

Question: How long do I have to be patient with an obnoxious, irresponsible fellow-worker? What would Jesus do?

When we think of patience, we may think of it as the ability to endure hardship, suffering, affliction or even persecution without giving up and losing faith and hope (Romans 12:12; James 1:2-4; 5:10-11). But patience can also include the ability to endure obnoxious or even sinful behaviors in others without responding with uncontrolled anger or sin of our own. A biblical proverb says, “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel” (Proverbs 15:18; cf. Proverbs 14:29). While patience helps control anger, it does not make it wrong to take appropriate action in hope of preventing the continued improper behavior of someone. These are times when loving patience must not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good and leave any revenge to a just and wise God (1 Corinthians 13:4; Romans 12:19-21). For us to lovingly confront an offensive acquaintance is not inconsistent with patience, and sometimes we may need to become stronger in our protests.

I believe that Jesus would tell us to look at the example of God’s long-suffering patience with his people Israel and Judah. Through long years of their repeated idolatry and rebellion, God was patient. But this patience did not keep him from protesting against the ways of his people. Repeatedly, he sent prophets to call them to repentance. When it became necessary, God was very stern in his warnings. Often, God’s appeals to Israel did result in at least temporary changes in their ways. After Judah and Israel had ignored the warnings of God’s prophets for centuries, he finally reached an end to his patience and sent them away from himself.

Since we do not have the Lord’s ability to fully know what lies in the heart of another person, we must be careful when we feel we have reached an end to our patience. However, after kind but firm confrontation with an offensive person, we may need to do as God did for Israel when he sent them away. We may find it necessary to exile the offensive person by separating ourselves from him. At the same time, we should strive to maintain the compassionate and forgiving spirit of God that stands ready to restore the offender when he shows real change. That’s what God did for Israel upon their repentance after seventy years of captivity in Babylon.

It is not necessary for a person to sit passively by enduring obnoxious and irresponsible behavior in others. We can kindly but firmly confront their behavior. If they persist in their ways, there may come a time for protesting strongly and even separating ourselves from such people. Above all, we must pray for continued patience and faith in the Lord to take care of us and guide us. I believe this is what Jesus would do.

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