

In theological terms, forgiveness, and its little sister Patience, are at the core of Christianity. It is no wonder, then, that with all of these virtues which the Scripture tells us to adorn ourselves with, that patience and forgiveness are expounded to a much greater degree in this list than the others. While all the others are simply a word or two, patience is connected to forgiveness via the road of tolerance which is lined with the likeness to the forgiveness which we have been shown by God through Jesus Christ. All of this expressed in 20 extra words which modify the term patience.

What I think that this implies is that patience, which is really just immediate forgiveness of irritating discomforts, is a vitally significant relational virtue which is to exemplify the brotherhood of the church.

What I want to do today is to consider together why patience is so important, what patience really is, how it is related to forgiveness, and how we can grow in it and continually be dressing ourselves in it.

### **First of all, why is patience important?**

Well, to be very on-the-nose, it's important because God says it's important. It's in this list. Not only that, but it to a human characteristic because God Himself is patient towards us. Being made in God's image, as Christians believe, means that we are to reflect His character, not just externally, but internally so that we might honor Him by our imitation of Him in all that He has set us forth to do. Paul, the writer of this letter to the Colossians, referred to Jesus's attitude towards him when he was still called Saul, the persecutor and enemy of God's people, as that of "patience" in 1 Timothy 1:16.

Referring to himself as the chief of sinners, he wrote to Timothy explaining God's great mercy, "But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." God's willingness to endure our wickedness, our foolishness, our ignorance, our pride, is not due to lack of concern, but because He is patient, desiring all to come to repentance and find life and redemption through Jesus, His Son. He is not slow to act, but patient with a purpose.

So, the first reason that patience is important is because our Father is patient.

The second reason that patience is needed is because we live in a world of discomfort, suffering, and pain. People will hurt us in this life, and love, which is patient, Paul wrote in that famous chapter 13 to the Corinthians, is the necessary Christ-like quality which restores and protects unity, mutuality, and the flourishing of human relationships and life in reality of sin's present presence.

Therefore, the unity and oneness of God's people, which Christ Jesus came to produce among us, depends upon this clothing of patience between us. Patience is necessary because we will always be around people who are different than us, who enjoy things more or less than we do, and with whom, apart from Christ, we would not be friends. God builds His people from former enemies and from a diversity of personalities and cultures and backgrounds.

This is because of what patience is. Notice the immediate phrase that Paul uses to extrapolate on what patience is, "bearing up of one another." 'Bearing up' means

“tolerating” or “enduring” one another, even when someone has behaved annoyingly or irritatingly or even thoughtlessly.

Sometimes it helps to consider the opposite. The opposite of patience is not merely impatience, but rather irritability, exasperation, annoyance, crankiness, bitterness, and a quick-temper. In the book of Proverbs, which advises patience as an element of wisdom, contrasts “slow to anger” to “short-tempered” (14:29), “hot-tempered” or “stirred up in rage” (15:18).

And in the positive the Sage says that one who is “slow to anger” is “one who rules his spirit.” (16:29). The patient man rules his own spirit and is not ruled by it. Patience is the mastery of one’s own soul. It is having a heart that doesn’t even feel the need to complain in the face of provocation, but instead lets compassion rule the moment.

Do you see why gentleness precedes patience? Patience is gentleness in the face of provocation. Not all provocation is the same, of course. Your nose can be provoked by body odor, but that provocation is not the same as having a trusted friend steal from you. But, patience is required for both. Patience is the compassionate heart’s response of kindness, purposing to work, speak, and act for the flourishing of one who has provoked it, remembering its self-assessment of humility, controlling its strength by love, and enduring the provocation without coming apart at the seams but letting love lead any response.

Thus, patience is motivated by love for the offender, and still, even in the midst of being provoked, seeks the flourishing of one who is behaving like an enemy and not a friend. Loving your enemies, the command of Christ Jesus, begins with patience. All human

peace and flourishing depends upon it. How important, then, is it, and how much do we need to have it? Desperately.

In this way, I like to describe biblical patience in this way: **it is the inner strength to tolerate immediate provocation without melting down and losing your dedication to the flourishing of the one who has provoked you.**

I heard a great illustration by someone once describing patience as a hardened metal which can endure great heat before it melts into a liquid form. The blue flame of the forge can sit on a piece of steel and not alter its composure until it hits 2500°F. Think of this as patience. It can endure the heat of someone's foolishness for a long time before it melts down. Now, compare this to the metal mercury. Mercury loses its composure at room temperature. With just a little bit of provocation, it runs all over the place and makes a huge mess. That is impatience. It cannot tolerate the heat.

