

**THE EVIDENCE OF FAITHFULNESS****GALATIANS 5:22-23**

What does faithfulness look like? Here's a picture. One tribe of Native Americans had a unique way of training their young men to be brave. On a boy's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. This was the first time he'd ever been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken miles away. Then his blindfold was removed and he was left alone by himself all night long. It was a terrifying night for those boys. Imagine what he felt like when a twig snapped, when an animal howled or when the wind blew. Then, after what probably seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight would pierce the darkness of the forest. Looking around, that boy would see trees, flowers and perhaps a path. And, to his utter astonishment, he would also see a man standing just a few feet away from him armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there watching over his son all night long. That's faithfulness.

If you're accused of being a Christian, what evidence will convict you? The evidence that you are truly a child of God is called the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We're on the homestretch in our study on this subject. But, once again, I'd like everyone to find the following passage in your Bible – Galatians 5:22-23 – but I want us to read those two verses in unison today. “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!” (Gal 5:22-23 NLT)

Today, let's think together about faithfulness – the seventh in that list of nine. The basic meaning of that word in the Bible is to be reliable and trustworthy. Or, to put it another way, faithfulness is the ability to keep your promises in life and to the people you love – to God, your family, your friends, everyone else with whom you relate meaningfully. The Bible proclaims God's faithfulness everywhere. “The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.” (Lam 3:22-23 NLT) If faithfulness is keeping promises, the Bible says God definitely keeps His promises. In the Old Testament it says, “Understand, therefore, that the LORD your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands.” (Dt 7:9 NLT) In the New Testament it says, “God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1Cor 1:9 NLT)

Your relationship with God is built on His faithfulness. We live a world where very few people keep their promises. But our God keeps all of His promises. With God there is no false advertising, no deception, no pulling a fast one, no broken promises. God was, is and shall be utterly and absolutely faithful. Have you ever questioned God's faithfulness? Probably. God doesn't think like we do. His timeframe is rarely our timeframe. In addition, the Bible says He deliberately

allows problems to come into our lives. When that happens, we're often prompted to ask, "God, why is this happening? Are You really there? Are You truly faithful?" And God's response is usually something like this, "My child, you were saved by faith, now you must learn to live by faith, walk by faith, stand by faith, pray in faith and overcome through faith." The more you keep putting your faith in God the more He produces faithfulness in your life. Here's the first of two simple truths about faithfulness. Faithfulness is all about...

### **KEEPING YOUR PROMISES TO GOD.**

What does that mean? First of all, it means you use what God gives you for His glory. God's given you life, breath, health, strength and a body in which to serve Him. He's given you talents and abilities. He's showered you with a variety of blessings. The Bible says followers of Jesus have been given abilities and talents called spiritual gifts that can be used to help bring other people to Jesus and to help build His Kingdom here on Earth. One of the great turning points in life is when you realize God didn't just create you so you could live for yourself and pursue your own dreams and ambitions in life. You were created for a purpose – to bring glory to God Himself and to fulfill His plan for your life.

Every day you live is God's day. Every breath you breathe is God's breath. Every talent and ability you possess is ultimately God's talent and ability. Two indisputable facts proclaim that you belong to God. One, He is your Creator. You're no accident. Nor are you the chance outcome of evolutionary processes. God dreamed you up before He ever created the world and then He made you in your mother's womb. Two, God is your Savior. You were a sinner destined for hell and eternal damnation. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection, God made an eternal claim on your life. You were bought with a price, the blood and body of One most precious to God Himself – His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. You have to decide to live faithfully before God. And that decision begins with the life altering realization that everything you have and everything you are belongs to God. The Bible puts it like this, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body." (1 Cor 6:19-20 NLT)

Faithfulness is about keeping your promises to God. That means, secondly, following Jesus fully right to the end of your life. Anyone can say that he or she has become a follower of Jesus. But the proof of that claim is faithful commitment to Jesus right up until the moment you pass into eternity. Anyone can follow Jesus for a while – a week, a month, a few years. But the proof is in the longevity. But it's also more than just longevity. Some so-called Christians are exactly in the same place with God that they were 20, 30 or 40 years ago. That's not faithfulness; that's just getting stuck. God expects you to mature, to grow, to develop and to achieve the spiritual potential He put in you. Real faithfulness is letting God grow you up fully into Christ likeness.

You know what produces that kind of faithfulness. Trusting God through times of adversity. Hanging on to and persevering with God when the going gets really tough in life. This is the ability to say, “Lord, I do not understand this and I do not like this. But I will trust You in it and I will trust You for it.” God absolutely prizes and delights in that kind of faithfulness. The Bible says, “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.” (Jam 1:2-4 MSG)

There’s no one more beautiful than a person who’s walked with the Lord faithfully for 50, 60, or 75 years. We have some of those dear people right in this church! He’s been through the wars of life. She’s been on a mountaintop here and there, to be sure, but also in many a valley. Despite it all and through it all, he’s held onto God. She’s never turned her back on her Father in Heaven. When you encounter a person like that, you get to see walking and talking faithfulness. It’s something supernatural. It’s the Holy Spirit coming out of that person. If you watch any professional soccer on TV, the announcer will sometimes describe a player as a “great finisher.” That doesn’t mean he’s a great dribbler, a great passer, or a great ball handler. Ultimately, he knows how to put the ball in the back of the net and score for his team. He finishes. Well, God wants you and me to be great finishers. Don’t you hear that desire is when Paul says? “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness....” (2 Tim 4:7-8 NLT)

