**Guidance Class #4: Faithfulness**

**Introduction**

Any time you make a decision, you want to know what success will look like. How do you decide which stock to pick? The one that seems like it’ll be worth the most money when you retire. How do you decide which brand of peanut butter to buy? The one that’s gonna taste best. Which core seminar to attend? The one with the coolest teacher, right?

*[Get the class to give examples of decisions they made this past week. What was the goal they had in mind when they made that decision?]*

Every decision has a particular measure of success in mind. What are we trying to accomplish? But what is that for a Christian?

That’s what we’ll be talking about today. In short, we make decisions with the aim of being *faithful*. And that has massive ramifications on why and how we make decisions.

What we’re going to do today is see first where this idea of faithfulness emerges from Scripture. Then we’ll look at the freedoms and responsibility that faithfulness brings to our decision-making.

First: what is faithfulness according to the Bible?

**1. What is Faithfulness?**

Let’s get to this question by starting with some review from last week. Last week we looked at some of the things that the Bible says are God’s will for our lives. Does anyone remember any of those? (for us to obey—John 14:21; for us to be holy—1 Thes 4:3; for Christ to be exalted—Eph 1)

We talked about how frustrating it is that all of these have to do with boring things like developing character and maturity rather than the really important decisions in life like who should I marry or what job should I take. And we finished with a quote from Kevin DeYoung about how messed up our priorities are when we think this way.

*Simply put, God’s will is your growth in Christlikeness. God promises to work all things together for our good that we might be conformed to the image of his Son. And the degree to which this sounds like a lame promise is the degree to which we prefer the stones and scorpions of this world to the true bread from heaven. God never assures us of health, success, or ease. But He promises us something even better: He promises to make us loving, pure and humble like Christ. In short, God’s will is that you and I get happy and holy in Jesus.*

The aspect of God’s will that he’s chosen to reveal to us is stuff like “obey Jesus” and “be holy” and “become like Christ.” Why does he seem to think that is so important? Because in Scripture, it seems that God cares way more about who you are than what you do.

Let me repeat that again because it’s important and more significant than we might think at first. God cares way more about who you are than what you do. Let me explain.

What is God’s great aim for the universe? [to show off his glory.] Why is that good? [because it’s why he made us; he’s the most excellent, satisfying, joy-giving being in all the universe. It would be unloving and wrong to point ultimately to anything *but* him.]

God made you, and he redeemed you…to show off his glory. How does he do that? Well, this brings us to a great paradox of the Christian life: he shows off *his* work through *your* work. Take a look at Philippians 2:12-13 on your handout:

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling…”

That’s our work. “Work out your own salvation.”

“…for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Who ultimately gets the credit? The one who sent his son to free you from the bonds of sin. The one who gave you a new heart. The one who is recreating your desires. The one who aids you by his Spirit and guides you by his word. It’s ultimately *his* work that we see as you become more holy, so *he’*s the one who gets the glory.

God is the master sculptor, and he is creating in you a masterpiece to show off his power and goodness and glory. That means that everything you do has value in two ways. It has value because of what it accomplishes, and it has value because your decision to do it says something about God. I’ll give you an example. Let’s say you’re an LA on the Hill. (Legislative Assistant, that is.) You work hard all night to help a complex piece of legislation get through, keeping your cool when other people are freaking out, not getting offended when people say mean things to you. How does that show off God’s glory?

Well, there’s the *substance* of what’s been accomplished. You’ve had a small hand in passing what you hope is a good law. And if it is a good law, it shows off God’s glory by improving government. Good government points to a good God. After all, God invented government.

But there’s also the *manner* in which you accomplished it. You worked hard because you saw yourself ultimately working for Jesus, not your boss. You treated others out of self-giving love rather than self-serving obligation, which can be pretty counter-cultural in politics. That displays the new life that Jesus has been building in you since the day you were saved. Your work is showing off his work.

Now, when we gather forever around God’s throne, I think we’ll be praising God for both those things. The substance of your work and the way your work showed off his work. But based on where the thrust of Scripture seems to land, I think that the second will often prove more important.

