

FAITHFULNESS IS SUCCESS

Selected Scripture
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The group began in 1990 with seventy men and a football coach. The following year 4,200 men attended the first official rally. In 1992 over five times that many came, and the next year 50,000 men packed into a single stadium in Denver, CO. In 1994 the rallies spread to seven stadiums around the country, with attendance topping 275,000. This phenomenal growth continued during the next three years with attendance at twenty-four stadium rallies in 1997 reaching 1.25 million.

This movement was known as the Promise Keepers and whatever your assessment of it was; their growth during the early 90s was nothing short of phenomenal. The stated goal was to support men in the promises that they had made to their God, their wives and their families. With the climbing divorce rate, the rise of deadbeat dads, and the merciless demands of the work place, men needed to be reminded of their obligations.

The response by columnists and pundits was wide spread from accusations of a “feminist backlash,” keeping women barefoot in the summer and pregnant in the winter to “it’s about time.” What I found fascinating is that this call to be promise keepers obviously struck a chord. Apparently it’s difficult to make and keep promises in our culture and these men wanted some help doing so.

The irony of the movement is that by pulling men away from their homes and family obligations for weekend gatherings where the virtues of promise keeping are trumpeted, they may have inadvertently taken these men away from some of the best exemplars of faithfulness in their own homes. What some men most need is not another man who can help them keep their promises but to learn from one of the best examples of faithfulness, whom they already know, namely their own wives! Can you imagine what would happen if a million

women took off for the weekend to declare their commitment to promise keeping while their husbands stayed home with the kids? There would be open rebellion. I have a hunch, and it's just a hunch, mind you, that many women are way too busy being faithful in countless quiet ways to see the need to hold a pep rally about it. Perhaps not a few Christian men could do quite well just paying attention to examples of faithfulness right in their own back yards. But I digress.

Faithfulness is a "fruit of the Spirit" listed in Galatians 5. Like all the fruits of the Spirit, this fruit has its roots in the very character of God. The Greek word Paul uses here is *pistis*, "trust," which is translated also as "faith." This is so because there is an obvious connection between understanding faith as "trust" and faithfulness as "trustworthiness." If we see faith as a verb, an action as opposed to simply a state of mind, then clearly faith has ethical implications. Our lives are profoundly shaped by whether, whom, what, when and how one trusts. God calls us to both trust God (who is trustworthy) and to emulate God's trustworthiness. Trust requires steadfastness.

The Old Testament consistently links God's faithfulness with God's *hesed*, God's everlasting or steadfast love. Hence, when Abraham's servant travels to find a wife for Isaac and is led to Rebekah, he announces, "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master*" (Gen. 24:27). When Moses receives his epiphany of God, the Lord passes before him and proclaims, "*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*" (Ex. 34:6). This is echoed in Psalm 100: "*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations*" (v.5). These connections are hardly surprising because the notion of God's "steadfast love" or "covenant love" carries within it the idea of an abiding, constant faithfulness.

From cover to cover, the Scriptures depict God as a promise maker and a covenant keeper. This is true whether it is God's promise to Noah and his family never to flood the earth again, the promise to Abraham and Sarah to make them a blessing to many nations, or to Moses and the children of Israel in the wilderness to lead them to a promised land. The God in these stories is not an absentee landlord, but one who enters into a relationship with a particular group of people, in a particular time, and is bound by that covenant forever. As Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury puts it, "God's love for this creation never comes to a point where it can take no more," (*A Ray of Darkness*, Cambridge: Cowley, 1995, 51.)

Remarkably, apart from this God, the Hebrew people have no identity. They are known as "the people of God." And even more so, God would not have the identity God desires apart from this people. This God chooses to be bound to this people and in being so bound, to reveal the mysterious depths of divine love. "I will be their God and they will be my people."

Here again we see a facet of God's other-directedness. The people of Israel were chosen not because they were special (Deut. 7:7-9), but for a purpose, a mission: to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6). Once we see how central this practice of being bound to others is the very identity of this God, we see how there is no division between God's love and God's faithfulness. God loves with a steadfast, faithful love.

