

"The Fruit of the Spirit is Patience and Kindness"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.
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Proverbs 21:21 + Micah 6:6-8
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Proverbs 21

²¹Whoever pursues righteousness and *kindness* will find life and honor.

Micah 6

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and *to love kindness*, and to walk humbly with your God?

2 Corinthians 6

¹As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, *patience, kindness*, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness

for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. ¹¹We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.

¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

I. Introduction

For the last couple of weeks, we've been looking at two of the fruits of the Spirit: joy and peace. We've seen that both joy and peace share one common theme, and that is that each one starts with God. Joy begins with knowing that we are believers who are saved by our faith and obedient to God's call in our actions. Similarly, peace begins with knowing that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, all the things that separated Jews from Gentiles were abolished and put to death. Without the assurance that we are saved, joy in the NT sense does not and cannot exist, and without the peace that Jesus created by destroying the things that separate us, peace in the NT sense cannot exist. Where joy and peace differ has to do with the consequences of these convictions in our lives. John 15 reminds us that joy expects us to manifest our obedience to the commands of Jesus to love God, love our neighbor, love our enemies, and to love each other as Jesus loves us. Ephesians 2 reminds us that peace expects us to manifest our willingness to speak the truth to each other, to make just judgments when needed, and to pursue lives of virtue and righteousness. And both of these are very different from the modern understandings of joy and peace as our passive response to our circumstances or the avoidance of any kind of conflict.

Those are for sure legitimate and reasonable things for us to consider, but they do not represent the pinnacle of our Christian aspirations for joy and peace in our daily walks with God.

Today, we double the fruits that we will consider and take a look at the next two fruits in the list, namely patience and kindness. We can cover two of the fruits at once because there are far fewer passages dealing with patience and kindness in the Bible than there are that deal with joy and peace. So let's see what Scripture says about patience and kindness for us today, starting with the language of "kindness."

IIA. Pivot to Kindness and Patience

(**slide2**) Kindness as one of God's characteristics is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible. While there are many words within the semantic field of kindness, by far the most important one is the one which occurs in our reading from Micah 6, which tells us that our Lord wants us "to do justice (עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט), and to love kindness (וְאָהַבַת חֶסֶד), and to walk humbly (וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְפָנֶיךָ) with our God." That Hebrew word translated "kindness" (Hebrew חֶסֶד) is one of the most important words in all of the Hebrew Bible, occurring hundreds of times (246 times per the NIDOTTE 2:211). The key thing about that word that separates it from our understanding of kindness is that the word is rooted in relationships, and that is why some translations use the phrase "loving kindness" which I actually prefer to the NRSV's translation. Specifically, as you can see on the screen behind me, that Hebrew word "was used to designate behavior that fulfilled obligations to those in the family or tribal relationship" while in a more general sense "it basically denotes an attitude and a behavior that display faithfulness to an obligation to a relative, friend, host, guest, master, subject, etc" (RISBE 3:19, citing TDNT 2:479 for the second quote). Thus, the "kind" quote unquote behaviors expected of the ancient Hebrews were relationally based.

As an Asian-American, that has always been part of my cultural upbringing. We were supposed to be successful because success would bring honor to the family name while failure would bring shame, and bringing honor to the family name was part of our obligation as members of an Asian family. This is partly why Asian cultures are often more willing to retaliate against a bully when the victim is a family member. That's just the right thing to do from the standpoint of family obligations and the importance of maintaining a family's honor. And that's why for the first time ever that I can remember, I used a single verse from Proverbs as our first Scripture reading: "Whoever pursues (רִיגָה) righteousness and kindness (צֶדֶק וְחֶסֶד) will find life and honor" (Prov 21:21; note that the NRSV here follows the LXX [ζωὴν καὶ δόξαν] while the MT adds the word "righteousness" [צֶדֶק וְחֶסֶד וְכִבְיֹד]; scholars generally think that the shorter LXX text is to be preferred; see, e.g., Reyburn and Fry, UBS Handbook 453; Toy ICC 407; Murphy WBC 157; Fox AB 1:688; Clifford new OTL 192; and amongst the modern translation the NRSV and NAB; but the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project recommends the longer MT over the shorter LXX {CTAT 5:674-75} and is followed by the JPS Tanak, online NET, NIV, NASB, NJB, and NLT). The pursuit of righteousness and kindness - along with truth and justice, two of the most important virtues in the OT - has as its result life and honor. Not necessarily wealth or power, or fame or fortune, but life and honor, the living of a life that is actually worth living because one is committed to doing the just and righteous and kind thing.

