Matthew 25:14-30 *Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness*

***2,632***On May 29, 1982, the Baltimore Orioles played a double-header. In the first game, Cal Ripken, Jr. started at third base. It was the 23rd straight game that Ripken played in. For the second game of the double-header, Ripken was given the chance to rest. A man named Floyd Rayford started in his place.

The next day, May 30, 1982, Ripken was again in the Orioles line-up. He would remain there for the next 2,632 games. **For 16 years, Ripken would play** in every game the Baltimore Orioles had. It is the major league record for consecutive games played.

It is a remarkable record of endurance, toughness, and just showing up.

Baseball is not necessarily the most physical of sports—the opportunity for injury in sports like football and hockey and soccer is much higher. For the most part, baseball is a lot of standing around punctuated by bursts of energy if a ball is batted in your direction or if you bat a ball into play.

But the thing about baseball is its relentless schedule. A 162 game schedule is played in approximately 185 days. That means most weeks teams play 6 games, and some weeks they play every day. During that time there are all sorts of opportunities for scrapes, pulled muscles, collisions, and general fatigue. It is rare for a baseball player to appear in all 162 games in a single season, let alone every game for 16 seasons.

During Ripken’s streak, there were multiple opportunities for him to take a day off. During the streak, he and his wife had two children. His daughter Rachel was born during the off-season, but his son Ryan was born on July 26, 1993. That’s the middle of the season and was when Ripken’s streak was nearing 2000 games. It also just happened to be a scheduled off-day for the Orioles.

Ripken was hit by a pitch 58 different times during the streak. Now, I don’t know about you, but I think getting hit by a baseball would hurt. I mean, if I threw this baseball at you as hard as I could, you would want to get out of the way. And I’m guessing I could throw a baseball, at best, at about 60 miles per hour. Major League pitchers are throwing 90 miles per hour. Getting hit by a pitch thrown that hard is going to leave a mark. You would think that at least one of those 58 hit by pitches would be enough for Ripken to want to take a day off.

Plus, maintaining a streak like that means avoiding major injury. Twice—in 1985 and again in 1992—Ripken injured his ankle but played through it. The injury in ’92 was severe enough that the Orioles called up a minor leaguer to substitute in, but Ripken played anyway.

In June, 1993 the Orioles and the Seattle Mariners were involved in a benches clearing brawl. During the fight, Ripken severely twisted his right knee. He was sore the next day, but still played. Had he sat out, the streak would have ended at 1,790 games.

In 1996, during the All-Star game team photo, Chicago White Sox pitcher Roberto Hernandez slipped and fell into Ripken. He broke Cal’s nose. Ripken still played in the All-Star game and was present in the Orioles line-up two days later, keeping the streak alive.

Probably the greatest threat to the streak came through labor strife. In 1994 the players’ union went on strike, ending the season and cancelling the World Series. As the 1995 season was approaching, the strike had still not ended, and baseball’s owners were seriously considering beginning the season with replacement players. Ripken declared that he would not cross the picket line to keep the streak alive. The Orioles’ owner declared that he would not field a team of replacement players. But, even so, if baseball had begun the season that way, the Orioles would have had to forfeit every game they refused to play in, and Ripken’s streak would have ended.

As it turned out, the owners and players reached a deal at the last minute, the start of the season was delayed three weeks, and when the Orioles played their first game Ripken was in the line-up.

It’s significant, because 1995 was the year that Ripken caught the previous record-holder, Lou Gehrig, who had played in 2,130 consecutive games—a record that had stood for 56 years. The day that Ripken broke the streak—September 6, 1995—is still remembered as one of the most important regular season baseball games in history. Ripken hit a home run that day, huge banners reading 2,131 were unfurled over the rightfield wall, and the game was delayed for about 25 minutes in the middle of the fifth inning when it became official. Ripken and the streak are credited for restoring fan interest and faith in the game after the disastrous strike of 1994.

The streak continued for three more years until late in the 1998 season when Ripken quietly, and without advance notice, asked his manager to leave him out of the lineup. Ripken played three more years after that, but began regularly taking days off.

***Showing Up***I thought of Ripken’s streak when I started to think about today’s Fruit of the Spirit: faithfulness.

We are in a series of sermons springing from **Galatians 5:22-23.** The Apostle Paul is talking about the characteristics that will be present in the life of someone who is following Jesus. He says that the Holy Spirit will be present in your life and where the Spirit is you will see evidence in things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We’ve said that we want to be people known for following Jesus, so we’re going one by one through this list to talk about what these things are, and how we can cultivate the conditions in which the Spirit will produces these things in us.

