Randy Frazee:

You're listening to the Bible Roots Podcast with pastor Randy Frazee. If you're a church leader looking for creative ideas to help your church engage more deeply with the Bible, this podcast is for you. And now, for today's episode.

Randy Frazee:

Welcome everybody to episode seven of the Bible Roots Podcast. My name is Randy Frazee, and I get to be the host of this wonderful new show. This podcast is devoted to the topic of Bible engagement. Why? Because Bible engagement is the number one catalyst for spiritual growth with no close second. Check out episode one, where we lay out this discovery and then keep listening up through and beyond episode seven, our episode today. If you're a pastor or responsible for leading people spiritually through a small group, your family, or even one-on-one discipleship or coaching, this podcast is for you. And we encourage you to share it with others you know in that same space.

Randy Frazee:

Now, today, my guest is my good friend, Mark Batterson, and I am so excited, beyond excited about this conversation. Let me tell you a little bit about Mark, if you don't know who he is, for all three of you; Mark Batterson serves as the lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington, DC. One church with many locations. NCC is focused on reaching emerging generations and meets in theaters throughout the DC metro area. NCC also owns and operates Ebenezers Coffeehouse, the Miracle Theater, as well as the DC Dream Center. NCC is also developing or redeveloping a city block located at the intersection of Capitol Hill, Navy Yard and Riverfront neighborhoods.

Randy Frazee:

The capital turnaround will be a mixed use space, including event venue, child development center, marketplace, and co-working space. Mark holds a doctorate of ministry from Regent University and is a New York Times bestselling author of 19 books, including The Circle Maker, In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day, Wild Goose Chase, and has recently released Double Blessing, Whisper, and Play the Man. Mark is married to Laura, and they live on Capitol Hill with their three children, Parker, Summer and Josiah. And I know all of you're asking, "So what does Mark do with all of his spare time?" That's pretty crazy. Hey Mark. Thank you my friend. It's so great to reconnect with you again. Welcome to the podcast.

Mark Batterson:

Hey, thanks, Randy. Enjoy to be with you. And I love the Bible. And so I love conversations about the Bible. I couldn't agree more. I think you said number one catalyst for spiritual growth, no close second. And I'll just say off of the top, my daily Bible reading plan has been a lifeline-

Randy Frazee:

Wow.

Mark Batterson:

... for me over the last couple of years. So I'm excited about this conversation.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Thanks Mark. It was so cool when I reached out to you. I know you're super busy and you immediately got back like, "I'm all in Frazee. Let's do this." Hey, let's go back, because we had a chance to be together, as COVID was opening back up, we were together at a church planter conference in Colorado. We can certainly chat about that. But I remember years ago when we met, like a million years ago, back when the dead sea was just sick, I like to say. Zondervan headquarters is the first time I remember you and I encountering each other. You may or may not remember that. And you and I were both quite a bit younger back then and we were starting off in our writing adventures and we met and I have just so much enjoyed paralleling ministry with you. I think I may be a little bit older than you, even though I look younger, I think. I'm just joking, man.

Randy Frazee:

But tell us about your upbringing, just for everybody to know Mark Batterson, your upbringing, and your call into ministry.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. I'm a Midwest guy, born in Minneapolis, lived in Wisconsin, grew up in the Chicago area, tried to plant a church at the ripe old age of 22, Randy, when you have everything all figured out.

Randy Frazee:

How could that go wrong?

Mark Batterson:

I actually had a 25 year plan for a church plant that my professor gave me an A on. So it has to work, right?

Randy Frazee:

Why not?

Mark Batterson:

It did not work. We fell flat on our faces. That first attempt was a fail. But that's what opened us up to go anywhere and do anything. And so my wife and I packed up a U-Haul move to Washington DC, and we've been here ever since. We've had the joy of leading National Community Church started with a core group of 19 people. And we've been at it for a quarter century now. Time flies when you're having fun. But I will say this, I believe in long obedience in the same direction. And I think you over exaggerate what you can do in a year or two, but you under-appreciate what God can do in 10 or 20.

Mark Batterson:

And so you've got to dream big, you have to think long, you have to pray hard. And when those three things come together, God has a way of doing something that you can't take credit for. So we're a multi-site church, as you mentioned. Capitol Hill is our genesis, our origin, and that's where we live and where we're building out this city block. But then we have some opportunity to serve all around the city, including a DC Dream Center in Ward 7, which is a high impact ministry that we've had the joy of building and launching. And so some good things happening. Despite what we see on the news every night, some really good things happening here in DC; an undercurrent of spirituality that we're believing for revival in the nation's capital.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Well, first of all, Mark, your commitment to DC area is Amazing. And I think this kind of a bonus axiom for people beyond Bible engagement is what you said about that long obedience. I think that it's known by those of us who are a little further into ministry is that sometimes we quit right before a blessing is starting to come. And sometimes, you just got to just hold onto the plow. Hey, I want to talk about... Because I have a son. I think we talked about this. We're going to come to NCC in the 1st of June with my son and my daughter-in-law. They are right in the thick of DC. My son is a litigator right across the street from the White House, 1717 Pennsylvania Avenue. That's pretty doggone close.