Retracing this line of thought: In the Bible, God’s main goal in everything is to show off his glory. As a result, he’s more interested in what he’s doing *in* you than what you actually accomplish in a temporal sense. So your work matters mainly because of how it shows off his work in you.

Let’s take a look at Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25 to see how all this relates to the concept of faithfulness.

We won’t spend time reading the whole parable, but I’ll summarize it. Before he goes on a long journey, a master entrusts money of different amounts to three different servants. The first to put the money to work and make more money. The third buries the money. All three give what they have to the master at the end of the parable. The first two servants are rewarded. But when the third servant comes up, Jesus gives the story a twist.

24 He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26 But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. 29 For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

What did the unfaithful servant do that was lazy and wicked? [*He hid the money in the ground*] Why was this wrong? [*1) He neglected his responsibility; 2) He didn’t consider his master worthy*] And what was the consequence? [*He’s thrown out into the darkness—into hell*]

Really? Hell seems like quite a consequence for something as simple as burying money! I mean, he gave the money back, didn’t he? He didn’t steal it. What’s going on here?

Let me describe in a bit more detail what the servants did. The faithful servants trusted that the master would return as he said—and so they risked absolutely everything on his promise. They didn’t hold anything back. But the unfaithful servant decided to play it safe. He either thought that the master might not return as promised—or that when he did, faithfulness wouldn’t be rewarded. So he hedged his bet and reduced his risk by burying the talent *and* doing other things with his time.

The faithful servants trusted their master’s word and his goodness. But the unfaithful servant had faith in neither! Now, when we put God in the place of the master, as Jesus does, we understand how evil this assumption is. God is not a hard master! He is beautifully, eternally good and satisfying and trustworthy. What’s more, good stewardship advertises that God is good. Bad stewardship says that God is not good. And since he is the source and epitome and sum of all that is good, defamation of his goodness is the essence of evil.

You may *think* that you can play both sides and please both masters—but in the end your desire shows that you have no faith in God. You’re not a Christian. This parable isn’t about being a “good” or “mediocre” Christian—as if those categories existed. It’s about the difference between heaven and hell.

And what is the good servant called by his master? [wait for answer] That’s right. Faithful. In the Bible, faithfulness means *stewarding all that God has given us to show off his goodness*. Stewarding our time, and our money, and our skills and our relationships. When we use all of that for *his* purposes, we show that we believe his purposes to be supremely good. That’s the life of faith.

This is our goal in decision-making. Every decision you make has the potential to say something true or false about who God is. He cares hugely about that. Above all else, we want to be counted faithful. Why? Because “faithful” means we’ve used all that God’s given us to show off his worth. Why care about that? Because that’s why God created this world! The extent that we’ve been able to do that is what will matter most for all of eternity in heaven.

Let me dissect this idea of “faithfulness-focused decision-making” a bit more. Making this decisions this way means three things:

1. Focus: It means making every decision with our eyes focused squarely on the Last Day. Hebrews 4:13, “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” For the Christian, that is no reason to fear that day; with John our cry should be “Come, Lord Jesus!” Maranatha! But it is a sober day nonetheless, to put it mildly. We should make decisions setting our hearts on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2).
2. Goal: It means that the goal of every decision is God’s glory. 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” A life spent well, a faithful life, is a life focused entirely on displaying the excellence of who God is. That is a life whose value will last into eternity.
3. Extent: It means thinking about how *all* of me can be used in this regard. Regardless of what results God chooses to bring from my efforts, I want to put all of myself at his service. Romans 12:1, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

This world says that your value is mainly in what you do. The more significant your contribution to society, the more your life is worth. But the paradigm of faithfulness is the polar opposite. God says that your value is mainly in what your life shows about what *he’s* done. And that means that sometimes what is of immense value doesn’t really register in the world’s eyes. Whose life was worth more? The doctor who saved thousands of children’s lives? Or the recovering addict who spent every ounce of his faith and more just to live a normal life and be at church each Sunday? We can’t say. But what we do know is that “without faith it is impossible to please God.” And he may surprise us when we get to heaven as to which lives were truly faithful.

