

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *Loving God through Confrontation*

**SERIES:** *Pathways*

**SCRIPTURES:** *Genesis 43; Exodus 1; 23*

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*\*Credit to Bible Gateway; Gary Thomas,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church.

We are in the fifth week of our sermon series on Pathways (**SERMON SERIES GRAPHIC**). Discovering and exploring 9 different pathways for connecting with God. The premise of the series, is that we are all different and so the way in which we connect with God will be different. While all 9 pathways are important for us to consider...the level at which we practice them will look different for all of us.

And I do just want to say thank you for your participation in this series. We, as a staff, have just received so much positive feedback. When we first started we weren't sure how the flyers were gonna work. What kind of participation there might. But just been so grateful for the way you are engaging this series.

This morning is pathway 5, which means that we are stepping into the second half of our series. And I just want to encourage you to **“finish strong”**. I remember when I was at Messiah College playing soccer, this was one of the core values of the team. Coach always used to say, “Everybody starts strong. When practice starts, when the season starts, when a New Year starts. Everybody starts strong. The difference between good players and great players is that great players finish strong. When everybody else is getting tired and giving up and losing interest...great players re-focus.”

I don't know how you started this series. But I want to encourage you today to re-focus. Re-Engage. Re-commit. Make sure you pick up the flyer when you walk out. Be intentional. Be someone in the depth of your character who chooses to finish strong. This is in fact a Biblical principle related to discipleship.

Paul says, (Philippians 3:14) - **I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

And if you missed any of the previous flyers, we have extra copies from every week, so far, out at the connect station or you can find them on the church website.

So today, the fifth pathway for connecting your life to God's life. Today we are going to explore

### **I. The Activist Pathway to maturity.**

Simply put **the activist pathway means connecting to God through confrontation.**

And I want to say right off the bat there is some explanation needed related to this pathway. I saw some eyes light up in the room, when I said we are going to talk about connecting with God through confrontation.

Yelling at the official or the opposing teams parents last night at your kids basketball game...or giving your co-worker a little piece of your mind...or making obscene gestures at the person who cut you off in traffic...or losing your temper with your family....that's not what we're talking about, when we say "loving God through confrontation".

Rather the idea here is that you and I, we human beings, have a **God-given sense of justice.**

That sometimes we look around our world and recognize that's not fair. That's not right. Someone should step in and make things right. That's the sense of justice inside of you!

*I read a story a while back, about a gentleman David Hagler, he was the Program director for LA Sports & Law Chapter, and he also works as an umpire. And he says, that one day he was driving too fast in the snow in Bolder, Colorado and a policeman pulled him over and gave him a speeding ticket.*

*And he says, I tried to talk him out of it, telling him "how worried I was about insurance and how I'm typically a good and careful driver."*

*And the officer said I should go to court and try to get the fine reduced or thrown out.*

*The first game of the next baseball season I'm umpiring behind home plate and the first batter up is this same policeman. I recognize him. He recognizes me.*

*He asks me how the thing went with the ticket.*

*I tell him, you better swing at everything!*

(John Ortberg)

Time to settle the score. Deep within the human soul we all have this notion of justice. And we all know when that notion has been violated.

One nation attacks another nation and civilians are called "collateral damage." People are killed, children orphaned. And we know that's wrong.

Humans oppress other human beings based on status or skin color or gender or education level and we know it's wrong.

Rich, wealthy men take advantage of young girls and seemingly get away with it as a nations and governments turn their heads and look the other way. I think I bring this up every year around this time. I learned about this on our youth mission trip to New York City about 10 years, but the sex trafficking that occurs while Superbowl football game is being played is sickening. We know it's wrong.

Every day young boys and girls are exploited in underground mines, so that the rich and powerful can enjoy life's pleasures. We know it's wrong.

For those who are activists you're hearts are gripped, in a way far deeper than others, by the issues of justice in our world...Abuse, poverty, sex-trafficking, racism, environmental justice...and they connect best to God when they confront these evils in our world. That's what we mean, when we say "connecting with God through confrontation."

So let's take a look at one example of the...

### **A. The Activist Pathway in Scripture**

And I'm going to do this by looking at one of the major issues of justice that we find in Scripture.