Mark Batterson:

Wow.

Randy Frazee:

And my daughter-in-law is a producer for the NewsHour at PBS and they are right in the middle of it. And it's interesting. Okay? So they've been there now, boy, a number of years now. But both of them were raised in Texas, okay? Where I got to pastor for, oh, well maybe about 30 years in the Dallas Fort Worth area then San Antonio. And you are in DC. And so this concept of... It would be really helpful to talk about what it's like to engage the scriptures in DC, how is it different than a place like Texas, which is quite a bit different? How is it important? I said here in the notes, "How is it important to be like a son of Issachar today?" So give us your perspective on the difference between engaging the Bible with the two different audiences.

Mark Batterson:

Well, the good news is that the Bible is omni-relevant. We don't just read it, it reads us. And the fact that it has stood the test of time, and from Texas to DC, to really any language, the word gets incarnated in a way that has such profound impact. I do think, I don't like using big fancy words, but occasionally I know one or two that I'll throw out. And one of them is this idea of eisegesis, that we tend to read into the text, our personality, our history, and we have to be really careful and guard against that. At the same time, I think you're asking a brilliant question that DC has a very different personality and history than, say, Dallas or San Antonio or any place else. And so you do have to really be a student. I've studied the history of this city. You have to know what the strongholds are.

Mark Batterson:

And by the way, on that note, when you start discovering the history, it sometimes adds a little oomph to what you're doing. This city block that I described that we own, that we're building out, it sits at the intersection of 8th and M street, which is across the street from the historic entrance of Latrobe Gate of the Navy Yard, which was established in 1799 by Thomas Jefferson. It is the original gateway to the nation's capital. So look at what the Lord's done. He's given us a corner of the gateway and our prayer room is right on that intersection. And so here we are.

Mark Batterson:

And then you start reading; like in my daily Bible reading plan, I was reading about Shallum, the chief gatekeeper. This is in the depths of, I think, first Kings or second Kings. And you start connecting the dots and seeing that, "Okay, well, every city has gateways. You need to have a theology of this city." And then you start thinking about Jeremiah 29, that you build houses and you plant gardens because you got to have a 70-year perspective and do things that make a difference to the third and fourth generation. So now I'm just riffing a little bit, but at least-

Randy Frazee:

No that's good, man.

Mark Batterson:

... that's kind of whetting our appetite. So DC is a very unique place to do ministry and understanding, for example, political correctness. This is the epicenter. Well, if I have to choose between biblical correctness and political correctness, I'm going to choose biblical correctness seven days a week and twice on Sunday, but we've got to live in that tension, so to speak.

Randy Frazee:

I think, Mark, whether you're in Texas or in DC, we've got this issue now where there's an ideology and theology. And so the ideology, some are saying, is even becoming a religion apart from something like Christianity or Islam or Judaism. Ideology is becoming a religion. And I think at my time in Texas, 30 years in Texas, is that sometimes I felt like the believers were reading the scriptures through a political ideology and they were more committed and are more committed to that than they are the theology. And yet, I think it's similar, isn't it, to in DC, sometimes where it's a bit challenging.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. Well, I think that's spot on. We are a church that tries to reach across the political aisle. That's not easy to do because the polarization is so intense right now. But I would say this; if you filter your biblical theology through your political ideology, it's called idolatry.

Randy Frazee:

Yes.

Mark Batterson:

And so we've got to make sure that we're flipping that and realize that we have blind spots and there are sight lines that we maybe don't see. And I'm so grieved, Randy, by, we have lost civility. And civility really is grace in the public square. And so I'm not throwing stones at anybody. I just think it's interesting that, I think, for every Supreme Court nominee for the last 17 years, no one from the other party has voted for someone who was nominated by the other party. No one.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

Well, that right there shows that it's along political lines that we draw these things. And I think we've got to realize that we are, first and foremost, citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

Randy Frazee:

There you go.

Mark Batterson:

And recognize that the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And I think all of those things mix together, but boy, does our biblical theology have to be on point right about now.

Randy Frazee:

And it's so important for young pastors emerging to be intrigued and fascinated and passionate about biblical theology and make sure... Because what you said, and I want to make sure everyone hears this because it was spot on, I agree with you 100%, is that when you're reading your theology through your ideology, it's idolatry. We think of idolatry as being some sort of statue somewhere in the Old Testament. But is the modern day and discipling your people through that can be challenging, like during COVID with mask or no mask, should you meet or not meet? What about the George Floyd race...

