

Faithfulness

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to Galatians 5 verse 22 as we continue our series on the fruit of the Spirit. I'll read at the beginning of verse 22 and then the last word.

But the fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness. Let me get straight into a definition.

Faithfulness means being reliable, dependable, trustworthy, these kinds of things. A faithful person will be true to their word, they will do what they promise, you can trust them.

But it's even more than that. It means being these things that are obvious things, being these things over the months and over the years, through the good times and the bad times.

The counterfeit is seen when people seem to be faithful as long as that suits them. But they turn away from others or they turn away even from God when they're not getting what they want out of the relationship.

[1 : 24] But a faithful person proves their loyalty over time that they are in it for the long haul and we are called to be faithful.

Now let me get into the five points I want to make. In my notes I have some stories about people that I think are examples of faithfulness and others that are examples of unfaithfulness.

But if I start telling stories, that'll be 10 minutes of stories. So you think yourselves of people, maybe people you know or have known, who are particularly examples of faithfulness that you love and that encourage and challenge you.

So five points. The first two I hope to get through completely, the rest we'll see. Point number one, let's trust a faithful God.

Let's trust a faithful God. I think we need to begin here. If faithfulness means being true to my word and that being shown over time, then God is obviously the ultimately faithful one.

[2 : 52] He's utterly trustworthy. He's totally dependable. He's always true to His word. He's been that over the years, the centuries, the millennia and He will be that forever.

God is faithful and we can trust Him. I want to highlight just one theme that's raised in Galatians here that illustrates the faithfulness of God.

And it is that He is the God of covenant, the God who commits Himself to people. Now, covenant's an important theme in Galatians and lying back of it.

And Paul knew his scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and the story of God making covenants with somebody like Abraham or at the time of Moses or with David or you've got the new covenant in books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In all this, God was making a commitment to people. He was binding Himself to them and he was saying to them, I will be your God.

[4 : 08] I covenant. I commit myself to be for you. And so he made covenant promises to them. It's very important to note that in covenant, God was being seen to be different from the gods of the nations round about.

They were capricious. They were moody. They changed their mind. You never knew for one day to the next what would please them.

They were fickle, but the God of covenant was faithful. Now just to pick up on the covenant with Abraham that's mentioned in Galatians in chapter three especially, two promises in this covenant. Number one, there was the promise of a seed of offspring. So let me read Galatians 3.16. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.

It does not say, and to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one and to your offspring. And Paul says, who is Christ?

[5 : 25] A second promise was that of blessing to the nations. Let me read 3.14. So that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.

So that we might receive the promised spirit through faith. So Paul is saying, way, way back God made covenant with Abraham and God has kept his word and Jesus is fulfillment of that covenant double promise.

Jesus is the seed that was promised and Jesus is the one in whom the nations of the earth will be blessed.

And we could take time tonight to trace this promissory faithfulness of God through all the covenants of the Old Testament and through the promise of the new covenant, all of them fulfilled in Jesus.

You see, God kept building up the picture. He kept painting in a little more of it. He kept saying more of what he would do.

[6 : 43] And then in Jesus, he has done it and he has done everything he promised. He has kept his word.

If you think of it in terms of our understanding of God as Trinity, the Father faithfully sent his Son to be the servant of the covenant.

And the servant's Son came and fulfilled his mission in immaculate faithfulness. And the Holy Spirit faithfully upheld Jesus throughout all of his ministry.

So God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been faithful to all his covenant promises. They're all fulfilled in Jesus. They're sealed in the blood of Jesus, in the blood of the new covenant, in the blood of the everlasting covenant.

So the point tonight is that this God, the God of covenant, the God of promise, can be trusted because he will never go back on his word and he will never go back on the blood.

[8 : 06] The words that he has spoken fulfilled in Jesus and the blood that he promised shed in Jesus. You can trust the word and you can trust the blood.

God will never go back on what he has said and done in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so that's where I want you all to begin.

