

# Faithfulness and the Sermon on the Mount

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## Introduction

Christ does not require us to be rich, good-looking, multi-talented, socially prominent, or formally educated. There is one thing he requires of every one of his servants: **faithfulness**. The faith has been “once for all delivered” into our hands (Jude 3) and we are all “stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10).<sup>1</sup> The chief responsibility of a steward is to be faithful (1 Cor. 4:2). *Faithfulness* sums up all that Christ asks and expects of His disciples.

The need for faithfulness in Christians was never greater than at present. We live in an unbelieving world, drunk on its own supposed cleverness and self-sufficiency. Because of this prevailing world view, ours is an evil, compromising, and hopeless world. Never has the devil had so many false philosophies and erroneous religions as now. Never have men had so many avenues of temptation and sin thrown at them from Satan. From this perspective, our task is more difficult in some ways than that which the apostles faced. Not since a century ago have so many within the church proved unfaithful in the proclamation and practice of the Truth, while still claiming to be the Lord’s people. In such a world as ours, the great need is for men and women, boys and girls, who have done all that is necessary to stand and then who will faithfully, unflinchingly, stand (Eph. 6:13-14).

What faithfulness is not: it is not merely regular worship and class attendance, although this is the most frequent “standard” of the term by many Christians. Now those who are faithful are never those who forsake the assemblies, but some of the most unfaithful saints I know never miss an assembly. They think nothing of stabbing the Lord’s faithful ones in the back for profit or popularity, or of being stingy, foul-mouthed, dishonest, or wine bibbers. Faithfulness is not merely believing in or standing for some or even many right or good things. Billy Graham and Oral Roberts do this. It is not something properly judged when one’s skies are blue, and the wind is at his back. It is more accurately discernable when the winds of adversity are blowing, and the clouds are dark and threatening.

## The Meaning of *Faithfulness*

The meaning of *faithfulness* may be learned from two Biblical perspectives:

**First**, from the definition of the Greek verbal adjective, *pistos* is translated *faithful* 51 times in the ASV New Testament. The Greek lexicons indicate that it connotes such kindred

qualities as being steady, reliable, trustworthy, loyal, and dependable. *Faithfulness* is thus the quality of being faithful; it is steadiness, reliability, trustworthiness, loyalty, and dependability.<sup>2</sup>

**Second**, we learn the meaning of faithfulness by observing the way it is applied in the New Testament.

### ***It is applied to Deity***

God keeps his word (Heb. 10:23), is not capricious (Jam. 1:17), but dependable (Rom. 3:3; Heb. 13:5). Our Lord is the Faithful Apostle, High Priest, and Witness of God (Heb. 3:1; Rev. 1:5). Men might prove unfaithful, but not the Christ (2 Tim. 2:13). He proved His faithfulness by discharging all that God sent him to do (John 17:4; 19:28–30).

### ***It is applied to the Gospel***

Four times Paul used *faithful saying* to describe his inspired instructions to Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:15; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Tit. 3:8). The entire body of New Testament doctrine is called “the faithful word” (Tit. 1:9). God twice assured John that the words He spoke to him were “faithful and true” (Rev. 21:5; 22:6).

### ***It is applied to various ones in the Bible***

These admirable believers include Abraham and Moses (Gal. 3:9; Heb. 3:2). The Lord appointed Paul as an apostle because He counted him faithful (1 Tim. 1:12). Paul described Timothy, Tychicus, Epaphras, Onesimus, and Sylvanus “faithful.” Antipas of Pergamum was a “faithful witness” who gave his life for Christ (Rev. 2:13). Such faithful ones are ever held up to us as worthy examples. They are God’s very best, most noble, righteous, and powerful people. A study of their lives helps us to understand what *faithfulness* means.

God’s Word urges faithfulness upon all His people. God’s servant is “faithful and wise” who properly exercises his stewardship, and he will be appropriately rewarded (Mat. 24:45–57). The Lord tells us to be faithful in “very little” matters as proof that we can be trusted with greater responsibility (Luke 16:10). The foremost requirement of a steward is the faithful handling of the owner’s property (1 Cor. 4:2). *Faithfulness* is part of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22). Women (likely the wives of elders and deacons, as indicated by the context) must be “faithful in all things” (1 Tim. 3:11). The Lord will bestow the crown of life to those who have remained faithful in the face of persecution, even to the point of martyrdom, for His sake, for they shall “overcome with the Lamb” (Rev. 2:10; 17:14).

