

Today, we're exploring the final fruit: Faithfulness. What does it mean to be faithful? You'd probably list adjectives like "reliable", "constant", "steady". A person who is faithful is always there. They make it to the end. You can depend on them.

Faithfulness is something we see less and less in our culture. Not too long ago, a person who took a job at a company expected to work there until they retired. Companies were faithful to their employees and vice versa. But not anymore - a person who works at the same place for 30-40 years these days is the exception, not the rule.

We could point to divorce rates or the skyrocketing birthrates among single mothers as evidence that the idea of faithfulness to a spouse or a child is somehow becoming an old-fashioned notion.

We could even point to the so-called phenomenon of Church-shopping. Rather than committing to a particular body of believers, we leave if music or teaching doesn't "meet our needs", as though all of this were for me and not something meant to celebrate the God of the Universe.

Culturally, we understand faithlessness. But at an individual level, we understand this failure of faith as well. Which of us has always been the friend, the parent, the spouse, the child, the follower of Jesus we want to be? We're all familiar with that sense of failure, that sense of defeat that comes when we're not faithful.

That's not to say we're all a bunch of sociopaths or anything like that. We love our families, our friends. We gather here because we love God. But we are also conscious of our failures, our infidelities.

That can make series like this one hard. We talk about the Fruit of the Spirit, and it can easily turn into defeatism. I'm not patient. I'm not especially kind. I'm not gentle. I'm not faithful.

And way before I ever heard a sermon on it, I *tried* to be better. Who among us hasn't tried to be better?

And today, we talk about Faithfulness. Making it to the end. Finishing well. Never giving up. Never quitting. A friendship. A marriage. A relationship. A new way of life.

Is it any surprise that in a faithless culture, quite a few of us in here are probably thinking, I don't need one more sermon about a person I just can't be, no matter how hard I try. I don't need to be reminded of my failure.

It's this kind of failure that keeps people out of Church. Somewhere along the way, Church became a place where broken people weren't welcomed. Where mistakes were frowned upon. Where people who fell down got left behind instead of helped up. Somehow, we decided the cross is only for good church people who are holy enough for God to love. Well I've got good news for you: this isn't that kind of sermon. Today, we're not talking about *your* faithfulness. Because let's all admit something together here at the beginning:

Is any of us faithful enough to earn God's love? Nope. No one. Not me. Not you.

Now let's follow up with this question: Should my failure keep me from God? No! Never!

Today, we're not talking about your faithfulness or your faithlessness. Today, we're talking about the Spirit's faithfulness, about God's faithfulness.

Over and over, the Scriptures contrast our infidelity with God's faithfulness. Unlike us, God doesn't change his mind about a promise, or fail to come through. The most perfect example of God's faithfulness is Jesus himself: even though it cost him everything, Jesus was faithful to follow the Father all the way to the Cross, to give himself up to death for us, to rescue us from the consequences of our infidelity. Our failure. And even then, God was faithful not to let Death be the final word. Because of Jesus' faith, the Father raised him from the dead, opening up a new world, a new reality for all us unfaithful people who would follow after Jesus.

That's great news! Even when we're unfaithful, God is faithful. Even though we fail, God never does! If we understand that, if we get that God's faithfulness is the ground, the foundation of our faithfulness, then that changes everything for us.

How many of us approach God with an anxiety about our failures? How many of us feel that every time we come to church, we walk in dragging our baggage behind us?

That's not a new phenomenon. I think it goes clear back to the ancient Temple system, to the sacrifices we once had to make. Because in those days, I always approached the Temple as a sinner. I had to bring an offering with me, a meal for God. I gave it to the priest, and the priest gave the best portions of it to God, then gave the rest back to me to eat. In bringing God a sacrifice, I was declared forgiven, welcomed in.

But then I'd sin again, and have to do the whole process over. And that was the flaw in the Temple system: let's look at Hebrews 10.

The book of Hebrews is actually a sermon from the first few decades after Jesus died and was raised. Most of the first Christians were Jewish people who believed that their God had come as Jesus and was doing a new thing.

These first Christians quit offering sacrifices in the Temple because Jesus had died and was raised. But some of them, apparently, got nervous and started going back to Temple. The sermon we find in Hebrews is directed to these Jewish Christian communities, and it's a beautiful, complex and brilliant argument from the Jewish scriptures about why Jesus truly is the Jewish God made flesh, and how his death and resurrection have replaced the Temple/sacrificial system once and for all.

Listen to what the preacher says, beginning in v1:

The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshippers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared. But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." -- Hebrews 10:1-4 (NLT)

The problem with that system is that it didn't transform the people involved in it. The person who brought the sacrifice was essentially still the same broken person that was faithless in the first place. That's not a very good system. It means I live with guilt all the time. I know that I've failed, that I've messed up, that I've been unfaithful. And I can approach God, but every time, I hope my sacrifice is enough. That the grain or the bird or the animal I brought is enough to earn God's forgiveness. I can approach God, but it's as the same fallen, broken person I was last time. And the time before that. And the time before that. I always come as a sinner, not a son or daughter.

