

Matthew 5:11-16; James 2:14-24  
 “A Fruitful Life of Faithfulness”

I want to begin by asking you to think of somebody who has been faithful to you; someone who has loved you unconditionally or someone who has forgiven you of really big stuff! (Faithfulness is our theme today.)

Perhaps it was a parent who never gave up. Maybe it was a sibling, a sister or brother, your spouse, or a friend.

What did that faithfulness feel like? How did such faithfulness affect your life?

Did it bring Relief?

Some of you have experienced unfaithfulness in a relationship in which someone was deceptive or disloyal. We know what that feels like! It may have been a friend or a family member, but it was always horrible!

It's possible that some of you have *never* experienced the faithfulness you longed for! I'm here to tell you the good news! God, your Father, is faithful; and He will never, never lie to you or forsake you! The Bible says: **If we are unfaithful, God remains faithful because He cannot be untrue to Himself.** 2 Timothy 2:13 (GW)

This is really a profound statement if you let it soak in a bit. We know that God is love. We know, too, that God is faithful! He cannot be untrue to Himself! He is going to love and He is going to be faithful. He is going to love and be faithful to *you!* God is going to complete and fulfill what He said He would! To be other than faithful would make Him other than God!

But our God is a faithful God!

And when we think about faithfulness, there must be an object of one's faithfulness! If you are faithful, you are faithful to something, right? You are faithful to your principles, to your family, to a friend, to something or someone! There is an object that benefits from faithfulness.

God is faithful to Himself and to us! To you and me! And the fruit of God's faithfulness lives in us, so that as we experience difficulties in relationships, we have the Spirit to be faithful! We have the impulse and the power to remain faithful. We can overcome disloyalty with loyalty; we can overcome faithlessness with faithfulness because we are being molded by a greater Spirit than what we find in the world. We are growing with mercy, love, kindness, and forgiveness.

Don't you want to be that faithful person in someone else's life?

The 1989 Armenian earthquake needed only four minutes to flatten the nation and kill thirty thousand people. Moments after the deadly tremor ended, a father raced to an elementary school to save his son. When he arrived, he saw that the building had been leveled. Looking at the mass of stone and rubble, he remembered a promise he had made to his child: “No matter what happens, I'll always be there for you.” Driven by his own promise, he found the area closest to his son's room and began to pull back the rocks. Other parents arrived and began sobbing for their children. “It's too late,” they told the man. “You know they are dead. You can't help.” Even a police officer encouraged him to give up.

But the father refused. For eight hours, then sixteen, then thirty-two, thirty-six hours he dug. His hands were raw and his energy gone, but he refused to quit. Finally, after thirty-eight wrenching hours, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. He called his boy's name, “Arman! Arman!” And a voice answered him, “Dad, it's me!” Then the boy added these

priceless words, “I told the other kids not to worry. I told them if you were alive, you’d save me, and when you saved me, they’d be saved, too. Because you promised, ‘No matter what, I’ll always be there for you.’”

God has made the same promise to you. “I’ll always be there for you!” (*When Christ Comes*, pg. 21-22)

I want the fruit of God’s Spirit to grow in me! Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness... I don’t want the fruit of faithfulness to be small, green, unripened fruit. I want it to be luscious, juicy, ripe and ready! Don’t you?

I’m tired of *hoping* I’ll live right and love right! I want to *just do it!* Faithfulness, with all its bling and dazzle!

But we *grow* into levels of faithfulness. Did you know that? That’s the biblical image of fruit in our lives; it describes a “growing” process.

You might find it interesting that we can now identify different stages of faith through which we move as we grow and mature as Christian believers. James Fowler’s research some 40 years ago has been helpful to the Church: (this is an adaptation of Fowler’s research)

1. **Simple Faith:** The earliest stage of faith is a “Simple Faith.” We understand that people, or children, begin with a very simple faith, the kind of faith that trusts in Christ and asks few questions, if any. Those who are in this level of simple faith adopt the thinking and teachings of the authority figure in their lives, whether it be their parents, their teacher, or their minister. They embrace whatever the authority says is the right thing to believe, accept, and do! In this stage, they take no personal responsibility for their spiritual growth, but they apply the lessons of the Bible in a very literal, mechanical way.

2. **Identification and Beginnings of Internalization:** The second stage of faith development still finds the person dependent on what their leader or parents believe and say. But here, people begin to think about their life experiences with what they’ve learned from Church. They are beginning to ask, “How do my experiences compare with what I am being told?” They begin to take some responsibility for their spiritual growth with the help of others, as they become disciples.

