

# Faithful and Fresh

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Date: 04 March 2018

Preacher: Derek Lamont

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Okay, so we're not looking at Romans today. So I very quickly adapted something that I was going to initially be speaking at this weekend down in Chelmsford, which was a church conference.
- And they asked me, one of the things I asked me to do was to speak on the subject of keeping fresh and faithful in the ministry. I was just saying that he's been a minister for a long time.
- He's an old guy. He's a punt of lots of wisdom. So it was going to be a very short talk. So I just looked at this morning and slightly adapted it.
- So you'll bear in mind that it was originally to be presented to a group of elders and ministers. And it's not really a sermon as such, okay?
- But you're forgiving. And you will forgive me today because it was a very short notice. And I believe the principles that are involved are really applicable, absolutely to us all.
- [ 1 : 0 0 ]     We all need to keep fresh, don't we? We all need to keep faithful. I just want to read a few words again from Hebrews, this time from Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 19. I'm not going to preach on this, but it's just applicable, I think, for us.
- Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that is open to us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.
- And since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
- Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.
- So it's kind of relevant to that passage and what I say is some of it, at least, will be included in that. So what I have to say is based on retrospective learning, mainly.
- [ 2 : 0 7 ]     So you look back at your life, you look back at your life just under 30 years of ministry or Christian life or more in terms of Christian life. And we kind of learn a lot of the time, don't we, retrospectively.
- We look back at all the mistakes we've made. And we say, well, if I'd done that differently, or if I'd thought differently here, and if I'd acted differently, and God in His grace enables us to learn retrospectively.
- And so it's great, but it is great. We don't need to learn retrospectively. We can learn front end, and that's good, obviously, and more important. We all need to be kept fresh, don't we, and we all need to be faithful.
- And maybe in the light of new elders that we're making shortly, it's important to remember that as leaders and also for all of us.

We're always fighting. We're always fighting to remain stale. To remain stale. Okay, okay, keep forgiving. To remain faithful and not become stale in our Christian lives.

[ 3 : 07 ] Now I want very briefly to define what I mean by faithfulness. You need to be, and I need to be very careful in defining faithfulness. Because when I'm speaking about faithfulness, I'm not speaking about our faithfulness in comparison with other people.

You know, oh, I'm faithful. There may be not. But it's in relation to our own heart, and our relationship with God. I'm talking about us being faithful towards God, because very often what we compare ourselves to others and say, oh, I'm doing pretty well.

I'm pretty faithful compared with other people. But I'm not interested in that, and we need to be very careful in making that definition of faithfulness.

I'm not going to focus on some of the very obvious things. I'll maybe mention some of the more obvious things in the ones that may be less obvious. So here we are.

Some of the things that I think we need to work at in order to remain fresh and faithful. The first thing is, it's really important, and it's the first text that I have, is to work on humility.

[ 4 : 08 ] Proverbs 11, chapter 2, when pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom. Now, this is my main point, okay, is the importance of working at humility.

Much of what I'm going to say is subsumed under this title of working at humility. Now, interestingly, you can't manufacture it.

You can't say, well, I'm going to be humble today. You just can't manufacture humility, and that's where the spiritual disciplines come in. That's where our connection with God in a daily basis comes in.

And I only want to focus on one thing on the spiritual disciplines, that is Bible reading and prayer and church and Bible studying, all these things. I'm going to say, let the light of His grace shine into the darkness of your own heart.

That's the main thing. If you can allow the light of His grace into the places of your heart that are very dark, then you will understand grace for what it is, and you will be grateful to breathe every day, and you will recognize how much you owe, and you'll see how undeserving you are.

[ 5 : 20 ] It's a great thing to take the discipline, spiritual disciplines, and not say, I'm going to be good to have read today and prayed, and God must be very happy with me, but rather allow these disciplines, the light of His grace to shine in the horrible, ugly, dark places that you're afraid even to go yourself, because it will help you understand how much you've been forgiven and how great His grace is to you that He still loves you and cares for you.

