

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 6, 2022**

**FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #7:
FAITHFULNESS: *Semper Fi*
1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Proverbs 3:3**

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

So far in our study of the fruit of the Spirit we have considered #9, the fruit of self-control, and #8, the jewel of gentleness. Today we turn our focus to #7 on Paul’s list – the spiritual fruit of faithfulness. For some biblical perspective, I invite you to turn to 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 and follow along as I read. Here Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that he will be judged by God on the basis of his faithfulness to the message of the gospel and to this mission God has given him.

Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

[Read 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5. Read also PROVERBS 3:3.]

* * * * *

Semper Fi (short for *Semper Fidelis*) is the motto of the United States Marine Corps. The Marine Corps has had a rich, distinguished tradition of excellence for going on 247 years since it was established by the Continental Congress in November 1775. “From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli” and beyond, the Marine Corps, like the other branches of our nation’s military, has had a proud history of uncommon valor and service in defense of liberty and justice for all.

Some of you are Marines. You may be married to a Marine. You may be the parent of a Marine. Or the son or daughter of a Marine.

Whether or not you have any connection to the Marines, you probably know that *semper fi* means “always faithful.” Faithfulness matters to the Marine Corps. Faithfulness to duty, honor, and country.

Unfortunately, not every Marine lives up to the motto of the Corps. Not every Marine is always faithful. Not every Marine is a good Marine. Sad but true. It is also true that not every parent is a good parent. Not every husband is a good husband. Nor is every wife a good wife. Not every teacher is a good teacher. Not every leader is a good leader. Not every role model is a good role model.

Solomon articulates the problem in Ecclesiastes 7:29, where he says: “God made humankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.” *The Message* puts it this way: “God made men and women true and upright; *we’re* the ones who have made a mess of things.”

Almost in a state of despair, Solomon says in Proverbs 20:6: “Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?”

Faithfulness, it seems, is a rare and valuable trait.

In the time of the Old Testament prophet Hosea (the second half of the 8th century BC), God brought this indictment against the nation of Israel: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land” (Hosea 4:1) In the colorful language of *The Message* it says: “No one is faithful. No one loves. No one knows the first thing about God. All this cussing and lying and killing, theft and loose sex, sheer anarchy, one murder after another! And because of all this, the very land itself weeps and everything in it is grief-stricken ...” (4:1-3). It sounds a lot like the world today, doesn’t it?

God accused the people of Israel, His covenant people, of being unfaithful to Him in both the wandering of their hearts and their embrace of immorality. Then He went on to warn them of the serious consequences of their unfaithfulness if they refused to repent and turn with their whole hearts to Him.

There is no question that faithfulness matters to God.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNFAITHFULNESS

Sooner or later, unfaithfulness leads to trouble. It often has ripple effects that are more far-reaching than anything we intended or anticipated.

In Joshua 7, we find the story of a man named Achan who acted unfaithfully with respect to a specific prohibition God gave the people of Israel when they conquered the city of Jericho and its “walls came a-tumblin” down.” Through Joshua, the Lord had told the people not to take any of the plunder of Jericho for themselves. But Achan took some of the forbidden things for himself, in direct violation of God’s command.

Achan probably thought it was no big deal, but the consequences of his sin were felt not only by himself, but by his family and even the whole nation of Israel. Achan’s sin resulted in a crushing defeat of Israel at the town of Ai and the deaths of 36 soldiers. In the wake of this defeat, fear gripped the hearts of the people of Israel. Their confidence was shattered. “The hearts of the people melted and became like water,” it says in verse 5.

Ultimately, when Achan was identified as the one whose unfaithfulness had infected Israel, he and his whole family were put to death so that no trace of his sin would remain among the people of Israel. The consequences seem severe to us, I know, but sin in the community of God’s people was a big deal. And still is, even if the discipline imposed is not the same.

If Achan had known what the consequences of his covetousness would be, do you think he would still have done it? If he had foreseen the ripples of his disobedience, do you think it would have deterred him? Hard to say. I hope so. But we don’t know. What we do know is that the result of his unfaithfulness was trouble beyond anything he ever imagined.

Which can serve as a warning to us. *Our* sin, *our* disobedience to God, *our* rebellion against God, *our* unfaithfulness to God, can have more – and more awful – consequences than we might ever conceive, even to the extent of affecting generations.

