PATIENCE AS A VIRTUE: RELIGIOUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Sarah A. Schmitker and Robert A. Emmons

ABSTRACT

For millennia, theologians, moral philosophers, and writers have identified patience as an important aspect of virtue and excellence of character. This study seeks to understand the religious and psychological underpinnings of patience and presents the Patience Scale to measure individual differences in the trait. Undergraduate psychology students (n = 324) completed survey packets containing items to measure patience as well as the Values in Action Strengths Scale (VIA-IS), measures of religiousness/spirituality, and measures of self-control, time perspective, the Big Five, and mindfulness. The 24 strengths of the VIA-IS were related in varying degrees to patience, but sufficient independence from existing strengths was demonstrated. Patience was significantly related to spiritual transcendence and to religious behaviors. Anticipated uses of the Patience Scale and implications for future research are discussed.

“A person is said to be patient…because he acts in a praiseworthy manner by enduring things which hurt him here and now and is not unduly saddened by them.”

—St. Thomas Aquinas

“Genius is eternal patience.”

—Michelangelo

“Patience is the companion of wisdom.”

—Saint Augustine

“The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not smashing it.”

—Arnold Glasgow

Patience has long been recognized as a human strength and critical component of moral excellence. Familiar maxims such as “patience is a virtue” exemplify the desirability of the trait, and moral philosophers and religious leaders emphasize the importance of developing patience to achieve the “good life.” Virgil states, “Every misfortune is to be subdued by patience” (Aeneid V, p. 710), and the Christian scriptures include patience as a key component of righteous character: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22, New International Version, emphasis added).

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Virtually all major world religions acclaim patience as a fundamental virtue and worthy character goal.

**Jewish perspectives.** Patience is a fundamental component of the Jewish faith. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is described as patient. The refrain, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6–7), echoes throughout the Torah reminding the Jewish people of God’s patience and love. Numerous narratives from the Old Testament illustrate God’s patience toward the nation of Israel. In the book of Nehemiah, the Jewish priests recount Israel’s rebellion against Yahweh and Yahweh’s great patience, “For many years you [Yahweh] were patient with them… in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them” (Nehemiah 9:29–31). Throughout Jewish history, God is seen as patiently waiting for his chosen people to repent and turn toward him. Even God’s acts of judgment, punishment, or discipline are a sign of his patience because “the essential message is always the same: I have not finished with you yet” (Harned, 1997, p. 29). Just as a parent’s discipline of a child is an act of patience and love, so too are God’s chastisements of Israel acts of patience.

In addition to characterizing God as patient, Judaism conceptualizes patience as a virtue for humans to foster in themselves. The Jewish people are implored throughout the Tanakh to develop patience as an aspect of wise living. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Jews are instructed, “the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride” (Ecclesiastes 7:8). The book of Proverbs frequently implores its readers to practice patience with adages such as, “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32), or “A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly” (Proverbs 14:29).

**Christian perspectives.** Christianity also imputes great importance to the virtue of patience. As in the Jewish scriptures, patience is depicted as a core component of God’s character in the New Testament. In the book of I Timothy, the Apostle Paul describes Christ’s patience towards humanity, “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (I Timothy 1:16). Moreover, the patience of God is presented as