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Annie: Hi friends, and welcome back to another episode of That Sounds Fun, our 10th anniversary year. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today.

Before we dive into today's conversation, I want to tell you about one of our incredible sponsors, Athletic Greens. Taking care of our health is not always easy, I hear you. But there is one simple way to make sure we're getting the nutrients we need in a day. It's why I've been drinking AG1. It's just one scoop mixed in water once a day, every day. It makes me feel so much more energized and ready for the day.

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If you wanna take ownership of your health, start with AG1 as well. Try AG1 and get a free one-year supply of vitamin D3 plus K2, and five free AG1 travel packs with your first purchase exclusively at drinkag1.com/soundsfun. That's drinkag1.com/soundsfun. Y'all check it out.

Intro: Today on the show, I get to talk with my friend and one of our worldwide favorites, John Mark Comer. You know him and love him, and today is his sixth time being on That Sounds Fun. That's right. Member of the Hall of Fun, any guest who's been with us more than five times. He's taught us so much about rest and Sabbath. And in his new book, *Practicing the Way*, he's doing a deep dive on some spiritual practices that will help you and Jesus connect in consistent and deeper ways.

This is another incredible conversation to help us really kick off this year. Remember, we're letting ourselves have the whole month of January to kind of plan and prepare and move into 2024. And this conversation, I think, is another step in that for us. So here's our friend and Hall of Funner, John Mark Comer

[00:02:42] <music>

Annie: Okay, John Mark Comer, welcome back to That Sounds Fun. Annie, what a delight to see you. You fill my heart with joy.

Annie: What a treat.

John Mark: Great to see you.

Annie: I feel the same way. Listen, I have a big announcement for you that you don't even know.

John Mark: Okay, hit me.

Annie: Listen, I gotta show you this. We are on video. You, my friend, are part of the Hall of Fun.

John Mark: What?

Annie: John Mark Comer. Right here.

John Mark: Is that something new? I am basically off social media. I work from home. I have no chance to ever listen to podcasts. I'm out of the loop on all of my friends, all of them. I have no idea. I don't know if you-

Annie: Yes, here it is.

John Mark: I had no idea. You could have adopted nine babies. What is the Hall of Fun?

Annie: I did not. I'd have texted you. I'd have sent you the gift thing on Amazon if I was adopting nine babies. Okay, that Sounds Fun Podcast Hall of Fun is anyone who has been a guest on the show five or more times-

John Mark: What?

Annie: And today is your sixth episode, my friend.

John Mark: No way. Who else? Who's in competition for number seven? That's the question.

Annie: Right next to you is Santa Claus. Right next to you is Santa Claus, just so you know.

John Mark: I have so many questions. Did you...?

Annie: No, no, no. Let me tell you who else is on here. Ellie Holcomb. Who else would you know on here? Michael Ware, Dave Barnes, the girls from She Reads Truth. I mean, there's only about 10 of y'all. No, sorry. Three times four is 12, 13, 14 people in 800 episodes are in the Hall of Fun.

John Mark: Can we just stop and just say Hall of Fun? Well done on the branding. A++.

Annie: Thank you. Thank you.

John Mark: That's clever.

Annie: I thought you'd enjoy that. So congratulations. I've been dying to tell you in real life and I thought, no, I gotta just save it for when he is on the pod and say, welcome to the Hall of Fun.

John Mark: Okay, so for those watching on the tube or whatever, can you please replace your That Sounds Fun logo backdrop with the Hall of Fun so that people can see my name on every podcast?

Annie: So people can see it?

John Mark: Thank you.

Annie: Yes, we will share it. We will absolutely share it. Okay, John Mark, it is our 10th year of That Sounds Fun. We have a lot of celebrating to do this year.

John Mark: Congratulations.

Annie: And one of the ways we're doing that, thank you, is we are starting every episode asking, tell me what sounds fun to you right now. Tell me what's going on in the Comer home that is fun for y'all right now.

John Mark: What sounds fun? Vacation sounds fun, Annie Downs. It has been such a stressful season. So we just moved, all of our kids started a new high school and we bought an old fixer upper and I'm starting an organization. And let me just say, you should do one of those things at a time, not four of those things at a time.

Annie: Yeah, right, right.

John Mark: Like when I fantasize right now, it's not about bad things. It's about vacation. Like I just imagine myself in Airbnb. Somebody sent me a link to one like way out in Joshua Tree, like desert, desert, like no neighbors, dirt road, Joshua Tree and I just can't stop thinking about it. I just wanna go.

Annie: Oh, listen, Airbnb is such a bad drug for me, dude. It is such a bad drug.

John Mark: It's bad.

Annie: So on this answer, what sounds fun, I'm loving just our Sabbath feast right now. We just moved and we had this incredible Sabbath community in Portland that we would do. We began the Sabbath with like a Sabbath feast together and it transformed our Sabbath practice. It was the highlight of the week. It was just a weekly party and a really special group of people.

And then we moved and did a 10-month kind of family gap year with some lovely people, but basically nobody there kept Sabbath. So we just did Sabbath by ourselves for a better part of a year, which is fine. It was still really beautiful. And now we've kind of moved to put down roots in LA and we're building community kind of from scratch. There's only a few people we're close to. But they've been coming for Sabbath dinners, keeping Sabbath and a couple of them are just hilarious and wonderful to be around. So that sounds fun.

In this crazy season of stress where my life is way outside my kind of normal, more healthy boundaries, just as far as work and activity, it's such a gift to know that Sabbath is coming. And no matter how many hours... we're recording this on Thursday. No matter how many hours I have to work tonight, how late I have to work or whatever, I know that tomorrow at 6 p.m. all the devices will go off. There'll be no anything, no work, and some really great people I love will be sitting at my table and I at least have that 24-hour gift. So that sounds fun.

Annie: How do you not bend to the pressure externally or internally when Saturday comes of like, man, if I could just do two hours, if I could just do two hours of work and I could knock out two hours, all the kids are reading books, my wife is out doing something with friends, if I could just do two hours of work, I would feel so much better. How do you not bend to that?

