

The Fruit of Longsuffering

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, encourage you to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called upon, with all lowliness and openness to one another, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1,2, Author's translation).

When the Holy Spirit comes into our spirits, the basic change which takes place is in our attitude—toward God, toward ourselves, and toward others. We change our attitude toward God in that we receive Him rather than reject Him. We change toward ourselves in that we see ourselves as having an intrinsic worth rather than merely a particle of matter in the reaches of space. And we change our attitude toward others in that we care about what happens to them, rather than being indifferent to them. These attitudes become part of our spirits as Christ is part of our spirits. It is important to understand, however, that the basic change is in the spirit and not in the flesh. We have spoken of this before, but would like to refresh our memories.

Attitudes in the spirit motivate us to change practices in the flesh, but there is no guarantee that personality will change. Christian people often have personality problems like non-Christians. It is unsound to say, for example, as many do, "If you were a Christian, you wouldn't act that way." That is like saying if you were a Smith or Jones you wouldn't act that way. One is a Smith or Jones because one has been born into the family of Smiths or Jones', not because of how one behaves. Of course, one may say, "We Smiths don't act that way," and hope thereby to alter behavior, but whether or not the behavior changes, will not alter the familial status.

Similarly, we are born into the family of Christ by the infusion of His Spirit as a child is born into a family by the infusion of the seed of life from that family.

But doesn't the coming of the Spirit into us change us?

Only in terms of the Spirit. Paul says that the flesh has no good thing in it. It does not change. If the Holy Spirit permeated the flesh, Paul could not say there is no good thing in it.

But doesn't Paul also say that if any man is in Christ, he is anew creature?

Yes, indeed, but what is it that has become new? In the previous verses, he has said that Christ died on behalf of all so that those who live should no longer live unto themselves but to the One who died on behalf of them and rose again (II Corinthians 5:15). Then he says that from now on we no longer know anything according to the flesh. Paul goes on to say that he doesn't even know Christ according to the flesh. Then in verse 17 he says that in Christ we are new creatures. In what sense new? In the sense that we have been lifted from the fleshly realm into the Spirit realm. Our mortality has been made immortality. We are no longer prisoners of the transient earthly kingdom—we are of the everlasting Spirit Kingdom. We no longer see life through the eyes of the mortal flesh, but the eternal spirit. Animals perceive things through the senses of animal instinct. Humans perceive things through the eyes of the

human. Spirit beings see things through the eyes of the Spirit. Sometimes humans do behave like animals, but that is considered unacceptable behavior. Just so, we who are spirit by nature often act like those who are only human, but we have nevertheless been lifted from the human category and have become partakers of the Divine nature (see II Peter 1:3). This, of course, is what makes it possible to occupy eternity with God in vast reaches of the universe when we join with Christ, to live with Him forever, we may come to Him battered and bruised and stained and tarnished, but we will appear faultless before Him "*Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before His presence with exceeding joy*" (Jude 24). Notice that He says faultless—not flawless. The reason He can make this statement is that His blood covering has taken away the charges that were against us, nailing them to His cross (Colossians 2:14). So, there is a difference between the realities of Christ in the Spirit and the behavior patterns in the flesh. Thus, if one has the Spirit of Christ, he is a new creature, even though one may have personality problems in the flesh. As we have said so many times, the evidence that Christ is within us is the desire to have Him there. If His presence were dependent upon behavior, we would never have any security of salvation, and we would also be in the same position as the Pharisees.

But what has all of this to do with longsuffering?

Longsuffering is one of those fruits of the Spirit that are intrinsically within us as Christ is within us. Because of His presence in the spirit, we know that we ought to be longsuffering toward others, but because of the weakness of the flesh, we do not always follow through. Again, there are many ways that the Christian is longsuffering that may not be obvious. Of course we must ask what is the meaning of the term? The Greek word is *makrothumia* which has to do with our attitude toward persons rather than toward things. The word for patience—*hupomeno*—has to do with things, remaining steadfast in trials and tribulations. The opposite of *makrothumia* is *oxuthmia*, which means literally quick to retaliate. *Makrothumia* implies that one has the power to retaliate but restrains oneself. In Romans 3, Paul describes the godless as "swift to shed blood." The same Greek word is part of that expression. Paul gives an important clue to the meaning of the word in the passage above—"bearing one another in love." It really has to do with a process of retaliation. Christians do not always refrain from retaliation, but there is a definite check of the Holy Spirit. If they retaliate, they do so contrary to their conscience, rather than instantaneous and thoughtless vengeance. These, of course, are general principles. The thing is that Christians know better, and do have the check of conscience, even if they do not always follow that check. Again, Christians have a certain measure of caring for each other that helps to restrain the negative and vengeful reactions.

Paul encourages the believers to behave toward one another with such "forbearance." The Greek word which is translated "beseech," is better translated "encourage." It is the same word that we have for the Holy Spirit—*paraclete*—"comforter" or "one who encourages." Our English word "encourages" is from the French word which means heart—*cour*. To encourage means to enhearten. Paul encourages the Christians to bear with one another in love.

The word "longsuffering" is also used of God's attitude toward the world. It is not so much that He feels good about the world or condones its activities, but

rather that He restrains His wrath in infinite grace, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." So the Christian, in relation to others, regardless of personal feelings, restrains the temptation to retaliate for wrongs done and walks in grace and kindness among the people of earth, recognizing our common plight as victims of a world gone wild, and often hostage to the weakness of the flesh. Paul says, "*We that are strong ought to bear the weakness of the weak and not to please ourselves.*" But what if one is not always longsuffering? What if one does not always bear with the ones who wronged him? Remember longsuffering is a fruit of the spirit, not a natural expression of the flesh. Jesus said, "*The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.*" The spirit of longsuffering is in the believer as Christ is in the believer, but the flesh expresses that Spirit imperfectly.

David Morsey

March 1987

www.harvestermission.org