

“Cultivating Faithfulness”

Introduction: Have you ever laid out on a dark but starlit night and enjoyed the show put on by shooting stars? They are fascinating to watch. Kind of like fireflies that flit about in a field, shooting stars appear seemingly out of nowhere, flash their brilliant light, and then quickly fade and burn out. Though they grab our attention, in no way can we count on them to help us find our bearings if we are lost. For that we need the North Star which has shined brilliantly and faithfully for thousands of years, giving direction to countless numbers of travelers, whether by sea, land, or air. The North Star can be counted on as an important reference point for finding one’s direction.

Jesus, you may recall, calls his followers to be the light of the world (Ma. 5:14f). Paul picks up on this theme and writes that we’re to shine like stars in the universe (Phil. 2:15). In both contexts, we are being called to live in such a way that helps lead others to the living God. And so we need to be, not fickle, like shooting stars, but faithful—reliable, dependable, and trustworthy, like the North Star. This is what it means, as we continue in our look at the fruit of the Spirit, to cultivate faithfulness.

Let’s begin our look at this aspect of the Spirit’s work in us through one of the parables of Jesus.

I. Called to Faithfulness not Success

A. In the parable, Jesus holds up two examples of people who were faithful, and one who was not. All three were servants of a master who, before going on a journey, entrusted his wealth into their care. To one he gave five bags of silver, to a second two bags, and to a third one bag. Then he went away. When he returned, he called for an accounting of what they had done with what had been entrusted to them. The first two servants had invested and doubled their master’s money; the third man had done nothing but dug a hole and buried his bag in the ground.

B. What is important to observe here is what the master deemed important. It was not the differing amounts that each had been given. Nor was the amount of the return the critical factor. Both servants were said to have been “faithful in handling this small amount,” both were given a “well done, my good and faithful servant,” and both were promised more responsibility. The servants were not compared to one another, nor judged on how much they had earned. What was important to the master in the case of each of the first two servants was not their success but their faithfulness in being a good steward over what they had been given. They had shown themselves to be reliable, dependable, and trustworthy. The third servant, by contrast, had not. He had done nothing, he had not been faithful, and so he received neither a well done nor the promise of more responsibility. He had not shined and so remained in the darkness.

II. Created to Rule and Reign

A. Last week, when we sought to understand the aspect of the Spirit’s fruit called goodness, we began with creation, by a good God, and the goodness this God has knit into his creation in the way he designed all things to work together, from our relationship with him, to our relationship with ourselves, to our relationships with others, to our relationship with creation. Within this order, human beings have been especially designed and designated to rule and reign, like good and faithful servants of the master, over all that this Master has entrusted to us. It is described for us in the beginning of the Bible like this:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature . . .” [Ge. 1:27-28]

B. As image-bearers of the Creator God, we have been charged with ruling and reigning, with caring for all things—not only birds and fish and animals, but also cell-phones and computers and cars and children and churches—the list goes on—in a way that honors and shines the light on the glory and grace of our God. If we rule faithfully—responsibly and dependably—we will reveal who God is. If we rule unfaithfully, his reputation will suffer. A faithful God should be revealed by a faithful rule.

C. Further, our call to rule and reign will never end. At the end of the Bible, we read this description of the character of God’s new creation:

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. . . There will be no more night . . . for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. [Rev. 21:3-5; cf. 21:1-4]

No curse, a throne in our midst, no more night—all very different from our present experience. But what’s the same is that we will still be God’s servants, ruling and reigning over all things. When the kingdoms of heaven and earth are joined, we will not be singing a VBS praise song that will never end, but will be living out our worship in a role of faithful responsibility, in a role where our work will no longer be frustratingly cursed but wonderfully blessed. Thus, all that we do now, all the ruling and reigning over the small amount that God has put into our care is kind of like a training program for our future. If we’re not faithful, we may never know what it’s like to have the curse, and darkness, removed. If we are faithful, great and wonderful responsibility awaits, as well as the joy of celebrating with the Master.

Illustration: As we go along in life, before the end comes, we get glimpses of this joy. Last week I called up the AMC one morning to inquire about space in their hut system. I was told to call back after 1:30 as the staff was taking part in a training event. When I finally reached someone that afternoon, I asked him how the training event had gone. He couldn’t stop talking about how wonderful it was because it had involved the president of the company coming in, sitting down with these employees over slices of pizza and bowls of ice cream, sharing life together, listening to what his staff had been hearing from various customers, and thinking about how to make things better. No curse, no darkness, just ruling and reigning joy that comes out of a faithful master working hand in hand with faithful servants.

III. Cultivating Faithfulness

A. So, to go back to our parable, why did the third servant not use what he’d been given in a faithful way, and what might that tell us about how to cultivate faithfulness in our own lives? We’re not told directly, but we can read between the lines a bit and see that his view of the master had become distorted. He was afraid of the master and believed him to be harsh. He somehow thought the master would take things that didn’t belong to him. No wonder he was afraid to step out and invest what he’d been given. He didn’t see that this was a master who was faithful to his promises, who promised great reward, and who longed for his servants to step out and try so that they would share in his joy.

How we view our “boss” greatly affects how we serve him or her, doesn’t it? If our view of God is one of a harsh and judgmental taskmaster, he will not be a delight for us to serve, nor will we serve very effectively. But he is not that way. He in fact is good, his love does endure forever, and his faithfulness will continue for all generations (Ps. 100). Or as God revealed his character to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7). To cultivate faithfulness, we need to sink down deep into the character of this faithful God so our view of him does not get distorted and we will want to serve him faithfully, out of his faithfulness to us.

B. To cultivate faithfulness, we also need to be aware of a challenging weed that is the disposable nature of our culture. We have disposable plates, cups, napkins, diapers, razors, contact lenses, even computers, and the list goes on. We say that these things make life more convenient, and to a certain extent they do, especially when camping! But we really like them because they require nothing of us. We don’t need to clean them, sterilize them, repair them, or service them in any way; we don’t need to be faithful to them but can just get rid of them and move on. It’s then not that great of a leap to carry this mentality into how we might think about marriage, or a job, or membership in a church. Should we really be surprised if we find it easier to “dispose” of a relationship, or want to keep our options open, instead of making commitments, either to a person or a place or a meeting, and being willing to faithfully work things out?

C. In our cultivation of faithfulness, we can also be of great help to one another. Hear from the writer of Hebrews as he reflects on our need to encourage one another to remain faithful, given the challenges of life:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. [notice our faithfulness is grounded in the faithfulness of God] And let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another . . . [Heb. 10:23-25]

Our sixth habit of discipleship is to be in relationship—a small group—in order to encourage growth in others, and in ourselves. Given the challenges and fears of life, we need one another to keep moving forward faithfully. I wonder what would have happened to the third servant had he been in a small group for growth and accountability? He could have used, it seems to me, some encouragement not to bury what the master had given him, but to care for it faithfully.

So as we seek to shine faithfully and dependably in the universe, like the North Star, counted on to give others direction toward the living God, may we begin by soaking in the faithfulness of God toward us. Then, may we go on to encourage one another on toward love and good deeds as we seek rule and reign responsibly and faithfully over all that God has entrusted to us.