

Faithful

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By Rev. Will Nelken

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Especially these last two Sundays, it has been my longing to express to you that you have a calling from God. That does not mean He has singled you out above other people, for His calling is actually extended to every human.

But the universality of God's calling to Christ in no way diminishes its value; rather, it expresses the largess of His love, the broad extent of His graciousness. God wants you to be with Him, more than you have ever wanted Him.

Last weekend, I reminded you of Jesus' words, "Many are called, but few are chosen." Of all those who respond to the initial invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good," some continue with Him—some follow. They are the ones He chooses. The Chosen are a subset of the Called.

One more time, let's listen closely as Pastor Veronica reads 2 Peter 1:3-11 in an effort to extract the nectar of spiritual knowledge from the Holy Spirit's words.

² Peter 1:3 By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know Him, the One who called us to Himself by means of His marvelous glory and excellence. ⁴ And because of His glory and excellence, He has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.

⁵ In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone.

⁸ The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins.

¹⁰ So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away. ¹¹ Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Peter gave us a charge in verse 10, when he wrote, “*work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen.*” To get a clearer sense of the import of our responsibility, please listen as I read a selection of other translations of that same phrase:

...try hard to be certain that you really are called and chosen by God. (NCV)

...make every effort to be sure of your calling and election. (NET)

...be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you. (NASB)

...make every effort to confirm your calling and election. (HCB)

...all the more do your utmost to make firm your calling and choosing. (TScrip)

...you must do all you can to show that God has really chosen and selected you. (CEV)

...try even harder to make God’s call and His choice of you a permanent experience; if you do so, you will never abandon your faith. (GNT)

This process is so important that after telling us, step-by-step, how we are to develop our faith, Peter emphasizes it again by calling for our utmost diligent effort to confirm it.

“*Make God’s call and His choice of you a permanent experience.*” Make your calling and election sure (*lit*: stable-footed, steadfast; a measure of progress).

Do you remember learning to ride a bicycle? Riding a bike requires two things from you: balance and forward motion. Trying to balance on your bike without forward motion is very difficult, especially if you’ve never ridden a bike before. However, at the beginning, even with forward motion, balance is challenging. So, if someone walks beside you, keeping a hand on the back of your seat to help you balance, you can concentrate on the mechanics of riding, while getting the feel for keeping your balance.

Can you ride a bicycle still? You know what they say: once you’ve learned to ride a bike, you’ll always be able to pick it up again. In fact, it’s used generally as a metaphor for resuming a habit that’s fallen into disuse—“It’ll come back to you, like riding a bike.”

I like to think, if they’d had bicycles in the first century, that Peter could have used bike riding as an analogy for the Christian life. I have three things in mind: (1) riding a bike won’t work unless you keep moving forward; (2) in order to move forward you must keep your balance; and (3) it’s a skill so deeply engrained that it will never be forgotten.

Developing your faith in Jesus Christ is another way of saying “living faithfully.” The Hebrew concept of faith in God was never a static idea, like a creed, but a dynamic life lived in relationship with God. Not an idea, but a life. Biblical “faith,” in most instances, is best understood as “faithfulness,” not right beliefs. So when Peter wrote of developing one’s faith, he was referring to living a faithful life.

Developing faithfulness to Jesus Christ involves the same three elements as bicycle riding:

Forward Motion

You must keep moving forward. To cease your forward progress is to slide backwards and lose ground you had gained. When Jesus commissioned His followers, He said to them, “Go.” But the tense of the verb in the original language is not an imperative, but a participle, expressing an ongoing action: “*As you are going...*” (Matthew 28:19). He assumed that they would be in motion; all that they needed was the right direction—to use their motion to “*make disciples of all kinds of people.*”

Keep Your Balance

As you are going, you must maintain your balance—spiritually, morally, ethically, relationally. Balance is dynamic, not static; it requires frequent and continual adjustments. The moment you think, “I’ve got it now,” you’ll have to readjust to maintain spiritual equilibrium, or you’ll crash. You must stay alert, because the road ahead may change, the climate may change, others may misbehave, you may grow weary, you may be distracted—any of which could interfere with your balance. You must stay alert.

Never Forgotten

The continual effort required to maintain forward motion with balance, develops muscle memory and muscle memory actually develops routine brain function—neural pathways of sense and perception and response. The result is that you need not re-learn the skill from the beginning every time you mount your bike. Even after months or years of disuse, the skill can be quickly restored. It’s true for choosing a faith response to a challenging situation. It’s true for interceding in prayer for a lost friend. It’s true for lifting up praise to the Lord after an emotionally dry season or a lapse in attending to your spiritual life.

Making Certain

Peter thoughtfully described the eight elements of developing faithfulness to Christ in verses 5-7, and these are the *means of confirming* our calling and choosing by God. If you want to be sure (have a certainty about your personal relationship with Jesus Christ), if you want to show others what your faith means to you, if you want to confirm your faith in meaningful progress, if you want to make faithfulness to Christ a “permanent experience” in your life, DO THESE THINGS (follow this path).

