

Faithfulness

“Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, **but a faithful man who can find?**” (Proverbs 20:6). We often quote the first part of this verse as it relates to the lost, but we are missing the point if we don’t apply the last part of the verse to ourselves! He also said, “Help, Jehovah, for the godly man ceases; **for the faithful fail from among the sons of men**” (Psalm 12:1).

Biblical evangelists are not immune to unfaithfulness to the Lord and to their calling. **Brothers and sisters, we are not invincible.** Our enthusiasm for the Gospel can wane, our zeal for the glory of God can cool, and our passion for the lost can die. Certainly it does not have to be that way, but if we don’t learn to value faithfulness as an asset and cultivate it in our own lives, we can fail in our calling as leaders.

Is faithfulness a need for evangelism team leaders? Absolutely. I am sure that we have all experienced it. We get back from an organized outreach or boot camp and we are elated. We go home and begin “tearing it up” on the local streets. Believers are trained and teams are formed. Testimonies are posted on message boards. But over time, and the time can vary anywhere from a few weeks to months, we begin to find excuses for our lack of faithfulness to our calling. It may be fear. It may be demands from other responsibilities we have. It may be adversity we face from people that we love and respect. Or it may be burn out because we simply haven’t “sharpened the axe” in the Word and prayer. Whatever the cause, the effect is the same: while we have been able to perform for the “big game” (the big outreach), we drop the ball when it comes to the “regular season” of week in and week out evangelism and evangelism training.

Plateaus are a part of the Christian life and in some sense inescapable. Biblical faithfulness can help inspire us to keep on moving even when the motivation is not there, when the excitement has worn off. Biblical faithfulness keeps us moving until we can are past that plateau.

While there are many places we could go in the mirror of the Word to talk about faithfulness, one of the best is Matthew 25:14-30, the parable of the talents.

The main point of this text has to do with the difference between a true and false convert. A true convert will faithfully discharge his duties for the sake of the Kingdom. He will take the “goods” entrusted to him (the Great Commission and all that is included in it: both the Gospel and the Holy Spirit empowerment to proclaim that Gospel, Acts 1:8) and invest them for the sake of the multiplication of the Kingdom during the long time when the Master is away (verse 19). The false convert does not do this, but has a bunch of excuses. When the Master returns in judgment, the false convert has a lot more to say than the true converts, but nothing to show for the initial investment in his life or the long period of time that has passed. He is left totally without excuse, and his latter end is worse than the first, being cast into Hell (verse 30).

I hope that no one misunderstands me. I do not think that most evangelism teams have been infiltrated with false converts. The point is that the unprofitable servant in this text habitually manifests behaviors which are not Kingdom behaviors. We all sin occasionally even as true converts (1 John 1:8-2:2) and when we do, we manifest behavior that is not Kingdom behavior. While our end will not be the same as the unprofitable servant's, we need to reject any of our imitations of his behavior just as radically as if our end *were* the same! He does not represent true Christianity, so we must reject our pathetic imitations of his actions in our lives and ministries!

Why were the first two servants commended? Because they were first and foremost faithful! The word "faithful" means "trustworthy" in the Greek language. It has also been translated, "reliable" and "credible." The original Webster's Dictionary of 1828 defines the English word this way, "Firmly adhering to duty; of true fidelity; loyal; true to allegiance; as a faithful subject. Constant in the performance of duties or services; exact in attending to commands; as a faithful servant" (emphasis mine). The actions of the first two servants prove their faithfulness.

We all want to hear the Lord's, "Well done thou good and faithful servant!". How can we run this race so as to hear those words one day? We need to remember these lessons from the parable:

1. There are no good excuses for a lack of faithfulness.

The unfaithful servant tried making excuses, but notice that he didn't blame himself, or even the other servants. Instead, he blamed his master! He based his inaction on the supposed "harsh" character of the master (verse 24). In order to understand what this slacker is saying, you should know that in ancient times, the word "hard" in verse 24 was used as a synonym for the word "inhuman" in at least one ancient inscription! In other words, he was accusing his master of being a "slave driver."