Let's trust a faithful God. We can rest in him because he can be trusted as nobody else in the whole universe can be trusted.

His word and his blood can be relied upon for time and eternity. Let's trust him as our rock in a world of sand.

Secondly this, this may take a little longer, let's be faithful disciples. What I want to say here is that the God who is faithful to us calls us as we trust him to be faithful to him as individuals, as disciples who follow him.

[9 : 27] I want to highlight two things here. First of all that you and I are called to be faithful in my walk and then also faithful to my calling, walk and calling.

First faithful in my walk, I mean by that in my daily walk with Jesus. You have the language of walking twice in this passage in Galatians 5.

In verse 16 it says walk by the spirit and the following verses stress our practical, ethical daily living. And then in verse 25 there's a different word used that I am reliably informed as here very well translated as keep in step with the spirit.

Now the spirit unites us to Jesus. So when we read about walking in the spirit and keeping in step with the spirit, it's another way of saying that the spirit connects us with Jesus.

[10 : 48] And by the spirit we walk with Jesus. Now what does that mean? Well let me suggest one or two things.

First of all when we walk with someone, hopefully it's an opportunity to enjoy each other's company and especially to talk and to listen.

Like two days ago I'm walking along a pavement and there are four young women walking towards me all clearly together.

But I had to step off the pavement into the road, danger to my own life and limb at my age because they were all looking down at their phones.

So they were together but they weren't really engaging with one another, they were engaging with other people. But normally when we walk with someone we want to enjoy time with them and share with them and have conversation.

[11 : 57] And so when we walk with Jesus in the spirit it's important that we're keeping the lines of communication open, that we're listening to Him as He speaks in His word and we're speaking to Him in prayer.

So we walk and we listen. Further this, when you walk with someone obviously you're walking the same path, you're travelling in the same direction.

So in the Bible when we read about walking there's this regular image of the way or the road and it's a picture of the kind of life that we're called to live.

You might call it the Jesus' route or route, the Jesus' way. And the Spirit wants to show us the Jesus' route as we keep in step with the Spirit we're walking the way of Jesus.

So we want to let the Holy Spirit set the direction of travel. We want to stay on the path that Jesus wants us on and live in a way that pleases Jesus.

[13:21] Also think of this, a step is a very little thing but we all know it's important to pay attention to where we're putting our feet.

We watch where we walk. And I think it's important that in the Bible being faithful in the little things, being faithful step by step is an important principle and it's taught more than once by Jesus in various contexts.

Here's one, Luke 16 and 10. It's actually in the context of responsibility for money. 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.

So Jesus is saying, be faithful in the little things. We say the devil is in the detail but God is in the detail.

God watches over our steps, the Bible says. And he wants us to be careful where we walk and to be faithful to him in the steps that we take.

[14:41] And we were singing earlier, I noted that his promise is enough for every step I take. We trust him for every step.

And also this, in our walk, remember the journey is long. Man called Eugene Peterson, it must be nearly four decades ago, wrote a book that's become a bit of a classic, a long obedience in the same direction.

The language of long obedience in the same direction comes from Friedrich Nietzsche of all people, but never mind. And Eugene Peterson takes the reader through what are often known as journey psalms, the psalms of ascent that people sang on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Psalms 120-134.

And the subtitle of his book is discipleship in an instant society. And he then, and in a forward to a recent reprint, is saying the same thing that he lives in a society where people want the new and the novel and quick fixes, even in spiritual things.

And he says there is often little enthusiasm for the holiness which will require long patience and perseverance.

[16:10] And he highlights two words that he says are lifelong words for us, disciple and pilgrim. Disciple he's saying we're actually in a lifelong apprenticeship to a master.

And pilgrim, we are on a lifelong journey, really going someplace to meet that master. So it's a call to perseverance to keep going with this long faithful obedience in the same direction.

So faithful to my walk in these ways. But then also faithful to my calling, my calling.