John Mark: I don't know if this is a helpful answer, but I feel like, based on my own experience and that of a few older, wiser people that mentor me and I respect and look up to, that if you go on the spiritual journey, not to get too emo here, but there is a bit of an arc where early on in our life, we tend to be, you know, in David Brooks's language, our focus is what he calls the first mountain.

You know, if not all people, but in particular people like me or like you who are a bit more type A, a bit more driven, a bit more entrepreneurial, our focus tends to be work, getting our life together, building a career or a ministry or whatever, doing things in the world, all good things, but underneath it, there is a drivenness, there's

an ambition, ego. I don't care how good what you're doing is, planting a church or starting a ministry, or writing books about Jesus. Our motivations are mixed at best. And anybody that says differently is either delusional or highly deceptive, either are bad lads.

Annie: Un-self-aware on their best day.

John Mark: I mean, at best, my motivations are mixed. That's the honest truth. And especially early on. You know, there's a gift in that. I think that ambition, which is something the New Testament warns against, God is so gracious. I think He often uses our shadow side, uses our mixed motivation to propel us to do things that if we actually knew how difficult they were going to be, we would never say yes to.

So I think ambition works with ministry and work, similar to how romance works with marriage. Like M. Scott Peck does the kind of evolutionary psychology around how intense feelings of desire for another person last on average six to 24 months and then go away. And they're often designed by God or nature or, you know, depending on your worldview, to get us to make a commitment to another person in marriage that if we actually knew how difficult marriage was going to be, none of us would ever make that commitment.

But those feelings, which often are just, frankly, we romanticize them and we sanitize them, but often they're just burning sexual desire or narcissism, or I like how this person makes me feel, or I'm insecure. And when I'm with this person, I feel less insecure. I'm anxious. And when I'm with this person, I feel safe. They're less than noble motivations a lot.

But God often uses those mixed motivations to get us to make a commitment that then if we stay faithful, that commitment over decades will be one of the most difficult and one of the most transformative relationships we're ever in.

And I think work and ministry is the same way. God often uses this mixed motivation of ambition, ego, anxiety, we want to prove our daddy wrong or whatever. And God so graciously meets us in that and uses it to get us to then go do things that often require self-sacrifice, death to self, facing our shadow side, suffering, pain, building resilience.

So all that to say, that is that kind of drivenness that not all people have, but a lot of type A people have, I think it is slowly burned clean as you apprentice under Jesus over a lifetime. I don't think our motivation is ever... I don't know that there's ever a moment where I am pure love and I'm on this podcast just to radiate love to Annie F. Downs.

I would like to think that when I'm 80 and we're on podcast number 71 of the Hall of Fun, I would like to think that my motivation would be much more pure and loving and servant-hearted than it was the first time when I'm like, "Oh, Annie, that's a big podcast. I want to sell books. I want to make it as a writer. Let's go on her podcast." I would like to think there's a transformation of my motivation.

Now, this is a very long answer to a very short question. But I think what happens is as that motivation begins to be burned clean, purged, purified, set free by Jesus, there's a good thing that happens where we began to do our work more out of love and service. You know, that Kahlil Gibran line, work is love made visible. You know, we began to do our work just to express the love of the Trinity to other people.

But the sad part of that is, or the difficult part that I'm facing now, this kind of whatever middle point I'm at in my spiritual journey is I would much rather just read books and pray and make dinner for my family than do anything. I feel really free of ambition and really like, yeah, but I would love to just sit in my quiet office and pray for the morning and read and think, and then go make dinner for my family and watch the sunset, you know? So I have to get my motivation up, you know? So I don't know. Did you ever read the book or come across the paradigm on the critical journey, that stage theory at a Fuller Seminary?

Annie: I don't think so. That's not the graphic you have in the book, is it?

John Mark: There is a graphic in the book.

Annie: The triangle?

John Mark: No, not the triangle. It's a circle graphic on stages of... I don't really go very deep into it in the book. I kind of reference it in the book. But they have this, so stage theory is kind of like the discipleship version of developmental psychology, where they attempt to kind of map various stages we go through in our spiritual development into Christ-like character.

There's these two professors, Janet Hagberg, Robert Gulick, they came up with this six-part Stage Theory based on a large data set of thousands of Christians. There it is.

Annie: Found it.

John Mark: There it is right there.

Annie: Page 77, everybody.

John Mark: Read them to us, Annie.

Annie: Okay. Stage one, recognition of God. Stage two, life of discipleship. Stage three, productive life. Stage four, journey inward. Stage five, journey outward. And stage six, life of love.

John Mark: So I love this paradigm. We could talk about this for the whole conversation.

Annie: Do it.

John Mark: But the point I make in the book about it is that they argue most Christians never mature beyond stage three.

Annie: Yes, yes.

John Mark: So stage one-

Annie: Because there's a wall.

John Mark: There's a wall. So stage one, they call recognition of God. That's what evangelicals would call getting saved. Ancient Christians called it awakening. You awaken to God and desire to follow Him.

Stage two, they call life of discipleship, which is just like you become a basic Christian. You begin going to church, learning the Bible, learning basic spiritual practices, learning how to obey the commands of Jesus.

Stage three, the productive life. You begin to do things for God. You may lead a small group at your church or start a podcast or begin to take your work seriously as a Christian or volunteer in an area or lead a mission trip or start a justice initiative. You begin not just to learn about Jesus, but to actually do Jesus kind of stuff.

And that's where most Christian discipleship ends. It's the end of most American Christian spiritual development. And then you tend to, and this is not this linear, the wall can come at any point in your journey. It can come when you're four years old due to a family trauma. It can come much later. It can come multiple times.

But you hit what they call the wall, which is some kind of an experience. Like the language in Alcoholics Anonymous is the only way out is through. It's some kind of experience. It's divorce. It's the bankruptcy. It's the failure of a business. You get fired. It's some kind of an experience where there's no getting around it.

And you're in a time of pain, suffering, you're in a trial or tribulation in the language of the New Testament, and the only way out is through. And a lot of people never go through. They go backward. They get stuck. They get off the spiritual journey. They deconstruct their faith and go on a different journey.

