

“SEMPER FIDELIS”

*Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much,
and whoever is unrighteous in very little is also unrighteous in much.
So if you have not been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with what is genuine?
And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you what is your own?*
(Luke 16:10-12).¹

I have never been much of an athlete. I am neither the son nor the grandson of an athlete. I do have a second cousin who played for the Chicago Cubs farm team, but beyond Brian, I am hard pressed to name any athletic folk among my blood kin anywhere.

My most successful athletic effort was almost fifty years ago, in 1968. As a freshman in high school, I and two other non-athletic classmates—we were all members of the band—decided that we would jog around the track in the afternoons on our own. We did this for quite some time, though I’m sure we never set records for anything. The other two guys were Hulitt Gloer and Philip Dupoy.² I don’t remember where it came from or how it began, but at some point, we started a three-part chant to encourage ourselves as we ran. The chant went like this: “Per-se-ve-rance / is the better part / of va-lor.”

Want to try it? Let’s do it as “call and response”: **Per-se-ve-rance / is the better part / of va-lor.** “Valor,” of course, is “heroic courage.” Hulitt and Philip and I reminded ourselves that for most of us, courage is best shown in the ordinary “keeping on keeping on” of everyday life rather than in moments of glory such as those we see in famous or Olympic athletes.

You and I never know as we begin the day whether we will be called upon for valor such as the passengers of United flight 77 demonstrated in the September skies over Pennsylvania sixteen years ago; but the character of which heroes are made is not constructed in a moment. *Character is built in the decisions we make all day long, every day.*

At the same time, it is often our heroes who inspire us to “up our game” and to make changes in our daily decisions, isn’t it? Here’s one who inspires me: it was 1983, shortly after the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut. General Paul Kelly, Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited some of the wounded in a military hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. One of these survivors was Corporal Jeffery Lee Nashton. Nashton had been severely wounded, and he had so many tubes running in and out of his body that he looked more like a machine than a man.

As General Kelly approached his bed, Nashton struggled to motion for a piece of paper and a pen. He wrote a brief note and handed it to his Commandant. Corporal Nashton had written only two words: “*Semper Fidelis*,” the Latin motto of the Marine Corps. The words mean “Always faithful.”³ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

The Gospel of John tells us that “*the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and **faithfulness**. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son*” (John 1:14, NLT). And *Jesus, who was that “Faithful Word,”* later told us, “**Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won’t be faithful in large ones.** *If you cheat even a little, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities*” (Luke 16:10).

This morning we’re considering the seventh of the nine *Fruit of the Spirit* Paul listed in Galatians 5:22-23, and this seventh “fruit” is “faithfulness.” The word Paul used is *pistis* (πιστις),

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 10, 2017. “The Big Nine, #7: Faithfulness.”

² These days, fifty years later, Hulitt is a seminary professor, and Philip is a recognized author.

³ James Dobson and Gary Bauer, *Children at Risk* (Waco: Word, 1990), pp. 187-188.

which is usually translated, “faith,”⁴ but here, situated in a list of eight other nouns in a list of Christian virtues, *pistis* is understood to represent “faithfulness,” a characteristic produced—like each of the other Fruit of the Spirit—by God’s transforming work in our lives.

Faithfulness is a character quality that includes such things as perseverance, endurance, trustworthiness, integrity, reliability, fidelity, loyalty, dependability, and consistency. We understand these things best when we see them lived out in human lives, so I’m going to tell you some stories about faithfulness.⁵

Some of you know what the symbol on today’s PowerPoint is, and others are wondering. This is the Arabic letter, “NUN,” which is the first letter of the word “Nasrani,” which means “Nazarene.” It is used by ISIS to mark the homes of Christians, who must either flee, convert to Islam, or die; and it is being increasingly used by Christians who live in freedom to identify with Christians who live in persecution (Hebrews 13:3).

Ghazala is an eighty-three-year-old woman who was too sick to leave her village of Karemlash when ISIS invaded, and she had to stay in the occupied town for ten days before she escaped. She resisted the ISIS attempts to force her to convert to Islam, telling them, “I’m eighty-three years old. You want to make me a Muslim now? You can shoot me and bury me, but I’ll never convert to Islam.”

