

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: *Colossians 1:24-29*

DATE: *January 1, 2023*

SERMON: *“Fully Mature”*

BILL: Good morning and Happy New Year to all in this room and all who are joining us from home this morning! If my calculations are correct, this is the fourth time that Ray, Shaun and myself have come together to bring the morning message, and at the risk of taking a joke and running it into the ground, I'm willing to take that risk because it does help us move in the direction we want to go this morning.

This running joke originated with Shaun, who – the first two times we did this team preaching – he took care of the introductions, and introduced the three of us as **“Two Old Guys and a Young Good- Looking Guy.”**

Ray: And so the first time Shaun did this we all humored him and we all laughed politely...and when he did it again the second time around we humored him and all laughed politely...but the third time around Bill and I said “That’s enough” and we explained to all of you why Shaun no longer had the privilege of doing the introductions. And you all humored *us* and laughed politely.

And yet, even as we joke, there is no denying that while Bill and I may not see ourselves as “two old guys”, we are in fact clearly *older* than Shaun.

Shaun: Clearly. 😊

But in all seriousness, there is this process where **we mature physically**. How many of you had some kind of growth chart in your home, when you were growing up? A place such as a closet or doorframe that you used to mark your height from year to year. I have two brothers, an older and a younger and I remember I used to love this growth chart because there was a time when I was clearly catching up to my older brother. And then I went through a phase where I wasn't nearly as excited because my younger brother started to catch up to me. Because height and physical growth is a status symbol when you're young like that. I told him, it wasn't very nice to catch up to me like that. He said maybe I should just grow faster and it wouldn't be a problem. So, I told him God doesn't look at your physical appearance he looks at your heart. God clearly thinks I'm the spiritually mature one in this family. Which probably tells you the true condition of my heart back then.

Ray: And we don't just mature physically, but **we mature emotionally** as well. I imagine that all of us have witnessed a child throwing what we would call a "temper tantrum." They may hold their breath, stomp their feet, throw themselves on the floor.

And while it's true that how well we mature emotionally varies from person to person, we don't see adults holding their breathe or throwing themselves on the floor, do we?

Bill: That's right, and so we mature physically, we mature emotionally, and for those who are serious about knowing, loving and following Jesus, **we mature spiritually** as well.

And unlike physical and emotional maturity which is to some degree inevitable, how well we mature spiritually seems to fall primarily on us and our willingness to look to God and depend on His Spirit to help bring this about.

And so what we want to do this morning is talk about how we can help each other in our pursuit of spiritual maturity. The first step we are taking is this: The staff and the Church Board have adopted what we are calling **a theme for 2023**, and that theme is **Fully Mature in Christ**. These words are found in Colossians 1:28 and reads like this:

Colossians 1:28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

So there's this website called BibleGateway, and they send me a verse once a day at whatever time I select, and so every morning at 6:50 my phone dings and there's my verse for that day. Back in September I was on vacation and every morning I'd be out on the beach sitting in my beach chair because I enjoy watching the sun come up over the ocean. I'm out there one morning, 6:50 rolls around, my phone dings, and there on my phone is my verse, and it's Colossians 1:28.

And I remember sitting there reading and rereading those words, thinking, this is what we want to be about here at Five Forks, proclaiming Jesus not only by the words we speak but also by the way we live...admonishing one another, that is counseling, cautioning, sometimes warning each other...teaching each other with wisdom...and why? So that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

Shaun: And so this morning's message will serve as the launching point for this theme that we're going to keep before us throughout the coming year. And this is something that all of us who have decided to follow Jesus will be involved in, because it doesn't matter if you have recently become a follower of Jesus, or have been following Him for some time now, or have followed Jesus for a very long time...we should all be looking to mature, that is, be committed to this

ongoing process of knowing Him better, loving Him more, following Him more closely.

Ray: Here's what we'd like to do...first, we're going to look at **What the Bible Says** because in the Bible we find examples of those who are struggling to mature and why...there are also examples of those who *are* maturing, and how.

And then after looking at what the Bible says, we'll turn our attention to **What Our Lives Say**. What growth should we expect to see in the lives of those who are relatively new disciples of Jesus...and what kind of progress should we expect see in our lives as we continue to mature?

