



86: Decision Making with James Bryan Smith

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 86.

This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place.

If you've been around here for a while, you already know how this works. Every week I offer a little story, a thoughtful prayer, and a simple next right step. But a few times over the course of these almost two years, I've added a second microphone and invited a friend to join me for a next-right-thing conversation. It's rare - in 85 episodes I've only done this 4 times. But today we'll make it 5.

Most know my guest today as Jim as you'll hear in a moment, but I'll introduce him as Dr. James Bryan Smith, my teacher and my friend. He's the Executive Director of the Apprentice Institute and a theology professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas where, if you remember, is where I just received my Masters in Christian Spiritual Formation and Leadership.

It's where I met and have gotten to know Jim who is also an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, the host of the Things Above podcast, as well as the author of ten books most notably The Apprentice Series.

So even though I'm finished with school, I can't seem to stay away from Friends University. I'll be back in Wichita at the end of September for their annual conference called The Apprentice Gathering.

It's a conference for people from all over the world to come together to learn about the stories, practices, and community of Christ in the field of Christian spiritual formation. If you join us in Wichita (which I encourage you to do!) you'll hear from many speakers, including Jim himself, as well as William Paul Young, Natasha Robinson, Chris Huertz, Richella Parham and yours truly, Emily P. Freeman.

I'll be teaching an all-day intensive at the gathering on September 26, where I can't wait to spend time leading attendees through a formational framework for starting and finishing creative projects. I'll tell you a bit more about that intensive at the end of the episode, but you can always visit apprenticeinstitute.org and click on "The Gathering" at the top of the page. That's where you can reserve your spot at the conference this fall, September 26 - 28.

Like I said I'll tell you more at the end of the episode but first, the second most often quoted phrase from this podcast is one I didn't even say. The first phrase people repeat the most is obvious, *do the next right thing*. Want to know the second most often quoted phrase? Well, it comes from James Bryan Smith and we'll share the story of it right now. Listen in.

Emily: I'm so excited to sit down with you today because this is a first for the Next Right Thing Podcast, you are the first guy I've had on the podcast.

Jim: The first dude? The first dude. O Yes! Right.

Emily: As you know, I don't normally do interview conversations, but some conversations are just begging to be had and so I'm so grateful to have you sitting here across from me.

I remember when my husband, John, first told me about this little book called Hidden In Christ, this little white book. He was like, Emily, you gotta read this. This guy thinks like us. He speaks our language. So, that was actually the first of your books that I read. But, I know a lot of people read The Good and Beautiful Series, first. That is what I heard being an apprentice in The Apprentice Experience.

So, those listeners who don't know, Jim is my teacher.

Jim: One of them.

Emily: James Bryan Smith, officially James Bryan Smith, but when you meet him in real life he doesn't let you call him that.

Jim: Yes, Jim

Emily: By the way, side note, what do you think it is about writers authors that have three names?

Jim: Well, in my case, Jim Smith is super boring, so I had to jazz it up. I had an aunt that said when you ever publish if you do, you have to use all the names your mama gave you. So, James Bryan Smith. I think it sounds kind of sophisticated.

Emily: It does indeed, yep.

Jim: And you are Emily P. Freeman.

Emily: I followed suit.

Jim: And that's Penelope, according to me. I want it to be Penelope so bad, but it's not.

Emily: I kind of do too, actually. Well, listen, Jim, for those that don't know you, which by the way, they do, they just don't know it yet. We will get to that in a second. But you call yourself the Forrest Gump of the Christian world, and I would love for you to tell us why.

