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Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. Welcome to 2023. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today. We have got a great show in store.

Before we dive into today's conversation I want to share about one of our amazing sponsors, [Athletic Greens](#). Y'all know I'm not really a New Year's resolution girl, but I do love rhythms and routines that help me be a good friend to myself. Things that simplify or help me pursue health and save time, I'm in. That's why Athletics Greens is such a good partner.

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Here's what I love about it. AG1 gives you increased energy and mood support. Okay, it's fair that we might need some mood support right now. Okay, it's fine. It supports quality sleep, which is one of the things I'm very committed to this year. I mean, being well-rested is a game-changer, right? And it's all in one. No need for supplement routine that comes with a bunch of different products to keep up with in a bunch of different times a day. That's challenging for my soul.

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And if spelling URLs isn't your favorite thing going into the new year, be sure to visit the show notes right below for a whole bunch of helpful links: links to our sponsors, a transcript of the show, our weekly email newsletter, the AFD Weak in Review, and the link to subscribe to Let's Read the Gospels. Oh, I hope you're reading the gospels with us. They are all there. All those links are available for you.

Intro: Today on the show I get to talk with one of your favorites, one of my favorites, John Mark Comer. This is exactly who I was hoping, hoping, hoping we could start the year with. And sure enough, we got to.

You probably already know him from his previous visits on That Sounds Fun. But if not, you can get to know him back on Episode 31, the January 2018 rhythms episode about Sabbath, Episode 180 talking about living unrushed lives, and on Episode 328 sharing how to overcome the lies that we believe.

Yeah, we're gonna have to start giving jackets for people who are here five times, aren't we? We got to figure out something. But I'm so happy he is back. He's wise. He's kind. He's brilliant. He is one of our favorites.

And I'm so glad to have him here to share about the exciting things he's got going on with his new organization Practicing The Way, what it's been like to be away from public life for a year. You are gonna love hearing all about this. Y'all know we go deep quick. John Mark Comer did not come to play in 2023, you guys. So here's my conversation with our good friend John Mark Comer.

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Annie: John Mark Comer, welcome back to That Sounds Fun.

John Mark: Great to see you, Annie.

Annie: I mean, what a treat! I cannot tell you. There's no one... Truly there's no one else I'd rather start the year with. I think we've done it twice now, that you've started the year of the podcast. I mean, you went off the internet for an entire year, disappeared from our lives, came back with Practicing the Way. How are you? How is everybody?

John Mark: I'm doing just fine. A year off the internet was a very good thing for my soul. There was so much, not to go too deep, too fast or TMI, there's such a latent danger when you do spiritual life as your job, because it's public. And you know, Jesus had really strong warnings about public spirituality. So it was so nice to just walk with Jesus for a year and have nobody else know about it. There's no pictures of it, no sermon illustrations. I won't even tell you what it was. But it was a really... it wasn't bliss. It wasn't utopia. But it-

Annie: Yeah, it wasn't a 365 vacation, right? It could have been.

John Mark: No. I mean, that are closer to a hospital visit than they are to a vacation.

Annie: Wow, that's interesting. Why?

John Mark: Well, because they're not just a break. They're deep inner healing and reset. I've done two now. My first one was shorter, but it was still pretty long, three months. And in prayer going into it, I asked God for a kind of image. Because you know, we all live from kind of controlling metaphors that we make sense of our life with. And which metaphors you make sense of your life with are a profound importance. It's why I think the teachings of Jesus are so full of metaphors, because we all live from metaphors, from controlling kind of idea paradigms.

So I asked Jesus for a metaphor in prayer, and the one that came to mind was like... if you've ever watched like old black and white World War II movies that are set in the Pacific, there's a couple where like a soldier is wounded in battle or he's shot down, over the Pacific Ocean or whatever, in a dogfight and he's injured. And so he's sent back to a hospital, which was in Hawaii. And there's these movies where, you know, he's in traction, and he's in a wheelchair, and he's in a... but it's like palm trees and it's beautiful and is running with a nurse. But he's injured and hurt, and if he doesn't get better, he's going to die and not continue his life.

So I feel like that was the image that God gave for me. I mean, part of that was because we were in Hawaii for a bit, but it was very much like that—this mixture of like, "Oh, Paradise, I'm off work, and I'm in so much pain right now and I'm injured and I have to attend to my wounds."

One way to frame ministry, this is a controlling metaphor for me, is it's vicarious suffering. Like Jesus on the cross, it's intentionally allowing pain and suffering into your life in order to allow the blessing of God and the healing of God to come to other people. And that might sound a little sob story, but I just think that is built into the architecture of what pastoring is. So you have to attend to those wounds or you end up ministering not from your wounds but out of your wounds. You know, it's the Rohlheiser line "what you don't transform you transmit."

Annie: Yes, yes.

John Mark: So after 20 years of ministry in one of the most spiritually oppressed, liberal secular cities in North America, I had enough wounds that I needed to get some of them transformed so I don't spend the next 20 years just angry or hurt or reactionary or fearful.

Annie: Which came first? The need for sabbatical or the realization that it was a good time for sabbatical, or your desire to create Practicing the Way?

John Mark: I was due for sabbatical. I was actually overdue. I got delayed because of COVID, which is not a great time to leave your church.

Annie: Oh, God. Can you imagine? You guys, this is really hard. I'm gonna go ahead and go."

John Mark: "This is a really hard year, so I'm going to Hawaii, everybody."

Annie: Yeah, yeah, yeah. "Sabbaticals are on the calendar, so y'all get it."