David also learned the hard way that unfaithfulness leads to trouble. A few weeks ago, I mentioned his lack of self-control, as seen in his affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who was one of David's most loyal and devoted military officers. Then, after learning that Bathsheba was pregnant, David tried to cover up their affair by ultimately arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle. It was not David's finest moment.

David's unfaithfulness resulted not only in trouble in the short term, but in the long term, too, as turmoil and conflict would plague his entire family for the rest of his life. Even after his death.

However sweet it may taste to the mouth, unfaithfulness always turns sour in the stomach. No matter how appealing or attractive it may seem in the moment, sooner or later unfaithfulness leads to trouble. Always.

A second consequence of unfaithfulness is that it destroys trust, which is the foundation on which strong relationships are built.

Infidelity or adultery destroys trust in a marriage. If you want to sabotage your marriage, cheating on your spouse will do it.

Once trust has been lost, it is very difficult to regain. Once it has been eroded or shattered, it is not easy to rebuild. Not impossible, but extremely hard.

Years ago, when we lived in Pennsylvania, I got a phone call from a couple I knew. They were both believers, actively involved in another church (not the church I was serving as pastor). The husband, in deep remorse, had confessed to his wife that he had been unfaithful to her. They wanted to know what they should do. Was there any hope for their marriage? Could it survive this?

I assured them that there was – and is – hope for their marriage, that it could – and can – survive even this. By the grace of God it is possible, because God's grace is greater than the worst sin you and I could ever commit. Yes, there was hope. But it can take years, maybe even a lifetime, to rebuild trust destroyed in a moment of unfaithfulness.

Unfaithfulness destroys trust. It is true with respect to marital infidelity. It is also true with regard to lying, which is another form of unfaithfulness. When you lie to your spouse (or vice versa), when children lie to their parents, when employees lie to their boss (or the other way around), when leaders or the media play fast and loose with the truth and weave a web of lies and deceit, the result is that trust disintegrates. The foundation on which the relationship is built crumbles. Unfaithfulness destroys trust.

THE VALUE OF FAITHFULNESS

The Bible makes it clear that faithfulness matters to God. God values faithfulness. Having drawn us to Himself and saved us by His grace, God calls us to be faithful to Him. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:2: “It is required of those who have been given a trust that they be faithful.”

In several places in the Gospels, such as Matthew 24 (the warning to be ready when Jesus returns), Matthew 25 (the Parable of the Talents), Luke 12, and Luke 19 (the Parable of the Minas), Jesus highlights the importance of being fully engaged in the work we have been given by God. Those who are attentive to the responsibilities and privileges and opportunities given to them by God will be commended by God and rewarded for their faithfulness. God expects us to be faithful in His service, so that the promised return of Jesus will not catch us unprepared.

God loves faithfulness. He wants us to be faithful to Him in what we believe, what we preach and teach, and the way we live as followers of Jesus. He calls us to stay true to His Word and His way when we’re tempted to turn aside or compromise or cave in to fit in or go along with the crowd, when the crowd is going in the wrong direction.

President Teddy Roosevelt once said: “It is better to be faithful than to be famous.” Yes. Better to be faithful than popular. Or rich. Or powerful.

Like the Marines, God is looking for a few good men and women and young people – more than just a few, actually! – He can count on, people of Christlike character and conviction and courage, people intent on cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in all its varieties, people who will be faithful to Him not just in the short term, but over the long haul. Are you one of these people?

Semper fi. Always faithful. You know as well as I do that, as with the Marines, not every Christian lives up to this motto. Not every church member is always faithful. Nor, sad to say, is every pastor or Christian leader. We all fall short. Not every servant is faithful and wise, diligently devoted to the Lord’s will. Sometime our agendas get in the way of God’s agenda. We easily get preoccupied with our own reputations and interests. It is not hard for us to get off track.

Would God say that you and I seek to live *semper fi*?

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

I know this for sure: If anyone can lay claim to the motto *semper fi*, it is God Himself. Over and over, from beginning to end, the Bible tells us that God is absolutely faithful.

Jeremiah, knowing the unchanging character of God, even with his world collapsing around him and his heart in anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem, could still say of God in

Lamentations 3:23: “Great is Your faithfulness.” It is one of my favorite Bible verses. And one of my favorite hymns.

