

“Not Too Much to Bear”
Part 8 – FAITHFULNESS
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“For the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Since June 9th, we have been focusing on these verses in Galatians 5:22 & 23 in partnership with our children’s ministry for the summer. Wouldn’t it be a better world if these characteristics of Jesus were well-ripened in all of us? Wouldn’t we turn on the news with a lot more glee, anticipating hearing all about the great things going on in the world today? Well, what you and I know is that God is doing great things all the time. God is at work in the world today. There are lots of beautiful things happening around us all the time – they just rarely make the national news. In our series entitled, “Not Too Much to Bear,” we have already been challenged in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness. Today, we focus on faithfulness. Let’s pray:

O Father God, thank you for your faithfulness to your promises. Thank you that your love never fails. Thank you that we can completely depend on you. Open now, we pray, our hearts and our minds to receive the food of your holy Word. We know that our spiritual growth depends on this food – and we are hungry for it this day. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are two connected points to the characteristic of faithfulness. First, being faithful means being trustworthy and dependable. A faithful person is a person of honesty and integrity, someone you can rely on. Faithful people keep their word. They do what they promise. They can be trusted not to betray a confidence or cheat or deceive.

My granddaughter Mia has decided she wants to try cheerleading for the Fayetteville Browns youth football team as her sport for this school year. On Thursday evening I went to her training camp practice. At the end of the practice they were playing a Simon Says sort of game with cheerleading moves. Some of the girls changed positions without the code words, ‘Simon Says’ then quickly went back to their previous position when they realized Simon didn’t say to change. I found it interesting how almost all of the girls tried to cheat or deceive the leaders – saying they didn’t move when they clearly had. Being faithful means that you are trustworthy, dependable, honest, reliable, and free of manipulation and deception. We need to teach our children faithfulness by our words, our corrections, our encouragements, and our own deeds.

So first, being faithful means to be trustworthy, honest, and dependable. Secondly, being faithful means exhibiting these characteristics over a long period of time. Faithful people have proven that they can be faithful for the long haul. You don’t have to worry whether they will do as good a job this week as they did last week. They always do their best. Faithful people show that they are routinely dependable in all kinds of ways and all kinds of circumstances. Bottom line: Faithfulness is the Holy Spirit-grown character of somebody you know you can rely on all the time.

Only God is 100% faithful. Only God is 100% worthy of our trust. Only God is 100% dependable. We just sang, ‘there is no shadow of turning with Thee.’ Shadows come and go with the turning of the planet, but God’s faithfulness does not come and go. God is 100% faithful to his promises – he has proven it throughout the long centuries of history with his people.

Now some may say in times of trial and doubt that they struggle to believe that God is 100% worthy of our trust and 100% dependable. They say and think things like this: “We have prayed and prayed for a certain outcome and God says he loves us, and he hears us when we pray – but things did not turn out the way we wanted.” Well, you’re not the only one in that boat, friend. It’s quite difficult after a disappointment or a loss to get to the place where we are willing to accept, and can accept the truth that what we wanted, that what we prayed for was not God’s will, was not God’s best for us. That’s so hard. But over the course of our lives, over the course of history – when we look back, we can see in all of it that God was faithful. That God is

faithful even when we are not. That God was ever-present even when we wanted to turn away. Deuteronomy 32:3-4 declares this truth: *“Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.”*

God is faithful, and by his Holy Spirit working within us, his faithfulness can ripen in our lives and display his trustworthy, dependable, honest character to the people around us wherever we are. Yes, wherever we are. Home, school, work, in the fields, with the sports team, shooting the breeze with the boys, on our social media accounts – YES! God’s faithfulness can be displayed in my life and yours, showing others what it’s like to be the steady one in the group, the sturdy one on the team (the one they call the rock), the dependable one in the warehouse, the one the others can trust to do things the right way and for the right reasons. And I’m telling you, that’s the kind of employee an employer wants to hire, that’s the kind of teammate a coach wants on the team, that’s the kind of student a teacher wants in the classroom, that’s the kind of friend anyone wants to have, and that’s the kind of follower Jesus wants behind him. Except, except there is more to the characteristic of faithfulness that comes from the Holy Spirit. In this world, being faithful is so needed and important, and can point others to the faithfulness of God. But as part of the Kingdom of God here on earth, there is a different mission for you and me other than simply being trustworthy and dependable over the long haul.

In Matthew 25 we read the story that is entitled in most Bibles, The Parable of the Talents. This is where we find the words of Jesus, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”* In the parable, Jesus gives us two examples of people who were faithful and one who was not. Let’s take a look at the story.

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’ ²¹“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ ²²“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’ ²³“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ ²⁴“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ ²⁶“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. ²⁸“So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ “From these verses we can grab hold of several really important truths:

1. God entrusts all of us with different ways to serve him in his kingdom here on earth.
2. God expects us to be faithful, investing what he has given us to make his kingdom grow.
3. God rewards those who are faithful with more responsibility in the kingdom, which gives us an ever-increasing share in the joy of the Lord!
4. God doesn’t like it when we squander what he has given (that is an understatement).