When she was later asked why she thinks the ISIS terrorists didn’t kill her, she replied, “I wasn’t afraid of them; I was never afraid of them. They had weapons and guns, but I wasn’t afraid — because God is with me.”⁶ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

Mariam Yehya Ibrahim is a Sudanese Christian sentenced to death for her faith. Her ordeal began when one of her Muslim relatives filed a complaint saying that she had married a Christian and abandoned Islam. She has now been set free, but she was prepared to die for her faith, telling the judge, “I am a Christian, and I will remain a Christian.”⁷ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

Ken Wytsma has written about meeting a Christian leader in eastern Congo, one of the most dangerous places in the world. For fifteen years, this man’s life has been regularly threatened as he faces the seemingly impossible task of trying to restore villages decimated by rape, murder, and plunder.

When the leaders of a large, well-known global relief organization visited the region, they saw what an effective job this man was doing and asked him to become the leader of their Congo

⁴ πιστις, though used repeatedly elsewhere in Galatians to signify a person’s response of trust regarding God’s salvation provided in Christ Jesus (cf. 2:20; 3:6ff.; 5:6), here undoubtedly means the ethical virtue of “faithfulness.” πιστις as a noun is used by Paul to speak of one of the divine attributes, “God’s faithfulness” (Romans 3:3), though more commonly the adjective πιστος is used when referring to that ethical quality of God, “God is faithful” (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:18; also 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:3). Here, however, the subject is the believer and the context is determinative.

⁵ See Luke 16:10-12; 1 Corinthians 1:9, 10:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:2; Revelation 2:10, 3:14. Opposites of faithfulness include faithlessness, fickleness, untrustworthiness, inconsistency, uncertainty, waywardness, and capriciousness. Perversions of faithfulness include legalism, workaholism, fanaticism, and extremism.

⁶ <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/the-long-lent-of-iraqs-christians>

⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/31/us/new-hampshire-sudanese-woman/index.html>

operations. He rejected their offer, even though it meant higher pay, greater safety, and increased influence. Here's what he told them:

“God gave me the job I have. God has helped me build the relationships and the respect that I have. He has opened the door for me all these years and kept me safe on every trip out into the bush. I'm right where God has called me to be, so why would I go anywhere else? *I don't just want to do good. I want to be where God wants me to be.*”⁸ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

So, my friend, how is it with you? How is faithfulness doing in your life these days? Most of us would probably say that we're ready for God to give us a Great Challenge. We're ready for our “fifteen minutes of fame,” but that's not how faithfulness usually works.

Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of our day, understood how faithfulness relates to our ordinary lives. “To give my life for Christ appears glorious,” he said. “To pour myself out for others, to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom, I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We imagine that giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$10,000 bill and placing it on the table: ‘Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.’ But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$10,000 bill for quarters.

“We go through life putting out twenty-five cents here and fifty cents there. We listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying ‘Get lost.’ We go to a committee meeting. We give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Giving our lives to Christ isn't usually glorious. It is done in all these little acts of love, twenty-five cents at a time. It would be easier to go out in an explosion of glory. It's harder to live the Christian life little by little over a lifetime.”⁹ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

Jim O'Connor teaches math at St. Francis High School in La Canada, California, and he's known for his tough, no-nonsense approach to pushing his students toward excellence. On one occasion, a couple of years ago, some of the boys from St. Francis visited Los Angeles Children's Hospital to recruit donors for a blood drive, and when the staff found out where they went to school, they said, with awe, “You must know Jim O'Connor. Isn't he *wonderful?*”

The boys were stunned to hear such praise for their “mean math teacher,” but their shock turned to awe when they saw their teacher's name at the top of the hospital's blood donor honor roll. Mr. O'Connor had donated seventy-two gallons of blood and platelets at that point, saving many lives along the way. But there was more

The boys were blown away when they learned that Jim O'Connor, who had never married and never had any children, volunteers three days every week holding and rocking sick and dying babies when their parents can't be with them. “I've always respected him,” one student said, “but now I want to be like him.”¹⁰ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

About five years ago, Bismark Mensah, then a recent immigrant from Ghana, was collecting shopping carts as a part-time worker at a Wal-Mart near Seattle. He was accustomed to finding things customers had overlooked in their carts, things like keys, phones, wallets, and credit cards; but this time he found an envelope bulging with \$20,000 in cash!

⁸ Ken Wytsma, *Pursuing Justice* (Thomas Nelson, 2013), pp. 161-162.

⁹ Darryl Bell.

