and playing it safe. They talk about “getting around to it,” but this seldom happens.

The late Baptist ethicist T.B. Maston used to teach his students that one must find a course between impatience and passivity. One must understand that God wills just and loving relationships and institutions. Most are not just or loving. One must create a tension that will move people and institutions from the “is” to the “ought of God.”

He would illustrate this with a rubber band. He would string it between two objects. Left slack (passive), nothing happens. Pulled too tight (impatient), and the band breaks. But with the appropriate amount of tension, movement and change will occur.

The “ought,” of course, is what God wills for people, relationships and institutions. The “is” is where we fall below the “ought.” The Christian will not passively accept the “is.” Nor, generally, will he or she become so impatient about the gap between the “is” and the “ought” that he or she will break relationship or become destructive of things.

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Often his timing is not my timing. Often we need to sensitize folk to needed changes, keep some tension on, but wait on God to make it happen in his time and in his way. And it does. And it is better than I could have ever imagined.

For example, I spent over a year fretting with one of our churches that needed a pastor. They looked at some good and not so good candidates. They could not get together in favoring any of them. I grew impatient. I supplied the pulpit

intermittently. Finally, more than a year into this adventure, God called a young man in one of our churches into the ministry. He went to supply for them. It was “love at first sight.”

The church has healed. It is growing. God is blessing. I see now that God did not have in place the person he wanted to pastor that church when the need arose. If the church had become impatient with my impatience and called someone else, wow, I hate to think of the consequences for them, for the pastor they would have called and even the pastor that they ultimately did call.

God is a God of surprises. Live with patience. Find a course between impatience and passivity. Enjoy.

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