Then finally, as pastors, we see one of our primary responsibilities is to provide **Opportunities** for everyone here at Five Forks – adults, youth and yes, children – to mature as we all come to know, love and follow Jesus. And so we'll be sharing with you some of the things we envision for the coming year.

Shaun: So let's begin by looking at...

1. WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

...about spiritual maturity. And to get there, let's first look at some examples where things weren't going as planned.

Back in the days of the early church, there was this large city called Corinth, and the apostle Paul spent some time there getting to know the people, talking to them about Jesus, and some of them became followers of Jesus and a church was established there in the city.

After a year and a half Paul moved on to start other churches in other cities, and then he started getting reports that things weren't go well back in Corinth, and so he wrote them a letter, *admonishing* them for forming these factions within the

church where their loyalty – their allegiance - seemed to be to specific men, rather than to Jesus. And so Paul wrote...

I Corinthians 3:1-2 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.

Paul is using this great imagery to help the Corinthians recognize their lack of maturity, their lack of spiritual growth. We all know that infants start out on milk, but as they mature, they gradually begin taking on solid food. And Paul says to the church, *“You’re still infants...though by this time you should be ready to take on solid food, you haven’t yet matured. You’re more intent on following men than you are on following Jesus.”*

Bill: Another occasion where the church seemed to be spinning their wheels is found in this letter called Hebrews, where we find this group of Christians in danger of falling away from Jesus. It says...

Hebrews 5:11-6:1a We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity,...

So here we see another group that is struggling to mature...but did you pick up on how the writer is pointing out that there are those who *are* mature...and

they're consistent in taking steps that will help them live in a way that is noble and right.

Ray: Fortunately, the examples that we find in the Bible are not all stories of individuals or churches who are struggling to mature. There are examples of those who clearly are making progress. For example, Paul also was instrumental in starting a church in the city of Philippi, and he wrote a letter to them, talking about how he wanted to leave his worldly accomplishments behind, and instead fully identify himself with Jesus. He wrote...

Philippians 3:13-15 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. (Paul is saying, "I'm not there yet.") But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.

Those who are maturing will realize that they are "not there yet." And just like in the Hebrew's example where it talked about "constant use" and "training"....here in Philippians we read about the importance of "straining" and "pressing on."

It becomes easy to see is that spiritual maturity is not inevitable, is it? If we're serious about being a follower of Jesus, it takes a strong commitment.

Shaun: And not just a commitment for us individually, but as part of the church body. For this to really work, we all have to be in this together.

Yet another church that Paul helped get off the ground was located in the city of Ephesus. And yes, he wrote them a letter as well, and in the midst of it Paul was emphasizing the importance of the church working together, using their individual gifts and abilities...

Ephesians 4:12b-14 ...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God *and become mature*, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Paul is talking about how easy it is for those who have not yet matured, to be easily deceived and led astray by false teaching. And this is why it's so important for the church to come together and have these conversations, because if someone has just recently become a follower of Jesus, it's possible that they could be easily led astray by false teaching. It's important for us to gather together and study and talk about the Bible as a group, to ensure that we're getting it right.

Bill: Okay, and so now that we've taken time to look at some of what the Bible has to say about spiritual maturity, let's take some time to look at..

2. WHAT OUR LIVES SAY

...about our spiritual progress.

You know, we use different terms to identify ourselves...some will say they've been **"Saved"**. *"I'm saved, he's saved, she's saved, have you been saved?"*...many will use that terminology. While others will identify themselves as a **"Christian."** *"I'm a Christian, he, she, they are Christians...are you a Christian?"* This is the terminology that others will use.

But what we mean – or should mean- by saying that we are "saved" or identifying as a "Christian" is that we have made a commitment to actually follow Jesus.

When Jesus would say “Come, follow me”, He wasn’t saying “Pray and prayer and then come back and check in with me on your deathbed” right?

As we read the Bible, the expectation is clear...we’re to follow Jesus, and as we do, we’re expected to mature. And so what might this look like? We’ve come across words like “infants” and “milk”...”solid food”...but what do these terms really mean for us today as we look to follow Jesus?

