

FAITHFULNESS

1 Corinthians 4:2

Because of his service to the Colonial cause as the leader of the Continental Army from 1776-1782 and the presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and because of his service to our country as the first President from 1788-1796, George Washington can rightfully be called, as Lighthorse Harry Lee said it in his eulogy at Washington's death,

“first in war,
first in peace, and
first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

But how did this man whose father, a modest Virginia farmer, died while he was still young and who had little formal education and who was guided through his first years by an older half-brother and who had a volatile temper with which he struggled all of his life become the father of his country?

Part of the answer is found in a set of rules by which young George Washington disciplined his life. He copied these “Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation” from some English source and meticulously lived by them, not just as a young man but to a large extent through all of his sixty-seven years.

And we can accurately conclude this morning that George Washington was a success, as a man, as a leader, and as an American.

But I want us to consider an even more important question this morning, not what it takes to be a success as a person or as an American but what it takes to be successful in our Christian life, what it takes to be successful in the eyes of God.

In one of the most challenging and at the same time comforting verses in the Bible we are given insight into this essential question. Listen to this word from God's word:

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”



SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FAITHFUL?

Let me give just one example.

A year or so ago I talked to a pastor's wife in Tennessee. Her husband David has been the pastor of a church in Clinton, TN. One cold winter night, he went outside to get something in a rain storm and he fell and busted his knee cap. Shortly after the surgery, he had a serious heart attack, so they had to do open heart surgery and he has to recover from that before he can do the therapy on his knee. But then she added – they also discovered during the time when they were dealing with his heart that both of his carotid arteries are more than 70% blocked so they are going to have to do that surgery as soon as he recovers sufficiently from his heart surgery. In the midst of all this difficulty, David has had to give up the church.

But then she said something that amazed me. She told me, “We have decided that this is one of the best times in our lives, because our people have responded with love we didn't even know they had and God has been leading us through the whole process. The doctor's we needed, who were not even supposed to be here, were here when we needed them. God has been remarkable in all of this. This has been one of the best times in our lives.”

That's what faithfulness means.

Faithfulness means to say with Joshua, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Jos 24:15).

Faithfulness means to say with William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, when he found out he was losing sight in both of his eyes: "I have done what I could for the Lord with two eyes; now I'll do what I can do for the Lord with no eyes." [B,B,11, 84]

Faithfulness means making the commitment of Jonathan Edwards, early American preacher, who wrote in his diary at age 17: "Resolved that all men should live to the glory of God. Resolved, secondly, that whether or not anyone else does, I will."

Faithfulness means to keep serving Jesus the best we can for as long as we can.

Or as the country preacher once put it, to keep serving Jesus until He calls or until He comes.

And the Bible says:

"It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."



SO WHY IS FAITHFULNESS IMPORTANT?

First of all, faithfulness is important *because of what our faithfulness will do for God.*

If ever anyone had a reason to give up, it was Elijah. He stood alone against Jezebel the queen and against the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. In case you didn't add that up, that was 851 against 1!

Elijah challenged them to a contest on Mt. Carmel. Each side – and remember it was 851 to 1 – would build an altar to his God and call on God to respond. The god who responded would demonstrate he was in fact God.

The prophets of Baal and Asherah went first. They built their altar, and then they shouted to their god, but no response came.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He built an altar and then dug a trench around it. Then he ordered them to pour water all over this sacrifice and the wood. "Do it again," he said. Then, a third time he said, "Do it again." The wood was soaked. The sacrificial animal was drenched. And water filled the trench around the altar.

The Elijah prayed. He didn't shout. He simply prayed in a quiet voice: "God show these people you are God."

And the fire came from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, and licked up the water in the trench.

Do you remember what happened then? The people on the mountain fell on their faces and cried out, "The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!" (1 Ki 18)

My preacher growing up used to say: "We Christians are the only Bible some people ever read." And he is right.