#### **The issue of racism.**

For as long as humans have existed we have tended to create systems of hierarchy and prejudice based on skin color...where certain groups are more powerful than other groups and use that power to oppress, marginalize and enslave other human beings.

The book of Exodus, really the central text of the Old Testament is a story built around systemic oppression by the Egyptians who saw themselves as superior to the Hebrews whom they enslaved. That's racism.

You get a sense of this superiority complex at the end of the book of Genesis. Remember Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, but works his way up to Pharaoh's right-hand man. And eventually his brothers, who sold him into slavery, come looking for food in Egypt. Listen to the undertones of this passage...

**Genesis 43:32 - <sup>32</sup> They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians.**

One of the key punchlines in the book of Exodus is found Exodus 1.

**Exodus 1:8-9 - <sup>8</sup> Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. <sup>9</sup> "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup> Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."**

You sense the undertones of racism by the Egyptians. Such an attitude is in direct conflict with the central teachings of Jesus and his community of people.

The Hebrews were led out of this culture of Egyptian racism and called to be a distinct community as an example to the world. **"Holy and set apart"** is the phrase you will see that God asked of his people.

And so all throughout the Jewish law, God commands his people to be different from their Egyptian oppressors...Be distinct by treating "the alien and the foreigner" with

neighborly love rather than oppression. God is saying my people must tear down, confront the evil of racism.

**Exodus 23:9 - <sup>9</sup>“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.**

**Leviticus 19:34 - <sup>34</sup> The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.**

Jesus continued this same theme with his followers in the New Testament as they begin wondering, who really is my neighbor. One of his central teachings is a story about neighborly love of foreigners...we call it, the story of **the Good Samaritan**. Jesus is breaking down racial barriers and animosity.

Sadly, however, this superiority complex has continued to be an issue for the world and including for followers of Jesus. And look, I know that this is a complicated issue and we don't have time to go into all of the details in a Sunday morning sermon. And we have come a long way on the issue of racism. But issues of race, as much as we like to think are just a thing of the past, continue to be a problem in our world.

Part of the reason this resonates so much with me and that I feel convicted so strongly is because of my role as a teacher and how teaching in the church was abused in previous generations on this very topic.

Here's how Christian organization describes it...

*Race, as a formal, legal, sociopolitical category, was invented to justify the genocide of indigenous peoples and the theft of their land, and the enslavement of African people, as well as a myriad of other oppressions, by suggesting a human hierarchy*

*where “white” people reside at the top, Black people are fixed at the bottom, and everyone else is jockeying for position in between. The Christian Church often played an active part in providing theological support for the lie of human hierarchy.*

I'll just give you one example from a sermon in 1860's, one pastor said that because of slavery...

**“At this very moment there are from three to four million Africans,—learning the very best lessons for a semi-barbarous people—lessons of self-control, of obedience, of perseverance...learning, above all, where their weakness lies, and how they may acquire strength for the battle of life. These considerations satisfy me with their condition, and assure me that it is the best relation they can, for the present, be made to occupy.”**

This kind of stuff makes you almost sick to your stomach. And like I said, we've come a long from that mentality but I was reading more modern-day statistics about this. It is still true that black males are 5.8x more likely to be incarcerated than white males. Black home buyers are denied mortgages roughly twice as often as white home buyers. And the difference in median household income between black households to white households is significant. 70,000 – 41,000. Again, I understand the statistics don't tell the whole story and there is a complicated conversation that goes along with those numbers. We don't want to go one extreme or the other.

But in the face of racism, the activist pathway holds us accountable. The activist pathways asks, “What is my responsibility as someone who follows Jesus?”

Ok, let me mention 3 lessons that I think we learn through the activist pathway...

## **B. What we learn through the activist pathway.**

### **1. The activist pathway acknowledges sin/evil.**

And I think this is really important to say. We are living in a world that doesn't really like to talk about or acknowledge there is actually a thing called sin or evil or right and wrong. So much in our world is about, letting everyone decide for ourselves what is right and wrong.

If something feels good to you, go ahead and do it as long as you don't bother me.

The activist pathway teaches us that there is a standard of right and wrong. It's God's standard.