Randy Frazee:

And a lot of us pastors didn't really know our biblical theology and started even talking out of ideologies. And we had a lot of people around America leave churches over, maybe some missteps we made, or what do you think about all that?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I think we got a little out of our depth. And I... Randy, I believe every "ology" is a branch of theology. And so I think, for example, if you don't have a basic understanding of neurology, you're not going to appreciate the healing of the man born blind because this is not an astigmatism, this is someone... There was no synaptic connection between the optic nerve and visual cortex in the brain. So this is synaptogenesis.

Mark Batterson:

What I'm getting at is; I really think that we could afford to be a little bit more studied and versed in other "ologies", but then make sure that the epicenter is our theology, and that that's where we put our stake that it's the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that yes, reason, experience, tradition, those things inform our faith, but scripture is the final authority when it comes to matters of faith and doctrine. And so that's where that sequence becomes really critical, especially in a culture where we have ideologies that most of us, Randy, we have a very superficial understanding of those and probably we underestimate the impact they have. In fact, could I dig a little deeper on one of them?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Go for it, man. Go for it. Yeah-

Mark Batterson:

Let me-

Randy Frazee:

... I want to dig with you, man. My mind is popping.

Mark Batterson:

So this is dangerous, but evolution is one of those trigger words. The reality is, to me, micro evolution, this ability to evolve, is a total testament to the creativity of God.

Randy Frazee:

That's right.

Mark Batterson:

That he designed us in a way that we can grow and evolve. I believe that God, in the beginning, created out of dust and breathed the breath of life. I have no doubt about that. So I have issues with the macro piece. And so let me poke at Darwinism for a second.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Go for it.

Mark Batterson:

The challenge with it is that if you believe in a lowly origin... We have a high view of everyone's created in the image of God, like you are invaluable irreplaceable. In fact, the Talmud, Jewish commentary on the Old Testament says if you save one life, it's like you say the whole universe. So we have this incredible dignity of life view. Well Darwinism; if everything is random chance, there is just so much logical fallacy and circular reasoning. And then subliminally, it sends this message that, I mean, who is to say what's valued and what's not?

Mark Batterson:

And it has this subconscious effect on a culture where you don't value life the way that you could or should. And so that's an example of an ideology that just gets into the soul of a culture and can have detrimental effects beyond what we appreciate. And I would be the first person to admit, Randy, too, that sometimes Christians are so narrow minded. We don't even study science. Well, Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." So let's both end it and understand and stay humble in the whole process. So I don't even know what we just talked about, but-

Randy Frazee:

No, that's good.

Mark Batterson:

... there you have it.

Randy Frazee:

No, it's very important because we got into this because of the complexity. And like I said, my son and daughter-in-law are very educated and they moved to DC with a very strong faith. They still have a strong faith, but the way they navigate it is, they've become better listeners, they've become more open-minded. It hasn't necessarily let their theology really shift them. And I remember even years ago, an atheist started coming to our church. He had three sons that he wanted to have a moral foundation. But he decided to stay at the church and listen to the sermon. He wasn't opposed to it. He is not into miracles. And I decided to do a message out of Philip Schroeder's book years ago, The Science of God, and a great book from a astrophysicist. And he just proposed how to reconcile the six days of literal creation, Yom, Hebrew days, with what maybe actually happened through an evolutionary process.

Randy Frazee:

And I just proposed it as a potential idea. I'm here in Texas. And so I've got people that are like, "Man, it's six literal days. It's got to be that or you're heretic." And then I've got this guy here. I didn't present it as one or the other. I just said, "Here's something that might even make you think God's even bigger, that it's really not naturalistic evolution, but it's really theistic evolution that God has... That He found a.. Because time unfolds slower in different places in the universe, and he picked one of his billions of universes, which we now can scientifically prove to measure time that's unfolding at the same time it does on earth. And six days of creation were actually true." And I just presented it... I didn't present it as though I believed it, I just presented it as a point of intrigue.

Randy Frazee:

And this guy said, he said, "That was it. You removed my barrier, man. And once you did that, I had nothing else to do, but to pursue the resurrection of Jesus. That's only thing was left. You took that away from me." The guy became a believer and grew like crazy. Just about two months ago, he passed away from ALS and he relied on the resurrection to lead him into Christ, and now he was relying, he said at his death, on his resurrection through Christ. And it was a good example of how you have to listen and be educated to teach to a modern post-secular society in Texas, who listen more to Fox News, except in Austin, and way more of the people are in DC. Correct?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, absolutely. So good. And could we have a little bit more humility. Recorded history... Recorded human history is only 5000 years.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

