

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Faithfulness takes time

—Galatians 5:22-23; Matthew 25:14-30

All fruit takes some time to grow. There is no such thing as instant fruit in God's creation. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—also takes some time to fully develop, although some of the fruit does very quickly start growing after the Spirit plants faith in a Christian. Case in point: Jesus visited the home of Zacchaeus, a tax collector and a sinful man, and brought salvation to that home as the Spirit used Jesus' words to make Zacchaeus a believer in Jesus. That same day, with the fruit of love and joy and peace growing within him, Zacchaeus displayed kindness and goodness as he pledged half of his possessions to the poor. Nearly instant fruit of the Spirit. Yet there is fruit of the Spirit that by its very nature cannot be even nearly instant: patience and faithfulness. Pastor Buchholz already covered patience three weeks ago. Today's fruit of the day is faithfulness. The only way the fruit of faithfulness can show up is with the passing of time. Faithfulness takes time.

Take a close look at the word *faithful*. There is *faith* in that word. If you are faithful, other people can believe in you. They can trust you. You are trustworthy. Because your behavior is consistent and dependable, other people can consistently depend on you. That's faithfulness, and it takes time.

Jesus told a parable to demonstrate what faithfulness is. Also, what unfaithfulness is. And, what the final result is of each. Jesus' parable, his comparison story, starts with God, really Jesus himself, who is the master in the parable. Jesus says the master is going away on a journey with the intention of coming back. So there is going to be an interval of time in the there. Faithfulness takes time. But before the master leaves, he entrusts talents to his servants. We should understand right up front what the *talents* are. I know it looks like the same word as our English "talents," where we mean natural abilities and skills. But in the story, a *talent* (the Greek word *tálanon*) is a valuable amount of money. One *talent* could easily be \$15,000 or more in today's money. In the parable, the *talents* are separate from a person's natural ability or skill because the *talents* are distributed according to a person's ability. Listen. *[He] entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability.* The ability and skill of each was already there, of course previously given by God. But now the master in the parable puts a trust in each man's hands, a responsibility, an opportunity to be faithful according to that man's own ability. So the master gives out different amounts. There's a lesson to be learned right there. Faithfulness is a very personal matter between the master who gives and the servant who receives. The man with five trusts in his hand can't be faithful for the man with two or one in his hand. And the man with one trust in his hand can't be faithful for the man with two or five trusts in his hand. Each must be faithful to the master for himself. Likewise, you cannot be faithful to my Lord for me, and I cannot be faithful to your Lord for you. Each must be faithful to the Lord Jesus for himself, for herself.

Note what each man does with the trust that is put into his hands. Faithfulness does not delay. It gets right to it. *The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.* That does not happen in a day. It takes some time to gain the five and to gain the two. *After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.* Faithfulness begins when the Lord gives, and faithfulness ends when the Lord says it is time to give account. So what happens? The servants are praised and commended by the master. He says, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."* There is joy and happiness for both master and servant. *"Come and share your master's happiness! Come into the joy of your lord!"* And there is a gracious reward, which ends up being more responsibility and more opportunity to serve the master even more. *"You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things."* What's \$30,000 or \$75,000?! The master has much more than that to offer his faithful servants! The master says the exact same thing to the man with five and the man with two. The exact same thing. Without comparing this servant with that servant, the master looks for faithfulness from each. Nothing more, nothing less.

Okay, so we have good and faithful servants on one hand. So what's on the other? An unfaithful servant? Well, yes, but Jesus uses much stronger terms than "unfaithful." *Wicked, lazy, worthless.* That's what Jesus says of the unfaithful servant. The servant makes an excuse for his unfaithfulness—by blaming the master! *"Master, I know that you are hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."* Oh, the servant's fear was real! But as has been said, he feared the master enough not to lose the talent, but he did not love the master enough to use the talent. I think that's worth repeating. He feared the master enough not to lose the talent, but he didn't love him enough to use it. The master does not accept the man's excuse. *"You didn't even take the time to deposit your trust into the bank and earn some interest, even at .01%. At least you could have done that!"*

For the faithful servants there was commendation, joy, and being put in charge of many things. Not here. Now there is denunciation from the master. He says, *"You wicked, lazy servant,"* and in the harshest of terms, *"that worthless servant."* There is weeping and gnashing of teeth, rejection into the outer darkness. And there is the stripping of everything he ever had. Everything is taken from him.