But if you go through, you go into stage four that they call the inner journey. This is where you might begin to do therapy and revisit and you begin to become aware of your shadow side. You might begin to adopt more contemplative Christian practices and you begin to come awake to your family of origin, to your woundedness, to the parts of you that are deeply broken and you can't fix through willpower.

And then stage five, they call the outer journey. So now you begin to re-kind of emerge into the world and do good things. And from the outside, stage five, this is what I'm getting to... and stage three look very similar. You're out doing things for God. You're doing work-

Annie: Oh, yeah, they do a bit.

John Mark: But they're very different because you are profoundly different at this stage. Your motivational structure is profoundly liberated of the ego. You're not like pure love yet but you're real, you are calmer, you're more tranquil, you're more free of outcomes, you're less interested in success.

What's the Ronald Rolheiser line? Success has very little to teach us in the second half of life. That still feels good, but it doesn't really do much for our development as people. Whereas early in the journey, success does a lot because success early on, if we are graced with that, tells us and trains us what we are to give our energies to.

But once you kind of know that, and now I know that, it's kind of like now, success is not really going to help me. If I had written a book and it did well when I was 24, that would have been a great indicator like, oh, you should write. Now I'm like, all right, no, I know I want to write till I die. If this next book does amazing or if it flops, either way, it's not really going to help my development as a person of love, you know?

Annie: Right, right, right.

John Mark: And then they have a final stage, the life of love, which few people ever reach. But that's just you just radiate love. Your life is your ministry, not even what you do or what you say, just people being around you. You just like are a medium for a conduit for the love of the Trinity. So lots of things we could say about that.

In the book, the point I'm making is that most people's model of discipleship doesn't take them past stage three. To your conversation in this point, I don't know where I'm at in that journey, but somewhere in that awkward middle where my motivation is slowly, but surely being purged and purified. And I'm at the spot where... I think maybe I'm in stage four and I just want to sit and journal and pray, but I have to get up and go to work in the morning.

Annie: Well, you know what's funny is when I look at the diagram and when I think about what you're writing around it, because what you're writing around it is, this is what we thought. We thought there'd be a fast version of this and there is no fast version of life as an actual apprentice of Jesus. And for as much as I love you and love being your friend, one of the hardest things you tell me over and over in your work is this is going to be slow. The whole thing it's just gonna... this is our whole life.

I bet I say this quote almost every time I teach John Mark, where you said, you don't decide when you're 80 who you're gonna be when you're 80. You're deciding right now. And you talk about it again in Practicing the Way. You talk about like, hey, your favorite people, everyone, when you get to know them at 80, they are either very great to be around or very not great to be around because they have been formed their whole life.

John Mark: There's not a lot of 80-year-olds that are mid as my kids would say, you know? There are some, but mostly 25-year-olds aren't like the next Mother Teresa or like a potential terrorist. Most 25-year-olds are just mid. We're just like hopefully decent people. Most 85-year-olds lean significantly to one of the two sides.

Annie: Right, right. As you know, I love Practicing the Way. I love the podcast. I love the work y'all are doing with that organization. This book though, I told you yesterday, I texted you, I was like, "This thing is stout." There is so much to do.

John Mark: What did you mean by stout? You did text me that and you put stout in all caps. I was like, "I don't know, is stout a good thing? Is it a bad thing? I'm not sure."

Annie: You know what could happen? I'll tell you the truth. And you can tell me if you want me to cut this. What could happen when somebody writes a book around an organization they're creating is it's just the exact same stuff that the people already know. And this is not that. Practicing the Way the book... I said this to my teammates at lunch today. I was like, "There are things in this book that I have not heard. And I've listened to every podcast y'all put out because I'm trying to be an apprentice of Jesus.

John Mark: I'm pretty sure you are, Annie.

Annie: Well, thank you. So there are some things that you read in the book that are mentioned as well. I mean, the practices and the practices. But the book is stout because, and here's my question that I'm getting to, is if this is going to be my whole life, if this journey is long with getting through these stages, and if this is a long, slow process, as you said... hold on, I wanna read you to yourself. I'm gonna read you a quote.

"If spiritual formation is simply the way of the human spirit or self is formed into a definitive shape, then spiritual formation in the way of Jesus is how each of us is formed to be like Jesus and become our deepest, truest self." And then you literally go on to be like, and it's gonna take forever. It's gonna take forever.

John Mark: It's paraphrase, people, but yes.

Annie: The rest. I didn't read the whole page. That's a paraphrase of the rest of it. If spiritual formation is gonna take forever, do we need to define where we are on that circle? Do we need to know where we are in the journey or do we just keep going?

John Mark: There are different schools of thought. Some people are very borderline hostile toward the idea of like a stage theory of kind of attempting to map the spiritual journey because there's no one size fits all approach and the danger with trying to like say, oh, I'm in stage three or I'm in stage two or I'm in stage five, the danger is, you know, you fall prey to either pride or despair. You know, oh, look at me, I'm so far ahead or oh, look at me, I'm so far behind. And pride and despair are both, you know, not helpful at all.

I find it helpful because I think we're not the first people to go on the spiritual journey. There are many that have gone before us over the last few thousand years, saints and sages and who have left behind, you know, words of wisdom, you know, kind of markers for the road and, you know, to look for and words of warning of what to watch out for.

And I think an attempt to kind of plot yourself can be, for certain personality types like my own, very helpful really just for two reasons. You want to better name Jesus' invitations and His warnings to you. So wherever you're at, whether you're midlife or 21 and you just became a Christian or you're 85 and nearing the end, you want to be able to say, hey, here at this stage in both life and in spiritual development, which are not the same, but they overlap, these are some of the real dangers. And at this stage, here are some of the invitations of Jesus to me, you know? And they're very different.

Ronald Rolheiser has written I think more helpfully about this concept than anyone I know. He would say that the invitations of Jesus are for all people for all time, but they come to us differently at different stages and seasons of our life, you know? So when Jesus says... we read, you know, come deny yourself and follow me, if we're 15 years old and we're not a Christian yet, we hear that and receive that invitation one way.