The false convert typically thinks of God as unreasonable, harsh, a "slave driver." Especially when confronted with the righteous demands of a Holy Law. We have all heard it: "My god is not like that! My god is a god of love, not some judge!"

Even true converts can sometimes fall prey to this kind of thinking, but in the other extreme. Have you ever cancelled your team's evangelism outing because you sinned that day and aren't "worthy" to go out and preach the Gospel? In spite of your repentance? In spite of your confession of sin? In spite of having been cleansed in Christ's blood? Remember this: on your best day you are not worthy to go out and preach the Gospel! You are not somehow made worthy to preach the Gospel because of your obedience. It is all of God's grace! Don't justify disobedience to God out of a false piety when you have sought God's cleansing! What an insult to the Lord of glory when we say to Him, "Yes, I know I am forgiven by your blood and cleansed, but that's not good enough tonight. I cannot go out and preach because my standard is higher than Yours"! When were you ever worthy? Ultimately, it's the same mistake as the unprofitable servant. Don't cast His character as being more severe than it is. Of course, if you are not repentant, that's another issue, but don't let satanic guilt keep you from preaching the Gospel!

2. Fear paralyzes.

We all know about the paralyzing power of fear. It's enough to say that the unprofitable servant was paralyzed by fear, a phobia, about his master's harsh character.

When I was 13 years old it was a requirement for all of the guys to jump off of the diving board in swimming class. One problem: what I did in swimming class couldn't technically be called "swimming." I would usually get in the lane against the pool wall and fake it. How can you fake swimming? By taking a stroke with the arm towards the inside of the pool and with the other arm fake a stroke by grabbing the gutter that lines the pool and pulling. Under the water I would grab the pool wall with my foot and push. It's pathetic, I know, but I was terrified by the water because of an experience I had when I was very young.

So when the day came to jump off of the board I kept "reverse budging" in line...letting everyone else get in front of me to take the death defying three foot plunge into the middle (the middle!) of the deep end. When I could finally prolong it no longer, I stood on the edge of the board for half an hour. I remember my teacher's change in strategy while I stood there: he started by trying to coax me in, then by waving around the rescue hook they had in case I started drowning (comforting thought) to finally cussing me out and questioning my manhood. The last bell rang, the next class came in (horrors! The senior high girls gym class watching my 85 pound frame quaking in fear!) and he finally let me walk off the board! I won!

Or did I? My fear paralyzed me. My fear won. It moved me to inaction. Just what satan wants from us who do biblical evangelism.

I have heard team leaders share that fear has paralyzed them. We all recognize it as a trick, a scheme of the enemy. Satan being on a short leash, we should also recognize that when attacks like these come along, they have been permitted by God (see Job 1-2). Ray Comfort has written a very helpful article for those who are paralyzed by fear in The Evidence Bible called, "Closing Words Of Comfort." If you haven't read it already, stop reading this devotional and read the article now.

3. Talking about service is not the same as serving.

It is interesting to note that the faithful servants only needed ten Greek words each to give an account to their master. The unprofitable servant used thirty Greek words to try to excuse his lack of service! He talked more than the two faithful servants combined!

As a leader, don't be quickly impressed by new team members who talk a mile a minute about what they are going to do or what they have already done. Don't promote based on how much they talk about evangelism, but based on their reliability. Don't give positions of responsibility based on their talking, but on their action.

By the same token, posting on an internet message board is not the same thing as taking out a team and evangelizing.

4. God does not expect more than we are able to give.

All three servants received talents “according to their ability.” We might not think much of these talents since the numerical values are only five, two and one. But when you consider the value of a “talent”, then you understand that it was no small thing that the master entrusted his servants with.

A gold talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. A denarius was one day’s wage. Considering that the average American’s daily wage is \$120.23 a talent would be worth \$721,380 in our economy! So the first two servants would have received \$3.6 million and \$1.4 million respectively!

