

July 1, 2018

Church Planting

*How Mature Are You?*

Acts 24:24-27

**Opening words:** American Christian author and preacher, A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) once wrote, *"I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months."* That quote makes me ask you this series of questions: How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit happen in an instant? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today? The Holy Spirit is important, because without the Holy Spirit the church has no future.

Today, I continue my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Never forget it. Acts is the witness of the Holy Spirit, and I am attempting to reconnect with the Holy Spirit because we need a revival. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 24:24-27. This is sermon number fifty-eight in the series. I have called this message *How Mature Are You?*

**Acts 24:24-27** Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." <sup>26</sup> At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. <sup>27</sup> When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

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Billy Graham once said, *"Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow Him every day. Don't be swayed by the false values and goals of this world, but put Christ and His will first in everything you do."* That is a great quote. I find it to be challenging. If you find those words to be challenging, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-fourth chapter of Acts. Do you remember the storyline? Paul had returned to Jerusalem with a love offering to help the needy in the Golden City. It should have been a happy reunion, but it wasn't. The new Jewish-Christians were against him because he had devalued the Old Testament law. The Jewish community was against him, because he was promoting the resurrection of Jesus. The people didn't just find Paul annoying, they hated him. A group of approximately forty had taken an oath to kill him. Their scheme was uncovered and Paul was sent to Caesarea for

his own protection. Does any of this sound familiar? We have covered that material in the past three weeks. All of this sets up today's reading.

Paul is on trial. The words are straightforward. Governor Felix is presiding over the case. He is a complex character. History remembers him for his corruption, cruelty, and immorality. Two of the three are found in this reading. Look at two things. First, he was looking for Paul to bribe him, a sign of corruption. Second, he was married to Drusilla. Their marriage was questionable from the very beginning. She was a beautiful woman who was the daughter of Herod Agrippa, who arranged her first marriage, at the age of fifteen. She remained in that marriage for approximately a year. She left her husband to marry Felix. Through the eyes of God, their marriage was unholy. Their generation was outraged by their marriage because their generation had something called morals. In our low moral times, such behavior doesn't seem so shocking. Let me say it clearly so you don't miss the point. Felix was a bad man, and Paul's trial was a sham. Yet, the scripture reading today is not about ancient Roman law. It is about spiritual maturity. Look at the story again through a spiritual filter.

Felix and Paul stand as polar-opposites. Felix had everything this world has to offer. Professionally, he was successful. He was not just respected, he was feared. He had a big salary and a beautiful wife to help him spend his income. Through the eyes of this world, Felix had it all. Through the eyes of this world, Paul had nothing. He had a mountain of legal problems and his earthly future was questionable. Yet, the one who had everything was intrigued by the man who had nothing. There is something about Paul's message that resonates in Felix's soul. Spiritually speaking, Felix and Paul were polar-opposites. Felix was spiritually dead. Paul was spiritually alive. Spiritual maturity is not just an issue for Biblical characters. It is a big issue for our spiritually struggling world. So, let me ask you the question of the day: How spiritually mature are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

When I was young, my grandmother would come for an annual visit. She lived in Brooklyn, New York and we lived in Warren. When I was real young, I remember her coming on the bus. Later, she would fly. The mode of transportation really didn't matter. The scene was always the same. She would greet me with a hug and kiss. Then, she would say, *"Russell, let me look at you."* She would smile and say, *"I almost didn't recognize you. You have grown so big."* My dad, who hated my grandmother, his mother-in-law, always said annually, *"Of course, the boy is growing. If he wasn't growing there would be something wrong!"* Are you growing spiritually, or is there something wrong?

Do you remember my favorite preacher story? You must, because I tell it several times a year. I find it to be haunting. It comes from Tom Tewell, who was pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He recalls being interviewed for ordination years ago. The interview took place in a large empty church in the middle of the week. A half-dozen veteran ministers interviewed him on the finer points of Calvinistic theology. As his interview came to an end, he felt good about his answers. He was told there was

only one more question to answer. It came from the oldest man on the interview team. (I think he was sixty-one 😊) It was the only question he asked all day. He looked at the young Tom Tewell and asked, "Are you making any progress in the faith?" Tom said, he opened his mouth, but not a single word came out. Let me ask you this question: Are *you* making progress in the faith? If you are not making any progress in the faith, then there is something wrong. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" How spiritually mature are you?