(slide3) But that is only one part of the meaning of the word, which is also used of "the disposition and beneficent actions of God toward the faithful, Israel his people, and humanity in general" (NIDOTTE 2:211). Thus, in Psalm 33:5, we read that "the kindness of the LORD (רַחֲמֵי ה' יְהוָה; compare רַחֲמֵי אֱלֹהִים in 2 Sam 9:3; as far as I am aware, these are the only occurrences of "the kindness of the LORD" and "the kindness of God" in the OT) fills the earth." In one sense, that extension of God's kindness to all living beings is based on both the relationship between God and the world he has created and on the

fact that "kindness" as a mode of behavior appears to be expected of the one in the superior or more powerful position. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, retired professor from Princeton Seminary, argues that "kindness" is "appropriate to the *superior party* in a relationship, involving 'deliverance or protection as a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship'" (per NIDOTTE 2:220). What is different about this is that the acts of kindness that God extends to all living beings is not rooted in God's status, or office, or superior position as God vis-a-vis our status and inferior position as created beings. What is different is that these acts of divine kindness are rooted in *God's own nature*. And so, the refrain in Exodus 34:6-7a reminds us that the LORD is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (רַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת), keeping steadfast love (נֶצַח חֶסֶד) for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." This represents the oldest and most traditional view of God within the pages of the Hebrew Bible, and the word translated "steadfast love" in Exodus 34 and highlighted in red on the screen behind me is the *same word* translated as "kindness" in Micah 6 and Proverbs 21. God shows kindness to all of creation because that is who God is. Nor is that confessional refrain limited to Exodus 34. The prophet Joel proclaims, "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (וְרַב־חֶסֶד), and relents from punishing (וַיִּנָּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה)" (Joel 2:13). That association of "abounding in steadfast love" with "relenting from punishment" is the reason why Jonah initially refused to proclaim God's word to the Assyrians according to Jonah 4:2, where Jonah says, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a" - wait for it..... - "a gracious ~~God~~ and merciful [God; translation slightly emended for English clarity], slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love (וְרַב־חֶסֶד), and ready to relent from punishing (נָחָם עַל־הָרָעָה)" (other passages which include this refrain include Neh 9:17; Ps 86:5, 15; 103:8; 145:8; see NIDOTTE 2:216; TDOT 5:57-58). As the centuries rolled on, a new liturgical formula is created and becomes one of Israel's traditional refrains, and it affirms that God's steadfast love/kindness endures forever (כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם), most famously in its shortened form in Psalm 136, where the refrain "for his steadfast love endures forever" at the end of every verse (for the longer form, see also Jer 33:11; 1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13; 7:2; Ezra 3:11; Pss 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1; in shortened form without the initial יְהוָה כִּי־טוֹב also in 1 Chron 16:41; 2 Chron 7:6; 20:21; Ps 118:2-4; see TDOT 5:58).