And I recognize that it's the only place that the preacher can be as we rely on the Holy Spirit, and in our lives also that we rely constantly on His grace to enable us to live the kind of life we need to live, and not on our own ability, not on our comparisons with other people, righteous comparisons, comparisons of righteousness with other people, or how well and faithful we may be doing.

So work at humility. Something we can't manufacture. It comes as we allow God to deal with us. It's a byproduct in many ways.

Enables us to be not that important. Remember, I'm speaking to preachers and elders, and that's one of our tendencies to think we're very important.

And we're not that important, because true grace enables us to see that we have great power at our disposal and great significance in our lives and our calling, but paradoxically it enables us to be self-forgetful.

[ 7 : 00 ] And that's true for all of us in our lives. We're servants of Christ and of other people. We're not big shots. We're not big shots as Christians. We might be big shots in the business that we live, that we work in, or the academy, or in anything else, but under Christ we're all one, we're together, and we can be servants of one another, and we can do the menial things because we do them to God's glory, and because it doesn't really matter that we're given important tasks in our Christian lives.

We recognize and we see, and we know that giving the cup of cold water is what Jesus recognizes. That's what He sees, and He loves that. That's a great release for us, and it's a great release in our lives.

We're really not that important. So you will go tomorrow, do your best as a Christian with God's help and God's wisdom and the dependence on Him, with a good motive.

You don't need to be the best at everything. We don't need to be magnificent and the best in every field of our lives, but simply do what we do.

One of my lecturers a long time ago in the Free Church College said to me, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing badly. Think about that. I think I know what He meant.

[ 8 : 23 ] I don't think He meant that do things badly, but I think He meant just do things, serve. God will give you the grace. Well, I think that's what He meant anyway.

But it's so easy to have a Messiah complex, isn't it, as a Christian, and particularly as leaders. Oh, everyone needs me so much. We rethroned ourselves, whether it be in terms of leadership or in any other area of our lives, and we regard ourselves, even in a church context, as so important that we believe the lie that it's all up to me and my gifts and my abilities.

God becomes a sideshow. He can't possibly do things without my help, but it's enslaving, and we make very bad gods. We're poor gods.

God is a good God, and He makes a good God. We're not good gods. So humility is very important because it reminds us we're not that important. And also, and kind of parallel to this, keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously.

And that's important. And God has given us a sense of humor. It's a great thing. Just look in the mirror sometimes and have a bit of a laugh at yourself, and stop being so hypersensitive that everyone is out to get us.

[ 9 : 41 ] We are being treated badly. Just have a laugh sometimes at ourselves and about our lives, recognize that life will go on without us as soon, maybe sooner than later.

And God can cope. And when we receive criticism, and leaders receive a lot of criticism, and so maybe do congregations and people in their lives, whether it be in the workplace or in the church, don't be broken by it.

It's not an excuse to be critical from others to be critical, but recognize that that will be life for us, and if we don't take ourselves so seriously, we can cope with that.

There's usually, even in the most severe criticism, a grain of truth somewhere. Look for it. Find out what might be there that we might deal with in our own heart that others might find critical.

But don't be precious as we are humbly under. Grace is a great humbling reality and enables us to keep repenting and turning to God and finding our identity in Him.

[ 10 : 42 ] And it also keeps us learning. We're disciples. We're always disciples. You know, and I think of when I came to Edinburgh 17 years ago, I knew nothing about city center ministry, and you may be looking at me saying, well, you still don't know very much about city center ministry, but I felt I've learned so much, things I never dreamed that I could learn, and we've seen changes I could never have imagined in terms of the church and growth and church planting, and it's good sometimes to admit our ignorance and to just cry out for help and guidance and for God to lead us in the way He leads us.

So that's my main, most important thing, working at humility, and we all need to do that. It's the absolute care. It's the core of grace. It's the core of understanding our Christian life and walk, and if we are proud, it will just cause us no end of trouble in our Christian lives.

So humility, also work, and I guess they're all kind of related, work at honesty. One Corinthians 2 verse 3, Paul says, I was with you. This is the great apostle Paul, in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

I think our leadership and our Christian lives should involve vulnerability. Paul was willing to confess that he comes to them in fear and in much trembling.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine a leadership seminar today giving that kind of advice or that encouragement, but there is a great sense in which we become vulnerable before our fellow Christians and in leadership, not in a kind of vulnerable way, if you know what I mean, because it's a vulnerability that's based on the strength of our relationship with God.

