

Semper Fi

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, **faithfulness**, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Galatians 5:22-23

I’m not usually drawn to lists, but this list is different. Most lists are boring; some lists are important. Before pilots fly, they go through a safety check list to make sure everything is working properly. New patients fill out the doctor’s questionnaire about their medical history. They run through a check-list of health issues. When I was a boy we lived about a mile and half from the grocery store and my mother sent me to the store with a list. There were a few times, especially at the beginning, when I didn’t read the list very carefully and got the wrong item. My mother remained cool. She didn’t make a big deal over it, but she did train me to read the list.

When it comes to spiritual formation, list-making doesn’t seem to work very well. Pray more, check the box; read your Bible, check; attend church, check; go on a mission trip to the Congo, check. Some people like things spelled out in black and white. They want a to-do list for the soul, because at the end of the day they want a feeling of accomplishment.

But the apostle Paul’s lists are different. He doesn’t come across as a program director making life easier for us by giving us a to-do list. He is more like an artist painting a profile of what the disciple of Christ looks like. Old lists, scribbled on a scrap of paper, are thrown away, but portraits are hung where everyone can see them. One of my favorite lists is in the apostle’s letter to the church at Colossae.

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Colossians 3:12

The contrast between a check-off, to-do list and a character portrait is especially evident in Paul’s description of putting on the full armor of God.

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions. . .” Ephesians 6:14-18

Whether Paul is describing the fruit of the Spirit or the clothing of righteousness or the armor of God, he is painting a picture of the faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. And all these “lists” take after the eight-fold portrait given by Jesus of the beatitude based believer presented in the Sermon on the Mount.

The apostle's fruit of the Spirit word-picture is special in several ways.

(1) He has hung this extraordinarily positive portrait of the fruit of the Spirit right next to a realistic description of the acts of the sinful nature. We cannot ignore either painting. As much as we might want to be positive, we have to take into account the ugly reality of a sinful and fallen evil world that threatens life in Christ. He itemizes fifteen random perversions of the good and leaves room for more. Paul is a realist, not an idealist. The tension in the text matches two conflicting realities. The portrait on the right is not pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. Both are realistic. The acts of the sinful nature are placed in sharp relief to the fruit of the Spirit and life in step with the Spirit.

(2) The fruit of the Spirit is a metaphor for the organic process of spiritual growth. Only God creates good fruit. We cannot invent it or manufacture it. The Spirit of God is in control of these qualities and only those with the Spirit's DNA produce such fruit. With that said, "By calling them 'the fruit of the Spirit,' Paul does not intend something passive on the part of the believer" (Gordon Fee, *Empowering Presence*, 444). There is an equally important emphasis on the part we play in this organic process. The works of the sinful nature puts emphasis on human endeavor and fruit implies divine empowerment, but Paul stresses that those who belong to Christ Jesus "have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires." The produce of the fruit of the Spirit comes from living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit, all of which stresses the close organic relationship with the Spirit.

Faith & Faithfulness

Of all the words used to describe the fruit of the Spirit, faith may be the broadest and most flexible. The meaning of faith and faithfulness is at the heart of Paul's letter. Our words faith, faithfulness, belief, and believe, all come from the same πιστις (pistis) word group, meaning confidence in, trusting in, reliance upon, loyalty to, and depending on. Faith is above all else a relational word. If freedom in Christ is the theme of Galatians, faith is freedom's foundation. Faith is Paul's key word for the Galatians and he uses it more than any other word.

For Paul, the word "faith" summarized the whole gospel of grace. His earliest reputation was simply this: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now **preaching the faith** he once tried to destroy" (1:23). So, he was known for preaching a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul's total confidence was in Christ alone. He wrote, "We know a person is not justified by observing the law, but **by faith in Jesus Christ**, so we have **put our faith in Christ Jesus** that we may be **justified by faith in Christ** and not by observing the law. . ." (2:16). Faith in Christ defined for Paul the deepest and most passionate reality. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, **I live by faith in the Son of God**, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). Faith in Christ established the legacy and continuity of salvation history. He wrote, "Understand, then, that **those who have faith** are children of Abraham," and then he repeated it for emphasis, "So **those who rely on faith** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (3:7,9). Quoting from the prophet Habakkuk, he declared, "No one is justified before God by the law, because '**the righteous will live by faith**'"