Faithfulness, as a manifestation of the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives should be

displayed through our honest, dependable, trustworthy behavior wherever we are, no matter who is with us. But ultimately folks, faithfulness from God's Spirit is given to us to point to the faithfulness of God and to build the kingdom of God. We are called to be faithful to God through our devotion to Jesus Christ and to his church. We are called to be faithful to God by putting what God says is first, first in our lives. We are called to be faithful to God by trusting Him to equip us to do things we thought we'd never, ever do. We are called to be faithful to God by speaking up for our faith, by making room on the bench for those we don't know, by giving sacrificially of our precious time, our waning energy, and our hard-earned money – because ultimately it's not our time, our energy, and our money at all, is it? God has been faithful to give us everything that we need to serve him and build the church that the gates of Hell will not prevail against, and in return? In return we faithfully take what he has given and passionately invest it wherever the Spirit leads.

Listen, when we are faithful to do what God has given us to do and continually strive to keep doing it according to his will, God will stretch you. God will call you out of some places into other places. God will do a development or redevelopment project in your life that starts stirring up something down in the core of your being that you never even knew was there. God knows who you are! He made you! Stop with the "I don't have a purpose" talk. As brothers and sisters in Christ, as children of God, as disciples of Jesus, we all have a purpose. It's the same purpose! **We all have the same purpose.** Here it is: **We are all here to know God, love and enjoy God, and glorify God with our lives forever and ever.** That's your purpose! That's my purpose! How you do that at age 6 is different than how you do that at 30 and 60 and 90 – but that purpose never changes and never goes away! Your purpose is to know God, love and enjoy God, and glorify God with your life forever and ever. And so the ultimate picture of faithfulness is this – Choosing to live into this purpose day after day after day over the long-haul of your life.

You can live into this purpose by the way you practice and play soccer alongside your teammates. You can do this by the way you fold bulletins with precision. You can do this by the way you learn the names of the children and youth sitting around you so that you can pray for them by name. You can do this by the way you spend your Saturday night so that you are awake, alert, and ready to worship on Sunday morning. You can do this as you put on an attitude of giving instead of an attitude of taking no matter when you walk onto this property. We are not here to get something. We are here to faithfully, sacrificially give ourselves back to God who has shown us what faithful, sacrificial giving looks through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. You can live into this purpose by the way you love your spouse, by the way you forgive your friends and your enemies, by the way you are dedicated to being the best student you can be this school year, by the way you turn off stuff, meaning video games, movies, tv shows, and videos on social media, stuff that you know is harmful to a heart striving for faithfulness to God. You can live into this purpose by stepping forward to serve with our children and youth on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. You can live into this purpose by putting your hand up and saying, "Where is there a need I can fill?" no matter how young or old you are. Just showing up here on a Sunday morning might get you a gold star for attendance folks, but on the faithfulness scale – how's the return on the investment God has made in you?

There is such joy in being faithful to God's purpose in our lives! There is such peace in knowing we are doing exactly what we were made to do no matter what season of life we are in. Stop the lie right in its tracks that you're too young, or too old, or too short, or too tall, or too busy, or too slow, or too hyper, or too shy, or too broken, or too poor, or too new to the faith, or too whatever – and choose faithfulness!!! Choose to open up your heart and your mind to possibilities! Possibilities! How can you get to know God, love and enjoy God, and glorify God with your life using the gifts and skills that God has given you? Open your heart and mind to the possibilities!!

True story: An old missionary couple had been working in Africa for years and they were returning to New York City to retire. They had no pension; their health was broken, they were

booked on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big-game hunting expeditions. No one paid attention to them. They watched the fanfare that accompanied the President's entourage, with passengers trying to catch a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship moved across the ocean, the old missionary said to his wife, "Something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these many years and have no one care a thing about us? Here this man comes back from a hunting trip and everybody makes much over him, but nobody gives two hoots about us."

"Dear, you shouldn't feel that way," his wife said. "I can't help it; it doesn't seem right." When the ship docked in New York, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor and other dignitaries were there. The papers were full of the President's arrival, but no one noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap flat on the East Side, hoping the next day to see what they could do to make a living in the city.

That night the man's spirit broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this; God is not treating us fairly." His wife replied, "Why don't you go in the bedroom and tell that to the Lord?" A short time later he came out from the bedroom, but now his face was completely different. His wife asked, "Dear, what happened?" "The Lord settled it with me," he said. "I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, *"But you're not home yet!"*¹

Perhaps you need to go into your bedroom and have a heart-to-heart talk with God as this missionary did. Perhaps there are some things he needs to settle with you. Surely there are changes in behavior, attitude, and perspective that we all need to make to more fully live into our purpose as disciples of Jesus.

The daily reward for faithfulness is a calm spirit, knowing that you have invested well what God has given. And the long-term result, the final reward for displaying well the Spirit-grown fruit of faithfulness? Hearing Jesus say to each one of us when we make it home to Heaven, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."* No trophy won on earth, no promotion, no accomplishment of any kind will come close to this reward. Let's go after it, friends, by knowing God, loving and enjoying God, and glorifying God with our lives every single day, forever and ever, Amen.

Let us pray:

Holy God, thank you for your faithfulness. Thank you for your steadfastness. Thank that in you there is no deception. Thank you that on your promises we can stand. Forgive us for allowing our minds to slip into the pit, choosing to believe that we had no purpose, that we were too far gone. Forgive us. Help us to see what you see and to invest what you have given for the expansion of your kingdom. Give us a kick in the pants so that we are not comfortable sitting on the sidelines watching others live into their purpose. Help us to give ourselves grace and to give others encouragement. May love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control flow freely into and out of our lives to your glory! This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ Talking to My Father, Ray Steadman.