Our hearts are often impatient, losing their composure at the slightest heat and running all over the place and making a mess. But biblical patience is the emotional strength to be calm in the face of an unfavorable circumstance, whether that is an impersonal circumstance or a person who has burned you.

Because, not only are we different in non-essential things which we ought to tolerate in one another, but we will also fail to love each other well, we will actually sin against each other, and it will be imperative that we are patient with each other, willing to forgive one another. Your patience makes my repentance safe, and your forgiveness leads me to open the door to my own need to be deeply changed. Patience is powerful relational medicine in the presence of brokenness.

In fact, the word used here is a compound word, meaning “long + anger”. It is the heart character which is slow to an impassioned response, “slow to anger” is the description used of God to Moses in Exodus 34 and it is explicitly connected there to forgiveness, as well. In many languages, patience is expressed in very pictographic idioms, such as, “to keep one’s heart from jumping” or “to have one’s heart seated”.

**Now, Paul connect patience with forgiveness immediately.** That is because patience is immediate mercy and openness to forgiveness, particularly of the little annoyances and wrongs of people. There are larger wrongs, more harmful sins, more destructive behaviors and words, sometimes over longer periods of time, and the like which not only require patience, but require a greater and consistent patience, which we think of as forgiveness. Note how Paul connects them, “if anyone might have a cause for blame against another”. Therein lies the nature of the need for forgiveness. I want us to go to a parable which Jesus taught regarding the relationship between patience, forgiveness, and this idea of “cause for blame or censure” from Matthew 18. It is often entitled, “The Parable of the Wicked Servant”, but it could just as easily be entitled, “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant”.

Let’s read it: Matthew 18:21-35

**Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"** <sup>22</sup> **Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.** <sup>23</sup> **"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.** <sup>24</sup> **When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [~\$188 million].** <sup>25</sup> **And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to**

be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And moved with compassion, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [~\$11,000], and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Now, note how the plea of each of the servants, when confronted with their debt, is "have patience with me." That is, I know that I owe you, I have wronged you, but please let judgment wait. Have mercy. You see, patience, then, is a type of mercy towards those who have wronged you, a shifting of justice forward by a willed waiting.

Now, notice what the King does. He isn't merely willing to wait, which the servant requested, so that they could pay it back. How could the man go and make \$188 million if he did not have it now? That kind of loss took a long time and a lot of

foolishness or fraudulent wickedness to achieve, it would not be overcome by sheer will. No, he would never be able to pay it back. So, the King “forgives him” the debt. The King expresses patience by debt forgiveness, not restitution or remuneration of the loss. This shows us that patience is both related to forgiveness because it is willing to forgive when a wrong is admitted and mercy is pled for. Patience is settled on the matter *in the moment* of provocation.

Now, notice how this forgiven servant, who had lost \$188 million of the King’s money, acts when he finds a servant who was indebted to him for \$11,000? He “choked him” and demanded that he pay him back *now*. Not only did he do this, but he did it publicly. Do you see that? He was proud in this publicity, wanting the eyes of others not to look upon him as a debtor who was forgiven, but instead to look upon the debt of another. This is impatience, which Jesus clearly labels at the end of the parable as unforgiveness. It is the emotional choking of a person publicly, expressed through complaining about another person’s sin against you, gossip, exasperated eye-rolls and back turns, a critical spirit. Impatience seeks to cut the oxygen off from another soul, gradually pressing in on another with accusations, blame, and demands to make things right even when the person has repented and asked for mercy.

**You see, this is forgiveness. It is you, the one who has been wronged, paying down the emotional debt of an injury or provocation against you.** What is an emotional debt? It is the pain which you *feel* from being wronged. The weight of injustice upon the heart. It is felt, and it hurts. No matter what you believe about forgiveness, or what worldview that you are coming from, there is an emotional debt of pain that you feel when someone wrongs you. And patience is not the absence of that pain, the

ignorance of that damage, but rather the inner strength to endure it without choking the other person in your heart. Without becoming irritable, bitter, or agitated towards them in an effort to make sure that they “feel your pain”. Now, it doesn’t mean that you “loan them significant emotional capital”, either. Jesus did not entrust himself to men, because he knew their hearts. He escaped the self-righteous crowds who sought to destroy him. Forgiveness is not trust. The King doesn’t loan the servant another \$180 million, and forgiveness does not imply that we should be placing ourselves in situations where those who are unrepentant will continue to abuse our trust.