If we're 72 years old and we've been following Jesus for half a century, we hear and receive that same invitation. It means something different. What it means to die to yourself, to surrender yourself means something different at 72 than at 22. So I don't know. I find it helpful. Other people don't. You can make too much of it. You can make too little of it.

I think the key is to realize, and what I'm trying to message in this book, that following Jesus is not a religion called Christianity that you ascribe to and you learn more about through lectures and sermons, and books. That following Jesus is a lifelong spiritual journey. It's more like apprenticeship to a master craftsman or artist than it is learning. It's more like learning jujitsu than learning quantum physics. It's something you learn with your body and your life, not just with your brain. And it is a lifelong journey that you never arrive. You never arrive.

Annie: You never arrive.

John Mark: You're always in progress. I mentioned in the book technology... So you talk about this a lot, Annie, but our generation is living through when the... have you ever had Ben Sass on the podcast?

Annie: No. Do I need to?

John Mark: I think he's brilliant. I'm so apolitical. He was a senator for a while. I don't even know what his voting record was. I have no opinion on his political life.

Annie: I'll look him up.

John Mark: But I love it when he is talking. He's written a couple of great books. He was a historian, educated at Yale before he went into politics, and now he's back in education. But his basic case is, hey, listen, 200 years from now, when historians explain our generation, our lifetime, right, they will not talk about Donald Trump. They will not talk about Antifa. They will not talk about political polarization. They will not talk about everything happening in Congress.

They will talk about the shift to a digital world and how it was, in all of human history, one of the most epochal changes that human beings have ever lived

through, and that it caused so much so... Like he talks about the last major change being the shift from an agrarian world to an industrial world, which happened, I think, roughly from the 1870s to the 1920s, right, over about half a century.

And he talks about how the social disruption caused by... he talks about prohibition, right? So we look back at prohibition and think it's so bizarre that America made all alcohol illegal, right? But then he talks about how there was an 86% approval rating for prohibition.

Annie: Oh, wow.

John Mark: 86% of Americans thought we should make all alcohol illegal. I can't fathom that. And he basically says it's because alcohol was such a problem because the social disruption caused by all of these people who basically were rural farmers living in small extended family village life, deeply relational communal life, moving into Queens and Chicago, and these urban environments surrounded by strangers, noise, busyness, was so great that substance abuse was so out of control that 86% of Americans thought we need to make all alcohol illegal.

And then he basically says that the social disruption we're living through in the shift to social media and the digital age is an even greater disruption. And instead of happening over half a century, it basically happened in half a decade. And-

Annie: A decade. I was about to say not even a decade.

John Mark: You think about mental illness and anxiety and I'm like all the craziness. So it's a long way of saying we are living through a technological revolution that 500 years from now people will still be talking about. And there are gifts of this. I mean, I'm looking at you in real-time. You're on the other side of the country. It was not very long ago it would have been like a four-month journey for me to come look at your face and I probably would have died on the journey. The odds of making it were about 50-50, right?

So now it's like, it's amazing. I'm looking at a picture of you from another part of the world, you know? So there are amazing gifts in technology. You're listening to a recording of this weeks or months later. But I think technologies have three disastrous impacts on our spiritual formation or discipleship. It has unconsciously trained our bodies to expect life to be fast, easy, and controllable. So-

Annie: Yes. I'm on this part of the world.

John Mark: Fast, no problem. It takes about 30 seconds to text you a link to Riverside and like, let's pop on, let's chat. Easy. Requires nothing. I move my thumb a couple of times

and boom, I'm looking at Annie Downs. Controllable. I can start, I can turn off, I can edit it, I can put filters on it to try to make my skin look less whatever. Like it's so controllable.

Spiritual formation is the opposite of those three things. It's not fast, it's slow. It's not easy, it's difficult. And it's certainly not controllable. It's radically outside of our control. And often it's the things that we can't control and fight against like suffering that God uses the most and failure and disappointment and heartache that actually is like God's curriculum to shape us to be people of love.

Again, I'm not trying to whine about technology. I'm grateful that I can never get lost anymore because of my maps app, blah, blah, blah. But there are some real shadow sides to it when it comes to formation that I think we have to actively work through.

[00:30:48] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners, [Shopify](#). Okay, if you're starting a small business this year or if you make something really cool and have been trying to figure out the best way to sell it, Shopify is the way to go. Whether you're making artwork or earrings, we are here for it and so is Shopify.

We use Shopify to run shopannieffdowns.com and it has been so easy and helpful. They're the global commerce platform that helps you sell at every stage of your business, from the launch of your online shop stage to the first real-life store stage all the way to the "did we just make a lot of money stage?"

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Sponsor: Okay, friends, people ask me all the time for a Bible recommendation. And so I cannot wait to tell you today about the [NIV Quest Study Bible](#). Hand to heaven, it is the Bible I have been using since 1995, which is a very long time ago. It is a

unique study Bible with notes written in question and answer format. The only question and answer Bible. It is so helpful for me. I love it so much.

There's over 7,000 notes, 350 different articles, and it gives insight into the common, uncommon, and sometimes perplexing passages in the Bible. The questions are sourced from real people by Zondervan and Christianity Today. And it highlights the top 100 questions asked by readers. There are reading plans and charts and maps.

You guys, it is so fun. Truly, it is such a fun Bible that keeps my curiosity high for the last - what's the math of this? 29 years? For a very long time, this Bible. Is that math right? Yes, that's wild that it has kept... I mean, it has kept my curiosity high for 29 years in the same Bible.

You can get it in regular or personal size. And the editions are available for teens and kids as well. Just visit amazon.com/queststudybible. I think you're really gonna love it. Again, that's amazon.com/queststudybible.

Sponsor: Okay, when I am thinking through what I need in my house, [Thrive Market](https://ThriveMarket.com) is literally my go-to for getting all of my groceries handled and stocked up on my household essentials as well. You just can't beat the convenience of picking out everything online and then it magically arrives at your doorstep. I really love that Thrive Market carries brands with the highest quality ingredients.

Their filtering system is super easy to use so you can sort based on your lifestyle needs. Whether you're looking for organic kid snacks, low-sugar alternatives, or gluten-free pantry essentials, you can curate your own shopping experience really easily.

