

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 7): Faithfulness”

Psalm 117; Galatians 5:22-23; Lamentations 3:19-33, Matthew 25:14-30

Halfway through my seminary education, I took a class called Advanced Biblical Exegesis with Dr. Cara. After studying Greek and Bible basics, we had to take what Dr. Cara called “the hardest class in seminary.”

You know what he said after that? (In America, an A is the highest grade.) He said: “Almost no one should get an A in this class. For many of you, if you get an A, you’re sinning.”

What did he mean!? Many of us had spouses and children, jobs and ministry responsibilities. We all had other classes. We all had friends. Churches. Dr Cara said “This is a class. This is not your life. You want to get an A in life. Be faithful to what God has called you to. God has called you to much more than getting an A in Advanced Biblical Exegesis.”

Secular culture doesn’t do faithfulness very well. The world around us does much better at success. “Get your A in Advanced Biblical Exegesis.” “Get into Gymmi, get into your dream university. Get a great job that pays great. Buy things. Show your success through conspicuous consumption.”

You might think this story is about success. About making money. It’s not. Jesus tells us a story about a master who leaves for a long journey. He gives his wealth to his 3 servants (14). He doesn’t say “listen, when I come back, you better show me some results. I want a big return on investment.” He simply entrusts his wealth with them.

And it’s a lot of wealth. A talent is 20 years of a laborer’s wages. That means one servant gets a century’s worth of wages to take care of. Even the one who just got 1 talent got twenty years’ wages!

The master doesn’t demand success. The master doesn’t even say “don’t lose a penny.” What does the master expect? The master expects faithfulness.

Now the servants have capabilities (! 15). But still: this is a huge responsibility. The servants should feel deeply honored by it! If one of you told me you were going away for several years, and you gave me 5 million Swiss Francs ... I would be nervous. But I would be deeply honored. And then I would start a business.

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When I started a church in the US, the church agencies who invested in our new church did two things. Number 1: They told us that perhaps the majority of church plants do not survive beyond 5 years. Number 2: They told us that we were not a failure as a person if our new church failed. And they assessed our abilities and took into account risk factors. By the time they gave us the money to actually start a church, we felt honored, but not pressured. We were free to exercise creativity with responsibility. To experiment, to adapt, and to do something new and beautiful without the pressure that we must succeed. What was asked of us was faithfulness, not success.

The Lord God is not short on resources. When he gives us opportunities, he doesn’t stand over our shoulders demanding success. The Good Lord is not your boss or your board or your stock investors. We’re not here to bear the fake secular fruit of success.

If the world is not interested in faithfulness, but success, what’s religion’s problem? Sometimes religious people just want more butts in the pews, more bucks in the budgets, more bling in the buildings. Secular success in church.

But sometimes they do the opposite. The fake fruit of religious faithfulness is “faithism.” Your faith is ultimately in your faith. You are good at faith. Or you try to be. You envy people who have more faith. You look down on people with less faith. You’ve made your faith about your faith. Your faith is in your faith. Guess who it’s not in? Jesus. Guess what you’re not doing if you’re focused on your faith as the thing that really matters: being faithful. It’s a small, pathetic, and frightening world when you’re stuck inside your own faith.

But notice in our parable that—just like Jesus doesn’t demand success—he also doesn’t spiritualize faithfulness. He doesn’t say: “Here’s 100 years’ wages. Believe really hard. “If you can see it, then you can be it. If you just believe it, there’s nothing to it.”

The master just wants the servant to be faithful with his wealth. And that means being wise, steady, dependable, creative, active. There’s a bad habit in religion. People “faithify” secular pressures of success. They tell you to simply trust the Lord. If you fail, they’ll usually say you weren’t trusting the Lord enough.

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There are times when Jesus points out the great faith people have. It pleases him when people trust his Father. But this parable from the mouth of the Lord Jesus doesn't “faithify” success. It doesn't praise faithism. Instead, Jesus' story invites us into something more genuine: A faithful life. The fruit of faithfulness.

The faithful servants receive the massive sum of money from their master. As soon as the master goes away (16), the first two servants are working on their assignment. Putting the money to work.

