

Imagine living without fear of how you will perform or how people will respond to you. That's the vision we're dealing with today as we begin this series.

To get there, we need to deal with four questions. The first two determine how you approach every circumstance and person in your life. And the second two determine how you develop the character of your relationships. Four questions:

- Can I trust God?
- Should I trust people?
- What does it mean to be faithful?
- How can I practice faithfulness?

Your answers to those four questions will decide how you see the world. Now, having said that, I want to come back to something we said last week ... that ... really ... is critical to this conversation. When we talked last week about the cross and the resurrection, we said that beneath the sinful nature our Messiah came to repair, there's a deeper issue. There is something broken deep inside all of us. We can put a label on it and call it sin, but really ... what is broken is trust. We are not secure at the core, and that insecurity breeds *fear*. That's the human condition. We are threatened by the loss of control, so we compensate. We use things like money or stuff or position or power or some talent we've got to build value into our life. And we hope somehow that what we've built will bring a sense of security, but all it really does is mask insecurity.

So there is a battle going on within us constantly. And Jesus spoke into this battle. He said (Matthew 7:9-11) - *Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give*

*good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!* What he's really doing here is addressing the fear that God does not have our best interests at heart. Jesus is asking a question but really ... he is asking us to look at the tension between what we *feel* and who God is. Because of that thing that's broken deep inside ... that *trust* ... we question God's faithfulness. So we feel vulnerable. But Jesus is telling us here that the issue is not God. It's *us*. It's what's broken in *us*. We don't believe God is faithful because we are not faithful.

Go all the way back to the story of Noah and the ark. After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah. That's what the rainbow is all about. It was a sign of God's promise ... that He would never again cut people off or destroy what he created. So this new covenant established with the survivors of that flood was built on trust and mercy. It was God's promise to always be for us, not against us. But for whatever reason, people couldn't hear that, so two chapters later we fall into the story of the tower of Babel ... the people's attempt to make a name for themselves apart from the name "children of God. And as the generations passed, the people disintegrated into idol worship and even into slavery. But God in his mercy called them up out of that bondage and when he'd brought them to the promised land, he made yet another covenant with them. Through Moses, he told his people ... the ones who call on his name ... that they would be his treasured possession. And the people responded to that grace and mercy by going off to build an idol. Do you sense a pattern developing?

But God did not let go; he did not give up. The whole second half of the Old Testament is filled with stories of people running from God in disobedience while God relentlessly and hopefully pursues them. Why? Because God has chosen to deal with us on the basis of his faithfulness

rather than on the basis of our value. Let me say that again: *God has chosen faithfulness as the foundation of his relationship with us.*

There's a word in Hebrew ... spelled *bth*. That word is often translated as "faith," but actually the verb form is most often translated as "trust." And when it is used to talk about God, you will often see the concept of "security" coming out in the context. Some other Hebrew words are close relatives. The word for *deliverance* is related. So is the word for peace. So just looking at these words ... trust, security, deliverance, peace ... when I put all that together, something profound emerges. These words I find in the Bible tell me that trust is linked to security. And security is linked to deliverance. And deliverance is linked to peace. So there's a building effect. I will never reach peace until I've built a foundation of trust. Because until I learn to trust God, I'll blow around with every wind. Every interesting idea will become my newest thing ... so I'm constantly looking for solid ground and there's no security in that. And with nothing but insecurity to drive me, I will never be delivered from my demons. And without deliverance, there is no peace. So ... until we learn to trust God, nothing else will line up in the direction of the peace we hunger and thirst after. No wonder we live in fear.

In the book, *The Shack* (which I highly recommend), the main character of the story is in a conversation with God. He's just lost a child to a morbid crime and he is grieving desperately when he has this encounter with God. And into that grief and confusion God speaks and he says, "The real underlying flaw in your life ... is that you don't think that I am good. If you knew I was good, and that everything ... is *all* covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me." (*The Shack*, p.126)

Everything ... all our relationships and all our choices ... it all comes down to whether or not we believe God is good and can be trusted. And the great news is that yes ... God can be trusted. Until we claim that, nothing else matters. So ... do you trust Him? Do you believe ... really ... that God loved you enough to send mercy into the world to cover everything in you that's imperfect? Do you believe God is always at work doing exactly what is right for you? Do you trust God's faithfulness?

