

Faithfulness

Psalm 57 and Lamentations 3:19-26

The Fruit of the Spirit we are studying could equally be labelled – 9 aspects of God's character.

The work of the Spirit in us is to transform us to be more Christlike. Jane started last week's sermon with the same idea.

The Fruit of the Spirit, listed in Galatians 5, are aspects of God's character that He desires to grow in us. (Great minds think alike!)

There is of course a simple route to these fruit. The more time we spend with God, the more like him we become, just as the more time we spend with another person the more their influence rubs off.

Our holiday was in Northumberland stopping with our Son and Daughter in Law in Leeds to break the journey. In Leeds you hear broad Yorkshire. Near Berwick on Tweed the two most common accents were either Geordies or Scots coming down over the border. Overhearing parents and children in conversation demonstrated their shared accent. Children speak like their parents.

Until they get older when children can develop two ways of speaking. At school or with their friends, their accent can be the local accent. At home with their parents they may well get told to stop speaking so sloppily. Or maybe that was just my experience! Stop dropping your aitches.

We can become like those we are with. But there must be integrity. It doesn't work well to have a split personality.

I once did some coaching with a lovely Christian guy grappling with this problem.

At church he loved to worship and pray and speak of Jesus. It bothered him greatly that at work his language was very poor indeed. Of course he was a long way towards solving the problem by being honest about it and seeking a solution. Which we found. In his case there was nothing at all in his work environment to remind him of God's presence and his determination to clean up his speech. He started keeping a small holding cross in his pocket. He LITERALLY clung to the cross, and it strengthened him to clean up his speech. He found he could be more faithful to God.

One of the great Old Testament themes is that God is faithful and His people are not. My evangelical dictionary of theology says

Faithfulness characterizes God's loyalty to his covenant people.

A covenant is an agreement by two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other behalf. The most obvious example was celebrated here yesterday as Lindsey and Peter were married. They made a covenant.

Covenants are open ended. The amount of love Peter shows to Lindsey is not limited by the amount of love she shows him. It's not a business transaction. What is required is that both parties are seeking to fulfill the covenant to the fullest extent of their capacity.

Those of us who go to Dormy each month see beautiful examples of covenant love in action. The love and gentle care being shown by one spouse, when their partner's capacity to respond is now diminished. This is faithfulness in action. Faithful to the marriage promises.

Faithfulness

Sadly we know only too well the pain of unfaithfulness. When marriage promises are broken, when friendships are broken, when we let each other down.

Most frequently we are unfaithful to God, failing to live as he invites.

How can we grow in this aspect of God's character...or rather, how can we aid the work of the Spirit to grow this aspect of God's character?

When speaking about the fruit of the Spirit previously, I have spoken about pathways.

The pathway of Righteousness will aid peace and patience.

Easy to remember – do the right thing.

The pathway of Strength will aid gentleness and self-control.

Easy to remember, His strength is sufficient for me.

But faithfulness can be practised in the every day situations we find ourselves in. The trick is not to look at our own rather poor track record, but to continually look to God – and worship, prayer and God's word are a great way to do that.

Songs are a great aid, the music helps us recall the words.

Sing with me if you know this little song, a setting of the Lamentations reading.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases

His mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning

New every morning

Great is your faithfulness O Lord

Great is your faithfulness.

Our capacity for faithfulness, increases as we remind ourselves just how great is God's faithfulness and his promises to us.

Which brings us to Psalm 57. Unusually we know the exact circumstances when this Psalm was written.

In secret David has been anointed king of Israel, but Saul is still King. David is recruited into Saul's service initially to play music when Saul is spiritually and deeply troubled.

David has defeated Goliath. He is a warrior of renown.

He is good looking, musical, everybody loves him.

And Saul wants him dead.

So David is on the run.

The Psalm doesn't pretend everything is hunky-dorey.

V1 Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you I take refuge.

I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed.

But as he pours out his need he focusses on the character of God.

God sends forth his love and faithfulness.

Great is your love, reaching to the heavens,

Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

David trusts in the faithfulness of God to fulfil the promise made to him.

There comes the rub. We probably don't feel worthy of God's love or convinced his faithfulness will be extended to us because of how unfaithful we can be. Why should God love me? Even more reason to remember God's covenant of love towards us, his forgiveness and His faithfulness.

Faithfulness

Worship reminds us of God's faithfulness, but we aid the development of this fruit in ourselves by fulfilling our calling, our service, our offering of ourselves back to God. Our part of the Covenant.

I'll close with a story.

Do you remember Charles Colson? He was known as President Nixon's hatchet man and actually served 7 months in prison for obstructing the Watergate investigation. He became a Christian and travelled widely as an evangelistic preacher.

He was once invited to preach at the notorious San Quentin prison and of the 2,200 inmates 300 had signed up to hear him. On arriving; there had been a find of a cache of weapons and the prison was in lockdown, so only a small number of prisoners came to the chapel and most of these were Christian anyway. Colson felt deflated. He had hoped to preach the Gospel to a big number and hoped for a big result. So, he thought he would do ten minutes and leave it at that.

Then he spotted a video camera and thought they might video the talk for the Chapel library – so perhaps he had better give it his all. So he did. He preached as if there were 1000 people listening.

Afterwards he shared his disappointment with the prison chaplain that so few could attend. Didn't you know, asked the chaplain...because of the lockdown they videoed your talk to show on the closed circuit TV's tomorrow morning and afternoon.

In fact they showed it nearly a dozen times and ALL 2,200 inmates heard the message.

Colson said he learned three lessons

1. Mother Teresa was right. God calls us to faithfulness, not to success.
2. If our goal is to change society we often fail. When we are obedient to God, he blesses our efforts more than we can envisage.
3. We should not grow weary in well-doing, we shall reap a harvest if we faint not.

The pathway for this fruit of the Spirit is worship in the every day circumstances, reminding ourselves of God's character, and seeking to be faithful in whatever he calls us to do.