Jim: Yeah, I call myself that if listeners know the film Forrest Gump, which you should, it's a fantastic film, one of my favorites. In the movie, Forrest, sort of accidentally ended up meeting all of these famous people. Some like Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy, he just shows up in these places where he is meeting these famous people and it is always by accident. It just occurred to me as I was looking over my life, God has somehow orchestrated in such a way that I have come in contact with a lot of, in the Christian world, in the Christian space, many of my heroes, and some have developed along the way. As a college student, I sat in classes with Richard J. Foster, who is a very significant voice in Christian Spiritual Formation, through Richard we started a ministry called Renovare. I've gotten to know Dallas Willard, and of course the luminary that Dallas is, and I got to know him. Along the way, I invited Brennan Manning to an event to speak on this chapel program. He came and we became friends and I got to hang out with Brennan quite a lot. Rich Mullins, the Christian singer/songwriter, stumbled on to the campus of Friends University where I teach and he came here to do a music education degree, which he didn't need, but Rich came to chapel one day and we became really good friends. He lived in our attic apartment for two years. When I was in graduate school, I went to a little event where someone had invited Frederick Buechner, the great writer, Frederick Buechner to come and almost no one, like six people showed up and I showed up because I love Frederick Buechner's writing so when he was done, everyone left so I was there one on one with him for like two hours.

Emily: Stop it.

Jim: The list kind of just goes on and on. Through time, Jan Johnson and all these people I just kept on meeting. I did not deserve any of this, but I keep meeting these people. Henri Nouwen was real significant to me and on and on and eventually Emily P. Freeman, which I count that as one of the later celebrities that I've gotten to know.

Emily: Right, one of the later developments. Well, remind me quickly. Going back to that first interaction with Richard Foster, is it true he had been praying for someone younger to come into his life for him to mentor? Is it true? Did I read that right?

Jim: Yeah, that story was told to me by our mutual friend, Marti Ensen. Marti was part of Renovare who did a lot of missionary work in Africa. Good friends, long time friends with Richard. She said that he thought God was going to bring a student to Friends University that I'm going to invest in. Then, I came along, and he did mentor me. Several years later, I was with Marti, and she said, "Oh, so you are the one." I said, "The one what?". She tells me the story that Richard had been praying for that and you came along. And so, it's a beautiful thing. It tells you about prayer and all kinds of things. His impact on my life was huge and I hope I can continue his legacy as well.

Emily: It tells you about prayer and it also is a great example of doing the next right thing because in so many ways you didn't even know at the time that that was even happening. He invited and you said yeah, sure. I'll learn from you, but you didn't know what it was going to lead to, which is so lovely.

Jim: No clue, no clue. When I came into his class the first time, if you don't know Richard, (he loves me he will forgive me for saying this) he is short and boisterous and animated. You read his books and you don't always think that.

Emily: That's right.

Jim: It's weird, Richard and I have done so much work together. We used to travel around the country and we'd do conferences and people would come up to me and many times they would be shy and say things like "I've read all of Richard's books, and I didn't think he would be like this in person." I'd say, "Why's that?" They would say, "Well, he's not very tall, and he's very boisterous but in his books, he seems like he would be very tall." I thought how do you see that? He writes like a tall person.

Emily: He writes like a tall person. That is so weird.

Jim: Isn't that the weirdest thing you've ever heard? So, when I walked into his class and he was sort of goofy and silly and fun in a great way. I had no clue because he wasn't super famous then. It was 1981 and *Celebration of Discipline* came out in 1978 so he was just a teacher to me. He didn't put on any heirs at all. I thought of him as a professor and then a mentor and so forth.

Emily: I love that.

Jim: Yeah, it was the next right thing for me to step in and do and it was a huge next right thing to do for me.

Emily: When it comes to decision making, can you look back on your life and say maybe after college, some decisions you had to make after that, are there any decisions that at the time you made a decision and it was your next right thing but it ended up leading somewhere that you didn't expect or a decision that was maybe difficult to make or something you really felt like definitely I feel great about this decision. Is there anything that you can think of on that?

Jim: There are many but the one that comes to mind as you are asking that question is, is my choice on where to go for graduate school. I know you had the decision, "Do I go to graduate school?"

Emily: I did.