That's the first step toward living without fear of how you will perform or how people will respond to you. Our ability to trust people begins with how much we trust God. So if you keep an emotional distance with people or tend to have high expectations of them ... these issues begin with how much we trust God. The less we trust the vertical relationship, the more expectation we place on the horizontal ones. No wonder our relationships break under the strain.

This is not to say that everyone around us is trustworthy. Listen to this. Paul says (Romans 3:10-17) - *"There is no one righteous, not even one. 11 there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. 13 Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. 14 Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. 15 Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace (listen to this ... because we just talked about this pattern ... the way of peace) they do not know."*

Clearly, people will disappoint you. If we base our commitment to others solely on their behavior we've got nothing. So our only logical basis for extending faithfulness ... is in

response to what has been given to us. In other words, if peace is our goal, then we have to learn how to practice faithfulness toward each other in the same way that God practices faithfulness toward us. Does this make sense?

Mark Hatfield tells the story of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa. They visited the ministries of the Sisters of Mercy. They visited the “House of Dying” where sick children are cared for in their last days. They visited the dispensary where desperately poor people line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. And Hatfield watched Mother Teresa minister to these people, and he was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering. He asked her, “How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?” Mother Teresa replied, “My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful. I am called to be faithful.”

There’s the trick. You see, if our relationships are strictly horizontal, then all our expectations for success have to be met by people whose “throats are open graves; whose tongues practice deceit; whose mouths are full of bitterness.” If everything depends on the right behavior of the guy in front of me, then no wonder we feel so empty. *But ...* if my relationships with others are rooted in my relationship with God ... in other words ... if my horizontal relationships depend on the strength of my vertical one ... then I won’t be shaken by every imperfection. Because I don’t need that in order to be at peace. So ... should we trust other people? In the way that God does, yes. By fixing our eyes not on the person, but on Jesus. ***Everything filters through Jesus.***

Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says. He says (Hebrews 12:1-3) - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2*

*fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* That's what it means to be faithful. It means running the race to the end ... not gauging your pace on your running partners but on the Coach, who is waiting for you at the finish line.

So ... we're talking solutions in this series. What are the solutions that will help us begin to practice faithfulness more seriously? In real-world terms, where do we begin? Four thoughts:

1. **Commit to truth.** Proverbs 12:17 and 22 says - *An honest witness tells the truth, but a false witness tells lies ... The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.* We have visiting missionaries this week ... two from the Dominican Republic and two from Australia. The other night we were talking about the whole situation with Tiger Woods. Someone commented about how kind the gallery has been toward him this week, and the guy from Australia said, "Americans are very forgiving." And he meant that in a sincere way. And then he said, "The one thing Americans do not tolerate, we've noticed, is lying." I don't know if that's a particularly American trait, but he's right. Truth and trust go hand in hand. It is hard to trust someone who has no commitment to truth ... even in the small stuff.

I could spend all day talking about why we lie ... really, it comes down to fear ... but I want to tell you what set me free years ago. Somewhere I read this line, "Why not let God take care of your reputation?" That was a radical thought for me. That God has my back. I don't have to defend myself. That changes the character of every relationship.

2. **Keep your word.** The best way to build trust is to let your yes be yes and your no be no. Jesus said (Matthew 5:7) - *All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* Practice making your word something people can count on.

3. **Fight past the “don’t want to’s.”** Faithfulness will call you over and over again to fight past your feelings and hang in there. Paul tells Timothy (1 Timothy 6:12) - *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.* In other words, Paul says, stick with it.

4. Finally, Peter gives this advice (1 Peter 1:22) - *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, **love one another deeply, from the heart.*** Jesus said it this way (John 15:12-13) - *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

In Jesus’ case, that meant a literal death. More likely for us, it means I don’t have to win every argument. I don’t have to defend every perceived wrong. I don’t have to live in fear of your response, because my faithfulness is a vertical equation, not a horizontal one.

Imagine living without fear of how you will perform or how people will respond to you.

Faithfulness is where it all begins. Everything we will talk about in the next six weeks depends on getting that equation right.

So that’s the invitation today. It is an invitation to trust God. I want to pray with you that we will get what it means to be faithful. That we will get just how much God’s faithfulness means to us, so we can begin working that into our lives and relationships.