

The Ripe Stuff sermon series
#8 – Faithfulness – Lamentations 3
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I'm a card-carrying word nerd, so when I hear a new word I love to share it with others. I have a new word for you today that you may not know. It's "evanescence." Do you know that word? There was a band at the end of the last decade called Evanescence. Great music, but I thought the name was made up. Turns out it wasn't! "Evanescence" is best described by an example. My grandfather, my dad's dad, died in 1997, about a month before my wedding. It's been almost 21 years since I've heard his voice, and I'm not sure I know what it sounds like anymore. That's evanescence, which means possessing a quality of vanishing or disappearing. A rainbow is evanescent. Fog is evanescent. I'm afraid many of my sermons may be evanescent.

I wonder if, in today's society, faithfulness is evanescent. In a culture that encourages us to pride ourselves on not being tied down, it's becoming harder to be faithful, to make lasting commitments. Think about the impermanence of the contracts we sign. We can switch cell phone service providers with no penalty. We can join a gym on Jan. 1 and quit on Jan. 31 with no consequences, at least not the monetary kind. There are very few things today that require us to sign on the dotted line and commit ourselves, and so the quality of faithfulness may be becoming a lost art. It is evanescent.

What does Paul mean when he calls faithfulness a fruit of the spirit? The definition of faithfulness is "trustworthy, honest, loyal, steadfast." The word appears over 60 times in scripture, mostly referring to God's faithfulness to us. I'm not sure how many references there are to our unfaithfulness to God, but I'm guessing it's some multiple of 60. We have a history of unfaithfulness to God, and yet, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy, "If we are faithless, God remains faithful – for God cannot deny Himself." So, let's go ahead and get this out of the way here at the beginning: we are not faithful to God. We try but we fail. A few chapters into the Bible and Adam and Eve have already disobeyed God and then Cain has killed his brother Abel out of jealousy and lied about it. Go one book further and the Israelites, whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt, are grumbling and complaining and worshiping a golden calf rather than the God that saved them. Are we any better today at not worshipping false idols? We are not faithful.

Then why should we be motivated to cultivate a fruit of the Spirit that we already know is evanescent, that is going to shrivel on the vine? If we know we're not capable of faithfulness, how can Paul call us to live it out? This is one of many instances in scripture where we are called to be more than we are. Remember when Jesus says, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect?" There's about a 0% success rate on that one, and yet that doesn't mean we should stop trying. We're not always going to be perfect in our faithfulness to God or to each other, but we can strive to be a little more faithful today than we were yesterday. Because, I believe when we are faithful to each other, we are faithful to God. So, trusting that God is faithful to us even when we're not faithful to God, how can we do our best to live out the fruit of faithfulness in our lives?

Do you remember the game "Scruples?" A person would read a situation from a card, and then the rest of the players would vote on what they think the person would do. For example, a card would say, "Someone you really don't like invites you to an expensive restaurant and offers to pay. Do you go?" Hmm. I would ask, "Is it a BBQ restaurant?" Or, "A friend asks you to write a reference for a job you feel they aren't qualified for. Do you write it or refuse?" Hmm again. The person would write down their answer, and then the rest would vote. A person who has

scruples or is scrupulous is someone who does the right thing, even when it might not be the popular thing. They are true to their character and to who God created them to be.

We used to be able to assume that about people, didn't we? Our default setting for people used to be, "I'm going to assume the best about this person until they prove otherwise. I'm going to assume they're honest and trustworthy. I'm going to assume they'll do the right thing, and even if they don't, I'm still going to give them the benefit of the doubt." Talk about an outdated way of thinking! Can we make those assumptions today? Or do we lead with the expectation of unfaithfulness, untrustworthiness, unscrupulousness? If that's not a word, it should be.

Our society has given us plenty of reasons to doubt people's faithfulness. Did you know a properly made lightbulb could last 100 years? It's true. But today's lightbulbs don't, and we can thank the Phoebus Cartel. Sounds ominous, doesn't it? The Phoebus Cartel was a group of early lightbulb makers, including GE and Phillips, we got together in 1925 and colluded to limit the life of a lightbulb by making the filament much thinner, which would mean consumers would have to buy lightbulbs more frequently, thus increasing the cartel members' profits. The cartel had planned on keeping this scheme up for decades, but their plan burned out in 1939 with the start of World War II. If you can't trust the people who give us light, who can you trust?

