

# **FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH**

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*SERMON: "Gaining Traction"*

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## **Introduction**

Good morning. It is good to be with you on this the last day of the year. Those of you joining us on line, it is good to have you with us as well.

When I was about six or seven years old growing up in Zambia, Africa, my dad began teaching me how to **ride a motorcycle**. He would put me in front of him, almost sitting on the fuel tank so I could reach the handle bars. And he would ride in the back. So I would steer and then we would ride around the loop in our Orchard.

After he was comfortable that I was getting the hang of it, he would get us started, then slide off the back and I would continue riding, by myself, until my turn was over. And then my dad would jump back on the seat so I could stop. But he would hold the bike upright since my feet didn't reach the ground. In fact, my feet didn't even reach the foot pedals when I started.

As we got older he would teach us more and more about the bike – how to corner safely, how to accelerate carefully, how to change gears and so on. He even taught us about changing the oil and other mechanical stuff. By the time I reached 13 I was a pretty confident and safe rider. The goal was that by the time each of us children turned 16, my dad would take us into town to take our motorcycle drivers test. We all passed on the first try. My mother was the only member of our family without a motorcycle license.

But one thing my dad never taught me about riding motorcycles was how to drag race. So, well before I was old enough to get a license, I decided it was time to learn how to drag race on my dad's motorcycle.

At the school near where we lived, there was about a quarter-mile of straight gravel

road. It was well out of earshot of my dad's office. My friends had a bike too. So we would drag race on that gravel straightaway. It was a lot of fun.

I noticed that drag racing on the gravel had one big problem. How to get good traction with the rear tire. When you would crank the accelerator and pop the clutch, the back tire would just spin for a while and you didn't get very far. So, I had the idea that if I would put some added weight on the back seat I would gain more traction and I could get up to speed much faster. The weight I decided to use was one of my friends.

So, with my friend on the back I gave it the gas and popped the clutch. The tire gripped the road just as I'd hoped. Unfortunately, the metal rim went faster than the rubber tire and tube, and it ripped the valve right off the inner tube. So, there I sat on my dad's bike with a very flat back tire.

I had learned how to gain traction for drag race, but I also had to go explain to my father why the tire was flat. But not just flat. I had to explain how the valve stem was ripped clear off the tube. Life lessons we learn.

Today we want to talk about **Gaining Traction**

Gaining traction in our lives of following Jesus. That is, we want to talk about making progress in the right direction in our spiritual lives. In other words, "Are we getting better at getting to know and love and follow Jesus?"

This morning we will start with a **Quick Review** of the year to help us think about this. It will include some self-evaluation. Then we'll look at **An Example From Hebrews**. And then we will finish up talking briefly about how we keep **Going Forward** into the New Year.

## **I. A Quick Review**

I always liked it when the teacher gave us a review in class before a test so that we knew what was going to be on the test. I guess that's part of what we are doing this morning.

Because, for the whole year we have had a focus here at Five Forks. What is it?

(Only put up the graphic after someone has answered correctly. Becoming **Fully Mature in Christ.**) It is from:

**Colossians 1:28** would you read it with me

**Jesus is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.**

In the very first sermon of the year we pointed out that maturing spiritually will mean we **find greater intimacy with Jesus**, we will do **continual self-evaluation**, and we will develop **deeper and more authentic relationships with each other.**

Pastor Shaun began the year talking to us about different **Pathways** (graphic with nine pathways listed) that people find most helpful to meet with God. And by practicing those pathways, we notice our intimacy with Jesus growing, or increasing. There was a lot of interest in that series. Do you remember which pathway resonated the most with you as you worked at developing greater intimacy with Jesus?

Now let me ask you, a year later how are you doing? Have you been gaining traction in the times and ways that you meet with God? Would you say, intimacy with Jesus has been increasing in your life?

I was reminded just a few weeks ago, while I was out hunting, how for me, being outdoors in nature is a significant pathway for me to meet with God. So how are you doing? Do you still remember which pathway is most helpful for you?