John Mark: No, I'm on a seven-year rotating basis. So that's just kind of my life rhythm that I'm working very hard to live by. And trying to steal a page out of Andy Crouch where I'm trying to live on closer to 80% of my income and save for that seventh year so I can take a longer year off. We'll see how that plays out long term. But that's my goal.

So I was due for a sabbatical and Practicing the Way was kind of disconnected from that. That was a long time coming that had been in my heart for many years. And it was just kind of a question of when not if. And through a very long story, we concluded that the back side of COVID when I was going to go on sabbatical either way, strange as it might sound at first hearing, was actually the optimal time to kind of transition to a new leader at our church for all sorts of really good reasons. It's gone very well.

Annie: And Tyler is just incredible. What a great leader!

John Mark: He is special. No, he's a better leader than I ever was, ever could be. He's doing an amazing job. The church is thriving.

Annie: I'll tell you, the other staff member that I love to shout out is Bethany Allen. Listen, that girl...

John Mark: Yeah, we love you, Bethany.

Annie: She is so smart. I'm having her on this year. I haven't even... I think I told her that in text message. I'm not sure. She's coming on this year. It's on my to-dos.

John Mark: Oh, good.

Annie: Because I just think she's such an excellent teacher. And hearing her on the Practicing the Way Podcast... the Rule of Life Podcast, having her thoughts around Sabbath, I thought she's just so smart. She's impressive.

John Mark: She's a gift.

Annie: Yeah, she's awesome. Will you kind of define Practicing the Way? What is this thing you've created?

John Mark: I mean, in a nutshell, it's just a simple, beautiful way to integrate spiritual formation into your church or small group or community of friends who follow Jesus.

Annie: I mean, this is how we're kicking off the year. This is when people want new rhythms in their life. John Mark. I mean, that is all of us. I can think of eight metaphors that work for me for 2023 of how I hope I transform by the end of the year.

But as I listened to the podcast and have been thinking about it, I have this really hard question that I prepped you with because I think it is a hard question. Why do we do spiritual formation at all? Why does it matter? Is there some goal at the end? Is there a win here? Is there like... Why do we put energy toward this?

John Mark: Well, okay, what do you mean by spiritual formation? I'm not looking for a right answer here. I just want to make sure I answer it well.

Annie: No, this is a real conversation we're having. I mean, this is like-

John Mark: What does Annie Downs mean by "do spiritual formation"?

Annie: Right. I'd love this. Because if you were in the office before we hit record or when we were eating lunch after with our team, I would have said to you, "John Mark, help me with this." Because as I'm thinking about how much I put and a lot of my friends put energy toward fasting, prayer, being in community, Sabbath, all these things, I just kind of had this existential crisis in my car driving back to Nashville from Atlanta as I was listening of like, "To what end, John Mark? So that we know God better? Is that the whole thing?" Because a lot of times I feel like the spiritual disciplines are about transforming who we are. To what end?

John Mark: So first off, let me just push back a little bit on this.

Annie: Yeah, of course.

John Mark: And you know this. But for listeners, it's very important not to equate spiritual disciplines with spiritual formation. Spiritual disciplines are a sub... not even a subcategory. They're more of like a tool that's a part of this larger kind of human growth idea of spiritual formation. So spiritual formation is the process by which we are formed into people of Christ-like love, yes, through deepening surrender to, in union with the Father and the Son and the Spirit.

And spiritual formation is less something we do and it's more something that is done to us. There is a both and, you know, what ancient Christians called synergy. We work with God, not for God and... you know, He does it without us. St. Augustine in the fourth century said, "Without Him, we can't, but without us, He won't."

So that we have a part in our spiritual formation, and He has a part, but it's not 50. Sometimes I hear people like... Spiritual formation is not a Christian thing, just to make... you know, for starting from scratch. It's a human thing. To be human is to grow, evolve, change, adapt.

We start as little embryos, we become infants, we become babies, toddlers, we grow up, we get old, we die. And through that there's not just a physical formation, but there's a psycho-spiritual formation. We're all becoming a person every single day.

Sometimes I hear people talk about how they're getting into spiritual formation, which is beautiful. I have no problem with that. But it's kind of a chuckle, because, I mean... And what they normally mean is like, "I'm starting to practice Sabbath," or "get into spiritual disciplines," or "I'm reading books by Ronald Rolheiser, or I'm listening to this podcast," which is great. Or "I'm in therapy."

I'm for all of that stuff. What they mean is they're starting to take their part in their formation more seriously, they're starting to get more intentional about their formation, and they're starting to really learn about the intricacies of how the soul was formed in the image of Jesus. It's great.

But what you need to clarify is we're all into spiritual formation. We're all being formed. President Trump is a product of spiritual formation. Mother Teresa is a product of spiritual formation. Gandhi was spiritually formed. Hitler was spiritually formed. I'm spiritually formed. You're spiritually formed. We're being formed. We will be formed. It's just a part of who we are.

So Christian spiritual formation is how we apply a level of intentionality to our formation that is based on the lifestyle, the patterns, the rhythms that are laid down by Jesus Himself, rather than just getting sucked into the kind of habit architecture and worldview that's all around us, you know?

Annie: Yeah.

John Mark: Back to your question, why spiritual formation? Why should we do that? Why should we take this seriously? And of course the premise of my life's work is basically I think that transformation is possible if we are willing to rearrange our

lives around the practices and rhythms and truths of Jesus that He Himself did. And most Christians don't do that, which is why most Christians, I think, have very limited experience of healing and transformation.

So back to your question, why do that at all? There's a couple of ways to answer that. Let me answer your question with a question. Annie, what do you think—Not to put you in the hot seat—what do you think God is doing right now?

Annie: What do I think He's doing right now?

