

INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh message in the Fruit of the Spirit series I'm calling “Gracefruit: Jesus Living in Me.” Let's look at our key passage again. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

I'm borrowing the title of this message on faithfulness from Eugene Peterson. He is best known for his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, but he has written a number of excellent books as well. One of his earliest books is entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. The title itself has fascinated me for years.

But Eugene Peterson didn't invent that phrase; he borrowed it from Friedrich Nietzsche. Some of you guys may be thinking, “I remember that guy. Didn't he play linebacker for the Packers?” No, that was Ray Nitschke. Nietzsche was German philosopher. In one of his books he wrote: “The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”

Of course, Nietzsche is best known for starting the “God is Dead” Movement. Nietzsche died in 1900, so you might have seen the quote that says, “God is dead. Nietzsche, 1883.” Underneath it says “Nietzsche is dead. God, 1900.”

Even though Nietzsche was wrong about God being dead, his phrase “A long obedience in the same direction” is a winner. That's a simple definition of the fruit of faithfulness.

Have you ever thought about how important the word “faithful” is? In order to illustrate it, let me ask you an historical trivia question. You may know that I love Presidential trivia so here's my question: “When was the last time we had no legally sworn-in President of the United States?” The correct answer is January of 2008. Here's what happened. Our U.S. Constitution mandates that the Oath of Office for the President should be: “I do solemnly swear that I will FAITHFULLY execute the Office of the President of the United States.” At President Obama's inauguration on January 20, he placed his hand on the same Bible that Lincoln used for his Oath of Office and prepared to repeat the oath after Chief Justice Roberts. But Chief Justice Roberts made a mistake when administering the Oath. He led President Obama to say, “I do solemnly swear that I will execute the Office of the President of the United States FAITHFULLY.”

You may be thinking, “That's no big deal.” Well, it *was* a big deal, because the Justice Department advised that unless the Oath is repeated exactly as it appears in the Constitution, it is not binding. So, it wasn't until 32 hours later the next day, January 21, 2008, in a private ceremony in the White House that President Obama correctly repeated the Oath of Office, and he put the word “faithfully” in the right place. Some have pointed out that he didn't use a Bible for the do-over. But that's not a Constitutional requirement and three other presidents didn't swear on the Bible: John Quincy Adams, Teddy Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson.

So, the word “faithful” is an important word! In this message I want to talk about faithfulness in two directions. First, let’s notice God’s faithfulness, and then we’ll talk about our faithfulness.

I. WE TRUST THAT GOD IS FAITHFUL TO US

Like all the other flavors of the fruit of the Spirit, faithfulness is not something we have to manufacture ourselves. It is part of the character and nature of our God.

We don’t read the book of Lamentations very much because it contains the expressions of misery of the weeping prophet, Jeremiah. But in the midst of the darkness of his soul, Jeremiah was able to see the brilliant faithfulness of God shining into his heart. He wrote, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22-23)

In 1923 Thomas Chisholm blazed the new Chisholm Trail by writing a poem about God’s faithfulness. It was later put to music and has become one of the most beloved hymns of all time. My daughter, Jenni, had it sung at her wedding here in this room 10 years ago. In spite of the King James language the words are still beautiful: “Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father; There is no shadow or turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not; As thou hast been, Thou forever will be.” I love the third verse that says, “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth; Thine own great presence to cheer and to guide; Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow; Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.” The chorus goes, “Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; All I have needed Thy hand that provided; Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”

As I was learning this hymn as a child I would often confuse the “Thy” with “my” and found myself singing, “Great is my faithfulness.” But that’s not what it says! There are many times when we may not be faithful to the Lord, but there has never been a moment when He has not been faithful to us.

The Bible says in 2 Timothy 2:13 says that when we are faithless, He remains faithful. 1 John 1:9 says that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able, but will with the temptation, give us a way to escape. Psalm 86:5 tells us that God is abounding in love and faithfulness. And Psalm 100:5 tells us that God’s faithfulness continues through all generations.

Our God is faithful!

But you have to move that understanding from your head to your heart. You have to TRUST that He is faithful. Sometimes when trouble and tragedy afflict us we wonder what God is doing. But these are the very times when you have to TRUST that God is faithful to keep His promises to us. He has a plan for your life—a plan to prosper you, not to hurt you; a plan to give you hope and a future.

II. WE KNOW THAT GOD REWARDS OUR FAITHFULNESS

God not only admires faithfulness, He requires our faithfulness. In His message to the church at Smyrna Jesus said, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10) We learn two things from that verse. First, faithfulness may cost us everything—even our lives. Second, God will reward us for our faithfulness.

How many of you have ever seen the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park? There are larger and more powerful geysers than Old Faithful, yet it remains the most famous of all geysers because of its predictability. If the previous eruption lasts less than 2 ½ minutes, the next one will occur 65 minutes later. If the eruption lasts more than 2 ½ minutes, the next eruption will happen 91 minutes later. You can set your watch by it.

