

“Empowered: Faithfulness by Faith”

July 4, 2021

Summer series – Fruit of the Spirit

When we go to the store, many times the produce section is one of the first areas we go to or the first we pass. The variety is bountiful, and usually, you can see someone looking over the collection of peaches or plums, or testing the watermelons, to see which look the best, feel or sound the best, and hopefully will taste the best.

Usually, we don't take one of everything in the produce section. We pick and choose what we need or at least what our favorites are. As we're studying the fruit of the Spirit, we might be tempted to focus on our favorites - maybe what comes more easily to us - rather than opening our hearts to let the Holy Spirit cultivate all of them in us - knowing that it's possible even when it seems difficult.

Faithfulness is a quality that we seek to show as we love and serve Christ in the world. But as we've been learning in this series, it's tough to simply "have faith" sometimes - to be patient with God's working in our lives.

The Greek word for faithfulness used in Galatians is *pistis*.

SHOW SLIDE: Greek word for FAITHFULNESS (PISTIS) πίστις

Faithfulness is the product of faith, of trust. Faithfulness is when God's values are lived out in commitment and obedience. One scholar says that faithfulness "is a courageous, steadfast living out of an inner integrity grounded in trust and reliance on the goodness of God." Another says that faithfulness is the character of one who can be relied upon. Still another defines faithfulness very simply as "love hanging on." Faithfulness is our faith in God lived out.

Faithfulness is a heavy word because it requires something of us. It's difficult to simply "have faith." We know the blessing of faithfulness - from God and others. To have loved ones who can be trusted is a gift. We also know the pain and reality of faithlessness. We've trusted someone and been hurt. We've experience betrayal. We've been taken advantage of.

As with all of the fruit of the Spirit, God is the measure of faithfulness. It is God's nature to be faithful - to be loving and consistent, never giving up. We hear it from the beginning. God is faithful even when we're not faithful. One writer says, "with God there is no false advertising, no deceptive business practices, and no broken contracts." That's good news.

And just like the rest of the fruit, faithfulness isn't something we achieve on our own. It is a gift of God nurtured through the presence of the Holy Spirit working in us. God's faithfulness awakens faith in us, and we respond in obedience. As we're

celebrating a national holiday based on the concept a freedom, we would do well to remember that Paul is writing about what freedom in Christ means and how we're called to live in freedom when we claim a relationship with Christ. What does God require of us? It's certainly important to celebrate the freedom we have, but we have to consider what it means that we have freedom in Christ.

This parable came be uncomfortable to hear. In Matthew 25, Jesus offers a poignant description about the Kingdom of God. Faithfulness is what the first two servants show, but not the third. But I struggle because I feel like I might be the third servant.

The contrast is striking. This is about investment and return. We want something tangible - a good return on our investments. A simple savings account doesn't earn much interest. But other options that require us to invest a certain amount or maintain a certain balance mean more risk.

It's important to know what terms Jesus uses here. A talent in Jesus' time was a measure of weight, then it became a measure of coinage. There are moments when Jesus uses hyperbole - exaggeration - to make a point, and this is one.

The master leaves the servants with a lot of money. A denarius was a normal wage for a day laborer. One talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii - about 15 years' wages for a day laborer. So, I assume anyone listening got caught at the amount of money. For these servants, who had nothing, the master's trust is enormous!

And it's easy to hear the story and move on, but I sympathize with the one-talent servant. I'd be scared out of my mind entrusted with so much money. He'd probably never even thought of having that much. In Jewish culture, burying money was a responsible way to safeguard it. Even more, Jewish teaching said anyone who buries money put in their care is no longer responsible for its safety. So, he plays it safe, but by burying it, there's no potential for growth.

So, this parable is tough: is the servant being cautious and safe or just shirking responsibility for what he's been given? The master doesn't give any instructions; he leaves the servants with the responsibility - quite a risk to take! Two of them do something to earn more, and the other doesn't. When the master returns, this one-talent servant is thrown out without apology.

