

Faithfulness

This is the last week of our focus season called The Unshakable Life, where we are talking about godly character traits. Now, a few of you have said you really needed this series and ask, “Why do we have to stop here?” Well, we can revisit it again in the future, but for now, we’ll end this week as scheduled because we don’t want to overwhelm you.

We realize that there might be more than one of these virtues that have really convicted you. But you won’t solve them in a week. So, just go back and review the last five weeks. What did you learn that has been most impactful? What’s just one virtue you’d like to pursue in the weeks ahead? Just take one and focus on it.

This week, we’re going to consider the character trait of *faithfulness*. The dictionary defines faithfulness as “*firm in adherence to promises or in observation of duty.*” Notice that definition has two aspects to it—one is voluntary, the other is not.

First, a faithful person is someone who keeps her *promises*. Every so often, I hear an advertisement on the radio that actually says this, “If you have credit card debt, don’t let the credit card companies trick you into believing you have to repay the whole amount.” Let that sink in a minute. You agree to borrow a bunch of money from these companies, but when they ask you to pay it back what you agreed to, they’re the ones being unfair? Faithfulness means that when you borrow money, you pay it back.

But our lack of faithfulness isn't just financial. One of the saddest stories is a dad who regularly promises he'll be at his son's game, but always ends up working late. The website Ashley Madison, whose slogan is "life is short, have an affair" has 45 million subscribers. In 2017, one study found that in 1/3 of the marriages they surveyed, one or both of the partners admitted to cheating. Marriage vows are becoming so passé that it seems like every week another mainstream publication comes out with an article that advocates open marriages or suggests getting rid of marriage altogether. We're just not very good at keeping our promises.

But the second aspect of that definition has to do with responsibility and duty. The fact that many of you cringed when I said the word "duty" is the indication of a societal shift. Duty and obligation are dirty words.

Sociologist, Robert Putnam wrote a book called "Bowling Alone" that examined the state of commitment in America. His research showed a precipitous drop in the membership of almost every civic group or club in the last 50 years—bowling leagues, service organizations, PTAs. Church membership has managed to stay pretty steady, but church attendance overall is declining, mostly because people attend less frequently.

A few decades ago, a man would retire from the same company he worked for out of high school. Today, it's not uncommon for someone to have a new job every few years. I'm not saying that's a character flaw, but it's an indication that as a society, we don't feel

the same sense of commitment we used to. If the money is better over there, we jump at the opportunity. If we find a church with a better band or children's program, we go. That's the world we live in. But the loss of any sense of obligation also means we're less inclined to take responsibility for others. Our society values *freedom* more than *faithfulness*, emphasize *options over obligations* and *rights over responsibilities*.

We do it because we think it'll make us happier, but the problem is that, it's not working. Stress related illnesses continue to grow. Loneliness is at epidemic levels, people trust each other less than they did even a few years ago. And the General Social Survey shows that Americans report they are significantly less happy than in 1972. The quest to be free from obligations and keep our options open, doesn't seem to be good for us.

Today, I want look at a great example of faithfulness in Scripture. Turn with me to 2 Samuel 9. But first some context. King Saul was the first king of Israel, but it didn't take long for his reign to go downhill and for God to decide he needed to be replaced.

Now, being king isn't like being president. In a monarchy, kingship stays in the family. So, there was no reason to think Israel wouldn't work the same way. King Saul's son, Jonathan, would normally be the rightful heir to the throne, but God hand-picked the boy David, to succeed him. So, already you can see potential trouble coming.

In 1 Samuel 17. The Philistines were threatening and no one in Israel seems to be able to muster up the courage to face the Philistine champion, Goliath. But one day,

when David visited his brothers on the battlefield, he was appalled by what he saw. So, with Saul's reluctant blessing, David went out to meet Goliath, and beat him with a slingshot and Israel routed the terrified Philistines.

This made David a legend and he became Israel's most successful military leader. As David won more battles, people wrote songs comparing David to Saul. *"King Saul is OK, but David is awesome!"* And here's where the story takes an interesting twist.

Saul became jealous of David. In fact, something snaps inside him and he begins to really resent David. On the other hand, look at what 1 Samuel 18:1 says about Jonathan. **"Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt."**

Now, I know this seems weird to many of us. In fact, there are some who believe this shows that David and Jonathan were gay, but that's only because our society has a hard time imagining a close, intimate friendship without sexualizing it. We sexualize everything, so we can't hear about two guys expressing strong emotions without thinking they're gay. But being hung up on this kind of thing is a modern, western phenomenon.

When I was in Sierra Leone last year, it wasn't uncommon at all to see young men or boys holding hands or one latched on to the other's elbow.

