

Christian Virtue Series: Faithful 100% Gal. 5:22; Job 1:13-21; 2:9,10;

I Kings 19:9,10,18

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During the 1988 Armenian earthquake, a man ran to the school where his son attended, and found the building collapsed. He remembered the words that he always told his son when he left for school: "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." He began digging through the rubble, looking for his son. At the 38 hour-mark, long after others had given up, he heard a sound and discovered that 14 of the children were still alive, including his son, who said, "Dad! Dad! I knew you'd come. I told the other kids if you were alive, you'd come dig us out, and you did!" This father was faithful to the promises he made to his son. And, faithfulness is this morning's Christian virtue.

We all like to think of ourselves as faithful, that we're loyal to people and causes. Maybe not as faithful as Horton the elephant, who promised a wacky bird to watch her egg for her! And did so despite tremendous adversity, saying, "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent!" We may not be that faithful, but we certainly don't like to be thought of as unfaithful, like those who secretly forsake their wedding vows for an affair, or those who betray their country, or like Judas who betrayed his friend, Jesus.

And the Bible calls us to be faithful people. The Apostle Paul writes, ²²*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,* ²³*gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.* (Gal. 5:22,23) Here we find a list of nine Christian virtues, called “fruits of the Spirit” by Paul. These are character traits which God’s Spirit wants to build into us, traits that are good for us, good for Christ’s community, the church, and good for society. And faithfulness is one of those traits. God wants us to be faithful people; Faithful to one another and faithful to God.

The Bible gives us many examples of people who tried to be faithful to God but found it to be challenging. One of those people is Job. Job was a righteous man who was blessed by God with wealth, land, and a large family. Then the roof fell in, literally. ¹³*One day when (Job’s) sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother’s house,* ^{14a}*messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them,* ¹⁵*and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.”* ¹⁶*While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you.”* ¹⁷*While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed*

three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” ¹⁸*While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house,* ¹⁹*and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.”* (Job 1:13-19)

In a few minutes’ time, Job learned that he had lost just about everything that was important to him- his herds (and therefore his wealth), his servants, and even his young adult children- seven sons and three daughters we’re told earlier. An unimaginable, devastating loss. How would Job respond? Look at the next few verses. ²⁰*Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped.* ²¹*He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”* ²²*In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.* (Job 1:20-22) Tearing his robe and shaving his head were ancient ways of expressing deep grief. But in the midst of that grief, Job acknowledged that all he had was a gift from God anyway, so he will not curse God or forsake him, just because these things were taken away.

Job remained faithful to God in horrible circumstances. And then... it got worse! He was afflicted with boils and sores covering his entire body. And this was during a time which lacked the kinds of relief available to us with modern medicine! Job's wife tells him to just give up on his God, who clearly isn't doing him any good. "Curse God and die," she says. Great advice, Mrs. Job! Job's response, "*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*" (Job 2:10b) Job remained faithful to God in the face of horrific tragedy, which he could neither understand nor explain. That's what faithfulness often does. It remains loyal even when loyalty is difficult.

In 1940 Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in the Deep South of Americus, Georgia, as a haven for racial unity and cooperation. In 1954 the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home. In the midst of the raid, Jordan recognized the voice of a local newspaper reporter as one of the Klansmen. The next day, the same reporter showed up in the midst of the smoldering ruins where he found Jordan planting seeds in a field. He said, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued his prodding with no response from Jordan. Finally the exasperated reporter

exclaimed, “You’ve got two Ph.D’s, you’ve put 14 years into this farm, and now there’s nothing left. Just how successful do you think you’ve been?”

Jordan turned to the reporter and said, “You just don’t get it, do you? You don’t understand us Christians. What we are about is not success, but faithfulness.” Jordan and others would rebuild the farm. They started a ministry building homes for poor families which eventually inspired an international ministry known as Habitat for Humanity. And the farm continues its work of racial reconciliation to this day. God calls us to be faithful.

But it’s not always easy, is it? The stories of Job and Clarence Jordan remind us of that. And so does the story of Elijah. Elijah was a great prophet in the 9th century B.C. You may recall his great victory in a contest against the prophets of the god Baal, which required great faith and courage. But then, in retaliation for Elijah’s victory over her prophets, Queen Jezebel issued an order that Elijah be killed on sight. In terror, Elijah fled, ending up far away holed up in a cave. Here’s what happened next.

⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁰He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the

Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” (I Kings 19:9-10)

Elijah is clearly questioning whether being faithful to God is worth it! He feels like he's kept his end of the bargain, putting his life on the line to overthrow pagan religion in Israel. But where has it gotten him? Hiding in a cave, far from home with a death sentence hanging over his head. God takes mercy on Elijah, showing himself to him and giving him someone to hand off the ministry to- a man named Elisha. God also pointed out that Elijah's fear was distorting his view of reality. He was not the only one left who was faithful to God; It only seemed that way. In fact, there were 7000 left in Israel, who had not bowed the knee to the god, Baal. In a time of crisis our fears can blind us to the reality of our situation. God will provide what we need to remain faithful to him and one another.

How are you doing in being a faithful person? Are you keeping your promises (large and small) to your wife, to your husband? To your children, to your co-workers, to your church, to God? What steps do you need to take to build up your faithfulness?

In the film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the King*, Frodo Baggins, a hobbit, is given the task of taking a powerful, magical ring to the

evil land of Mordor in order to destroy it. It is an impossible, life-threatening task. Gandalf, a wizard, understands that Frodo will need help on this journey, so he enlists another hobbit, simple, faithful Samwise Gamgee, to accompany Frodo on the trip. In fact he makes Sam promise that he will never leave Frodo. He also enlists seven other brave individuals to accompany Frodo. They become “The Fellowship of the Ring.”

Well into the journey, after several harrowing experiences that took the life of one of his friends, Frodo nobly decides to go alone to Mordor, so as not to endanger his friends anymore. He steps into a boat and pushes off by himself. Let’s watch what happens next. (VIDEO CLIP)

I love Sam’s words, “I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. A promise. ‘Don’t you leave him, Samwise Gamgee.’ And I don’t mean to. I don’t mean to.”

We’ve all made promises. To other people, to institutions, and to God. Faithfulness is having the character to keep them.