"For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance." Everyone who has...an opportunity for service that was used, a responsibility that was followed up on and fulfilled, a faithfulness that was proven over time...ends up with even more. *"Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."* Everyone who does not have...who neglected the opportunity to serve, who blew the responsibility placed on him, who was too wicked and lazy to prove faithful...will have everything taken away.

Jesus told this parable to his twelve disciples in the final week of his life, late in the day on Tuesday of Holy Week. In fact, it is the final parable he told. He was soon leaving them. He was going away, and he was entrusting to them the gospel ministry. He was entrusting to them their roles as husbands and fathers and citizens and whatever else he was putting in each of their lives to serve him until he came back. Jesus is still away and returning at any time. The parable stands there for us. Or each of us really should say, "It's saying something to *me*." Jesus is teaching me about faithfulness and its gracious reward, and about unfaithfulness and the horrible punishment for being wicked and lazy.

So I take stock of what the Lord has put into my life, and you do the same for yourself. And not so much the talents and the abilities, but more so each responsibility, each opportunity, every trust that the Lord has put into my hands. He has already given the talent and the ability. Focus on the responsibility and the task at hand. I need to remember what God expects of me. St. Paul said it: "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor 4). And that happens over time. Being faithful takes time. It's like building a long chain one link at a time. Faithfulness is more than a link or two or ten. Faithfulness is the whole chain. And to keep constructing that chain, it takes much more than personal determination. In fact, the flesh, our sinful nature, cannot even begin to be faithful in a way that God would commend. Jesus says, "Apart from me you can nothing," and the Bible adds, "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

Faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit. It takes time with God. It takes time in God's Word. It's not our faithfulness that saves us from past unfaithfulness. Today's love and affection do not make up for yesterday's laziness and apathy. Today's stellar parenting does not erase yesterday's pursuit of self. Today's assignment well done does not cover yesterday's absence and the previous incomplete. Today's sanctified living does not clean up yesterday's trip down into the sewer. Our sinful flesh may think that way, but that's not the way it works in God's accounting. As God sees it, doing better going forward does not make up for everything done worse before. What was Jesus doing three days after telling the parable of the talents? Jesus was dying on a cross. What does his dying on the cross tell you about faithfulness? Great is his faithfulness. He is faithful in all he does. His faithfulness reaches to the skies. His faithfulness continues through all generations, right on down to you and me. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Every day. All day. All the time. And we pray that God keeps our whole spirit, soul and body blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are assured that God who calls us to faith in Christ is himself faithful; he will answer our prayer and do just that. What saves us from our unfaithfulness is the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So thankful that God is so faithful to us! It takes time with him, it takes time with his Word to appreciate how faithful he is to us, how dependable his saving grace is. His faithfulness to us fuels our faithfulness to him. Otherwise we end up running on fumes, and our faithfulness will fail. Remember, faithfulness is not a fruit of our natural abilities and skills. It's a fruit of the Spirit.

Faithfulness takes time to talk to God in prayer. Ask for his help, seek his strength, and knock at his door before you begin your task. Ask, seek, and knock while you are fulfilling your responsibility. Thank him every time his Spirit worked within you the will and the action to attach one more link to the chain of being faithful.

Faithfulness takes time devoted to people. To love our neighbor as ourselves, we have to spend time with our neighbor. To love each other as Christ has loved us, we have to spend time with each other. To love the people God has placed closest to us in life, we have to spend time with them. And not just quality time, but quantities of time.

Faithfulness takes time devoted to tasks. We can't just rush through our responsibilities to get to our pleasures. Faithfulness takes hard work and dedication. Patient effort. The willingness to learn and grow.

Faithfulness takes time. How much time? God only knows. Faithfulness takes as long as God gives the time, the abilities, and the talents, whether that responsibility is 1, 2, 5, or more. But if it ever seems to you like being faithful is too hard and is taking too long, then what can lift your spirit more than thinking of the end with your gracious God and Savior telling you, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come into the joy of your Lord"?