

Followers of the Way

The Fruit of the Spirit – Faithfulness

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Deuteronomy 32:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

When I was growing up we had a record player which looked like a small suitcase with a lid that locked. When opened up you placed the record on the spindle and pressed 'on', it dropped to the turntable and the arm moved across to play. What we heard was a scratchy, tinny sound, very lo-fi, low fidelity; but that's all we had. Then when I turned 13 my mother invested in our first music centre (remember those?). It not only was advanced technically, but also a beautiful piece of furniture. A teak cabinet with sliding doors, behind one was a radio and the other revealed the record player with two speakers at either end. When a record was played on this you had stereo sound: no more scratchiness or tininess; here was true hi-fi, high fidelity, a faithful reproduction of the sound the artist originally recorded.

Fidelity comes from a Latin word meaning faithful. Another Latin phrase I learned when I worked for an insurance firm was *Uberrima Fides*, Utmost Good Faith. This is the rule which governs all insurance contracts, although those who have made a claim under their insurance policy may wonder just how far that extends!

Our next Fruit of the Spirit is Faithfulness.

I mentioned at the beginning of our series how John Stott prayed each morning that God would cause the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit to grow in his life. Stott regarded each triplet of the fruit in a different way: the first three he saw as pointing upwards to God – love for God, joy in God, peace with God. The second three: patience, kindness, goodness, point outwards to our fellow man. While the final three of faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are really inner qualities.

So today we are thinking about the fruit of faithfulness.

As with all the other fruit, our faithfulness is a reflection of the faithfulness of God. We see this throughout the Old Testament. As you may be aware, the Hebrews divided their Scriptures into three sections called the Tanak, an acrostic for Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, what we call the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Apart from the first five books, the order is not the same as our Old Testament. For example, the Jews include the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as Former Prophets. And some of the books in our prophetic section – Lamentations and Daniel – are found in the last section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings. So, remembering the different three-fold division of the Hebrew Scriptures, can we find reference to God's faithfulness in each one?

Let us have a look and see how far we can get. The first section is the Torah, equivalent to what we know as the Pentateuch, or five scrolls. One of the oldest poems in the Bible is found in Deuteronomy 32, when Moses recited, or even sung, these words to the Israelites before he died, and the people

crossed the Jordan to the Promised Land. It is a song that testifies against Israel's rebellion, yet proclaiming the faithfulness of God.

We heard the first six verses read, but I am much more familiar with the musical version by Mary Kirkbride Barthow and Mary Lou King which goes:

Ascribe greatness to our God, the Rock
His work is perfect
And all His ways are just.

A God of faithfulness and without injustice
Good and upright is He. (Deuteronomy 32:3-4)

God's faithfulness is both proclaimed and shown throughout the Torah, as seen in his dealings with his rebellious and stiff-necked people, yet he never gave up on them.

What about the prophetic section? The LORD's faithfulness is proved in his continuing care for his people: leading them into the Promised Land; defeating their enemies; providing Judges when they disobeyed; and eventually giving them the King their hearts desired. But it's in the Latter Prophets where his faithfulness is spoken of openly.

In praise of the LORD Isaiah wrote in Chapter 25:1

O LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done marvellous things,
things planned long ago.

Despite describing the Israelites failures in the Former Prophets (our historical books), and warning against sin in the Latter Prophets, God's faithfulness shines through all of these Scriptures.

The final division in the Tanak is the Writings, and, as the first book of that section is Psalms, it sometimes goes by that name. Once again we find God's faithfulness described here. In Psalm 36 David contrasts the sinfulness of the wicked with the righteousness of God. In v.5 he writes:

Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.

Another example in the Writings comes in the middle of the book of Lamentations Ch.3:22-23:

Because of the LORD's great love, we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

This was written during the most terrible time in Israel's history, when Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple burnt, and the people sent into exile, under God's judgement because of their sin. Yet even in those horrendous circumstances, when they were suffering the terrible consequences of their own unfaithfulness, they were still able to affirm the eternal faithfulness of

God. He showed himself faithful throughout the Old Testament, in his covenant promise to Abraham, and ultimately in sending the promised Messiah, his own Son Jesus.

Jesus, too, was faithful to all the Father sent him to do: to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, set the oppressed free, and announce the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19). He was faithful too in offering his life up as a sacrifice for sin. Hebrews 2:17 calls him a 'faithful high priest in service to God ... that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.' Jesus not only presented the offering for atonement, he himself *was* that sacrificial offering.

Hebrews also lists many heroes of faith in Chapter 11, people such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, David and Samuel. All of them are commended for their faith; but faith and faithfulness go hand in hand. Those who had faith also proved faithful.

One of my favourites is Joseph, he of the Amazing, Technicolour Dreamcoat fame. Although Hebrews only commends him for his faith in believing the Israelites would return to the Promised Land, his faithfulness shines throughout his story. From not allowing himself to fall into temptation with Potiphar's wife (even though it meant prison), to proving himself faithful among the prisoners, to becoming Pharaoh's Prime Minister, being faithful in all his duties.

There are many examples of faith and faithfulness we could point to. In the New Testament; the Apostles (apart from Judas!), Barnabas, Timothy, Paul himself, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla and Aquilla. In Church history; Polycarp, Athanasius, St Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, the Wesleys ... as well as in our own experience. These are all hi-fi people, those full of the fruit of faithfulness.

But how can we develop that fruit of faithfulness in *our* lives? What can help us do that?