John Mark: Yeah. This is not a test question. I'd love to hear your thoughts. I've been thinking about this lately. What is God doing right now?

Annie: I mean, I think he's doing a lot of things.

John Mark: That's what makes it hard.

Annie: Yeah. I'm thoughtful to use the word "think" versus "know" because I don't actually know. So I'm just gonna say what I think. I think He thinks about all of us. I think Scripture is clear about that, that the sands of the sea, kind of the sands of the beach situation. I don't know, John Mark. It feels harder than it should. I think He's thinking about all of us. I think He's actively...

John Mark: I think I just asked you a really hard question with-

Annie: Yeah, right?

John Mark: ...no heads up. I'm sorry.

Annie: No. Stop. This is real friendship. I do not care. But I mean, when I'm thinking about it, I'm thinking I know, He's involved in all of our lives, because scripture is really clear about that. I know, He sends out angels, helpers, workers, right, and He sends the Holy Spirit. So I think there's a mailing and receiving department that is happening. I know where He's sitting. So those are my answers.

John Mark: That's great.

Annie: I hope that was right.

John Mark: Listen, you have to talk to somebody smarter than me to get a right or wrong.

Annie: Well, yeah. What's your reason for asking? And what do you think?

John Mark: Well, this is my current thought. What I think that God is doing right now is what He's been doing. He started with Adam and Eve, and then Abraham and then Israel, and then Jesus and the church and now with us. The same pattern, the same through line.

I think what God is doing is forming a new humanity, a new people group, not based on ethnicity or citizenship to a nation-state or consumeristic preference or blood, but based on allegiance to Jesus as Lord, as King of the Kingdom of God.

He's forming a whole new humanity that is pervaded by love, that has been spiritually formed into people who are like Jesus: loving, peaceful, joyful, wise, strong, courageous, truth-based, willing to suffer, self-sacrificial, who are pervaded by in one word love, in order to one day co-rule with Jesus over the entire cosmos, and refashion the entire cosmos as a temple for God and His Bride and the language of Revelation, this new humanity to live together in love.

Annie: So you're thinking less about the angel shipping department than I am is what you're saying?

John Mark: Well, I think that's a means to an end. I think they're doing it. Santa's elves are working.

Annie: Now, if anybody needs to know the difference between John Mark and Annie, that was it. It just happened. It just actually happened.

John Mark: It just happened. Everybody's like, "I don't even know what he's trying to say, but I like the shipping department."

Annie: No, I know what you're saying.

John Mark: Scripture begins with two human beings created to rule, right? This is what the image of God means. It means ruler, kings, queens. They're created to take the raw materials of the planet and create it into a garden-like environment for humans to thrive.

So this is what humans do. Even fall in broken, screwed up humans go to a city. You're looking at the human attempt to rule. Like drive down a highway. This is the attempt to rule. I'm looking at a piece of art, listen to a podcast. These are human beings, rearranging the raw materials of the planet to try to create a utopian society for people to flourish and peace and justice and love and happiness. Right?

Annie: Yeah.

John Mark: Now secular society is trying to do this apart from God, which is why it's destined to fail and it is failing. But the Christian concept is to do that with God and under God and for God, but ultimately with God. And at the end of Scripture, what do you see? You see human beings restored to their rightful place. That language is used.

Ruling in Revelation 21:22 is all this garden of Eden imagery. And now human beings are back in the garden, but it's a garden-like city and they're kings and they're queens and Jesus is King, but we're ruling with Him. And the image is like it just goes forward, on and on and on.

So if you back up to that, this is where the Western and particular evangelical view of quote, "heaven" just kills any robust impetus toward discipleship or spiritual formation. Because if the goal is just to get people to believe the right things about God so they can go to heaven instead of hell when they die and in the meantime just, you know, know that God loves them, then yeah, why in the world will we do all this really serious work to say yes to Jesus reforming our inner woman or man?

But if the goal is... Like imagine if I said, Annie, 20 years from now, you're going to become the president of the United States. You're gonna become the most powerful political ruler in the world. How would you spend the next 20 years of your life?

Annie: That's right.

John Mark: Would you just hang out and you know... I don't know. I mean you would rest. But would you just goof off? You would probably be like, "Freck, I gotta go get my PhD. I gotta do this. I gotta get into cold plunges. I gotta get a mentor. I gotta deal with my family stuff. I gotta learn history. I gotta get ready." We have been told by Jesus, "Your destiny is to co-rule over the universe with me."

[00:20:43] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners, [Brooklinen](#). Okay, since we're already on the subject of getting good rest earlier, you know I'm right there with you. And luckily Brooklinen is too.

They make keeping a resolution to rest well this year easier than ever. You can upgrade your sleep space with the home essentials that you need to unwind. Quality always counts when it comes to R&R. So Brooklinen only trust the best materials to help you unwind. You can trust that you're getting the best weaves and construction for favorites you can keep coming back to.

Now is the time to cozy up that sleepy space, you guys, because the comforter sale is here. You heard me. The comforter sale is here. Brooklinen has got sleep down to a science and I'm trying to catch up. They've thought of all the details to help you find your perfect match. Their comforters come in three weights, the lightweight, all season and ultra warm to get exactly what you need at bedtime.

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For unlimited time, Brooklinen is offering my friends 15% off comforters. It's a comforter sale, you guys. And if you're listening to this episode after the sale, visit Brooklinen.com today and use the code THATSOUNDSFUN for \$20 off plus free shipping. That's [Brooklinen.com](https://www.brooklinen.com), and the code is THATSOUNDSFUN.