*Any questions?*

**2. Faithfulness Brings Freedom**

Generally, the decision-making we’re used to is what you might call “outcome-focused decision-making.” In other words, your goal for making a decision is to secure a particular outcome, like I talked about at the beginning of the class. Invest in a stock to secure your retirement. Take a job to secure wealth and happiness. And so forth. Contrast that with “faithfulness-focused decision-making.” Invest in a stock so as to be faithful with the money God’s giving you—but trusting him entirely for your retirement. Take the job to be faithful to God’s command to work—but trust his Providence for whatever your job might bring.

Just to tease out the difference, let’s contrast these two:

1. In outcome-focused decision-making, we trust ourselves for the outcome. In faithfulness-focused decision-making, we trust God for the outcome. Like with the retirement example I gave earlier. Let’s say you make wise decisions with your money and then something completely unexpected occurs, and you lose everything. The world says you’re a failure. But from faithfulness perspective, you may be just fine. Your decision was faithful, even if it didn’t work out as you’d planned. It still showed off God’s goodness.
2. In outcome-focused decision-making, we get the credit for good results. In faithfulness-focused decision-making, God gets all the credit.
3. In outcome-focused decision-making, success is something we can see. Does the outcome happen that we wanted? In faithfulness-focused decision-making, things are a little more murky. We won’t actually be able to see what success was until we get to heaven, although we can be confident we’re being faithful to God if we are being obedient to his clear commands in scripture.

OK. With these definitions laid out, let’s look at how the concept of faithfulness brings great freedom in decision-making. Specifically, I have in mind three freedoms that you’ll see in your handout.

1. Freedom from perfectionism. Some of us struggle with paralysis in decision-making because we’re perfectionists. You can’t even decorate your bedroom because it has to be *perfect*. Or you agonize about your decision of where to go to school, or what house to buy, because MY WHOLE LIFE DEPENDS ON THIS ONE DECISION!!! Or you’re terrified to get married because you *might* be marrying MR. WRONG!!!

Now, I don’t want to necessarily play down the reality of those fears. To take that last example, living in a bad marriage is…I don’t think words can do it justice. Your decisions matter. They matter hugely.

But here’s the key: you don’t trust your mate-picking prowess when you get married. You trust God. You enter into that union out of faith in him, not faith that you’ve done your homework just right and are set for life. You don’t know what marriage holds, do you? But God does. He promises that whatever comes from his hand will be for your ultimate, lasting good. And for his glory. You can trust him.

So stop thinking that your primary goal in making decisions is to secure a certain outcome—like a happy marriage. Or the perfect-looking home decorating scheme. God doesn’t guarantee any of that, no matter how well you follow some process for good decision-making. You make a good decision in order to be faithful with the opportunities God has given you. Then you trust the outcome to him. If the outcome isn’t what you’d hoped for, you work by faith to trust that his plan is always best.

Some wise, secular advice I’ve received before is that if a decision is reversible, make it decisively, and move on. You can always move back to DC. You can always quit your new job. You can always sell your house. I think that this advice is especially apt for Christians who really trust God’s care for them. Do your best to gather the information you need to make a faithful decision. Then move along. Don’t sit there paralyzed and unable to make a decision because you don’t know if it’s going to turn out perfectly. Trust God! He’s in control, he knows what’s best. Were you faithful in how you made the decision? Did your decision show him to be good and trustworthy? Then you’ve done what you need to do. That’s the confidence we can have as servants of an all-powerful, all-merciful God.

1. Freedom from regret. There’s a second, related freedom that we should examine, which is freedom from regret. Having made a decision, some of us seem to live life looking over our shoulders, filled with fear that we may have made the wrong decision. And, if we’re honest, sometimes that fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, doesn’t it?