This was no small amount that the master gave even the unprofitable servant! Yet look how lightly he esteemed the charge that his master gave him!

As an aside: our Master gave us a charge before He left this earth: preach the Gospel to every creature. He even gave us the means to do it: the presence and power of the Holy Spirit! The Gospel itself is a treasure, a pearl of great price! Yet how lightly the church esteems it. It seems that almost everything has become more important than this treasure: church picnics, entertainment, endless social events, and so on.

Back to the issue at hand: the master entrusted his servants with nothing less than his estate! He gave them not a measly little portion to look after, but a substantial amount! The unprofitable servant could not claim that his amount did not matter since it was so small: it was more than sixteen years of wages! And it was what the master thought that his servants were able to handle, according to ability.

When he returned, he awarded the faithful servants according to their faithfulness in proportion to what they had received. They both doubled the investment. The servant who made five more talents was not given more than the servant who made two more. They received the same commendation. If the other servant had made only one more talent, it is reasonable to assume that he too would have received the same praise.

But he didn’t. Instead he made excuses and hid his talent based on the false premise that the master was unreasonable when he had already demonstrated his reasonableness with the other two servants.

God does not expect you to be a Ray Comfort. He expects you to live up to your capacity to be who He has called you to be! A faithful servant doesn’t measure himself or herself by others. Faithful servants simply serve to the best of their God-given abilities. And that is all that God asks.

5. God commends faithfulness, not success or intelligence.

He does not say, "Well done thou good and successful servant." It is not, "Well done thou good and witty servant." He commends faithfulness!

Sometimes we are tempted to think that we ought to be commended by the Lord because we know something that the rest of the Church doesn't know. It's like we're on God's "Dean's List" because we know the secret handshake. We know "Hell's Best Kept Secret" and the "Way Of The Master" and the rest do not. When we do this we become a victim of another kind of self-righteousness. Left unchecked, it can become a deadly Pharisaism. God will not praise us on Judgment Day because we **know** HBKS and WOTM. He will praise us if we **use** these Biblical tools faithfully!

Or we are tempted to think that if we are extremely "successful" when we do go out to preach the Gospel, then our inconsistency doesn't matter much. After all, if someone gets saved every time we go out, what does it matter if we only go out sporadically?

What characterized all of the great men and women of God? We do not remember them today because they stumbled upon lost Biblical teaching and only intermittently taught it, when the mood struck them! We do not remember them because they preached the Gospel once in awhile! We remember them because they were faithful! Because their passion was the Biblical Gospel and they could not help but preach what they had seen and heard!

What if Martin Luther decided to work on his translation of the Bible only when he got moved out of the cold, dank castle in Wittenberg into something a little more comfortable? What if John Bunyan decided that he couldn't work on Pilgrim's Progress until he was home with his wife and children instead of the jail in Bedford? What if David Brainerd gave up his mission to the American Indians because praying for hours in the snow was too rough? Or Hudson Taylor gave up his mission to China because of the difficulties? What if Elisabeth Eliot abandoned her mission to the Auca Indians of Ecuador because of the martyrdom of her husband and the other missionaries? What if Ray Comfort decided to throw in the towel back in the 1990's because despite of all of the books and videos that went out, there still had been no sweeping change in the church's attitude towards evangelism? Where would we be?

The only reason why we remember these great men and women of God is because they were faithful. If we desire the glory of God in our ministries, we must be reliable. Our evangelism teams should be as dependable as clockwork, no matter what the "results" are.

Leaders, whether or not we have a heritage to pass on to our spiritual descendants depends directly on whether or not we are faithful, week in and week out, to doing the work of evangelism! As Steve Green sang, "May all who come behind us find us faithful." And, much more importantly, whether or not we receive the Lord's approval depends on whether or not we are faithful.

May God richly bless you as you do the work of an evangelist!