We are working our way through the last few weeks of our series called Belief that examines the ten core beliefs, the ten core practices, and the ten core virtues of the Christian faith. Last Sunday we examined the virtues of goodness and kindness. This morning we will examine the Christian virtue of faithfulness. I will unpack faithfulness under three subheadings: 1) the vertical nature of faithfulness; 2) the horizontal nature of faithfulness; and 3) where the vertical and horizontal natures of faithfulness intersect.

I. The vertical nature of faithfulness.

The Hebrew word for faith or faithfulness is emunah. The root of emunah is the Hebrew word, emmet. Emmet means truth.

So, whenever the word “faithfulness” (emunah) is attributed vertically to God, the word always points to God’s truthfulness…He is a God who is true to His word…He keeps His promises. If you remember your Old Testament, God repeatedly makes promises which are referred to as covenants. Covenants are promises made within a relational contract or agreement. Christian marriage is our best contemporary example of a covenant. In the Christian marriage, a man and woman make promises to one another within the context of a relational contract. Like many contracts, there are witnesses present and both the man and woman sign a certificate stating their intentions to be man and wife until one of them dies. The promises made in a wedding are binding and to some degree legal, but far more relational than a real estate contract. In the same way, God makes relational promises in His covenants that are binding, legal, and deeply relational. For example: God promise Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17 that he will bless Abraham to be a blessing to the world. He promises Abraham that he will become a great nation, that his descendants will outnumber the stars, and that his family will inherit a land flowing with milk and honey. God make promises to Moses and to David as well. All of these promises are referred to as covenants. So, whenever the word emunah is applied to God, it is first and foremost a declaration that God has been faithful to keep his covenantal promises. It is a confession that God is true to His Word based upon all that He has done. A great deal of the Psalms and the prophets consist of recounting the Lord’s faithfulness. Here are a few examples of emunah as ascribed to God in the scriptures:

Psalm 33:3-4: Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts. For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

Psalm 100:5: For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Joshua 21:43-45—Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers…not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Lam 3:22-23—The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
Whenever I think of the word “faithfulness,” I can’t help but think of the great hymn, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* which was birthed out of the passage we just read in Lamentations 3. It is one of my all-time favorite hymns. The first verse and chorus sum up the vertical proclamation of God’s character as faithful:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not; as thou hast been thou forever wilt be. Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided; great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me.

The Lord is faithful, amen? Like all of the virtues, faithfulness belongs to God. We know nothing about faithfulness if not for God. God is always faithful, and He rightfully expects His people to be faithful to Him in response to His perfect faithfulness to us. Now…what does it mean for human beings to be faithful in our vertical relationship to God?

When God tells His people to have faith…to be faithful…the expectation is that they will stand firm upon the promises that God has made. Their trust is not to be some kind of passive resignation in the absence of reliable data as the atheist suggests; on the contrary, faith is an active decision to move forward with confidence that God can be trusted and that God is faithful based upon the evidence of all that God has done. How are we faithful to God? We trust Him and we do what He has commanded us to do. There’s only one problem: human beings stink at being faithful to God.

When we read the Bible, we hear God constantly telling His people: “I delivered you out of Egypt through signs and wonders. I parted the Red Sea so you could cross over safely. I fed you mana in the wilderness when you were hungry. I fed you water out of a rock when you were thirsty. Trust me. Have a little faith. Don’t rely on your own strength and your own limited understanding. Don’t devote yourself to gods who cannot save you. Place your faith in who I am, what I have said, and I what I have done. Live faithfully according to the promises I have given you. Abide by my law as an act of faith and trust, and you will have nothing to fear…I’m true to my Word.” However, as early as the fall in Genesis 3, we know that no one is or ever has been faithful to God’s covenant with humanity. In the Psalm 78, the psalmist recalls the covenant history of Israel. He writes about God’s faithfulness, about all of his works and wonders and provisions for the Israelites, but throughout the psalm the writer repeats over and again:

[They were] a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God…they did not keep God’s covenant but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders he had shown them. He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly…he made streams come out of the rock…yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Lord Most High…they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant.

