

Growing in Faithfulness?
Called to Be Fruit Bearers VII
October 30, 2016

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16-25 (ESV)

Scripture Reading:

¹⁴ "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His master said to him, '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.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His master said to him, '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.' ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?' ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 25:14-30 (ESV)

It says in the Bible that in the beginning God created human beings, starting with Adam & Eve, in His image. In His image he made them male and female. All human beings were originally created in God's image. But very soon afterwards, Adam & Eve sinned and that sin nature has been inherited by all of us. Naturally, as human beings we like to blame other people so we blame Adam & Eve for the sin nature that lies within us. But the truth is we would have all done

the same thing as Adam & Eve. In fact we all do the same thing as Adam & Eve, quite often. Often we reject God and His ways. So we all have God's divine nature within us which is warring all the time with our sinful nature which also lies within us. And unless and until God intervenes, the sin nature will win out. So God took it upon Himself to intervene and He sent His one and only Son, the only perfect one without sin, as a propitiation for our sin, or as others say, an atonement for our sin. God being God cannot sacrifice His holiness for our sinfulness. So He had to offer His only Son, His perfect sinless Son, as the sacrifice for all our sins, thus holding His mercy and grace together with His wrath and judgment for our sins.

But God goes even beyond that for those who put their faith in Jesus as the atonement for their sins. He begins to restore us to His original creation, where the divine nature becomes the dominant nature. The process of God restoring us back to that which we were originally created is often referred to as "sanctification." The Fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 are characteristics of God's divine nature. God's children, those who have been redeemed by faith through the blood of Jesus Christ, should possess those same characteristics, at least to some level. Other than love, perhaps the most important one is the one we are looking at this morning, "faithfulness."

If one looks through the entire Bible, it doesn't take long to realize the importance of faithfulness in the eyes of God. Almost 500 times we find the words faith, faithful, faithfully or faithfulness. Just like most of the other fruit listed in the *Fruit of the Spirit*, the biblical definition of faithfulness is rather all encompassing.

The Christian biblical definition of faithfulness, starting in the Old Testament with those who were faithful to God and culminating in the New Testament with faith in Christ, has five very important elements. Actually it has a lot more than five but these five essentials I want to highlight this morning:

1. Faith in God involves right belief about God –

Often in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, the words faith and belief are interchangeable.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says this about Christian Biblical Faith –

“Throughout the Bible trust in God is made to rest on belief of what he has revealed concerning his character and his purposes. In the N.T., where faith in God is defined as trust in Christ, the acknowledgement of Jesus as the expected Messiah and the incarnate Son of God is regarded as basic to it.”
Evangelical Dictionary of Theology

Our knowledge of God and Jesus will always be incomplete, especially during our life here on earth. If we had full and complete knowledge, we would not need faith. But there is a minimal amount of faith needed to be saved: Faith in Jesus as both the incarnate Son of God and the salvation for one's sins is the basic minimum!

2. Faith accepts God's Word as truth

The Bible views faith's convictions as more than just mere assumptions or nice ideas. The Bible views faith's convictions as certainties and equates them with truth and knowledge.

Paul writes in II Thessalonians 2:13, *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers (and sisters) loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through **belief in the truth.***

Listen to these words from 1 John 5:18-20 (ESV):

¹⁸ **We know** that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. ¹⁹ **We know** that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. ²⁰ **And we know** that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

3. Obedience is a necessary element of biblical faith

Throughout the Bible, faith is depicted as believing, knowing and obeying "the truth." Paul's letter to the Romans begins with these words:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵ Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.
Romans 1:1-5 (NIV)

Paul's letter to the Romans ends with these words:

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.
Romans 16:25-27 (NIV)

In the biblical definition of faith, obedience is a necessity!

4. Faith is a supernatural divine Gift (inherent in the word divine, it is a gift from God).

Sin and Satan have so blinded fallen men (and women), that on our own we cannot properly discern God's word, God's truth.

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

II Corinthians 4:4 (NIV)

The Holy Spirit needs to enlighten us. Faithfulness is both a spiritual gift (that which is given to some in greater amounts than others) and it is a fruit of the Spirit. Faith is a gift from God, a fruit of the Holy Spirit but like all the other spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit it has to be nurtured, and the only way we do that is by being close to the vine.

