

August 3rd: The Fruit of Faithfulness

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit—this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We've been looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we're studying the fruit of faithfulness, and exploring what it means to cultivate fidelity and curiosity within ourselves and our relationships. So we're glad you've joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next couple of months.

Before we begin this meditation, let's take a moment to pray together.

Faithful God, you have remained with us even when we have drifted away from you. You have remained constant while we have been uncertain and disconnected. You have loved us even when we have disobeyed or been disloyal. You have walked alongside us when we've pursued other priorities. In this time of reflection, remind us that we are called to be your disciples, in alignment with your mission, and sent out into the world for divine purposes. Speak to us anew this morning, and rekindle the fire inside each of us, so that we can enter this new week with trust and faith. Amen.

As Marly alluded to last week, this final section of the Fruit of the Spirit is where we start to find trouble. You see, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness were all one and two syllable words, easy to say, easy to describe, and easy to learn, but these final three fruits are a little bit more complicated. And it's not just because they're all three syllables, a mouthful to recite—it's because they're a little more tricky to unpack. For example, when we started this series on the Fruit of the Spirit, I knew this particular topic, faithfulness, would be the most difficult for me to write a sermon about.

Why, you might ask? Isn't the Bible full of stories about faithfulness? Isn't scripture packed with songs and prayers about people who thanked God for

his faithfulness in their lives? Well, yes. Of course! You don't have to read very far to find a passage where God's love and protection for humanity is remembered and celebrated—that is true.

You might remember this verse from Deuteronomy 7, "Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments." Or this one from Psalm 36, "Your mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds." Or maybe this one from Lamentations 3, "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I hope in Him!'"

And God's faithfulness doesn't stop at the end of the Old Testament, we have many instances in each of the four Gospels that reminds us that God has always been, and will always be faithful. Jesus walked alongside his followers and people until his path brought him to death and resurrection, and never once did he waver in his purpose or falter in his love for humanity.

Then why is faithfulness such a tricky topic?

Well, it's because faithfulness is not easy for human beings like it is for God. Faithfulness is an essential part of God's character, but it's not always something that we excel at. In fact, our Bible has many records of human's outright defiance of God, and examples of our unwillingness to abide by his commandments. Our creation narrative ends with a story about human disobedience, resulting in a sense of brokenness. Our early books of the Bible detail a nation of people who wander in the desert for 40 years, because some of them decided that they could no longer trust God to lead them to the promised land. And there's more!

In particular, I think of the words of our ancient prophets, who often cried out against the persistent infidelity of their fellow Israelites. In the 8th century BCE, Amos strongly condemned the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom for

the rampant disparity between the rich and the poor, which he saw as evidence of a lack of faithfulness to divine justice. In the southern kingdom of Judah, the prophet Isaiah calls out the idolatry of his nation's leadership and people, saying that their worship of other gods was unfaithful to God, which was the spiritual reason for their current exile in Babylon. And let's not forget Hosea, whose very life became an extended metaphor about infidelity for his audience, as he tried to combat the unfaithfulness of God's people by marrying a woman named Gomer, who was known to be a prostitute.

And we see in the New Testament that Jesus also witnesses this reality, when he is betrayed by one of his own disciples, and again when he goes to pray at the garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus prepares to pray, he invites three of his friends to join him and keep watch, but he discovers after a little while that they have fallen asleep. Jesus said, "So, you men could not keep watch with me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, so that you do not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." These men failed to be faithful for a single hour, at the most crucial moment in Jesus' life, when he was about to be taken into custody and killed.

Unfortunately, this unfaithfulness and infidelity is part of humanity's story, it's an integral part of our Christian history. And that's not even taking into account our modern world, in which humanity has seemed to repeat all of these ancient mistakes. We still have rampant wealth inequality, we still worship money and success instead of God, and we still struggle with spirits that are willing but flesh that is weak. We see countless examples of how we are unfaithful towards each other as well, including a recent affair between a CEO and the head of HR that was exposed by cameras at a Coldplay concert. Although they quickly scrambled out of sight, their infidelity to their respective spouses was revealed for the whole world to see, and for the entire internet to share.

All that to say, that's not a great track record, is it? But does that mean that all hope is lost? Does that mean that we're irreparably broken? Does that mean we, as modern disciples, should give up on trying to be faithful?

The answer to that is no, we are not beyond repair. And no, we should not give up.

In fact, the reason Jesus came to be with us in the first place was to model a relationship that brings us back into connection and wholeness. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, all of humanity is invited into a new way of living that permanently reunites with our Creator, making it so that we will never be separated from God again. And to help us learn to live this way, the followers of Jesus were sent the Holy Spirit, which is the holy presence of God that lives inside each of us, and this divine power empowers each of us as we continue this lifelong journey of faith.

Paul himself was a person who deeply regretted some of the choices he made earlier in his life, he was a leader who was so opposed to Jesus and his followers that he actively persecuted them, he was an enemy of the gospel. So I think Paul intimately understands that human beings are bound to mess up and make mistakes, we don't always get it right. However, the good news is that faithfulness isn't necessarily about perfection, just like the fruit of goodness wasn't about perfection. Instead, the faithfulness that Paul is talking about, and the kind of faithfulness that God has shown humanity throughout our history is about steadiness. That kind of faithfulness is about consistent presence and effort that moves us towards greater connection and trust.