## What Does Faithfulness Require of Us?

The Lord gives us ample answers to this question in his great mountainside sermon.

*Faithfulness requires a willingness to suffer persecution*

**Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted the prophets that were before you (Mat. 5:10-12)**

Please notice that not all persecution brings blessing — only that which is for righteousness' sake, for the Lord's sake, and for serving God as did the faithful prophets of old. Ours is a day in which too few Christians are willing to undergo any suffering, regardless of how much they may have to compromise the Truth and righteousness. Lamentably, many of our elders, preachers, and school administrators are among this number. Call not those elders faithful who care more about a few soft brethren and their money than they do about sound doctrine and the man who is determined to preach it. Are those elders faithful who will not only allow, but insist upon, only a super-sweet, ever-positive, don't-ever-offend-anybody policy in pulpit and classroom, for fear they might lose some members? Such a church will never be strong in the Lord's eyes unless it **does** lose some members, including such elders.

Are those preachers faithful who withhold part of the Truth to keep their position? Every Gospel preacher who has been at the task for very long knows that it often takes only a handful of loud-mouthed, half-converted members (such seem invariably the loudest) to uproot his family in almost any congregation. He also knows what subjects they are most sensitive to. It takes a special kind of courage to declare the "whole counsel of God" in such circumstances but those cannot be called "faithful" who fail to do so! We live in the incredible time in the church in which many of the wrong preachers are being fired, hired, and retained. Several years ago, it was the weak, shallow, soft, liberal man that would be asked to move on as soon as he was found out. Now more and more this sort of spiritual sissy is being sought, kept, and encouraged, while the man who is determined to preach all the Truth in a plain and forceful manner — as did the Lord and His apostles — is being fired and is not desired in many places. Were Christ and Paul living in our time, they would not be long tolerated in many of our pulpits. Listen, men: As much as you love and respect your wife and her counsel, as much as you respect the elders where you preach, when you get into the pulpit or pick up the pen you owe faithfulness to one alone! Personal consequences do not detract or deter the faithful man

from speaking as the oracles of God. Let us remember that the faithfulness that brings upon us persecution, suffering, and painful rejection has the Lord's blessing upon it.

Are those college administrators faithful who continue to provide a haven, a platform, and endorsement for unsound brethren and their destructive heresies? Such is often done under the pretense of ignorance. The nearest thing to humility you will find in some of our PhDs is their plea of "I wasn't aware" when you ask them why they put certain unsound speakers on their lectureships or continue to use them on their faculty. We have some wonderfully fine and faithful men with advanced degrees, and I thank God for them. We also have some who are either intentionally encouraging departures from the Truth, or they are just plain oblivious to what is happening in the church. I strongly suspect they are not all that ignorant. I fear that most of them know exactly what they are doing.

I call us all back to the prophets of old to whom our Lord referred whose faithfulness led them to the lion's den, the miry pit, sword's thrust, and assorted other personal perils. I call us all back to the apostles and their willingness to be imprisoned, stoned, beaten, and chased from city to city rather than prove unfaithful to our Lord. I call us all back to the Lord himself who was constantly opposed and rejected and who ultimately was unjustly tried, beaten, mocked, spat upon, and finally nailed to a cross because He would be faithful to His Father at all costs.

The cost of faithfulness to God has always been great, and it is growing all of the time in our Godless world. Without any apology, our Lord charges us to be faithful whatever the cost. He even promises that we will pay for our faithfulness. "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). Many brethren don't know the meaning of persecution because they've never taken a stand against anything or for anything to cause the devil the least concern. Unfortunately, this includes many preachers and elders. The name *faithful* should not be hastily used to describe anyone whose character and convictions have not been tested by suffering and persecution for righteousness' sake.

#### ***Faithfulness requires absolute respect for Scripture***

**Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 5:19).**

If the Lord's displeasure descended on those who would break even the least command of the inferior Covenant, how much more does He frown on those who are unfaithful to the

superior Covenant of Calvary? The inspired writer of Hebrews makes this very argument, urging scrupulous, faithful treatment of the Gospel:

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation (Heb. 2:2)?