Read the passage once again...

⁵In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God’s promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance

with godliness,⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone. (2 Peter 1:5-7)

That says it very well, and we'll take a closer look at its components in a moment, but first I want to read Eugene Peterson's version from *The Message*:

⁵⁻⁷ So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others.

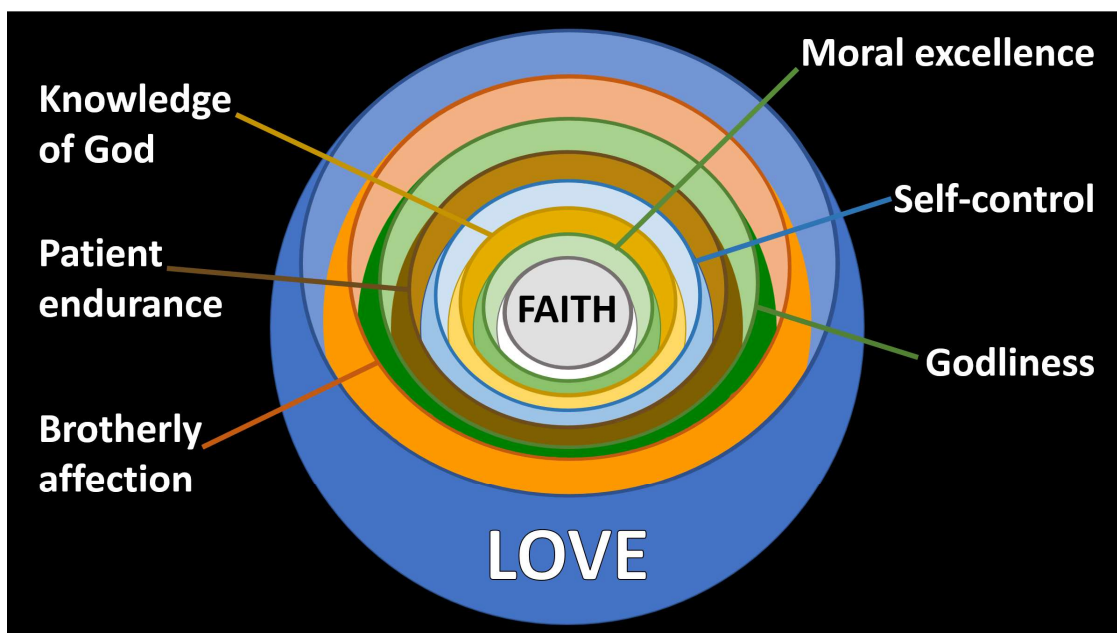
Whatever Peterson's paraphrase may lack in word-for-word detail, it fairly captures the *heart* of the passage.

By the phrase "building on" he reminds us that each element is dependent on all that preceded it, building on each previous experience and development.

With the word "complementing" he informs us that each forward step grows out of the last; they are integrally connected and assisted (they function as stepping stones).

All of this is summed up and adeptly expressed by the final clause: "each dimension fitting into and developing (further) the others." Each step fits together with all the others; they are not disconnected. Each grows out of the last and leads to the next, further developing your faith and faithfulness.

Think of these elements as eight nesting spheres. The heart of the Christian life is indisputably FAITH in Jesus Christ. But as Apostle James eloquently argued, faith of the mind cannot stand alone; it must be demonstrated by corresponding actions—that describes faithfulness.



What actions express and reveal our faith? What actions develop and enhance our faith?

- Moral excellence (integrity).
- Knowledge (of God).
- Self-control (Holy Spirit leadership).
- Patient endurance (when tested).
- Godliness (devotion to God's ways).
- Brotherly affection (unity of the family of God).
- Love for everyone (neighbors and enemies).

"Each dimension fitting into and developing (further) the others."

This is not about BEING certain of your calling and choosing (in the sense of a static awareness that you have arrived at your intended goal)—the finish line is well ahead of us still.

It is, however, all about MAKING CERTAIN of your calling and choosing by following an ongoing, developmental path called "faithfulness."

If we think of them as concentric circles, the "called" are the masses to whom Jesus reaches through His people; the "chosen" are a subset of the called who respond in faith to the call. When they step into Christ by trusting Him with their lives, they become God's chosen.

Jesus said, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).