Sponsor: And I gotta tell you about another one of our incredible partners, [Thrive Causemetics](#). Let's talk about things making me my best self. Brooklinen and Thrive Causemetics. Maybe over the holiday break I was inundated with ads about sales on skincare products and new makeup to try. I'm sure you weren't too. And you know your girl AFD is up for trying new fun stuff but I'm not going to tell you to try any products that I don't actually love.

Thrive Causemetics has us covered in that department. We're talking high-performance beauty and skincare products made with clean skin-loving ingredients. I love the word "cause" in their name because every purchase you and I make supports organizations that help communities thrive.

In 2021, they supported over 10,000 military families through their product donation program and gave \$200,000 in cash to giving partners that are focused on combating racial inequality and breaking barriers for people of color. I don't know about you, but when my makeup helps me look and feel great while also making a substantial difference in people's lives, well, I'm here for it.

My favorite, favorite of their product along with over 20,000 five-star reviewers is their liquid lash extension mascara. It gives me long, strong, no clump lashes that look like I'm wearing extensions and lasts all day and then easily slides right off with warm water and a washcloth at the end of the day. Did I give this mascara as a

Christmas gift? Yes, yes I did. Did I order a replacement to for myself at the same time? Also yes.

But to pair with your new favorite mascara, might I suggest Thrive's infinity Waterproof Eyeliner? It is smudge-proof so it lasts all day and goes on so smoothly. And depending on your preference, you can choose from their new bold colors or classic neutral shades because they've got options that complement every eye color and skin tone. Now is a great time to try Thrive Causemetics for yourself.

Right now you can get 15% off your first order when you visit thrivecausemetics.com/tsf. That's thrivecausemetics.com/tsf for 15% off your first order.

And now back to our conversation with John Mark.

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John Mark: The problem is that we can't rule and reign with Jesus over the cosmos unless we have been spiritually formed into people who are like Jesus, who are loving and wise and courageous and discerning and who live in alignment with truth, not with lies or error or untruth. So we have to be spiritually formed otherwise the result will be disastrous.

You know, not to go political, this is why politics is a disaster right now in America. It's because we're trying to do power without formation, and we're trying to do social rule without a transcendent moral source of authority. And it just doesn't work.

The framers of our constitution, and I'm not some big, hardcore constitutionalist guy, but the framers of our constitution developed a system that required virtue to function, required goodness. It's why we're a republic, not a democracy in spite of all the party-level stuff, because democracy has been tried before historically and it's a disaster. Because you don't have enough good people, there's not enough people who have been spiritually formed to make rule of the people resulting goodness.

And it's why there's often an overcorrection toward monarchy. It doesn't work hardly ever. But the idea is, if you can get one good person in power, then we can be good. Unfortunately, the track record history is not very good on that one.

Willard used to say that the world is searching for a system that's so perfectly designed it no longer requires you to be good. And that's what America is trying to do with politics. They are trying to find a political system, a tax system, a welfare

system, a justice system that doesn't require goodness. It just punishes badness. And it just doesn't work. You have to be formed into a person who is like Jesus in order to have the capacity to rule over the world.

I've been thinking a little bit about this. In my kind of model of spiritual formation, at the core of it is surrender. Surrender, I think, is the foundation of the spiritual life. Jesus said, "I always do what pleases the Father."

But at some level, I think, the more we surrender to Jesus, which is the more we yield to His wisdom, His love, His truth, His presence, the more we take up our cross, as Jesus said, and die to self and let go of the ego, the more we surrender, ironically the more we become the kind of people who God can empower to do whatever we want.

Willard used to say that's God's end goal for you is, you've been so spiritually formed that God can empower you to do whatever you want to do because what you want to do is so in line with practice, you know?

Annie: Right. Right. Oh, that's good.

John Mark: If you said to a 12-year-old boy, you know, "I'll give you..." I don't have a million dollars, but "I'll give you a million dollars. I'll give you Thor superpowers," I mean, what would they do with it? They would just go out and beat up their friends and make girls kiss them and blow all the money on fortnight, or a Lamborghini, whatever. They would just blow it all, you know.

But there are people that if you said, "I'll give you Thor's powers, and I'll give you a billion dollars, whatever," they would take it and do extraordinary exponential good in the world because they've been formed. So you know, you have multiple things.

One, you have this kind of meta arcane thing of we have to be formed because the end goal is not to just die and go to heaven instead of hell and go to the good place instead of the bad. It's to grow and mature to one day rule of Jesus, not to mention that, you know, it's very ambiguous in the library of Scripture what happens to us upon our resurrection. But one thing is clear, that it's not just more of the same. It's not just we come back to life and we keep living as we're living now. It's a whole other category of existence.

You know, some of the early church fathers, Gregory of Nyss, you know, he defined sin as a refusal to keep growing-

Annie: Oh, my gosh.

John Mark: That was his definition of sin.

Annie: The refusal to keep growing.

John Mark: A refusal to keep growing. I mean, one of the ultimate insults we have to people, you know, like when people often move to the big city, and they go back to their small town, and they meet some kid they knew in high school and like, "Oh, Johnny, just the same old Johnny." That's not a compliment.

Annie: Right.

John Mark: It's like he hasn't matured, he hasn't grown, he hasn't developed. What's this? This eastern kind of obsession with enlightenment with becoming an almost like superhuman and reaching a new plane. There's all sorts of goofiness in there. But I think part of that is like the Christian iteration of that is what theologians call glorification.

So it's not hard to imagine that on the other side of resurrection there is still growth, development, enlightenment, expansion of the human person. Who knows what we will become in Christ if Christ is our template? And then ultimately, you know, there is far, and this is where it's ambiguous scripturally too, but there is far more continuity between how we live now and who we are later.