Years ago, I learned that everyone falls into one of five spiritual stages. I don't know the origin of these stages, but I do find them to be helpful. Everyone falls into one of these five stages. That means, you fall into one of these stages. Today, I challenge you to discover your stage, so you can take steps to advance to the next stage. If you remain at one of the first four stages, there is something wrong. So, if you are ready to look at these five stages of spiritual growth, say, "**Amen!**"

**Stage 1: The Seeker** If you find yourself at this stage, then you are spiritually dead. Ephesians 2:1 says each person starts out in life "dead in (their) transgressions and sins." This stage is categorized by the word *unbelief*. However, their unbelief does not stop them from trying to get answers to some of life's most basic questions: Why am I here? Is there life after death? Why do bad things happen to good people? Felix, in the scripture lesson for today, is an example of a seeker. In the scripture lesson for today, Felix was curious about the faith and he had questions. Do you know anyone who has questions? Do you know of anyone who is curious about the faith? Do you know any seekers? Are you a seeker? Do you know of anyone who is a believer?

**Stage 2: The Believer** Once we come to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we become spiritually alive. The Bible calls these individuals "infants" (1 Peter 2:2) or "babes" (1 Corinthians 3:1). They know something has changed in their lives and they are excited about the change. They tell everyone about this exciting new change and in the end, they make a mess. This stage is categorized by the word *ignorance*. One of the things a believer needs is a spiritually mature role model to help them, who will give them individual attention. Do you know of someone who won't stop talking about the faith? They simply drive you crazy. Do you know any believers? Are you a believer? Do you know of anyone who is a learner?

**Stage 3: The Learner** As a person grows spiritually, they become a spiritual child. There are many examples in the Bible of spiritual children (1 John 2:12; 1 Corinthians 13:11). Their basic nature is to be self-centered. They are still excited about the faith, but doing good does not come naturally. They do good to be rewarded, or to avoid an unfavorable outcome. Have you ever known someone who did something good, hoping they would be rewarded? Do you

know any learners? Are you a learner? Do you know of anyone who is a server?

**Stage 4: The Server** As a learner grows, they become a spiritual young adult (1 John 2:13). They have a good grasp of the Bible, understand God's ways, and have a heart for mission. They have a passion to serve, please and bless, and they want to make an impact and be useful. The problem is, they don't have an interest in producing new disciples. Do you know of anyone who just can't do enough for others? Do you know any servers? Are you a server? Do you know of anyone who is a leader?

**Stage 5: The Leader** This is the final stage. They are spiritually mature and begin to produce disciples. They are our spiritual parents (1 Corinthians 4:15,17; 1 Thessalonians 2:11; 1 John 2:13-14). The difference between a server and a leader is, the leader tries to find ways to help others advance through the various spiritual stages. The person who introduced you to Jesus and helped you grow spiritually is a leader. Do you know any leaders? Are you a leader?

So, here is the question: Where do you find yourself in these five stages? It is my experience that it is easy to categorize someone, but it is hard to categorize yourself. This is my opinion and my opinion only: One of the major reasons the mainline Protestant church is failing is that we have a shortage of spiritual leaders. It is not a matter of getting the right pastor. It is not a matter of developing a slick marketing campaign. It is not a matter of reading the right book or attending a new workshop. A newly created program from the bureaucrats will not help. The reason the mainline Protestant church is failing is that we have a shortage of spiritually mature people. Where have our spiritual leaders gone? If you will pray for more spiritual leaders, say, **"Amen!"**

Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) was raised in a foster home in Hawthorne, California. Her foster parents were devout Christians. At sixteen years of age, Marilyn married Jimmy Dougherty. He said she was a sweet, generous, religious girl. Something went very wrong. She died on August 5, 1962. According to the Los Angeles Coroner, she died because of an "acute barbiturate poisoning." Today, we simply say she committed suicide. At the time of her death, much was written about her spiritual health. I remember hearing she once met Billy Graham, who witnessed to her. After hearing the great evangelist out, they say, she said, "I don't need your Jesus." I hope that story isn't true. Marilyn Monroe needed Jesus. How do I know?

Because, we all need Jesus. Do you remember the quote from Billy Graham? The great evangelist once said, *"Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow Him every day. Don't be swayed by the false values and goals of this world, but put Christ and His will first in everything you do."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** How spiritually mature are you?