(slide4) But did you notice something else about that confession in Exodus 34? It also confesses that the Lord we worship is "slow to anger" (אָרְךָ אַפַּיִם), and that is the idiom most commonly used for God's patience in the Bible (per Bibleworks 10, it occurs in the HB at Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; and Nah 1:3 as an attribute of God). In fact, the only place where God's patience is explicitly mentioned in the OT is in Nehemiah 9:30. That chapter is a national confession of sin by the post-exilic Jewish community of faith. In that confession of sin, Ezra notes that "[For] many years you" - that is, God - "you were patient (וַתִּמְשַׁךְ עָלֵיהֶם) with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen." Earlier in the chapter, the language of "slow to anger" occurs in verse 17, where we read the ancient confession again, that "you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger (אָרְךָ אַפַּיִם) and abounding in steadfast love." And we are explicitly told in Proverbs that being "slow to anger," or patient, is a desirable attribute. Proverbs 14:29 says, "Whoever is slow to anger (אָרְךָ אַפַּיִם) has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly," and

Proverbs 16:32 says much the same thing when we read, "One who is slow to anger (אֶרֶךְ-אַפַּיִם) is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city." The same pattern for both virtues seems to be presumed in the OT: our human patience is valued as a virtue because God is patient, just as our love of kindness is valued as a virtue because God abounds in steadfast loving kindness.

IIB. Pivot to 2 Corinthians

(slide5) In other words, the two fruit that represent this morning's focus - patience and kindness - have their roots in **both** who we are **and** what God expects of us as his faithful and obedient children, just like God's patience and God's kindness is rooted in **who God is and how God acts**, not just to the chosen people he saved from Egypt, but to everyone in the human race. Perhaps this explains why Paul goes to such great lengths to emphasize how he and Timothy "have commended ourselves in every way" in 2 Corinthians 6. As servants of God, they list the ways that they have modeled the kind of behavior that God expects of all his children who identify as faithful and obedient followers of Jesus. These behaviors are not modeled in the peace and quiet of a sanctuary during worship, or the joy and happiness of a shared fellowship time after worship. Instead, in verses 4-5 he lists the kinds of situations that he and Timothy found themselves in: "in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonment, riots, labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger." None of that sounds like the ideal situation for someone's patience and kindness to manifest themselves. But despite these negative circumstances, Paul and Timothy do exactly what is expected of them: they have commended themselves as servants of God "by purity, knowledge, **patience**, **kindness**, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God" according to verses 6-7a.

III. Pivot to today

So the lesson for us today is hopefully crystal clear. This week's fruit of the spirit - patience and kindness - is the human analogue to God. Just as God's nature and character include patience and kindness, traits which manifest themselves in what he gives to the world, so as faithful and obedient followers of Jesus, we are to nurture the character traits of patience and kindness and manifest those character traits to those who are in need of such gifts.

(slide6) Of course, things aren't quite that simple because according to Scripture, kindness and patience exist in relational contexts, and that raises the question of what we should do when someone takes advantage of our patience and kindness. At what point does our being patient and kind enable someone to continue in their unproductive behavior without taking responsibility for themselves? I love to read advice columns like Dear Abby and have done so since my youth. One of the questions that is being posed to advice givers like Abby follows this kind of scenario: I have a friend or a relative or even a child who is in financial need, got evicted from their home or apartment and needed a place to stay, so I offered them the spare bedroom in my house. But in the X number of months since they've moved in, they haven't looked for or gotten a job and thus aren't contributing anything financially to my home. Instead, all they do is play video games or surf the internet or invite their friends over for parties or get together and that is becoming a major headache. But I'd feel guilty kicking them out since they don't have any other place to go. If we were in the position of the letter writer, would we let the friend or the relative or the child continue to stay in our home from a sense of patient kindness, despite the fact that they have no job, aren't looking for a job, and are basically using our home as a rent-free hotel?

Or consider a different kind of situation that I read about this last week. Someone asked a longtime friend for a "loan" quote unquote of \$6000 because the asker was facing foreclosure due to being behind on their mortgage payments. The one who was approached had a secure and well-paying job, and thus had plenty of money in cash accounts and long-term investment funds. In that sense, giving up \$6000 wasn't the kind of financial sacrifice that would have entailed eating macaroni and cheese for a month, but they were worried about whether this would become a recurring pattern since being behind on a mortgage payment now makes it likely that getting behind on a mortgage payment in the future might happen again. Does the expectation that we are to be patient and kind mean that if we were faced with this situation, we should comply with our longtime friend's request, kindly loan them the six grand and patiently hope and pray that we get the money back at some point and that we are never asked for money again?