3. **Internalization/Identification:** In this third stage, people begin to process the experiences in their life differently as they examine the deeper lessons of the Bible. What are the deeper implications on my life ...following a man with a cross on His back? What does it mean to love and forgive in this situation? And how am I to understand faith in God when things don’t always happen the way I believed they would? Mentors are still important, but the issues of faith become more the responsibility of the individual.

Now any one of us can live out our faith from any of these stages. Some will remain in stage 1, a Simple Faith, their whole life, and they’ll be satisfied! Others will rise to stage 2 or 3 and may remain there forever.

Not everyone reaches stage 4. **Internalization:** This stage develops in adulthood, but not all adults come this far. People at this stage have examined issues of their faith from thinking, talking, and studying, with critical examination and faithful reflection!

Those who mature with this stage of faithfulness have such a firm confidence in God that they cannot be shaken! Even when they experience personal disasters, their faithfulness is solid, as they wait on the Lord beyond the rewards of this life.

An illustration of this deeper faithfulness came out of a World War 2 story: Sweeping

across Germany at the end of war, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There, on the crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message:

- I believe in the sun—even when it does not shine.
- I believe in love—even when it is not shown.
- I believe in God—even when He does not speak. (Robert Schuller)

Not everyone remains faithful through the tragedies of life. But God is with you, encouraging you to grow through the trials and tragedies with faithfulness! So let's talk about what faith or faithfulness really is. And I would begin with a definition of faith: **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.** Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV)

“The conviction of things not seen...” Do you hear that? The *certainty* of things yet unseen!

Faith is the early bird that feels the light and sings to greet the dawn while it is still dark.

But let's understand that growing into the deeper stages of faith often occurs only through the real tough times in life. The Bible says: **Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.** (James 1:2-4)

This reflects on the stages of faith we discussed earlier: a deeper faith in Christ comes *because* we face trials in life and we have to examine more closely what we believe with what we experience and what the Bible teaches us with how the Holy Spirit counsels and comforts us!

A faith that results from endurance is total dependence on God and a willingness to believe in His goodness. Faith is not something we use to put on a show for others. It is complete and humble readiness to do whatever He calls us to do.

Let's not neglect those couple words there: *ready to do*. Faithfulness is action. The Bible says: **Do those things that prove you have turned to God and have changed the way you think and act.** Matthew 3:8 (GW) So faithfulness is action or activity! Someone once said, “We never become truly spiritual by sitting down and wishing to become so. You must undertake something so great that you cannot accomplish it unaided.” Phillips Brooks; *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

When there was a controversy about the importance of faith, James, who grew up in the same household with Jesus as his older brother, helped bring some clarity to what we should understand about faith.

READING James 2:14-24; (listen for the phrase, “good deeds”)

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? <sup>15</sup>Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, <sup>16</sup>and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well" – but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

<sup>17</sup>So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

<sup>18</sup>Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

<sup>19</sup>You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. <sup>20</sup>How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds

is useless?

<sup>21</sup> Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. <sup>23</sup> And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

An ineffective faith is an unchanged, inactive life. Faithlessness. This passage tells us that we can't leave undone the things that need to be done! If you see someone who is hungry, someone who needs clothes, someone who needs encouragement, someone in trouble or sick or in the hospital, your Christian faith and godly love compel you to act! Faith produces good deeds!

So many good things can be left undone because we fail to identify injustice and suffering and prejudice – those things we are called to reconcile or resolve!

We are to be salt and light in our world! We are to “flavor” the world with God’s goodness and compassion! We will be judged by how productive or unproductive our lives are. God has no use for people who “call” themselves Christians but do nothing about it.

How productive are you for God? An ineffective faith is marked by an unchanged life. Where is God calling you to be faithful today?

The Bible tells us: **Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.** A faithful person makes sacrifices to serve as God’s ambassador! He believes God and knows that God will work all things out for good.

For some of you, faithfulness begins at home, faithful in your relationships. For others, faithfulness begins at Church, where you're identifying a place to be involved in ministry, to serve the Lord as a mentor for spiritual formation, assisting with the Scouting program, faithfully giving financially to the ministry we offer our community, becoming a disciple in one of the Church's small groups, and on and on.

Faithfulness begins with trusting God and continues in trusting God. Faithfulness in little things is a big thing!

[PRAYER] Dear Jesus, I am in awe of Your faithfulness to me. To think that You are constantly available to me is beyond my comprehension. I don't think I've ever had such an offer in a human relationship. And yet there are so many times when I overlook Your faithfulness and ignore Your offer to be in a relationship. I'm sorry. Please help me choose to be with You more often so that I am acting out my desire to be true to You. And please help me act out Your faithfulness to me by being faithful to others You put in my life: my children, my parents, my partner, my friends and strangers. May I mirror Your faithfulness in the lives of those around me.