Other geysers are unpredictable and cannot be safely approached. But when Old Faithful was named in 1870, soldiers used it for a laundry, because they knew when it would erupt. They would safely walk up to it and put their dirty clothes in it. They found that linen and cotton clothing would be shot into the air clean, but wool clothing was torn to shreds.

Old Faithful just keeps spewing along day after day, week after week, and year after year. Let me give you another word for faithfulness. It’s good old-fashioned “sticktoitiveness.” That may not be a word, but when you need a word and can’t find a word you make up a word. Faithfulness isn’t just doing the right thing once; it’s doing the right thing over and over again, day after day, week after week, year after year—just like Old Faithful. A good synonym for faithfulness is loyalty. How loyal are you? Let me mention four areas of our lives where God requires us to be loyal and faithful. And like every other variety of fruit, we can’t manufacture faithfulness, but when we surrender to Jesus, who lives in us, His faithfulness will be displayed in our lives.

A. Through Jesus I can be a loyal family member

Husbands and wives, are you faithful to each other? Parents are you faithful to your children? Children are you faithful to your parents? The traditional family is under attack today in America. The basic foundation of a nation is the family, and the devil knows that if he can destroy stable families then our nation will fall apart.

When things are great in your family, loyalty comes easy. But when families go through tough times, that’s when we need to show our loyalty to one another. There’s a picturesque verse from Proverbs that speaks about the value of loyalty. “Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble.” (Proverbs 25:19)

If you’ve ever had a toothache, you know that it makes you miserable. If you have a bad foot, every step you take is agony. And that’s a description of how miserable families are when family members are unfaithful.

B. Through Jesus I can be a loyal friend

You can’t choose your family, but you can choose your friends. And if you go through this life with some real friends, then you are rich indeed. The Bible says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (Proverbs 17:17)

A few years ago a national magazine had a contest to ask readers to give a definition of a friend. Some of the submissions that won honorable mention said, "A friend is someone who multiplies your joys, and divides your sorrows." Another person said, "A friend is someone who understands your silence." But the winning entry said, "A friend is someone who walks in when all the world has walked out."

You may be thinking, "I wish I had a friend like that." Well, if you want a friend, you must first BE a friend. Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man that has friends must show himself friendly." (AKJV)

C. Through Jesus I can be a loyal manager of God's money

The Bible talks about "stewardship" but we don't have a frame of reference for that word, because we don't have people in our culture who work as stewards any more. In the old days of England, a steward was a man who ran the estate of a wealthy landowner. He lived in the house, and used the land owned by another man. His job was to manage it well. If your last name is Stewart, you probably had ancestors who managed a large estate. The word comes from two old English words, "stig," meaning "house" and "weard," which meant "guard." A steward was someone who guarded and managed his boss's house.

All of us are stewards. We don't own anything; we only manage it for our Boss, God. That house you live in? It's not yours, God owns it and you're managing it for Him. That car, those stocks, and bonds? They aren't yours: God owns them all. What kind of manager are you?

Jesus said, "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?" (Luke 16:10-11)

To put it another way, if you're faithful with a little, God will entrust more for you to manage. You may be thinking, "If I had a million dollars, I'd give God 10% of it." Well if God can't trust you to tithe on the \$1,000 you make a week, what makes you think He will trust you with more?

This is a powerful verse because most American Christians reverse the order. They think, "If I'm a good spiritual manager, then God will give me riches." Jesus said exactly the opposite. He said that if you're a good manager of God's money, then He will entrust you with true riches. So if "true riches" isn't referring to money, what is it? True riches are spiritual blessings. To put it simply, you may think, "If I was more spiritually mature, I would tithe to the Lord." Nope. Turn it around. If you tithe your income to the Lord, you will become more spiritually mature. If you don't believe, it try it. You may be backslidden, go ahead and tithe and see what happens. You may be a lukewarm believer, go ahead and tithe and see what happens. That's what God says in Malachi 3:10. He says, "Bring all the tithes...and see if I will not throw open the windows of heaven and pour out for you so much BLESSING (true riches) that there will not be room enough to receive it." (NKJV)

D. Through Jesus I can be a loyal church member

We need to show loyalty to our family, to our friends, to God, and we should show loyalty to each other by being a part of the church. The Bible says, “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12:5-6) I belong to you, and you belong to me. I need you and you need me. We all need each other, so God provided a structure for this and it’s called the church.

As I travel around the world, I notice there are three big “M’s” America exports all over the world: music; movies, and McDonald’s. But fortunately there is something unique to America that we haven’t yet exported to foreign countries—uncommitted Christians. In a typical American church, like Green Acres, we will have many more members on our rolls than actually attend. For instance, we have over 15,000 members but two-thirds of our members don’t even show up on a given Sunday. Plus in America there are people call themselves Christians and attend a church, but they haven’t joined. They’re like “free-floating” Christians. That’s another American phenomenon I hope we never export.