And today, we’re talking about faithfulness.

Faithfulness is not exactly the most flashy characteristic on this list. It’s not always eye-catching or newsworthy. Faithfulness is dependability. It’s trustworthiness. It’s being the kind of person other people can rely on. Faithfulness is, by definition, the predictable, the habitual, the sturdy, the routine. It’s the sort of thing that, when we see it, we tend to take for granted. And thus, we tend not to give much credit for it.

Back in April, I wrote a little about faithfulness in the Pastor’s Column for the local paper. I’m sure you all carefully study whatever I write in the paper—clip it out and stick it on your refrigerator and stuff—and if that’s the case, these next few sentences might seem familiar. But if not, let me share what I wrote:

There also needs to be a recognition that there is beauty in accomplishing the routine. There is something to be said for doing the little things, for punching the clock, for the ordinary.

We need a theology of showing up. We need to celebrate the discipline of doing what needs to be done.

The Biblical word for this is faithfulness.

That’s why I told you about Cal Ripken, Jr. It’s one of the rare examples I can think of where someone is celebrated just for going to work. It’s a testament to the power of sticking to it. It’s a reminder that there is something godly about being dependable.

And, make no mistake, faithfulness is godly. It comes from God. Most of the time we use the word “faithfulness”, we are talking about God’s faithfulness to us. We just sang: “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” God is faithful. And that’s one of the reasons Faithfulness is a Fruit of the Spirit He wants to grow it in us.

In a book called *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan gives a two paragraph survey of some of the many verses that talk about God’s faithfulness. Here’s what the Bible says about God’s faithfulness:

He abounds in faithfulness, and by faithfulness He keeps His covenant of love to a thousand generations. Because of His faithfulness, He does no wrong. He shows Himself faithful to the faithful. He’s faithful in all He does, and by it He guarantees that His words are right and true. His faithfulness reaches to the skies, is sent down from the heavens, and is appointed to protect us like a shield and a rampart. God’s faithfulness surrounds Him and goes out before Him. He will not betray it, and it endures forever.

In faithfulness, God disciplines His children. Because of His faithfulness, He will keep all His promises. His faithfulness is great. It is not canceled out by our lack of faith. Because of it, He forgives us and cleanses us from confessed sin, and He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. By his faithfulness, God sanctifies us and keeps us blameless until the coming of Jesus and by it He gives us strength and protection from the evil one. Faithfulness is one of Jesus’ names. What’s more, the faithfulness of God is connected with His love, righteousness, truthfulness, steadfastness, compassion, mercy, peace, grace, slowness to anger, creative power, mightiness, justice, deliverance, relief and holiness. (57-58)

It is because of God’s faithfulness that the sun comes up every morning. It is by His faithfulness that the leaves of the trees create clean air for us to breathe. Through His faithfulness your heart continues to beat. These are regular occurrences, run-of-the-mill events that we take for granted. And yet they would not happen unless God faithfully causes them to happen. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness.

But, again, when faithfulness is named as a Fruit of the Spirit, it is not talking about God’s faithfulness to us but this trait of God being evidenced in us. It’s talking about us displaying the trait of faithfulness in our relationship with Him, and our relationships with each other.

I’m going to define faithfulness like this: **Faithfulness is being reliable even in the little things.** It is showing up. It is taking care of the routine. It is paying attention to the small, unseen, taken-for-granted acts of faith. Here are some of the acts of faithfulness that I think we should celebrate:

* The parents who faithfully care for a special needs child.
* The city maintenance worker who faithfully goes out early in the morning to plow the city streets.
* The nurse’s aid who faithfully helps residents in the nursing home finish their supper.
* The Sunday School teacher who faithfully prepares a lesson for 5 or 6 children.
* The neighbor who faithfully checks on the widow next door.
* The pastor who faithfully preaches to a small country church.
* The senior citizen who faithfully prays every morning.
* The married couple that have been faithful to each other, and faithful to their vows, for 10 years, or 30 years, or 65 years, or more.

It is not always the extraordinary and the flashy that makes an impact for Jesus. There is much to be said for those who quietly and consistently do the routine things. The little things. As you grow to be more like Jesus, seek to grow in faithfulness.