[ 12 : 42 ] People need to see in our daily Christian lives and among the leadership that we struggle, that there's a battle going on. Now, that's a balance.

You can't always be saying either in leadership or in your life that everything's a battle and a struggle and failing and feeling vulnerable all the time, but there's that balance where we recognize, you know, how many people have you heard saying maybe to you, oh, I didn't know you had any struggles in your Christian life, or I could give you hundreds of examples of people who have said to me, yeah, but that doesn't apply to you.

You're a minister. You understand. All these, you don't have any battles or struggles, if only people knew, because we so often just want to give the impression that everything's well, everything's good.

I've got it all sussed. I have no problems. And yet there must be that vulnerability as there was with Paul, because it's honest. It's hugely honest.

And your life will be the most powerful sermon that people will ever hear, and that will include your ability to say you're vulnerable and you're failed and you're fallen, but you've gone back to the living God to be forgiven and renewed and refreshed and redeemed.

[ 13 : 59 ] And that's tremendously significant. Work it honesty. Work it honesty in that vulnerable sense, but also in knowing what you're good at and knowing what you're bad at and not trying to do everything, so that as Christians in our lives, we accept that we delegate stuff to others who will do it better than us.

Others are very bad at that. We've grown up in a model of one-man ministry, and it's difficult to break that. And yet it's hugely significant and important that God has made us all to work together as the body of Christ, and it means us knowing what we're not good at, delegating and also others willing to serve and take on board.

So we have strength and courage and service, but also vulnerability and honesty. If you're living your life based on living up to the expectations of others or wearing a mask of decency, it will break you.

It will break you, because the Christian life is a matter of the heart. So work it honesty. And again, this is kind of similar, I'm going to cut out some bits here.

Work it being yourself in your Christian life. Psalm 139, 13 and 14, it's just great, Sam, of praise about the created individual. You formed my inward parts, you knitted me together, my mother's womb.

[ 15 : 28 ] I praise you for I'm fearfully and wonderfully made, wonderfully all your works. My soul knows it full well. That's you. That's the individual that God has made you, and it's important to know who you are as an individual.

You're not just a lump, a part of a lump of a Christian body, that all kind of are the same. You are your own individual. You're not somebody else, and somebody else isn't you.

Stop trying to be somebody else, and stop trying to make other people you. We've got a great habit of thinking everyone must be the same. And everyone must be the same as me, usually, and yet he's made us different.

Praise God for some of the different gifts he's given to other people that may not be your gifts, and don't seek to fuse everyone into one bland mass of evangelical ordinariness, because we're all different.

And it's important that we're not to try and pretend to be someone else. I said, I was going to say to these guys, don't be a groupie on the Reformed preacher circuit, celebrity circuit.

[ 16 : 37 ] You know, there's this great thing about, you know, preacher, and I want to be like the best. I want to be at conferences, and I want to be like Tim Keller. I was vowed I wasn't going to say Tim Keller, because it's not me that says it.

It's not me. It's Corey. He's the one that's brought that American guy into the congregation. It's not me. It's Spurgeon. I said, I, whoever it happens, you know, we can't be, and as preachers we can't be other people.

We have to be ourselves. I have to look at the gifts of Corey and say, he's a great theologian. He's a great preacher. He's a better preacher than me, but he's different. And he looks at the same way, and we fuse our gifts together, and there's not a clone of Christianity.

And there's not a clone of being a Christian in the congregation. There's not a clone in your workplace. You know, you're an hour to be Christ-like, but in your own unique character, and that will make you the best you.

When you're Christ-like and you are thankful for being you and being uniquely you, work at being yourself. Now, I was going to say something, well, at the conference, I was going to say, because it's kind of, for me, it was important, so I'll mention it.

[ 17 : 51 ] I'll just mention it. God-tribalism at all costs, you know? I think we're bad for it. We're bad for it in our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition.