I think that's how many of us experience our faith today. We don't do sacrifices anymore, but we keep careful record of our sins. We come on Sunday and search for that feeling, that experience of God's presence that brings with it feelings of forgiveness and welcome. But then we go back into the world and we fall. We mess up. We're unfaithful.

And those failures start to pile up until the next week, when we come back and ask forgiveness and hope that God will welcome us again.

Does anyone know what I'm talking about? This feeling that we have to earn God's love, God's forgiveness, God's welcome? Anyone feel trapped in that system and wish there was a better way? Well, according to the preacher, God always had a plan to do better than that:

He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time. Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand." -- Hebrews 10:9-12 (NLT)

Jesus did what we can't. Because Jesus never failed. Jesus was perfectly faithful. So when he approaches God, it's not with guilt, with condemnation and judgment. Jesus approaches as the perfect child and then *gives himself up as the sacrifice*. That had never happened. Never in the history of the universe had a child been perfectly faithful to his father. Never before had a person who didn't need a sacrifice to worship God offer himself up as the sacrifice that everyone else needed.

Do you see what Jesus' sacrifice did for us? Look again at verse 10:

God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time. -- Hebrews 10:10

One sacrifice. For all time. And now we're holy.

This speaks directly to that feeling of working, of earning that we know so well. In the sacrificial system, the High Priest was a busy guy: he was always working on behalf of the people. Standing, offering sacrifice after sacrifice to God so the people could be forgiven and welcomed. Day after day. Year after year. Over and over and over.

When Martin Luther coined the phrase "Priesthood of the Believer", he meant that we all have equal access to God. But we've distorted his meaning. We act like Priesthood of the Believer

means we all have to work to earn God's welcome. We no longer rely on that one person to be holy on our behalf, now we all carry the guilt and burden of not being good enough.

But what did the preacher say?

But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. -- Hebrews 10:12

Jesus - our High Priest - did it once. And then, he *sat down*. As in, job finished. Work over. Mission accomplished. Congratulations, you're welcomed by God.

You don't have to try. You don't have to work. You don't have to earn. The doing's done.

We need to stop there for a minute. That's a huge paradigm shift for most of us. We don't think this way. We certainly don't live this way. If you look at us, it's pretty clear we think that holiness is something we earn.

We think that our holiness depends on our faithfulness, not on God's.

That's how our world works. If you want something, you work to earn it. Say you want to be vice president of a company some day, what do you do?

You work hard. You earn it. You put in your dues, and one day, if you do a good job, you get the promotion. Because you *earned* it.

That's a mentality we understand. So we import it into our faith.

We start out as sinners. We want to be saints. We want to be holy. We want to be good enough for God. So we work. We earn. We do the things Christians are supposed to do. We pile these all these things up, hoping that if we're faithful enough, we'll get there.

We read our bibles and pray. We come to the altar and repent of our sin and beg forgiveness again and again and again. We serve and go on mission trips and give money to the Church and charities. We try not to snap at people who make us mad and... you know the lists, right? We do all that stuff so we can earn God's approval, God's welcome. So we can earn holiness.

And that'll turn out one of two ways: we either fail to do all that stuff, or we succeed.

When we fail, when we can't be faithful to God, our steps crumble beneath us and we fall. It's crushing. Demoralizing. If it happens often enough, we'll probably abandon the project all together. I know so many people who live with exactly this sort of quiet desperation. A lot of these people leave the Church altogether. They think they're not good enough for God. They say things like "If I came there, the building would burn down around me."

Even if you're in the Church, it's on the fringes. The life that God calls you to, the exciting, vibrant, flourishing life of holiness the Scriptures promise is a dream you're convinced you can never achieve. So you just sort of get by, and eventually learn to ignore that sense of spiritual failure because you weren't good enough.

Then there're the people who do don't fail. They think they're making it. Your iron determination clings to the holiness rules you either established for yourself or learned from someone else. Your whole life becomes a carefully regimented series of rules and regulations. It's exhausting to keep piling this stuff up, to keep up with everything, and if you ever stop long enough to look around, you're looking down at all the people who aren't as holy as you. You realize that you don't have many friends, but there's a sort of pride in that because they couldn't hack it and you can.

But there's this quiet desperation about you, too. Because – and you'd never say this out loud – but despite all your efforts, you don't actually *feel* any closer to God than you ever did. This tower of legalism you build for yourself only separates you from everyone around you. You become cruel, judgmental and bitter.