***The “Talents” Parable***So how do we do that? What can we do to allow the Holy Spirit to grow faithfulness in us? For an answer, I’d like us to turn to a parable of Jesus. If you’ve been around the church very much, this might be a familiar story to you. I know it is a passage that Jay preached on just this past January. It’s a story that is often used to talk about how we handle money, or to challenge us to use our gifts to serve God. But it is also a story about faithfulness. And as I read it, I want you to pay attention to what it says about faithfulness. The passage is **Matthew 25:14-30,** and the story is known as the parable of the talents, or the parable of the bags of gold. Here’s what it says:

**14**“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. **15**To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. **16**The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. **17**So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. **18**But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

**19**“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. **20**The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

**21**“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

**22**“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

**23**“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

**24**“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. **25**So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

**26**“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? **27**Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

**28**“‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. **29**For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. **30**And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Did you notice the word faithfulness in there? Did you catch how this is a story about faithfulness? I don’t have time to do a full study of this story, but I’d like to talk about it in terms of what it says about faithfulness. There are three things we can do to increase our faithfulness. I found these in a sermon by James Merritt on Rightnow Media.

***Each According to His Ability***First, we need to **take stock of our God-given ability.** Being faithful begins by understanding the gifts that God has given us. Let’s look at the first couple of verses, **14 and 15:**

**14**“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. **15**To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability.

The story begins by telling us that everybody has ability. Everybody is responsible for something.

When we read parables by Jesus, we usually try to figure out who the characters are supposed to represent. In this one, I think it is fairly straightforward. The man going on a journey—the master of the household—represents God. The servants represent us. And the bags of gold represent our responsibilities, our assignments. The idea is that God has given everybody on earth a purpose, a reason for being here. We all have an assignment to serve Him.

And notice, these assignments are given out according to ability. You see that? The servants don’t all get the same responsibility, but they get their responsibility according to their abilities.

This is important. We all have some ability. We all have an assignment. It’s not all the same. Some abilities are greater than others. But there is no hint that the servants with more abilities are valued more than the servants with less abilities. There is no value judgment here. Just a recognition that God has not assigned us all the same abilities or responsibilities.

On the one hand, we should find encouragement in this. If you feel like you have nothing to offer to God; if you feel like you are lacking in abilities; if you look at others and think that God has blessed them way more than you and thus must love them way more than you—none of that is true. God gifts us in different ways, and gives us different assignments, but all of those gifts matter.

And, on the other hand, we should be humbled in this. Because if you feel like you have tons to offer to God; if you feel like you are just full of ability; if you look at others and think that God has blessed you way more than them—then you should remember that there is always someone with more ability than you. If God gave you two bags of gold, there is somebody out there with five. And if He gave you five bags, there is probably someone out there with ten.

Now, let me talk a little bit about the word “talents.” One of the things that can be confusing about this parable is the word “talents.” That’s the word for the bags of gold the master gives out. In this translation, they have put bags of gold. But in the translation in your pew Bibles, and many English translations, it is left as talent. In the original language, Greek, the word *talanton* was a significant amount of money. And the confusing part, for me, is that we often talk about this parable as though God has given to each of us “talents” in the way we use that word today—talking about a gift or ability. We say: ”That’s a talented person.” And, in fact, our English word, and the way we use it today, is directly derived from this story. When we describe a person as being “talented” we are saying that God has gifted them in a particular way.

So, even though this is talking about money, we really do get from this that everybody has some talent, some ability, some responsibility given to us from God which He expects us to use for His glory.

That, then, is the first step to being faithful: take stock of your God-given ability. Figure out what areas God has given you responsibility for. Don’t get caught up in whether someone else has more ability or less--it’s not how much we have that matters to God, but how we use what we have to honor Him.

***Went At Once***Now, second, we need to **take advantage of our God-given opportunities**. Being faithful means putting what God has given us to work for Him. **Verses 16-18:**

**16**The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. **17**So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. **18**But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

This is all about opportunity. Obviously, these men were expected to do something useful with their master’s money. Jesus doesn’t detail what instructions, if any, the man gave to his servants; but clearly there was an expectation that they would put what they had been given to work for him. They were expected to be stewards. They knew it wasn’t their money, they knew they would be using it on his behalf, but they also knew he wanted them to use it well.

And notice, everybody had the same opportunity to leverage what they had been given. They weren’t expected to all have the same results. The guy with two bags isn’t expected to have ten bags at the end. They weren’t expected to have the same results, but they we expected to give the same effort.

