

Series: Life Stories
Part VI: Patience Has Its Limits
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
July 8, 2018

We are continuing to look at these parables of Jesus in our series we are calling, “Life Stories.” These stories told by Jesus speak to us about the real meaning of *life*. Perhaps the most difficult question about the meaning of life has to do with suffering and evil. As a pastor, the question I get asked most often that troubles people is, “Why is there suffering and evil?” Often someone asks the question because of the suffering they or someone they care about suffers. To even ask that question assumes some kind of moral order in the world in which good and evil are real, that there is some reason for it, and perhaps that someone, such as God, can and should do something about it.

That “why” question has been around for a very long time. Some belief systems suggest that whatever we face in life is the result of something good or bad we have done in this life, or even a previous life. And while that is *not* what our Christian faith teaches about these things, that idea is floating around in the background of this parable we are about to read.

In preaching on these parables, I am discovering that most of the parables are a response to something. Jesus is not just the roaming storyteller. No, he tells almost every parable *in response* to something happening at the time, and this parable is no different.

Prior to the parable we are about to read, some people tell Jesus about an incident where Pilate, the local Roman governor and the one who would later order the crucifixion of Jesus, had apparently killed some Jews while they were making their religious sacrifices. Jesus notes the tone of their comments, and Jesus senses that they are implying that these people must have done something *really* bad for God to allow this to happen to them.

So, Jesus takes the approach of first focusing on those telling the story, saying in effect, “So you think they were worse sinners than you? God doesn’t work that way. And by the way, like everyone else, you need to repent, too!” Jesus then reinforces his point by referring to a tower that had fallen, killing eighteen people -- again emphasizing that this did not happen because they were worse than anyone else and somehow God was punishing them. And it is after this that Jesus tells this parable from Luke 13:6-9:

Then he [Jesus] told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9, NIV)

In this parable, Jesus talks about a fig tree that was planted in a vineyard, which was not that unusual. The owner of the land has hired someone to take care of the plants. One day the owner

goes to see how things are growing, but he finds that the fig tree does not have any figs. Three years was the normal time it takes for a fig tree to mature and produce fruit. The land owner seems frustrated. He tells the person taking care of his plants that he has come for three years looking for figs, but since this tree seems incapable of doing what it is supposed to do, then it is time to cut it down. The landowner adds this question as a way of explanation: “Why should it use up the soil?”

Now, if you have ever been to that part of the world, you know that growing anything is not easy because there is very little water and the soil is not that good. It is kind of like the desert areas of southern California. But since 1948, the nation of Israel has become expert in growing things in the desert by using long hoses that drip water only where that plant grows. They have made the desert bloom. Growing something in that climate takes great effort and resources, so if something does not grow, we may understand why the landowner would be impatient and want to try something else in its place. But, the person taking care of the plants suggests this: “Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.” (Luke 13:8, NIV)

One way to interpret this passage would be to say that the land owner represents God, and the fig tree represents the people of Israel. God has created them for a purpose, showed great patience in giving them ample time to grow up so they can produce the “fruit.” Fruit is whatever purposes God has in mind for them. And maybe the person tending them is someone who is their “champion” – telling the landowner to give them just a little more time to grow up. This person will even work at helping them to grow up.

But, when Jesus tells this parable in response to what others have told him about those killed by Pilate, he doesn't really try to explain why God does or allows things -- though he makes it clear that God doesn't work the way those who tell him about this imply. However, Jesus does focus on two things here – *patience* and *time*. The landowner is not impatient – he has allowed the normal amount of time for maturity. And the person working the grounds suggests even more time -- which we assume was granted since Jesus does not say the landowner chose to do otherwise. It shows us that *God is patient*. It is a theme throughout the Bible when it talks about God being patient and even “long-suffering.” I believe that *God gives us all the time we need to become the person God created us to be*. So, God is patient with all of us.