Jim: But in my case, I knew I was going, I just didn't know where, so I had narrowed it down to a few schools. It's going to sound braggadocious when I tell you where I applied. I applied to Princeton and to Yale. I visited both of them. I flew from little Wichita, Kansas to big New York City. Took a train down to Princeton. Had a fantastic visit. The people were lovely, the campus was beautiful. They were warm and welcoming and everything was leaning in that direction. I even bought a sweatshirt like I was going here. I was pretty sure.

Emily: O Wow!

Jim: Took the train back to New York City. Overnight, got up in the morning and took the train to New Haven, Connecticut. New Haven is not very pretty. It is kind of like the armpit of Connecticut.

Emily: I've not ever been, but that is very disappointing to me.

Jim: It is a downer. Well, I won't keep going. New Haven is not pretty and Yale is pretty gothic in their architecture. And they didn't know I was coming and they weren't welcoming. The buildings were dilapidated. So my entire day was a downer. I wrote in my journal about both experiences. I was taking the train back to New York I thought, yeah, this is a fairly easy decision. But, back to an earlier person I had mentioned, Henri Nouwen, was a person I had corresponded with. The great spiritual writer, was a great friend of Richard Foster's, so Richard gave me his address and amazingly he returned my letters. I asked him in a letter, where is a seminary where I can go to continue to grow my faith. And he answered, "There isn't one." Which was very discouraging.

Emily: No kidding.

Jim: He said they just weren't equipped to do that. But he had been at Yale Divinity School and he felt like there would be some people there that could be helpful to you. I share that Emily because, based on if I did a pro/con list which I know you write about not always being the best way. My pro/con would have been off the charts to go to Princeton, but something deep inside of me said, it was probably Henri to an extent, but also, something just pulled me to make the decision to go to Yale Divinity School. And I'm so glad that I did because I did meet some professors that were huge. I ended up meeting my wife.

Emily: Aw, I don't think I knew that. You met Megan there.

Jim: That is very important. And the person doing our sound engineering right now is my son. He wouldn't be here.

Emily: He wouldn't be here.

Jim: Kind of like a Wonderful Life. There would be no Zoo-Zoo and her petals. Your listeners know the movie. So, none the less, decisions have a huge impact, don't they?

Emily: They do and they don't always make sense.

Jim: Right.

Emily: Which I'm really grateful that you shared that story because so many times we don't trust that pull or that gut feeling or we don't have the Henri Nouwen letter to guide us. So, that's good. That's good, Jim. Well, I mentioned before that our listeners know you whether or not they realize they know you. It's because of this. The most by far the phrase that I quote the most is the phrase that comes from you. When I returned, you know our graduate program here at Friends. I know I've told this story before, but we come out once per semester and this is our final one. But we do a total of four times, the first time I came out here to Friends, did that class, and went back home and joined my small group, my community group at church. They had been excited about me coming out they had been cheering me on and praying for me so they wanted to know how was the first full semester of school. What's one takeaway from school? What did you learn? I said, I don't know if I could tell you academically what I've learned, but I can tell you this. I know one thing for sure. I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights. I live in the strong and unshakeable Kingdom of God, the kingdom is not in trouble and neither am I. When I said that, everyone tried to grab a pen or their phone to write it down and asked me to say it again. Please say it again. So I said it again. And since that day, the people in my small group have told me that that few sentences have been transformative in their faith. I know that for my friends in real life and I know that for the next right thing listeners because it is the phrase that I quote the most often. Sometimes people accidentally say that I said it, and I really try and give you credit, Jim. It's so brilliant, so fantastic. So I would love for the man himself since I have

you here I know there is a story behind that phrase, and I would love it if you would share with us.