They were expected to be faithful. That’s what this is all about. Look at what the master says to the first servant when he returns, **verses 20-21:**

**20**The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

**21**“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

In the end, there are only two types of servants in this story: those who are faithful and those who are not. The faithful servants take their responsibility seriously. They go to work. They leverage their abilities to bring gain to the master.

But the unfaithful servant does not. He does not take advantage of the opportunity before him. He does not take responsibility for the gift the master gave him. He sits it out.

And really, I think this is the thing that sticks out to me most in this parable: what is inexcusable to God is to not use the ability you have. It’s the faithlessness that drives the master crazy. The third servant simply does not show up. He does not try. He does not put in the effort. Look at **verses 26 and 27:**

**26**“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? **27**Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

The impression I get is that the master would not have been upset if this servant had invested the money and lost it. The assumption is that there is risk involved in investing. He wasn’t judging on results. He was judging on effort. He was judging on faithfulness. What is simply inexcusable here is that the servant did nothing with what was given to him. He sat on it. He buried it. He refused to get into the game.

What about you? Are you taking advantage of your God-given opportunities? Are you leveraging what you have for His glory? Are you being faithful?

***Whoever Has Will Be Given More***Then, third, **take note of our God-given accountability.** Pay attention to the fact that we will be judged for our faithfulness. There will be an accounting for what we do with what we were given.

It’s interesting to note that the emphasis in this parable is not on the faithful servants, but the unfaithful one. Much more is said by him and to him than with the other two. There is a strong note of warning here.

So, for instance, pay attention to the story the third servant tells. **Verses 24-25:**

**24**“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. **25**So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

The only one of these servants with a story is the one who got nothing done. The first two don’t have much to say. They took what they were given, they put it to work, they earned some more. They don’t need to explain themselves.

 But this guy is full of excuses. “You are a hard master.” “I’m not as good at business as you.” “I was afraid.” He’s got a story, but he’s got no results.

Here’s a truism: the less people do, the more they talk. And the more people talk, the less they do. It’s people who get nothing done that need an excuse. This lazy servant is the perfect forerunner of our victim society, right? It’s all somebody else’s fault. He’s a victim of circumstances. It’s God’s fault for not giving Him more ability.

But the master says there is no excuse for doing nothing with what you have. This man didn’t show up. He didn’t punch the clock. He didn’t put the work in. And yet He wants to blame everyone else. And in the end, he’s going to suffer for it. **Verses 28-30:**

**28**“‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. **29**For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. **30**And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This man was not faithful. He didn’t think the opportunity associated with that single bag was worth the risk, so he refused to take responsibility for it. And in the end, it was taken away from him.

Verse 28 is a key verse: “Whoever has will be given more…whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Jesus says something very similar earlier in the parable, but He says it in a more positive way. He says it twice, the exact same words, **in both verse 21 and 23,** speaking to the faithful servants:

Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.

Remember the definition of faithfulness I gave earlier? Faithfulness is being reliable even in the little things. Here it is, from Jesus Himself. “You have been faithful with a few things.”

Sometimes we think that we should be given responsibility for things we have not yet proven we are ready for. Maybe you are an associate at work, but think you should be a supervisor. But have been faithful in your responsibilities? Do you show up on time, and stay late? Why would your boss want you to manage other people if you can’t even manage yourself?

Or maybe you’re a teenager who thinks you should be able to take the family car out. But tell me, how have you been about taking care of your bicycle? Does it get put away where it belongs? What about your clothes? Do they get folded and hung up the way they are supposed to? Why should you be trusted with something worth thousands of dollars if you can’t take care of something worth only a couple of hundred?

What about with God? Do you want a bigger role in His kingdom? Do you think He should give you more responsibility? Then ask yourself, how have you done with what He’s already given you? How faithful have you been with what He’s already asked you to do?

Faithfulness is being reliable even in the little things. It is showing up. It is taking care of the routine. It’s being dependable and trustworthy for a long period of time

God is incredibly faithful to you. He shows up day in and day out.

What about you? Is the fruit of faithfulness growing in your life? How are you doing with what He has entrusted to you? When He returns, will He find you faithful?

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This story contains a line that I think a lot of us hope to hear. It is, I don’t think there can be any debate, the greatest compliment any of us could receive. When I get to the end of my journey—either when I die or when Jesus comes again—when I stand before Him for the first time face to face—I hope to hear Him say: “Russell, well done. You are my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”