And as a Thrive Market member, I save money on every single grocery order, like an average of 30% each time, you guys. They also have a deals page that changes daily, and it always has some of my favorite brands on it. Plus, when you join Thrive Market, you are also helping a family in need with their one-for-one membership matching program. You join and they give.

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Thrivemarket.com/thatsoundsfun.

Okay, now back to our conversation with John Mark.

[00:34:42] <music>

Annie: Do you know there are times... Tell me what to do about this. There are times where I feel as guilty about being on my phone as I used to feel when I was in sin patterns I couldn't get out of as a teenager.

John Mark: Oh, interesting.

Annie: Like it feels like the same kind of like, man, I wish I wasn't doing this. Man, what am I doing? What am I doing? Like, I don't wanna spend my time like this. I have those same narratives in my head sometimes about not being able to... not being able, put that in big quotes, not being able to put my phone down as I did as a teenager, when I was struggling with sin patterns I couldn't get out of.

John Mark: Tell you what to do about that? Annie, you are a lovely-

Annie: Well, what do you think? You don't have to have a solution. What do you think about that?

John Mark: I think you are right. That's a fascinating insight into the inner dynamics of the soul. I think that's a good problem to have, feeling that way about your phone. I think shame is never helpful.

Annie: Right, right. That's practically my roommate sometimes. Yes, a hundred percent.

John Mark: I'm just hearing Kurt Thompson in my head. You know, shame is lurking in the shadows behind everything. So shame, I'm bad, I can't do it. I'd like, you know... That is certainly not a helpful way to break free of, you know, the addiction we all have at some level. It's a question of how bad is it not do you have it to our phone.

And I think a compassion and gentleness... What's that lovely line from the guy that wrote *Anam Cara*? Be gentle with yourself I think is in order because you're living in a world system that is designed to addict you to your phone. So in the same way that if there's an 18-year-old guy, male, let's say male, it could be a female, but let's say male, who's struggling with lust and sexual holiness and feel shame about it.

And that's not all bad to feel the conviction of the spirit of God, which is not shame, but is a, you know... and to feel, you know, sad over areas of brokenness. But you have to admit you're living in a world that God designed your body to basically be married by 17 or 18 and be like out working the field and producing children early on to help you work in the field.

And now we live in an era where not only does marriage happen technically, you know, on average 10 or 20 years after God awakens your body sexually, but, you

know, pornography is a thumb swipe away on your phone, you know? So that doesn't justify our habitual habits of lust. But it means as you approach it, you have to recognize this is a... you're fighting a worldwide system of evil and a conspiracy of factors.

And I think with the phone, it's the same. Like to try to live a slower, unhurried, contemplative, peaceful, Jesus-abiding life in the digital age, I mean, it's like... I mean, you are more than swimming upstream. You are attempting to live differently than 99% of the people around you, the systems of the world, the structures and institutions of our society, which goes to community.

You know, sin thrives in secrecy. There's that saying in AA, we sin alone, but we heal together. Or there's that other saying, we're only as sick as the secrets we keep. So, which is why the Christian pathway out of sin, addiction, compulsion is confession. It's naming your wickedness and your woundedness—I talk a little bit about this in the book—before not just God, but before loving community. So there are no secrets. We can't free ourselves of all sin based on a choice or willpower. But we can confess all of our sins.

Annie: I know you say that in the book, and I hate that because I would like to believe that I can willpower my life into the life that I want.

John Mark: Oh, that'd be awesome. That'd be so rad if that were true.

Annie: I know. And I convinced myself that four days a week. That like, I can just do what needs to be done to have the life that I want. And then I bizarrely get tied up in disappointment when I can't do it, John Mark.

John Mark: Shocker.

Annie: But willpower, I mean-

John Mark: How does that work?

Annie: You write about it, about like willpower just isn't the thing that we think it is.

John Mark: No. I mean, it works on very small changes. Very small changes. But it's not helpful once you begin to touch on the deeper stuff in your shadow. You know, you love the Enneagram. Once you start getting into all that Enneagram stuff in there, willpower is not... it's not the solution, you know?

I mean, how I like to think about it, and I write a little bit about this in the book. So the New Testament, the writings of scripture, the preaching of the Christian way

give us this kind of vision, theological, spiritual, moral, relational vision of how life should and could be in the kingdom of God.

And discipleship is a lifelong process of beginning to develop the desire and the capacity, the ability and the willingness, which are two separate things, to... you know, we often desire to do God's will long before we have the ability to do God's will. You know, I desire to not worry about my future. I do not yet have the ability to not worry about my future, at least not at a consistent basis.

So discipleship is a lifelong process of becoming the kinds of people who have the ability and the willingness to live this Christian vision of life in the kingdom of God. And it's a lifelong process. So that is all about change. It's all about how do you go from the people that we are to the people who are living the Sermon on the Mount over a lifetime.

And when it comes to change, we approach change two ways, directly and indirectly. Direct change, or we could just say through the agency of willpower, is great. I use direct change whenever I possibly can, but it only works on small changes.

So, for example, if somebody right now begins their morning by checking Instagram rather than by, you know, say, praying a psalm, you could listen to a sermon, you could go to church, you could listen to a podcast, you could be inspired in your heart, and you likely, unless if you're a full-on digital addict, which actually is a lot of the population, but if you're not, then you probably can just decide, based on your will, Hey, I'm going to read a psalm, I'm going to pray a psalm every morning before I look at my phone. Great. And by the way, don't feel shame if you don't have that capacity. Many people don't right now because of digital addiction. But most of you, or many of you can.

But once you begin to touch on the deeper issues of discipleship... I mean, I'm at a spot in my discipleship where almost all of the brokenness in my life is so far beyond my ability to change through willpower or direct effort. You know what I mean?

It's my emotional reactivity to my senior in high school when he does something that scares me, or it's disappointment I have over my marriage and the way it leaks out, and my wife is lovely, but the way it leaks out and contempt kind of digs and that. Or anxiety I have over the future or fear of what other people will think of me. All of these areas where I need to change in order to become the kind of person who is living in the kingdom of God with Jesus, who is more loving and joyful and peaceful, they are all beyond the range of my willpower.