Jim: Well, it's probably public domain by now so you can quit quoting me. It's in a life of its own. The story isn't as great as I like, I should probably make up a better one. In truth, it happened accidentally. I was teaching the first phrase, "I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights" came about when I was teaching a college class, undergraduate class and I was trying to communicate with the students something very important about Apostle Paul. That is the Apostle Paul in his epistles used the phrase, In Christ or In Christ in us by my count around 89 times. That's a lot. So, I was stunned at the sheer size, the amount at the time. Wow, if Paul uses that phrase and self identifies as being in Christ or Christ in us, then that should be the dominant way we understand our identity as Christians. So, I was up in front of the classroom. I had written 89 times on the board and I'm talking about all of this stuff. I said at the end of the day, folks, as Christians, we have to understand we are people in whom Christ dwells and to the class as I was saying those words, just like your listeners, there was a student in the front row, his name is Chris, and I'm still in contact with Chris, he is a doctor now. But, he raised his hand and asked if I could say that again. And I said, we are people in whom Christ dwells and I could tell that when I said the phrase the phrasing had some spiritual energy and I believe it does because first of all, it is biblical and it's dealing with truth that we didn't just make up as power of positive thinking. It's actually rooted in biblical reality. So, I think that certain words and phrases have that kind of power. Dallas Willard said that he prayed for those kinds of words and phrases because he knew the power. Dallas had so many phrases like that. They are so quotable. Dallas said, quit quoting me. I said I can't say it any better.

Emily: Right. If someone has already figured out how to say it,

Jim: Right. I can't say it better than you did and in that same sense that phrase "I am one in whom Christ dwells". And then delights came a bit later. It came when I discovered how many people have so many toxic self narratives. Like, well, yeah, I guess by the virtue of the resurrection, He lives in me, but he doesn't like me. He just camps out here. But, no, He delights in you. Then, dwells and delights is just so nice on wordplay with the "d's" there and so then,

once I added that, it gained more power. It's teaching another truth that God doesn't just tolerate you, he delights in you so the combination of that. And then the strong and unshakeable kingdom was really Dallas again. Where he was teaching on the kingdom of never in trouble. And Hebrews 1 says we have this kingdom that cannot be shaken. So, I sort of took Dallas and Hebrews and a number of other in this amalgamation of this living in this strong and unshakeable kingdom. The first time I ever uttered that to a friend was in a really rough place herself and I just kind of said that to her I knew when the words came out of my mouth they were from the Spirit, that's not from me. I think there is energy and power from certain words and phrases and God uses them and that is why they have a life of their own.

Emily: So, was that when with your friend, the kingdom was not in trouble and neither am I, is that when that came in?

Jim: Yes. She had lost a job. And so, she's a basketball coach and people lose their jobs and no one really knows but your family, maybe your friends. It was in the paper and I saw it in the paper. I felt so bad for her. That is all I could think to say was, "The kingdom is not in trouble, and you're not in trouble." She would later say to me that all of the things people would say to her, that was the one that I could stand on and be strong.

Emily: Because it is so hopeful.

Jim: It is so hopeful.

Emily: It brings you back into the reality of living in the kingdom of God. It's just too good. Too good. And sidenote, to our writers, I think that is such a powerful story of you asking Dallas where do you get these phrases, and he says he prays for them. And how important wording and phrasing actually is. Sometimes they come like for you kind of in the moment and it has some power to it and then other times, we have to work to find those phrases that work well. And this one does. and I'm so grateful.

Jim: Speaking of writers, I think it was Mark Twain that said, The difference between good words and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning. The idea of well, it's a good word, but it's like POW!, like lightning, it has life to it, when the words come together just the right way.

Emily: Before I ask you my final question that I've now asked most of my few guests that I've had, I want to ask you a little bit about you know I'm going to be coming out to Friends again, even though I've graduated you've pulled me back. I can't stay away. I'm coming to the gathering that you have every year. There might be some next right thingers, that is what I call my listeners by the way, I don't think I've ever said that out loud.

Jim: Do they like being called that? thingers?

Emily: I don't think they do. I might have to take that out. But, there might be some listeners who this would be the very thing they are looking for. So, can you tell us a little bit about that, the conference?