Forgiveness can still put up boundaries to alleviate harm. However, it does mean that we do not make them repay what they have already taken. Notice that the King’s patience eventually ran out when the servant showed his wickedness. Patience also has an end, but it is never arrived at quickly, and like gentleness, it ceases when others are being harmed.

**How, then, do we ‘choke’ others with our impatience?** Because we feel the emotional debt, we make an effort to gain emotional restitution from that person. In a sense, we make some kind of demand, directly or indirectly, that they pay us back for that pain.

Some of the ways that we demand to be paid back directly is through aggressive words or body language. We insult someone to their face, belittle them and attack their character. Or, we punish with silence, trying to get them to feel the same emotional pain that we feel. Or, we seek to make them feel guilty, or ashamed, to control them to regain power that we feel was stolen from us.

We can also demand emotional payback indirectly, gossiping about the person whom we believe owes us. We take it back from their reputation, slander them and accusing

them to others, showing how deeply we were hurt by them and how difficult our life is because of them. These are simply unforgiving ways to salve our emotional pain by throwing the cost back onto the one who hurt me.

A third way that we can impatiently respond to our feelings of being wronged is to respond with a passive-aggressive form of pride. We say, “I’m not going to make you pay. It’s beneath me. I’m a better person than that. I’ll be the godly one in this relationship.”

With any of these examples of impatience, however, is the truth that making someone else pay actually changes us into the very evil that hurt us to begin with. It makes us self-centered. It keeps us from seeking the welfare of others. It pervades our hearts and grows into a spirit of fear, self-pity, anger, and it ends up controlling us. *You* feel better by “choking” them, but you end up being the one changed, twisted, hardened in the process by enthroning yourself in your own heart. We look at the example of the “choking servant” in this parable and we cringe at the violence, but impatience and unforgiveness have the same root!

### **So, what does patience under provocation look like?**

Spiritual patience doesn’t enjoy conflict, but it doesn’t avoid it, either. It doesn’t do vengeance, but it doesn’t avoid telling the truth or drawing boundaries on another’s behavior. Patience is not the same as trust, but it doesn’t tell the truth just to make the other person feel bad or draw boundaries just to make the other person feel small.

However, patience is most often silent on the harm done, because it is not due to a pattern of harm and the emotional harm is not great. They are not debts that would be

beneficial to bring up – so patience simply pays them down silently and completely. For example, when your 5-year old picks your prize roses because she wanted to give them to you as an act of love. Don't be impatient. Just be appreciative because the glory of the ignorant act is greater in quality than the glory of the flower itself.

When your spouse promised to do the dishes in the evening, but she had a very stressful day and fell asleep on the couch in exhaustion, you patiently forgive and do the dishes yourself. Love is patient. Constant criticism, nitpicking, hard and unbending lines of demarcation is not patience. It's not even love. Rather, it is a form of trying to prove to the other person her moral debt imbalance through exasperates sighs, cynical comments, eye-rolls, and murmuring. You can strain a relationship to the point of breaking with constant criticism and nitpicking. There should be one criticism for every 20 praises.

Yet, sometimes silent patience is actually unloving. To allow a brother or sister to continue in behavior or attitudes which harm you or others is not loving, but careless. Patience, then, while enduring the emotional debt and not demanding payback, must speak up and tell the offender of his offense in a way that is not coercive or demanding, but is revealing and give the hope of redemption and change. Love is the revealing of harm done in a way that acknowledges the harm, but is open to hearing from the offender. It is hopeful of clarifying confusion and seeing repentance and growth in holiness *for their sake*. And it is redemptive in that it does not demand 'making the past right', but still states hopes of the offender loving well in the future, trusting the Lord as the means of that change. Note how the king dealt with the first servant. He addressed the debt. He listened to hear from him what happened. He heard his pleas for mercy

and granted them. He wanted the servant to go free and do well. Therefore, it speaks the truth completely for the flourishing of the one who has harmed you, and not to somehow make sure that they pay you back for the hurt that you caused. It is future-looking and future-calling for holiness and truth and love, even when it must draw hard boundaries and tell the offender, “no more”, it is for the offender’s good, too.

Now, it is important to note that the servant who refused to go free and do well in like manner was not shown patience by the King in the end. God’s patience will run out towards the unrepentant. It is the most loving to warn the unrepentant, in the most severe words, just like Jesus did in the parable, with some of the most severe words in the New Testament to help us understand the severity of an unforgiving and unrepentant heart.

**So, how do we get this kind of patience? How do we grow this fruit of the Holy Spirit?**

First, note the heart of the King’s response to the servant who had stolen so much from him. Jesus said that he, “felt compassion.” This word, used only of Jesus in the entire book of Matthew, shows the heart of God toward sinners who recognize their sin, their debt, and ask for forgiveness.