As I was reading through the Bible this past week, finishing up the book of Genesis, I couldn't help but think about just how faithful Joseph, the Son of Israel, was. Mistreated and rejected by his own brothers, sold into slavery, accused of rape by Potiphar's wife, thrown into prison. Joseph's life was a life of many terrible things happening to him (most which he had very little or no control over), as well as a life of many blessings (again which he had very little or no control over). Joseph's life was a life of faithfulness to God in both the highs and the lows, and at the very end of his life as he is trying to reassure his brothers that he holds no grudges or disdain for them, he says these words, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:19-20).

Then there is the story of Jerry Sittser, who I believed I shared about many years ago. Jerry Sittser and his wife were born-again Christians, very active in their church, as well as many different ministries. Jerry was a religion professor at a Christian college, has a Master of Divinity degree and a doctorate in Christian history. He and his wife Linda had four children, age two through eight. On one particular weekend Jerry's mother came out to visit them in rural Idaho. After an afternoon and early evening of ministry and fellowship on a local Indian reservation, Jerry was driving the family van home when an intoxicated man driving 85 miles per hour lost control and crossed over and hit them head on. In one instant Jerry lost his wife of 20 years, his mother, and his four year old daughter. He had to literally pull all his loved ones out of the wreck, check their pulses and give CPR to those who were dying.

How do you remain faithful to God, a God who would allow something like that to happen? Yet, after a period of time, a time of deep pain and deep struggle, Jerry Sittser was able to declare his faithfulness to God once again. He even wrote about it in a book entitled, *A Grace Disguised*. I hope and pray that my faithfulness in God never gets tested to that extent. It scares me even to mention it.

Biblical Faithfulness is such an all encompassing topic. It involves right belief, especially about Jesus – who He was and is, what He did for us on the cross, and that He is the only way to salvation for our sins. It involves honesty and trustworthiness, something that we just simply brush off and dismiss today. In two weeks many of America's citizens will be voting to elect the leader of the most influential country in the world. And both major party candidates bring very serious questions about their honesty and trustworthiness. We act like it's no big deal. I am here to say that honesty and trustworthiness is a big deal to God, especially for His people.

Yet, most of the research shows that there really isn't that much difference today in America between those who claim to be Christian and those who don't when it comes to honesty, trustworthiness and faithfulness. God isn't mostly concerned about those who don't claim to be His people, He is mostly concerned with those who do!

Biblical faithfulness is mostly about the interaction between God and His people, His covenant people, stretching all the way back to His original people, the Israelites, similar to that described in Deuteronomy 7:9:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Deuteronomy 7:9 (NIV)

Which finally brings me to the 5th essential of Christian biblical faithfulness:

5. God is always the more faithful one!

Biblical faithfulness begins with God, God reaching out in love to His people. It is our responsibility to respond in a reciprocal fashion. That which was the main theme of the Old Testament is still the main theme of the New. Biblical faithfulness – that which begins with God should result in our faithfulness in return – not as a requirement for salvation, because just like we can never be perfect in any of the other fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 – we can never be perfect in our faithfulness. Of all the ones commended for their faithfulness in Hebrews 11, none of them had perfect faith. In fact many were far from it. God was, is and always will be the only perfectly faithful one. As the apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:13, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” If we're hedging our bets on our faithfulness to get us into heaven, we're in trouble. I'm betting on God, and since I am not a gambling man, that is the only thing I am betting on!

Like all the other spiritual fruit, faithfulness is a virtue generated only by the Holy Spirit. It should be evident at some level in all Christians and as we mature and grow in Christ, we should be growing in faithfulness.

I picked the Parable of the Talents to be read as the primary Scripture this morning because it applies just as much to the gift of faithfulness that God gives us than any other gift. In fact the ones who did something with what God had given them are referred to as “good and faithful servants!” A talent was just a unit of measure. In and of itself it means nothing. It would be like saying “I have a pound” or “I have a ton.” A pound or a ton of what? If faith is a gift from God, and the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12 (v.3, 6) that God gives it to us in different measures, then it is incumbent upon us to water it, nurture it and allow God to grow it.

Many of my sermon titles recently have come with a question mark at the end. It is no different this morning, “Growing in Faithfulness,” with a question mark at the end. Are you growing in faithfulness? Are you more faithful to God, do you have more faith in God, today than you were and had a year ago, two years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago?