

Voices: Patience and spiritual fruit

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Any time we deal with people, it is easy to feel frustrated, whether in our jobs, families, friendships or daily interactions—even in ministry.

As a young pastor, frustration gnawed at me: Why was I so frustrated? It is easy to pin the blame on other people, thinking it is their fault. The truth, however, is much of my frustration was my own doing. I was trying to be the Holy Spirit in the lives of other people and trying to force them into the mold I believed they needed to fit.

God doesn't call us to change other people. God calls us to be faithful and patient.

Sometimes in following Jesus, we expect everyone to be exactly like us. We expect them to be as spiritually mature as we are, to come to all of the same conclusions we do, and to live the Christian life in our image. My frustration came from my impatience and my lack of trust that the Holy Spirit can work in lives and form hearts better than I can.

Spiritual growth as fruit, not fast food

The metaphor of life as spiritual fruit appears over and over in the New Testament. "You will recognize them by their fruits," Jesus said (Matthew 7:16). Paul used the same picture to describe a life growing and being transformed by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24).

We tend to view spiritual growth through our modern lens, seeing it as something that should happen immediately. We see the spiritual disciplines

like a fast food menu, picking this or that discipline and receiving the growth we want almost immediately. The New Testament metaphor of growing fruit is a much more accurate description of reality, however. The spiritual disciplines are more like seeds we plant and then water by God's grace.

Healthy growth usually happens slowly. Though we can plant the same seeds of Bible reading, prayer, fasting and other practices, God works in us in different ways and at different times to produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Each plant—each of us—is a bit different. God works in every heart differently.

The frustration comes when we are impatient, when we expect others to grow in the same way and in the same time as us, or when we look to our own lives and think something is wrong with us because we are not producing the same fruit as someone else.

Spiritual growth, like fruit, requires patience

Trust God's faithfulness. God is working in your heart and in the hearts of those around you. God's work is not always in observable ways. Many times, it is in small, ordinary moments, but God is working nonetheless to complete our salvation.

You may not be a pastor, but there are people in your life you are praying for and discipling and encouraging. Be patient. Spiritual maturity doesn't happen overnight. The seed takes time to produce fruit, and our frustration doesn't help the spiritual fruit to grow. Keep encouraging, keep loving and keep planting gospel seeds.

Maybe you are frustrated with your own spiritual growth. Be patient. God is working in you and all around you. That's not to say you can't help prepare the soil of your heart to receive the seeds of his gospel work. Make time to pray and read the Bible. Seek out community and those who can encourage you, and trust God to form you ever more into the image of Jesus day after day.

The kingdom of God works slowly because that is how real change works. Lay down your frustration. Be patient. God is faithful.

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