

“Faithfulness in an Age of Broken Promises”

Sermon Series – Fresh Produce #9

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First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC

June 13, 2021

(Proverbs 3:1-6)

Introduction.

Many years ago, my family and I made a road trip to some of the great destinations out West, and along the way we spent a few days at Yellowstone National Park. It was a great vacation, and we enjoyed seeing the sights of this wonderful national treasure. In 1872, Yellowstone became the first national park in the United States, and for nearly 150 years people have come from all over the country, and from all over the world, to visit this historic site.

What feature in the park do you think we looked forward to seeing most when we visited Yellowstone? That’s right, Old Faithful. It’s a natural hydrothermal geyser that was discovered in 1870 by the Washburn Expedition, and it was named for its frequent and somewhat predictable eruptions, which now number more than 1 million since Yellowstone became a national park. The eruption of steamy water, whose temperature at the vent has been measured at 204 degrees Fahrenheit, can vary in height from 100-180 feet, and eruptions of Old Faithful last from between 1.5 to 5 minutes in length. It currently erupts about 20 times a day every 60 to 90 minutes, and it is very impressive.

Old Faithful is tried and true. It’s consistent. Tourists, park rangers, and the cabins nearby all depend on the reliability of the geyser to erupt. So one definition of faithfulness is the ability to be trusted over the long haul, like Old Faithful. This morning as we study the next fruit of the Spirit, I want to talk to you about faithfulness in an age of broken promises.

I. The Faithfulness of God.

We live in an age of broken promises, and there is a crisis of trust in the world today. News headlines from all over the globe reveal the compelling truth that trust is low everywhere. Whether it’s in the world of politics, business, relationships, or in our personal lives, confidence in the trustworthiness of people and institutions appears to be at an all-time low.

For example, a Harris poll revealed that only 22% of those surveyed tended to trust the media, 8% trust political parties, 27% trust the government, and only 12% trust big companies. In another poll only 34% of Americans believe they can trust other people. No one is trustworthy.¹ What’s the antidote? How can we reverse these trends, and more importantly, how can we live counter to the culture of broken promises? I believe the key is the fruit of the Spirit faithfulness.

Unsurprisingly, most of the references in the Bible to faithfulness refer to the faithfulness of God, and the faithfulness of the followers of Jesus is rooted in and draws its power from God’s

faithfulness. If you take at a concordance and do a search for the word “faithfulness,” you’ll find more than 60 references in the Bible to the faithfulness of God. And 40 of those references occur in the book of Psalms, which recounts, more than any other book in the Bible the blessing of depending on God’s faithfulness.

In the NT we also read about the faithfulness of God, and there we learn that we’re dependent on Him for His faithfulness for salvation (1 Cor. 1:8-9), our deliverance from temptation (1 Cor. 10:13), and our sanctification and becoming like Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). We rely on God’s faithfulness for the forgiveness of sins (1 Jn. 1:9), our deliverance in times of suffering (1 Pt. 4:19), and for the fulfillment of our ultimate hope of eternal life (Heb. 10:23). Every aspect of the Christian life rests on the faithfulness of God. And even when we are faithless, God remains faithful, and we have the assurance in Scripture that *“the Lord is faithful to all His promises”* (Ps. 145:13).

Earlier in this worship service we sang the wonderful hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. The opening line of that hymn is from a passage of Scripture in the book of Lamentations. I think it’s important to note that one of the strongest affirmations of the faithfulness of God in the Bible comes in the middle of a book that emerged in the context of one of the most terrible moments in the history of Israel, when Jerusalem had been destroyed, the Temple burnt, and the people sent into exile. Yet even in those awful circumstances, even when they were suffering the consequences of *their own* unfaithfulness, they could still affirm the steadfast faithfulness of God. The words of that passage come as a shaft of light and biblical truth. God can be trusted, even when hope appears to be shattered on the rocks of sin and suffering.

The apostle Paul knew about the faithfulness of God in the OT and in his own life, so it is not surprising that he often reminded his readers of the Lord’s faithfulness. Only now he saw the faithfulness of God proved even more fully in the faithful life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. The Fruit of the Spirit Faithfulness.