Now here we're in the language of vocation or calling, the same idea. And the logic is this, if every Christian is unique, then each of us has a particular calling as an individual.

I think this is really, somebody told me recently that I keep using the word important, and every point is important. And this verse is important.

[17:33] Well this is really important. This calling that each of you has, it's personal to you, who you are and where you are now.

And this calling can change as your life changes. And the calling is more than just work. So that's a very important Reformation insight, that all Christian men and women are to exercise their divine callings in their working lives in the world.

And that theology of vocation related to work had immense cultural impact. It gave such dignity to people's lives to say that in terms of the time that the farmer at the plough, or the cook at the oven, or the mother at the crib, or the artist at the easel, or whoever, that each had a divine vocation, a calling from God.

But we need to be even more holistic than that, where you see all of life as relevant to your calling, and you're to be faithful in all of life.

Whether you're in work or not, whether you're at work or not. Just take one example, think about your relationships.

[19 : 04] You may be a son or a daughter, it's part of your calling. You may be a wife or a husband, it's part of your calling.

You may be a parent. It wasn't your calling before, but it is now. You may have become a grandparent. It wasn't part of your calling before, but it is now.

And these things may change and change again over the years, sometimes for very happy reasons, sometimes for very sad reasons, but they change.

And then think of your wider relationships. You may be in a relationship, you may be engaged, you will have close friends, you might have flatmates or housemates, you're in a seminar group, you're in a city group, you have work colleagues, you have neighbors, and so on and so on and so on. Nobody else in the whole world, and nobody else in the history of the whole world has ever had or has exactly that network of relationships that you have.

[20 : 26] So that's part of your calling now, where you are. I think this language of calling is very helpful against the guilt that we often have, where people will say, you should be like me, or you should do what I'm doing, or we might say, I wish I was like them, or had their gifts, or their relationship, or their job, or their whatever.

It's got nothing to do with your calling. You ask, what does God want me to do in this season of my life, where He has placed me with my personality, and my gifts, and my course, and my job, and my relationships, and my health, and my finances, and my opportunities.

He doesn't want you to be anyone else, because He's given them their unique calling. He has a calling for you, and you are called to be faithful in your vocation, to be faithful there, as somebody used to say to me, bloom where you're planted, faithful to my calling.

Now, before I leave this point, and I know we're well through the time, just a couple of other things in relation to our walk, faithful walk, faithful to my calling, is to speak about our own unfaithfulness. In all of the above, in anything that I've said, we are all conscious of our own unfaithfulness. We know that God doesn't let us down, but we often let Him down.

[22 : 20] So what do you do when you are unfaithful, when you let God down? Do you know what you do? You trust in His faithfulness.

First John 1, 7 and 9, I'll just read them. The blood of Jesus, His Son, goes on cleansing us from all our sins.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God has committed to our forgiveness and He will be faithful to His promise in the word and in the blood.

And He will always be faithful to the word and the blood. It's who He is. Now, sometimes we are seriously unfaithful, perhaps over a period of time, months, even back slidden for years, perhaps even publicly and dramatically unfaithful.

[23 : 39] What are we then to do? Will God take me back? Well, ask yourself this simple question, is He the kind of God who welcomes prodigals home?

That's all. Is He? Of course He is. He wants us back. We're invited to come home. I was very moved some years ago when somebody in one of my congregations talked about his father who had been a minister and an academic and he was a broad, I think, in the States, walking on a beach one day.

He got in conversation with a man who admitted to him that he had been a professing Christian years before, but he and his wife had completely wandered away from the faith.

And this man, my friend's father, said to him, do you know that for all these years that you've forgotten Jesus, He's never forgotten you?

In fact, he said to him, I believe that Jesus has been praying for you. All these years that you never prayed, Jesus has been interceding for you.

[25 : 03] It brought the man back. It just blew his mind. He had forgotten about Jesus in all kinds of ways since that early commitment, but he was brought back to a living faith in Christ when he was told that the God who had committed Himself to him was still committed to him.