In contrast with God's faithfulness Scripture is equally insistent that human beings are unfaithful. Our ancestors in faith were called a "*stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation who heart was not steadfast, who spirit was not faithful to God*" (Ps. 78:8). Like Israel, our unfaithfulness often stems from our lack of faith or trust in God. Perhaps one of the most poignant illustrations of this is when God instructs the prophet Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer, because that's what it's like being married to Israel. Even as Gomer runs off with

other lovers, Hosea is to be faithful to her, just as God puts up with Israel. As Paul reminds the Romans, our faithlessness does not provoke God to be equally unfaithful:

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, (Rom. 3: 3-4).

As disciples and servants of the Faithful One, we are called to be faithful or trustworthy, not only with our promises, but also with all the gifts that have been entrusted to us (Mt. 25: 21-23).

So, what are some things in our culture that militate against a life of faithfulness? In stark contrast to the faithfulness and reliability of God, our society is increasingly characterized by rapid change and instability. The pace and scope of change that transpired in the last century is staggering. My grandfather, born in 1898, commented that when he was born there were no automobiles and when he was old people were walking on the moon. A funeral director once told me that New England is one of the few places where people are buried more often than cremated because family roots go far back and there are family plots available. On the West Coast where there is high mobility and people do not put down very deep roots, so most people are cremated. I guess it's easier to take G'ma with you that way.

I think one reason it's hard to be faithful is we are encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted. Even though we believe intellectually that the grass is *not* always greener on the other fellow's lawn, we still act differently. Rather than sticking with anything for any length of time—whether it be spouses, jobs, friends, churches or hobbies—we tend to flit from one thing to another. As Catholic theologian Walter Burghardt puts it: "The word 'faithful' is not a parlor word. Dogs are faithful; Federal Express is faithful; the Marines are 'always faithful'; but much of America is uncomfortable with it, from coaches to spouses," (*Grace on Crutches*, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1986, 148).

One telling example of this is the premium we put on things that are disposable. We have disposable plates, napkins, razors, diapers, contact lenses, and cameras. Things that are disposable require no upkeep and are therefore more convenient. If they break or wear out, we can dispose of them, which is often cheaper than having them repaired. So now we have indisposable landfills. Within such a culture it's not hard to see why we find it easier and easier to "dispose" of relationships that are no longer useful or satisfying to us. Employers now speak of "disposable workforces" that consist of part time employees with low wages and no benefits. Consequently, there is little loyalty between employer and employee. Couples decide to live together to "keep their options open" rather than make unrealistic commitments.

How does this culture of disposability creep into the church? For one thing people tend to jump from church to church if they don't like the pastor, or the new building program, or the worship service, or if it fails to "meet my needs." Like a shopper, we'll go someplace we like better or like a diner at a smorgasbord, we'll take a little of that and some of this, but we won't commit ourselves to a full meal. It's easier to say we are part of the universal worldwide Church in the abstract, than it is to commit ourselves to a particular group of Christians with all their warts and wrinkles in the concrete.

Living in a disposable culture, where everything is changing rapidly and nothing is certain, encourages avoiding commitments. If you don't know what tomorrow will bring, why limit your options by committing yourself to any one person, group of people or a particular course of action? This reminds us again that in our society, we worship the cult of the individual. Within that worldview there is simply no answer to the question, "Why should I keep my promises?" Or, more to the point, "Why even make promises?" If the most important project in my life is "me," then I should keep myself as unconstrained as possible. I have no idea what kind of person you may be in 6 months, never mind six years so how could I

possibly make any kind of commitment. And besides, the way we move around these days, you may not even be here in six months.

