

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

8. Faithfulness

Matthew 25:14-30

We come this morning to the seventh of these nine qualities of the Christian’s life that Paul describes to the Christians in Galatia as “*the Fruit of the Spirit*”. We’ve been looking at this list and discovering what kind of life we should be leading if we are serious about following Jesus in walking the path of the Holy Spirit. The person who really wants to be committed to Jesus should be modelling these nine qualities in their life day by day – not choosing a few of them to concentrate on, nor gradually working through them and ticking them off to see what kind of “grade” of Christian excellence they’ve achieved, but seeing them all as completely integral to their life spent living out the values of the Kingdom of God in their community.

We’ve seen how love – sacrificial, outgoing love – joy, or serenity, and a peaceful reliance on God should be at the heart of this. And we’ve noted that patience, kindness and goodness should characterise our dealings with those around us, however difficult we might find that to put into practice.

Today we arrive at faithfulness and immediately come upon an issue with translation. We’ve already seen that some of these words pose a few little problems when trying to put Paul’s Greek into English, particularly the fact that the words translated “*goodness*” and “*kindness*” in this list are sometimes translated interchangeably elsewhere in the New Testament. The Greek word we find here is *pistis*. If you listen to the bits about Greek that I go on about from time to time – and I quite understand if you don’t! – you may remember that the word and its derivatives are most often translated as “*faith*”. It’s also translated as “*trust*” and “*belief*”, but only a few times as it is here as “*faithfulness*”. The Greek word can mean all of those things, so how do we decide which one to choose? Or, rather, why did the translators of the NIV (and most other English versions of the Bible) choose this word?

Well, there are a couple of things that you always need to bear in mind when you’re translating because every language has words that can mean more than one thing in English: not every word has a single, direct equivalent. The first thing to look at is the **context in which it is used**. In this list of qualities that characterise the life lived for Christ, the words around *pistis* are to do with things that seem to involve other people. We are not talking about being *patient* with God, nor about being *kind* to God. Next week’s quality is *gentleness*, which is about our attitude and behaviour towards other people. So it’s highly likely that this word is also about connecting with others, rather than something directed towards God. “*Faithfulness*” is a word which expresses that, rather than “*faith*”, which most people would read as something we have in God. If you read through the various commentaries about this passage, you’ll

find that pretty well everyone makes the same point. Some even translate the word in a way that makes it even more apparent: Tom Wright, for example, uses “*trustworthy*” here.

So that’s started to give us some idea of what the word means here in English. The other important thing to note when you’re translating a word in one context is to look at **how the word is used in other places**. The word will usually come up somewhere else so you can look and see how it’s used there. (Paul is a writer who sometimes makes up words that don’t appear anywhere else, which can be quite a problem, but that’s not the case here.) The word *pistis* is used all over the place in the New Testament, as well as in other Greek works. Most of the time it’s pretty clear – again from the context – that it means “*faith*” as in “*faith in God/Jesus*”. But one place where that clearly isn’t the case is in that parable we have just heard read from *Matthew 25*.

This parable is usually referred to as “*The Parable of the Talents*”. A *talent* was originally a sum of money, worth in today’s terms probably around £250. Because of this story and the way it has been interpreted over the centuries, the word has come to mean what we use it for today – a gift or skill or ability. The point of the story, though, is about using what we’ve been given. In the case of the three servants mentioned here, it was a sum of money. And Jesus is saying here – and there other ways of looking at this parable, I know – that it’s not what we’ve got that really matters, but how we use it.

These three servants were given different sums of money by their rich master who was off on a journey. It’s not anything to do with their status or rank, as far as we know, just a random distribution of money. On his return the master asks what they’ve done with the money and couple of them have used it in a way that has increased its value. The third servant has simply kept it hidden – it’s still there, but it hasn’t been invested, it hasn’t grown in value. So, one of the things to come out of this parable is this idea of using what we have been given – which is different for each of us. Whether it’s money or property or ability or time or connections or education or whatever, none of those things in and of itself makes us a better person or a better Christian. It’s down to how we use those things, what we do with them for the benefit of others and for the glory of our Master, Jesus.

But back to the task in hand: translating *pistis*. Do you notice how Jesus refers to these servants? Two of them are commended by the master for the way they’ve used what he gave them and he says to each of them: “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful in a few things.*” That’s the adjective formed from the noun “*faithfulness*”. It’s contrasted here with the description of the third servant who is called “*wicked [and] lazy*”. The first two have clearly shown “*faithfulness*” in their actions. This is not about faith in God or belief in God (or anyone else for that matter), it’s about

something else. And if we can work out what that is, we may have another clue as to what “*faithfulness*” means in the list of the Fruit of the Spirit.