Also in that first sermon of the year, we mentioned the **Bible project**. It is a churchwide effort that we are making to increase our knowledge of the Scriptures. Do you know more about our bible today, than you did last year? Do you find yourself hungrier for God's word?

But we don't want to just know the words or content of the Bible. We want to gain an understanding of what we are to learn about God, about ourselves, about how we are to relate to each other as we learn from the Scriptures, and then put it into practice.

Have you found yourself being more thoughtful as you read your Bible? Are you learning to always take the Bible seriously even though there are parts that we don't take literally? Have you found yourself even wrestling with difficult passages you may have steered away from before? The ones that are hard to put into practice or the ones that are difficult to understand. But now you stick with them, because you have a desire to know more and more about God and his Word. How are you doing in that area? Are you gaining traction in your study of God's Word?

And then sprinkled throughout the year we talked about nine **fruits of the spirit**. Paul lists them in:

**Galatians 5:22-23** Let's read these together as well.

**The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**

With each of these we talked about **Some Fruit, More Fruit and Much fruit**. This is really about putting into practice, the things we learn.

So how are you doing at **loving** others? If you love your friends that's good. It's not too hard - usually. But it is only some love. However, if you are learning to love your enemies, and bless those who curse you, to use Jesus' words from his Sermon on the Mount, that is really hard isn't it. We called that, Much Love. And if you are learning to do that, you are making tracks in the right direction. You are maturing.

Or how about in the area of being **patient** with others? We said it is "**The long time of waiting on someone, in which you don't give in to your anger or frustration.**" We talked about this back in April. Perhaps, at that time you thought of a difficult situation you were in, or a difficult person you had to deal with often, and you determined to become more patient.

Are you still living with that difficult situation or dealing with that person, but now you don't give in to your anger as quickly? Are you still trusting God will make it right, or help you through it? Or have you given up in anger and frustration? Some patience, more patience, much patience.

Or how about this one? Have you found yourself more apt to **“soften the harshness”** in another person’s life. This is how we described the fruit of ‘Goodness.’ We said we can do this by finding ways to do good, or to help them? The motivation for this often comes if we begin each day recognizing and thinking about God’s unending goodness to us?

We don’t have time to review the whole year but I hope you get the point. If you were to evaluate your life now, or better yet, have someone close to you, give you a grade on how you are doing at imitating Jesus, with the Fruit of the Spirit in your life, would it be a higher grade today than it was at the beginning of the year? Have you and I been maturing as followers of Jesus? Have we been gaining traction? Are we becoming fully mature in Christ?

I don’t want to put us on a guilt trip. However, this issue, about maturing in Christ, or gaining traction, as I have called it, seems to be a significant issue for us to consider.

This is not a new discussion. It’s a discussion, one biblical writer was having with Jesus followers, probably less than one generation after Jesus had left the earth and returned to his Heavenly Father. The discussion is found in the book of Hebrews and you can open up to the book of Hebrews in your Bible. It’s near the end of the New Testament.

## **II. An Example from Hebrews**

Hebrews is a letter most likely written to some Jewish Jesus followers. That is, people of Jewish ancestry and who are very familiar with Jewish history. They knew the stories of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt and then crossing the wilderness to finally make it to the promised land. They knew the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Samson and others.

They had also come to believe that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, was not just another teacher or prophet. This Jesus was none other than the long-awaited Messiah, promised by the prophets. He was the one who would save them from their sins. The one who had opened the way for them to have direct access to Yahweh the Creator and Lord of the universe. These people had apparently been Jesus followers for quite a long time but there was a problem.

**The Problem** – was, some of them were **Drifting Away**

Apparently, these Jesus followers were not making tracks. They were not making progress in their walk with Jesus. They were not maturing. Their spiritual lives were stagnating and in fact, some seemed to even be going backwards. Going back to who they were before they chose to follow Jesus.

