
The Fruit of Faithfulness

DAVE BAST

When I was young, I used to love to listen to music at home; for that matter, I still do; but when I was young—and this is what my grandkids find so difficult to imagine—I didn't listen to my favorite music on an iPod or an iPad or a smart phone. I didn't listen to it through earbuds; I didn't store it in the cloud, I stored the music on LPs—long-playing records—and I listened to it on our stereo or hi-fi. Hi-fi was short for high fidelity, and that was an appropriate name, because a good record, played on a good stereo, was remarkably faithful to the original performance. Well, as Christians, we are called to be hi-fi people. Fidelity, or faithfulness, is another fruit of the Holy Spirit. Let's think about that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are now approaching the end of our nine-part series on the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5. That is: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; and today we have come to the virtue or great quality of faithfulness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as we talk about that, and as we had on also the fourth program in this series when we looked at patience, we are happy to welcome Neal Plantinga as a guest to the program. Neal is currently the senior research fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship at Calvin College, and he is going to help us today think about faithfulness. So, welcome again, Neal.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Thank you, Scott; thank you, Dave. I am delighted to be with you.

DAVE BAST

And we are delighted to have you. So, if we get right into the list, the fruit that is translated faithfulness here in Galatians 5:23 is actually *pistis*, which means primarily faith usually—most of the time it is just translated as faith or trust...belief...and often it is found in verb form with a preposition: Believe in; or as John likes to say: Believe into Jesus or the Gospel; but here, the context seems to suggest that it is more the quality of our faithfulness that is in question.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And of course, the difference is not huge. Faithfulness simply means being full of faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is that faith that you have in God, which...I mean, faith is sort of...kind of the glue that makes us stick to God, that gives us union with Christ, where we are one with Christ; and so faithfulness is kind of that quality to be able to stick with something—to stick to something—over the long haul; which, as we have said, we bear these fruit because they are finally the characteristics also of God; and God, of course, in scripture is the ultimate faithful one.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Really, if you think of the word *adhesive* and then you think of the word *adherence*, they come from the same root. It means sticking to someone or something.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; and that is really the foundational idea here behind this; or we might suggest another synonym from the New Testament: Endurance...kind of the quality of hanging in there, especially when the going gets tough...not giving up, not melting away, not drifting off, not bailing on a relationship, but being faithful in that sense.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Or steadfastness; you are purposefully continuing—you have constancy—you are moving along toward a person or toward a project and you are persistent.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And when you are known for that, as God is known for that, it really does have a lot to do with faith and having faith in someone. I mean, I heard somebody say one time...you know, somebody asked them the question: Hey, did your father show up on time for that event he was supposed to be at, because he had to pick up the grandkids? I remember this person saying: Yes, I know he did. Well, did you see it? No, but if you drop a hammer behind my back, I do not have to turn around to know it hit the ground. That is just who Dad is. He doesn't miss anything. And that is who God is. He is always there when he says he is going to be there. He is, as you said, Neal, steadfast and steady and sure; and when we have faith in God, then we know that he is faithful and we are called to do the same.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Faithfulness in scripture is one of God's signature traits. It is woven all through the Bible...through the Psalms, through the Decalogue, God is the faithful one in circumstances in which it is sometimes surprising that he is.

DAVE BAST

You know, maybe we could just quote a couple passages...some of those shorter verses...especially from the book of Psalms, where faithfulness is often associated with another great word for God, his steadfast love or loving kindness; so, listen to this:

Psalm 36:5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens; your faithfulness to the clouds. Psalm 40:11 As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me. Your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me. Psalm 86:15 But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

That is almost Israel's confession of faith, isn't it?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, and sometimes it is musical: I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is, indeed, that *chesed* that we have looked at before; that steadfast love; the loving kindness of God. All through the Psalms, that is the number one thing for which Israel praised God, even in times that were tough; and so, there is a famous passage in the book of Lamentations, which, as the title would suggest, did not spin out of a happy time in Israel's life. It is a book of lament; and yet, at the center of that book is this line, from which came a well-loved hymn: ^{3:22}The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. ²³They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

And that is a great keynote from the Old Testament, and again, it became a great hymn, but it is the testimony of believers along the ages.