Well, looking at what they’ve done and at the master’s response to it, I think it’s pretty fair to say that they have acted in a manner that we would call reliable or trustworthy. These are two people who have behaved with integrity and have vindicated their master’s trust in them. And when we look back at Paul’s list we can see that this is, indeed, a quality that is connected with our attitudes to others, a quality that is part of the face we show to the world around us demonstrating that we are followers of Jesus.

As disciples, we are to be known as people of integrity, people who keep their word, people who can be relied upon, people who are loyal and trustworthy. Remember that Paul provides this list of Fruit of the Spirit in contrast to what he calls “*the acts of the sinful nature*”, and in amongst those we find “*hatred, discord, jealousy ... selfish ambition ... factions*”, characteristics that we might agree contrast markedly with “*faithfulness*”. Our culture is riddled with those latter things. We find our news reports full of stories of those who have not acted with “*faithfulness*”. There are those who have not been faithful to their partner, to their boss, to their duty, to their word. I said last week that we are living in a society that is becoming more and more suspicious, more and more cynical – and that is because of the perceived lack of faithfulness in our political leaders who have gone back on their word, in our cultural icons who have been lying or deceitful, in our sporting heroes who have tried to cheat by taking performance enhancing substances, in our business leaders who have succumbed to corrupt practices or underhand dealing. Because of a lack of faithfulness in a few rotten apples, our trust in the Police force, in caring agencies, in educators – in the Church, even – is starting to leak away.

That is why we need to live as Paul calls us to in these words. We need to be people of our word, those who can be trusted to do what we say, to live out what we preach. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “*It is better to be faithful than famous*”. Going back to that parable, this is about using what God has so graciously given us – our time, our skills, our money, our property and so on – in the right way, for his glory and for the good of others. There are all kinds of temptations that come our way – not least, the temptation succumbed to by the third servant just to hang on grimly to what we’ve got and not take any risks – all kinds of things we’d like to do with our lives and our possessions, but we must hold out against them. Mother Theresa once said, “*God did not call us to be successful, but to be faithful*”. We are not to try and live as the world does by feathering our own nests and doing everything for our own benefit, but to live as Jesus calls us to by faithfully following him and his ways.

And don’t forget, all of this is to be a reflection of the way God has related to us. As we’ve seen with “*love, joy, peace, patience, goodness and kindness*” so far, so too with “*faithfulness*” we can see that

God has shown himself to be utterly reliable, utterly trustworthy. The Psalms are full of praise for a God on whom we can always rely, a God who is always there for us, a God who never goes back on his word. And that was, of course, exemplified in human form by Jesus himself. He was always totally faithful to the task his Father had given him, even to that climactic point on the night before his execution when he cried out, “I really don’t want to do this, Father – but nevertheless, it’s not what I want, but your will that needs to be done.”

Take a moment or two some time to think about what God has given you, about what you could use for his glory and the good of others, and then consider whether you are being **faithful** in the way you use it. God has been so faithful to you – ponder that as well – so are you prepared to live in **faithfulness** to him and to others – a person known for your integrity, your loyalty, your reliability. And again, as we’ve said each time so far, if you’re struggling with it, pray to God for his help, for a good dose of faithfulness that you can share with others. And thank him that Jesus was faithful enough to give himself for you.

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One of the things to come out of this parable is the idea of using what we have been given – which is different for each of us. Whether it's money or property or ability or time or connections or education or whatever, none of those things in and of itself makes us a better person or a better Christian. It's down to how we use those things, what we do with them for the benefit of others and for the glory of our Master, Jesus.

Two of the servants are commended by the master for the way they've used what he gave them and he says to each of them: "Well done, good and **faithful** servant! You have been **faithful** in a few things." They have clearly shown "faithfulness" in their actions. They have acted in a manner that we would call reliable or trustworthy. These are two people who have behaved with integrity and have vindicated their master's trust in them. And when we look back at Paul's list we can see that this is, indeed, a quality that is connected with our attitudes to others, a quality that is part of the face we show to the world around us demonstrating that we are followers of Jesus.

As disciples, we are to be known as people of integrity, people who keep their word, people who can be relied upon, people who are loyal and trustworthy. Amongst "the acts of the sinful nature" we find "hatred, discord, jealousy ... selfish ambition ... factions", characteristics that contrast markedly with "faithfulness". Our culture is riddled with those latter things. That is why we need to live as Paul calls us to in these words. We need to be people of our word, those who can be trusted to do what we say, to live out what we preach. It is a reflection of the way God has related to us. God has shown himself to be utterly reliable, utterly trustworthy. And that was exemplified in human form by Jesus himself.

Questions of discussion

- 1) What does faithfulness mean for you? Give some examples.
- 2) The point of The Parable of the Talents is not to do with what we've got, but with how we use it? Would you agree? Why/why not? In what areas of our lives is that particularly applicable?
- 3) Would you consider our society/culture to have good examples of faithfulness? Why/why not?
- 4) How has God demonstrated his faithfulness to us?
- 5) How can we demonstrate faithfulness most clearly in our community?