You are capable of this kind of faithfulness, because the Holy Spirit is already within you.

But the big question is, how do we develop it? How do we cultivate it? How do we grow in our faithfulness? How do we become more like God who is faithful in all circumstances? To answer those questions, here's a framework that I've found helpful as I prepared for this message, and thought about faithfulness in my own life:

Biblical scholar, pastor, and author Eugene Peterson once wrote that Christian discipleship should be thought of as a "long obedience in the same direction."

Discipleship is just a fancy name of following and being faithful to Jesus, so I think we can easily make the claim that faithfulness and discipleship are basically the same thing. Therefore, I think Eugene Peterson would agree that faithfulness is also about a long obedience in the same direction. I really like this language of “a long obedience in the same direction”, so let’s break it down a little bit further. In this simple phrase, I see three important points for us, three ideas that I’d like for us to think about more deeply this week as we navigate our own lives and our desire to be faithful.

First, in Peterson’s mind, we have to zoom out to see the bigger picture. Faithful discipleship is all about the long game. Instead of the instant gratification that is so popular in our culture or the instant transformation that human methods attempt to offer us, faith happens over the long haul, and faithfulness develops little by little. It takes time to build, but it does add up.

It’s inevitable that our faith journey will have ups and downs. We go through challenging times, we lose loved ones, we grieve when unforeseen changes impact our routines. We might have “mountain top” experiences in a particular worship setting, or on a vacation when we can rest and marvel at the beauty of creation. We get stuck in seasons of sadness or disconnection, but then we have moments when we feel vibrant and full of excitement. We might find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, lost and afraid, but then rejoice when we discover a new truth or discern a new path for ourselves.

Throughout it all, we have small opportunities to be faithful. When times are tough, we can intentionally place our trust in God and look for his presence in our lives. When times are good, we can be grateful and thank God for all that he has done for us. And when we look back, we can trace the ways that God’s love has been with us—we can see a pattern of compassion and care that has been a persistent part of our story. So this week, is there a way that you can commit to an act of faithfulness that you can hold onto for the long haul? Is there a new spiritual practice that you want to try out for this season, or one from your past that you’d like to try again to help you stay connected to God? Can you look back through your life with gratitude for ways that God has

shown up and carried you through difficult seasons? Can you set aside a few minutes each day to remind yourself of the larger story that is unfolding in your life?

Second, faithfulness is tied to obedience—a true and consistent desire to listen to God’s voice and follow where he leads. I know that obedience is a word that might give some of us some pause, but what Eugene Peterson is talking about is a willingness to intentionally put God’s plan for our lives ahead of our own desires or impulses. And God’s plan for our lives is all about creating a world where all of creation exists in harmony and abundance. God’s plan for our lives is all about transcending our current brokenness, and being transformed into a more equitable, more just, and more loving community. With that in mind, obedience is saying yes to things that help us to grow, and saying no to things that keep us in behavior patterns, cycles and systems that are not good for us. Obedience is saying yes to actions that get us closer to God’s plan, and saying no to actions that distract us from our divine purpose.

Maybe you sense God’s invitation to pursue a specific kind of work, or you feel called to parent in a certain way—saying yes to those kinds of roles and responsibilities could unleash transformation that impacts every aspect of your life. Maybe you are exploring a passion project or a way you can give back to a local organization or meeting a timely need in our city—saying yes to those kinds of opportunities could produce more safety or creativity or joy in places where there had previously only been injustice, despair, or disconnection. In this new week, I invite you to be more attuned to what God is nudging you towards—are you listening for the invitation that is just for you? Can you find one thing to say yes to? Or is there something that you need to say no to this week, in order to be obedient to the kind of life that God wants you to live?

And finally, faithful discipleship moves us towards God’s vision for wholeness and reconciliation. Faithfulness has a specific direction, it has what the Greek philosophers called a “telos,” a greater purpose or end. God’s greater purpose has always been and will always be a new creation, an eternal reality called the Kingdom of God—and so our individual and collective faithfulness builds

toward this common goal, even if we don't always see those strands of action being woven together. When we cultivate faithfulness inside of ourselves, and inside of this congregation, we are part of creating this future for ourselves and all of humanity.

The truth is that the journey towards this end goal isn't always smooth or easy, and there will be times when we want to give up. But before we throw in the towel or get too discouraged by the state of our world, here is a little encouragement from the author of Hebrews, written in chapter 12, verses 1-3: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

If you're growing weary this week, I invite you to find enough perseverance to keep running this race. If you're struggling, can you look to good friends for support? Can you set aside time for a hobby that brings you peace? Is there a self care practice that would fill your cup?

My friends, a long obedience in the same direction fixes our hearts, souls, and minds on Jesus, and by following his example we will never go astray. By looking towards Jesus, we can be reminded that not even death will keep us from the good news that God has promised. So hear this good news today: God's faithfulness transcends everything, God's faithfulness is forever, God's faithfulness is new every morning.

Amen.