

# **FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH**

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*Series*

*SERMON: "2021 Final Exam"*

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(Credit Carl Willis)

## **Introduction**

Have you ever had someone ask you, "Do you (or did you – if you are older) Do you like school?" I was one of those who, although I may not have always admitted it, actually liked school. I like being in class and learning new things. I still do. In college and seminary, I took extra classes just because I wanted to learn new stuff.

However, I do not, and never have, liked taking tests. Particularly final exams. Where you have to recall everything from the whole semester or sometimes even the whole year. That dreaded statement by the teacher – Your Final Exam is worth 50% of your grade – or some other ridiculous percentage. "What, don't I get any credit just for showing up to class – mostly awake and paying attention?"

In college I had this one professor, our botany professor, who was getting ready to retire. He had a reputation of being pretty tough. When he handed out the syllabus, there it was – Final exam – but no indication of how much of our grade the final exam counted for.

So, we went through the semester – a lot of field trips all around campus and some off campus – identifying almost every plant known to mankind it seemed. There just seemed like a mountain of information to remember.

At the end of the semester after cramming for hours – going over a whole stack of 3x5 cards with all the identifying features about every plant, we show up for the final exam. The professor hands out the exam and it is just 1 single sheet of paper, and only has a half page of

printing and the other side is blank. “Oh no. It’s one of those dreaded essay exams.” We thought.

1<sup>st</sup> question – “Write down the 5 identifying features one should look for in order to identify any plant.”

That is a pretty easy question to start out. It’s like: look at the bark. Look at the leaf shape, look at the flower or fruit. Any unusual characteristics. Standard process for every plant identification.

Next question: What is the most helpful thing you learned from this class?

Next question: What was the best method of learning the information for this class?

Next question: What do you expect to use from this class after you graduate?

Next question: What would you change if you taught this class?

Last line on the exam: Thanks for being a student in my class – have a great Christmas break.

That was it. Final exam. And I crammed for all those hours for this!

But notice how profound the exam really was. Rather than just focusing on memorizing a bunch of information, the professor was asking us to reflect on the experience of the class. On our learning process, on how we would be different because we spent time in his class. Those are profound and thoughtful exercises to engage in – regarding any experience we have in life.

I got to thinking, this is the last Sunday of 2021. Perhaps a good time for a final exam. So this morning, I invite us to participate in a **2021 Final Exam**. I am not going to ask you questions about all the sermons you heard.

Instead I want to use the pattern of my wise old botany professor. We will make it a time of reflection. I hope it will be a valuable time of reflection for us.

Our key verse is

[2 Corinthians 13:5](#)

**Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith.**

That sounds like a pretty serious test. Paul is inviting the Jesus followers in Corinth, and us, to a time of self-examination, or testing. This time, the testing takes the form of reflecting on the past year. How did we do over the past year at learning to know, love and follow Jesus?

It's true, Paul told the Philippian jailer – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” For some that is as far as they get. They give **mental assent** to the statement that Jesus is the Son of God. That is very important information to believe.

But we believe the far greater question is: “How have you done at loving and following Jesus?”

This question is important because it will help us to assess their faith. “The question digs a little deeper. Do we really believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Or is that only a statement we use?”

I will suggest several areas where we can examine ourselves, for the sake of assessing our faith and how genuine it is. Now, It takes time to reflect well, and deeply. We will not have as much time as we need this morning. But I hope you will take more time this week. At least I want to get us started.

These are the areas we will briefly examine:

Our **Consecration** or Dedication to Jesus. Is Jesus really Lord and master of all of our lives?

Our **Behavior** – how have we behaved or acted?

Our **Influence** - What impact have we had?

Our **Love** – How have we loved?

And our **Attitudes** – How have we really felt inside – in our spirits?

1<sup>st</sup> let us examine your **Consecration** or Commitment

We read in the Old Testament:

**Joshua 3:5 Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.”** He was talking about when they were getting ready to cross the Jordan River, on their way from Egypt. Then, after the Israelites destroyed the city of Jericho, God told Joshua:

**Joshua 7:11 Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions.**

When the bible talks about **consecration**, there are two aspects that are closely related. In Joshua 3:5, “**consecrate**” is sometimes translated as **purify** – like a ceremonial washing. The Israelites were to purify themselves ceremonially in preparation to be in God’s presence. This is related to the holiness or purity or perfection of God.

The second meaning of the term has to do with “**being set aside for a specific purpose.**”

When the people destroyed the city of Jericho, all the spoils of the battle were to be destroyed as a sacrifice to God, except the silver, gold, bronze and iron – that was to be put in the treasury of the tabernacle. It was “consecrated” or “dedicated” to God. It could not be used for anything else. It was set aside for a specific purpose.

Kind of like in the electrical wiring in your house. The electrician has created a circuit just for your stove. From the circuit breaker to the stove, nothing else is connected to that circuit. Your stove is the only appliance on that circuit. Sometimes it is called a ‘**dedicated**’ circuit. Or in bible terms we could say it is a consecrated circuit. It is used for nothing else except to power the stove.

