

“GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 100:5; Proverbs 3:3; 20:6; I Corinthians 4:1-2, 17

Prayer: Holy Father by the present power of your Holy Spirit give us all ears to hear what your Spirit wants to say to us. Cause your Word to penetrate our hearts and change us.

Introduction.

After a long break, we return to Galatians 5 and the final two fruit of the Holy Spirit, faithfulness and self-control. We did gentleness out of order back on Father's Day.

The Fruit of the Holy Spirit is about cultivating Christian character out of which flows God-glorifying conduct. Faithfulness is another essential characteristic of a Holy Spirit filled Christian.

Character of Faithfulness.

Faith and faithfulness go hand in hand. What we believe translates into action. Faithfulness is the outward visible sign of the inward reality of faith.

Faithfulness is easy to define. There is a veritable cornucopia of synonyms we can use. Trustworthy, steadfast, reliable, dependable, constancy, fidelity, integrity, loyalty, devoted, honest, responsible, conscientious, principle-driven, true to one's word. Furthermore, being faithful means all those things over the long haul.

Hebrews 11 is a long list of saints who showed faithfulness over the long haul. They practiced a long obedience in the same direction.

We just finished a study of Daniel. When his enemies tried to find some grounds for charges against him “they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because *he was faithful*, and no error or fault was found in him” (Daniel 6:4).

Faithlessness means all the opposites, not keeping faith; dishonest; disloyal; unreliable; fickle; undependable; treacherous and unscrupulous; a fair-weather friend.

The Character of God.

As we have noted with each of the fruit, so also faithfulness is bound to the very character and nature of God. God is faithful at the core of His being. He is faithful to Himself and He cannot be unfaithful. He is faithful to His Word, to His love and mercy and justice, to all His covenant promises and He does all He says He will.

One of the common images of God in Scripture is of a rock, God is The Rock, immovable, unchangeable, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. He is the picture of faithfulness.

Psalm 100:5 For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

We see God's faithfulness expressed in His covenants, He is a covenant making and covenant keeping God. God kept His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses and David. He delivered the children of God out of Egypt, kept them safe through 40 years in the wilderness.

The crowning example of God's faithfulness is His sending His own Son to be our Savior from sin, who fulfilled every promise made in the OT.

Think about how dependent we are on God's faithfulness. We depend on it for our salvation, for our deliverance from evil and sin and temptation, for forgiveness, for carrying us through tough times, for everything we need in this life and for eternal life.

God's faithfulness is on every page of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to make us more like God, more Christ-like. And in the process, we become more human, the way God created us to be. If we would be like God, then we must be like His faithfulness. The fruit of faithfulness in us flows from His faithfulness.

Obstacles to faithfulness.

We are sinners and it is our nature to be unfaithful, to be selfish and lazy. On top of that we are an unfaithful people living among unfaithful people, an unfaithful culture that is constantly tempting us to be unfaithful. Psalm 78 describes our world:

Psalm 78:8 a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

We live in a fickle culture. Everything is fleeting, impermanent. Couples live together to keep their options open, making it easier to be unfaithful, rather than make promises that might take real effort to keep. We are committed to being uncommitted.

A generation ago a person worked the same job their whole life. Today's young people will have a dozen jobs before they retire.

Living in the big city of OKC before coming here we saw people change churches with some frequency, staying a few years and then moving on to something better or different, something that met their perceived needs better. No commitment to the long haul, no loyalty, no growing through challenging times.

What a blessing to be a part of a congregation that isn't like that.

Ours is a throwaway culture, everything is disposable, relationships, jobs, spouses, friends, churches and hobbies. Why lock ourselves into one relationship or one course of action or one group of people.

How many young people won't commit to plans for next Friday night because they want to keep their options open in case something better comes along?

Why promise your kids you will do something because then you are locked in and create expectations you might not want to keep?

Someone said the unofficial motto of our society is "Don't count on me" (Kenneson, p. 188). We worship at the altar of the individual, at the altar of the self, what I want, what's best for me. Why be faithful when no one else is, or when it hurts us or puts us at a disadvantage?

Hardship and trials and troubles are obstacles that tempt us to question or doubt God's faithfulness and cause our faithfulness to Him to waver. Times of testing are not for doubt, they are for growing and deepening our faith. Scripture anticipates this temptation in us.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

I Peter 4:19 Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Revelation 2:10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Cultivating Faithfulness.

If God calls us to faithfulness, then we can be confident God makes available to us tools and resources to cultivate faithfulness. There are many and the more we avail ourselves of them the more we will grow in faithfulness.

I Corinthians 4:1-2 ... as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 ..., *it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

Cultivate faithfulness by praying and asking for it.

I hope I have made clear these fruit, these character traits don't grow by our just trying harder to be better and do better. They are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, they have their source in God. Ask God by His Spirit to instill these qualities and then by grace cooperate with the Spirit knowing it is God who works in us.

Cultivate faithfulness by asking God to show you when and where and to whom you have been unfaithful or not kept your word or not followed through.

When and where are you most tempted to unfaithfulness and what can you do to guard your heart and mind in those times and places?

Abraham lied, Jacob cheated, Noah fell into drunkenness, David committed adultery, Peter denied Jesus, all acts of unfaithfulness, but they all trusted God and turned to Him and found God to be faithful even when we aren't. They are reminders that we are all a work in progress, stumbling forward on this path of faith and faithfulness.