The Lord's approval is upon those who faithfully obey and teach the Word. Paul loudly echoed the same on the eve of his own execution: "Preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). The fact of the matter is that there is no other criterion for measuring faithfulness to Christ apart from faithfulness to His Word: "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). Show me a man who is flippant, careless, superior, and disdainful toward the Sacred Page, and I will show you a man possessed of the same attitudes toward its Author, regardless of his claims to the contrary.

In a day when many brethren charge with "bibliolatry" those who, like Paul, are "set for the defence of the gospel" (Phi. 1:16b), we take refuge in the Lord's own unblushing respect for the written Word. Faithfulness to God absolutely demands it! When one surrenders undaunted faithfulness to the Holy Word, he has surrendered all cause to be faithful to anything that matters. "To the law and to the testimony" the faithful constantly resort!

*Faithfulness requires a willingness to sacrifice our most precious possessions*

**And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.... And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee... (Mat. 5:29-30).**

In the passage just quoted He speaks of two of man's most useful and prized physical members. He boldly says, "pluck it out," "cut it off," if faithfulness requires it. While the "cutting" and "plucking" are figures of speech, they are powerful in their application. Jesus often spoke of sacrifice when He challenged people to follow Him. He later declared that even the dearest family ties must be counted expendable to be faithful to Him (10:35-37). If necessary, houses and lands must be expendable if faithfulness to Him requires it (19:29).

The Lord was calling on the ultimate measure of sacrifice in His disciples when He exhorted the church at Smyrna: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). While He elsewhere teaches that we must serve Him till the time of our death (e.g., Mat. 10:22), that is not His point here. The exhortation to the Smyrna saints is in a context of suffering, imprisonment, and tribulation. Jesus is saying that we must be faithful even to the

point of dying for Him, if necessary. (I counsel my preaching brethren that this is not an appropriate funeral passage unless, like Stephen, James, and Antipas, the departed saint has died in defense of the faith.) The summary of this spirit of sacrifice is found in Christ's call to those who would follow Him:

If any many would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man profited, if he gain the whole world, and lose or forfeit his own self (Luke 9:23-25)?

He stammered not in issuing this challenge. Faithfulness demands it!

*Faithfulness demands that we clearly decide who we will serve*

**No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Mat. 6:24).**

Unfortunately, many Christians have not made this decision yet. (Actually, to fail to decide clearly is to decide – against Christ.) So many have just enough religion to make them miserable. A spiritual struggle is going on inside them constantly. They have some spiritual inclinations and desires, but they want to remain attached to, identified with and participants in the world. They know better but will not do better. Every week they have to decide afresh whether to get up and come to Bible school and worship Sunday morning or do something they would like better. Such don't even struggle with Sunday night, Wednesday night, and other meetings anymore. This spiritual equivocation was the problem of the Laodiceans who didn't want to totally abandon Christ, but neither were they ready to follow him faithfully. They dwelt in that muddy, shallow spiritual swamp the Lord described as nauseating lukewarmness.

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15-16).

Christ sets it out plainly to them: Get in or get out; get on or get off; get hot or get cold. Quit trying to be religious without being spiritual. This passage implies that the Lord has more respect for a sincere atheist than He has for a half-hearted, hypocritical disciple. Tragically, both are lost, however. The whole point, of course, is to spur the Laodiceans to faithfulness so they can be saved.

This principle needs to be applied to the leaders among God's people. A frightening number of such need to decide whom they will serve. I grow weary of hearing preachers talk a "strong game" on various lectureships, while it is obvious that they are playing a weak game at

home. They continue to lend their names to questionable, if not unscriptural, practices. They encourage false teachers by using them, praising them, publicizing their efforts, and fellowshiping them when they should be marking and avoiding them (Rom. 16:17–18). I grow weary of hearing college administrators make impassioned pleas about the “conservatism” of their schools as they continue to harbor false teachers on their faculties and lectureships. It is a strange new concept to me to hear a Bible lectureship opened with the statement that the administration of the college feels no obligation to refute any positions presented by lectureship speakers, as I heard at one school. It became obvious on that campus during past lectureships that this was the policy in force; now the policy has been verbalized! It was erroneously stated that this had been the policy of the school through the years, which must have caused the past great presidents of that institution to at least shake their heads in amazement in their hadean resting places!