Recorded human history, only 5000 years. And we know so little. I mean we have hieroglyphics, so we know a little bit about Egyptian culture. But let's be honest, we know so little about a 1000, 2000, 5000 years ago, much less how that all happened when God said, let there be light. Somehow those words started traveling at 186,000 miles per second and left creation in its wake. And so what an amazing miracle we get to live day in and day out. And I think sometimes, we just get so bent out of shape by a literal, where maybe it could be figurative. And I understand with higher criticism and the concerns of the slippery slope, "Well, what if we start dialing back on what we believe about this or that, or the other thing?" I totally understand that. But I think sometimes, we have a straw man argument for things that we're wasting energy where we don't need to.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that what you're really talking about is not what you believe or don't believe here in this podcast. What you're talking to is about how you teach today to a post Christian society, how you teach to a group of people that their ideology has overcome their theology. And I think just probing these things being much more knowledgeable of the "ologies" is going to really help us gain a greater audience to know that we're listening to them is for sure.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. And it's that Romans 1, that God reveals His nature, His divine qualities through what he's created.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

And so it's a holistic approach with a high view of scripture. And when we do that, when we... God first reveals Himself as creator, and I think that's the door that many people come into faith through that creation door, well as, of course the cross or redemption door and there are other doors, but wow, what a fun conversation.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. You and I could geek out on theology all day long, my friend, Hey, I'm going to take us out of the atmosphere down to something super practical about Bible engagement, you as a lead pastor on how do you select your teaching topics and how do you so related to where you're trying to take the congregation. In other words, do you consider where NCC is at, where the community's at first and then select your topics. So when you selected your topics for this year, how did you go about doing that?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, well there's 26 years of doing it. So there are always... I'm an ideator, and about 90% of our sermon series over 25 years would kind of come out of my head and my heart. And then our creative team, our campus pastors, others would maybe be that other 10%. The primary hat I wear is the teaching pastor hat. So what we do is we gather every fall and kind of identify where are the strengths and weaknesses, you almost do a SWOT analysis of where-

Randy Frazee:

Of the congregation?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, of where the congregation is spiritually. And we used to survey. We would throw, kind of pitch sermon series ideas. We haven't done that in a long time, but by the way, we wouldn't just pick the series that got the highest survey response, the ones that got very little response, we realized, "Huh? Maybe those are things we should be talking about too, because people don't want to hear about it."

Randy Frazee:

They don't want to hear about the seven woes of Jesus. Right?

Mark Batterson:

Yes. So it's an awesome responsibility. Isn't it, Randy, to kind of plan out a teaching diet. Now I want to be careful here though. Let me take a little bit of pressure off. Every pastor has had this experience; is someone coming and saying that they're going to leave the church because they aren't being fed.

Randy Frazee:

Yes.

Mark Batterson:

Now I have two reactions to that and I hope we're... Some of you are listening, we're just getting to know each other, so please hear my heart in this I'm having a little bit of fun, but I want to say to them, my kids learned how to feed themselves when they were two. Like-

Randy Frazee:

That's on you dude. Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

The only ceiling on your intimacy with God and impact on the world is daily spiritual disciplines. You've got to be in the word day in and day out. If you're relying on one meal a week that where I'm feeding you, oh you're you're going to starve to death. Because that was never the way it was designed to be. Now I certainly want to rightly divide the word, I want to help teach the word, but at the end of the day, Randy, I'm preaching less to feed people these days and more praying that people would have an insatiable hunger for the word of God that no sermon can satisfy. In other words, go get into the book yourself and get a daily Bible reading plan and start digging in. But in terms of sermon series, we began the year... It's time to dream again, we just felt strongly in our spirit that we've been doing a lot of languishing, a lot of reacting and Acts 2:17, "If you're filled with the spirit, you're going to dream some dreams."

Mark Batterson:

And then we went into a series on love in February that kind of plays off of this idea of Valentine's day, but much deeper than that. Our prayer was, we need to fall in love with God all over again. And if we do that, we're going to be good to go, that's the "Do what you did at first," Revelation 2.

Mark Batterson:

Then we just came out of a series on Esther about courage because our hunch is that-

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

... we are now a creative minority and a moral minority in America as the church. And it's going to take a little bit more courage to hold to biblical convictions in the days to come. And no one needs to fear that, that's how the early church operated that's when we're at our best. And so we then begin to discern, how do we teach the full council, the full gospel, Old, New Testament, try to get some book studies in there as well as a few topical series. And the next thing you know, we have a teaching plan for the year, but I mean it's crazy. You only get 52 weekends and let's be honest, only the pastors come in 52 weeks.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Matter of fact, I'm going to go there next-

Mark Batterson:

Okay.

Randy Frazee:

... because historically, sermons are weekly. You just mentioned that. And our people are committed with their schedules before COVID it was 1.7 times a month was considered a super committed person. But it's really hard when you only have them for one hour a week. And then for most people it's not all every week, it's maybe 1.7, maybe two. And then you've got this rise of digital communication, which is 24/7 on demand. So I follow you pretty closely Mark, so I already know some of the answers to this for you, but I want you to spell them out. How do you respond to this? We got Google searches where people are searching, "My marriage is in trouble," and up comes the first on the first page comes divorce lawyers. That's what comes up, not our message. And so we've got an opportunity through social media to speak to people 24/7, and I know you do some of that stuff to go beyond that. Even though by this time, Hebrew says you should be teachers of the word, you should have learned how to feed yourself two years in.