Evangelicals want to believe that you believe the right things about God, you try to live the best you can and then you die and it's like some cosmic light switch is flipped and you are all the sudden perfect and holy and just and loving and happy and formed and Christ's-like. That may be how it works. You have to just say, Scripture does not clearly teach that.

I used to think the Catholic doctrine of purgatory was ridiculous, because it's not really in the Bible. But if you read a good Catholic theologian, they argue... Of course, it's not in the Bible. They don't get purgatory from the Bible. They get it from logic. Because their logic is, upon death many Christians, if not most Christians, have not been formed to the point where, one, they could actually even be in God's presence, and two, where they could co-rule with Jesus over the universe.

So purgatory is an attempt to almost do what spiritual formation and discipleship was intended to do in this life, but in the in-between of this life and the life to come. So they would say, "Hey, listen, it's not scriptural. It's logical. You have to become somebody."

Annie: You have to form.

John Mark: Even evangelicals think that God will just flip a switch and boom, you'll be ready to go. And that may be so. But where are you getting that in the Bible?

So I'm not saying I believe in Purgatory. I'm saying I believe in the inner logic of purgatory. But either way, I'd... I mean, early Christians developed a three-stage spiritual formation process over the Christian life arc. And the first stage was what they called purgation. And it was basically an attempt to take on... Some of the spiritual disciplines, particularly like fasting, they view it as an attempt to intentionally take on suffering in order to let Christ forge you and form you in the crucible of pain and purge from you, burn clean of you anything that cannot last into God's presence and into eternity.

And then the final question, then the final layer of it is, you know, what ancient Christians called union with God. Like why do I want to be spiritually formed? Why? Because the greatest ache in our heart, whether we recognize it or not, is not virtue. The greatest ache in every human heart is for union with God.

Now, the people that we say are hungry for God are more just the people that have identified that ache is an ache for God. Whereas most of us miss identify it and think it's an ache for romance, or career, success or fame or money or a vacation or you know, whatever, rock climbing, whatever. But really, the deepest ache in the human heart, Christian, secular, nominal Christian, ardent disciple of Jesus, is for union with God.

And so why practice this? Why formation? Why slow your life down? Why sacrifice? Why purge? Why purgation? Because we ache for God. And it's through spiritual formation that we deepen our union with God, we're spiritually formed into people of goodness and love, and we become the kind of people who one day can rule over the University. I love David Brooks' idea of resume virtues versus eulogy virtues.

Annie: Oh, wow.

John Mark: He writes about, like, resume virtues or what we all talk about now in this life. Like, "How's your podcasts doing? I've sold this many books, and I'm starting this nonprofit. And here's my accolades. Here's what I've done. Here's who I am." Eulogy virtues are what... they're what we talk about. Eulogy virtues are what other people talk about when we die. And it's never that kind of stuff.

I got to attend the funeral of a very old and very famous Christian recently. And it was really an honor to be there. It was like a small kind of families, maybe 100 people in the room. I've had a connection to this person for many, many years.

Annie: Queen Elizabeth. It was Queen Elizabeth.

John Mark: It wasn't Queen Elizabeth. I'm sorry.

Annie: It was Queen Elizabeth, John Mark. I know it. I know it. I know it.

John Mark: Oh, all right. I was her spiritual director.

Annie: I wish. I wish.

John Mark: I'll let you know. Yes, exactly.

Annie: You're like, "It was us, Prince Charles." Oh, my gosh. Okay, sorry, go ahead.

John Mark: The closest I've gone to her is I'm on Season 4 of *The Crown* right now and I love it. I'm obsessed with *The Crown*. Anyway. It was so striking. This was a person that had, I mean, preached before I don't know to how many millions of Christians. And there was not a word about his preaching. There was not a word about how many people he was in front of in his life. There was not a word about how many... It didn't even come up. It was just stories about him taking his grandson who was gay and not a Christian out to breakfast once a week at 6 a.m. and how his grandkids loved him.

It was stories about fidelity to his wife. It was stories about him serving. It was just all these stories of relationships and character. And at the end of the day, nobody care that he was an internationally known preacher. It was the closest real relationships and the person who became.

And at the end of the day, that's what will last. It's who we become, and who we become that person with. That's what we'll carry with us into the future. And that's what we'll need in order to fulfill our role in the future.

Annie: If I can synthesize this for my own brain, spiritual formation and spiritual development matter, because we're doing it anyway. It is the nature of human. It is humans want to grow and change.

John Mark: Yeah, you're always being formed.

Annie: That's right.

John Mark: It's not a question of "Do you want to be formed?" It's "how do you want to be formed? Do you want to say in who you become?"

Annie: That's right. From 7, 8 p.m., I have options of what forms me. And it can be community-

John Mark: *The Crown* Season 4.

Annie: That's right. We're not putting them on a scale in this particular conversation. But you're saying we're always being formed.

John Mark: Yes.

Annie: And also there is an end goal of how do you want to reign and who do you want to be when that part of the rest of your life starts. And we just naturally long for God. And the way we get closer to Him is by spiritually forming in the likeness of Jesus.

John Mark: Right. So why did you ask me that question? Because you just said in 30 seconds and it took me 15 minutes to rambling-

Annie: Because I didn't have any of those answers. You did not ramble. I didn't have any of those answers. When I was thinking about John Mark, I was thinking, "Why do I want to do this?" I just was kind of having like... not a crisis in my garbage. Just like, Why do I want to do this?

I was listening to the Sabbath series that is available on the Rule of Life podcast, and I thought, "To what end? To what end am I?" Because my Sabbath practice feels stressful currently and it feels costly. So I kind of was just assessing, "Am I just doing this to make God happy or am I doing it because...?" Well, if you and I were just talking, I'm saying, I'm gonna be ready because people think I observe Sabbath. Am I doing because I'm supposed to do something for all these people who watch how...?