If we fizzle out at the finish,
if we give up when the going gets tough,
if we strike out at God when something bad happens,
this will not only reflect negatively on us. It will also reflect negatively on God.

On the other hand,

if we are faithful to God to the end,

if we stand *for* him even when everyone else is standing *against* him,

if we demonstrate an unswerving faith and confidence in him,

then people who watch us will be impressed by our faithfulness to see the one in whom our faith is rooted. And, like the Israelites on Mt. Carmel, they will be led to say, "The Lord - He is God!"

Our faithfulness will bring honor to God.

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In addition, faithfulness is important *because of what our faithfulness will do for us.*

At the funeral service of Mrs. Martin Luther King, Sr., one of the ministers who presided was a pastor from Cleveland, Ohio. A marker would be on Mrs. King's grave, he said, with her name and a couple of dates -

when she was born and

when she died -

and a little dash in between. And then he added: we cannot determine when we are born or when we die, but we can determine what we do with that little dash in between.

How can we make that "little dash in between" in our lives meaningful,

productive,

worthwhile?

Faithfulness is the key.

If we are faithful to the end, we can leave behind us the legacy of a life well lived.



SO HOW CAN WE DO THAT? HOW CAN WE BE FAITHFUL?

It's all about our relationships. To be faithful we must be correctly connected. Two connections are crucial.

Of first importance is our *CONNECTION TO CHRIST.*

Elton Trueblood, Quaker scholar and the author, called us a cut-flower generation. We want the fruit of the Christian life, he said, but we have cut ourselves off from our sustaining roots.

Jesus addressed this subject in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John using the image of the vine. "I am the vine; you are the branches," Jesus declared.

Then, he explained what that meant: "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

The only way we can be faithful is to be connected intimately with Christ. In the words of one old country preacher,
"Everything is fine
if we are connected to the Vine!"

The connection with Christ is crucial.

Also important is our *CONNECTION WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS*.

There is a delightful passage in the book of Ecclesiastes I often use at weddings. But the message is applicable here.

"Two are better than one," the Preacher who composed the book said. Then he explained why: "If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" The he concluded, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ec. 4:9-12).

That's the way it is in the Christian life. Isolated from other Christians, we are easily discouraged and defeated.

But
connected to other Christians,
supported by other Christians,
serving with other Christians,
who are also connected to Christ, we have "a cord of three strands" as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it, that cannot be broken.

To be faithful we must be correctly connected –
to Christ and
to other Christians.

Everything is fine as long as we are connected to the vine."



A few summers back, I spent a week in the city of Prague which is located in the Czech Republic. I taught a class on preaching in the SITE program that is attached to the International Seminary. The students were leaders of the Baptist Unions from all over central Europe. I loved teaching preaching, and I was blessed by the contacts with these dynamic Christians from other countries.

However, the highlight of the trip for me was Friday night. We sat on the second row of the Estates Theatre for a performance of *Don Giovanni*, one of Mozart's operas. What made the experience so unforgettable is that the first performance of *Don Giovanni* was given in 1787 in that very theater!

It was
a wonderful evening,
a spectacular performance,
an unparalleled experience.

At the end, because we were so pleased by the performance,
we jumped to our feet to give a standing ovation, applauding
the performance we had just witnessed and those who had
presented it.

Wouldn't it be an amazing thing if, as we moved across the
stage of life, we played our part in such a way that when
the performance is over and
the curtain comes down, and
we stand before the Audience of One
we know as God,
God would jump to his feet and . . . applaud!

What would make God do that?

If we make a lot of money?
If we possess unparalleled power?
If we have unequaled fame?

No. According to the Bible,
the one thing that will bring God to his feet,
the one thing that will garner God's favor,
the one thing that will make him pleased with our lives
is our willingness to serve him the best we can for as long as
we can. Faithfulness.

"Now it is required that those who have been
given a trust must prove faithful."

God expects
nothing more,
nothing less,
nothing else
than that.