

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: FAITHFULNESS

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Senator Mark Hatfield tells of touring *Calcutta with the late Mother Teresa* & visiting the "House of Dying," where sick children are cared for in their last days, & the dispensary, where the poor line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention.

Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers face daily.

"How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?" he asked. Mother Teresa replied, "My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."

Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. PROVERBS 3:3 – 4

The online **Urban Dictionary** is a publication for new slang and buzzwords added to our vocabulary on a regular basis.

One word on its site is ***sticktoittiveness***, defined as "***the ability to persevere and endure to the point of overcoming a particularly difficult obstacle.***" Faithfulness is the ongoing act of sticktoittiveness in both relationships and circumstances.

In Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life he lists "faithfulness."

The word is the **Greek word *pistis***, or "**faith.**" But when used in this way it has the meaning of "**fidelity**" or "**the character of one who can be relied on... trustworthiness**"

Why is this a characteristic of those who walk by the Spirit?

Because **faithfulness is a characteristic of God.**

The Psalmist declared, "**Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies**" (Psalm 36:5 NIV).

The Hebrew word is *emunah* and literally means “firmness,” figuratively means “security” and morally means “fidelity.”

Now we might think to ourselves – and keep it to ourselves – the fact that *although God has said* he is faithful, as far as we are concerned, there are things in our lives and in the world that are not the way we would wish them to be.

God has not answered our prayers the way we wanted, and certainly has not met our expectations the way that we hoped.

So although we might say “God is faithful” in a sort of abstract way, in church on Sunday, we might not be so convinced that God is faithful to us in the details – the things that matter to us – and also in terms of all the injustice in the world.

What good is God, and how can we talk about his faithfulness when things are not going the way I want them to go?

Tim Keller put it this way...

If you say, ‘Well, I’m interested in this Christianity, and maybe I’ll come and bite on it if I can see it will help me reach my goals and make me happy, and make my life easier.’ Then...

If you do that...You’re not coming to God; you’re coming to a butler.

Either God exists or he doesn’t exist. If he doesn’t exist you can’t come to him at all for anything, right?

But if he does exist, you have to realize you must come to him because he created you, and therefore, **God owns you.**

To not come to him and obey him would be an injustice.

The only way to come to God rightly, the real God, is to come without conditions and to say,

‘Forget happiness. Forget my goals, aspirations, things that I think are so important. Rather, I owe you everything.’

If you come to God like that...you will find God faithful in every situation you encounter.

There are only two ways to come to God.

You can come to God on the basis of saying, '**I owe you everything; you owe me nothing,**' or you can come on the basis of saying, '**I'm going to come to you, but then you owe me a lot for doing that.**'

And quite frankly, the only way for you to know on what basis you have come to God is to see what happens in the bad seasons.

When things go wrong, do you get upset and say,

'What good did it do me to come to church? God isn't faithful to me. He doesn't care.'

'What good did it do me to read the Bible?'— this or that circumstance didn't come out the way I wanted it to.

'What good does it do to be a Christian when God doesn't respond to me.'

Do you know what that shows?

'My number one priority is what I want, and I'm using God as a way to get there' as opposed to saying,

'My number one priority is to serve the God who died for me, and if happiness happens, great. If life circumstances change, great. But whether or not it goes MY way, I love you Lord, and I give it all to you.'

So often, I am SO confident that God's faithfulness can be trusted when I can see that things are working out the way that I feel they should be working out...

But what about at other times?

When things are not working out the way that I would like?

I remember being so distraught about a situation that I was in years ago as a young minister just getting used to a new church situation.

It was a very difficult church. I was working so hard in a particular department and getting little acclaim as a Christian educator. My supervisor, for some reason, seemed to constantly criticize everyone including me. I wanted to quit but I couldn't because of financial reasons, and I just felt in a terrible bind.

I became cross and grumpy; a real pain to be around...Finally

I went to see a mentor and friend about this. And this man was older, and wiser and a long time Christian.

He looked me right in the eye after listening to me rant, and rave, and worry and get all worked up.

He said these words and I'll never forget them. "Kim," he said. "God has been faithful to you in the past. He will not let you down now. Be confident in him. Trust his faithfulness. He will come through for you. If he doesn't, you, my dear, are in the wrong business." (meaning ministry, right?)

I've always remembered those words.

And yes, it was a very difficult time for me. Things did not just magically get better. But eventually...

Something new opened up, when I thought it never could, and I was able to leave and go to a much better situation.

But I began to think, gee... I tell people to trust in God's faithfulness all the time

But I don't do a very good job of it myself!

When I can't see the outcome, and circumstances go south, I act like God isn't there...the joy goes out of my life!

I become the wicked witch to those I love the most

Because maybe I am not as confident as I think I am that God is faithful...utterly trustworthy.

I've shared with you before that people often say at the end of their lives **"If I had it to do all over again, I would have worried less and trusted in Gods faithfulness more."**

Here is the irony: the less you're concerned about your happiness and equating Gods faithfulness with circumstantially things getting changed for your benefit; ***The more you are focused on the Lord and gratitude and recognize that God owes you nothing – you owe him everything...if you have that perspective - the more you will see God's faithfulness at work in your life.***

This is not a trick. You can't say, 'Oh, great. I get it. I come to God, and I say this and this and this.'