John Mark: Because I did some podcasts on Sabbath and now I gotta live up to my ego image. My brand is "Annie Downs is into Sabbath."

Annie: Totally.

John Mark: "We have to keep doing this."

Annie: Totally, even though it's really hard. I think some of that was what... My initial was like, "Hey, if we are starting 2023 as a people through our own practices at home, through the Let's Read the Gospel Podcast, through the Rule of Life, and Practicing the Way, through these options that we have in front of us to help us form spiritually, why?"

John Mark: Why?

Annie: Why use our time that way this year? So I feel like you gave me answers that inspire me toward that in new ways.

John Mark: When I frame up discipleship or apprenticeship to Jesus, I just use these three simple goals. The three goals are, one, to be with Jesus, two, to become like Jesus or you know, spiritual formation, and three, to do what He would do if He were me, to live as He did, to carry on His work in the world.

I think the three deepest human aches in every human heart is one, it's just union with God. We ache for our home and God. Two, we ache to become people of goodness and love and virtue and at ease and freedom and joyful and you know, at home in our own body. We ache to become something more than we are. And three, we ache to do something meaningful with our life.

We don't want to just be a carbon footprint and like watch Netflix and eat takeout and die. Steve Jobs was such a megalomaniac. It's like, "I don't want to make a dent in the universe." You got Elon Musk whose life's mission is, I think, you know, make humans interplanetary species. But what's underneath all of that drama is just we want to matter. We want to do something meaningful. We want the world to be better because we're here. We want people to appreciate our heart's work, our suffering.

Those are the three deepest aches of the human heart and I think apprenticeship or discipleship to Jesus, or you could use the word spiritual formation it's how we do that. And that's what the spiritual disciplines are, Sabbath, fasting, whatever, read scripture, listen to that gospels podcast, read a book, to open our mind and body to the Spirit of God so He can do what we absolutely cannot do: form us into people of love.

So there are part. And we can't control our formation. We can't architect it. We can't whiteboard it out and schedule it onto an iCal for the next 10 years. But we can wake up tomorrow morning before we need to and we can sit by the fire and we can open our heart to God and surrender.

Annie: I mean, that's it, right? Because actually what spiritually forms us, the disciplines are the only thing we can control of what spiritually forms us. Right? The disciplines are the ones that you actually can say, "This is on my calendar." The suffering and the grief and the tragedies and the gifts all there...

John Mark: And what happens in the disciplines? All we do is just put our body there. We can't control what God does with them.

Annie: That's right.

John Mark: God might do an incredible work or it might just be crickets. We're totally not in control. And that's the whole point because the root of the human problem is control.

Annie: A few years ago, I did a fasting discipline that you walked with me and a little bit. And at the end of that season, the next year of my life was recovering from that fasting and emotionally, spiritually, physically, and all these ways. And I thought, "Oh, I thought the formation was going to be the fasting." And the formation was what happened after the fast finished.

John Mark: Interesting.

Annie: And I thought, Oh, I had no idea. I mean, my counselor, and I still talked about... It was 2018? My counselor still talk about it, where she's like, "Well, it's like after you fasted, dah, dah, dah." And I'm like, "Oh, yeah, it took us almost a year." I mean, it took us almost a year after that lent for the ocean to settle. That's spiritual formation.

John Mark: Sometimes spiritual formation it's like surgery in a hospital. It's like you open these deep, wounded parts of yourself to God—You know, the early Christians called God the divine physician, the physician of the soul—and it's like God begins doing this deep work. But after a surgery, things get worse before they get better. Like you might be walking around, and then you go in for this major invasive surgery, and then it's like six months of recovery. And then you're healthier.

Annie: Right, right. That's how formation works a lot.

Annie: That's what you're doing with Practicing the Way and the Rule of Life stuff is that this invitation of spiritual formation is going to happen one way or the other. You can choose how this goes for you. And you get to be with Jesus if you choose Christian spiritual formation.

John Mark: Yeah.

[00:42:27] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just taking a quick break from this conversation to tell you about one of our amazing partners, [Rocket Money](#). Are you looking to manage your budget

better and save some moolah in 2023? Well, Rocket Money is just the friend you need.

Rocket Money, formerly known as Truebill, is a personal finance app that finds and cancels your unwanted subscriptions. It monitors your spending and helps you lower your bills all in one place. Over 80% of the people have subscriptions that they have forgotten about, which I'm mortified thinking of in my own life. I cannot imagine.

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And now back to finish up our conversation with John Mark.

[00:44:01] <music>

Annie: Okay, so Practicing the Way has released Sabbath as the first Rule of Life set of podcasts. What's the next one?

John Mark: The next one, which will probably come out, I think, about a week or so after this podcast is prayer.

Annie: Yes. Let's go. Why the order?

John Mark: After that in the spring is fasting.

Annie: Okay.

John Mark: Annie's like, "I'm out. I'm out."

Annie: That's it. Sabbath is the one that I think is fun. And that series wore me down clearly. So I can't wait. I mean, tell me how you pick the order of how you're releasing each of these as a part of rule of life. And then let's talk about what a rule of life is.

John Mark: I mean, it's not like some hyper linear strategic plan. We started with Sabbath for lots of reasons. One is just pragmatic. Most people are too busy and exhausted to have any meaningful spiritual life. So much less to attend seriously to their formation. There are some people that are just lazy and boring and need something to do with their time, but I don't know-

Annie: I don't know. Yeah, me neither.

