Welcome back to our life on the vine series. We are breaking down Paul’s list of the Fruit of the Spirit in the book of Galatians, and asking the question: In the midst of our culture, how can we cultivate these fruits in our lives? Today we are discussing Faithfulness.

 Take a look: Princess Bride clip

Apparently true love can make a grown woman throw herself down a deep ravine.

The man in black here makes a crucial observation about faithfulness, he mentions it’s main quality: endurance. Faithfulness, he talked of madam, your enduring faithfulness. Of course this clip is referencing “true love” between a man and a woman, which brings us to another important point: Faithfulness is always relational. That comes as no surprise. All of these fruits of the Spirit have been tied to our relationships, but we live in a world of impermanence, disposability and convenience. We expect the things we have to eventually go bad and need replacement. In fact our chest freezer just went out and we are trying to decide if we mess around with trying to fix it or if we just buy a new one, or if anyone here might know a thing or two… We understand that nothing lasts forever. Isn’t this our culture’s take on personal relationships? on marriage? Commitment is not as hard and fast as it once was. Marriage is fundamental to our society…it is fundamental to God’s plan from the very beginning. Committing oneself to one spouse, raising kids together and sharing responsibility for a home provides stability and consistency throughout the whole culture. But a marriage requires that both the husband and wife remain faithful to each other.

Times are changing, as they always do. People are holding off on marriage…the median age for a newlywed couple is now 30 years old, the highest it’s ever been. The number of co-habiting couples, avoiding the onerous of commitment, is rising to the tune of 18 million unmarried folks living with a partner, and this number is rising most quickly among Americans over 50 years old. 40% of new marriages involve either one or both partners having been previously married.

Commitment is seen as a scary thing, something to be avoided. After all, it makes demands on you. To remain faithful by definition binds you to someone else and constrains the way in which you behave. Faithfulness does not allow you to do whatever you want to do.

God is calling us to live differently. We are called to live faithfully in a world of impermanence.

Hosea learned this in the hardest way possible. As a prophet of God, Hosea was committed to speaking God’s word boldly to God’s people. Unfortunately, God wanted Hosea to do more than simply speak words. He called Hosea to enact the reality of Israel’s situation, and this enactment would involve every aspect of Hosea’s life.

Let’s take a look at his story:

It kicks off in Chapter 1 verse 2: **When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution, for the people of the land commit great prostitution by deserting the LORD.”** Now, I am willing to bet that most of us would turn to God and say, “Come again? No, I am not doing that! That sounds terrible!” And you are probably thinking, why would God ask someone to do this? But the answer is already given…because the people of the land commit great prostitution. It’s similar to the idea of a theme park. You can go a read a story about a boy wizard and his magical school, but taking a trip to Harry Potter World puts you physically in the story. You experience the sights and smells with your whole body at a theme park. The characters are no longer just in your imagination…the words have come alive. So here, God is calling Hosea to take his words and bring them to life. So that God’s Word would become a total-body experience. And Hosea, as a dutiful and faithful prophet, according to the text, does not even blink an eye. Verse 3 **So Hosea went and took Gomer**, in marriage, and they had children, three of them.

Wanna know their names?

The first born was named Jezreel. Kind of a cool name. It makes reference to the Valley of Jezreel which is featured throughout the Old Testament and is largely a place of gruesome violence. God also sayd to Hosea **“I will destroy the kingdom of the house of Israel…in the Jezreel Valley.”** So not a namesake anyone would want to have. His next child was to be named “No Mercy”…cute. And finally number three was christened, “Not My People”…Bright futures for these kids.

But see that is the point here. God is relaying a message. Repent! Turn to me! You are prostitiuting yourselves with other Gods, other affections. Your children will bear judgement! But it does not have to be that way. Verse 10: **In the place where it was said of them ‘You are not my people’ it will be said to them ‘Children of the Living God.’** Look as well at chapter 2 verse **“I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in devoted love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you will know the Lord.”** God established a covenant with these people, the the covenant was a two way agreement, an if/then proposition. If you obey my commands, then thing will go well with you. So clearly, as the Israelites seek after and worship their idols, God is more than justified in cancelling the covenant and ending the agreement altogether. Take a look at Chapter 6 verse 6-7 **“I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God instead of entirely burned offerings. But like Adam they broke the covenant; then they acted in bad faith against me.”** Israel has broken the contract. Since the very beginning, humans always have. So God has two options: he can end this agreement and be justified in doing so. The other party has acted in bad faith. But he instead chooses to renew the covenant, to extend his promises and blessings to his unfaithful people over and over again. Like a man married to a prostitute.