As we have seen, the fruit grows out of a life in the Spirit. It comes from God and we cannot do anything ourselves to make it grow, anymore than we can take a seed and make something grow out of that. But we can create the right environment – planting, watering, nurturing – for God to make that seed grow into a healthy, fruit-bearing tree. In the same way, we can so live in the Spirit that we create the right circumstances for God to grow his fruit in us, including faithfulness. I believe Jesus' Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 can help us here. This parable comes in the section of Matthew known as the 'little apocalypse' where he talks of the signs of the end times and his return.

In the parable he likens it to a master going away on a journey, of unspecified time, and entrusts his property to his servants: to one he gives five talents, to another two talents, and to a third one talent. Now we know that a talent was a unit of weight, equivalent to 75lbs, and what the servants received were amounts of gold. It's interesting to note, however, that our English word 'talent', meaning skill or ability, actually comes from this parable! So each servant was entrusted with a certain amount of the master's wealth. As we read the parable, we see no sign of jealousy or envy on the servants' part. The one who was given two talents doesn't say, 'Why didn't I get five like him?' Or we don't hear the man who only got one talent exclaim, 'Why has everyone got more than me?'

That's because the master knew his servants well and he gave to each one 'according to his ability' (v.15). The servant with five talents would have been over qualified for just two, and the one who had the two talents would have been overwhelmed, if he'd been given five. The master knew what each servant was capable of, even the last man who was only given one talent.

Once the master went on his journey, the first two servants began straightaway to put the money to work, each doubling what they were given. The last servant, however, just hid the money and did nothing with it. After a long time, again unspecified, the master returned and settled accounts with the servants. The first two presented the master with the original amount plus what they had gained. The response to these two servants was identical in vv.21&23:

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!

Aren't those the words that every Christian longs to hear when they meet their Master? And it's their faithfulness that is commended, not the amount of money they made. The first servant is not praised more highly than the second because he gained two and a half times more. No, they receive equal honour.

God the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, endows us all with gifts. We don't all have the same kind of gifts, or same amount of gifts; some have many, some have few; some are spiritual, some are natural. But just as in the parable, God entrusts them to us according to our ability. There is no room in the Christian life for jealousy. We must not say, 'He's a better preacher than me', or 'She sings much better than I can!'

Lyndon Bowring, chairman of Christian charity CARE, was invited to speak at a men's conference in Belfast along-side the distinguished American Bible teacher, Haddon Robinson. Lyndon was somewhat in awe of this man and wondered how he could compete with such a spiritual giant, so he prayed that his own talks would be better, more accepted, and more relevant than Haddon's. After he prayed, he was convicted of his sinfulness, realising he shouldn't feel threatened by a fellow preacher, or have any sense of rivalry. So he prayed again, this time that Haddon's talks would overshadow his own and receive praise from the delegates. He had learned a valuable lesson, and when he shared this with his wife, she responded, 'Well, I'm not going to pray that!' Then he said, 'Thank God for dear loyal wives!'

We are given the type and amount of talent God wants to give us, according to our ability, and we must faithfully use that talent in his service. And faithfulness is not measured in worldly success. If you run a business and make a profit at the end of the year, that's success; if you make a loss, that's failure. God's Kingdom values are different. Elizabeth was a dear missionary friend of ours, a talented teacher and preacher. She spent 30 years in India as a deacon in the Church of North India and lecturer in Union Biblical Seminary. When home on furlough, she was asked a question at one of her supporting Churches, 'How many people have been converted under your ministry?' Her answer, 'None that I am aware of.'

Elizabeth did not see the results of her labour, yet she faithfully taught children in Sunday School, she faithfully lectured young adults in Seminary, and continued doing that for 30 years. She was faithful with a few things. And that is what Jesus requires of us, to be faithful with the few things he has entrusted to us. But we are to be faithful no matter what; whether we see the results or not.

Lyndon Bowring was challenged by a peer who said, 'While Christians were asleep in the 1960s, lights went out in this House that may never be relit again.' He founded CARE which has gone from strength to strength. Elizabeth ministered tirelessly in India but was not aware of her impact. Yet both lived out the Fruit of faithfulness. Hi-fi people!

But what of the third servant? He had only one talent and what did he do with it? He hid it in the ground. We may think, 'Well that's OK, he was being careful, he kept it safe for his master so it wouldn't be lost or stolen.' And he was able to return it to the master when he came back. But listen to the language used by this servant and his master, vv.24-27:

"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. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

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? Well 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."

First, the servant accuses his master of being a hard man, who aggressively seeks profit by whatever means, and admits he was afraid. However, the master responds by calling him a 'wicked, lazy servant.' Wicked, because he refused to obey his master's command, and lazy, because he did not use his ability to prosper his master. The result? V. 30, 'throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Unlike the two faithful servants who were told, 'Come and share your master's happiness', (vv.21&23) a picture of heaven; the wicked, lazy servant is cast out 'into the darkness' (v.30). This surely is a picture of hell, far away from his master.

Jesus is coming back, and our readiness for his return is determined by our stewardship of the resources that He has given us. How faithful are we? Are we lo-fi, like the wicked servant; lazy, not making an effort, unwilling to take risks for our Lord? Or are we hi-fi, like the faithful servants; using what he has given us in his service, and doing so whether or not we see results?

May we be among those who, at the end of time, will hear those wonderful words:

'Well done, good and faithful servant!'