

Faithfulness • Galatians 5:22–23

Cholera is a frightening disease that causes such severe diarrhea that it is possible, in the case of young children, to become dehydrated and die within hours. Often the problem is that the water is not reliable. Too often it is contaminated and is a primary channel for the spreading of disease.

Years ago I was traveling in Africa and I got a lesson of a lifetime. Somewhere along the way I drank impure water and became sick far away from home for nineteen consecutive days. Ever since then, when traveling in third world countries, I'm always careful to make sure the water is boiled or otherwise purified. I'm careful about eating fresh fruits and vegetables. The risk is too great. It's just not the same as in the United States where you can go up to a drinking fountain anywhere in the country and not even give it a thought. You can drink out of a hose in someone's backyard and be sure that the water is okay to drink.

What's interesting is how unimportant to us is that which is all-important to people in third world countries. My guess is that when we got up this morning and brushed our teeth or took a drink of water from the faucets of our homes, none of us gave a single thought to its purity, much less thought that it might be life threatening. We assume that our water is trustworthy.

We're told that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Faithfulness and trustworthiness are really the same. It is a common part of our vocabulary. We would say that a faithful friend is a friend you

can always trust. If you have a faithful dog, you can depend on that dog to like you even if everyone else treats you rotten. And, if you have a faithful husband or wife, then you assume that person will keep those vows "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health".

The term used in Galatians 5:22-23 is "fruit of the Spirit" - not the fruits. It's singular. It's kind of like a recipe. There are these nine different flavors that mix together and uniquely make the "fruit of the Spirit".

Suppose you were trying to bake a cake but failed to add the water, or at least enough water. What would happen? It wouldn't stick together. You could put it in the oven and bake it at the right temperature for the right period of time, but it wouldn't be anything like the cake that was pictured on the box.

Although we don't usually think of the water as a flavor, or as anything that is all that important, yet without it all of the other ingredients, all of the other parts, would fall apart. It's the water that makes the mix work.

Now, suppose you could take the flavors, or ingredients, of the fruit of

the Spirit and put them all together in someone's life, but you left out faithfulness. The rest wouldn't work. It wouldn't stick together. Because if there wasn't a consistency of reliability, a trustworthiness, then what would you have? You'd have patience that sometimes loses its temper. Or you would have goodness that is occasionally evil, or self-control that is out of control, or gentleness that is

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mean. It simply wouldn't make any sense. And so trustworthiness is the glue that holds together all of the other Christian virtues. And trustworthiness and faithfulness are the same thing.

Faithfulness is keeping your word. If you're a Christian and you say you'll do it, it is as good as done, because that is what a faithful person does.

As a graduate student, I worked for a short time in the credit department of a Sears store in the Denver area. In those days before computerized records, every credit card customer had a card with dates and comments on the back.

My first day on the job I handled several customer cards that had AA on them. At first I thought that meant they were rated like bonds or school term papers. I figured an A was good, so an AA must be really good. Then my trainer explained to me that these customers paid "As Agreed". It wasn't saying they didn't charge or owe any money, but they kept the contract, they lived up to their deal, they paid what they were supposed to pay when they were supposed to pay it. They were faithful.

Faithfulness means dependability. There are very few surprises with a faithful person. She always does the job. He shows up on time. He doesn't call in sick unless he is sick. Work is done in a consistent way.

Faithfulness includes loyalty. In fact, that is one of the English translations for the Greek word *pistis*. A loyal person doesn't cheat the boss. A loyal friend doesn't gossip behind your back. A loyal spouse tries to make you look good.

There are all kinds of expressions of faithfulness. It can and should permeate every aspect of life. Faithfulness is a wonderful and beautiful and strong. It is what the Christian life is all about. But when it is missing, it is

tragic and painful and sad.

Two friends of mine were even better friends with each other. They had known each other all of their lives; they had grown up together. One was married and the other was single.

During the Vietnam War, the one who was married was drafted and was sent to Southeast Asia. He was concerned about his wife's welfare in his absence. His friend assured him that if she faced a need, he would be there to help.

My friend who was heading to Vietnam took great comfort in knowing he could count on his friend back home. However, the friend at home was not faithful. He had an affair with her that ended their marriage. He was not trustworthy.

Have you ever looked at a piece of dehydrated fruit? Technically, dehydration is the removal of water. While you could say that all of the other ingredients are still there, it doesn't look the same, it doesn't smell the same, it doesn't taste the same. It's not the same. It's completely different when the water is taken out of it.

