
Patience and Forgiveness

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 23 March 2025

Isaiah 55:1-9 • Luke 13:1-9



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our God is many things: all-seeing, all-knowing, everywhere present. God created everything and is in everything. God knows each of us better than we know ourselves. God is loving, compassionate, and endlessly wise. And in addition to all this, God is endlessly patient with us.

God created us for his pleasure, but God knows we don't do everything right. We make mistakes. We act selfishly. We hurt each other. We mess things up and don't always know how to put things right. But fortunately for us, God always gives us second chances, right up to the end.

God thinks of us as his children, and God is our Father. When I was a child, I remember my own father being a very patient man. Growing up isn't easy sometimes; you don't always know what is the right thing to do, but you try. And sometimes you mess up, even when you don't mean to. I've told you all before how once at the movies I ate up all my older brother's peanut butter cups,

when he offered me only one. Fortunately, my brother was patient too. With my father, I was always learning, and he let me make mistakes, which helped me learn. It seemed to me that he knew everything, but he didn't make me feel as if I knew nothing. I could hope to become like him one day.

I only heard my father really swear once. We were on our sailboat, and he had just unhooked the halliard from the top of the sail, the rope you use to pull the sail up, and he accidentally let go of it. Of course the hook end went whoosh! all the way up to the top of the mast — more than 15 metres high. The only way to get it back was to climb the mast. I heard a few choice words that day, which I think was a lesson he didn't really want to teach me. But against that memory, I have many years of loving patience to remember.

Jesus talks today about sin. We don't like to be told that we are all sinners, that we all do wrong things and make mistakes, but it's true. We can't help it. Even the best of us, like my father, are not perfect. Some of the people around Jesus told him of people who had been killed, some by the Roman government, and some in an accident, the collapse of a tower. The people at the time tended to think that if you did bad things in your life, then bad things would happen to you — I don't mean after you die, but right here on earth. And it was natural to think that you were better than those people who died — they must have been much worse than you to have something like that happen. But Jesus rejected that idea, and reminded them that we all do bad things, that none of us is perfect.

This could be rather depressing, if Jesus had left it like that. But he immediately goes on to tell a parable, one of those stories that you have to think about for a bit before you understand it. I confess that this one has confused me for some time, but just the other day, as I was thinking about this sermon, I had an idea. (Thank you, Holy Spirit!) The parable concerns a man who planted a fig tree, and looked forward to harvesting the figs from it. But every year, when it should have been covered with ripe figs, he found there were none on it. For three years he puts up with it, then he gives up and tells the gardener to chop it down, so he can plant something else that will do better for him.

But there is a gardener there (and the quiz question coming up is: Who do you think the gardener represents?). He tells the man to let it alone one more year. He, the gardener, will loosen the soil around it and add some fertiliser; in other words, he'll take good care of it, so that it will then grow and thrive and produce figs. I expect the owner of the fig tree isn't convinced, but he grudgingly agrees, and the gardener goes ahead and starts to work on the tree.

Did it produce figs the following year? We don't know. You can finish the story any way you like. The point is, the owner of the tree wanted to give up on it, but the gardener was patient. He could wait another year, give the tree another chance. And not only that, he was going to help the tree to produce its crop.

The tree could yet prove to be a real asset to the garden, and a source of delicious ripe figs for years to come.

So, the quiz question: who do you think the gardener represents? Does God give us another chance? Does God help us to grow? Yes and yes. Is God endlessly patient? Almost. Jesus' parable ends with the gardener saying:

Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down. (Luke 13:8-9)

Oh. If the tree doesn't produce next year, it will be cut down. The gardener gives it another chance, but it must take advantage of that chance, and start doing what it's supposed to be doing: growing figs.

God loves us and wants the best for us. We can make mistakes, but then we can repent, confess our sins, and be forgiven. God gives us lots of chances to do that. But there is a limit. Sometime, we don't know when, Jesus will come again, and when that happens, there will be no more confession. God wants us all to come to him, so that we can live with him in joy and love forever. But don't wait. Jesus is telling us, love God *today*. Confess and be forgiven, and do no more wrong *today*. Like the fig tree, each of us has a God-given purpose. Mine, I believe, is to preach and lead church services (and I pray that I'm right about that). Yours might be to be a schoolteacher, or a doctor, or a road worker. Whatever it is, do it as well as you can, and do it to the glory of God. Love God and love your neighbour, just as you love yourself. Like the fig tree, let us all grow where we are planted and do our best to please our loving Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.