Our culture doesn't have any point of reference for a covenant like this other than marriage. But in the ancient near east, people often formed covenants that weren't sexual, but expressed a deep love and commitment to each other. That's what Jonathan and David were doing.

But when you understand the situation, you understand how remarkable this covenant is. Not only does Jonathan say, "I want to identify with you," as heir to the throne, when he gave David his sword, bow and belt, he was symbolically relinquishing the throne to David.

About that same time, Saul completely lost it and repeatedly tried to kill David. While Jonathan always stuck up for him, it quickly became apparent that David couldn't stay around anymore. In 1 Samuel 20, David and Jonathan say goodbye. Verse 13, **"May the LORD be with you as he has been with my father. But show me unfailing kindness like the LORD's kindness as long as I live, so that I may not be killed..."** But then Jonathan asks David to make a promise to him. Here's the promise. **"Do not ever cut off your kindness from my family—not even when the LORD has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth."** From that point, David was constantly running from Saul.

Eventually both Saul and Jonathan were killed and David became king. His first order of business was to secure Israel's borders and remove threats. In other words, David's enemies were cut off. Then in chapter 9 is one of the most moving stories in the whole Bible. [Read 2 Samuel 9:1-13]

Now, I want to break this down because even though David had many reasons *not* to follow through on his promise to Jonathan, he stayed true. And I want to talk about those reasons because they're the same excuses we often make not to follow through.

First, Jonathan was *dead*. In other words, Jonathan wasn't around to know whether David kept his promise. And there's no indication that anyone else knew about the promise, so it wouldn't boost his reputation to keep it or hurt his reputation to break it.

This is why integrity is a critical aspect of faithfulness. How often do we rationalize things because "they'll never find out?" We say one thing but do something different when they're not around. Spouses keep secrets from each other. Workers don't really put in the hours they say they're working. We think what they don't know won't hurt them. But the truth is that it hurts *us* because it erodes our integrity and makes us believe that our *reputation* is more important than our *character*.

But David believed that *character* is infinitely more valuable. Every step you take leads you somewhere—either you train yourself to be faithful or you make deception

second nature. Integrity is a necessary component of faithfulness. Faithfulness still matters even if no one will ever find out.

The second excuse *was that David's situation had changed*. When David made the promise, Saul was just starting to show his resentment for David. At the time, the promise to Jonathan made sense because Jonathan could protect him from Saul. But now, even though the situation changed and David was king, he still fulfilled his promise.

I'm sure you know by now that change is the only constant in life. People change. The economy changes. Friends betray us and we part ways. Jobs change. Feelings change. You can't predict what life will be like a in a few days or months let alone years, so we can't make promises and intend to keep them only if things stay the same.

For instance, when you stand at the altar on your wedding day, you do so knowing that your spouse probably won't look as good in 25 years as he does now. [pic] Life changes. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Sometimes better opportunities come along. When you make a commitment, you have to know that things might not be the same when it comes time to fulfill it.

But breaking a promise simply because your feelings change is never, ever OK. They're feelings. They're going to change. Character that changes based on feelings is not good or godly character. Kids pay a *huge* price for this in our society. When adults pursue their happiness it's often at the expense of our kids and it teaches them that people can't

be trusted. Yes, kids are resilient and will survive, but they also learn who they can trust. Change doesn't give us an excuse not to follow through.

Third, there was *no immediate benefit for David to keep his promise*. What did David gain from showing kindness to Mephibosheth? David was a national hero. The people of Israel weren't suddenly going to switch their allegiance to a guy who was disabled. He didn't gain anything politically or financially. It would have been easier to leave him in LoDebar and yet he went out of his way to fulfill his promise.

Keeping our promise when there's no immediate benefit is especially hard in a country that has written right into our founding documents each of us is "endowed by our creator with the inalienable right to pursue our own happiness." When keeping our promise conflicts with our God-given right to pursue our personal happiness, of course we should let our commitment slide. We *deserve* to be happy.

Keeping your word might not always provide an immediate benefit, but it does benefit us in the long-run because it *strengthens* our character and it solidifies people's trust in us. When they know they can count on us, they'll be more likely to sacrifice for us when the time comes.

The fourth goes a step further, *there was a time it would have been politically expedient for David to kill Mephibosheth*. In 2 Samuel 21, there was a famine in Israel because Saul had broken an oath that he made to the Gibeonites. When David asked the

Gibeonites how he could make things right, they said they wanted him to wipe out all of Saul's descendants. Remember, Mephibosheth was a descendent of Saul, but because of his promise, he spared Mephibosheth even though it cost him political capital.

To this point, we've talked mostly about faithfulness to other *people*. But there are times when our faithfulness to Christ might cost us something. I know a lot of Christians talk about their faith in Christ, which often ends up being some vague belief that God exists or that God wants them to be happy and will always work things out in their favor. But that's nothing like what the Bible means by faith.

