

# ***Saints: Faithful and Fruitful***

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**November 6, 2011**  
**All Saints/Commitment Sunday**

**Galatians 5:20-26**  
**Matthew 25:14-30**

Today we begin a nine-Sunday series on Paul's list of the "fruit of the Spirit" found in Galatians 5:22-23. My hope is that when we arrive on New Year's Day, we will be ready to enter 2012 with these marks of Christian maturity as the measure and guide for our lives.

To get us started, I invite you to read the list of spiritual fruit along with me, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, patience, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

While Paul came up with this particular grouping, he didn't invent the concept. The picture of the Christian life as one which bears fruit appears forty-two times in the New Testament. That makes sense for an agrarian society that depended upon the fruit of the earth and the vine for survival and for income.

But we get it, too. What we do is seen by others. It's seen by God, too. As Jesus says, "You shall know them by their fruit." He urges us to bear good fruit, "Fruit that will last." He also tells a parable about a fig tree that is struck down and thrown into the fire because it takes nutrients and water from the ground and turns them into useless fruit, or none at all. It keeps taking away and giving nothing back.

But we were not made for this. We were created to be fruit-full. God's promise to us is that if we live into these qualities our lives will be changed and made much more rewarding. And the more people who do, the more the world will find its hope.

It's comforting to know that we don't have to take on this rather daunting list on our own. In reality, we can't produce these spiritual fruit alone any more than we can create, say, an apple with our own hands. We can plant the seeds, water the earth, cultivate the tree and harvest the fruit, but it's God who makes the apple grow.

Yet while the Holy Spirit produces the spiritual fruit, we also have an important role in developing them. They won't grow without our cultivation and care. When we make the effort, God produces wonderful things.

Now since there's no real hierarchy to Paul's list, we're not focusing on the fruit in the order he names them. Rather, we'll emphasize the one that fits in with the theme for the

day. Today, on All Saints' and Commitment Sunday, it's faithfulness. Which is a pretty good word to describe the saints of our lives.

We usually associate faithfulness with other words like loyalty or fidelity. And that's not a bad thing---it's a worthy goal to be a faithful friend or to keep the promises we have made. But Paul and the writers of the Bible thought of faithfulness first in relationship to God. In fact, whenever the word is used in the Old Testament, it's almost always used about God's behavior toward us. God is faithful.

Years ago, before personal scanners and printers, a young male college student walked into a photography studio with a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted the picture duplicated. Of course the photo had to be removed from the frame. In doing this, the studio owner noticed the inscription on the back of the photograph: "My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." It was signed "Diane," and it contained a P.S., "If we ever break up, I want this picture back."

There is no P.S. in our relationship with God. God will never break up with us. We belong to God forever.

This is the sort of faithfulness that the Spirit empowers in those who love God. Paul uses the Greek word, *pistis*, a simple trust in God. It is the confidence in God's unconditional faithfulness to us, a faith that God is with us in all things, will take care of us and be there for us always.

But it doesn't just happen. We need to cultivate this growing trust in how we live and practice our faith. If we stop going to church, reading the Bible, serving others in Christ's name, if we get so caught up with what's going on in our lives and all the demands we must meet, we start to question God and wonder if God is really there for us.

These are lessons the saints teach us. Saints are not only the spiritual giants. They are the everyday faithful, people who grow in their trust for God as they grow older in years. They come to see that you don't need to have all the answers or to be happy. Knowing God in a personal way is enough---in fact, it fills many more of the empty places than all of the input we receive in this digital age. Rather than being plagued by fears of the future and anxiety about death as the years go by, they become more peaceful and trusting. I have known some older people with a deep faith who have achieved an inner serenity very few of younger years experience.

This is the faithfulness God asks of us in all aspects of our lives, with people as well as with God. In our relationships with friends, co-workers, even our boss, do we follow through on our promises and communicate that we are people of our word? Can we be trusted to do what we say and be there for others?

Every once in a while I do a funeral of an older person and someone will say, “His word was his bond.” “You could always count on her.” That’s a pretty great legacy for anyone to leave.

And then there’s the faithfulness of the marriage bond. We often jump to thoughts of infidelity when we talk of faithfulness between two people. But you can be unfaithful to your spouse without every touching another person. Did you ever notice that the traditional marital vows never mention sex? They’re about caring for one another in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, they’re about attending to the needs of the other as much as you do your own—maybe more. If you faithfully carry out those vows, the love will last.

When you are a faithful person, it means not only that you can trust God, but God can trust you. God can entrust you with responsibilities and resources and know that you will make the most of them.

That’s the point of Jesus’ parable of the talents. Notice that faith in this case does not mean a passive waiting for the master to come and take back what is his. It means taking some risks to invest what you have been entrusted with. In fact, faith is the ultimate risk-taker, since it stakes its life on One we cannot see or touch but can only trust. But for those who risk this life of faith, the payoff is priceless, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

I hope that we can allow our faith to inform us when we commit ourselves to God and this church today. The best and most fulfilling way to make our commitments is not to support a budget or to fill out a form. It is to offer ourselves and our gifts as an act of faith, a statement that we may not know exactly how this commitment will work out, but we will see it through to the end. We won’t give in a half-hearted way or give up when we’re half-way through. We’ll make our promise of faithfulness and then we will keep it, and in that way we not only support our church and serve God but we will create a wider space for the Spirit to come and produce magnificent fruit in us.

I invite you to invest yourself in the work of the kingdom. If you will be faithful in little things and in big, if you will cultivate the time, talents and treasures that God has placed in your care, you will discover the fruit of the Spirit growing in you. And, as you come to the end of your earthly life, you will hear the words spoken to all the saints who from their labors rest, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.”