And so it is with the dehydrated fruit of the Spirit if faithfulness is not there. You may still have love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness, but it doesn't look the same or smell the same or taste the same - because it's not the same - if faithfulness is missing.

If you're like me, you want to be faithful. But how do you grow that way?

That Greek word, *pistis*, can be translated either "faith" or "faithfulness". That's because my faithfulness to you grows out of my faith in God.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9 we are told that God is faithful to us. God is 100% trustworthy. He keeps his word. He tells the truth. As we look to God and see the way he relates to us and the

way he treats us we see how we are supposed to treat other people.

Some people think that to be a Christian you have to go to church, be baptized and keep all the rules. Interestingly, the New Testament says that it's not rule keeping that makes someone a Christian; in fact, we are incapable of keeping the rules. What really makes someone a Christian is faith in Jesus Christ. A Christian believes what God says: that we're sinners, that he loves us, that Jesus Christ came and died on the cross so that we can have our sins forgiven and inherit eternal life.

A Christian believes God is trustworthy. And when we believe that, then something extraordinary happens - as we have that kind of faith in God, we then grow in our relationships to other people. The two are connected. Faithfulness grows faithfulness.

Have you ever seen a magazine article promoting the sale of government securities? There is usually a line that says that these securities are backed by the full faith of the United States Government.

The United States government doesn't back junk bonds. Anything that has the full faith of the US Government is considered the safest possible investment. No other government in the world is more stable, has a longer track record or has proven to be so financially trustworthy. If the government of the United States falls, not even our money is worth anything.

When an investor puts his or her money into a faithful government, that investor can be trusted to be financially secure.

Let's be more specific. Suppose you are

selling your house for \$100,000. You have two buyers. You check out the finances of each. Buyer #1 has \$50,000 in 1980s junk bonds and \$50,000 in Iraqi oil wells. Buyer #2 has \$100,000 in US government bonds that mature this week. Which buyer do you think is more trustworthy? Obviously the one with government bonds because the US government is more trustworthy.

The same goes for us and God. Everyone who trusts God is able to be trustworthy. Those who have their faith in God can be faithful.

Faith grows faithfulness. The Christian who is secure in his or her relationship with God is able to be secure in relationships with others. If we want our lives to be flavored with faithfulness and trustworthiness, then we should start out by placing our own faith in a trustworthy God.

Faithfulness is a very attractive virtue. As an employer I want to hire faithful employees. As a husband I highly value a faithful

wife. As a person I value faithful friends. And as a Christian, I want to be faithful so that I attract other people to God!

There is a wonderful example of faithfulness set in the first century context of slavery in the Roman Empire. Some say that there were more slaves in the Roman Empire than there were those who were free - significantly more. It was a great reality in the first century Roman Empire when Christianity entered the picture.

Many slaveholders who became Christians set their slaves free. But what happened to those slaves who became Christians and had owners who didn't like Christian teachings about God?

Faith grows faithfulness. The Christian who is secure in his or her relationship with God is able to be secure in relationships with others.

Here's the advice for Christian slaves found in Titus 2:9-10:

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

How did slave holders become Christians? By Christian slaves attracting them to God through trustworthiness, even in the worst of circumstances.

And how can Christians attract people to God today? At least one of the key means is through faithfulness - trustworthiness, dependability. It was a powerful practice and virtue then and it is still a powerful practice and virtue today if we want to impact our families and friends and our whole world around us for Christ. Even under the worst of circumstances.

Awhile back I read an article about geese that explained why geese fly in a V formation. It said that the flapping of their wings creates an uplift that helps the birds in back fly more easily. When the lead bird gets tired, it rotates back in the formation and another bird takes the lead. The geese in the back part of the V honk to encourage the ones in the front who have to do more of the work. (I guess that means that when you're driving down the highway and someone honks at you, it's really just for encouragement!)

But this article went on to explain something very interesting about geese. When one of the geese in the V formation gets sick or is shot, two other geese pull out of the formation and follow it down to help and protect the wounded goose. They stay by that wounded bird until it dies or is able to make it on its own. Only then do they resume their journey.

It seems to me that they are faithful. They

are trustworthy geese. The question is how did they get that way? The answer is that God created them to be faithful. And the same God who instilled in those geese that quality of faithfulness, created us to be flavored with the fruit of the Spirit in the image of a faithful God.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, FAITHFULNESS, gentleness and self-control.”

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