So, in addition to being thankful for God's patience with us, then we might also say that *we need to model that same kind of patience with each other*. I know I can get impatient from time to time. And in our world in which everything seems to be getting faster and faster, we all seem to have less and less patience with each other. Just see what happens when someone is sitting at a stop light, waiting to turn across traffic. If you hesitate for even a few seconds, you will usually hear the blare of horns reminding you of your transgression. We all need to have more patience instead of demanding that everything happens *now*. Psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests that learning to have patience through delayed gratification is actually the master skill needed for us to grow up and mature in life. So, patience is something we all need to work on.

We could say *that* is the message of this parable. We could, except for the last line of our parable. The person tending the plants suggests waiting a year, but ends up by saying, “If it bears

fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.” (Luke 13:9, NIV) In other words, “Just show a little patience and give it some time to see what happens. But, if it doesn’t grow after another year, *then cut it down!*” My guess is that most of us like the first part about patience, especially if it means that God shows each one of us patience and gives us more time to grow up – which many of us probably need. But, it is what comes *after* that that may be the most troubling part of this parable. As we have said before when looking at these parables, there is often a “twist” in the parable that is unexpected -- but points the way to a deeper truth.

Prior to this ending we could say that there seems to be a lot of grace in God’s patience. There is even a “grace period” given – some extra time if needed – like the time between when a bill is due and when we are hit with the late fees. As long as you make a payment before the late fees are assessed, many places will not “ding” your credit record. The extra year is God’s grace period. However, there seems to be a limit to God’s patience. Even the person who asks for the extra year suggests that cutting down the fig tree makes sense -- *if there is no fruit.*

For those of us who struggle here, let me say this – *God’s grace may be unlimited, but God’s patience is not.* So, don’t confuse God’s grace with God’s patience. God’s grace is there for all. It is God’s free gift and not something we earn by being “good enough” or as in this story, being “not as bad” as other people. God’s grace is the unconditional love of God that we are given for the forgiveness of sins, so that we can change our way or repent, and start growing fully into the person God created us to be. Grace is not a “free pass” for us to keep living in ways that are not God’s will for us – ways that are harmful to others and ourselves. The purpose of God’s grace is to provide the means and the time to mature -- to produce the “fruit” God has created us to produce. That fruit can be seen in our love for each other, and in qualities such as kindness, gentleness, patience, and all of the other “fruit of the Spirit” Paul writes about.

I believe, however, that there is a limit to God’s patience. God does not say that we can take as long as we want. God is fair and God gives us plenty of time to respond and mature – even extra time if we need it – but, not forever. There are limits.

One of the most obvious limits is the fact that no one lives forever in this life. And while the life expectancy for us in this country continues to rise, those life expectancies are still averages and not something everyone is promised. No one knows for sure how many years we have here, so putting things off and hoping there will be enough time to get it straightened out later may not be the best strategy.

It reminds me of what a church member in a previous church did during the “dot.com period.” Those of us who were around and investing back then know that the stock market had this incredible run up, and pretty much everything you put money into went up. I remember having lunch with a church member who said he was quitting his job in order to become a “day trader” because he thought he could do very well at that. Now, he had no formal training. But about a year later he asked to meet with me again over lunch. This was after the market had fallen and self-corrected with lots of folks losing the money they had gained. He wanted me to know he would not be making a financial pledge to the church that year, not because anything was wrong at the church, but because he was going back to his old job and had a negative cash flow for the

year. He had been trying to “time the market” by selling before things went south -- but it did not work.

Sometimes I hear of people thinking that way about their lives and their commitment as followers of Christ. They seem to be saying they want to live their lives the way they want to, but when they get older, then they will come back to church or God before it's too late and take advantage of God's grace. Now, will God allow that? Sure -- because God is a God of love and grace. But, just think about what you miss out on – a meaningful life in relationship with God while bearing the “fruit” of God's grace. Instead, you come to God with what's left of your life, as if that is some great prize. Again, the Bible tells us that God and the angels rejoice over the return of anyone who is lost, but it doesn't have to be that way – trying to wait until the end of our lives. So, if you think trying to time the stock market is risky, then what about trying to guess when you might run out of time in this life?

If we ended this message there, it would be somewhat of a downer. I also think we would miss out on what is the most important part of this idea that *God's patience has its limits*. I think that God's patience having limits is actually some very good news! Let me explain why.