I would never forget him. God will remain faithful to the commitment He's made to us and He will always be faithful. Again, I say it's who He is.

Well, the third point was, let's be faithful churches. The God who is faithful to us also calls us to be faithful to Him as groups of Christians, as churches.

I don't think there's time to deal with that now. I was going to talk, first of all, about being faithful to the gospel, which has an easy thing to illustrate from Galatians.

At the very beginning, Galatians chapter 1, 6 and 7, Paul says that these people are deserting him in the gospel, turning to a different gospel, which is not a real gospel.

[26 : 17] They've forgotten, as somebody put it a year or two ago, they've forgotten that Christ plus nothing equals everything.

They're trying to add works to Jesus, trying to add rituals to Jesus to be acceptable. They're forgetting that Christ plus nothing equals everything.

I was also going to talk about our being faithful to our responsibilities as leaders in the church and as members who serve. That's where the language of Moses in Hebrews 3 and back to Numbers, Moses had it even tougher than Derrick.

People grumble all the time, people, leaders mutiny, death threats, they want to stone him. Derrick hardly ever has that kind of experience.

I was also going to say something about the eldership, but that'll have to go. Let me just say one thing about churches and then move on. It is simply this, that to be faithful, we need each other.

[27 : 31] You need fellowship to keep you faithful. Just one reference to this, Hebrews 10, 23 to 25, listen to the way it works.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. In other words, let's be faithful. For he who promised is faithful.

So God is faithful, but he doesn't stop there. He says, and let us consider how to stir one another to love and to good works and not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another.

We say that we will not stay faithful unless we're meeting together, talking together, eating together, praying together, encouraging one another and stirring each other up.

We need each other to be faithful. One of the reasons for city groups that Derrick was talking about is to do exactly that kind of thing, to fulfill these two or three verses in Hebrews, so that we keep each other faithful, we keep each other true, we help each other stay on track for Christ in the power of the Spirit.

[28 : 59] Let's be faithful communities, faithful churches. The fourth point, let's be faithful to others.

God calls us to faithfulness in our close relationships, to love others by being loyal to them.

I have two things there, marriage and friendship. Maybe I'll say a little about friendship. Marriage is an obvious area to talk about faithfulness in a culture where all kinds of pressures against faithfulness in marriage, and you tend to have some kind of promise still in a marriage service to be faithful.

I went online the other day to look up marriage vows, and the traditional ones tend to have something about being faithful, but increasingly all the advice was make up your own vows that are completely personal to you.

I read two or three of them, and I gave up at the one that began, sweet pea. I mean, Derek, are you going to say that?

[30 : 16] Now please say after me, fair, sweet pea. But traditionally, marriage vows have always included the word faithful, and a promise to lifelong faithfulness.

So that's an area obviously of importance and challenge, but I don't like to say too much about marriage because the first 43 years have been such a learning curve and haven't quite cracked it yet.

But the other thing is friendship. I'll say something about friendship. Now again, doing research for this faithfulness and friendship, I asked somebody, how many friends do you have, and she said 241.

Okay, you know where that comes from. But how many real friends do you have? And she thought maybe 10.

I said, how many real, real friends that you could trust with anything? She said two. Well, it's great to have two of that kind of friends.

[31 : 30] That's a lovely thing to have. Proverbs 18, 24, a man of many companions may come to ruin. A person of many Facebook friends may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

And in the first place, that's referring to a human relationship that you have a friend who sticks even closer than family. Not just a friend in the good times, but a friend at all times.

Not a fair weather friend, as we say. Proverbs says that too. And you often hear people say, don't you, I went through something very difficult and I found out who my real friends were.

They stayed faithful. And it's also a friend who tells the truth, who's willing to confront you and challenge you when necessary.

Proverbs 27, 6, faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy. And above all, a friend who prays.