No, I mean it. Who can you trust? Can you trust doctors? Lawyers? Mechanics? Politicians? Clergy? We could all think of examples in each category of people who have proven themselves unfaithful to their calling, who have produced the rotten fruit of dishonesty, who have abused trust, who have not honored their promises. We've been conditioned to lead with skepticism and the expectation of unfaithfulness because our world tells us that's the way most people are these days. Is that true? I don't believe so. But we're always wary, aren't we?

That's why cultivating faithfulness is so important today. Because if anyone should be able to be found faithful and trustworthy, it would be those of us who claim to follow God as shown to us in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 11 gives us a litany of people from the Bible who were reckoned as faithful – Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets. While none of them were perfect, they were known for their faithfulness, their steadfastness, their loyalty and trustworthiness. And that is how we should endeavor to be known, as well. Are we known for our faithfulness?

I ran into an acquaintance a few years ago that I hadn't seen in a while. I used to read his blog on a regular basis, but had fallen out of the habit. I didn't want to hurt his feelings with that information, so I engaged in what's called social lying, which means lying to avoid sharing a painful truth. I told him, "I really enjoy reading your blog!" He said, "Cool! Did you enjoy reading about my trip to Australia?" I said, "Well, I didn't read it last week." He said, "I was there a month." I dug the hole deeper by saying, "Oh yeah! I forgot. Great blog posts!" Then, thinking I could tap dance my way out of this one, I said, "I can't remember...did you go with anyone?" He paused and said, "Uh...it was my honeymoon." Ok, so I got caught in a social lie. No big deal, right? But it is a big deal.

I remember when I was a kid I went to K-Mart with my aunt Nancy. As we were walking back to the car, she reached in her pocket and pulled out a packet of flower seeds. She had picked up the packet in the store and absentmindedly stuck it in her pocket instead of in the shopping cart. This packet probably cost \$.25. I don't think not paying for it was the cause of K-Mart's downfall. Aunt Nancy looked at it, looked at me, and said, "I better go back and pay for this." At the time, I thought, "Really? It's a quarter! It's no big deal." But it is a big deal.

I rented a car a few years ago and found in the trunk a really nice pair of sunglasses. As luck would have it, I needed a really nice pair of sunglasses. No one would know, would they? The original owner could just buy new sunglasses. A few days later, Sydney asked me where I

got my new sunglasses. I told her I found them in a rental car. She said, “Hmm. I bet the owner probably misses them.” Dang it. So, the next day I took them back to rental car place. The clerk looked surprised that I would return them, then opened up a drawer with about 50 pairs of sunglasses in it and threw them in. Keeping them would have been no big deal, right? But it is a big deal.

Part of being faithful means being the person God created us to be in the little things and in the big things. It means honoring the promises we make at our wedding and our baptism and when we dedicate a child, but also our promises to be fair, to be just, to be kind at all times. It means being steadfast in our commitments even when the quality of faithfulness seems to be fading away in our society. As one commentator said, “Our culture traffics in the impermanent and the fleeting.” Because of God’s unwavering faithfulness to us, we followers of Christ should stand out for the ways that we strive to be faithful to each other and faithful to the person God created us to be. The person sitting here in this church right now should be the same person making the tough decisions about how to be faithful out in the world. If we are only faithful followers of Christ in here, then we’re not really following Christ, we’re just letting him carry our stuff while we lead our own life.

Do you know the concept of muscle memory? It’s the idea that if you do something enough times, your muscles will learn the task and be able to perform it almost involuntarily. Riding a bike, throwing a ball, and playing an instrument all involve muscle memory. The best way to cultivate faithfulness as a way of life is to actively practice it each and every day. The more we strive to be faithful, the more it becomes a part of who we are and how we live, like spiritual muscle memory. We should cultivate faithfulness to the point that we don’t have to think twice about returning some sunglasses or going back into the store to pay for something or honoring a commitment. Our faithfulness becomes a part of who we are.

When we falter, which we will, we can lean on the promises of scripture that God is always faithful. God will always offer us a second chance to learn from our mistakes and do the right thing, to live out our faithfulness each and every day. Let us never forget the words from Lamentations, which can serve as a balm for the broken promises made to us and made by us: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.” Despite our wavering faith, we can trust the promise that great is God’s faithfulness to us.