Of course, sometimes our patience and kindness doesn't cost us anything financially but still raises questions we have to answer. On May 1st I gave my classes a math test, and one of my students had the nerve to skip class and miss the test despite my seeing him in the classroom across the street during the prior period. After confirming that mine was the only class he skipped that day, I emailed his parents to let them know he skipped class and the test, and after thanking me for letting them know about the skipping, their first question in response was, "Well, he can still make up the test next week, can't he?" I have to admit that I took the coward's way out and let the student make up the test, but I have been second guessing myself for most of the month of May. Why reward the student who skipped the test by letting him take it later, for full credit, after he has an extra weekend to study and might have spoken with his

friends to learn what the test was going to cover? Should I have let him make up the test but put a 75% or 80% cap on his grade? Or told him to do it as a take home test for half credit since he'd be doing it with open notes, open AI assistance, or could have paid a tutor to do it for him? Thankfully the test was mostly blank so I didn't have to worry too much about fairness of grade with respect to other students, but that didn't have to be the case. Is this the kind of patient kindness God expects me to give my students when they cut class just because they aren't ready to take a test?

In other words: Are there limits to the patience and kindness that God expects us to give to and share with the neighbors we are commanded to love, the enemies we are commanded to love, and with each other, being commanded to love one another the way Jesus loved his disciples? Are we allowed to withhold patience and kindness if someone is taking advantage of us?

(slide7) These kinds of questions are especially important because the Bible recognizes that there are limits to God's patience and kindness. The prophet Nahum says in chapter 1:2-3, "A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger (אֶרֶךְ-אַפַּיִם) but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty." In this passage, the traditional claim that God is "slow to anger," highlighted in red on the screen behind me, is surrounded by the affirmations that God is jealous, avenging, and wrathful, and that God will take vengeance and rage, affirmations that are highlighted in black. That juxtaposition of divine attributes means that God is not unconditionally patient (or kind, for that matter) and that patience lives with and may even eventually give way to vengeance and rage.

Numbers 14 is another example that is difficult for us to read with our modern New Testament eyes. In that chapter, God says to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they" (verses 11-12), Moses intercedes for the people, rejects God's offer to make a new nation "greater and mightier than them," and God responds with forgiveness in verse 20: "I do forgive, just as you have asked." All of that is fine and dandy. But there is still a consequence to the people's disbelief: "none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it" (verses 22-23). That declaration on God's part doesn't seem to reflect a posture of infinitely patient loving kindness either.

Well, if there are limits to God's patience and God's loving kindness, then there must be limits to ours as well. The question is, where do those limits exist, and what boundaries can we put around ourselves so that we aren't taken advantage of by others? That's not an easy question to ask, and I definitely don't have a simple, easy answer for you. But I do hope and pray that despite the risks in being patient and kind, we will continue to nurture those qualities of our character and to manifest those qualities in our behavior. After all, love doesn't always end up the way we want it to, but that doesn't stop us from seeking love and giving love to others. I've trusted people that turned out to be manipulative individuals using me to enrich themselves and trusting that my naivete would prevent me from seeing that. And I definitely regret that they were right about me in that respect. But that won't stop me from trusting people anyway.

So let's focus our attention on the kind of character God wants us to have and the kind of behavior God wants us to manifest. Let's make being patient and kind to each other our first instinct, even though there are some situations like the ones I've listed that may rightly give us pause. And just like God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45), so let us do everything we reasonably can to let our patience rise on the evil and the good, and our kindness on the righteous and the unrighteous. Hallelujah! And Amen.