While there are no hard and fast rules for this, what we’d like to do is just try to describe some of what we might expect to see happening in the lives of **new disciples** who have just started following Jesus...those who might be referred to as “infants in Christ”. Not in a demeaning way, but just acknowledging that they’re just getting started.

Then we’ll look to describe what we might expect to see happening in the lives of those who have been at it, and are actually making progress and maturing spiritually as time goes by. So Ray, why don’t you get us started?

Ray: Sure...so if you’ve just recently made a decision to follow Jesus, you can and should begin to experience God’s presence in a very personal way. That is, **you begin to recognize that God is actively engaged in your life** in ways you may have missed before.

You may have read the Bible before becoming a follower of Jesus, but now you find yourself reading it in a far more personal way...you look to see what a passage might say about who God is and what that means in *your* life.

It’s amazing the many different ways that we begin to experience God if we take the time to look for Him. We see Him in the world around us, through nature, that is, His creation...we experience Him through songs that we hear, and

conversations that we have, because God often speaks to us through other people.

Because your eyes and your ears and your heart are open in ways they never were before, you now recognize God stepping into your life in ways you never did before.

Shaun: As you begin following Jesus, another thing that you'll likely come to experience is **a desire to gather with other disciples of Jesus and have conversations** * like we talked about earlier. We see this happening down in the café just about every Sunday when we hold what we call the Sermon Lab. Disciples who are at all different places on their journey, doing what we find written in our 2023 Theme Verse, that is, *admonishing and teaching one another with all wisdom*. Gathering together and hearing what others have to say, hearing what they have learned is something we recognize as very helpful to us.

* **(On the screen):** He is the one we proclaim, **admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom**, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ([Colossians 1:28](#))

Ray: If you are a new disciple, you will find yourself becoming more thoughtful about how **words like “forgiveness”, “patience” and “an uncluttered lifestyle” are not just virtues to admire, but virtues we are expected to put into practice.**

You see that these are not just ideals that are out of reach, but your growing dependence on Jesus helps you to see that these things *can be done*...and often with positive results. You realize that you are being transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

Bill: One more example – and this list could go on an on - of what your life will show once you begin to follow Jesus: **The Bible will slowly, gradually begin to come together for you.** We all understand how, at first, the Bible can be so

daunting...but among other things, many new disciples are surprised to discover that the Bible is not written in chronological order, rather, there are sections, some dealing with history, some with poetry, some with letters written to specific churches dealing with specific issues.

As you become more and more familiar with how the Bible is laid out, you'll see how it's all woven together even though it was written over vast periods of time with God working through many different authors. Most importantly, you will see how what is written ultimately leads us to Jesus. The only way this understanding comes is through that "constant use" that we talked about earlier.

If you have just started following Jesus, just be consistent in your reading and studying and gathering with others in order to discuss the Bible, and just let it come to you. Because it will.

Shaun: Well, like Bill said, these are just a few examples...and so if you're recently become a follower of Jesus, what does *your* life say? Hopefully you can relate to a lot of what we've just talked about and are encouraged by what is taking place in your life at this time.

So let's take a few moments now and talk about what our lives should say if we have moved beyond infancy, and are **growing disciples**, taking on more solid food. Go ahead and get us started, Bill.

Bill: One thing I hope our lives would reveal would be **a greater level of intimacy with Jesus.** The conversations we have with Jesus they become very open and very honest, and what's really great, is that we come to discover that we are better able to recognize and discern His voice...and not really a voice, but His leading.

This was a struggle for me at first, because I did all the talking or I would allow my mind to wander...but over time I've learned to talk and then just be quiet and open up my heart and listen...and I'm grateful for how Jesus has helped me and guided me in so many different ways. And this greater level of intimacy is something that will unfold in the lives of all those who are committed to following Jesus.

Ray: What else might our lives show if we have moved on to the more “solid food” that we read about earlier in that letter to the Hebrew Christians? Remember what it said?

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

What is being talked about here are mature believers dedicating themselves to righteousness...talking about and continually learning what it looks like to live in a way that is noble and right.

If we have matured to this point, our lives will reveal **a willingness to consistently self-evaluate our behavior, our words, our thought-life, our attitude towards others...followed by a willingness to make changes** in order to become more and more like Jesus.