You know why? Because no matter how good you can make yourself, it's not good enough. There's no way any of us can be good enough to earn our way to God's holiness. Earlier in Hebrews, the preacher says this:

[The High Priest] is able to deal gently with ignorant and wayward people because he himself is subject to the same weaknesses. That is why he must offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as theirs." -- Hebrews 5:2-3 (NLT)

In that old system, even the high priest had the same weaknesses, the same infidelities as everyone else. There's no such thing as "good enough" for God. You can't *earn* God's faithfulness, God's rescue, God's welcome. You can't be good enough for God to make you holy.

That whole system is broken and wrong.

Look at the new thing God has done through Jesus:

Because you are now part of God's family, he sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts... You no longer have to live as a slave because you are a child of God. And since you are his child, God guarantees an inheritance is waiting for you. -- Galatians 4:6-7 (Voice)

You are *now* part of God's family. He *sent* the Spirit. Past tense. Therefore you don't have to live like a slave anymore. Later, Paul goes on:

Dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman; we are children of the free woman. So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law." Galatians 4:31-5:1 (NLT)

Christ *has set us free*. Already done. In the past. One sacrifice. Once and for all. *Now* make sure you stay free.

Did you know Paul didn't use the word "Christian" to refer to the people in his churches? He used a different word, over and over in his letters: he called us "saints". Saint is from the same root as "sanctified", which means set apart. A saint is a person who is holy.

Do you see the wholly different pattern Paul uses over and over?

Jesus died. And that freed us. It made us holy. Once. Over. Done. And now, we should start acting like it.

You don't have to *try* to be holy. God has already declared you holy. Start acting like it.

You don't have to *earn* the VP slot. God *gave* it to you. Now start doing your job.

Wait, you might say. That's not really any different. That's still earning it. That's still me having to do something.

Well, it would be, except for a huge, crucial difference: the power to be holy in this model Paul uses isn't my power. It's not your power. It's God's. It's the power that comes from Jesus, our true high priest.

Look at what Paul prayed over the saints in Philippi:

This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. I am writing to all of God's saints in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus... I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. -- Philippians 1:1, 6 (NLT)

We are God's work. God is building us. It's not on me to see my life perfected, completed, finished. That's *God's* job because God started it in the death and resurrection of Jesus and God will continue to work in me, to change me, to teach me and shape me until the End, until God's Kingdom comes here and God's will is finally done on Earth as it is in Heaven, until the resurrection of all the Dead, when I will finally and wholly be conformed to the image of Jesus.

Until that Day, I know I have forgiveness. I know the work is over. I don't have to earn God's welcome. Because, as the preacher said:

When sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices. And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. -- Hebrews 10:18-20 (NLT)

All these fruit of the Spirit are ours. We don't have to earn them at all. They're gifts from Jesus, who died for us, whose death and resurrection make us holy. So we can live courageously in this new life. We can choose to grow in God's grace.

I was trying to think of a really good, concrete example of what this looks like: that we don't have to rely on our own power to achieve the life God calls us to. That it's not *my* building project but God's. That so many of us have access to the amazing power of the Spirit, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, but we ignore it and try to live a holy life, to be faithful in our own power instead of God's.

Imagine I give you a car. The car has the power to take you pretty much anywhere you want to go. But instead of driving the car, instead of taking advantage of its power, you try to move it with your own power. How silly is that?

Probably about this silly: [\[video\]](#)

Brothers and sisters, you don't have to live under your own power. You don't have to try to be the person God is calling you to be in your own strength and ability. All that lies down that road is defeat and legalism.

Jesus died to make you holy. You're a saint, and the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in you. Your infidelity isn't how God measures you. You're measured by *God's faithfulness*.

That means that when you fall, you can get back up. When you have a setback, you start again. Failure isn't the End. Because your life, your journey, isn't ultimately your responsibility. The same God who called you holy in the first place is working in and around you and me right now. Making us into the person we were called to be. And *God is always faithful to complete his promises*.

The preacher concludes his thoughts on Jesus our high priest by challenging us:

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God is faithful to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. -- Hebrews 10:23-25 (NLT)

Don't you want to be a part of a community like that? Don't you want Beaver Creek Church of the Nazarene to be a place that demonstrates God's faithfulness to a faithless culture?

Communion Set-Up

We close today, appropriately, with the communion meal. Ancient sacrifices were opportunities to be welcomed at God's table, so the night before Jesus died, the night before our perfect high priest offered himself as our perfect sacrifice, Jesus offered us a meal.

He gave us bread that is his body, broken for us. And he gave us wine (we use juice) that is his blood, poured out to restore our relationship with God.

In this meal, God welcomes us to his table. God tells us that our sins have been forgiven, once and for all. In this meal, God declares that we are holy, not because we are faithful (we're not), but because God is faithful never to abandon his precious creations. Because God the perfect father never leaves or forsakes his sons and daughters.

You don't come to this table because you've got it all together. You come because you've been unfaithful. Because you were broken. Because you failed.

And at this table, you find welcome, love, forgiveness. God is welcoming his children home.

Let's pray.

Benediction

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God *is faithful* to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. -- Hebrews 10:23-25 (NLT)