One reason so many in the pew are so undecided and unconvicted about various doctrines, men, and institutions among us is because of the inconsistencies in their leaders. We could have and should have long ago negated the influence of the *Mission Magazine* crowd, the Campus Evangelism/Crossroads movement, the Highland Church in Abilene, Sweet Publishing Co., and similar malignant influences if only elders, preachers, college administrators, and editors had decided whose side they were on and had taken a stand, such as the Getwell church in Memphis and others have done. But no, those on the left have continued to move comfortably in high circles among us, money has continued to pour into their programs, their literature and books continue to be praised and purchased, and brotherhood papers have continued to publicize their activities and to encourage people to hear and support them. Because of such vacillating compromise there is more confusion right now in our ranks over what fellowship is and who is to be fellowshiped than ever there has been to my knowledge. I sound to you a challenge of old: “Who is on the Lord’s side?” (Exo. 32:26). I call on us to sound forth this challenge. We are either with and for Him or against Him; we either gather men to Him or we are scattering them from Him (Mat. 12:30). Faithfulness demands a clear-cut, unapologetic decision to be on the side of God and His Son—to serve them—regardless of how much pay, prestige, popularity, or what or how many persons might have to be rejected or exposed to do so.

*Faithfulness demands that we be as narrow as the Lord and his way*

**Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it (Mat. 7:13-14).**

Is it not ironic considering these words that so many brethren – and practically all the world – would almost rather be shot than be called “narrow-minded”? The terrible triplets of a revived Romanticism, Existentialism, and Humanism have combined to produce – at least in the Western world – a spirit of “anything goes” super tolerance that laughs at duly constituted authority and God-given verities. In society it has led to chaos in music, literature, and art and to such social ills as murderous unrestricted abortion, an ever-burgeoning crime rate, and immorality below the level of a stray tom cat. In the church it has brought a relaxation of moral standards, both in dress and conduct. It has brought open rebellion to God’s delegated authority of elders in the church. It has foisted the attitude that perhaps sin and religious error are not so bad after all. It has attempted to cast off book, chapter, and verse preaching that is to the point and that demands a response, in favor of short, sweet, motivational lectures that wouldn’t stir the fuzz on a gander’s snout. It has caused some of our colleges to turn out “Bible” majors who have hardly been exposed to the error of worshiping with instrumental music and who can’t even spell *premillennialism*, much less refute these heresies, and who have no clear convictions on the distinctiveness of the church. It has resulted in the utterly false position that refuses to reprove, rebuke and challenge the errors and immoralities all about us and among us. It has spawned the “open microphone” concept in which it is averred that the weakest and most erroneous brethren have as much right to teach and to address the church as do sound preachers and elders. It has robbed hundreds of churches of their duty to those who will not repent of their immorality or false doctrines and deeds. (It is hard to imagine what one would have to do or teach in most of our congregations to warrant even a mild reproof from the elders or preacher.) The injunctions to keep the church pure are just too “narrow” for many, regardless of how plainly the Gospel teaches them.

There is much talk lately about why we are not growing as we did 30 years ago. I think the answer may to a great degree be in Matthew 7:13-14. We’ve become too broad-minded, too tactful, too soft-spoken, too tolerant, and too much like every other religious outfit in town. We’ve forgotten that Christ and the apostles never heard of the Dale Carnegie courses or books, and consequently, they didn’t use his methods. We’ve become so ultra-sweet in our attempts to communicate the Gospel that any old sinner, even a man that’s had half a dozen wives, can



become a Christian without ever repenting. Our “one-shot”, “jiffy-mix” approaches to converting people may have put some of our congregations on the list of those baptizing over 100 in a year, but they’ve also added large numbers of people to church rolls who haven’t the faintest concept of the New Testament church and the practice of daily, pure religion. We were called “Campbellites” and were accused of preaching everybody to Hell in the past, but in those days, people knew we were around and that we stood for something, even if they disagreed with us. The broader we have gotten in our thinking, our behavior, and our message, the less attractive have we become to miserable sinners in search of a better way.

Let us not forget where the broad way terminates. Even in this life it is so. Many of us could name numerous preachers and churches that decided they couldn’t abide in the narrowness of Truth. They gradually entered the broad way by a silence here, a compromise there, and a tolerance of error and sin elsewhere; now they have been lost to the Cause, never to be reclaimed. Of course, that is only the lesser loss. The greater loss to those who enter and remain on the broad way is irreparable, everlasting destruction. Let us never pronounce that man or woman “faithful” who is unwilling to be as narrow as the Lord and His way.