I belong to this group. This is my identity. Everyone else is rubbish. Now, that can happen in churches. We can be narrow and judgmental, and it's often accompanied by mean-spiritedness.

They just don't understand the Bible properly. They just don't really have the teaching that we have. It's important to see the blessings and the benefits and God working in other traditions the way He clearly does, and learn from them.

And maybe they will learn from us, and we will learn together. It's not about giving up our principles or all being blandly the same, and we aren't going to agree with everyone.

We're not going to be Christianized, we're not going to agree with everyone either. But please remember the constituency of heaven is going to be far more diverse and varied than we would ever understand and recognize in our own.

[ 18 : 58 ] There's not going to be labels there. We will just be glad to be there, won't we? We'll be glad even if we're the furthest, as some famous preacher said.

If we're just right at the back, we'll be glad that we're there, and there'll be a diversity beyond our understanding. It's great to know how much we don't know, and what I think we will find out how much we got wrong.

Last couple of things. In terms of faithfulness, it's probably not related to faithfulness and freshness directly, is it?

Maybe it is. But these are just some thoughts going forward. They've certainly helped, and sometimes in my failure to apply them, I've recognized stillness and a lack of faithfulness.

So last two things, be human. And I guess they're kind of related previously. As Christians, we're body and soul, aren't we? We're not just kind of souls not inhabiting a body.

[ 20 : 04 ] Remember who we are. God is made as body and soul. So I say to all of you, work hard for Christ. Consider your motive, certainly.

It's good to work hard to be exhausted for Jesus. That's fine as a Christian, to work hard in your workplace. Do your very best. Give of your best, physically, in whatever way you can.

Be the best you can be as a teacher, as a lawyer, as a joiner, an electrician. It doesn't mean you will be the best, but make every effort to be the best person in that environment.

And also then, when you work hard, play hard. Play hard. Enjoy life because God has given us that balance that we need to take.

Stop thinking that the world will not go round if you stop working. It's not good for us to have that complex. Take time off.

[ 21 : 04 ] Take days off. Take proper holidays. Play hard, but play righteous. But do something with... You can see I'm speaking to preachers at this point, can't you?

Do something mindless. On your day off, don't read Spurgeon Sermons. Do something practical. Do something fun.

Laugh again. Please keep laughing. It's terrible, isn't it? The older you get, this is a rule of life. The older you get, the less you laugh. That's true.

The older you get, the less you laugh. My children, when they were wee, they'd just laughed all the time, and we laughed with them. But when you get older, the way of the world, your kids growing up, Royal Bank of Mother and Father, all these things, and he stopped laughing.

We don't laugh as much. We think it's childish, it's not childish, God made laughter, and it's one of the great releases for us. So work. Be human.

[ 22 : 11 ] Be human. And work, having non-Christian friends. And again, maybe this specifically for people in... or geared towards people working in a Christian environment.

But it's important that we keep non-people that aren't Christians as our friends. Remember, our calling is to reach out to people who don't know Jesus. How will we?

How will we do that? Are we just expecting like a magnet to come towards us and just be willing to hear everything we have to say as we splurge out to them? Generally not.

We need to be committed in friendship and in faithfulness and in grace and in humility towards them. And it sharpens who we are and also keep great Christian friends inside and outside of the church, of your local church.

So last thing, be human. The last thing is, I think it's important to work constantly at being realistic in our Christian life. If we're going to be fresh and if we're going to be faithful, we need to work at being realistic.

[ 23 : 19 ] Ephesians 6, 12. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.

Now, we've said this a lot, haven't we? That probably is, if humility is the most significant thing, this is the most important thing to finish with, to recognize that our Christian life is a battle.

And that's where we will get to the place of renewed freshness and faithfulness. Most of us will be plowing a battle in our Christian lives.

We will be envious and think that everyone else has it much better. It'd be great to be in a Christian church in China or in different parts of Asia or in South America or in Africa where hundreds of people are coming to faith and churches are bursting at the seams.