David says in Psalm 36:5: “Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens; Your faithfulness to the skies.” This was David’s way of saying that he knew he could depend on God in good times and bad. No matter what.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul says: “God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” What does that mean? It means that God can be trusted to do what He said He would do. He can be trusted to finish what He starts. He can be trusted to keep His word. He can be trusted to give us the grace and strength we need in every situation.

Are you struggling with a particular temptation in your life? Do you find yourself drawn to something you know is wrong? It doesn’t matter what it is. There is good news for you in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

In other words, whatever temptation or sin you may be dealing with, you don’t have to give in. Defeat is not a foregone conclusion. Why? Because, as it says in *The Message*, “God will never let you down. He’ll never let you be pushed beyond your limit. He’ll always be there to help you come through it.” Resisting temptation can be painfully hard. (Some people can resist anything but temptation!) But. God. Is. Faithful.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 says: The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect (us) from the evil one.”

If there is some unconfessed or unresolved sin in your life, something haunting you from the past or eating away at you in the present, if you struggle with feeling unforgiven for something you did or failed to do, take to heart what the Bible says in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins (if we’re honest with God and mean it when we say we’re sorry), God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” God. Is. Faithful.

If you get discouraged or disheartened about the shape the world is in, or about how hard it is to live as a follower of Jesus in the world today; if there are days when you feel like giving up and throwing in the towel, take this message from Hebrews 10:23 to heart: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess (that is, the hope of our salvation in Christ), for He who promised is faithful.”

Or, as Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*: “Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going, because God always keeps His word.” Always.

Even when faithfulness comes with a price tag, when it results in suffering or hardship, when bad things happen in spite (or because) of our faithfulness, the Scripture encourages us to “commit (ourselves) to our faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19).

Get the picture? God is *semper fi*. Never does God exhibit the fickleness or faithlessness that so often characterizes this world.

Even when we prove to be unfaithful, God remains faithful forever. He remains true to His character, true to His word, for, as it says in 2 Timothy 2:13, He cannot deny Himself. In both His justice and His grace, in His holiness and compassion, God remains faithful and true.

Semper fi, of course, was the story of Jesus' life, too. From beginning to end. From the manger all the way to the cross, Jesus was faithful and true to the will and plan of God the Father for our salvation. You can count on Jesus, because He was and is *semper fi*. Always faithful.

FIND US FAITHFUL

So, what about you? Your faithfulness matters to God.

It matters in marriage, in the promises a man and a woman make to love and be faithful to one another in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as they both shall live. It matters in the promises we make when we present our children for baptism or dedication. It matters in the vows we take as church members – promising, in humble reliance on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to live as becomes followers of Christ, to serve Christ in His church by supporting and participating with the fellowship of believers in its service to God and its ministry to others to the best of our ability, and to do all we can to promote the unity, purity, and peace of the church.

It matters, too, in the generous, strategic use of your spiritual gifts, your financial resources, and the opportunities God gives you. It matters in the giving and keeping of your word.

It matters in being what God has called you to be and doing what God has called you to do with your life. It matters in blooming where God has planted you, in the exact circumstances and challenges of your life right now.

Faithfulness matters when people are watching you. It matters just as much when no one is watching.

Some of you may remember this song by Steve Green. I'm not going to sing it. But the words are worth hearing:

We're pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road.
And those who've gone before us line the way.
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary,
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace.

O may all who come behind us find us faithful.
May the fire of our devotion light their way.
May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe,

And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
O may all who come behind us find us faithful.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
Let us run the race not only for the prize,
But as those who've gone before us.
Let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on thru godly lives.

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone,
And all our children sift thru all we've left behind,
May the clues that they discover,
And the memories they uncover,
Become the light that leads them,
To the road we each must find.

O may all who come behind us find us faithful.
May the fire of our devotion light their way.
May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe,
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
O may all who come behind us find us faithful.

(Written by Jon Mohr. © 1988, Birdwing Music, Jonathan Mark Music.)

The fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness. So, "let love and faithfulness never leave you. Tie them around your neck; carve their initials on your heart" (Proverbs 3:3).

With the help of the Holy Spirit, live your life *semper fi*, to the glory and praise of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.