Faithfulness is about keeping your promises to God. That means, thirdly, being a success as God defines it. American culture will never define success the way God does. It certainly doesn’t define success in terms of keeping promises, does it? God isn’t into accomplishments and accumulating stuff which is often how American culture measures success. God equate success with faithfulness. The Bible says, “Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful.” (1 Cor 4:2 NLT) God sees you as His manager. In a general sense, you help manage this world on God’s behalf. But, when you become a follower of Jesus, that management takes on a new, greater, more specific dimension. You become the primary way He reaches other lost people with the life changing message of Jesus. The late Mother Teresa was on a street corner in Calcutta. Three people were laid out on the street in front of her – each of them desperately ill. She began working with one person. As she worked with this person, someone asked her, “Aren’t you upset that you can’t get to all the bodies?” Mother Teresa replied, “No. God created us not to be successful, but to be faithful.” When you come to the end of life, here are the kinds of questions that will determine if you’ve been a success from God’s perspective by how they’re answered. “Did I take what God gave me and use it for His glory? Did I follow Jesus right up to the end? Did I point other people to Jesus with my lips and my life?” Here’s a second truth about faithfulness. It’s also all about...

## **KEEPING YOUR PROMISES TO PEOPLE.**

First and foremost, love your family. Faithfulness is one way of showing a person you love him or her. When you show faithfulness to your own family, you're showing love in a profoundly important way. Let me get a bit more specific about loving your family. When you love your family faithfully, it involves the decision to be exclusive. I'm referring here to sexual faithfulness. Sex is a wonderful and powerful gift God has created, but if you don't use it within the boundaries God intended it will destroy you and the people you love. The gift of sex is like water or fire. Both of them are great blessings God has provided. But if you let water get out of its boundaries, you have a flood and people drown. If you let a fire out of its boundaries, it can destroy everything in its pathway. It's the same with the gift of sex. Adultery is like setting a match to your own marriage and your own family. Everyone gets burned and often the family is destroyed. Now, you might be a single person today who is tempted to say to yourself, "Well, that might be true for married people, but it doesn't apply to me." Oh, yes it does! Young person, sex before marriage is breaking your promise to your future spouse. You're already depriving him or her of what rightly belongs only to him or to her. God calls you to be faithful to your future spouse in advance

Loving your family faithfully means the decision to be invested in them and their lives. This is spiritual, emotional and relational investment in your spouse, your children and others close to you. You seek their well being at every level. You cherish them. You refuse to tolerate that creeping separateness that can show up in your marriage or your family. You listen, you communicate, you work hard at that relationship even though it might seem like your efforts aren't amounting to much. William Cohen was a U.S. Senator and a former Secretary of Defense for our country. When he was in high school and college he was a star basketball player. He got his love for basketball from his dad who started taking him to games when he was six. His dad would drive long distances to see his son play. When he played in high school, Cohen's dad would come by every practice. He'd yell instructions. "Pass the ball" or "Shoot it." Some of Cohen's teammates started getting on him about his dad's omnipresence, so he told his dad it would be easier for him if he stopped coming to practices. His dad said OK. One winter day, Cohen was dribbling down the court and he just sensed he was being watched. There at the window into the gym, Cohen could see his dad covered with snow peering in through the window. Cohen said he felt like his heart was going to break. He never spoke about it with his dad, but he played every practice after that knowing that his dad was probably out there looking on.

Loving your family faithfully means the decision to be consistent. Do you keep your word to them? When you make a promise to your spouse, your child, your parent or another close family member, do you keep it? Do your everyday actions match up well with your words and what you claim are your values? Loving your family faithfully also means the decision to be a servant. Do you provide what is necessary? Not just financial and material stuff. Do you provide

a spiritual, an emotional and a relational environment where a spouse and where kids can thrive? Kids obeying their parents with a good attitude is being a servant. Caring for the needs of aging parents is being a servant. This side of Heaven, patiently loving your family might well be one of the most important demonstrations of Holy Spirit-inspired faithfulness you and I will ever see.

Secondly, when it comes to keeping your promises to people, practice integrity with everyone. What does that look like? One, practice integrity in your commitments. Be a person of your word. Follow through. If you accept a responsibility, do it – even if you want to get out of it. In the long run, lack of integrity will end up biting you. Years ago, a young Christian woman accepted an offer in August to teach at a school closer to where she wanted to live. That meant she had to break the contract she had already signed with another school. The principal of the jilted school said her justification was simply, “I have a peace about it.” He commented sarcastically, “Isn’t that lovely? She’s got the peace and I’ve got the pieces.” God’s Word says, “Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?... Those who... keep their promises even when it hurts.” (Ps 15:1,4 NLT)

Two, practice integrity with your money. Pay your bills faithfully. Pay people back faithfully. Don’t cheat your employer by giving him or her less than your best effort at work everyday. Three, practice integrity in your witness. God has brought people into your life that He will never bring into my life and vice-versa. They are there precisely because God wants you to love them and because He wants you to share with them the transforming message of Jesus. Are you praying for those people – family members, neighbors, people you work with or go to school with? Are you looking for an opportunity to have a spiritual conversation with them? Are you taking the initiative to invite them to church? In addition, do your words and your actions point people to Jesus? You can either bring honor or disgrace to Jesus’ Name by your integrity or lack of integrity.