NEAL PLANTINGA

It is a wonderful thing to realize that in the psalms of lament, the psalmist, who is lamenting in faith...he believes God is there; he believes God is responsible; and it is because God is faithful that the person lamenting cannot believe what just happened; and then complains about it, sometimes with even a note of accusation; but with one exception, I believe, every psalm of lament ends in faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the great thing about the psalms of lament. The psalmists lament God's absence to his face, right?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They believe they will be heard. Why? Well, because God is faithful. That is what he does. So, you have that irony that, yeah, God, you seem to be off duty. You are far from me. You never listen to me, but I am praying to you anyway because at some level I know you are still listening.

DAVE BAST

So, faithfulness is a great component—one of the greatest components of God's character in his relationship with us; and we have also touched on the idea that it is an important part of our character. What we actually mean by character: The fact that someone is trustworthy; the fact that they can be depended upon; the fact that they are steadfast, that they are a high fidelity person. That all kind of contributes to what we call character in a person, isn't it?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; our character arises from our temperament. We have a certain bent toward certain character traits, but then it is also cultivated...practiced.

DAVE BAST

And I am thinking of a passage in the book of II Corinthians, where Paul was accused by his critics, and they were many in that church, of lacking in character—of being fickle. He sort of defends himself rather hotly, because I think he is worried that they might reject the Gospel if they were rejecting him. So, he says: ^{1:18}As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes" and "No". ¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you—Silvanus, and Timothy, and I—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it is always "Yes;" ²⁰for all the promises of God find their "Yes" in him. So, here Paul sort of defends his own character but also God's at the same time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, that is our inspiration, to be faithful as God is faithful; but faithful to what specifically? Faithfulness, as you said, Neal, is like adhesive. It adheres to something, and in just a moment we are going to look at several somethings, to which our faithfulness attaches itself in this life. We will take that up in a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and joining us again in this program for our conversation on faithfulness is Neal Plantinga.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Delighted to be with you, Dave and Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we were mentioning earlier that to be faithful is to be faithful *to* something—to adhere—to stick to something; but I think, Dave and Neal, I think there are a number of things that we are called to be faithful to; and one of which is our faith itself, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you have I Corinthians 16:13, where Paul advises as he closes out that letter:

Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong. So, we are called...we were saying earlier that the word for faithfulness in Galatians 5's list of the fruit of the Spirit is faith, but sort of maybe a wheel within a wheel, but we are called to be faithful to faith; and we can wonder about how that goes.

NEAL PLANTINGA

One of the things when I became an adult and read Paul seriously for the first time, is that he was very much aware of the dangers to faith; not just that there would be persecutions, but also that there would be laxity, that there would be a lack of interest, that people would forget God's fingerprints were all over them; and so, he was regular in telling them to guard their faith—to keep it strong—and to do the things that would continue to give it sinew and bone.

DAVE BAST

If you think about his letters, almost every one of them was written, not just to address moral issues that cropped up in the Church, but doctrinal issues as well. As if the faith is constantly sort of being distorted or twisted or assaulted from various directions; and while we kind of shrink from the idea of an inquisition...we would not want to mount that, necessarily...*the* faith—the Christian faith—the Gospel—does require a certain amount of defending, doesn't it?

NEAL PLANTINGA

It does, and it requires a certain amount of practice. One of the reasons that in many churches Sunday after Sunday you recite the Creed, I believe in God the Father Almighty, is you are rehearsing your faith; and Christians are, in that respect, like musicians. They need constantly to practice their faith lest it get rusty.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and we were talking about Paul saying that, but all of this brings to mind a passage from the sometimes lesser known little epistle...almost a little New Testament memo, as we called it in a series a while back, of Jude, where Jude writes:

^{vs.3}Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. ⁴For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ, our only sovereign and Lord.