Evil is evil...not because it is simply a cultural or social construct, but because there is a God and there are things He determines to be good and true and right and evil is opposed to God's goodness.

In fact, you don't even have to be a Christian to kind of sense that evil is a real thing.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, **“Whatever else men have believed, they have all believed that there is something the matter with mankind.”**

Most of the great philosophers you can think of have acknowledged the reality of evil. Freud and Plato, Karl Marx and Ralph Nader, Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi and Jesus all agree with this – something is wrong with us and cries out to be put right. That is the heart behind the activist pathway.

The Bible says it like this...

**[1 John 1:8](#) - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.**



The activist pathway helps us to call sin, sin. The activist pathway looks around at our world and says, this is wrong, to treat people this way is not right.

Racism is wrong. Racism is a sin. Not just because our culture has determined we don't like it anymore, but because God has a standard and racism breaks his standard.

Abuse is wrong. It is never ok. Not just because we've said we don't like. But because it breaks God's standard for loving human relationships.

Poverty is wrong.

Sexual exploitation is wrong.

The activist pathway teaches us to take sin/evil seriously.

And then second, because there is a thing called evil, the activist pathway encourages us to do something about it.

## **2. The Activist Pathway teaches us to confront evil**

The activist pathway, teaches us to respond to evil. Doing nothing, complacency, in the face of evil is not a valid response.

There is a famous quote that you've likely heard before in this regard that says, **"The only thing necessary for evil to triumph in the world is that good men do nothing."**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who lived in Germany during Hitler's reign, was very critical of the churches response or we might say lack of response to the racism of Nazi Germany. And he once remarked that...

**"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." (Bonhoeffer)**

This is why you will find that social activism has a long history in Christianity. This is why the Christian church, for all of its failures has often led the way in societal reform...today fighting the evils of abortion, racism, AIDS, poverty, sexual slavery, and child pornography, among others. (Thomas 132).

While some Christians were using Scripture to argue for the institution of slavery, it must not be overlooked that it was also Christians who first began to work for the abolition of slavery, because it violates God's created order that every human is valuable.

And then the third element of the activist pathway...

### **3. There is an appropriate response to evil.**

One of the things that I think is crucial in our approach to sin and evil is that the "way in which" we confront evil matters. When it comes to confronting evil, we cannot say...anything goes. And in some ways, this is where the rubber meets the road for followers of Jesus.

There's an old saying, that again, perhaps you've heard...**"the end justifies the means"**... the idea behind those words is that *"you can do whatever you need to, in order to bring about the result you think is best."*

For example, if winning is the ultimate good...then do whatever you need to do in order to win...if it means cheating, do it...because the end (winning) is the ultimate purpose...you do whatever it takes to win.

And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that sadly this has at times been the mode of operation of the church in our world. Winning, gaining power, defeating evil at all costs...belligerence, hatred, violence and even injustice in the name of "fighting for justice." And for those things, the church, who claims to live according to the

“way of Jesus” should repent when we get it wrong. For using Scripture to justify slavery we must repent.

Jesus said, **I am the way, the truth and the life.** And so the way we live and the way in which we deal with evil and sin matters. And Jesus says that the ultimate purpose in life is **loving God and loving others. (Mark 12:30-31)** Notice, even “defeating evil” is not your primary purpose in life. Did you know that? Your primary purpose is to love God and love others.

In fact, in the grand scheme of the universe...we don't need to worry about evil winning, because Scripture teaches that God will deal with evil and sin ultimately one day, Himself. That's a relief to us. It means we don't need to force the outcome in our favor. Confront, resist absolutely. But we don't need to defeat evil any way possible ourselves, because God is going to take care of that.

And so, for us/humans, the way in which we deal with evil and sin must follow the way of Jesus and his ultimate purpose of loving God and loving others. In fact one of our Brethren In Christ Core Value statements says...

**“We value all human life and promote forgiveness, understanding, reconciliation, and nonviolent resolution of conflict.”**

Perhaps the best example of this, is Jesus own teaching in his famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said,

**<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. <sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.**

One of my favorite authors, Shane Claiborne, calls Jesus teaching here “**Holy mischief**”.