Jim: Yeah, it's an annual conference and this will be the 9th that we have done so we've been doing it awhile. It's here on the campus of Friends University and each year we bring in great speakers and we have workshops, you'll be doing one of them and I just think God has anointed this event because it's little Wichita, Kansas. Can anything good come out of Wichita? As they said of Jesus and Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Well, something did. It turns out that beautiful things happen at this event every year and I don't know exactly why. We do our best to bring good people. People come from all over the country, even from all over the world where we have had people from other countries find their way here. And come year after year. The conference is for people who want to learn how to learn to live as an apprentice of Jesus, who want to grow in their formation in Christ-likeness. so that is what draws our particular tribe together, if you will. So people are of that ilk that want that kind of experience, it's a wonderful little three day event here and in this case, September 26-28, 2019 and I'm excited for the speakers that will be here and the people that are coming. Thanks for the opportunity for a little plug there.

Emily: Absolutely! I'm excited too. I'll be leading one of the workshops on Thursday. It's still conference but it's kind of pre-conference.

Jim: Yes, it's the Intensive.

Emily: Yes, the Intensive and I'm excited about that because I get time with people. It's not just sort of a one hour thing it's all day.

Jim: Yes. You can do some deep work there.

Emily: You can do some deep work. I'm starting to discover is part of my jam. I really enjoy the kind of the small group. I'm really looking forward to that time. And another reason to come back to Wichita.

Jim: Yes, it is in September and it will be beautiful.

Emily: September, in Kansas, that's lovely. Well, Jim tell us here last question, What is your next right thing?

Jim: Well, this is going to sound morbid and strange. I'm 57, I'm an old man. Which isn't really that old in the grand scheme of things. But as I begin to think about my life, I think about how do I finish well? Which is one of those things that I hope people do. And sometimes, I don't know about you, but I've had people that I don't think finished well. They just kept working. So, this season I've been thinking about How do I finish well? What are things I want to do with whatever time that is? I don't know if it's going to be the typical 65 or whatever that is. I'm just a little more conscience and probably more protective of my time. I know that when I say yes to something it is no to something else. So I'm in that season of what do I want to say yes to? What is the right thing to do? Does that fit with how I want to finish well?

Emily: What a great answer. I love it. Well, thank you for saying yes to this.

Jim: It was the right thing.

Emily: I'm so glad our conversation was your next right thing.

Jim: It was wonderful.

Emily: Thanks, Jim.

Well as I mentioned at the top of the episode, Jim and I would love to have you join us at The Apprentice Gathering this September 26-28 in Wichita, Kansas. Tickets are on sale now and be sure to reserve your spot in my all-day Thursday intensive called “**Discern Your Next Right Thing: A Formational Framework for Starting (and Finishing) Creative Projects**” where we’ll explore the question: *What if you could approach your next idea with new hope, fresh eyes, and a solid plan?*

Maybe you’ve always wanted to teach a class, write a book, lead a small group, start a non-profit, or host a new kind of gathering. But you’re worried this new idea will turn out like all the rest: *unfinished and forgotten*.

In this intensive, you’ll identify a current project that matters in your life, work, or ministry, whether it’s something you’ve always wanted to start or an in-progress project where you feel stuck. Together we’ll walk through how to

- Identify 3 essential keys every creative project needs
- Develop a hopeful vision for the people you are called to serve
- Find new energy to do your own thing well

Your creative work is evidence of the good and beautiful image of our Trinitarian God. Let's discover how he may want to continue to reveal himself through the unique filter of your personality.

Visit <https://apprenticeinstitute.org> and click on The Gathering in the menu at the top to reserve your ticket. And if you want to attend my intensive, be sure to choose it from the dropdown menu on the registration page.

As always you can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or at emilypfreeman.com and grab a copy of The Next Right Thing book while you're there! You can find links to it there on my website or at nextrightthingbook.com and don't forget to take the quiz to find out your decision-making personality.

You can learn more about Jim, his books, the Things Above Podcast and The Apprentice Institute at apprenticeinstitute.org.

It only seems appropriate to end with that quote from Jim I'll never stop repeating - I'll change the pronoun to speak to you but the message is the same:

“You are one in whom Christ delights and dwells. You live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. The kingdom is not in trouble and neither are you.”

Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.