Oddly, this kind of reticence to make and keep promises, shows how much importance we attach to making commitments. We instinctively know that making promises to people binds us to them and makes them important. That's why we avoid them. Why say I'll be home for dinner at 5:30 knowing that people will be waiting for me? That will just create certain expectations and limit my options. Best to say, "I don't know." "You'd better not count on me," is the unofficial motto of many people in our society. For some, it may be a legitimate need to get control over their time and commitments or it could be they don't want to disappoint people. But might it also be that we don't want to tie ourselves down? We want to safeguard our own independence and autonomy? If that's so, then how can we ever learn faithfulness if we never give anyone an opportunity to count on us? You commit yourself to a life of profound loneliness and lack of intimacy if you are unwilling to weave those webs of commitment.

Another "value" that our culture gives us is that if we can't make commitments that are "honest" or "authentic" or "true to ourselves," then we shouldn't make them. So, if I don't feel like visiting my grandmother in the nursing home, it's better that I stay home and keep my integrity and authenticity intact than visit her out of any sense of obligation. What a crock that is.

So, how can we resist these tendencies in our lives? How can we cultivate a life of faithfulness? *First, practice the presence of God.* What is the first thing that springs into your head when you wake up in the morning? Is it the list of obligations ahead of you that day or is it a whispered prayer of thanksgiving that God was with you through the night and is present with you at the beginning of this new day. We are so indoctrinated with the idea of God's abiding presence, that we take it for granted. It's no big deal. When we go to church we

assume God will be present because God's *supposed* to show up at church; that's God's job description!

But one reason we gather week after week is because we have amnesia. We need to hear the story again and again of God's faithfulness to the people of God as witnessed to from cover to cover in the Bible. In fact, in the *Book of Revelation*, Jesus is called "the faithful witness," (1:5). We hear stories of the saints who have triumphed in their faithfulness and of those who have failed, but who get up and do it again. So remind yourself frequently throughout your day that God is at your right hand.

Secondly, make and keep promises. We can make and keep promises because we worship a God who does the same and we are to reflect that divine image. Thus, like God, we choose not to be known apart from the relationships we have entered into by means of covenants and promises. Marriage is one of the few practices left in our culture where we make and keep promises. Christian marriage, when rightly understood and practiced, embodies and reminds us of God's faithfulness. Part of the risk and reality of any marriage is that we in ourselves lack the resources to make this thing work. Apart from the faithfulness of God to us, how do we have any hope of remaining faithful to one another? In making such a covenant, we are saying that our behaviors and choices from that moment forward will be shaped by that covenant. It is a faith statement: "I have no idea what kind of person you may become twenty-five years hence, but I put down my stake here and claim faithfulness to you even as you do so for me."

Contrary to the message of popular culture, such promises open up new possibilities rather than limit one's options. I may not know what it's like to flit from one relationship to the next without any commitments, but neither does the sexual adventurer know the deep satisfaction of having someone who is always there for you, who doesn't snigger if you mess up, who knows not only your body but your soul. In the same way, those who chose not to have

children, and this is not meant as a criticism because some are not called to be parents, may know what it's like to travel extensively and spend money without the constraints parents have, but neither will they know the joy of unhindered love when you walk through the door at the end of a day, of watching a little person blossom before your very eyes, and of creating that wonderful space called home for a gaggle of people.

Lastly, tell the truth. You can never be faithful, if you don't have anyone who can faithfully tell you in love when and where you're falling short. We are not yet what we shall be and should never be satisfied with the status quo. As Paul put it, we are being transformed from "glory to glory." The vision that compels us is the person of Jesus Christ into whose image we are daily being transformed. God in Christ has told us the truth about ourselves: we are God's beloved and we are also sinners under reconstruction. Because we take this for granted, we are free to bind ourselves to one another. In so doing, we make possible further acts of faithfulness.

This kind of progress usually doesn't take place in giant leaps, but in small steps; choices made moment-by-moment, day-by-day. A cleaning woman who'd been converted at a Salvation Army meeting was asked what difference Jesus made in her life. She said, "I don't sweep dirt under the carpets any more." When St. Francis was hoeing his garden one day, he was asked, "What would you do if you knew you had only one day to live?" "I would keep on hoeing my garden," he replied. Faithfulness, not success is what God calls us to.