

Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness

March 31, 2019 Pastor Bill Chadwick
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I've put into the bulletin some inserts.

Half of them read (yellow) "I have *exhibited faithfulness when...*"

And the other half (green) say "I have *experienced* faithfulness when..."

I invite you, if you are willing, to share in groups of two or three or four how you completed that sentence. (They do so for two minutes.)

This was just to prime the pump on thinking about faithfulness. I apologize to you introverts who just hated that exercise.

A story. The nine year-old girl had endured a sermon series in her church on the big theological words like justification and sanctification and predestination and all the other "-ations." One day in her elementary school classroom the teacher asked, "Does anyone know what the word 'procrastination' means?" No answer.

Finally, the little girl raised her hand and said,
"I'm not sure what it means, but I know our church believes in it."

Today we will look at "sanctification." But we'll come back to it in a bit.

Another story. I can't remember if I've shared it with you before. But if I have, it bears repeating. I was having lunch with one of our older members a few years ago and he talked about years earlier visiting his mother in the nursing home, when she was deep in dementia. He came into her room and took her hand and said, "Mom. It's me. (And he gave his name.) Your youngest." His mother looked at him, thinking, processing...finally. "Ah, I remember. You were the naughty one...but I love you anyway."

Right there is a complete sermon on the love of God for us. We are loved, no matter how naughty. But that's not why I told that story. We'll come back to this one as well in a few minutes.

We continue with our sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. In my long career I have not done a series on the fruit of the Spirit before. It was my suggestion to do this one. But I've found it to be hard. The logical temptation is to simply urge the flock to "Be loving," "be joyful," "be peaceful," "be kind," on down the line.

But that's not the point of what Paul was writing to the Galatians about. He was urging the folks back at the church in Galatia to be living in the Spirit. Then all these attributes should pretty much follow along naturally as byproducts of that.

As we faithfully live in the Spirit, continually turning over our lives to the leading of God, we will automatically exhibit all of these attributes.

In your bulletin, on the other side of the insert, is a Thought to Ponder. It's from Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. They have multiple pastors and the website doesn't indicate which one authored it, but it's wonderful.

If we intentionally, prayerfully walk in the Spirit, day after day, all through the day, the fruit of the Spirit will become the habit of our life; truthfulness, kindness, generosity and gentleness will gradually become the muscle memory of our soul, until, eventually, the life we once thought was impossible for us to live becomes impossible for us not to live.

We become truthful, gentle, generous and kind, not because we have to be that way, but because we can't not be that way, because we're walking in the Spirit. Our words change, and our voice. Our movements change, and our pace. Not all at once, or once and for all, but slowly, slowly, little by little, our texts, emails and Facebook posts change, as well as what we laugh at and joke about, and who we sit down with and stand up for.

And all this transformation comes about, not because of any law or rule, threat of punishment or hope of reward. We no longer even think in those terms. We've been walking in the Spirit so intentionally for so long that slowly, quietly, little by little, the life we once could not have imagined ourselves living, has become the life

we can't not live; a life so thoughtful, mindful, gentle, generous and kind that other people will have to have God to explain how we got that way; a life which, without the Holy Spirit, we could not live, but which, with the Spirit, we can't not live.

(©Northminster Baptist Church, Jackson, MS)

There's the sermon. Heck, there is the entire sermon series wrapped up in three paragraphs.

That is the definition of sanctification. If we are faithfully following Jesus we shouldn't just be getting older, we should be getting better.

My encouragement is for us to faithfully turn over control of our lives---and control of the universe—to the Spirit of God. And to do it over and over and over again. Because *some* of us have a tendency to take control back. I won't name any names. I don't need to.

So we start there: Live by and in the Spirit.

So let's go back to that member of our church who began life as “the naughty one” of his family. Can we guess who it was? No, it wasn't Rich Miller. Not John Crampton (holder of the all-time record for penalty minutes in the old St. Paul City High School Hockey Conference), or any of the usual suspects.

Before I tell you, note that when he told me that story I asked, “*Were* you indeed the naughty one?”

“Oh, yes,” he confirmed. “I earned that.” He *was* the naughty one. It was hard for me to imagine...Al Netten as the naughty one. Obviously, something major happened along the way. Because those of us who know Al know him as a kind and gentle and thoughtful man. He is one of my heroes in life. How did he get this way? One day at a time, letting the Spirit live in him.

Another example, one I have watched unfold over three decades, so I can give you more details. Let me tell you about my brother-in-law, Rich, married to my wife Kris's older sister Lynn. I met Rich when I started dating Kris 32 years ago. At the time Rich was in his late 30's. He had come out of some difficult childhood

circumstances and was putting those behind him with all his energy. He was a very bright, hard-driving, highly successful attorney

Of course, I didn't see him at work. I saw him at family gatherings...Now, I'm pretty competitive, my spouse is twice as competitive as I am, and Rich was a notch or two above her. A deep family tradition among the Jacobsons is playing the card game whist. I like to play cards. I'm a good card player, but I hated playing against Rich, and even more strongly dreaded playing *with* Rich, for fear of making a mistake that might cost our team a point. Rich was so intense.

Rich came out of a Christian home, but my sense was that his faith didn't mean much to him as a young man. But under the influence of his wife and his wife's entire family, Rich started to attend church regularly. And then he was invited by one of his Catholic friends to go on a silent retreat for a weekend at Demontreville Retreat House in Lake Elmo. Then Rich joined a Bible study. Later he entered the Master's Program. This wasn't studying for a Master's Degree. It was a two-year discipline of study, prayer and small group conversation to become more devoted to THE Master. He started reading books on how to be a faithful follower of Jesus. He accepted leadership responsibilities in his congregation. He reads the online daily meditations put out by Richard Rohr. He does the silent weekend retreat every year. He gives away lots of money. He volunteers his time with mission groups from North Minneapolis to Africa.

Little by little Rich has been transformed. Today he is patient, gentle, generous, loving. He is truly a joy to be around. He has let the Spirit take over his life and now he exhibits the fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness (sometimes translated generosity) faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. He still likes to win, but more so he makes sure that everyone wins, that everyone is having a good time.

That's sanctification: the process of becoming more saint-like, more like Jesus, as we let the Spirit of Jesus control our lives.

Let us pray: "Gracious God, may these words of Paul become living words in our lives, that each day we might grow to be more faithful and joyful disciples. In the name of Jesus. Amen!"