The Bible reports what we all know is true: God keeps His covenant promises, we break our covenant promises. God has shown complete fidelity as the Bridegroom, but we, the beloved, have been adulterous. In Hosea 4:12 we read, “My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.” We have all been an adulterous people, giving ourselves to gods of our own making rather than the God of heaven and earth.
This leads us to the Gospel. In light of God’s perfect faithfulness and our horrible infidelity as His people, we deserve death…we deserve a divorce that would render us cast out from the presence of our faithful, loving God. But God so loved His whorish people that He sent His perfect Son to live among us as the Bridegroom, to show the Bride what perfect faithfulness looks like in human flesh, and then God gave up His son to the punishment that our adultery deserved. Because Jesus satisfied the penalty for our unfaithfulness on the cross, our infidelity has been forgiven…we have been saved by grace (Eph. 2). Our loving God kept His promises by sending Jesus. In fact, Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise that God ever made…God’s faithfulness to us is truly GREAT! Amen! Here is the last verse of that great hymn which captures God’s faithfulness in the Gospel--let’s sing it together:

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth; Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide. Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine with ten thousand beside! Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Never forget Church…never forget young people on your way to college…never forget you who struggle with depression…never forget you who fret over your wayward sons…no matter how desperate your circumstance, no matter how dark your mood or how strong the temptation to walk away from your faith…never forget Jesus on a Roman cross in your place. God has been faithful…He gave up His only son for us…The Bridegroom gave up His life for the Bride! Thanks be to God! This is why we are to stand firm as Christians. We can trust the Father. As Paul writes in Romans 8:31-33, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Paul’s point is clear: If God loves us enough to give us His perfect Son as the Lamb of God; we can trust Him with our career. We can trust Him with our finances. We can trust Him with finding a spouse. We can trust Him when trying to have children. We can trust Him with our cancer treatment. We can trust Him even when we can’t feel Him. We can trust Him even when we’ve screwed up. The Father gave us the Son…what more does He have to give before we will be faithful? Trust God Church…be full of faith…Our Father is true to His Word.

II. Understanding the horizontal nature of faithfulness.

Now, when we talk about the virtue of Christian faithfulness, not only are we referring to God’s faithfulness and our response to God’s faithfulness (the vertical nature of faithfulness), we are also talking about faithfulness in our relationships with other people (the horizontal nature of faithfulness). Now, to be clear, when I say horizontal relationships, I am simply referring to human relationships with other humans. Quick story: I referred to “horizontal relationships” in a wedding ceremony not long ago, and the elderly grandmother of the bride, who was sitting on the front row, gave me the biggest smile! Later, during the reception, she sought me out, shook my hand, and thanked me for teaching about sex in my sermon! That’s not the kind of “horizontal” I was referring to then or in my message today…so don’t get distracted!

Faithfulness is required in any relationship where promises are made. We expect our spouses to be faithful to the vows we made on our wedding day. Children expect their parents to be faithful
to their promises. Employers expect their employees to be faithful to the job they agreed to do. And friends expect their friends to be faithful to the relational promises made in their friendship. Faithfulness in a relationship…to the spoken and unspoken promises between people…is a virtue that has high value in any society.

Like His Father in heaven, Jesus made promises in His relationships with His friends. He promised them that He would not leave them or forsake them. He promised to be always with them. He promised that He would give them rest for their souls and a room in His Father’s house. Jesus made promises in His relationships, and He kept those promises. Notice also that Jesus made these kinds of promises to people who could never pay Him back. Jesus regularly chose to build meaningful friendships with hurting people; and Jesus loved those friends with the intent of making them whole. In fact, the religious moralizers in town resented the attention Jesus gave to hurting people. In Matthew 11 the prudish religious people complain saying, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!”

Study Jesus and you’ll see that His faithfulness in relationship was His genius. Consider the twelve men he befriended to be His apostles. Talk about dysfunctional dudes! These guys were the poster children for A.D.D., they were constantly arguing and fighting among themselves, posturing to see who was the greatest, and so on. And yet Jesus loved them. He remained constant, firm, and consistent in his relationship with them. He spent time with them; He poured into them; He rebuked them when necessary, and He forgave them again and again. As a result, His friends (minus Judas) came to know the Father through Jesus and were utterly transformed by the Holy Spirit. In fact, they would go on to change the world in His name like no other group of friends ever had before or ever have since. This kind of Christ-like faithfulness is critical to creating deep, long-lasting friendships that bring healing and wholeness…not to mention healthy, God-honoring marriages, effective partnerships at work, and a healthy church family.

III. Where the vertical and horizontal nature of faithfulness intersects

There is an amazing story in the Bible that shows the wholistic nature of faithfulness—it is a story that makes me weep just about every time I read it. If you have your Bibles, turn to Mark 2, and let’s read this story together. The words will be on the screen.