My problem is no longer that I don't know what the Bible teaches, and it is not that I don't desire to obey the commands of the Bible. It is that I do not have the capacity in my body to obey the commands of the Bible consistently. And that's the life of discipleship. How do you become the kind of person who can actually obey what Jesus commanded? And that's a lifelong process. Those kinds of changes we approach indirectly.

So let me give you a couple basic examples of indirect change. One would be the practices of the spiritual discipline. So let's take anxiety. Jesus says, don't worry about tomorrow.

Annie: Right. Very direct, Lord.

John Mark: Thank you, Jesus. Now I know-

Annie: Can do.

John Mark: I want to obey Jesus' commands. Other commands it takes you a while, like His commands around money, His commands around sexuality, divorce, often take you a while of following Him to come to agree with Him, to come to trust His moral vision. That one, I'm like, no, no, I'm there. I don't wanna worry about tomorrow, Jesus. I would love to be a person who is totally free of worry.

My problem is not a lack of biblical knowledge, and it's not a lack of desire. It's that the habits of sin in my body are so deep that I am so afraid so often of tomorrow. So I can't just flip a switch and not worry about tomorrow consistently. I can a little bit. There's certain things I thought might come in, but no, I'm not gonna worry about that. I'm just gonna be in the moment. But consistently, overall, I'm not yet the kind of person that can live with no anxiety about the future.

But you know what I can do, is I can practice Sabbath. That is within the realm of my willpower. I can turn my phone off for 24 hours every weekend. I can begin my morning by praying the Psalms before I ever touch my phone. These kinds of changes are within the realm of my willpower. I can do them as a disciple of Jesus. And they're indirect change.

So one definition of the practices or the disciplines is they are disciplines by which I do what I can do, practice Sabbath, turn off my phone, read the Psalms, pray the Psalms, so that I can make space for God to transform me into the kind of person who can eventually do what I currently cannot do—not worry about my future or be anxious at all.

So I can't flip a switch and never worry again about my future, but I can practice Sabbath. I can pray the Psalms. I can do life in community and bear my fears with my close friends. I can do the work of therapy and just keep exposing deeper and deeper layers of my brokenness to Jesus to heal.

And eventually, God, through all of that messy, lifelong relational process of discipleship, can transform me into the kind of person who's less anxious, less anxious, less anxious. Maybe not pure freedom, but I think that there will be a day where I've already seen dramatic growth, where I will be profoundly calm and at peace before God. That will be my new baseline. But it's a long, slow process.

Annie: It's a long, slow process. One of the things you wrote about... we have the Let's Read the Gospels podcast where I read the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, for the whole year of 2023, and we're doing some more here in 24. But one of the things that I never paid attention to until you called it out, and now every time I read it, it stands out to me, is there were only two groups, crowds or apprentices. I mean, there were Sadducees and Pharisees, so there's a difference. But of people who were following Jesus, you were either in the crowd or you were up-close apprenticing.

And as I'm reading and listening, as I'm even hearing you now, the indirect and the growth, is it fair to say that there are areas of my life where I'm an up-close apprentice and there's areas where I might be in the crowd? Or are you all one or the other?

John Mark: Well, the nice thing about apprenticeship is it's more about your level of devotion than your level of maturity. And that is so encouraging to my heart.

Annie: That's so encouraging to my heart, John Mark

John Mark: Not just Jesus' disciples. People get confused between the apostles and the disciples. People think Jesus had 12 disciples. Jesus had hundreds of disciples. At least 120. He had 70 that he sent out. He had female disciples, which we literally have no record, not a one of any rabbis in the ancient world. All rabbis had disciples. We have no record of any rabbi ever with a female disciple before Jesus. I mean, He was the Rabbi with female disciples.

So Jesus had all these disciples and then He had this subgroup of 12 apostles that were this highly symbolic group that blah, blah, blah. We digress. I mean, talk about not just His disciples, but His inner 12. They were a freaking disaster. I mean, they were not... but they had left everything to follow Him.

I mean, one of them full-on went back and betrayed Jesus. Others denied Jesus, abandoned Jesus, arguing about who's the greatest, were so obtuse that the second member of the Trinity had to say to them at one point, are you so dull? Like they were so thick headed and willfully ignorant. And I love that.

So the marker of a disciple is not, are you like crazy, sagacious, calm, spiritual saint? It's, are you willing to really follow Jesus? It's a measure of commitment, of devotion, of are you willing to give up everything and to follow after Him? And you're stumbling, broken, wounded, I'm still a mess way.

Annie: Wow. So crowd versus apprentice has nothing to do with your ability, it has to do with your desire.

John Mark: It's not a moral category.

Annie: If you want to be an apprentice, you're up close. That's it.

John Mark: Yeah. Because the crowd had some people that were really good at what they were doing. It had some people that were really good moral people that were Torah observant Jews. It had other people that were like murderers that were scheming to kill Jesus. Other people that were just new, were still considering who is this Jesus.

But I mean, the point I'm making in the book is in America, we have three categories. We have the crowds, disciples, and then we have Christians. This like middle category of people that like basically agree with the Jesus kind of sort of Christian worldview with some glaring exceptions and maybe even go to church, maybe even on a regular basis, but their life is not organized around learning to obey everything that Jesus commanded.

It's organized around work or pleasure or materialism or fame or success or going fishing on the weekend. That category does not exist in the gospels. And I argue it's a literary device. Not because they're not aware that there are people like that, not because there weren't people like that in Jesus' day, but they wanna force you the reader. They wanna put this binary on you that we hate. And they wanna give it no nuance because they want you to ask yourself the hard question, am I an apprentice of Jesus or am I just a face in the crowd?