You see, in the ancient world. Men often wore two layers of clothing. An outer layer and an inner layer. Jesus says, if someone does evil to you and takes your outer garment. That is wrong, it is unjust. But he doesn't say steal it back. Beat them over the head to get it back at all costs. But he also doesn't say, do nothing...rather he says...confront evil, humiliate evil by exposing it's degradation of humanity. Take off your other garment so that you now stand naked in front of your enemy. Expose evil for what it is. Don't respond to evil with evil, but also don't do nothing. Does that make sense?

The testimony of Scripture is not one of “any means possible” in order to defeat evil, but is rather “**a creative resistance against the forces of evil that disarm the forces of evil.**”

**“The Rule of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth cannot sustain itself forever; ultimately both parties end up blind and toothless.”** Ghandi

We must confront evil...but we can't fight evil with evil...that only leads to more evil.

There is a legendary story in the Anabaptist tradition about this man, Dirk Willems (**PIC**). I can't remember if we've talked about this story before. But it's such a powerful story it bears repeating. Dirk lived in the 1500's during the protestant reformation. Not going into all of the details on this, but at this time in history the church only practiced infant baptism. Dirk, stood against the larger church, and was re-baptized as an adult...hence the term anabaptist, literally meaning to rebaptize. We the BIC fall into that anabaptist tradition. Anyway, for his beliefs he was condemned and arrested by the church and sentenced to burn at the stake, by other Christians. Legend has it, Dirk escaped captivity, using a rope made out of knotted rags. As he fled, one of his captors noticed him escaping and gave chase. They ran

out over a frozen lake. As they ran across, Dirk's captor fell through the ice beginning to drown. Dirk, could not let his enemy die, because of Jesus teachings... So, he turned back, rescued his captor who arrested him...and Willems was burned at the stake.

And it begs the question: In what ways, can we creatively resist the injustice/evil we find our own world?

Alright let me just mention...

### **C. One caution for the activist**

The caution for the activist is...**Violence**

Activists can have a tendency to adopt a "Me and God against evil" mindset.

In their enthusiasm set wrongs aright, they can hurt/bulldoze those who get in the way of their cause for justice. Activists can end up being argumentative and belligerent in the name of fighting for a just cause. They can end hurting others, in the name of "doing justice and setting things right." Sometimes even, the hatred for evil turns into a hatred towards other people!

We even find examples of this in Scripture.

Moses, when he saw an Egyptian beating his fellow Hebrew. He knew this wasn't right...what did he do...He killed the Egyptian.

Peter, when Jesus was arrested, lops off of a soldiers ear. Jesus said, put sword away Peter. There is a way we do things and there is a way we don't.

This is why it is so crucial they we stay engaged with the teachings of Jesus in scripture. The saying is what would Jesus do. Not what would Moses do or what would Peter do. We want to do justice, but we want to bring it about justly.

Ok, so this week the invitation is

#### **D. An invitation to confrontation.**

Of course, as with the other pathways, the degree to which we participate in the activist pathway will differ. There are some people, for whom this may be their primary pathway. People who connect best to God through acts of justice on behalf the weak, the voiceless, the powerless in our society. And if that's you, or if you through this series discover that that is you...then you need to begin taking some steps to get involved some kind of justice project. But even if this is not your primary pathway, keep in mind, we've said that there is element in each of the pathways that is important for all of us to understand and appreciate in our lives. Make sense?

This is take-home flyer #5. On the front side of the flyer is the activist self-evaluation that I have adapted from Gary Thomas's chapter in the book. Fill that out and compare to your other pathways. Begin sorting through and evaluating which pathways seem to be primary for you.

The second side of the flyer is my suggestion for how you can practice the activist pathway this week. Start by reading some of those passages of Scripture related to issues of justice and social action in Scripture. Then consider how you can take action on one of these issues. And I will say, one of the first steps is learning more about some of these issues.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that we must be willing to have uncomfortable conversations with people who do not look like us, building relationships across racial and religious lines. "I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they don't communicate with each other, and they don't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other."

So learn more about an issue and that will be the first step in helping you know how to begin responding...taking action...confronting that issue.

And then as always take some time to talk to God about your experience of activism.