John Mark: Most people I know, and it's not true of all people, but most people I know are just way over busy, overcommitted, over-addicted to whatever, and exhausted. And exhaustion is a deal breaker in the spiritual life.

Annie: Wow.

John Mark: So I think for most people spiritual formation begins with rest. Practicing the Way is basically our attempt to write what Dallas Willard called a curriculum for Christ's likeness. The only other person I know that's intentionally tried to write one was Dallas Willard, TA, the professor James Brian Smith at Friends University is wonderful.

He's written one about 32 weeks long. And his first week, the first practice is sleep, not even Sabbath. Just sleep. He just has people sleep eight hours a night for a week. And there's all these stories of people being like, "It was life changing. I started to hear God's voice and feel God's presence and His love." It's like just sleep.

Annie: Sleeping.

John Mark: Not even Sabbath. Just sleep. I think that just goes to most people are too busy, too hurried, too exhausted, too distracted to have any meaningful spiritual life. And so Sabbath is, as you know, the ultimate line in the sand of resistance against that. And I believe that rest is essential to the starting place.

There are theological reasons for it that I could get philosophical about. In Genesis, this is beautiful theology of Sabbath where the Hebrew day and by default, the biblical day begins, not at midnight, like in the Western calendar, or at sunrise and Western consciousness, but at sunset. So in Genesis 1, there was evening and there

was morning the first day or whatever. Not morning and evening, but evening and morning.

And then Sabbath is like the eighth day is what it's called by some theologians, meaning it's the end of the week but it's also the beginning of the week. So this is whole biblical theology of how the day starts with sleep and the week starts with rest.

Eugene Peterson says it's God's teaching justification by grace through faith from page one of the Bible. I'm not sure I agree with that definition of justification by grace through faith. But the idea I love.

Annie: The idea.

John Mark: God is teaching from page one that we work from rest not for it. That we work from this place of I'm loved, I'm a son, I'm a daughter, I'm rest, my value is not what I produce or accomplish. All of our work comes out of this place of rest and Sabbath. So that's why we wanted to start at a pragmatic and a theological level with Sabbath.

Annie: How quickly should we be able to write a rule of life? Is that a sit-down in January thing? Or is that as we're going along with practicing the way it could take months? How does it work with writing a rule of life?

John Mark: Well, like formation, Annie Downs, you know this, but you already have a rule of life. Everybody has a rules of life.

Annie: We are all living by rules of life.

John Mark: We are all living by rule of life even if you've never heard that, you know, nomenclature in your life. Just meaning we all have a morning routine, we have a job probably or you're a caregiver, or we have something to do with our time as a volunteer or artists or whatever. We have a night routine, we probably have some subscriptions to some streaming platforms, maybe we have social media, we probably have a budget. Hopefully, you have a budget. Not all people do. We have a way that we spend our weekends, our free time, we have hobbies, we have relationships, we have a family we're from. All of this is a rule in a sense.

In another sense, a rule of life is an attempt to bring intentionality to this life architecture and to kind of design or redesign your life to arrange or rearrange your life in such a way that it's more conducive to put Jesus at the center rather than on the periphery for it.

As for how long it takes to write a rule of life, there's not a clear answer to that because you can start really, really small and really, really simple. You know, I would like take an hour and start with a tiny rule of life and then over several years, I would try to develop and expand. You have to experiment a lot with the rule to find a rule.

And then your rule has to constantly kind of iterate as you hit different stages of life and different seasons of work or family or singleness or COVID or you know, whatever. So you didn't have COVID down in Nashville. But the rest of us had-

Annie: Except the last time we recorded. Lord have mercy. When people talk about that last show that you were on, people are like, "That was one of my favorite ones." I was like, "I don't remember a word of it." I was so sick.

John Mark: I was just so excited. I was like, "Finally I'm gonna get to be with Annie Downs in her studio," and I'm in Nashville recording from my hotel room.

Annie: It was awful. It was awful.

John Mark: You gotta be kidding me. Satan, sin, and death.

Annie: That's it.

John Mark: I think as a general rule of spiritual formation, start where you are not where you should be. All that secular habit literature, you know, all the research at Stanford and other spots that have studied habit really closely, you know, they call it tiny habits, is basically you have the most success if you start really, really, really small.

BJ Fogg has written extensively about this. He writes about if you're trying to floss more regularly, just start by flossing one tooth and then smiling in the mirror, and just try to do that every day, and then try to work up to two. It sounds so stupid. But if you think about it, it's so much easier to floss one tooth.

Annie: And move on, yeah.

John Mark: And move on. He calls it tiny habits. But that's how broke we are. We can't even floss all of our teeth. You're gonna be able to do that based on willpower.

Annie: Right.

John Mark: So start really, really, really small with your rule of life, and then just constantly be looking for that growth edge, you know?

Annie: Yeah. One of the reasons we're doing Let's Read the Gospels in the pattern that we are is we're like, "Just sign up for January. Just listen for one..." We're not telling you to listen to the Bible in a year, though I love Father Mike and all the resources that people do like that. I'm like, "Can you do a month? Can you listen for a month? And then if you want to listen again, it's going to be the same stuff. And we're going to learn something new."

Because the other thing that I hear a lot, I wonder if you experienced this with Practicing the Way people as well, but if someone falls off a practice on January 20th, they feel like they can't start again until January 1st. Right?

John Mark: Right. Yes.

Annie: Versus like, "Hey, you missed a day, you're fine," or "You missed three days, you're fine." And what we're saying is, "Hey, listen, if you fall off on January 20th, come back on February 1st. We'll just do it again. You're fine. Let's learn a rhythm. Let's get a rule of life that last 30 days of listening to Scripture, and then see how many times you want to do that in the next 12." Little bites.