[32 : 40] We're called to be faithful in prayer for our friends. And perhaps the best way to have a faithful friend is to be a faithful friend.

The best way to have a trustworthy friend is to be the kind of friend who is trustworthy to them.

Let me quote a song about, it's called, unfair weather friend. I mean, my tastes won't be most of your tastes. So Willie Nelson, anybody heard of Willie Nelson?

Singing with Merle Haggard, great friends. Their voices aren't quite what they used to be, but I think it's a great song. One unfair weather friend.

Look it up on YouTube. The whole sky opens up and it rains down on my head. I show up at your door, beat down and soaking wet.

[33 : 40] I know you'll open up and let me waltz right in. My come whatever, unfair weather friend. And later on, you're always there, right where you've always been.

My come whatever, unfair weather friend. It's a great thing, a lovely thing to have that kind of friendship in our ordinary human relationships.

And of course, in terms of the gospel, in Jesus, we have the ultimate unfair weather friend.

The fifth and last point was going to be, let's think about our roots. So think about your roots for a minute. You can't have fruit without roots in the right soil, with the right nourishment.

And theologically and practically, the fruit of the Spirit comes from being rooted in Jesus Christ. The Spirit unites us to Christ.

[34 : 49] The Spirit plants us in Him. And it's in our union with Christ that the Spirit brings forth His fruit in our lives. The Spirit is interested in roots and fruit, in Jesus' roots and in Jesus' fruit.

On the right kind of roots, so the right nourishment and the right irrigation, perhaps just read Psalm 1. Many of us were reading it on Wednesday night in city groups.

The person who meditates on God's word is said to be like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither.

So it's a person who's fed by God's word and irrigated by God's Spirit so that the roots go deeper and deeper. That person is contrasted with a chaff that's rootless and weightless and the wind blows it away.

But this tree is strong and stable and the roots go deeper and deeper. And it's rooted to bear fruit through the years.

[35 : 59] And it's secure until the judgment the psalmist says, let's think about our roots. Because my life is your life rooted in Christ by the Spirit and our roots going deeper week by week and year by year, growing deeper into Christ so we're stronger and more stable in the storm and bearing fruit in season.

Well let me conclude. Let me take you for a minute to the parable of the talents, very famous words Jesus says twice in Matthew 25 in the story about those who didn't bury their talents but use them for their master.

He says, well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much, enter into the joy of your master.

These are the words every Christian wants to hear one day. Well done, good and faithful servant.

And as Christians we can be confident that we will hear these words one day because to circle back to the beginning because God is faithful.

[37 : 23] God has committed himself to us in Christ and God will be faithful, he will keep his promises. And the Christian life in a sense, and I finish with this, the Christian life is a life of trusting in the promises of God from beginning to end of the Christian life.

Just listen to a couple of verses from 1 Corinthians 1, 7 to 9, verses that assure us that God is faithful from our first calling to faith to the consummation at the end.

These are the words. As you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end and you will be guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ and God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The God who called you into fellowship with Jesus is the God who will keep you in fellowship with Jesus and who will one day make you guiltless like Jesus and bring you to the place where you will be with Jesus forever and forever.

So trust the God who is faithful and keep trusting that he will hold you fast and do that to the end and forever.

[39 : 09] Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you above all tonight that you are the faithful God, the God who promises and who keeps his promises, the God who sent his Son and the Son who was faithful to his commission in life and in death.

We thank you for our living Savior whose faithful life becomes ours and who died for all our unfaithfulnesses, that we might be united to him as our Savior and have our roots deep in him and seek to live for him and bear fruit to his glory.

So help us in our walk as individuals, help us to be faithful to our own callings as individuals, bless us in all our relationships, to be faithful to others in marriage and home and family and in friendships and help us as churches to be faithful in all our different responsibilities above all to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the commission to bring that gospel to a needy world.

So receive our thanks for all your goodness to us in your covenant love and faithfulness. We bless you in Jesus' name. Amen.