So, the Bible says God can be trusted. That’s a sure thing. But can God’s people be trusted? Are the people of God faithful? The answer is not so much. That’s where the fruit of the Spirit comes in. Left to our own devices, you and I have a pretty spotty record when it comes to faithfulness, and we need God’s help to cultivate this character quality of God in our lives. We are limited in how faithful we can be under our own strength, and human willpower can accomplish only so much. We need to pray that God will bring the transformation that is needed and fill up what we lack, but we also need to yield to God and work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit to become the faithful people God wants us to be and deep down we yearn to be.

Faithfulness is defined as being dependable, reliable, loyal, and trustworthy. It’s being a person of honesty and integrity, and faithful people keep their word, they do what they promise, and they can be trusted not to cheat or deceive. Faithfulness shows up in all aspects of a person’s life and conduct – in business, relationships, speech, and behavior, and there isn’t a square inch of our lives God doesn’t want us to become as faithful as we possibly can be.

In the passage in Proverbs we’ve read this morning, we read where Solomon instructs his son to *“let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, and write them on your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and humanity”*

(3:3,4). We should be faithful with our *time*, and if we tell someone we'll meet them at a particular time and place, we should show up and be there on time just like we said we would. We should also be faithful in our *speech*. If we give our word on a matter, if we make a promise, we should follow through on it even when doing so is costly. One of my favorite verses in the book of Psalms is where it says that a person of integrity "*keeps his word even to his own hurt*" (Ps. 15:4).

We should be faithful in *marriages*, and the vows we take when we get married are intended to keep us faithful, even when we're tempted to wander, and even when the relationship gets hard. We should be faithful in our *friendships*, and there is nothing quite like a faithful friend who stays closer to you than a brother or a sister in the good times and the bad. And we should be faithful in *business*. Honesty and integrity are qualities that shine like stars in the night in the world of commerce these days because they are in such short supply.

Ultimately, our greatest calling to faithfulness in the Christian life is our *faithfulness to Christ*. There are many influences these days that discourage a whole-hearted commitment to Jesus, and it's easy to deny we know the Lord, just like Peter was tempted to do. It takes courage to stand up for Jesus today, and history is filled with people who once identified as a follower of Christ, but they fell away and lost their passion for the Lord. The worries of the world, the pressure of peers, and even the adversity of persecution can prompt a person to wander away or deny the Lord. Just read the warnings in the seven letters to the church in the book of Revelation, and you'll get a feel for how people even in the early church tended to wane in their commitment to Christ and they weren't as faithful to the Lord.

Being faithful to Christ isn't a solitary exercise, and it's so much easier to be faithful when you have a band of brothers or sisters to encourage you in your commitments. Don't try and go it alone in the Christian life. Find other believers with whom you can be faithful companions on the journey in following Jesus. I don't know where I would be today without the support of my best friend Jim Singleton or my three covenant brothers from seminary – Allan, Trevor, and Paul. And more recently having Cyndy, my wife of just over one year, as a companion on the journey has been amazing. These dear people have helped me learn greater faithfulness than ever before.

II. Examples of Faithfulness.

What does faithfulness look like? Are there examples we can follow as we think about developing a greater life of faithfulness today? Fortunately, there are many people in Scripture and throughout church history, as well as in contemporary life, that can give us an inspirational picture of what faithfulness looks like.

In the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews we read of God's great gallery of faithfulness. The stories of people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Rahab are lifted up as examples of individuals who believed God and were faithful in following the Lord. They weren't perfect, but they were faithful. The author of the epistle writes about people who conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, and quenched the fury of the flames.

This last reference is to Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You'll recall that when the king commanded that they bow down and worship an idol, they refused. And they boldly replied to the king, "*O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will*

deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if not, be it known to you that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Dan. 3:16-18). They were faithful, and God rescued them from the flames.

Another example of faithfulness in church history is that of Amy Carmichael. Born in Ireland in 1867, Amy heard the great missionary statesman Hudson Taylor speak about God's call to missions at the Keswick Convention when she was 20 years old. She was ready to sail for India when she fell ill and was unable to travel. Undeterred, she finally made it to India where she opened a safe house called Dohnavur Fellowship after rescuing children from being trafficked in the Hindu temples. The last twenty years of her life, she remained bedridden but wrote several books and poems about her deep love for Christ. Her dedication to serving God inspired many Christians to become missionaries and to remain steadfast in their faith.

