

DAY 20



Patience & Contentment



By Gretchen Filz

“Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you, all things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.” —St. Teresa of Avila

With all that we’ve covered so far about abandonment to divine providence, it’s obvious that *truly* trusting God, with every bit of our will, doesn’t come easily. There are, however, many things we can practice to help us trust Him more over time.

The first of these is patience, which will help us to rest contentedly in God’s will for us in the present moment, whatever it may be. As St. Francis de Sales teaches us, “Await therefore in peace of mind the effects of the divine pleasure, and let his willing suffice you, since it is always most good.”

Patience Gives Us Strength In Our Trials

Of all the virtues, patience is essential for success in self-abandonment to divine providence. As St. Gertrude the Great tells us, "...that which is most pleasing to God is to maintain interior patience, and to desire that the entire Will of God may be accomplished in them." Without practicing patience, we won't be able to endure our trials in a way that pleases God.

Patience is a "daughter" of the cardinal virtue of *fortitude*—the virtue that makes us willing to endure difficult things for the sake of obtaining a greater good. Fortitude applied to enduring painful or evil things with self-composure is the virtue of *patience* (the Latin verb *pati* means to allow, permit, suffer, or endure).

The benefit of patience, says St. Augustine, is that it helps us "bear evil with an equal mind" so that our suffering doesn't overwhelm us. The primary emotion that patience helps us to moderate is *sorrow*. "A person is said to be patient," says St. Thomas Aquinas, "because he acts in a praiseworthy manner by enduring things which hurt him here and now, and is not unduly saddened by them."

When we meet our sufferings with patience, we avoid sinking into excessive and debilitating sadness, grief, or anger. This, in turn, frees our mind to prayerfully discern and follow God's will through the difficult situation we're in. The person who is patient has great command over themselves, and can more easily rely on God in any difficulty.

Practicing Patience

How do we *practice* patience? When we come to a moment of trial, we should first ask Him for the virtues we need to endure it well—before asking Him to remove it from us. The first virtue we should ask for is patience, which allows us to remain at peace and place our trust in Him.

Reacting impatiently to our trials—with outbursts of anger, frustration, or sadness—only adds to our sufferings and makes them unbearable. However, responding with patience helps us endure trials with greater serenity as we wait for God to accomplish His purpose through them. When we choose to be patient in a moment of difficulty, we'll quickly discover His grace supporting us, and our trial won't feel as unbearable as we first imagined. We'll then be able to declare with St. Paul, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

We must also practice patience with other people; with frustrating situations; and with the evils we endure in the world, keeping in mind that the end of all things is approaching, and soon every wrong will be made right: "Be patient, therefore, beloved ... strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (Jas. 5:7-8).

We must also be patient with God—just as He is continually patient with us—when He seems to delay in answering our prayers and keeping His promises. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pt. 3:9).

We can think of patience, most simply, as waiting for God to act. God takes great delight in those who patiently wait for Him as He steadily works out His good purposes for our lives: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage" (Ps. 27:14). As St. Catherine of Siena observed, those who are patient prove by their behavior that God's presence dwells within them: "...patience shows better and more perfectly than any other virtue, that God is in the soul by grace."

Our greatest example of how to practice patience in the midst of evil and suffering is the Passion of Christ:

If you seek patience, you will find no better example than the cross. ... Christ endured much on the cross, and did so patiently, because when he suffered he did not threaten; he was led like a sheep to the slaughter and he did not open his mouth.

—St. Thomas Aquinas

Patience Leads to Contentment

Cultivating the virtue of patience helps us to be content with where God has placed us in our present circumstances, even when we find no way to improve our situation by diligent effort. Instead of succumbing to the mindset of being "stuck" against our will, we can choose instead to be content—knowing that we're right where God wants us to be—until He leads us out of the situation.

"When, therefore, something adverse happens to us, let us accept it from his hands, not only patiently, but even with gladness. ...

What greater consolation can come to a soul than to know that by patiently bearing some tribulation, it gives

God the greatest pleasure in its power?"

—St. Alphonsus Ligouri

Being content with our current situation opens us up to receive the special graces God has prepared for us, especially in those circumstances where we feel helpless or stuck. If we're content to do God's will in the present moment, we will necessarily find every grace that we need.

Be Content With How God Made You

Practicing patience and contentment applies especially to accepting how God, in His wisdom, has uniquely created us. Many of us struggle with this aspect of abandonment. It's common for us to wish that we had better gifts: that we were more intelligent, more charming, more skilled, and so on. We wish we weren't fraught with so many weaknesses, defects, and disabilities. Yet our surrender to God must extend even to these personal disappointments. "Be content with what you have," writes St. Paul, "for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5-6).

We're often impatient with these unavoidable setbacks because we imagine that what we lack is preventing us from enjoying something better that would be ours otherwise. We may say to ourselves, "If only I didn't have this disadvantage, my life would be so much better." That way of thinking is deceptive, because what's best for us is precisely what God has willed for us. We must truly believe this: it is His divine promise.

The soul that does not attach itself solely to the will of God will find neither satisfaction nor sanctification in any other means however excellent by which it may attempt to gain them. If that which God Himself chooses for you does not content you, from whom do you expect to obtain what you desire?

—Fr. Jean Pierre de Caussade

Even if God willed for us to be the most untalented and despised creature in the world, we should be content with our lot, knowing that nothing in the world is more perfect for us than this. Blessed Henry of Suso once said, "I would rather be the vilest worm on earth by God's will, than be a seraph [the highest angelic being] by my own." St. Alphonsus Liguori put it this way: "It would be the greatest delight of the seraphs to pile up sand on the seashore or to pull weeds in a garden for all eternity, if they found out such was God's will."

We must conform ourselves to God's will and be content with how He has made us. This includes being content with the abilities and disabilities that He is pleased to give us, and not pine for the lot that has fallen to others.

Our conformity to the will of God should extend to our natural defects, mental ones included. We should not, for example, complain or feel grieved at not being so clever or so witty or not having such a good memory as other people. Why should we complain of the little that has fallen to our lot when we have deserved nothing of what God has given us? Is not all a free gift of His generosity for which we are greatly indebted to Him? ...

But it is not enough just not to complain. We ought to be content with what we have been given and desire nothing more. What we have is sufficient because God has judged it so.

Just as a workman uses the shape and size of tool best suited to the job in hand, so God gives us those qualities which are in accordance with the designs He has for us. The important thing is to use well what He has given us.

It may be added that it is very fortunate for some people to have only mediocre qualities or limited talents. The measure of them that God has given will save them, while they might be ruined if they had more. Superiority of talent very often only serves to engender pride and vanity and so become a means of perdition.

—Fr. Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure

Learning to be patient and content with the circumstances God has given us prepares us for the next helpful aids to abandonment: trust and confidence in God.

Coming in Day 21 . . .

Trust & Confidence in God