And a face in the crowd doesn't mean you're a bad person, doesn't mean you don't believe in Jesus, it doesn't mean you don't agree with Christianity, doesn't mean you're... it just means your life is organized around something else.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

[00:51:01] <music>

Sponsor: Y'all are always so kind to compliment my hair, and number one, thank you, and number two, you need to know it's [Prose](#). You know, we love a quiz around here. Prose has a hair consultation quiz where you answer questions on everything from the climate where you live, the issues you are having with your hair, your hair type and texture, and your eating habits. Then they analyze 85 personal factors and handpick clean ingredients that get you closer to your hair goals with every single wash. I'm telling you, I've taken the quiz, gotten my shampoo and conditioner and I love what Prose does for my hair.

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Okay, have y'all listened to our latest episodes of Annie's MiniBFF podcast yet? We are having the best time getting to read some of our favorite stories from the Gospels from some of our favorite kids' storybook Bibles. And in case you missed the announcement, you can also watch the episodes on YouTube. Y'all, we are having a great time.

So if the MiniBFFs in your life want to follow along with what we're reading as they listen or watch, Zonderkidz is offering a discount on the storybook Bibles that we're going through. It's the collection that includes the Jesus Storybook Bible, The Tiny Truths Illustrated Bible, and the I Wonder Bible.

So just visit faithgateway.com and use the code AD20, like Annie Downs 20, for an extra 20% off any of these three products, the Jesus Storybook Bible, The Tiny Truths Illustrated Bible, or the I Wonder Bible. That's faithgateway.com, and the code is AD20 for an extra 20% off any of these three products. Make sure you grab the bundle as we have more episodes coming up every Monday.

Did you hear the fun news? The Let's Read the Gospels Guided Journal comes out March 5th. You can pre-order it right now. We have loved going through the Gospels with you over on Let's Read the Gospels podcast. and as we were talking about how special and sacred that has been, my publisher said, this really matters.

So we decided to create this beautiful journal that includes a 30-day reading plan that we've never done together on the podcast, so it's brand new to us, too. It also includes questions for you to process along the way and journaling prompts for you to go through.

We're going to do this book together as a community, and on the podcast in April of 2024. So start thinking about who in your life you could invite to go through the guided journal and Gospels with you, and go ahead, get your copies of the Let's Read the Gospels guided journal today. You know what we say around here. You don't have to be in the Gospels every day to be changed, but every day you are in the Gospels will change you.

So go pre-order your copies of Let's Read the Gospels guided journal from Amazon or Target or wherever you love to buy books. This would make a great Easter gift for a basket or a birthday gift or just a little "it's a good Monday gift". So go pre-order your copies right now.

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

[00:54:34] <music>

Annie: Okay, I have a Gospel-centric question that is okay if you don't have an answer. I just would like to know what you think. I read it yesterday for Let's Read the Gospels, and every time it brings a question to my mind. In Matthew, Jesus says, you will sit on 12 thrones around me, right? Do you know what I'm talking about?

John Mark: Yeah, judging the 12 tribes of Israel.

Annie: So does that include Judas?

John Mark: Ooh. Yeah, that's... You know what I do in hard situations like this? I text Tim Mackie.

Annie: Yeah? Yeah, right, I'm gonna ask him. He's coming back on the show in the spring. So I am gonna ask him. I asked him if Mark was the naked guy at the end of Mark. That was my big question for Tim Mackie.

John Mark: You don't ask him that because it's theoretically my namesake. There's no John Mark in the Bible, but people think there is. It's a confusion thing. And theoretically, it was the naked guy, if it's so.

Annie: That's right.

John Mark: So I don't wanna be that guy.

Annie: Yeah, that's interesting though, right? That Jesus, knowing where it would go, said, you're the 12 that will sit in the 12 thrones and judge the 12 tribes.

John Mark: And they have a sense that there needs to be a 12th apostle to replace, but it's ambiguous in the text because before the coming of the Holy Spirit, they draw straws. It's unclear if God was involved in that or not. It's a really interesting story. I haven't quite been able to make sense.

I mean, I know this. I know that without getting into all the emotionally loaded stuff, it's interesting that Jesus had female disciples, but not female apostles. And that's an interesting question. And there are different theories about that. Because He was so radical at breaking down kind of gender barriers. So there are different theories from different people I really look up to and respect. I don't have any dogmatic view on that.

But certainly, I think what most people agree on is that the reason Jesus chose 12 apostles and possibly the reason he chose 12 men was it was this like symbolic prophetic act that he was kind of restarting a new Israel, which was founded by 12 brothers, or which became the literal name for 12 tribes.

So Jesus is saying that my followers who eventually are made up of Jews and Gentiles, a major theme in the New Testament, we think of it as no big deal. It was earth-shattering at the time. This is a new Israel. I'm forming a new family, a new humanity. I'm fulfilling the promise I made to Abraham so many centuries before. I will bless you and you will be a blessing and through you all nations on earth will be blessed.

This movement is now going outside the boundaries of ethnic Jews to the whole world, and it's starting with this small community of apprentices of Jesus. So certainly, whatever else is happening, that's happening. And the 12 tribes judging the... I think that's what Jesus is saying is My promise to Abraham is coming true.

Annie: Yeah. Okay, I like that. That's very good. Ain't that fascinating though?

John Mark: That's amazing.

Annie: So to me, stuff like that is what keeps...

John Mark: That's my way of giving you a different answer, you didn't ask that question and because I don't know the answer to that.

Annie: Oh, it's so good. But the beauty of scripture is those questions never stopped coming the longer we're in it.

John Mark: And that's where Tim Mackie's book is so awesome on the Bible is full of puzzles and they're there on purpose. And they're like the Psalm 1 kind of way of meditation on scripture. He calls it Jewish meditation literature. You're designed... I've just followed Jesus long enough. But even some of the ones that are troubling to me, that one's not troubling, other parts of the Bible are troubling. And I just trust that I don't understand it yet. And that if I just sit with the puzzle, they're not all gonna get solved by the end, by the time I die. You know what I mean?

You just have that beautiful moment where like, you've read a story in the Bible for forever and you're just totally confused by it. And then you randomly hear some podcast or hear some sermon or something. And you're like, oh, oh, that's what it means. I've always wondered about that. And it's always been weird to me. And then like, somebody just says something, you're like, oh, now it makes perfect sense. That makes sense. I've had so many of those moments. You learn to just hold in gentle tension the parts of the Bible that you still have questions about.

