

Faithful to the Faithful One

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D

North Aurora, Illinois, October 10, 2004 - XIX after Pentecost

Psalm 111 NIV

Praise the Lord. I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever. He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness. He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever — holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

2 Timothy 2:8-15 NIV

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever — holy and awesome is his name (Psalm 111:9).

If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

These verses, from our Scripture lessons for the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, remind us of the faithfulness of our God. He has established his covenant with us forever, through his Son Jesus Christ, and he will remain faithful to his promise.

Last week we looked at our need for greater faith — a need we all recognize in ourselves. Faced with the challenges of living, we would join with Jesus' disciples in crying out to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Like the prophet Habakkuk, we would station ourselves on the ramparts of our beleaguered lives looking for that assuring word from the Lord, "The righteous shall live by his faith." We need that faith — that spiritual toughness that manifests itself in a determination to obey the Lord through thick and thin, to serve him come what may, and to move the mountains in our lives.

But one aspect of faith we didn't cover last week is suggested by our readings for today. We would all walk the pathway of faith for a more victorious and overcoming life, but that pathway is a two-way street. The faith we desire, our faithfulness to the Lord, is only a response to *his faithfulness to us*. We don't work up faith in ourselves out of nothing; it comes because the God we serve is faithful to his own in the first place. *Our Father God* is faithful and reliable and solid; the faith we exercise is our trusting, obedient family response to God's prior faithfulness. John the apostle put it another way when he said, "We love because he first loved us." Love is *commitment*, and commitment is *faithfulness*. It's just another way of saying that when we act out of faith we are only responding to what God in Christ has already done for us.

In the Bible, God's faithfulness to his people is manifested primarily through a structure called the *covenant*. In my opinion, the concept of the covenant is the key to what the Bible is all about — and it's no accident that in older translations the two parts of the Bible are called the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. In fact, I wrote my doctoral dissertation around the idea that the Scriptures were recognized

to be the Word of God in the first place precisely because they express some aspect of the structure of the biblical covenant.

Obviously I can't give a whole lecture on biblical theology here, but let me just say that the covenant is like a treaty between a Great King and his vassals, those who rule over parts of his empire. Such treaties were a common feature of diplomacy in the ancient world, and examples of them have been found among the Hittites and other peoples that have many of the same features of the covenant we find in the Bible. First the Great King identifies himself — just as the Lord says to his people, “I am the Lord your God.” Then the King reminds his servant-king what he has done for him — “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Then the King says, in effect, “These are your obligations to me to keep this treaty in force.” In the same way, the Lord lays down our obligations to him, the main one being, “You shall have no other Gods beside me.” Our other obligations essentially follow from that one Great Commandment that Jesus quoted, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.” Then the Lord sets up some sanctions, or things that will keep this agreement in force. Basically, he says, “If you keep this agreement, you will be blessed, but if you violate this covenant you will be cursed.” There are long passages in the Bible that talk about the judgments that come upon those who aren't faithful to God's covenant; perhaps the best example is the Revelation to John, but we'll look at another one later on. And then, finally, there is an act in which the two parties ratify or seal their agreement, by making a sacrifice or by sharing a meal. At Mount Sinai, Moses sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the people, and then the elders of Israel went up the mountain, and they “beheld God, and they ate and drank.” And, of course, Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” — a meal that points to the great sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross, where he took upon himself that curse we mentioned, bore the judgments for our sin, and reestablished the covenant with a new Israel that would be faithful to God's calling.

Incidentally, whenever we celebrate Holy Communion our worship service follows that same covenant structure. First we sing God's praises and he reveals himself to us as our Great King. Then we listen to his Word of instruction. Then we gather at the table to share a meal with him. Finally, he sends us forth with his blessing. So you see why Holy Communion is such an important act of keeping covenant with our Lord.

Well, I said I couldn't do a lecture on biblical theology but I think you just got one. Please don't quote Acts 26:25 to me, the words of Festus to Paul: “Thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.” Happily, the Bible contains a brief statement of the covenant: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Some form of it is found in Exodus, Jeremiah and several other places. “I will be their God, and they will be my people” sort of sums up the responsibilities of each party to the agreement. God agrees to be our God — our leader, governor, provider, protector, Father — and we agree to be his people — his servants, his worshipers, his children.

The covenant is a family thing; we have this relationship with God as members of his household. You parents know what problems arise when children try to run the family, or when parents *let* their children call the shots. Or, in a business, you know what chaos ensues when the employees try to undercut the boss. The Lord says, “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” When we turn this around and try to run God, making him *our* servant to do *our* bidding, then it's easy to see how the covenant relationship has gotten out of whack. That's what happened in the religious community Jesus was born into, and that's why Jesus came to restore the covenant — to bring a *new covenant* in his blood.

Psalms 111 mentions the covenant twice in its ten verses. Verses 4-5 say, “He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever.” Verse 9 says, “He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever — holy and awesome is his name.” Psalm 111 is one of my favorite thanksgiving Psalms because it celebrates God's faithfulness to his covenant. Verse 7 declares that “the works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.” Psalm 111 is a reminder that when we talk about *our* faith, we need to see it as a reflection of God's faithfulness to us through his everlasting covenant.

I've said many times from this pulpit that worship is a meeting with God. When we come together as the body of Christ, we need to focus on his presence in our midst. We need to sing of *his* wonders and *his* love, and sing our praises to *him*. Worship is about Jesus Christ, and what our Father has done for us through him. As Hebrews 13:15 says, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” And yet, all too often our worship focuses not on God but on ourselves — how much faith *we* have, how dedicated and committed *we* are. Our hymnal is full of songs about *us* and *our faith*, and sometimes I have trouble finding hymns to sing that focus, instead, on the majesty and mystery of God.