(3:11; Hab 2:4). Paul's theme is emphatic: salvation is by faith alone: "So that what was promised, being **given through faith in Jesus Christ**, might be given to those who believe" (3:22). Everything depended on faith: "Before **the coming of this faith** [through the faithfulness of Jesus] we were held in custody under the law. . . So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be **justified by faith**. Now that **this faith has come**, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (3:23-24). Faith stands for the end of slavery and for the 'Abba' relationship with God the Father (4:6). Faith stands for freedom: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (5:1). Faith stands for the new creation (6:15). Faith stands for the believer's enduring hope: ". . . **By faith** we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope" (5:5). Faith is Paul's top priority and bottom line, so that he can say, "**The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love**" (5:6).

There is a powerful connection between **the Faith** and **faith in Christ** and our **faithfulness**. When Paul quotes from Habakkuk he is not proof texting. He references the essence of the prophet's spiritual direction. "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." Faith is trust in the certainty of the revelation of God and draws a sharp contrast between those who trust in themselves and those who rely on God. "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by faith [or by their faithfulness]." Faith and faithfulness are inseparable, as the prophet graphically illustrates:

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Hab 2:3-4; 3:17-18).

The connection between faith and faithfulness is especially pronounced in James' spiritual direction, when he said, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:17). "Faith without deeds is useless" (2:20). "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (2:26). Faith in Christ is demonstrated through the works of faith. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. In the words of the Reformers, "Faith alone justifies, but not the faith that is alone." Works are meant to follow faith as sexual intimacy follows marriage, or as power flows from an energy source. "People are not saved on account of any work of theirs," wrote Jonathan Edwards, "and yet they are not saved without works." J. I. Packer wrote, "Holiness is no more by faith without effort than it is by effort without faith."

Bad faith is faith without faithfulness. The apostle Paul affirmed the natural complement of faith and faithfulness when he wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:8-10). To the church at Philippi he stressed the relationship between faith and faithfulness when he wrote, ". . . Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). "Luther put it well: "True faith will no more fail to produce good works than the sun can cease to give light."

The relationship between faith and faithfulness makes me think of the relationship between a wedding and a marriage. In the last few weeks, my wife Virginia and I have been to three weddings. Three Christian couples starting life together as husband and wife. The wedding receives a lot of attention, but its over in a day, but the marriage takes a lifetime to work out. “Weddings are easy; marriages are difficult,” writes Eugene Peterson. “The couple wants to plan a wedding; I want to plan a marriage. They want to know where the bridesmaids will stand; I want to develop a plan for forgiveness. They want to discuss the music of the wedding; I want to talk about the emotions of the marriage. I can do a wedding in twenty minutes with my eyes shut; a marriage takes year after year of alert, wide-eyed attention. . . . In marriage we develop the long and rich life of faithful love that the wedding announces. The event of the wedding without the life of marriage doesn’t amount to much.” Likewise, the event of conversion—confessing faith in the Lord Jesus, doesn’t amount to much without the life of faithfulness. Faith and faithfulness belong together.

This past year a pastor friend experienced a tragic divorce. His wife became romantically involved with the youth pastor. They had an affair. She left her husband and the youth pastor left his wife. Two families in a household of faith were torn asunder. The pastor sought to love and forgive his wife, but his attempts at reconciliation were rejected. For him, faithfulness meant four resolutions: (1) Stay alive; (2) Don’t hurt anyone; (3) Love his children; and (4) Serve his church. Every day, in Christ, he vows these four commitments. Faith apart from faithfulness is no faith at all and faithfulness without faith is impossible.

No Middle Ground

There is something striking about Paul’s contrasting lists. There is no middle ground between the acts of the sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit. There is no list describing the typical in-between state of most believers, who aren’t as bad as the first list, but not as good as the second list. They are not in the throes of sexual immorality, lust and debauchery, but neither are they bearing the fruit of love, joy and peace. They condemn blatant idolatry, witchcraft, and hatred, but they don’t go all the way and embrace patience, kindness, and goodness. They live lukewarm lives, neither hot nor cold. But according to Paul, there is no middle ground between faith and faithfulness.