Sometimes that regret is driven by a fear of other’s opinions. Will people admire me for my foresight in purchasing this house? Will my boss get angry at me for making such a foolish business decision? Will people ridicule me for my choice of carpet color? Sometimes that regret is driven by reality. It becomes clear that you *did* make a bad decision. You *did* overpay for your apartment, you *did* pick the wrong roommate, you *did* rent a terrible vacation house, you *did* make a bad investment. What’s your response when that happens? Do you savage yourself, beating yourself up over your bad decision? Do you obsess about where exactly you went wrong?

The thing you need to realize is that God could have kept you from making that decision if he’d wanted to. That is most certainly in his power. Why didn’t he? Well, he must have greater things in view than you do, even if you don’t expect to understand that until heaven. In that sense, I find Revelation 15 comforting. One day we will stand with the redeemed in heaven and sing this song:

Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy. All nations will come to worship you,

For your righteous acts have been revealed.

The key there is the tense of that last verb. “Your righteous acts *have* been revealed.” From that blessed vantage point, we will see all that God has done and it will finally make sense. We will be able to call all his acts right because we will see them as right. Not by faith, but by sight.

Of course, it’s quite possible that you were *not* faithful in how you made that bad decision. In that case, you should repent of your faithlessness—sorrowful not mainly because of the consequence of the bad decision, but because of a faithless decision that belied a lack of trust in an eminently trustworthy God—who has never given you the slightest reason to ever distrust his care.

But do you need to beat yourself up over those consequences? No, you need to patiently and humbly bear them as part of God’s good plan. Self-flagellation over a bad decision may seem humble and contrite, but at its core it can be quite arrogant. “Why did I make a bad decision? I deserve to make good decisions! I have no business making bad decisions. I’m a successful person after all.” You can see where that goes.

Faithfulness-focused decision-making brings freedom from regret because we trust God’s goodness even with the consequences of our bad decisions. A bad decision in no way negates the promise of Romans 8:28, that he will use *all* things for your good.

1. Freedom from pride. But there’s a third freedom that a focus on faithfulness brings, which is a freedom from pride. What happens when your decisions *do* work out as planned? When your house appreciates in value, your family loves the vacation, your date is amazed at your thoughtfulness, your resume builds like a staircase to heaven? Do you become proud? Think of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 just before he’s humbled: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?”

How foolish we must seem to God. Four people make equally prescient stock market investments. God chooses to bless one of them. He swells with pride at his brilliance; the other three shrink back in shame and regret. How ridiculous! As Hannah prays in 1 Samuel 2:7, “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.”

When you make a decision, make it your goal to be faithful, and entrust the outcome to God. If he blesses, praise him! If he blesses through your decision, praise him! Any wisdom you had was a gift from heaven anyway. May God protect us from turning his gifts into pride that walls us off from him.

**3. Faithfulness brings responsibility**

All this talk about freedom from anxiety and worry is exactly what some of you need to hear. You are the type As with your closets organized by color and your vacations planned down to the hour. But not all of us are like that, right? For some of us, the three freedoms I’ve just described push us dangerously close to irresponsibility. “So what you’re saying is, make a sound decision and don’t give it another thought, right?” By which you mean, “Make a half-hearted attempt to think through the issue, and then party on!”

That’s where we need to remember that the call to faithfulness is a high calling. There will come a day in time when you will stand before the Lord to give account for your life, just as those three servants did in the parable of the talents. The Bible isn’t clear exactly what will happen, or the interplay between our perfect righteousness in Christ and our accountability as Christians. But it is clear that this day should consume our attention.

Is there anything more important in your life as a Christian than being counted faithful as a steward in God’s house? Is there anything light or trite about that calling? It is God who works in us and God who gets the glory, and so through his power we should seek with all our might to be as faithful in this life as we can possibly be. And when we fail, to repent and continue seeking to be faithful.

**Conclusion**

I want to finish our class today by hearing back from you what’s been most useful about this concept of faithfulness-focused decision-making. Is it important because you are in need of freedom from anxiety? Or is it important because you need to feel the weight of this responsibility? Which of the freedoms I mentioned feels most freeing for you? What’s been most useful about today’s class?

Pray