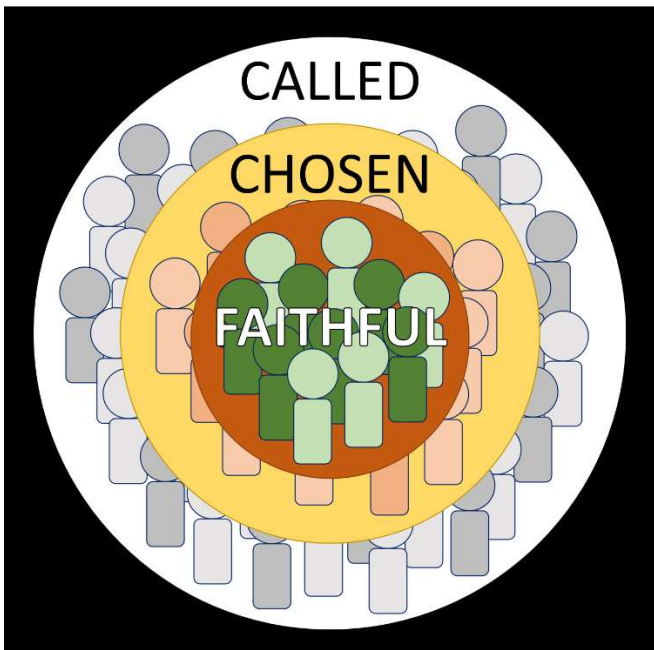
And we know from experience that some of the chosen fall away—through deception, through moral failure, through neglect, or through denial.

Jesus explained,

Matthew 7:13 "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. ¹⁴ But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

So, among the many who are called, few are chosen. And among the few who have been chosen, fewer still stick with it and choose, in return, to pursue faithfulness to Christ as a lifestyle.

The faithful, then, are a still smaller subset, as the following illustration indicates:



Have you been called? Of course you have been called—everyone who hears the Gospel message has been called.

Have you been chosen? If you have entrusted your life to Jesus Christ, you have been chosen, for God has chosen all who are in Christ.

Are you among the faithful? This is the question I want to help you to answer with confidence.

Our part is to (not perfectly, but) persistently follow the Christ, the Faithful One.

Hebrews 11:8 *It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. ⁹ And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents.*

Psalms 34:9 *Remain loyal to the Lord, you chosen people of His, for His loyal followers lack nothing!*

Ephesians 4:1 *Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.*

1 Thessalonians 2:12 *We pleaded with you, encouraged you, and urged you to live your lives in a way that God would consider worthy. For He called you to share in His Kingdom and glory.*

2 Peter 1:10 *So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away. ¹¹ Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Remain Faithful

The challenge is not to make no mistakes—you are a human being born with sin, you will make mistakes (some unintentional, some intentional). For this reason God invites us to repent (to own up to our mistakes and begin moving forward again) as often as we need to, and He promises to forgive and cleanse our hearts again every time. The only thing He cannot help us with is our stubborn refusal to turn to Him and admit our need.

Our challenge is to remain faithful.

John 8:31 Jesus said to the people who believed in Him, “You are truly My disciples if you remain faithful to My teachings. ³² And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Hebrews 3:12 Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. ¹³ You must warn each other every day, while it is still “today,” so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. ¹⁴ For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ.

Revelation 2:10 Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life. (Smyrna)

Revelation 13:9 Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.

¹⁰ Anyone who is destined for prison will be taken to prison. Anyone destined to die by the sword will die by the sword.

This means that God’s holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful.

In these last days,

Matthew 24:12 Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Diligent

To be faithful means to be diligent (not lazy), as in the parable of three servants:

Matthew 25:14 “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone.

¹⁵ He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

¹⁶ “The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. ¹⁷ The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. ¹⁸ But the

servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money.

¹⁹ "After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. ²⁰ The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, 'Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.'

²¹ "The master was full of praise. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

²² "The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.'

²³ "The master said, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

²⁴ "Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, 'Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate. ²⁵ I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.'

²⁶ "But the master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn't plant and gathered crops I didn't cultivate, ²⁷ why didn't you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.'

²⁸ "Then he ordered, 'Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. ²⁹ To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. ³⁰ Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Honest

To be faithful means to be honest (not corrupt).

Luke 16:10 "If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. ¹¹ And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? ¹² And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own?

Persistent

To be faithful means to continue persistently (not give up).

Hebrews 10:35 So do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you! ³⁶ Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.

³⁷ "For in just a little while,
the Coming One will come and not delay.

³⁸ And my righteous ones will live by faith.

But I will take no pleasure in anyone who turns away."

³⁹ But we are not like those who turn away from God to their own destruction. We are the faithful ones, whose souls will be saved.

In the End

At the end of time, when a global war is fought in the Valley of Megiddo, the rebellious nations of the world "will go to war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will defeat them because He is Lord of all lords and King of all kings. And His called and chosen and faithful ones will be with Him." (Revelation 17:14)

They shall share in His colossal victory. They shall share in His glory. Because they were called, chosen, and faithful.

Are you prepared now to "make your calling and choosing certain"? Will you make faithfulness to Jesus Christ your chosen lifestyle—with all its hiccups and potholes, with all its conundrums and quagmires, with all its fits and starts?

Tell Him you will.