Let’s not feed the illusion that the “balanced” Christian life is found somewhere in the middle between the acts of the sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit. For in the mind of God, such a balance is impossible. Niceness is not an acceptable compromise between malice on the one hand and love on the other. No one can rationalize private pornography as an acceptable compromise between blatant public lust at one extreme and inner purity as the other extreme. Does a mild form of self-indulgence work as a compromise between conspicuous selfishness and Spirit-led self-discipline. Some believers might judge the apostle’s vision of the normal Christian life as extreme, but Paul saw only one way to follow the Lord Jesus— “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25).

Marked by the Cross

Both faith and faithfulness are given a cruciform description in Galatians. Paul describes saving faith when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). Through our faith-union with Christ we have been crucified with him. But Paul goes on to describe sanctifying faith or faithfulness when he writes, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires”(5:24). We have been crucified with Christ (faith) and we crucify the sinful nature (faithfulness).

Paul’s language is uncompromising. He turns the vivid image of the cross, so vital for our salvation in Christ, into the working principle of our on-going life with and for Christ. This deliberate putting to death of the sinful nature is drawn from Jesus’ own words: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:34-35). To crucify means that our rejection of our old sinful nature is pitiless, painful and decisive (Stott, Galatians, 151). There is no compromise here between faith and faithfulness.

This two-fold principle of the cross, we are “crucified with Christ,” and we “crucify the sinful nature,” is not a description of the heroic Christian life but of the ordinary Christian life. This was meant to be the norm, not the exception. I am drawn to the example of my father, who illustrated the principle of the cross worked out in ordinary life. My brother Jonathan and I were nurtured in a environment that rooted life in the finished work of Christ on the cross and in the powerful example of Jesus’ life. Our dad was a teacher and mathematician, whose hobby was carpentry and wood working. He used his tenor voice to sing solos in our church. He was a hard worker, a man of integrity, who didn’t tolerate hypocrisy or manipulation. Jonathan and I knew him as our loving father, devoted to our mother, and selfless. Looking at my parents I never dreamed that adulthood could be as complicated as it is, because they depended on the Lord and enjoyed serving others.

Real goodness is hard to depict in novels and in movies. Evil, imaginary evil, is “romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating” (Simone Weil, Gravity & Grace, 120). What I think Simone Weil meant by comparing imaginary evil and real evil, imaginary good and real good, was that evil in literature or in movies produces adrenaline pumping excitement, whereas goodness comes across as boring. But the kind of evil we meet in real life is anything but exciting. It is ugly, depressing, and disheartening. It leads to disillusionment and despair. No one would have ever made a movie about my father. Faith and faithfulness don’t make someone famous, but they make a great father.

Faithfulness Pictured

Faithfulness is a noun. We are meant to picture it. When I picture faithfulness I think of the parents of a psychologically ill son. They never dreamed they would have to walk through this

dark night of the soul. The frustration of it all would be enough to put many over the edge, but as the young man's father, Ben, explained, it is the meaningfulness of Christ's gift of salvation that inspires him. One night he was coming home from church and listening to a CD of a worship service that he had helped lead on the base guitar. As he listened, he was unexpectedly overwhelmed by the truth of the Incarnation expressed in music. He was so moved he couldn't stop crying, not out of self-pity or anger, but out of a sense of God's deep love and joy. Jesus is Lord.

Faithfulness is personified in the irrepressible joy of Judy. She is married to Brian, a close Christian friend of mine who is HIV positive. Brian has hemophilia and contracted the virus through a tainted blood transfusion. It would be enough for Judy to focus on her husband, which she does with wonderful energy and happiness, but she has a heart for the poor and destitute in Liberia. She pours herself into caring for the poor with enthusiasm and wisdom. Another woman in her situation might lament her husband's health and feel sorry for herself, but not Judy. Her husband's needs and the needs of others, even those of the poor in Liberia, move her ever closer to her Savior. Jesus is Lord.