They had had a good start. In their earlier days as believers, they were abused and suffered for their faith. But they stood firm. They had even diligently stayed by others who were experiencing the same mistreatment. Look at **Hebrews 10:32-33**

**Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. <sup>33</sup> Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things. <sup>34</sup> You suffered along with those who were thrown into jail, and when all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew there were better things waiting for you that will last forever.**

Wow, that is a pretty amazing report. But for whatever reason they had failed to build on this great start. As I said they have apparently been Christians for some time but the letter writer still considers them infants instead of being mature.

**Hebrews 5:11 – 14 There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen. <sup>12</sup> You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. <sup>13</sup> For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. <sup>14</sup> Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.**

See? Instead of being mature adults in their spiritual development they were still infants.

Notice the result of this lack of maturing. There two things: **1. they are spiritually undiscerning** or spiritually dull. That is, they can't tell the difference between right and wrong.

Vs 14 **those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.**

So the first thing about maturing is learning to recognize the difference between right and wrong, according to what Jesus teaches. But then the second thing is:

**2. they don't know how to do what is right.**

**Vs 13 Someone who is still an infant doesn't know how to do what is right.**

The writer does not say the issue is how well you can explain complex theological concepts. The issue is not how pious a person is. In other words, how many religious things you do, or how reverent you will act in church. These are not the signs of maturing.

**The measure of one's maturing in Christ is as basic as knowing what is right and wrong and then choosing to do the right thing.**

And the second part is just as important as the first part. And it may be more difficult.

So, if we consider something simple, like how we should talk to, or about, another person. Maturing is knowing that you should only say things that build up another person, to quote Paul in:

**Ephesians 4:29 Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.**

How we speak may seem like a minor thing because it isn't murder or theft or sexual immorality. But it is not a minor thing. Because it is a sign of immaturity as a believer. And immaturity is a significant problem for anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus.

How much does it matter if we don't mature as believers?" The writer of Hebrews says it matters a lot.

**Hebrews 2:1 We must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift**

**away from it.**

The danger was: the believers were drifting away from their faith. They were in danger of losing their moorings, their foundation. They were even in danger of turning their backs on Jesus.

It is not clear from the letter that they were even aware that they were drifting away from the faith.

If you have ever sat by a lake and watched a piece of driftwood. It just sits there and bobs up and down on the ripples. It seems like it hardly moves. You get distracted for a while and when you look back, the piece of wood has just disappeared - quietly drifted away. This is a picture of what was happening to the Hebrew believers because they had failed to mature, to grow.

What are some of the results of this failure to mature?

One thing, some have stopped meeting with the gathered community.

**10:25 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.**

From the very beginning of the church, Jesus intended it to be a fellowship of believers who met together regularly. And apparently some of these believers had stopped meeting regularly with other believers.

And then some seemed to be moving back to Judaism a religion of regulations and rules.

**13:9 Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules about food, which don't help those who follow them.**

The writer is referring to having a relationship with Jesus, not just following the rules. This theme of drifting spiritually is found throughout the letter. The way the writer talks



about this drifting away seems to be that the believers did not willfully turn their backs on Jesus but rather they were slipping away without realizing it. Jesus no longer seemed to matter to them. He had become more of an afterthought. And they didn't even realize it.

What this teaches **us** is that we cannot just become a follower of Jesus, get our certificate of faith, and that's it. Neither can we just become Christian rule followers. The very nature of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to be a disciple - that is a learner. And that is one who is constantly learning and growing in intimacy with Jesus and the knowledge of Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews wants the readers to know that without making progress, without maturing, without gaining traction there is a very serious danger that a person may drift away from their faith in Jesus and not even realize it.

The letter of Hebrews is a **wake-up call**. I think of it like the rumble strips along the side of Interstate 81. If you have ever been driving on 81 and get distracted or doze off for a moment, and your car drifts to the side of the road and suddenly your wheels hit those rumble strips. That's a wake-up call, isn't it. It is a good thing. A helpful thing. Even if it is jarring and scary.

This is what the letter of Hebrews is. It can be a wake-up call to us as well. Maybe you are like me sometimes. Sometimes I need a wake-up call in my spiritual journey with Jesus.

Our hope has been that through out this past year, that we have been growing, making discernable progress in our relationship with Jesus and each other. And that we haven't allowed ourselves to just fall asleep and drift along in our journey of following Jesus.