You cannot play games with the omnipotent Lord of the universe.

There is that great quote...

'Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.'

A colleague of mine shared a story about being exhausted coming back from a mission trip in Africa. And they were in the airport waiting for their next flight and he is praying to God saying...

Lord, you know...I am all out for you; I mean look at all I have done for you. I have fed the hungry, and built houses for you, and prayed with people all week.

So in exchange all this service I have done in your name, for this last flight, could you please give me a window seat so that I can get a little bit of rest leaning up against the side of the plane...

No sooner had I internally prayed that prayer than I was called up by the gate agent and I received my boarding pass...21A. It was a window seat, and I boarded that flight and I nestled up against that window like I was home in bed.

God had definitely rewarded me, his good and faithful servant, by answering my prayer I was thinking as I dozed off. How faithful God was to me!

That is until the man next to me tapped me on the arm and said, "Excuse me. I'm traveling with a friend who is across the aisle. Would you mind trading seats with him?"

I looked over and tears began to well up in my eyes because he was sitting in a middle seat, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And I could hear God, talking to me saying, "*Trust me with you comfort. Its not what you wanted, but it's a chance to trust me in this.*"

The man next to me could tell I was not too excited about this request, so he upped the ante a bit. He said,

"I'll pay you \$100 to move."

Someone asked my colleague that night when he told this story... "Did you really take it? Take the money"

And my friend replies, he forced me to take it, just wouldn't let me not have it, so I promised I would do something really good with it. I'll probably schedule a massage or something just to help me recover from sitting in that middle seat.

You know, no matter who you are or what you're going through or where you're sitting, God is always

inviting us to trust in his faithfulness just a little bit more, but here's the catch: Trusting God's faithfulness is not always an easy thing to do.

Like any relationship, trust involves risk.

Trust involves uncertainty.

Trust involves the potential for let down and disappointment.

And yet when we dare to trust in God's faithfulness first; when we approach life recognizing that God owes us nothing – we owe him everything – and that our interpretation of events as being reflective of God's favor and faithfulness is completely off base...

We get to a place where we *can* trust God's faithfulness in the midst of the storm.

That's when Holy Spirit power gets going.

And friends...God does come through for us...every time...all the time...but not in our time...and often not the way we thought...and often God works in the midst of adversity...using the adversity for his purposes...

We just sang the hymn "**Great Is Thy Faithfulness.**" That was my mother-in-laws favorite hymn. She would sing it all the time.

Do you know who wrote that hymn?

Thomas Obadiah Chisholm. He was born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky in 1866.

He became a Christian at age 27 and was ordained as a Methodist Pastor.

But do you know what? He could only serve in the ministry for one year – one year only – due to ill health he was forced to resign. He was just too weak...he couldn't handle it...

He had to move his whole family and he became an insurance broker and was very poor most of his life.

but he said, **“God has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care which have filled me with astonishing gratefulness.”**

And it was that gratitude to God – not that God owed him anything but that he owed God everything – that inspired that great hymn.

So many of the hymns we have of praise to God, originated for the most part **not** from people who had found that God’s faithfulness meant that everything went their way and that God answered all their prayers the way they wanted him to.

Quite the opposite. So many of our hymns have come from people who found God faithful precisely when things were **not** going their way...when circumstances were terrible for them

Look at this list for a minute...

Fanny Crosby who wrote **To God Be the Glory**, was completely blind.

So was **George Matheson** who wrote **O Love That Will Not Let Me Go**

Also blind was **William Walford** who wrote **Sweet Hour of Prayer**

Charlotte Elliott who wrote **“Just As I Am”** – she was a bedridden invalid when she wrote this great invitational hymn

Catherine Hankey wrote **“I Love to Tell the Story”** also confined to her bed as well, recovering from a serious illness

Major Daniel Whittel who wrote the hymn **“There shall be showers of blessing”** – he was a Civil War amputee

William Cowper who wrote **God Moves In Mysterious Ways**, as well as **Joseph Scriven** who wrote **What A Friend We Have In Jesus** – both suffered with bouts of suicidal depression.

Horatio Spafford wrote **“It Is Well With My Soul”** after all four of his children drowned at sea.

Thomas Dorsey wrote **“Precious Lord, Take My Hand”** after his wife died giving birth to their son who also died.

These are just a few examples of many.

And you say...but God wasn't faithful to them! Look at all they suffered.

And I would say, being a Christian doesn't mean you don't suffer.

Where did we ever get that idea? And God's faithfulness has nothing to do with having our circumstances line up the way we want them too.

The Bible is full of suffering. Jesus suffered most of all.

God's faithfulness is all about God never letting go of our hand through the storm. Of fulfilling his promises to us and his purposes in his own way, at his own time...

These folks I just mentioned, were focused on praising God for his faithfulness to them, which they knew was the truth, even though things weren't going their way at the time;

And because they had the courage to proclaim that truth in the midst of their own personal trials and difficulties, think of all the people who have sung these songs and been blessed, transformed, ministered to.

These people – back then - had no idea that the songs that were born out of their personal tragedy would inspire and encourage thousands.

And its because they had the courage to say, *"You don't owe me anything. I owe you everything. You are faithful no matter if things go my way or not...and I put my trust in you."*

May we put our full confidence in the faithfulness of Christ, and may we be faithful to him...AMEN