Randy Frazee:

We do have this challenge that we don't get as much time with people as information's coming at them. How do you handle all that?

Mark Batterson:

Well, we've tried to never revolve too much around the weekend. I'm not saying it's not significant. It is, but we've always been a church of small groups, hundreds of groups that meet during the week, Monday to Friday during. COVID we launch something called The Upper Zoom-

Randy Frazee:

Yes, I know that.

Mark Batterson:

... Fun Play on the upper room. And so we do a digital prayer gathering. We went to something called the NCC daily, where we have kind of a daily touchpoint with people. So we tried to mix up and change our rhythms a little bit. I think we're going to have to let the dust settle here for a couple of years to figure out where the church heads, but I'm old enough to know that the church history is a swinging pendulum and I'll pick on worship, for example, hymns are the end all be all. And then the next thing you know, there's a pendulum swing into, well, it's worship choruses. It's more of a modern take. And then guess what, it'll swing back where hys are now innovative again.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

I think we overreact to a lot of things. I do think the Internet's here to stay.

Randy Frazee:

You think?

Mark Batterson:

I think so. call me a profit prognosticator but... And people will supplement their diet with the latest and greatest podcasts, and so we have a little bit different competition for the... Content is still king and we've got to up our game a little bit. How do our messages compete with the TED talk? we've got to be as researched, as on point, and the good news is; we have an unfair advantage and His name is the Holy Spirit. And so we speak a life giving word and that's a unique thing; His word doesn't return void, "God is watching over His word to perform it," Jeremiah 1:12. And so I think we need to have a little bit more confidence in God's word than maybe we have had, and let His word do the heavy lifting.

Randy Frazee:

Hi, this is Randy Frazee; host of The Bible Roots podcast, which is brought to you by my friends at Harper Christian Resources. Harper Christian Resources equips you to understand the scriptures, cultivate spiritual growth and disciple your people with Bible study resources from today's most trusted voices.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, I think you're right. I'm going to make two comments and then I'm going to ask you another question here. One; there's enough TED talks now where people can listen to them endlessly. And these people have focused on that TED talk for six months and they memorized it, and if you know... It's like you and I write a book, we travel and give the signature speech of our book, man and everyone thinks we're amazing, but a pastor has to turn around a talk every six days. He's back at zero again.

Mark Batterson:

Yes.

Randy Frazee:

But we do have the advantage of the word of God, which is, I think, the word of encouragement to us. Hey, tell us a little bit about, I think people are super interested in, what's your kind of rhythm in preparing a talk. I mean, do you, have you find yourself some sort of a rhythm, is it Monday like a Monday through Friday thing or is it maybe a bigger scope than that? How far out are you? Those kinds of things.

Mark Batterson:

It is. Let me zoom out and then I'll zoom in. Big picture I did, I read 3000 books before writing one. I think leaders are readers. I read once that every book, the average author puts about two years of life experience into it. So I figured if I read 200 books, I would gain 400 years of life experience, but only be a year older. And so I read thousands of books before writing one. And when we come up with our sermon series for the year, I start reading and researching. Now I keep doing my daily Bible reading plan and that's a critical piece. I don't think you ever want your devotional life to turn into sermon prep-

Randy Frazee:

I agree.

Mark Batterson:

... I think there's a danger in that. But then we get our weekly rhythm. We do a weekend planning meeting on Tuesdays where we're brainstorming and then Wednesday, Thursdays, are study days for me; I literally can get 10 hours of study in and I kind of clear my calendar. So I'm getting at least 20 hours of study in for every message I'm doing. And most messages are four messages and then I have to figure out which one of these four do I preach, because I can preach about six pages. I might as well show and tell this-

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, this will encourage people.

Mark Batterson:

For what it's worth, I print mine out landscape on a eight and a half by 11. And I had a father-in-law who pastored for 31 years, who... He would do it longhand and so I took a cue from him. And so I'll take this into the pulpit with me and I manuscript everything because I'm not good enough to speak extemporaneously. And then once I have that message, then I'll watch it back. I'll tweak it for that next service. And then it starts all over again. Although I have to say, we do have a teaching team at this point, I used to do 48, 50 weekends a year.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. I remember.

Mark Batterson:

But our teaching team, what that allows us to do is bring different personalities and histories to the pulpit that people may... It has a little bit different effect that... So that teaching team approach is a part of our methodology if you will at NCC, but that's the long and short of it.