Early on in her ministry, she had an experience of great disappointment in which a young girl with whom she had been working for a long time, a girl with whom she had made great progress, returned to the temple and to her old way of life in prostitution. Broken-hearted over the situation, Amy fell to her knees, and in anger and sadness she cried out to God and said, "This is not my problem! This is not my problem!" As she cried, in the silence of her tears she heard God say to her, "You're right, Amy. This is not your problem. It's my problem, but I'm looking for someone to help me with it." Amy went on to serve as a missionary in India for the next 55 years without a furlough.

These are pretty dramatic examples of faithfulness. Are there any ordinary examples we can follow closer to home? Yes, there are. I know of a young man who when he was 15 years old ordered a meal at a restaurant and walked out without paying for it. Later he became a Christian, and the Lord began to convict him of this small incident of theft. Whenever he drove by that restaurant, the Lord tugged on his heart about his dishonesty. Finally one day, when the man was in his mid-30s, he walked into the restaurant and said, "Twenty years ago, I had a meal in this restaurant, and I walked out without paying for it. I've calculated what it cost then and what it is worth now, and I'd like to pay my bill." The staff person looked at him quizzically and said, "Say what?!" He repeated himself and then handed the woman his money. The hostess asked, "Do you want to order anything now?" He answered, "No. I just wanted to pay my bill." He walked out of that restaurant a free man. It's never too late to be a person of faithfulness.

Finally, I know of another gentleman who had an affair that nearly destroyed his marriage, and it took him to his knees. But he confessed his sin, broke off the other relationship, and he did everything he could to repair the brokenness he created by his unfaithfulness to his wife. They did a lot of hard work together, but they were able to save their marriage. And then they began to pour themselves into serving other people together through their church. And now that man is a model of faithfulness in his congregation, and he's growing stronger every day in his relationship with Christ. It doesn't matter what you've done in the past. You can be faithful to Christ today.

Conclusion.

How is God calling you to be faithful this morning? What area of your life needs the Holy Spirit to help you be faithful? Is it at school, on your sports team, in business, in your marriage, with your friends, in your neighborhood? You can't do it on your own, but the Holy Spirit won't

do it without your cooperation. It takes the power of God along with a willing human heart. Ask God to guide you in working on one area where you can become more faithful and do the next right thing to cultivate this fruit of the Spirit in your life.

I close with this. There was a man by the name of John Egglan who never preached a sermon in his life before, and he never really wanted to. But then one morning he did. The snow left his town of Colchester, England, buried in white, and when he awoke that January Sunday in 1850, he thought about staying home. “Who would go to the church in such bad weather?” he thought. But then he reconsidered. He was, after all, a deacon in the church, and if the deacons didn’t go, then who would? So he put on his coat, his hat, and his snow boots, and he walked the six miles to the Methodist church.

When John arrived, he realized he wasn’t the only member who considered staying home that day. In fact, he was one of only 13 people who were present – 12 members and 1 visitor. Even the pastor was snowed in. Someone suggested that they all go home, but Egglan wouldn’t hear of it. They’d all come this far, so they would have a worship service. Besides, they had a visitor – a 13-year-old boy.

But who would preach? John was the only deacon present, so it fell to him. His sermon only lasted three minutes, and it drifted and wandered and made no real point in the midst of several. But at the end of it, an uncharacteristic courage came over John. He lifted up his eyes and looked straight at the young boy who was visiting. And he said, “Young man, look to Jesus. Look! Look! Look!”

Did the challenge make any difference? Let the boy, now a man, answer that question. He said, “I did look, and then and there the cloud on my heart lifted, the darkness rolled away, and at that moment I saw the sun.” What was the young man’s name? Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and he became one of the greatest preaches in England’s history. Spurgeon impacted tens of thousands of people for Christ through his long and effective ministry, and it began that day all because of one man’s faithfulness.² Sometimes just showing up and responding to the nudges of the Holy Spirit is what it means to be faithful.

Be faithful in a little, friends, and God will do a lot. *“Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, and write them on your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and humanity” (Prov. 3:3,4).* Seek to be faithful in the coming week, and with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, you can become your own version of Old Faithful – dependable, reliable, trustworthy, faithful. I’m eager to see what God will do in and through you in the coming week. Amen.

¹ Steven M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 11.

² Adapted from Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name* (Dallas, Word, 1994) 32-33.