Repent and ask for grace to be more faithful and go to those you need to ask forgiveness of. Take comfort from knowing God is faithful even when we are not.

Cultivate faithfulness by keeping your promises and commitments.

Husbands, be home when you say you will be. Dads show up where you say you will show up. Employees follow through, keep your word. Keep your vows.

Faithfulness certainly means sexual faithfulness, but it doesn't only mean that. When we made our vows before God and witnesses we vowed more than just to forsake all others for you alone.

We promised to love and to cherish, which involves dying to ourselves, to our selfishness and self-absorption.

Cultivate faithfulness by being faithful in small things.

Do you think it's OK to compromise on trivial things? Do we point out a two-dollar mistake on a bill? Cultivate faithfulness with money and handling finances, with guarding your confidences, by what you say and do on the internet. Be faithful when no one is looking, not just occasionally or with certain things, but in all things, even small things.

Luke 16:10-12 One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.

Keep your words honest. Someone this past week greeted me with "how are you?" I paused from the usual response of fine. It made me wonder how often we tell social lies, saying we are fine when we aren't.

Cultivate faithfulness by hanging around faithful people and learning from them.

Colossians 1:7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.

You can do this through reading the stories and biographies of faithful saints. Study the life of Moses, Joseph, Joshua, Samuel, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Paul and Jesus, and missionaries.

You can do it in person, many faithful saints might be right under our nose.

A week ago, I did the funeral service for Bas Scholten, the last of the four Scholten brothers. It was my privilege to know each of them and to do each of their funerals. Before each funeral, I asked their families to give me a list of adjectives to describe John and Evert and Bas and Bill. As any of you who knew them can guess, the lists were remarkably similar.

They were all faithful men, reliable, humble, honest, loyal, trustworthy. They were faithful to each other, to their wives, their families, their church, their country and most of all to their God.

What do you want said at your funeral, what adjectives will your family use to describe you? What can you cultivate now with the years you have left?

Parents cultivate the importance of faithfulness in your children and grandchildren. Tell stories, set examples, point it out when you see it. (See William Bennett's collections of stories).

Instill in the next generation the importance of faithfulness, integrity, reliability, dependability. Teach them how to work hard, how to go the extra mile, to show up early, not be late, to follow through, to do what you are asked, to show respect.

The more I talk to business owners and employers the more I hear of how hard it is to find good help, faithful, dependable workers. Just ask anyone here who hires people.

People who follow Christ and seek to be Christ-like should work circles around non-Christians, should stand out because of the quality of their work and the quality of their attitude.

It starts with the baby-sitting job or paper route or lawn mowing job, it starts with school and tests and cheating, it starts with telling the truth to mom and dad and then to the boss. It starts with how you treat other people's things or other people's secrets. It starts with loyalty to family and friends.

It is a character issue. Is our character being molded and shaped by the Holy Spirit or by the culture? Only by the Holy Spirit can we have the courage and boldness to pay the cost that will come with being faithful.

Biblical faithfulness starts in our hearts and it includes absolute honesty, utter dependability and unswerving loyalty.

Cultivate faithfulness to God and to each other in your church by recommitting to a deeper commitment, to faithfulness in worship and in service to God and each other.

Confess you neglect of your soul, of spiritual things, of prayer, Scripture, personal devotion.

Cultivate faithfulness by developing an attitude of willingness to suffer for Jesus and your faith.

In Revelation 1:5 there is a phrase "faithful witness" and the Greek word there is our word for martyr. Many faithful witnesses through history have been so to the very point of death.

Those in the armed services are asked if they are willing to pay the ultimate price in faithfulness and loyalty to their country. The same question needs to be asked of the followers of Jesus.

Faithfulness is tested in hard times, in times when it is tempting to turn and run. Faithfulness and loyalty are tested when circumstances spiral out of control and we start to question God or His goodness or His power.

Lamentations 3:19-23 Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall

20 My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.

21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;

23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

I Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Faithfulness doesn't focus on pain, hardship, affliction, trials or troubles. Faithfulness focuses on Christ, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. Christ focused on the joy, on the reward at the end. Cultivate faithfulness in hard things, when it is hard.

Cultivate faithfulness to the very end, to your last breath.

II Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Don't retire from faithfulness. You may have to retire from your job someday, but don't retire from faithfulness to God, from serving Him.

Here is how one Christian put it: "You may call it retirement; but I call it a change of station. A new front in the warfare. A new assignment from the King. There is work to be done for the cause of Jesus Christ, and I will do what I can do while I have breath. Because faithfulness to the cause is better than a life of comfort" (John Piper).

Cultivate faithfulness by living and service with a goal of hearing Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

Cultivate faithfulness by loving and worshipping our faithful God.

Love this truth about God and let it become refreshment for your soul, confidence and courage in the hard times, peace and joy in all times. Rest on the rock of His faithfulness and let it be the fuel for your response of faithfulness.

The great hymn of faith, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, is taken from the book of Lamentations which was written during a time of Israel's great unfaithfulness, when because of their sin, they had been exiled and Jerusalem destroyed and the temple burned. Yet in the midst of their unfaithfulness they could affirm God's faithfulness.

God's faithfulness is cause for worship and it is cause for us to seek to be faithful to God and each other by the enabling power of His Spirit in us.