On the idea of “forbearance”

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We may, when called to forbearance, shrink back. It’s not a word that’s as often as it used to be; it’s almost a strange, old-fashioned word. But when the scriptures call us to bear with one another, it’s important for us to step back, take a breath, and understand what it means.

In the New Testament are two main words that circle around this idea. One is often translated as “to forbear” or “bear with” or “forbearance.” The other is often translated as “to be patient with” or “patience.” They are found together in Ephesians 4:1:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with *patience*, *bearing with one another* in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In the parallel passage in his letter to the Colossians (3:12,13a), Paul uses these terms again: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and *patience*. *Bear with one another*.” Paul baldly states that we are all called to patience and forbearance as we try to maintain unity (“with every effort”). Paul also lists patience among the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians (5:23). There is a cluster of virtues that flow from agape-love, especially ideas of *kindness* and *gentleness*, of *humility*, and *faithfulness*.

It would seem that forbearance is a kind of patience; it is a patience that we have for one another.

What does forbearance look like? Some of this is in the avoidance of certain behaviors. James tells us, as we await the coming of the Lord “do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.” (James 5:9; King James’s English delightfully tells us not to “grudge not one another.”) Some of it is simply putting up with one another, noting especially that we only have to put up with one another if we find it difficult to be together. We don’t need to put up with one another when things are going well with one another. Just as God calls us to patience as we endure the difficult situation in our lives, we are called to patience with one other as we endure the difficulties of one another. Of course, even if we can look on conflict and disagreement as an opportunity to develop this virtue, this comes in the midst of lots of other, happier, things we can do together. For example, Paul, in Colossians calls for forbearance even as we dwell in the Word together, worship together, be “clothed in love” together.

Jesus stresses the importance of forgiving one another. Because we have been forgiven a great debt, we are to forgive one another (Mt 8.23–35). We seek forgiveness of our sins as we forgive others, and we are strongly warned that if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us (Mt 6:5–15).

Forbearance doesn’t mean agreement; in fact, disagreements provide one of the important contexts for forbearance. Forbearance doesn’t mean we approve of what we see as sin in others, but it does mean that even as we express that disapproval we do that in all humility, gentleness, and wisdom.

Putting up with other people doesn’t come easily, and our natural reaction is to remove ourselves from situations where we might have to do this. In fact, it might take deliberate, careful thought and practice to do so. But, as 1 Timothy reminds us, we need to train ourselves in godliness, which holds “promise for both the present life and the life to come.” (4:8).

This is something that we’ll have to work at. But working at this will result in amazing this: unity (as Paul writes), being faithful and godly as we await the Lord’s return (James and Jesus), and a full assurance of hope (Heb. 6:10–12).

Ecclesiastes writes,

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning;

The patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.

Do not be quick to anger,

For anger lodges in the bosom of fools.

Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?”

For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. (Ec. 7:8–10)

So, “forbearance” may be an old fashioned word, but it’s a important virtue to cultivate. It sounds less elevated to frankly state what it means: we need to put up with one another. But it’s no less important when stated in that way.