The master was gone a long time (19). By the time he returned, the faithful servants have doubled their master's money. Who knows what they did to double the money. Who knows how many successes and failures they had along the way. Maybe one bought a field, planted a crop, and then there was a drought. Maybe the price of land went way down. Maybe there was an epidemic and things were tough for a year or two. Or maybe there were a few normal years and then a really great crop. Maybe the price of land went up, and he sold the field. We don't know how they did it. But it wasn't magic. All we know is that they were faithful. And the master doesn't say, “well done, successful servant!” But “well done, faithful servant.”

Contrast that with the third servant. As soon as he gets his bag of money, he goes and buries it. He's not even going to try. Remember: the master is gone a long time. That means that for 99.99% of the time that he was responsible for his master's money, he was literally doing nothing. Doing nothing to serve his master. Exercising no creativity, initiative, savvy. Seeing nothing through over the long haul. Exercising no patience. Burning no calories. Not even thinking about his responsibility.

And you see what his excuse was when the master returned after a long time? He says “I was afraid of you. You're important. Rich. Powerful” (24).

And what did the master say? Not “oh, I'm sorry if I intimidated you.” He says “you are a lazy servant. And wicked” (26).

You see, the servant took no joy in serving. He only thought of himself.

And what is the result? Well, the faithful servants get three things:

They get to hear “well done!”

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They are entrusted with more responsibility and rewarded for it.

They get to enter into the happiness of their master.

We were made for all these things! To hear these three things:

“Good!”

“Here’s more!”

“Let’s celebrate!”

Someone asked me last night if I have ever preached on hell. I said that I preach on it when it is in the Scripture that I’m preaching on. Well, here’s a sort of allusion to hell.

Jesus says that the lazy, wicked servant (28) does not get to hear these three things. This is hell. To not hear “Good!” To not hear “here’s more!” To not hear “Let’s celebrate.” To be outside when the party is going on inside. And to realize that, actually, even though you resent the host for not having you at the party, you’ve always really disliked and distrusted that host anyway, and you wouldn’t want to hear his voice, receive his rewards, have more of his responsibilities, and share a toast with him, even if you could.

We think God is a bookkeeper like a secular boss. We think God is a spiritual bookkeeper, constantly gauging our spiritual energy. Constantly asking us if we really believe, like, really, deep down inside. But the Spirit of God brings about fruit in our lives, and that fruit is independent of “success” as well as of “spiritual enthusiasm.” The Spirit brings forth a steady faithfulness birthed from the deep-seated trust that God is precisely different than we’d expect: good, faithful, kind, generous, gracious. Because God is completely secure in his wealth and power, he is able to invest in our lives without worry. With a smile.

If we strive for success or super-spirituality, then we have fundamentally misjudged God, created God in the image of the culture or the church, rather than discovering the face of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you want to impress your god based on the secular model of success, you’re going to have to find another god. Because the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ loves the fruit of faithfulness, and is committed to seeing it in our lives. If you

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want to impress your god based on your super-spiritual ability to just believe really hard, you're going to have to find some other god to impress. Because the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is looking for the fruit of faithfulness, not a strong feeling of belief somewhere in your soul.

And where have we seen the fruit of faithfulness in a human life? Where have we seen the kind of human faithfulness over time that imitates God’s own faithfulness throughout eternity? We’ve seen it in Jesus. Thirty years of waking up each day, learning, growing, serving. Three years of speaking and praying and healing.

One long Thursday. One long Friday. One long Saturday in which he was faithful right to the end.

Jesus said “Father, I love and trust you. I know you’re good. So I’m going to get up this morning and love and serve the people in my life, in words and in actions.” And he did it beautifully and perfectly and faithfully. In private. In public. All the way till the end.

And you know what he heard when he rose again, and ascended to his Father’s home?

Good!

Here’s more!

Let’s celebrate!

To be a Christian is to love, trust, and follow the kind of God and Father who sent the kind of Son who showed that kind of faithfulness to us—to people like us who really struggle to be faithful. To be a Christian is to love this kind of God and Father so much that we learn to stop striving for success and searching for spiritual feelings, and start to follow Jesus in faithfulness. One foot in front of the other. Over a lifetime. With the smile of the Father in front of us. With the words “Good! Here’s more! Let’s celebrate!” ringing in our souls. With a longing to hear them with our very ears.

And we will hear those words, because if we belong to Jesus, his Spirit will produce in us the fruit of faithfulness. May it be so.