*Faithfulness requires identification of false teachers*

**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles (Mat. 7:15-16)?**

It is presently easier in some places to find wolf protectors among the Lord’s sheep than to find those who will identify and expose them. In fact, it is increasingly common in my experience nowadays for the false teacher to be praised, endorsed, supported, and welcomed, while the one who identifies him as a wolf is treated as the wolf should be treated. How different from the Lord is the attitude of such brethren on this matter. We are not left in ignorance on the way the apostolic church dealt with false teachers: They were watched for, marked, avoided, silenced, shunned, rejected, refused endorsement, and delivered to Satan (Acts 20:29-31; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; Tit. 1:10-11, 14; 3:10; 2 John 9-10).

Now there may be some witch-hunters, alarmists, and those who “play God” among us, but I doubt it. These and similar appellations are “red-herring” smoke-screen words designed to mitigate the force of justified accusations against them without having to answer them or repent of them. Such terms are designed to intimidate and silence the one who exposes the false teacher and his teachings. I know of no one who enjoys exposing error or sin of any kind in a

brother or sister; I certainly do not. Frankly, I would much rather always be able to commend and praise and never have to criticize or reprove. However, one is not a Gospel preacher or a faithful elder who shrinks in cowardice from this necessary task. If it makes me a witch-hunter or an alarmist to warn of a false teacher, then I am such with Heaven's blessing. If I am such a one, then what shall we call the Lord and His apostles who commanded and practiced this responsibility? If one would be great in the Master's eyes, he must be faithful to the charge to identify and expose false teachers.

*Faithfulness requires our complete respect for God's authority*

**Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:21-23).**

This passage teaches many great principles of Truth, but I would emphasize one: the vanity, foolishness, and presumptuousness of doing anything that is not authorized by the Lord. In a way, this summarizes all of the previously discussed ingredients of faithfulness. If one has his heart set to "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), he will be faithful in all things. It is not enough to "like" or "feel" a certain way about something. It is not enough that something attracts crowds. It is not enough that a congregation somewhere else is doing it. It is not enough that some "great name" among us supports, endorses, or teaches it. All that matters is, **does God authorize it?** It is not even enough to do it "in the Lord's name." The sons of Sceva promptly learned this to their own dismay and discomfort in Ephesus (Acts 19:14-16). Jesus' statement abundantly shows that not only is more than mere belief and confession of that belief necessary to salvation. It also shows that more than mere works is necessary. If they be not the works God has authorized, they are all in vain. That which God has not authorized He does not recognize. The church was restored in modern times on this very premise: book, chapter, and verse; explicit or implicit authority from Scripture for all we do and say! My, how we need to be reminded of it! So much being preached and practiced among us today has no more authority for it than the Baptist Church, John Calvin, Pentecostalism or some popular writer on psychology or philosophy. One is not faithful to God who is unfaithful to His complete authority through Christ. Those who try to "freelance" in religion, whether they are in the church or out, will arrive at the Judgment to hear the Lord ask, "Who are you? I don't believe we've met and it's too late to get acquainted now."

## Conclusion

*Faithfulness* involves the commitment of purpose and life to the Christ and His Word that exceeds every other loyalty. It makes one conscious of his relationship to the Lord, whether at work or play, among friends, brethren, relatives or hostile worldlings, at home, or in some remote spot on vacation. It is the trait that moved the apostles and their contemporaries to take every risk, injury, and indignity the world could heap upon them and come back for more, boldly living and preaching the Truth, instead of quitting. It is the quality that caused Paul to keep on preaching whether he received support from brethren or he had to support himself. It is that trait that will cause us to stand when others have fallen, to speak when others are in fearful silence, to keep on working when others have quit, and to even die if necessary rather than deny the Lord or compromise His eternal Word. Let us all aim no lower than this unflinching faithfulness, without which none can be great before the Lord.

## Endnote

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. *Faithfulness* is not found in the KJV New Testament and appears only twice in the ASV, where it is rendered from *pistos* because of contextual considerations (Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22).

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Spiritual Sword Lectures, hosted by the Getwell Church of Christ, Memphis, TN, October 17–21, 1982. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Garland Elkins and Thomas B. Warren (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1982).]

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