So, there is, Neal and Dave, what you were just talking about. You have to contend for the faith—you have to be ready to do it—and as you said, Neal, in practice, to talk about your faith is a requirement.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Well, here we run up against a well-known problem; and that is that those who contend for the faith can sound contentious...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And sometimes they are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

NEAL PLANTINGA

One time I heard Haddon Robinson, a great preacher and teacher preaching, talk about the prologue to the fourth Gospel, and how the only Son of God appeared to us full of grace and truth...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And Robinson said he must have been the only one. The rest of us can get one of those programs up and running, but not the other. So, you get people who are full of truth, but they are so miserable about it that you wish they would forget; and you get people who are full of faith...

DAVE BAST

Full of grace...

NEAL PLANTINGA

Full of grace, and cannot stand to tell you the truth. So, to have both of those things up and running...both grace and truth, that is the trick.

DAVE BAST

Here is another thing I think that biblically we would say we are urged to do as we practice the fruit of faithfulness, and that is to be faithful to our own word, to the commitments that we make, to the people to whom we vow these things. So, there is a verse, for example, in one of the great psalms...a beautiful passage from Psalm 116:

¹²What shall I render to the Lord for all of his benefits to me? ¹³I will take the cup of salvation... ¹⁴I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of his people.

So, a vow is a solemn promise, and you are not required necessarily to take a vow, but if you *do* take a vow, it is something we need to be faithful in keeping.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and Neal, I remember years ago you saying...maybe it was in class or in conversation...parents do not do their children any favors in terms of having trust in God when parents themselves keep breaking their promises to their kids, even little ones.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, a dad is disappointed that his son is not particularly reliable, and then remembers that he promised to attend all eight of his son's Little League games, and made only four of them.

DAVE BAST

Right; or the vows, you know, we undertake to be faithful to our spouses; ordination vows, another example, where we pledge our loyalty to not only the Bible, but to the faith as our church has articulated it. I mean, if you do that, you have to live up to it, right? I mean, pretty simple.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes. Lew Smedes, in a now famous sermon, once said that when you make a promise, you establish an island of certainty in the great sea of the future: I will be there for you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I remember, I think, in that same passage, Neal, he had that thing that I have brought into many a wedding homily when I have conducted weddings, ever since I read it from Lew: When you make and keep a promise, you are like God...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is so incredibly important.

DAVE BAST

That brings us back to II Corinthians 1, doesn't it? In Christ, God's promises are all Yes. Not yes and no, not first yes and then later no. God is not going to change his mind and renege and go back.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have seen two things in this segment so far: We need to be faithful to our faith, and contend for it. We need to be faithful to the other people. We keep our promises because God keeps his promises. But, I think the last thing we can think about in this segment: How we have to be faithful to Christ himself—to our Savior—which will include, as we saw in a previous program on patience, doing things Christ's way, but to be faithful to Christ himself; and you know, in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, that kind of came up again and again, where John, writing on Jesus' behalf to the early Church, accusing them again and again of not being faithful to Christ Jesus himself, which a lot of those seven churches were not doing.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, you mentioned those letters, Scott; they are full, as you said, of exhortation to fidelity—to faithfulness. So, just as an example: ^{Rev.2:8}To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, "These are the words of him who is first and last, who died and came to life again..., ¹⁰'Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer... You will suffer persecution, but be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you life as your victor's crown.'

So, there it is. We are encouraged to be faithful, to hang in there for Jesus; but Jesus himself was faithful first, wasn't he?

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes; one of the things that, especially during Lent, I often think of is that text in Luke Chapter 9, when the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Every line in that set face tells us of his infinite determination to follow through with the program of terrible suffering that he knows is up ahead of him.

DAVE BAST

So, we are called to be faithful to him. He was faithful to his Father and his Father's purposes, for which he came into the world; and we need that...we want it...I hope we do. We want to be faithful, but how can we develop it in our own lives? How can we actually practice faithfulness? Let's talk about that before we close

the program.
Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

NEAL PLANTINGA

And I am Neal Plantinga.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are closing out this program on faithfulness, part of a series on the fruit of the Spirit, and we were just talking about being faithful to Christ; but Neal, you were also saying to be *like* Christ, who set his face like flint, as the old translations of Luke 9 used to put it. He stared right at the cross that was coming, and he remained faithful to what his Father had called him to do.