However, the evil servant went out and acted like the king, but without the compassion which the king had showed him. We all do that. We’re servants who act like kings, demanding allegiance and performance commensurate to our self-sovereign expectations. But, compassion is found in the acknowledgment that I AM A BROKEN DEBTOR, TOO who needs great compassion from the One who is far superior to me, whose sin and robbery of God and His honor was exponentially greater than any which

has been taken from me. Did you notice the wicked servant's plea to the king was, "be patient and I will pay you back *everything*"? He assumed, in his plea, that he could repay the entire amount! Yet, the lesser servant didn't assume such an arrogant stance, but was requesting a greater compassion, "and I will pay you..." The wicked servant needed much more compassion, yet didn't ask for it – and his self-serving heart was willing to strangle rather than soften, still trying to pay the King back by collecting others' debts to him.

We, then, must behold the severity of our debt to the King of the Universe, and recognize the coinciding severity of His compassion towards us in the provision of Christ Jesus to answer for us. His compassion was so great that he became the indebted servant to those who had incurred the debt. He bound himself to you, united himself to you, and died at the hands of the jailers in order to repay what you had incurred against God. Look at Him and be softened! Look at His kindness and let your heart break towards your own sin! And then look at His sufficiency and His resurrection and His life and let your heart be encouraged that God's compassion is greater than your debts, that your debts are cleared and gone and there will be no reckoning for those who are united to Christ Jesus. Look at His promise to finish the work that He started, to complete you in your union with His Son, that He will present you completely holy, and without justifiable accusation against you, that no charge of the enemy will stand and no failure or weakness will remain.

**Ask the Lord to reveal to your heart the greatness of His love, His mercy, His patience, His forgiveness, until you worship deeply from a heart of complete and radical**

**gratitude.** Because until you seek the King who became an indebted servant for you, you will not grow in patience.

And at the same time, please remember this great and precious promise: patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. And if you belong to Christ Jesus, then you have God's Holy Spirit in you, working to produce it, growing it in you, and He does so by showing you the glories of Jesus. Go to him to change you, repenting of your propensity to anger, defensiveness, and the direct and indirect vengeances of insults, belittling, coercion, manipulation, gossip, and slander. And do so with hope and joy because God is patient towards you.

For, patience only grows in the fertile soil of the presence of God. Remember how Paul began this corrective section, "As God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved...clothe yourselves with patience. You are chosen by God, who is not surprised by your struggle to be patient and to forgive. You can confidently enter His presence to hear what He has to say about your heart. You are deeply loved, so you do not need to fear what He will say about your need to be changed, your need to humble yourself and repent, the depths of your brokenness and wickedness revealed. He gave His son for you...He is for you in the catharsis.

Then, put on the patience that He showed you as your uniform of your union with Him. Dress like the Father to whom you belong in Christ Jesus. Behold Him! Get to know Him! Seek Him out in His Word! When you behold Him as He is, you will rest in His provision and grace, knowing that you have, in your union with Christ Jesus, all the respect that you need, so you don't need to gain it back from those who have disrespected you. You have all the all the dignity that you could possibly have, a child

of the almighty God (!), so you don't need to fight for your dignity by tearing others down.

When you want to slam those who slander you with a good, wry insult, but you hold your tongue, you are paying down their emotional debt against you, because you don't need to be paid back. The King has drawn you into His own nobility. You are paying down that emotional debt in that very moment of temptation, and it has a cost. It is emotional pain, but the cost of you refusing to take some of it back by your own slander is nothing compared to the cost that the King incurred to clear your name, transfer your identity, and include you in His inner circle.

And here's the miracle of patience. As you consume the debt against you yourself, because you know the sufficiency of Christ Jesus, you will find that your anger will cease to have a control of you. It will soften and dissipate and you will master your own spirit, just as the sage said in the proverb. And as the debt goes down, because you know the sufficiency of Christ for you, you are free. It hasn't twisted you, it hasn't hardened you, it hasn't grown into the full-blown sin which defiles many. Instead, you have sought unity and oneness and wholeness, the way things are supposed to be, redemption and restoration and all that is consistent with the New Creation, whose clothes you have put on because you are united to Christ Jesus and freed from the comparison and competition of self-righteousness. By loving patiently, you have restrained vengeance by the heart of love, just as God, in Christ Jesus, has done for you.

Brothers...Sisters...clothe yourself with the patience of God.