Presently, I am reading through the Psalms again for my daily devotions, and this week one of the readings was Psalm 10. I want to read it for you now because it jumped out to me as speaking to what we are talking about today. It begins with the psalmist asking where God is during times of suffering. A few years back Rabbi Kushner wrote a book about suffering called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* Psalm 10 could be subtitled *Why Do Good Things Happen to Bad People? (And what is God going to do about that?)*

Why, LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,
who are caught in the schemes he devises.
He boasts about the cravings of his heart;
he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.
In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;
in all his thoughts there is no room for God.
His ways are always prosperous;
your laws are rejected by him;
he sneers at all his enemies.
He says to himself, “Nothing will ever shake me.”
He swears, “No one will ever do me harm.”
His mouth is full of lies and threats;
trouble and evil are under his tongue.
He lies in wait near the villages;
from ambush he murders the innocent.
His eyes watch in secret for his victims;
like a lion in cover he lies in wait.
He lies in wait to catch the helpless;
he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.

His victims are crushed, they collapse;
they fall under his strength.
He says to himself, "God will never notice;
he covers his face and never sees."
Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God.
Do not forget the helpless.
Why does the wicked man revile God?
Why does he say to himself,
"He won't call me to account"?
But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked man;
call the evildoer to account for his wickedness
that would not otherwise be found out.
The LORD is King for ever and ever;
the nations will perish from his land.
You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that mere earthly mortals
will never again strike terror.

When we see evil and suffering in our world, especially when it is caused by someone who takes advantage of the powerless and the helpless, what does the psalmist say is God's response? Well, in the short term it may look like God is doing nothing, and that good things keep happening to bad people, but in the long run, eventually God is going to set things right. At some point God's patience, which some mistakenly think means that God either doesn't care or doesn't exist – at some point even God's generous patience has its limits and God will say, "Enough – time is up! No more abusing the innocent and the powerless – time's up for you who do this. No more." And *that is the good news – that God's patience has its limits*. And while it doesn't necessarily explain or excuse evil and suffering, it does say that this will not be the final word, so don't mistake God's patience for a license to do whatever one wants. And trying to "time" God's patience is risky -- like trying to time the stock market – only more so.

Sometimes we see examples of God saying, "Enough – time is up!" Sometimes we see it acted out in courageous people here and now. We have all heard of the tragic shootings at the *Capital Gazette* newspaper in Maryland, in which a number of people were killed. Who knows how we might have responded if someone walked into where we were and began doing the things that person did. This week I read about how one woman who was there responded. Her name was Wendi Winters. She was a 65-year-old mother of four and was the community reporter for the newspaper. Someone described her as "a hearty, happy woman full of joy and warmth. She would be the one who hugged the hardest and laughed the loudest." (*The Wall Street Journal*, "The Capital Gazette Heroine" by Stephen Hunter, July 5, 2018) She had been trained, along with the others in her office, in a workshop that taught them to "run, hide, or fight." And if

you can't do the first two—run or hide -- then you fight back. She had only one weapon to use to fight back -- her body, which she threw at the man with the gun. Someone there said, "I heard her shout, 'No!'" adding that "There was anger in her voice." Those who knew her said she did it because she wanted to help others, and that her action probably gave a few seconds for others to escape -- even though it cost her life.

When someone acts with that kind of courage and self-sacrifice, I believe we are seeing a glimpse of what God is doing in this world to shout "No!" to evil. And God's divine "No!" began with Jesus, who gave his life on a cross to begin working God's plan to confront the evil and suffering in our world.

Three days after the attacks of 9/11, President George Bush climbed the stairs to the lectern of the National Cathedral to try to give meaning to what had happened. At one point he paused, and then said this about God and our world. Bush said, "This world He [God] created is of moral design. Grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time." (Jon Meachum, *The Soul of America*, 2018: 262) God is patient, but eventually God will say about evil and suffering, "Enough – time is up!" And friends, that is good news! But until that final day, when all will be restored as it should be, we are called to grow up, to mature, and to bear the "fruit" of God's grace and love – even to the point, if needed, of laying down one's life for a friend – because that is what Jesus did for us.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.