Now, when it comes to keeping your promises to people, I want to underline a third and final point: serve God’s people. How do you do that? One, worship faithfully. You might say, “Worshipping God on Sunday is about keeping my promises to God not to people.” Wrong! When you get up and show up here ready to worship God, it’s an encouragement to everyone else here. When you decide to skip it, part of the Body of Christ in this place is missing and that just hurts everyone here. Worshipping faithfully will also give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to use you to bless others with a word of encouragement or blessing.

Two, give faithfully. Again, you might say, “Whether I tithe or give an offering is about God not other people.” Wrong! When you give faithfully, you sustain God’s work in this place. You make it possible for the staff to do their work. You make it possible to keep this beautiful facility open for ministry. You make it possible to minister to kids and young people. You make it possible to offer programs this summer that can provide a platform for children and adults to hear

about Jesus. We're getting into the big vacation time of year. Some people give only when they show up for a worship service. I wonder what your mortgage company would do if you sent in partial payment for the month with the explanation, "Well, I was gone part of the month on vacation, so I reduced my payment"? Really? Give faithfully.

Three, relate faithfully. The Bible teaches and this church believes in the importance of community. Do you? Community is simply the development of quality relationships with a few of God's people. If you're not in a Sunday adult Bible class or a small group, join one. Those groups offer the opportunity to know and be known, to minister and to be ministered to. Yes, we need to start some new small groups and we're going to make an effort to do just that over the next few months. But, at the end of the day, you have to decide to relate faithfully to other followers of Jesus or not. Relate faithfully.

Four, minister faithfully. Pastors, staff members and Ministry Council members aren't the only followers of Jesus called to ministry. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're called to ministry. Every follower of Jesus has spiritual gifts that need to be used in the Lord's work. Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Are you using them? Faithfulness keeps on serving the Lord and ministering to others even when other people up and quit. It doesn't say, "Well, there you go. Now I have permission to just up and quit, too." Faithfulness keeps on serving the Lord and ministering to others until Jesus calls us home to Heaven. I've been blessed to share a time of prayer and discussion recently with two of our senior members. Both of them are in their 80s or near about. George Overholt faithfully teaches one of our adult Bible classes every Sunday. Creida Lahut tutors kids, has built wonderful personal relationships with internationals who don't know Jesus and still has time and energy to get our church's kids ready for baptism. When someone says to me, "Well, when I get done doing this or that in the church, I'm going to take a year off and do nothing", I groan inwardly. I don't find that in the Bible. There's no such thing as retirement from the Lord's work. Sure, you can change where you're serving and how you might be serving, but don't ever stop serving the Lord! Minister faithfully until Jesus comes or you go to be with Him!

Brother Zeno Zebrowski arrived in Japan from Poland as a Franciscan missionary in 1930. He ministered there faithfully for the next 52 years. He survived the atomic bomb attack on Nagasaki at the end of World War 2. Brother Zeno's works of charity made him a household name in Japan from the time he arrived there. Children flocked to him wherever he went. Often he himself would go out in the streets to beg for money for the poor. When his begging was finished, he went to the poor sections of the city to distribute all he had received. It was said he was a friend to everyone: to the homeless, beggars, criminals, black marketers, prostitutes and drug pushers. The people who came in contact with Brother Zeno immediately sensed his deep love and compassion for the poor. Along the way, he met this man – then Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Krakow, Poland. Brother Zeno spent the last few years of his life in a hospital.

About a year before he died, he was visited by that man again in his new role as Pope John Paul II. Before the Pope entered his hospital room, he was announced with these words, "The Pope from Poland has come." Brother Zeno, frail from a heart ailment and confined to a wheelchair, broke into tears as his Polish countryman greeted him, kissed Zeno's cheek and grasped the aged priest's hand in prayer. The Pope said to Zeno, "Zeno, I am very grateful for the great work you have done here." Zeno wept as he received his visitor. Can you imagine that scene?

If that scene fills you with something, it may be because at some level you identify with Brother Zeno. Maybe you're a little weary in your faithful service to King Jesus. Maybe you're feeling a little alone and unrewarded. There is coming a very special day for those men and women who, in spite of discouragement and setbacks, have continued to faithfully serve the King of kings where He put them. Now, I want you to imagine with me another scene. There will come a day when Someone will stand at a great doorway in Heaven itself. You will hear Him announced, "The Lord of glory has come." And then Jesus will walk in, greet you with a holy kiss, take your hands in His nail-scarred hands and say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things; I will make you a ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of the Lord." Faithfulness matters. Whoever has ears to hear, let him or her hear.