Randy Frazee:

No, that's fantastic.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

You held up one... It was with those, that landscape page. Was that-

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

... the whole thing or do you have more than one of those?

Mark Batterson:

So it would be... The average message would be, I can preach six pages in 30 minutes.

Randy Frazee:

So six of those landscape pages.

Mark Batterson:

Yep.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

So you do pages versus word count. I'm a word count guy.

Mark Batterson:

Yup. I... Well, I use the same font, the same font size and the same margins. So I know I can get six pages in, in 30 minutes. And so that's just... We're creatures of habit. It's so funny. Everybody has their own... And by the way, my prayer before going into the pulpit is, "Lord help me help people."

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

I've prayed that prayer thousands of times because part of it, Randy is I want to get my focus off of myself.

Randy Frazee:

Yes, yes.

Mark Batterson:

Because everybody, I can't be concerned about how people are going to perceive me, "Oh, are they going to love this message? Is this... Are they going to think I'm smart?" Man, you're in trouble if that's where your starting point. No, no, no. This is about help me help people. And then I found, when I pray through those notes, it really turns into a 30 minute prayer versus a 30 minute message.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

It hits differently. So those are a couple of things.

Randy Frazee:

That's good.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

I think really a big deal is, you got to have your identity question figured out before you head out to teach because if it's all about you and people liking you, sometimes I found the guy that has got his arms folded, you're thinking, oh man, he's rejecting everything. No he's struggling, man. He's struggling. And he's actually being more impacted by what you're saying and he's not liking it, but he's being impacted versus the person that always comes up to you and says, "That's the best message I've ever heard in my life." And that one makes me feel good. But the guy with his arms folded is experiencing potentially more transformation. And you got to get that, if you don't get the... If the young pastors that are listening, don't get this identity thing figured out it's going to swallow you up and spit you out. Don't you think?

Mark Batterson:

It sure will. If you live off of compliments you will die by criticism.

Randy Frazee:

Hey listen. Absolutely. That's good. Say that again?

Mark Batterson:

If you live off of compliments you'll die by criticism.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Yeah. You've heard that phrase "one criticism plus a thousand compliments equals one criticism" because you'll just be totally focused... Totally focused on that.

Mark Batterson:

Yes.

Randy Frazee:

We had a good family of ours leave to go to a different church and oh my gosh, and I just was, I'm still, I'm 33 years into this man. And I still... It's still bugging me. So I just reached out to them. I didn't know. And they said, "Well, it has nothing, and we love this church and it's all this," he says, "we're just taking a little bit of different position on the LBTQ community," where they're both physicians. And they said, "We just want to be in a place that's a little bit more progressive and open to that." And I'm like, Man, I totally get it. It's really, really hard. And I've a good friend in town that's way more in that venue," and I said, "It's the big sea church." And I just found out it wasn't because I'm a bad preacher. I thought, "Oh I could live with that."

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. Yep. No doubt. No doubt.

Randy Frazee:

Hey listen, let me... One of the things that a lot of people are talking about is that COVID, in some ways, awakened church leaders to focus less on attendance and more on engagement. Do you agree with that? What do you think? And how has that affected the way you approach ministry?

Mark Batterson:

Absolutely. Yeah. If your metrics are all about attendance, and given the fact that average church, 40 to 60% pre COVID numbers, you're going to be depressed if that's your metric. I've always leaned on Paul planted Apollo's water, but God gives the increase. At the end of the day, you got to worry about inputs, not outcomes.

Mark Batterson:

And I learned during COVID we went a year and two weeks where we couldn't gather by government mandate. So I'm preaching to 10 people that recording, you know what Randy, I learned to preach with some fire shut up in my bones.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

It's not about how many people are there or even drawing energy off of whoever you're preaching to. I think there just comes a moment where you're called to preach and you got to let it rip and do what you do. So yes, I think engagement has become huge for us, less concerned about those macro numbers and more concerned about who is in the upper zoom now, and we just spun off some prayer pods. How many people are praying in that kind of way, how many people are plugged into small groups? So they're in community with eight or 10 or 12 people that they can do life with. Much more focused on those pieces than just someone who walks through the door and a little clicker gets clicked, right?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, that-

Mark Batterson:

We've got a... Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

That feeds our ego. And I like attendance. I do, but I've really been awake... It's been a wake up call. So if we did a fasting initiative, so I got to teach on fasting, but the question is how many people came along with us in the journey. And so we measured that and that really helped us. We did a marriage initiative with the [inaudible 00:38:55] on, we want you guys to get a checkup on your marriage. So I did a marriage series, a family series. The question was not how many people showed up to listen to me, but how many people did this assessment and did four date nights together and then went to these four classes and really looking at those numbers, I'm getting a lot of satisfaction out of that, Mark, after 30 years. And just maybe COVID helped me to wake up to the fact that you have to pay attention to the numbers. That's really important, but it needs to be down the list a little bit. You think?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. During Lent, we decided to leverage that and do... Challenge our church to fast and do a John Wesley fast.

