

Patience

This week the fruit of the Spirit we're talking about is patience. Sometimes it's helpful to look at other Bible translations to see if the word is translated differently. The Greek word in this passage can be translated in several ways.

Older translations have used forbearance. Forbearance might mean putting up with something, but it also can mean being patient when someone owes you money. The gospel reading seems to reflect that meaning. In fact, forbearance has a legal meaning that is the forgiveness of a debt.

Another meaning is endurance...specifically in a bad situation. Endurance and remaining faithful even in the face of persecution was displayed by many of Jesus' early disciples. And even today in some places.

It can also be translated as long-suffering. I think that one can be a little tricky. Long-suffering patience in the face of persecution of faith should not be confused with staying in an abusive relationship.

The most important thing about any of those translations is that it begins with God's patience and forbearance with us.

If you attended our Lent midweek services, you'll remember that we learned about the parables of Jesus. Today's gospel reading is a parable.

One of the things we talked about is that parables can offer a one-to-one comparison between God and a character in the parable.

So in this parable, we might think that the King represents God. The verse after what we read has the king send the first slave to be tortured and thrown into prison. That's a problematic image of God for many of us.

But according to Pastor Kris the parable is a parable of the kingdom of God. And in the kingdom of God, this is what patience – or forbearance – looks like. And when it doesn't happen, it's no longer the kingdom of God.

The main point of the parable is the forgiveness of the debt – forbearance. Jesus told this parable right after Peter asked him how many times he must forgive someone who sins against him. Peter thinks 7 times might be about right. Jesus said, no not 7 times but 77. And really 77 just represents a big number.

God's forgiveness – God's forbearance – God's patience with us is massive. In fact God forgives a debt we can't pay.

Then, as the parable points out, that patience is supposed to flow from God to us to those around us...including those that we struggle to be patient with...that we struggle to forgive.

Sometimes, the person we most need to be patient with is ourselves. We have a timeline for just about everything – schooling, marriage if that's in our plan, kids, career, financial well-being. We get frustrated when those things are delayed.

Even our spirituality can be on some sort of timeline – our spiritual growth is too slow. Our emotional and spiritual healing is too slow.

Athletes get impatient and do too much too fast and get injured. Then healing is too slow.

Sometimes you just have to leave those time tables behind and trust God's time. Remember that God's infinite patience with us is where this all starts – it's the source of our patience. The spirit's work in us gives us that ability to be patient with ourselves and with others.

Everyone grows at a pace that is not up to us – including our own children. It can be hard to be patient with our kids – and really anyone who isn't maturing at the rate we think appropriate. And sometimes, interventions are needed when growth has gone awry for whatever reason. But then patience is especially needed.

As a teenager, I recall vividly my grandmother, Grandma Ollie, who observing me standing by the window watching for my friends to come pick me up, saying, "Daryl, a watched pot never boils.". And in my undeveloped brain, I heard, "A watch pot never boils." Which of course was me taking a saying and making it literal – and in my youthful insolence thought, what is a watch pot? It was only later in life that I came to understand the wisdom that Grandma Ollie was trying to convey to me – the wisdom of patience and that in my friends would arrive when they would arrive and perhaps there was something better to do than stand anxiously by the window.

I also recently returned home following a meeting of a non-profit board of which I am a member. I remarked to Kris that I was learning a lot of patience from this board. Coming from an environment where meetings are typically highly structured, these board meetings can challenge my patience as they are not as structured as I would like. I also have to remind myself that I am not in charge! And I am learning to be patient with their process, and to participate in appropriate ways, and eventually we end up achieving in 30 minutes that which could have been done in 10! I am a works in progress!

But now, its your turn to share stories of lessons in patience, or ways in which you have become more patient.

Thank you for sharing!

I am also mindful that impatience often comes in the form of righteousness – sometimes scornful righteousness, sometimes angry righteousness, often self-righteousness. Our patience is often challenged by others who we have judged to be less knowledgeable about something, who seem to think and believe differently than we do, and certainly act differently than we think they should. Yet if we can step back and listen carefully to what they are saying, or seek to understand why they are behaving or thinking differently than we do, then we leave room for God’s grace to flow. And in that space we can begin to experience patience for one another.

I end with the closing verses from the first reading, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

Amen.