

Why Patience Matters

“Among those born of women, there has been none greater than John the Baptist. Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Jesus is teaching that the greatest prophets and holiest people of the Old Testament—though justified in God’s sight—did not have access to what we have. John’s baptism was a precursor, certainly willed by God, but only a precursor to Christian Baptism. Christian Baptism actually gives us a share in the divine life so deep and intimate that, by God’s grace, we are capable of becoming great saints. That is what Jesus means when He says the least in the kingdom is greater than the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

Because grace—not our effort—is primary, the readings call us to cultivate a particular virtue closely tied to hope: patience. Two weeks ago, we focused on vigilance and hope; today the emphasis is patience and hope. The second reading calls us to imitate the patience of the prophets who waited for the Lord’s arrival. Isaiah prophesies, in vivid images, what God’s grace does: it brings life to what is dead—like a desert blooming. Isaiah, however, had to wait some seven hundred years from his prophecy to the coming of Jesus.

If you’ve never struggled with impatience, you can take a lap or two around the church and meet us at the end of the homily. For the rest of us, let’s be practical. Patience is fundamental. The saints put it bluntly. St. Teresa of Avila: “Patience obtains everything.” St. Thérèse of Lisieux: “The greatest saints practiced patience, and it was by patience that they became saints.” St. Francis de Sales: “Impatience ruins everything.”

What is the root of impatience? Think about your life. At bottom it is self-will—wanting my way—and self-sufficiency. And I’m preaching to myself first.

Six Practices to Cultivate Patience

1. Expect difficulty. Things will often not go our way; arm yourself—at least intellectually—by expecting difficulty.
2. Tolerate small daily annoyances. Virtues are like muscles; you build capacity by practice, beginning with daily inconveniences and irritations.
3. Be willing to surrender your plan, your expectations, your desires, your timing. I’m part German; I like my timing. I don’t always like other people’s timing—or God’s timing.
4. Accept interruptions.
5. Accept weakness—in yourself and in others.

6. Anchor your heart in trust, not outcomes.

Let's practice these.

Applications: Children, Spouses, Ourselves and God

On children. Your parenting is part of your vocation, so this is very much spiritual. Most of your issues with your kids touch control and pride—versus expectations and accepting weakness. Don't take their behavior personally. Be patient with yourself and practice good self-care, especially when you've lost your temper. Note what consistently irritates you and plan—like training a muscle—about how you will respond next time. Also, use Ignatian discernment: when you notice emotions not of the Lord, identify the trigger. Being directly disrespected, running late because of the kids, or siblings fighting are different triggers. When you see what it bumps into, ask the Lord to heal and purify you.

On spouses. If you feel underappreciated, let it go; God notices and will reward your good works. If there's unresolved conflict or resentment, work on managing your messaging and expectations through conversation. Don't score keep. If there are a lot of misunderstandings, work on open, attentive listening, and when you argue, use "I" statements rather than "you" statements.

On ourselves and God. Instant gratification is a killer; it does not make mature people. Be patient with the Lord's timing and with yourself. Avoid negative self-talk—it is never of the Lord. Pray regularly; spend time with the Lord who loves you, and you will better accept your limitations and grow in virtue. Trust God's providence and timing. There may be something the Lord wants to do in your life, but it is not yet time. Trust His wisdom.

Dear friends in Christ, our life is not self-generated; it comes from the Lord. Because of that, we must let Jesus be Lord of our life and stop trying to figure it all out on our own. Impatience, at the end of the day, is self-will. Let us surrender to God's will and trust that He is infinitely good, His timing is perfect, and His love endures forever.

Praise be Jesus Christ.