Randy Frazee:

Oh.

Mark Batterson:

It's from sundown Wednesday to sundown Thursday. And we had more than 400 people... By the way, Wesley wouldn't ordain anybody to the Methodist ministry who wasn't willing to fast once a week. And I find that fascinating.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

And so we had more than 400 people who said, "Hey, we're going to fast 24 hours once a week." That's the kind of engagement, Randy, where, "Okay, I can work with that." And just a reminder to leaders who might be discouraged, because the numbers aren't as big as they once were, listen, all God needs is 120 people who will pray for 10 days in an upper room. That's all God needs. All God needs is a remnant and some really good things can happen.

Randy Frazee:

That is awesome. Hey, I want to talk about a couple of your books. I mean you've got 19 books and I just brought out two of them because I thought they might have a little bit of interesting twist on engagement. So the first one is Whisper, which talks about how to hear the voice of God. So that's a good topic related to engaging God's word. That seems to be super pertinent to Bible and spiritual engagement. Love to talk... Have you talk about, a little bit about that book and how you were teaching that and writing that to get people, to engage the voice of God.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. It's almost the seven love languages of God. In other words, the way that God speaks to us. And I want to say this up front; that scripture is the centerpiece.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

That's the key to the whole thing, but just as God did in scripture, I still think He speaks through people and pain and He speaks through doors and dreams and desires. God speaks in all of these different ways. And the big question is; Who has the loudest voice in your life? Is it the still small voice of the Holy Spirit?

Randy Frazee:

Right.

Mark Batterson:

Or is it the voice of culture or even the voice of condemnation? Because the enemy can be pretty loud. Maybe another way that I've been asking that question, Randy, is; what percentage of your thoughts, words and actions are a reflection of the social media that you're following in and the news that you're watching and what percentage of your words, thoughts and actions are a revelation that you're getting from God's word? I'm a little bit concerned that we are overly influenced by what we're ingesting via news and social media. And we got to make sure that we're taking our cues from scripture.

Randy Frazee:

I think that's so powerful and more pertinent today, again, we talked about the ideology and where the information is coming from. And I think a lot of people are thinking that they're being innovative with... but they're really just kind of moving along with culture, what I'm seeing. And I love The Whisper book and you even also wrote a version for kids as well, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. I... What a enjoy. It was so fun, Randy, as fathers, you'll appreciate this, that we turned a few of these trade books into essentially picture books for kids, kind of bedtime story books. So God Speaks In Whispers is a beautiful little book that my daughter Summer and I wrote together.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. I saw that.

Mark Batterson:

And I've got to give her credit for most of the rhyming. She's pretty gifted. And then The Blessing of You is another beautiful little book that, what we're trying to do is, I have memories of my parents reading to me and some of my favorite memories are reading to Summer when she was a little girl. And so now to be able to co-author a few of those children's books for parents is pretty special, pretty meaningful. And I think can create some of those divine appointments when you're tucking the kids into bed.

Randy Frazee:

What I love about it is that you're not just teaching about hearing the voice of God, but you're really creating an experience where people are really actually given tools and really an expectation to actually hear the voice of God. Not just hear about hearing the voice of God. All right. Let's shift to Do It For A Day. You talk about Bible engagement. That's like being doers of the word, not hearers only. So tell us about the Do It For A Day project concept. I mean that's all about engagement isn't it?

Mark Batterson:

It is. And everything comes back to habit formation. Spiritual formation is habit formation. You cannot separate those two things. In fact, I would suggest that The Sermon On The Mount is six counter habits; love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile and give the shirt off of your back.

Randy Frazee:

Oh.

Mark Batterson:

Those are six counter habits. Theologians call them the six antithesis, but I see it as six counter habits. And so do it for a day is about 30 days to make or break any habit. You have to make or break the habits that are going to make or break you. And so if I can help you do something 30 days in a row, there's a good chance that we have formed a new habit. And so it's me kind of taking folks on a journey and whatever habit you need to make or break, I know exactly how it's going to happen. It's going to happen one day at a time. And that's kind of the key to the whole thing. And that's a very biblical concept. Give us this day, our daily bread. Living in day tight compartments.

Randy Frazee:

What I love about this and again, as it relates to the topic of engagement of scripture, is one idea is you link your sermon up to maybe what the small group's discussing to your personal study. So that's sort of still an intellectual sort of communal kind of thing. But what you're doing with this book and project and the teaching is that you are encouraging people to develop new spiritual habits in their life. And so ultimate engagement is not just studying along with you. That's kind of level one. The next level is really getting in there and saying, okay, dig down and try these things in the power of the Holy Spirit to see if it can change who you are as a person, not just make you smarter about the Bible, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Randy Frazee:

Okay. Mark, a couple more things here. This is a big two big questions and then I'm going to let you go. What is the number one thing that is discouraging you right now? And what's the number one thing you're encouraged about? Is that too much to lay on you?