Shaun: So here are some challenging questions for those of you who have been following Jesus for some time now: What does this self-evaluation look like in your life? *When* do you make time to do it...*how* do you do it...*how often* do you do it?

How have you come to distinguish good from evil, that is, how did God help you to recognize that which is helpful to yourself and to others? And when God

revealed to you things in your life that were *not* helpful to you and to others, how did you go about making those difficult but necessary changes?

Bill: Those *are* challenging questions Shaun, for all of us. But again, this is all a part of admonishing and teaching each other, hopefully with wisdom, in order for all of us to experience what it is to mature spiritually.

So one other example of what our lives will show if we have moved on to more solid food. We will find that **our need for the approval of others will decrease, while our desire to simply be faithful to God will increase.**

Back in November I was driving in to the church listening to a program on the radio called *Haven Today*, and they were taking a week to look at the life of John Bunyan, who some of you know lived back in the 1600's and is best known for writing the classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was fascinating to hear some of his life's story as I headed in to the church one day...it came to a part where he spoke of how his neighbors marveled to see the changes that were taking place in his life...they would praise him both to his face and when speaking about him to others.

And Bunyan said, *"Oh when I understood that these were their words and opinions of me it pleased me mightily, for though as yet I was nothing but a poor hypocrite, I still loved to be spoken of as one who was truly godly. I was proud of my godliness...and I did all I did...either to be seen or well-spoken of by others."*

We can relate to that, can't we? We feel good and there's nothing wrong with feeling good when others speak well of us...but we need to keep a check on our motivation and understand what Jesus was getting at when he said...

Matthew 6:1 “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Before becoming followers of Jesus, a lot of what drives us, what motivates us is the approval of others. We want people to notice us, we want people to like us. The host of *Haven Today* pointed out how many Christians in our culture appear driven to get “likes” on social media.

Bunyan became aware of this need in his own life, realizing how he was living for the approval of others...and this recognition led him to this point where he became less concerned about what others saw in him and thought of him, and more concerned about simply living in a way that was faithful to God. Again, affirmation is something we all need...we want to be liked...but it can't be what we live for. It can lead us into trouble. Living for the approval of Jesus rather than the approval of others is one thing we expect to see in the lives of those who are maturing spiritually.

Ray: Now remember Bill pointed out earlier that *physical* maturity and *emotional* maturity are inevitable to some degree, but when it comes to spiritual maturity, he said it falls primarily on us. And while that's true, as pastors we believe that it is our responsibility to provide...

3. OPPORTUNITIES

...for everyone here at Five Forks Church to experience spiritual growth.

And this isn't just for those of us who are adults...Pastor Chris oversees our Children's Ministry and Pastor Brady oversees our Student Ministry, and both of them are fully engaged with the three of us as together we talk about how

knowing, loving and following Jesus is something that runs throughout this entire church.

It's going to involve a spiritual maturation process, and we look to begin this process by helping to lay a foundation in the lives of the children who come through these doors, and build upon this as they enter their teen years...and this process continues all the way through adulthood **so that** * we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

* **(On the screen):** He is the one we proclaim, **admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom**, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ([Colossians 1:28](#))

Shaun: So let's talk about specifics. A little over a year ago the pastors and Church Board entered into some lengthy discussions on the topic of Discipleship, that is, what can we do to provide opportunities that will help us to experience spiritual growth?

And one thing we came to recognize was **the importance of strong, healthy relationships** within our church family. Think about this: In order to have the kinds of conversations that are so helpful for our spiritual growth, what is needed? We need to be honest, we need to be transparent, we need to be vulnerable, we need to be able to receive correction...we need to be able to trust one another.

And in order to trust one another, we have to get to know one another, and so we encourage you, our church family, to take advantage of the opportunities that can help relationships begin, grow, and ultimately flourish.

Ray: And so in 2022 there was a train excursion and a 5k run and a minor league baseball game...there were paint nights and swim parties and Christmas Dinners and so much more.

We trust that as we shared with each other about our jobs, families, and interests...there were also conversations that revolved around following Jesus. Maybe area's where we are struggling...perhaps areas where we have grown.

These may be harder because of the vulnerability that is required, but as followers of Jesus, we can't go at this alone. We need each other.