John Mark: Yes, exactly. And these are rhythms that we do for the rest of our life some of them, and especially some of the daily ones. And so if you miss a day, every day is a chance to begin again.

Annie: That's it. That's it. All right, John, Mark, we've taken up plenty of your time, my friend. What did we not say that you want to make sure we say?

John Mark: Gosh, I'm just happy to talk to you. I have no agenda here. The only thing, Annie, that I would say we didn't cover is just at Practicing the Way we're creating these resources for anybody that's interested. We do these four week practices. We started with Sabbath, we're doing prayer then fasting and solitude, Scripture and a bunch more.

They're designed to be done in community. And you can do with your whole church or with your small group, or you can get together with a few friends, and order some pizza and spend an evening. They're four weeks long and they're their actual practices. So they're not just like you listen to a podcast and talk about it. You actually like go do things each week as you begin to habituate these ancient spiritual disciplines from the way of Jesus into your body, your nervous system, your daily life, your rule of life, and create more and more space to slow down and to attend to the Trinity within and to open your life to God's healing touch. So those are available for anybody that wants them.

Annie: Practicingtheway.org.

John Mark: That's it.

Annie: And they're free because you have a group called The Circle who are helping take care-

John Mark: They're not free actually. They're quite expensive to make.

Annie: Yes, yes, yes. But our friends are also invited... Just like with *The Chosen*, if you love what's being made, you can have it and or you can also be part of making sure other people can get it for free as well.

So John, Mark, the last question, we always ask. You know this. You've done this four times now. We need to start giving jackets like SNL when you've been on the show five times. Because the show is called That Sounds Fun, John Mark Comer, what sounds fun to you?

John Mark: You know, I recently moved back to California where I'm from and I have been surfing every Saturday morning with my two teenage sons. I'm a level of bad that is not even funny bad. It's not even comical bad. It's just embarrassing bad. How am I going to rule over the universe if I can't even get up on the board? But it's really fun.

We're recording this on a Thursday and Saturday morning, 48 hours from now, I will be in the ocean, the Pacific Ocean with my boys in winter loving our life. That sounds fun to me, surfing with my boys, being a dad.

Annie: That's awesome.

Annie: Well done. Thanks for doing this. I'm thankful for Practicing the Way and Rule of Life and the work you're doing John Mark. So thanks for making time for this.

John Mark: Oh, thank to you, Annie. All right, well, next time I'm in Nashville, do me a favor and don't get COVID-

Annie: I promise I won't.

John Mark: All right.

Annie: I promise I won't and we'll get to do this in person one of these times.

[00:55:13] <music>

Outro: Oh, you guys, isn't he just the best? Okay, I know, he's just the best. I mean, my brain is still spinning from that entire conversation. Go check out Practicing the Way at practictheway.org for all of these beautiful resources and for the ways that you can support John Mark and the work they are doing in the formational discipleship work.

Be sure to follow him on social media if you don't already, follow Practicing the Way, and tell him thanks so much for being on the show. Listen, and you know when people ask me what's like the one book in their life they need to read, I say, John Mark's book, *Garden City*. So if you have not read *Garden City*, read *Garden City*. What an incredible way to start out your year!

So, okay, we heard what sounds fun to John Mark. Something we're going to be doing this year is hearing from you. So I want to know what sounds fun to you. So here's what sounds fun to one of our friends who the listener just like you.

Okay, Melina because the show is called That Sounds Fun, tell me what sounds fun to you.

Melina: So I'm Melina [SP]. I'm from Chicago. And what sounds fun to me is an all-planned vacation with my husband. I sit in the camp of the Enneagram nines. I don't want to make any vacation plans. I don't want to make any decisions. I want someone to make them for me. I will fuse into that personality and go.

Annie: You're like, "All inclusive, please."

Melina: Yes, yes. Just plan everything for me. I'll pay for it. I'll pay for it. But just plan it for me. That's all I need.

Annie: Oh, my gosh. I love it. Okay, so the only decision you have to make is where are you going? Where's the vacation that you and your husband are going? That's the only decision, the rest will be planned. But you have to tell us what part of the world.

Melina: Oh my goodness. We would really love to do Ireland or Greenland or somewhere cool like that, especially if we could go see the Northern Lights. Or, honestly, somewhere cool like Seattle. We've talked about we'd love to do Seattle. We have two kids five and under and so we would just like to go somewhere without them.

Annie: For a short amount of time.

Melina: My husband isn't into the heat. So I can't do Mexico or somewhere fun like that. But just somewhere more cooler. The Northeast. We haven't done a ton of places.

So somewhere cooler. And someone will say, "Here's where you're picking up your rental car. Here's where you're going to stay. Here's where you're going to eat." All the things.

Annie: Okay, great. So dear everybody listening, if you want to plan a vacation for Melina and her husband, she wants to go north, and she wants the decisions to be made.

Melina: Yes, exactly.

Annie: Oh, that's a great answer. Well done.

Oh, my gracious! That does sound very fun. Excellent. Excellent. Excellent. Hey, if you do anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me. That's how you can find me.

And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you. I will do the same. And today what sounds fun to me, I need y'all to know the number one thing that sounds fun to me is I'm going to Target today and I'm getting a travel shampoo and a travel soap so that when I get ready at the gym I don't have to use their shampoo.

That's what sounds fun to me is getting travel shampoo so that when I get ready to the gym... Because it makes my hair feel funny. Okay, that's what sounds fun to me today. Y'all have a great week. We'll see you back here on Thursday with Holly and Glenn Packiam. Y'all are gonna love them. We'll see y'all on Thursday.