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that! He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”

* I love the way Pastor John Ortberg unpacks this story in his book, Everybody’s Normal Until You Get to Know Them. If you have the opportunity, I encourage you to pick up a copy if for no other reason than to read the third chapter called, “The Fellowship of the Mat.”
Let’s take a minute now and reflect upon this story in light of this virtue called Christian faithfulness.

First of all, imagine the desperate situation of being a paralytic in the ancient world. The paralytic’s entire life was bound to a 3x6 mat. He would depend on people to feed him, carry him, clothe him, move him to avoid painful bedsores, clean him when he soiled himself…he lived a life of utter dependence. Not unlike our modern society, those with handicaps were often ostracized in the ancient Middle East. In fact, in Rome during the 5th century BC, there was literally a law that commanded parents to immediately kill any deformed child. This man’s life involved limitations and pain that most of us could not possibly imagine. He also suffered immense humiliation. He would have likely been set along the roadside near the city gate or some public venue to beg in order to raise money for those who kept him. In many respects, society would have considered this man to be less than human.

But here is what we learn about this man that comes as a bit of a surprise: he had friends. He not only had friends, he had amazing friends. Somewhere along the way this man, amidst all of his pain and limitations, learned how to cultivate friendships. We know this because deep, meaningful friendships never happen by accident. Real friendships require time, effort and prioritization. The paralytic wisely prioritized being a friend, even though his needs were great and undeniable. My guess is that he had a great sense of humor…he didn’t try to hide the fact that he was a paralytic…which means he blessed people with his vulnerability and humility. He probably mastered the art of listening…he likely became an expert question asker…he remembered what his friends said and followed up to see how they were doing. This kind of intentional attentiveness is always required to nurture friendships, and this gentleman clearly became an expert in the field. How do we know? Because his friends were faithful…really faithful. Look now to the story…

Our story takes place in Capernaum in the region of Galilee, and Mark tells us this was “home” to Jesus for a time. No doubt people all over town have been talking about this man, Jesus, who is known for healing the sick and casting out demons. So, on this particular day, when Jesus is “home” and crowds of people have gathered at the house where he was staying, the friends of the paralytic, out of love for their buddy, decide that they will take their friend to Jesus. And it’s not because they can’t accept their friend’s condition…it’s not because they are “judging” their friend’s status as a paralytic…it’s because they have hope that Jesus might heal their friend and make him whole.

Pay attention church: faithfulness in human relationships means, at the minimum, that we long for people to experience wholeness and healing, and so we do all we can to bring them to Jesus. But notice the order of things: these men are first and foremost friends with the paralytic…they are dear and faithful friends. The man confined to the mat has clearly learned to trust his friends…he trusts their intent…and he trusts them to do what is best for him. If the man on the mat had any suspicion that he was going to be dropped, or exploited, or used as a sermon illustration, you can bet he would have stayed home! Authentic friendship makes this story possible…authentic, faithful friendships are always critical to leading people to Jesus.
Now, as the friends get to the house where Jesus was staying, they discover that there is no room for their friend. There are crowds of people and physical structures that are blocking the way. Here is where the friendship is put to the test. In order for the friends to get their paralytic buddy to Jesus, there will be risk, hard work, and a significant level of inconvenience…but the friends prove to be faithful. They are willing to go the extra mile. They are willing to become “roof crashers!” (Ortberg, 49). They make a decision to do what must be done, no matter the cost, no matter the inconvenience, so that their friend can meet Jesus. I cannot think of a better picture of the virtue of Christian faithfulness.

Well, you know the story: they haul their buddy up onto the roof of the ancient home, and they begin to dig a hole in the roof. The roof would have been comprised of mud and thatch with wooden cross beams, so rest assured it would have been easily repaired. Still, we can’t help but wonder what was going through the mind of the homeowner. I can imagine him on the phone with his Allstate agent, “Well Mike, Jesus is here. Can we call this “an act of God?” (ibid, 50)

Now, let’s zoom into the room. Jesus is teaching, and suddenly dirt and debris begin to drop onto the heads of those below. Jesus is interrupted. I mentioned to you before that many, if not most, of the stories we have about Jesus are stories of Jesus being interrupted. I suspect Jesus is teaching on something of great importance when the interruption takes place, so his glance up to the roof may at first register a bit of frustration. But then this paralytic is lowered through the roof on his mat. The room becomes silent. Now watch what happens next in vs. 5: And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

When Jesus saw THEIR FAITH…the faith of the friends…He was moved to declare to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” There is so much in this story that speaks to faithfulness, but I only have time for two quick observations in closing.