In churches around the world all the believers are connected to a local congregation and they are loyal to their church. Attendance at these churches is MORE than their membership. In Asia, Africa, and Central and South America if a church has 100 members, there will be 120 attending. If they have 1,000 members, there will be 1,200 people attending. And in some of the largest churches, if they have 10,000 members they will have 12,000 in attendance. And the largest 25 churches in the world aren’t in North America. If Green Acres followed the pattern of these evangelical churches outside America, with 15,000 members we should have 18,000 people in attendance on a given Sunday. What’s the problem? America Christians show very little FAITHFULNESS and loyalty to their church. I’m not fussing at you, because you’re here, so good for you. I’m just diagnosing a spiritual problem that exists only in America.

Imagine joining an army, but then you show up whenever you feel like it, or not at all. And if you do go into battle, when the going gets tough, you leave the battlefield for a safer location. Would you like to share a foxhole with someone like that? We’re involved in spiritual warfare and too many of the soldiers of the Lord are AWOL: absent without love.

But I have a word for those of you who attend, but are not yet serving the Lord; you’re like a spectator rather than a participant. Of the 5,000 people who attend here semi-regularly, we only have about 1,500 who are actively serving somewhere. Will you demonstrate your faithfulness to Jesus by stepping up from the crowd to volunteer to be a part of the committed core? Over the next three weeks we are going to be informing you about where we need volunteers and how you can serve. Three weeks from today, August 5, is the day you’ll be given an opportunity to say, “I’ll serve.” If you’re an attender, but not serving, God wants to move you from the sidelines to service, from a listener to a leader, from convenience to commitment!

If you’re brand new here, be sure to check us out. Take some time to see what God is doing here. Yes, we’re a big church, but it’s because we have a big heart for our community and the world. I’ve heard this testimony hundreds of times, “I thought I would never attend a big church, but the longer I came, the smaller it became.”

But for some of you who’ve been attending for months, or years, it’s time to take the next step. Do you know the difference between an attender and a member? It’s the difference between being married and living with someone—commitment. Maybe you’ve been attending for years; the engagement has lasted long enough, let’s tie the knot!

And to our television audience, I want to say it’s wonderful to provide this ministry if you’re not physically able to attend church. But if you have the health to attend a local church, you need to get out of that La-Z-Boy and show up to a church that preaches Jesus. Television is not a substitute for worship because there is no opportunity to do what the Bible says that we gather to do on Sundays.

I like Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Hebrews 10:25, “Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.” The big Day is the return of Christ, so there’s no time to lose. Will you be a loyal church member?

CONCLUSION

Being faithful isn’t cheap. Sometimes it costs us everything. 9/11 wasn’t the first Islamic jihad attack on Americans. In 1983, the U.S. Marines were stationed in Beirut Lebanon as a peacekeeping force in the Lebanon Civil War. Early on a Sunday morning, a suicide bomber drove a truck through the barbed wire fence surrounding the Marine Corps barracks and detonated an explosive device equal to 12,000 tons of TNT. The building was leveled and 241 American marines, sailors, and soldiers were killed.

Since that time, there has been ample proof that Iran directly sponsored the attack, and just this month (July 2012) a U.S. federal Judge ordered Iran to pay more than \$813 million in damages to the families of the Marines who lost their lives. Of course, there’s no way to make Iran pay.

There were only a handful of survivors, and one of the Marines pulled from the debris was Lance Corporal Jeff Nashton. He had been terribly injured and blinded by the explosion. He was airlifted to a military hospital in Germany.

General Paul Kelley, Commandant of the Marine Corps, went to visit Corporal Nashton in the hospital to present him a Purple Star. When he walked into the hospital room General Kelley said he had never seen that many tubes coming out of one man. He commented that he looked more like a machine than a man.

General Kelley introduced himself, but blind Corporal Nashton didn’t believe he was really a general. He thought they were playing a trick on him. So he grabbed his collar to feel for stars. He felt one, two, three, four stars, and then he released the general’s collar and did his best to salute. He was unable to speak, because of a breathing tube, but he motioned for a piece of paper and a pen to write. Corporal Nashton scribbled two words on the paper and showed it to the General. He wrote, “Semper Fi.” Every Marine knows that stands for “Semper Fidelis,” the Marine Corps motto that means, “always faithful.”

The rough, tough general said he felt tears rolling down his cheeks when he looked at his wounds and read those two words. According to Marine Corps lore, that was the only time the General cried. He saluted Nashton and then he reached up and removed the four stars from his collar and pressed them into Corporal Nash’s hand and said, “Here, son, you deserve these more than I do.” Corporal Nashton recovered and he keeps those four stars in a case as a constant reminder of “Semper Fi.”

“Semper Fi” means never giving up or never giving in. We can say that about Jesus. He was always faithful, even unto death, for us. And as followers of Jesus we should always be faithful to Him. Because the Bible says one the day when we come face to face with Jesus we may hear Him say these amazing words, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!” (Matthew 25:21)

OUTLINE

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D. Church member

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes