

## COLLECTIVE

# Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 15)

## Fruit of the Spirit – Faithfulness

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In our previous lessons, we learnt about Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness and Goodness. In this lesson, we begin our study on the 7<sup>th</sup> Fruit of the Spirit – Faithfulness.

### Read: Galatians 5:16-25

“Well done, good and faithful servant...” (Matthew 25:21, 23).

That is one of the favourite sayings of Jesus that all of his followers long to hear. As we love and serve Christ through our lives, we want to be faithful servants. And that is what we can be, says Paul, if we allow the Holy Spirit to bear this portion of his fruit in our lives. But what does it mean?

There are two facets to the word “faithfulness”. On the one hand, being faithful means being trustworthy and dependable. A faithful person is a person of honesty and integrity, someone you can rely on. Faithful people keep their word. They do what they promise. They can be trusted not to cheat or deceive.

On the other hand, being faithful means exercising that kind of trustworthy behaviour over a long period of time. Faithful people have proved that they can be trusted for the long haul. You don’t have to check up on them. You don’t have to worry that if they did a good job last week, they might let you down this week.

No, faithful people show that they are routinely dependable in all kinds of ways and all kinds of circumstances. Faithfulness is the character of somebody you know you can simply rely on all the time. And that is exactly the same truth about God. That’s why faithfulness is the fruit of God’s Spirit at work in us.

### The Faithfulness of God

Can you think of anything the Bible says about God more often than this? One of the oldest poems in the Bible describes God as “the Rock,” and highlights the qualities that inspired that metaphor:

Ascribe greatness to our God! “The Rock! His work is perfect. For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.” (Deuteronomy 32:3-4)

For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. (Psalm 33:4-5)

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Look again at those descriptions of God in Psalm 33—faithfulness, justice, love. For an Israelite, the exodus story proved all of them. If you asked about the Lord’s faithfulness, an Israelite would say, “He kept his promise to Abraham when he brought us out of Egypt”.

If you asked about God’s justice? He showed that in bringing judgment on the Egyptians for their economic exploitation and genocidal oppression of our ancestors. If you asked about his love? Listen to how God put up with us, in all our grumbling and rebellion in the wilderness; how he gave us food and water and kept us safe from our enemies. That’s how I know that God is faithful.

### **The Faithfulness of Jesus and Paul**

Jesus was faithful as God’s Son. Jesus was faithful to the task he came to accomplish. He did his Father’s will and finished the work he was given to do—in spite of all the obstacles and temptations, human and satanic. So, at the end of his life, as he prepared to be obedient even unto death, he could say to his Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:4)

And so, Jesus called for faithfulness among his followers. Following Jesus requires commitment and perseverance. It means denying yourself and taking up the cross. It is not for those who start out with enthusiasm but then quickly turn back. It is not for those who are entangled with all kinds of other priorities. It is not for those who say “Lord! Lord!” to Jesus but never do what he says. It is not for those who want an easy road. Just look at the Beatitudes which point us to a very different quality of life within the kingdom of God that is the opposite of a life of carefree luxury and ease.

That verse (“Well done, good and faithful servant”) comes from Jesus’ famous parable about the bags of gold entrusted by a master to his servants. The master in the story says those words to the two servants who used what had been entrusted to them in order to bring benefit to their master. They worked with what they had and produced good results for him. And for that reason, the master calls them “good and faithful” servants (Matthew 25:14-23). They were good because they knew the right thing to do and did it, and they were faithful because they were trustworthy and did not try to enrich themselves at their employer’s expense.

Now that parable, like the others in Matthew 25, is not directly about money as such, but is one of several illustrations that Jesus used to speak about the urgency of the kingdom of God and the responsibilities of those who know and serve the King. But sometimes Jesus did actually speak about money and wealth in literal terms. He had some severe warnings about being addicted to it. But he also insisted that whenever we do handle money in any way, we need to be fully trustworthy, to be people of integrity and honesty. Faithfulness includes being accountable—materially as well as spiritually.

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your

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own? No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Luke 16:10-13)

Jesus was very clear. The great enemy of serving God is Mammon—not just money in itself, but money is a powerful and seductive source of temptation and idolatry. Unfaithfulness over money has been the downfall of so many Christians.

Faithfulness, then, requires integrity and accountability because it requires trust. And you can only really trust someone when they have proved themselves trustworthy by being honest, transparent, and accountable in all their dealings. For if they are not totally trustworthy in relation to money, how can you trust them in relation to spiritual or pastoral matters?

The apostle Paul was very cautious about this matter of handling money. He made a collection of money among the Christian churches in Greece to take to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering great poverty and need.

Paul talks about this collection a lot—in Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16, and 2 Corinthians 8–9. It was clearly very important to him theologically as well as for its obvious practical purpose of meeting a need. Paul saw this gift of money as a real tangible proof that these Gentile believers had truly believed the gospel and were obeying it in sharing their material goods (which were not abundant—he says they were poor too) with the Jewish believers.

Now we might think that Paul could have simply said, “Just give me the money and I’ll take it to Jerusalem. Trust me, I’m an apostle!” But no. Paul made sure that there were several other people beside himself involved in every aspect of the project, people who were trusted and appointed by the churches. These men would oversee the collection process and then travel along with Paul to make sure everything was honest and accounted for.

All the arrangements that Paul put in place were quite complicated (check them in 1 Corinthians 16:3-4; 2 Corinthians 8:16-24). It’s not easy to identify all the people involved—except that it is clear there were several of them. It was also probably quite costly to carry out the whole operation in the way Paul arranged it. It would obviously cost a lot more for five or six men to travel from Greece to Jerusalem than for Paul to go there by himself; travel by land and sea was not cheap in those days any more than it is today.

So, the arrangements and precautions that Paul built into the administration of this gift could have provoked resistance. People could have criticized and said, “Why send so many people? You are going to waste some of the gift on such expenses”—just as we sometimes complain about the cost of auditing our accounts. But Paul insists, “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.” (2 Corinthians 8:20-21)

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Paul demanded full accountability—for himself and all those involved in the process of handling this money. Such accountability is a crucially important part of biblical integrity and faithfulness. What's more, Paul applied this test of trustworthiness not only to himself and his companions, but even to slaves. Since slaves were so exploited and ill-treated, any slave might think that he owed his master nothing, so if he had the chance to cheat or steal from the master, why not?

But Paul tells slaves who had become believers in Jesus that they must live with a different attitude. They should serve their masters as if serving the Lord himself (Ephesians 6:5-7), and that included being faithful and trustworthy (just as they would for the Lord). So, he adds, "Teach slaves... to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive." (Titus 2:9-10)

In other words, faithfulness, honesty, and trustworthiness are qualities that commend the gospel to those who have not yet come to believe it.

### **A Final Thought**

At the beginning of this lesson, we said that faithfulness also includes long-term, steady, dependable, lifelong commitment. Faithfulness in that sense includes loyalty, which means wholehearted, whole-life allegiance, born out of love, and sustained by constant gratitude.

That kind of commitment includes unwavering faithfulness to Christ himself, as our Lord and Savior. It also means faithfulness to the Bible, faithfulness to the gospel, faithfulness to the church, and faithfulness to the work God has given you to do. It means faithfulness to the mission of God in the world and to all those who are engaged in it along with you.

Faithfulness means you know what you really believe, whom you really love, and what you are ultimately committed to. Faithfulness means being sure of what you want to live for and what you're willing to die for. Faithfulness is what author Eugene Peterson called "a long obedience in the same direction."

Paul, at the end of his own long life, could say those famous words:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Can we say the same words at the end of our lives?

### **Reflection/Discussion:**

- 1) How do we reflect God's faithfulness in the way we live our lives?**
- 2) Does faithfulness as the fruit of the Spirit reflect your values, or does it challenge your values in any way?**