Mark Batterson:

It's not, I am concerned about culture and where we're headed. It seems like everybody is blaming everybody for everything.

Randy Frazee:

It is right.

Mark Batterson:

And so I would flip it and say, this is our moment to stand in the gap as peacemakers, grace givers, truth tellers, tone setters. We are here for such a time as this, for such a place as this is... You need light when it's dark and you need salt in a moment like this.

Randy Frazee:

It's time for us to be... So in while it's the most discouraging thing, it's also could conversely the most encouraging thing, because this is our moment to shine because that's not who we are.

Mark Batterson:

It is. And now that means we've got to get some things right with the racial tension of political polarization. How do we function as a spiritual family and love each other, not just in spite of, but because of our differences. How do we celebrate different ethnicities? And how do we at least listen to those who have different opinions? We have four principles of peace making at NCC, ask anything, listen well, ask anything, disagree freely and love regardless. Those four things kind of guide us in having those hard conversations. Those hard conversations aren't going away. What we need to do is be a little bit better at grace and truth. Grace means I'll never give up on you. Truth means I'll be honest with you no matter what. And those two things combined are tough love. That's how we love people; with grace and with truth. And if we keep doing that, then we're following in the footsteps of Jesus and good things will happen.

Randy Frazee:

That is so great. Now I ask you the one thing that you're most encouraged about is that the converse side of that, or do you have something else?

Mark Batterson:

It is. I mean, it's probably... I just have to keep going to the back of the book. This is an open book test and listen, every nation, tribe, people and language, the day is coming when we will surround the throne of God and we will worship him in all those different languages, in all those different ways. God's going to get the glory, the kingdoms of this world that includes Russia, Ukraine, things that are happening that are so challenging on the world front, the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And so we've got to keep remembering the past, remembering the future and taking it one day at a time. And at the end of the day, Jesus said, "I will build my church." He didn't say, "I will build your church." He didn't say, "You will build my church." He said, "I will build my church and the gates of the hell won't prevail against it."

Randy Frazee:

Man. That is really tough. That is really tough stuff. Love it. Love it. Love it. I always ask everybody this; this is how we'll wrap up, is that you could be King Mark for the day, whatever you say everybody has to do. Okay. If you could just take one thing, whether you're talking to pastors or just to the congregants, okay. Okay. You can't ask me any questions you can't ask why you just have to do it. Do you have a thought on what that one thing would be?

Mark Batterson:

Wow. Okay. Well, I'll give you a serious answer. But before I do that, I said, if I ever ran for political office, I would've two planks. One; mandatory national nap time. I just think we would be happier and healthier. Jesus took a nap in the boat. So I'm a big believer in nap time. Two; pure maple syrup. Just call me crazy, but I think pure maple maple syrup is really, really good.

Mark Batterson:

So those would be my two planks. But in perhaps on a more serious note, you ever heard of the human library in Denmark?

Randy Frazee:

No.

Mark Batterson:

You can check out a person and hear their story. And I think, Randy, if we're going to get anywhere, we've got to get much better at listening to people's stories. And maybe it doesn't... That doesn't change my theology, but it changes my empathy. And so now I see you for who you are, and I just think God gave us two ears, one mouth. We got to use them in that proportion. And in fact, Francis Schaeffer said that if he had an hour to share the gospel, I think he said he would take the first 55 minutes and listen.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

And then the last five minutes he would share-

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

... The gospel. So-

Randy Frazee:

I think that's prophetic my friend, even though you lead a nonprofit ministry, that is prophetic. I love that. I think that's spot on. The Christian community is going to get so much headway if we will... If we will listen, realizing that listening does not change our theology. That's great. Hey Mark. If there's anything else you want to share that I didn't cover, we can do that. But I also want you to know we'll link everything we talked about in the show notes, like your books and things like that. We want to make sure that people know where to find you.

Mark Batterson:

Just all of my social handles; Twitter, Instagram, Facebook @MarkBatterson, and then MarkBatterson.com and Randy, as authors, I think we both know that books, you pour your heart and soul into it. It's blood, sweat, and tears.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Mark Batterson:

But I feel like it's a way that I can hang out with anyone, anywhere for about five or six hours. And if you're a slow reader, we can hang out longer than that. So, would love to engage with people in that way.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, that is awesome. My friend, thank you Mark, for giving us all this time, it's going to be so helpful to so many people and I'm going to be out your way to DC soon. We'll grab some coffee and take in a sermon and just love what you're doing and love that I got to parallel in ministry with you during these last 25, 30 years. My friend, love you.

Mark Batterson:

I love it.

Randy Frazee:

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Randy Frazee:

Now, may your faith be strengthened through God's word today and every day.