NEAL PLANTINGA

Yes, the Gospels are uncompromising on this, that Jesus had to endure Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, the lies of some witnesses, some plots by priests. He had to endure all of those things, and yet he went ahead and did the work he had been called to do. That is an incredible display of faithfulness.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, that was worse than the physical suffering, probably, that he faced.

NEAL PLANTINGA

I think so. One of the things that I often think about during Holy Week is that the physical suffering of Jesus on the cross was perhaps not greater than the physical suffering of other people the Romans crossed up.

DAVE BAST

Like the two guys on either side.

NEAL PLANTINGA

The two guys he was crucified with. But Paul tells us that he became sin for us; that he absorbed a whole world's sin into himself, and the emotional and spiritual load that required is something that we can only barely start to imagine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, that is one of the reasons why I think the New Testament always tells us that our faithfulness will be tested most when we are persecuted—when we suffer. It is not so hard to be faithful on an ordinary day, much less in particularly good times; but we are going to be called to suffer. Romans 5: We have hope in the glory of God, but then Paul writes: ³We also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope; ⁵and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. I think that is the key. We cannot be faithful by ourselves. We can only be faithful as Jesus was faithful if we are filled up to the brim with Jesus.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a beautiful idea here, too. We talk about perseverance, and as we all know, our tradition especially values the idea of the perseverance of the saints, but that is not so much due to the strength of our commitment to God. We do not put our faith in our own faith or our own faithfulness; we put our faith in the

God who is faithful to us, and who, even when we do *not* prove faithful, still remains true to us.

NEAL PLANTINGA

One of the things that I often think about in connection with God's faithfulness is that prominent figures in the Bible deeply disappointed God: Jacob, for example, a trickster, a wheeler-dealer, who had finally to wrestle with God and then has one of the most beautiful scenes in scripture, a re-meeting with his brother Esau, and says to Esau: Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God. Well, Jacob became especially known because after Jacob wrestled with God, the scriptures often call God the God of Jacob. Jacob became permanently attached to God just because of God's faithfulness. And Peter, who denied Jesus, Peter became the rock on which the Lord built the Church. These are beautiful ironies in God's faithfulness.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a trustworthy saying, as Paul introduces it. Actually, we did a series on *Groundwork* on all the trustworthy sayings, but this one from II Timothy 2*, where Paul says:

¹¹If we died with him, we will also live with him. ¹²If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us. (But here is the key): ¹³If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

We do stumble and fall, and we do disown him at times; and it turns out, he does not disown us in the end, he remains faithful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is the whole history of Israel, right? They kept letting down their end of the covenant again and again and again. God would chastise them. He finally sent them into exile, but at the end of the day, God said: Ugh, they are never going to keep their end of the covenant. I am going to have to do both ends myself, and so I will come in Jesus Christ and he will be the faithful human who will finally seal the deal. So, it is all rooted in the faithfulness of God.

NEAL PLANTINGA

In Mark's Gospel, when the women come to the tomb and meet the angels, the angels say: He is not here; he is risen. Go tell his disciples and Peter...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

NEAL PLANTINGA

That he is resurrected.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Singling out the one who had failed Jesus the most, but again, as you said, Neal, Peter, who could have feet of clay ultimately became the rock on which Christ built his Church, and we are so thankful for that.

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and our guest on this program was Neal Plantinga. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of the fruit of the Spirit by exploring the fruit of gentleness; a trait the world considers weak, but a study of the scriptures will show us it is one of our greatest strengths.

Go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and let us know scripture passages and topics you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

**Correction*: The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as II Timothy 1. The correct reference is II Timothy 2.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-fruit-of-faithfulness>

Printed on November 21, 2024

©  ReFrame Ministries