This is the meaning of consecration. Being consecrated to God means being set apart

only for God. For God's purpose. For God's use.

As we examine, or reflect on, our consecration to God, I ask you:

Are you completely dedicated to Jesus and following him, and no one else? Is all you have dedicated to Jesus?

The author of Romans sheds some light on this.

**Romans 6:13 Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God.** Everything about you must be set apart for God.

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, he replied:

**“Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength.”**

That is love God with all your **emotion**, all your **will**, all your **intellect** and all your **physical strength** or energy.

**Every part** of you must be dedicated or consecrated to God. Being consecrated is a critical component in our relationship to God. God is not willing to share any part of us with any other allegiance. Our total allegiance must to God only.

It is not uncommon for people today to think of existing in two realms or spheres. People often think of the **spiritual** aspect of who they are. And believe that belongs to God. Then, there is the other part of us that we have for ourselves, that we can do with what we want.

For example - **Money** – people ask, which part of my paycheck belongs to God and what can I keep for myself.

Or **Time** – how much time must I dedicate to God and how much time can I spend doing what I want to do?

**Activities** – which of my activities are religious and which are secular?

It is this separation of ourselves in the ‘God part’ and the ‘other part of us’ that is at odds with the understanding of consecration. The author of Romans wants us to grasp that everything about us must be dedicated to God.

**6:19 Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.**

**Romans 12:1-3 “And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. <sup>2</sup> Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.**

So ask yourself the question: “Over the past year, did I tend to see some of what I have as God’s, and the rest of what I have as mine?” (Pause)

Think back over the year and allow Holy Spirit to bring these types of decisions to mind. Were you completely consecrated to Jesus and following Him?

The next things we examine really help to flesh out our consecration.

Let’s **Examine our Behavior**

This refers to the things we do and say or don’t do or don’t say. The things other people can observe and evaluate.

Paul’s advice is;

**I Cor 11:1**

**Imitate me as I imitate Christ.**

Paul is all about following the example, in his behavior, of Jesus. And we should be too.

1<sup>st</sup> reflect on your **Home life**.

Think back over your behavior at home this past year. How did you **speak** to others in your household? Were your words, words that always built up? Or were your words more words of griping and complaining. Were your words soft and gentle? Or were your words harsh and accusing or even derogatory?

How did you **act**? Did you do your **fair share** of the chores? Did you go the '**extra mile**' to help the people in your household? Did you mostly see yourself as a **servant** to the family or did you expect others to serve you? Reflect on how you behaved at home. (Pause)

Now, how about your behavior in your **Social Life**?

I think in years past, we tended to put on our best behavior when others were watching. And then at home, when we thought nobody was watching, we were not as careful about our behavior. But these days we can put bad behavior on display for everyone to see.

Paul writes in **Ephesians 5**

**Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes—these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God.**

**<sup>7</sup> Don't participate in the things these people (immoral, impure, greedy people) do. <sup>8</sup> For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! <sup>9</sup> For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true.**

**<sup>10</sup> Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them.**

**<sup>15</sup> So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise.**

The way we conduct ourselves in our social lives is very important. So I ask: How do others view the way you live out your faith – if they know you call yourself a follower of Jesus?

**(Pause)** It is so easy to be drawn into ungodly behavior when we are around other people – perhaps the language we use, the complaining we do, or other behaviors.

How did you do in your social life – on social media in 2021?

Next, let's **Examine your Influence**

Jesus talks about our influence in his Sermon on the Mount.

**Matthew 5:13-16** “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor?”

Jesus is not talking about our power or clout – that is how we are able to get others to do what we want them to do – not that. Jesus is talking about how the way we live in the presence of others makes **them** different.

**Salt** brings out the best in food. I remember some of the discussions over the years about some of the best athletes or team mates. One phrase that is often used of the best players is, “They make the people around them better.”

As a follower of Jesus, our influence is not about being great in the eyes of others. It is about bringing out the best in others, and influencing them in the ways of Jesus.

I heard this story recently.

There was an older woman working at **Walmart** stocking shelves. She had recently retired from working full-time, but she wanted to remain active and work a once-a-week shift for a few hours. During her shift she was working alongside two younger folks that were full-time employees. While the three of them were working together, the two younger folks were doing the bare minimum of work asked of them. However, the older woman was working her absolute hardest trying to get everything done. As their shift ended, the manager praised all three of them for doing such a good job, but the younger folks knew it was not because of them...

Next week arrived, and the three were scheduled to work the same shift again. When the older woman arrived she was stunned to see how much had already been done. She then found and asked the two younger folks, “Who did all of the work?” They responded by saying, “We did. Last week we saw how hard you worked and the two of us were even praised despite only doing the bare minimum. You truly inspired us.” That is the type of influence we are

talking about. In 2021 – did your life inspire others to be better?

Jesus also calls his followers the **Light** of the world.