Look at our **theme verse***. He is the one **WE** proclaim, admonishing and teaching **EVERYONE** with all wisdom, so that **WE** may present **EVERYONE** fully mature in Christ.

* **(On the screen):** He is the one **we** proclaim, admonishing and teaching **everyone** with all wisdom, so that **we** may present **everyone** fully mature in Christ. ([Colossians 1:28](#))

It's clear that if we're going to mature, it will go a whole lot better if we're in this together. We're going to need to be honest with each other and trust each other. And so we'll continue to let you know of opportunities that we have so that you can join us as we look to follow Jesus together.

Bill: But when it comes to opportunities, there's also a second path, more structured, that we believe is necessary. And so there are Ladies Bible Studies and Men's Bible Studies...there are discipleship classes and weekly sermons and sermon labs...and with all of these we look to admonish and teach one another with wisdom. And let's just take a moment so we can express our appreciation to all of the lay leaders in this church who use their gifts to plan, organize, teach, and just be used by Jesus in many ways to help our church family come to maturity.

And then, as many of you know, in 2022 we began a new venture that revolved around **The BibleProject**. And many of you have participated by watching what we call the "Video of the Week"...and for those of you who have watched all 52

episodes in 2022, don't forget to turn in your handout so we can send to you your certificate of completion. I received the first one this past Wednesday night.

Ray: We're looking to build upon this in 2023, as we not only continue with a "video of the week", but this year we're going to open up the entire BibleProject Library...over 170 episodes in all, and we're dividing them up into **37 sections**, and we are targeting 3 specific groups.

Some of these 37 sections are geared to **New Disciples**, while there are other sections that are geared to **Growing Disciples who are ready for more solid food**...and there is a third section that is called BibleProject Classroom that is for those **Disciples who are ready to go deeper**.

Bill: What we're asking you to do is determine where to begin...maybe with the basics where you are introduced to the Bible...or maybe you're ready for a little more meat...our website will make it easy for you to navigate, and then simply **select any of the 37 sections** and watch all of the videos in that section at your own pace. There are **an average of 4 or 5 videos per section**, and the video's probably average around 5 or 6 minutes each.

Once you've watched all the videos in a section, you'll send a notification of completion to the church office – it will be right there for you, just click – and then the pastors will be notified and more importantly, we'll be greatly encouraged by the steps you are taking in order to mature.

Some of you may be asking, "Why so much emphasis" on these BibleProject videos over this past year? For one, they are very well done...we've received lots of positive comments from those who have participated in 2022...the visual aspect is helpful to many of us as the images help us understand key points...but the real substance is found in the teaching, which is very much aligned with our emphasis on knowing, loving and following Jesus.

Having said that, we understand that these BibleProject videos are not for everyone, because we don't all learn the same way.

Shaun: That's right, and so starting next week we'll begin a new sermon series geared in that direction. Our series is gonna be called "Pathways" (**Series Graphic**). The premise behind the series is that we, you and me, are all different. From our likes/dislikes to our family make up, our past experiences... our personalities, our temperaments and even our learning styles. What this means is that each of us will grow and mature on our spiritual journey in different ways. In this series, we're gonna take time to explore 9 different pathways for connecting with God. This will give each of us an opportunity to identify the discipleship path that we believe will help us continue to mature.

Ray: One final thing as we look to provide opportunities for spiritual growth. In Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, he lists nine characteristics that are known as the "Fruit of the Spirit." These nine characteristics: **Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control** should be increasingly evident in the lives of those who are maturing as followers of Jesus.

And so while Shaun does a majority of the preaching here at Five Forks, there will be times where we will look to give Shaun a break, and so Bill and I will be taking nine Sundays here in 2023 and focusing on one characteristic each week. And by doing so, will help us recognize what our lives can *and will* look like if we invite Jesus to teach us, with His Spirit working in us and through us.

Bill: We hope that you have taken advantage of some of the opportunities that were in place in 2022, and that you can look at your life and it reveals evidence of spiritual growth. And as your pastors, it is our hope that you will take

advantage of the opportunities – and more to come – that lie before us as we begin this new year.

We are thankful for all of you, we are thankful to be a part of a church community that is not perfect, but follows the One who is.

Would you pray with us?