The Biblical idea of faith is actually closer to the word faithfulness. It's not a vague belief, but it's a particular way of life that not only believes what Jesus says, but lives faithfully according to his teachings. And that often costs us something.

Church history is riddled with examples of Christians losing their life, not because of some vague belief that God wants them to be happy, but because of their faithfulness to Christ. We think these kinds of things happened a long time ago, but did you know that each year for the last three years, persecution of Christians has hit new highs. Today, 215 million Christians around the world are living under the threat or reality of persecution for their faith in countries like North Korea, Somalia, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen.

Chances are, you'll never be killed for your faithfulness to Christ, but it might cost you your reputation. You may not be able to do some of the things you used to do or

participate in some of activities you used to. It will cost you some nice stuff because faithfulness to Christ calls us to live simply give to people in need. It's easy fall into the "God just wants me to be happy" trap, but commitment to Christ will cost you.

Finally, rather than making the choice to break his promise *David could have just kept putting it off*. David could have just asked about Mephibosheth and when he found out he was still alive and doing OK, he could have just said, "Well, I'm the king and I have more important things to worry about right now, so I'll do it later."

One way we put it off is just to not make any commitments or promises. I'm really good at this one. Sometimes, I'm not sure how to answer or I don't really want to do it, but I also don't want to disappoint them, so I'll just say, "we'll see," and hope they forget about it. The problem is that's really frustrating for people. We might think it's an effective way to put it off. But if you do it often enough, you'll gain a reputation for being just as untrustworthy as someone who says they'll do it, but don't.

For David, there were few good reasons to keep his promise and a number of advantages to not keeping it. So, why did he do it? He did it because he knew how much God values faithfulness. Even though Jonathan was gone and would never see it, David *knew*. And more importantly, *God* knew. And David had to ask himself the question we asked at the very beginning of this series, "*What kind of person do I want to be?*"

A few months ago, on the Today Show, they interviewed a guy named Alex Sheen. Alex is the founder of a non-profit called "Because I said I would." [Alex Sheen pic] And the mission of the organization is simple, it's to "*change the world through promises made and promises kept.*" He started to honor his dad, who died from cancer in 2012. I was fascinated by the way he talked about his dad. He said, above everything else, I remember my dad as a man who always kept his word.

It was a powerful piece. And I thought more about it, it occurred to me that you could do a whole lot worse than, when you get to the end of your life, to have people say about you, "She was a person always did what said she would."

In fact, the interview reminded me of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says this, ³³**"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'** ³⁴**But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."**

Now Jesus wasn't saying if a Christian becomes president, he can't take the oath of office or if we testify in court we can't do it. What he's saying is that anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus should be someone for whom no oath is necessary. Don't be the

kind of person who parses words or tries to find a loophole to get out of your commitment. Be the kind of person that when you say you're going to do something, people know for a fact, that you'll do it. And when they ask you why you followed through even when it didn't benefit you, you can simply say, *"Because I said I would."*

Being ruthless about faithfulness builds our character. It deepens our relationships because people know they can trust us. It's a stabilizing force that our society desperately needs. But most of all, our faithfulness reflects the faithfulness of God.

Over and over, Scripture tells us to be like our father who is in heaven. Over and over, Scripture says that God is faithful to us, even when we've been unfaithful to him. While we're still sinners, God remains faithful in that when we confess our sins, he will forgive us.

And that's good news for all of us. In fact, there might be some in here, who are listening and you're being overcome with guilt because God is pricking your conscience. You know faithfulness has been an issue for you, whether it's with God or with the people closest to you. [worship team and ushers]

But we're going to end the service today with communion. Communion is that practice where we remember that God showed his faithfulness to us by coming in the flesh and going to the cross in our place. Over the last five weeks, we've been talking about godly character traits, but the heart of Christianity isn't trying to be better people.

The heart of Christianity is knowing God’s faithfulness to us—and then everything we do from singing songs of worship, to developing godly character is the only reasonable response for us. So, as we end this focus season, let’s return to the heart of our faith by taking communion together.

Prayer of Confession

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Developing godly character doesn’t happen in the big moments. It happens in the day to day. It’s doesn’t matter how you answer the question of who you want to be now, it matters how you answer it each and every day. I would highly encourage you to go back through this series and take one or two things and make a commitment to make every effort to develop in that area.

To help you do that, I ordered a bunch of cards from Because I Said I Would.

They're small cards that are blank except the words, "because I said I would" on one side.

The ushers have stacks of them at the door. I want you to take one or a few of those cards and write down something you will commit to—it might be from this message, it might be from one of the others.