I picture faithfulness when I think of a brave Christian sister in Arizona, Christi Napier. She has had twenty-six surgeries on her throat and esophagus. For this young wife and mother of two, this ordeal has gone on for over two years. Christi embraced her situation and accepted a ministry shaped by suffering. She became convinced that God desired to use her weakness for his glory. Christi wrote, "I sincerely don't know if God is ready for this to end. . . . All I know is that I desire to be healed, but my bottom line is Mary's prayer, 'May it be done unto me as YOU have said.' I absolutely LOVE knowing that my healing and the quality of my life has never depended on the doctors or my body's responses. It is in the hands of a loving Father that I do not pretend to understand - but Whose character I know. Ah, security in a crazy world. Praise God. I do not WANT to want healing more than I want His will. That is what I'm praying over." She continued,

"Remember when I shared a year ago that I was driving home from Bible study and just broke down and cried out to the LORD, 'I JUST NEED THIS TO END.' And He spoke into my heart, 'You don't need this to end. You JUST NEED ME.' And this wonderful wave of freedom broke over me and I realized that I never needed to panic. I was never desperate. I don't need certain circumstances to have the peace and rest and loving service in the LORD that I so deeply desire. I just need GOD." Jesus is Lord.

Faithfulness is a way of life. A close friend who has weathered intense suffering with great perseverance and witness, said to me, "I wouldn't share this with most people, but I feel like a Bible character." His instincts are right. As we live lives marked by the cross in daily dependence upon the grace of Christ, we identify with those lead characters in salvation history. We become like them and they become like us. We are one. As they were called, we are called. Jesus is Lord.

Faithful to the End

Faithfulness to the end affirms true faith from the beginning. “Today we emphasize the New Birth,” writes Peter Gillquist, “the ancients emphasized being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living; they spoke of the glories of the eternal kingdom....The emphasis in our attention has shifted from the completing of the Christian life to the beginning of it.”

One of the greatest preachers in the early church, John Chrysostom, left us a powerful example of how to end our earthly ministry, no matter what our gift and responsibility may be. He died in 407, but not before leaving us a powerful testimony of faithfulness to the end. His letters and treatises from exile are strong, uncompromising epistles, written by a resilient saint, who steeled himself against the world, the flesh, and the devil. John’s controlling thought was simple: nothing can destroy you but yourself. Your own worst enemy is not the devil or disease, but your sinful self. Your greatest danger is self-betrayal. Your greatest weakness, littleness of soul.

Faced with every reason to quit and with every excuse to become bitter, John contended that “no one who is wronged is wronged by another, but experiences this injury at his or her own hands.” Nothing can ruin our virtue or destroy our soul, that is not self-inflicted. John argued that poverty cannot impoverish the soul. Malignancy cannot malign the character. The lack of health care cannot destroy a healthy soul. Famine cannot famish one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. No! Not even the devil and death can destroy those who live sober and vigilant lives. The devil robbed Job of everything but could not rob Job of his virtue. Cain took Abel’s life, but could not take away his greater gain. Only those who injure themselves are injured. “Don’t confuse the argument,” John insists, “I did not say that no one injures, but that no one is injured.”

“. . . No one will be able to injure one who is not injured by himself, even if all the world were to kindle a fierce war against him. For it is not stress. . . nor circumstances. . . nor insults. . . nor intrigues. . . nor catastrophes. . . nor any number of ills to which humankind is subject, which can disturb even slightly the person who is brave, and disciplined, and watchful. . .”

Self-betrayal is the danger, littleness of soul the problem. “Those who do not injure themselves become stronger,” wrote John, even if they receive innumerable blows; but they who betray themselves, even if there is no one to harass them, fall of themselves, and collapse and perish.”

The motto for the U.S. Marines, *Sempre Fi*, is well known. John Chrysostom would have claimed it for the followers of Jesus, and so should we. Faith in Christ and the faithfulness of Jesus are inseparable. Every description of the disciple, including the beatitudes of Jesus, the clothing of righteousness, the full armor of God and the fruit of the Spirit, promotes the faithfulness of Jesus as the new reality for the believer. There is no middle ground between the acts of the sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit. No rationale for nominal Christianity. Every believer was meant to experience faith and faithfulness. We echo Paul’s passionate language: “I have been crucified with Christ,” and we agree with the apostle that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let

us keep in step with the Spirit.”