First, it was their faithfulness to a hurting friend that led four men to crash the roof to get to Jesus. It was their faith in God’s Messiah that led to their friend’s healing. Can you see that it is here…in vs. 5…in the mud and muck of a torn-up roof…in the dirty, sweaty, hopeful gaze of four friends on behalf of their buddy…as all eyes return to Jesus to see what He will do…it is here that we see both the vertical and horizontal nature of faithfulness? To be faithful to God is to bring hurting people to Jesus…to be faithful to hurting people is to bring them to Jesus. In other words, we cannot tell ourselves that we are being faithful friends or spouses or siblings or co-workers, and then we don’t bring our hurting loved ones to Jesus. And we cannot tell ourselves that we are being faithful to Jesus, and then care little about those He died to save.

Listen church: being NICE to the paralytic would have simply made his life on the mat a bit more tolerable for a time. But true faithfulness in friendship means we are not content for our friend to be laid up on this mat for one more day when getting him to Jesus can result in freedom from that mat forever! And here’s the deal: everyone has a mat! Everyone you know comes with a mat in tow. Everyone is doing what they can to make the most of their life on the mat…but Jesus did not die for “mat management.” Jesus died to set people free; to heal their broken hearts; to bring wholeness to their hopelessness; to set the world a dancin’!
Now…let us pause for a moment and consider where we are as a culture. Our humanist, increasingly “godless” culture will read this story and likely accuse the four friends of “judging” their friend who is bound to the mat. They will accuse the friends of “shaming” the paralytic, causing him to feel devalued. Why? Because they did not “bless” his mat. They did not “accept” his paralysis as some alternative form of “good.” Instead, our culture will label these four men as arrogant for believing the paralytic could be healed and made whole by taking him to Jesus. They will surely complain saying, “What does this say to all the other paralytics in town? Isn’t it communicating that paralytics are somehow inferior to those who can walk? Can’t we just accept paralytics for who they are? Can’t we just all just agree to bless the mat?”

Listen: it is not loving or faithful to bless a person’s mat. It is loving and faithful to show them your mat, and to take them to the One who made you dance! Loving mat-bound people means we accept people as they are; but, like Jesus, we are committed to their greatest good, which means we become faithful friends and crash the roof to get them to Jesus.

Last point…and this is important. When Jesus sees the faith of the four friends, he turns his loving eyes to the paralytic and says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” I’m sure that was confusing and initially disappointing to the four friends…and the paralytic…because they were surely hoping for the man’s legs to be healed. But I want you to know that this story could have ended right here with the forgiveness of sins…and quite frankly, it probably should have. Mark reports that due to the skepticism of the religious leaders in the room and that in order to prove that He had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus then says to the paralytic “Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” Mark gives us the sense that the healing of the paralytic’s legs served as a physical object lesson to point to the real healing that just took place in the man’s heart through the forgiveness of sins! In other words, the most important work happened 1) when Jesus addressed the man as, “son.” In so doing, Jesus helped the man to understand that he had a Father who loved him; and 2) when Jesus pronounced that his sins were forgiven. The forgiveness of sins healed the paralysis of hopelessness and condemnation in the man’s heart. Even if the man remained unable to walk for the rest of his earthly life, Jesus set him free from his sin…which meant his heart was healed…which meant his ultimate healing was accomplished even if his legs remained crippled.

Listen Church: the people we love have all kinds of physical, social, financial issues that are complicated and painful; but the eternal, deep-seated spiritual darkness of unforgiven sin is far more painful, limiting and deadly to those we love than their cancer, job-status, or the threat of bankruptcy. True freedom, healing, and transformation begin with a forgiven heart that has been adopted into God’s family…and there is only one who can offer that healing…His name is Jesus. When we introduce people to Jesus, He will first forgive their sins and bring them into His family, and what happens after that is up to Him. Perhaps he heals their physical handicaps, perhaps he doesn’t. Maybe they are cured of their cancer, maybe they die. Maybe they get a windfall of cash, maybe they go bankrupt. Final outcomes of people’s earthly existence are beyond our ability to control or predict. But Church, God is faithful…He keeps His promises…and what people need more than good health, lots of money, or long life…is Jesus. And that’s what they will get…they will get Jesus Himself, living in them…and that will set our mat-bound friends a dancin’ in this life and the next!
Church, be faithful. Be faithful to God, and be faithful to those in your relational world. Both expressions of faithfulness will mean we crash the roof to bring people to Jesus. Amen? Let’s pray.