I get stuck on sympathizing with the one servant if he's seeking security, certainty, and predictability. I can find myself there. But we have to get past the money part of this parable. Yes, Jesus uses money as the object, but the implications go far beyond that. He's talking about something of value. You might know this story as the Parable of the Talents, but it's also called the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants. Really, Jesus is talking about investment and return for faith and discipleship. This

comes near the end of the Gospel as Jesus is making his way to the cross.

There is Good News here, though I think it can be hard to see because we get so focused on that poor one-talent servant. The message of grace comes through in the master's abundant giving. He gives the servants generous gifts. But with grace comes responsibility and accountability. He expects something from them. The judgment is that we can miss out on serving and working with God and understanding the joy of sharing grace if we play it safe - if we keep faith to ourselves.

We have a responsibility to serve God with our God-given gifts. They are a trust from God - entrusted to us - and we're given the opportunity to use them to be faithful. We love and serve a living, giving God who created the world and who desires a relationship with us so much that God risked everything for us in Jesus Christ.

God didn't play it safe or make it all predictable. God asks us to give boldly from our abundance. God calls us to take risks for Jesus' sake, not always knowing the outcome. God calls us to share generously.

In the parable, the master is angry because the one talent servant has nothing to show for the master's gift. True, he didn't lose it, but he also *didn't do anything with it*. The servant operated out of fear and scarcity, not with hope and abundance, and the master wanted more coming from the investment - not just the investment itself. The servant worried about the gift instead of doing something with it.

Maybe this is a reminder to us that faithful Christian living involves risk - and the goal of following God boldly. Two servants did something to further the interest of the one who gave them the gift. They saw possibilities. They were committed to doing something with his gifts. Maybe that's a call to us - to step out of our comfort zones.

Following God's call - and our vocation - involves risk. Any ministry we try is a risk. Sometimes it doesn't fly, but if we never try it, how will we know? I've tried ideas that didn't go as I'd planned, and there are more that I'm too scared to try. But if the last year has taught me anything, we have to try new things like online worship and parking lot ministry!

And yet Jesus' word reminds me that faithfulness doesn't rest in having faith in myself. If that's where I place my faith, then it's misplaced. Ultimately, I put my faith in God who is able to do more than we can ask or think or imagine! But we have to be willing.

SHOW SLIDE: BE A PINEAPPLE (Stand tall. Wear a crown. Be sweet on the inside.). We are beloved by God to share that love and make it known!

There are many ways we use our gifts, but I was thinking about Vacation Bible School as an act of faithfulness. We put our trust in God and offer our gifts as a part of our commitment to nurture children in faith and learn something ourselves. The same is

true for Bible study or giving to missions or sending cards or serving others. We're living our faith in Jesus every time we offer our time, talents, and treasure - not keeping it or laying it aside or burying it - but doing something.

Jesus' words remind us of how much God has given to us. We cannot be fearful or apathetic with God's abundance in our lives. We can't take for granted the blessings in our lives - including the freedom to worship, and even more the freedom we have in Christ to look around and see our connections to others and build a better world. Accepting God's grace calls us to offer it to others without condition - praying, helping, serving, loving.

Yes, risk requires some vulnerability, which opens us up for joy or pain or disappointment - and for learning. A life of faith isn't one spiritual high, but many moments lived with the promise that God is with us. When we use the gifts of God, we can be assured that there will be a return - something that gives God glory and builds the Kingdom.

God calls us to risk - to go out on a limb for the sake of Jesus Christ. *Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. That's where all the fruit is!* Maybe you feel called to take that risk - to share an idea you have or get involved in ministry and mission in a new way that you haven't tried before. Our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness are a way that faithfulness shows in us and points to God who is always faithful.

The power of prayer is palpable when I talk to people who have been blessed your commitment to pray. Being with each other in worship whether here in person or connecting online - fellowship and community matters. We depend on one another. Sharing our faith and talking about how God is faithful encourages others to trust in God.

Jesus gets personal and wants us to look at ourselves and consider God's investment in us and our response. May we take risks and be faithful as God is faithful. We're invited to the table of grace because God is faithful to invite us. Let us pray...