Maybe I will step on some toes here, if one of these is your favorite song, but let me give some examples. “To the old rugged cross *I* will ever be true.” “I have decided to follow Jesus.” “This is *my* story, this is *my* song.” You see my point — these songs have their place as expressions of our testimony, but they’re *me*-centered instead of God-centered. And here’s one more that makes me especially nervous: “Take my life and let it be.” Well, actually it says, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee,” but I fear some folks really sing it the first way, “Take my life and let it be” — don’t bother me, God, with your demands on my life or your plans for me, just bless me and then *let me be* and I’ll work everything out for myself, thank you. Or what about that line, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.” Suppose your banker attended this church and you heard him singing *that*; would you get a little nervous about your savings account?

So many of these songs overstate the commitment we’re really willing to make: “I’ll go where you want me to go, dear Lord . . . I’ll be what you want me to be.” That sounds wonderful but, realistically now, how many of us are prepared to make that kind of commitment? We *ought* to be that committed, but frankly I look at myself and I wonder if I could sing that song and really mean it. I don’t want to lie to God about how great my faith is right now. My request is the same as the disciples: “Increase our faith!” My cry is the same as the father of the boy Jesus healed, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:21).

Do you see, then, why we need to put the spotlight, not on our own faith which can be so feeble and so fickle, but on *him who is faithful*? The apostle Paul got it exactly right when he wrote to Timothy, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” Paul recognized that we can’t ground our faith in anything that’s found within us. Our faith in God is only a reflection of his prior faithfulness to us, and we have this faith only as his gift. If we have faith, it’s only because we’re faithful to the faithful One. If we have faith, it’s only because we’re found in Jesus Christ, “the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead” (Revelation 1:5). As Paul says, “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness . . .” (Romans 3:23-25).

“This was to show God’s righteousness.” In other words, God was righteous where his people had failed him. God was righteous, faithful to the promise he had made to his people, even when they had turned away. God was righteous, keeping the covenant he had made. As Psalm 111 says, “He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever.” And because God’s covenant was made to last, he couldn’t just let it go when his people violated its terms. Instead, he made a way to renew that covenant.

Unfaithfulness to God has serious consequences; they’re built right into the structure of the covenant. If you remember from my little lecture of a few moments ago, there’s a *curse* in the covenant, a warning about the consequences of disobedience. Some of those curses in the Old Testament get pretty graphic. Here’s a sample from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 28:

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. . . . The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and frustration, in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your doings, because you have forsaken me. . . . The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them; and you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and there shall be no one to frighten them away. . . . You shall betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her; you shall build a house, and you shall not dwell in it; you shall plant a vineyard, and you shall not use the fruit of it. . . . The Lord will bring you, and your king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone. . . . You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather little in; for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worm shall eat them.

This goes on for 54 verses, and it gets worse — much worse! You can see why we don’t read Deuteronomy 28 in church very often. *But that’s how seriously God takes this covenant he has granted us.* That’s how seriously our faithful One takes this matter of faithfulness. And how it grieves the Lord when his people fail to respond to his faithfulness, and bring on themselves these curses, the consequences of disobedience to his righteous way. The prophets of Israel understood how the Lord was hurt when his people were faithless. Hosea, for example, compared God’s people to an unfaithful wife who spurned the

abiding love of her husband and went off seeking other lovers. He cried out, in the Lord's name, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? *Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.* Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light" (Hosea 6:4-5).

The Lord sends his judgments upon the unfaithful. That's just built into the structure of the covenant, and his administration of the universe. Actually, God doesn't have to do anything for his judgments to take effect; we bring the curses on ourselves by acting in a way contrary to how he's determined that things are supposed to run. But the Lord never gives up on us, He never stops loving us. "*If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*" "*He ordained his covenant forever.*" When we disobeyed, God did something about it. The price for disobedience must be paid; the curse must fall on the faithless. We couldn't keep that covenant, we couldn't be faithful in spite of all our great promises and wonderful songs. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But the faithful One loves us so much that he found a way to cancel out that curse. Paul explains this in several places: "And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13-14). "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." That's what our faithful One is like. And the only way we can ever be faithful to him is to accept what he has done for us, and let him create that faith in us. One thing that builds our faith is to hear the Lord speaking to us. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). In this family we're part of, our trust grows the more we hear our Father's voice speaking to us out of the sacred page. That's why we need to read the Scriptures during worship, and in our personal time with the Lord. That's why we need Bible classes, and Bible-based preaching. That's why all of our life in the body of Christ needs to be informed by the Word of God. We can theorize about God all we want to, and wonder why he does this or allows that. But when he speaks, we know he's here, and that's what counts. That must be why Paul told Timothy, at the end of our reading for today, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

If you're having problems with your faith today — if you're finding it hard to live the Christian life you'd like to live or to exercise the commitment you think you need to have — *try forgetting about yourself!* Try thinking about the faithful One and his mercy toward you in Christ. Try listening for his voice in the Word of God. Try *singing his praises* instead of pretending to be more faithful than *you* feel. See if that doesn't make a difference.

Sorry, no stories or anecdotes today, no illustrations, no "true confessions" about things that have happened to me that bring out the message. Just some theology from the Bible about being faithful to the faithful One, and that will have to do.

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