Wouldn't that be great? It's naive, isn't it? And it's idealistic. That is the life that we have. It's a life where we need to realize that we have an enemy, far stronger, far more knowledgeable than we will ever be, who often comes as an angel of light, who knows that Bible better than you will ever know it, who probably knows your own heart better than you know it, knows your sensitivities, knows your idols, knows our particular genetic makeup, and he will attack on all of these fronts in our lives.

[ 24 : 58 ] He knows the weak point in our lives, and he will go at that again and again and again, whether maybe it's popularity.

Maybe it's a feeling of being isolated and rejected. Maybe it's social media. Maybe it's pornography. Maybe it's the imagination. Maybe it's your marriage. Maybe it's your family.

But most often, I think, most often he will attack through our fellow Christian. That will often be the case.

He will attack in all these areas, but in the place where we should be safest, the Christian community, that's off.

This should be the place of grace and kindness, shouldn't it? Am I right? Shouldn't this be the place of grace and kindness? Place where there's a community reflection of Jesus Christ that we're all corporately responsible for?

[ 25 : 57 ] Don't point the finger at others if it's not happening. We all are responsible for that. But isn't it so often that the church is the place where it's like Siberia for the Christian?

It's cold. It's distant. We're isolated. We're misunderstood. Where have I been hurt most in my Christian life?

Has it been down the pub? Has it been watching football matches? Has it been with my non-Christian friends from school? No. It's been from my fellow Christians, from my fellow ministers.

And I've probably hurt them as much as they have hurt me at different levels. It's the judgmentalness. It's the dismissal.

It's the religious mafia that pull us apart and that destroy us. And that can be true for all of us in the church. It can be a bleak place.

[ 26 : 56 ] Isn't that tragic? Isn't it sad that the legacy of the Presbyterian church in Scotland is that we split every few years and become smaller and smaller and smaller and more insignificant and more narrow-minded and more judgmental and more bigoted and more sectarian?

Isn't that bad? And yet that's for some bizarre reason the experience that most of us have had at one level or another.

So it's important for us to be prepared in being realistic, not being prepared for splits or battles, but working with all our heart and soul to avoid them.

Remembering the unity of the people of God that we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight. Remembering the significance and importance of that there is one body.

But we do, in our Christian lives, because of being realistic, I think, need to develop a gracious, if this is not paradoxical, a gracious thick skin. It's a good thing to do, is to have a gracious thick skin so we can cope with the battles and cope with the attacks and not take them so personally that we can say sorry and we can also accept that there's something behind the opposition, very often a spiritual battle, an enemy of our souls.

[ 28 : 27 ] So we want to be fresh and we want to be faithful. Really the only place that we can do that is at the foot of the cross and continuing to learn.

The only way, I think, that I've survived in ministry is by, I think, beginning to understand what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9 where he says, My grace is sufficient for you, My power is made perfect in weakness, therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest on me.

That's a great key that we recognize His grace is sufficient for us. When you battle today at staleness and at being faithless, which we all battle to greater or lesser degrees, maybe that you see His grace is sufficient for you and His grace as it's worked out in community together that we support one another and help one another and build one another up and refresh one another and seek to encourage each other to be faithful.

That would be a great thing. Let's bow our heads in prayer. Another God, we recognize our own staleness so often, the very routine of church, the very routine of the service, maybe sometimes we think it's easy to go through the motions and forgive us when we make the routine more important than the truth that we share.

Help us to recognize the good things in routine and recognize the disciplines that you encourage us to have, that you say to us, Don't give up meeting together, as is the habit of some.

[ 30 : 20 ] We know sometimes we drag ourselves out to fellowship and to friendship. We drag ourselves to the place of opening our Bible where we would far rather watch something on Netflix.

Give us when we just find it so difficult, but give us honesty and reality and that great dependence on your grace to know and to see and to understand that our hope and our humility and our lives of freshness and faithfulness, our gifts from you as we seek to live our lives in your shadow, which is light indeed and freedom and life to the full.

So help us we pray. And if there are any here today who don't know you and who are content with simply knowing about you, may they reach out to you in faith today and cry for forgiveness and for that knowledge of you, which is eternal life and which alone can supply the freshness of true life for us.

So help us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.