¹⁰ Steve Hartman, “Tough California teacher has a tender heart,” *CBS News* (2-14-14).

Mr. Mensah could have used some of that cash. He came to the U.S. to study business administration so he could return to Ghana and help his mom expand her five small seamstress shops. And at the rate of \$9.05 an hour at Wal-Mart, it will take him a long time to fulfill that dream.

But Mr. Mensah says he never considered keeping the money. “My conscience wouldn’t allow it,” he said. “I couldn’t even drive home if I did that.” So, he ran after the couple who had left the cash. As it turns out, they were going to use the money for a down payment on a house.

Mensah said, “She was like, ‘Wow!’ She began to cry. She took some money and tried to reward me. I said, ‘No, no. I’m all right.’”

Bismark Mensah received Wal-Mart's “Integrity in Action Award” and a promotion. Now he works full-time for \$9.19 an hour—with benefits. But for him, the real rewards are elsewhere. He has this to say about his job: “In the parking lot, people chat, tell you their problems, you see that a person is not happy. I tell them, ‘God is in control. Everything is OK.’”¹¹ ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

Daniel Meyer tells about a retired woman who felt God encouraging her to look for ways in which she could use her particular gifts and situation to minister to the needs of others. She thought about her gifts and realized that she’d been told by others that she had the gift of hospitality.

This woman lived alone in a small apartment near a large university and had afternoons free. She pondered the needs around her and the people who tugged at her heartstrings. She thought about the nearby students who were far away from home, and an idea both strange and simple suddenly came to her mind. She got a stack of three-by-five cards and wrote these words on each one: “Are you homesick? Come to my house at 4:00 p.m. for tea.” She included a phone number and address and then posted the cards all around campus. That was pretty daring indeed.

After a slow start, homesick students began trickling into her house for tea; and when she died, ten years later, *eighty* honorary pallbearers attended her funeral. Each one of them had been a student who, once upon a time, found a hot cup of tea, a sense of home, and the gospel of Jesus in the hospitable heart of this faithful servant.¹² ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

Some weeks ago, late on a Friday afternoon, a severely disabled student found that she had forgotten some essential equipment at school, and the building had already been secured for the weekend. Someone thought to call the school’s Building Manager, who had the reputation of being very kind and thoughtful, to see what might be done.

The Building Manager drove twenty miles on Friday evening in order to help that student and her family, and he was recognized for his valor three days ago by the Howard County Superintendent of Schools. His name is Derrick Burks. ***Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful.***

So here’s the deal. Like each of the Fruit of the Spirit, faithfulness is the result of the work of God’s Spirit in our lives. We show faithfulness when we obey God’s commands and when we complete the work God gives us to do. God’s Spirit gives us both the desire and the ability to do this.

¹¹ Erik Lacitis, “Hero with a \$20,000 heart,” *The Seattle Times* (4-5-13).

¹² Daniel Meyer, *Witness Essentials* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 186.

Do you remember Paul's words in Ephesians 2? "*For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago*" (Ephesians 2:10). Do you know what's on your assignment list? Do you even know where your list is?

The place to start looking for your list is in Exodus 20—the *Ten Commandments*—and in Matthew 5-7—the *Sermon on the Mount*. Take some time to check out whether you're really on board with those guidelines and principles. Read the Gospels and underline the imperative statements of Jesus. Are you doing—or are you *not* doing—these things? How can we say that we love Jesus if we do not do what He tells us to do? Faithfulness may require more than simple obedience to the Bible's clear commands, but it never requires less (John 14:23).

This is not rocket science. Denzel Washington was encouraging a group of young actors a couple of years ago, and he told them that every night as they undressed, they should put their shoes so far under the bed that they will have to get on their knees in the morning to retrieve them. "And while you're down on your knees," he said, "thank God for a new day and ask God to help you live this day well. We all have a unique gift to go out and touch people and to give back to people. Understand your gift. Protect that gift. Appreciate that gift. Utilize that gift. Don't abuse it. Treasure it."¹³

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.

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 through godly lives.

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone
And our children sift through 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

*Oh, 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.
Oh, may all who come behind us find us faithful!*¹⁴

My friends, may God say to you, and to me, when we cross that final Finish Line, "**Semper Fidelis, my child. You have been faithful. Welcome Home!**"

¹³ www.cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/denzel-washington-put-your-shoes-under-bed

¹⁴ Steve Green, *Find Us Faithful*.