Annie: And when there stops being questions about Scripture and I get bored, if I get bored on anything, you know me, if I get bored on something, I'm out. So curiosity is one of the greatest gifts God's ever given me. I love being curious. So the Bible keeps being fun to me because I can't stop being curious about what we run into.

John Mark: I wonder if that's part of why God inspired the writers of the library of Scripture to have so many obtuse moments in there.

Annie: Just to keep us.

John Mark: To keep it interesting.

Annie: Okay, so finish with this for us. It's the second full real week of January and people are making their new rhythms for the year.

John Mark: Love it.

Annie: Just give us a pitch for apprenticing with Jesus. Why is this the year? If someone is new to this and they're listening because they heard this was a Christian podcast and they're new to this whole thing, or they're ready to re-enter into a faith life at all. What is the why behind apprenticing Jesus in 2024?

John Mark: I love the new year just based on my personality type. You know, there's nothing different between January 1st and December 31st, but there's some psychological line in the sand. We're like, all right. It's like the feeling you get at the beginning of a new day. It's like, okay, it's a new day. I love that sense of blank canvas, whether it's a complete myth and illusion or not, I love that.

Annie: Yeah, right.

John Mark: I think you can't think about apprenticeship to Jesus the way you think about getting in shape or going on a diet or finally quitting your job and starting that new business as this thing you need to go do. And is this year the thing I'm going to do? I'm going to start running four days a week and do yoga one day a week and eat all paleo and pray every day and follow Jesus. Take it out of that category, put it in the life category.

I opened the book with the question, who are you following? And I just try to argue that everybody is following somebody or something. In Christian language, everyone is a disciple. The question is not, are you disciples? It's who or what are you a disciple of?

And what I mean by that is right now you're already following something or somebody. You're already apprenticing. You're already on a journey. You're already going somewhere with your life. You're already moving through the universe. You're already getting up in the morning and putting on some clothes and going out to do something with your life.

You're already looking to something or someone to make you happy and give you peace. It could be, all right, when I lose 20 pounds or when my podcast gets to this or when my new business is this or when I retire, or when my kids graduate or when so-and-so likes me or when I get married or when I make this much money or when I graduate from college. It could be anything. Or when I, you know, climb El Capitan or when I travel to Honduras. It could be anything.

But you're already pursuing something or someone, looking for something or someone to make you happy and at peace or whatever language you put around it. So the call to apprentice under Jesus is in that category, not in the New Year's resolutions category. And I'm not against New Year's resolutions and have better habits and start your day by praying the Psalms, not by looking at Instagram.

Annie: It's a different category.

John Mark: But this is a much deeper question. It's about really, who are you trusting? Who or what do you believe will lead you to the life you most deeply desire? When Jesus

said, come and follow me, He wasn't asking you to do something you're not already doing. You're already following, you're already walking, you're already living a life.

He was asking or calling you to trust Him to shepherd you, lead you, guide you to the life that at some level we all most deeply desire, which we who follow Jesus have come to believe is found in following Jesus into the inner life of love that we call the Trinity and doing life with other followers of Jesus, sharing his love between us. Jesus called that, or the writer John, the apostle John called that the life that is truly life. And many people are living... if you're listening to this, you're alive, but are you living?

Annie: Yeah, that's it, John Mark. That's right. Well, I'm so grateful for this book. It feels the long, slow process of faith and writing-

John Mark: It wasn't my decision, just to clarify.

Annie: I know.

John Mark: It was my decision to write about it but-

Annie: I know. I know. You're just the one who keeps saying it to me over and over for the last, I don't know... you came on the show in March of 2017, John Mark Comer.

John Mark: Wow. There it is.

Annie: So for the last seven years, you've been telling me to slow down. But the thing about the book is that it really lays out how to write a rule of life and based on these practices. And I think-

John Mark: Which is a little bit more in the New Year's resolutions category, yeah.

Annie: Totally. But I mean, the thing is, it is the indirect thing you were talking about earlier, is the indirect way is to write the rule of life because the direct way I can't do on my own.

John Mark: Exactly.

Annie: But so I'm grateful for the long, slow process that 20... Also I don't have to have the rule of life by January 31st of 2024. I can spend the whole year writing what I want my life to be. Right. And that is being shaped as I'm working on it. So that is my goal is to spend the year doing it.

John Mark: I'm not a big tech guy, but we built a cool piece of tech on our website that's free. There's a link to it in the back of the book or you can go to practicingtheway.org. It's called a rule of life builder. That's really cool. It walks you through kind of a digital process to construct a rule of life. And then it's editable and it's shareable and it'll print it out in a PDF for you. It's pretty cool.

Annie: I love it.

John Mark: So that's there if anybody-

Annie: That's great. Thank you for that.

John Mark: It's free for anybody.

Annie: Yeah, thank you. Well, glad to have you on, my friend. Thanks for making time for us.

John Mark: Annie F. Downs, I love chatting to you. Thank you for having me on. Happy New Year and may the peace of Christ be with you.

[01:05:56] <music>

Outro: Oh, you guys, isn't he just the best? We are so lucky that John Mark always makes time, energy, space, thoughts for us. I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful for him. Few pastors have shaped my life the way John Mark and his work have shaped my life. And that seems true for a bunch of y'all as well from what you say to us.

So make sure you get a copy of Practicing the Way. And if you aren't already, go follow him on social media, tell him thanks again for being on the show, and thanks for being a Hall of Funner.

If you have any questions from this episode, you can drop them in the Q&A box on your Spotify app. Or if you want to, you can just DM them to us on Instagram @thatsoundsfunpodcast. We will answer them for you over there.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, on a plane on my way back to Nashville. Anywhere you may need me, that is how you can find me.

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home. Do something that sounds fun to you, and I will do the same. Today, what sounds fun to me is getting home and time to see a friend play some music tonight. So I'm just gonna hustle and bustle, hurry home to get there. So I'm excited to be back.

Y'all have a great weekend. We'll see you back here on Monday with a really important conversation as we are entering an election year with our friend, Michael Ware. We'll see y'all then.