So where do we go moving forward? We must keep maturing. Even though the year is over, we want to keep maturing. How do we keep:

### **Moving Forward**

It is important to note that the letter writer does this by keeping one thing in focus throughout the letter – God, and the fact that Jesus is God. The writer continually reminds the

Hebrews of who Jesus is and that He is well worth following. The letter writer **Keeps the focus on Jesus**. Notice just the first 3 verses.

### Hebrews 1:1-3

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. <sup>2</sup> And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.

Everything worthwhile in life hinges on keeping our focus on Jesus. At Five Forks we will always keep our focus on Jesus. Other distractions may swirl around us, but we are determined to always see life and the world through Jesus' eyes.

Jesus is the appearance of the Father here on earth. To see Jesus is to see God. Jesus exactly resembles the Father. Jesus is the one who enables believers to enter into an intimate relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Faith or trust in Jesus is the only way worth living one's life. Everything else is spiritual darkness.

So, believers are to keep their eyes on Jesus and mature in becoming like Him. The writer gives us some helpful advice on how to go about this.

### Hebrews 12:1-3

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. <sup>2</sup> We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. <sup>3</sup> Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up.

Let me briefly suggest 3 things that will help us continue gaining positive traction so we

can keep moving forward. We will keep our eyes focused on Jesus so we don't drift away and lose our faith. I will give you three T's to help us remember. First – it will take:

## **Time**

The letter writer referred to “**training to gain the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.**” (5:14) Training takes time. There is no alternative. There are no shortcuts.

Ask almost anyone today, and they will tell you they don't have enough time to do everything they want or need to do. I get that. But if keeping our eyes on Jesus is important, and we believe it is – time for growth or maturing is a must. Of all the important things you want to spend your time on in 2024, you and I must spend time with Jesus. Everyone has the same amount of time. 24 hours in each day. But we all choose how to spend it.

Somehow in the year ahead, you may need to carve out more time to spend with Jesus. Just recently I had a friend ask me if I would help hold him accountable for spending time with Jesus. I said yes, on the condition that he would hold me accountable as well. We are both early morning people. So, we have carved out about an hour a week, early in the morning to meet and hold each other accountable. Maturing in Christ is going to require some time. Will you make a decision to set aside some time for Jesus? Maybe you need a friend to help hold you accountable.

A second T is

## **Thoughtfulness**

As pastor Shaun shared the Christmas Story with us he reminded us of how Mary **pondered** about Jesus, the shepherds visit, the angel's announcements.

While maturing takes time. It is not just putting in time. You can put in time at the office and not get anything done. You can put in time visiting friends at the gym and not get in any better physical shape. You can even put in time reading your bible and not really gain much of an understanding about Jesus.

We must give deep thought to the things of Jesus. The letter writer invites the readers to think about the bible stories. To think about Jesus and what he endured for us, and why Jesus was willing to endure such shame and torture. So, I am inviting us to spend some time in deep thought about Jesus. Don't be content to just 'grab a quick bite and eat on the run of life' so to speak. Take time for deep thought. If you can get together with a few friends and share those thoughts on a regular basis it will find it will keep you from drifting away from Jesus.

And the 3<sup>rd</sup> T is

### **Tenacity**

This is being determined and persistent – not giving up. The writer of Hebrews calls it Perseverance – or endurance.

**10:36 Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.**

We are a culture that gets excited quickly about new things, fascinating stories, trends, fads and so on. We often hear about how quickly some news became well known. We have even coined a phrase for it. "It went viral." Meaning it spread and everyone was paying attention to it.

But we are also a culture that quickly gets bored and loses interest. We easily move on to the next exciting story. This should not be the case for our spiritual journeys. **"Patient endurance is what you need now, So that you will continue to do God's will."**

I've called that Tenacity, to help us remember. May we be a tenacious people in 2024. So that come what may, we will keep gaining traction and make positive progress knowing, loving and following Jesus in the New Year.

Let us do it together and "spur one another on to love and good deeds."

**PRAY**