**14 “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 16 Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”**

Light, brightens the day. Light makes it possible to see the good things around you. Our lives, our good deeds in particular, are to point others to see and praise God. That is how we have a positive influence in our neighborhoods and homes and work places.

What influence did you have in 2021? Was there more joy when you are around? Was there more hope when you are around? Did people feel encouraged because you were there? Did people choose to do better when you were around. Reflect on your year – in what way did you influence the people around you. **(Pause)**

Now let's **Examine Our Love**

We have used the phrase often this year, that we want to be those who **love others extravagantly** because God has loved us extravagantly. I spoke to us earlier in the year about having an **abundance mindset** like Jesus, rather than a scarcity mindset. The abundance mindset is a mindset that says, there will always be more than enough so I can share freely, I don't have to keep things to myself. How have you been doing with sharing what you have?

We talked about loving in ways like Jesus, that does not condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery. Or loving in ways like Jesus, that we would dine with those whom the community considers outsiders, traitors, unclean, sinners. How about love that covers over a multitude of sins? Love that forgives over and over again for the same offence. Love that is patient when we are in a hurry.

We must consider loving in tangible ways. John writes in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter:

**1 John 3:16-19 We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion - (that is, the person takes no tangible steps to relieve the suffering of the hurting person) how can God's love be in that person?**

**<sup>18</sup> Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. <sup>19</sup> Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God.**

When we love like that – our faith in God passes the test. It is genuine – to use Paul's phrase. How was your love in 2021? **(Pause)**

Last question on the test. Let's **Examine Our Attitude** But it is a 3 part question.

1<sup>st</sup> what was your attitude **Towards Christ?**

This may sound like a strange question. **What was your attitude towards Jesus?** As Jesus was preparing the disciples for the time when Jesus would leave them. He made several very significant promises to them. About what they could do in his name. About Holy Spirit. About his presence with them.

Those are amazing promises. But what I find most intriguing about Jesus words to his disciples are this succinct

**John 14:5 "If you love me, obey my commandments."**

Who among us wouldn't say that we love Jesus? But the validity of that claim is in our obedience. Two weeks ago Pastor Shaun told us that advent joy begins with obedience. Yes, God loves us unconditionally. Yes, God forgives all our sins. Yes, we have the promise of eternal life if we trust Jesus for salvation.

But the bottom line about our attitude towards Jesus is, "Do we love Him?"

Jesus very succinctly says: "If you love me, obey what I tell you."

This is why we keep saying we want to learn to know, love and **follow** Jesus. We cannot love Jesus and pay little attention to following him. That is just not one of the options.

So, what was your attitude towards Jesus in 2021.

What about your attitude:

### **Towards Others**

Paul writes in Galatians:

**Galatians 5:13-15 You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup> But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.**

Freedom, particularly **personal** freedom has been a rallying cry for many in the past year. Freedom is a hallmark of our American heritage. But notice what Paul says, "Use your freedom to **serve one another** in love." As you reflect on your attitude towards your personal freedom and your rights, were you mostly about serving others in love, or were you mostly about yourself?

Paul goes on to say, If we are always biting and devouring one another, watch out.

So I invite us to examine our attitudes towards others over the last year. How would Paul evaluate your attitude towards others? **(Pause)**

And finally, our attitudes **towards ourselves.**

There are probably two ends of the spectrum, and people tend to lean or gravitate towards one or the other.

For some, the year was a **struggle**. You recognize that many times during the year, you did not imitate Jesus well. In your actions? In your interactions with others. Or perhaps life just seemed to go south for you this past year. Health problems, financial problems. Long time relationships and trust were fractured and fell apart. The death of a loved one. And it has left

you feeling alone, depressed, with very little hope.

In fact, you may feel like God has either forgotten about you, or worse, you feel like God just doesn't love you anymore because you have not measured up. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For those who have been struggling with a sense of low self-worth in God's eyes. Let me take you to Psalm 139 to remind you of how precious you are to God.

### **Psalm 139**

**You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body  
and knit me together in my mother's womb.**

**14 Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!  
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.**

**17 How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.  
And when I wake up, you are still with me!**

What phenomenal statements about how God values each and every one of us. Let these words encourage you this morning.

At the other end of the spectrum in attitude towards ourselves is those who struggle with thinking too highly of ourselves. Your year went well. And when it does, it is not hard to fall for the lie that God must love you and approve of you, more than God approves of some others, because you have been such a 'good' person. When we begin to think that way, it quickly turns into pride and self-righteousness. The author of Romans helps us come back to earth.

### **Romans 12:3**

**Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.**

Where are you on this spectrum? Reflect on your attitude about yourself.

We began with an invitation to examine our faith, to see if our faith in Jesus is genuine. We conclude with the statement: Measure ourselves, Not by comparing ourselves to others,

But measuring ourselves by genuine faith in God who gives us that faith.

This exam takes some time. So I invite you to use this week to take a 2021 Final Exam.

## **PRAY**

## **BENEDICTION**

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may, with one voice, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.—1 Thessalonians 5:23