Listen to these words from chapter 11: **“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart winces within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.”** Have you ever felt this way before? This is the picture of a heart torn in two, a groom whose bride has been unfaithful, a struggle between anger and sadness, justice and forgiveness.

 Y’know my wife tells me that when I preach, I should include more personal stories. People love personal stories. Well, whether or not you do, I did want to take the opportunity to share with you a little about myself. I was maybe 25 years old, been married 4 years and had two kids at the time. I was working as a youth director at a church in Rochester MN. Life was going well, the future was looking bright, but out of nowhere, from my perspective anyway, my then wife confessed she was involved with someone else. It was a terrible feeling…like all my insides were sucked out. As I absorbed the news and vacillated between anger and sadness and forgiveness and frustration, I realized the rug had been pulled out from under me and I was falling. I remember making a decision: If I was falling, I was going to fall into the hands of God, to rely on Him and trust him through this time. If my wife wasn’t going to be faithful to me, I at least knew that God would!

 The following weeks were rough and draining and involved a lot of tongue-biting and gritting of teeth (which, by the way, you do not want to do at the same time.) And something was happening insode of me…I was developing a sort of pride. I was in the right and she was in the wrong and she needs to seek forgiveness from me because I am right. And I have been so gracious to her through all of this and I have been patient and I should get credit because I am the faithful one. Then Wednesday night came. We had youth group that night and during worship we sang a song called “Your Love O Lord.” The lyrics were straight scripture: “Your love O Lord, reaches to the heavens, Your faithfulness stretches to the sky.” I started to tear up, here I am trying to lead this song and I can barely sing it. God showed me in that moment of worship that I am the adulterer. I may have been faithful to my marriage but I had turned from God plenty of times, and yet he was always right there with open arms when ever I decided to come home. I was no different than Adam, no different than the Israelite people. I had left God for different idols. But his faithfulness is sky high! There was no boasting in my marriage relationship…I was no better. And yet I was able to find the strength to forgive her, because I knew God had forgiven me.

 Things did not turn out too peachy however. We were divorced and moved our separate ways. Our marriage ended in another statistic. But by God’s grace, I was able to connect with Tracy and we have re-forged our family into something new.

 What does God do with our unfaithfulness? He makes something new. His love is more powerful than our sin. He desires to be in relationship with us. He loves us! And he would rather be in a strained relationship with you and I than have no relationship at all. He would rather put up with unfaithful adultery, than brush his hands and be done with us.

**On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband” and no longer will you call me “My Lord.”**

In my mind, it is much easier to be a king, a Lord, than it is to be a husband. It’s easier to be in charge of someone than it is to be bound to them in faithfulness. But God desires relationship, intimate heart relationship with you and me. To be bound in faithful love…faithfulness…enduring faithfulness.

 But, you see, enduring faithfulness is not flashy. We tell stories and make movies about the cheaters. We like the drama of the extreme examples. Faithful people live more quiet lives, they don’t all attention to themselves. They endure.

And once again, we can experience the beauty of God’s church. Because, here in this room we have people who have an understanding of how this is done. People who have demonstrated enduring faithfulness in their relationship with God and in their marriages. People you would never hear of, people who do not congratulate themselves. But we have much to learn from these types of people.

 Take some time this week…of course, read through Hosea, and as you do see if you can have lunch with someone in your life who you know to be faithful. Talk with them, learn from them. How to they do it? What are some specific things they do in their everyday life? For once, we can shine the spotlight on the quiet, enduring faithfulness that is so often unnoticed. And in so doing, we shine a light on the faithfulness of our God that reaches to the skies!