



07: Faithfulness, Fame, and the Gift of Obscurity

Does it seem like the people around you, maybe it's someone in your church or on your Instagram feed are all stepping into something bigger while all your steps feel small and inconsequential? Today we'll talk about what a singer, a cyclist and a make-believe boss have to teach us about how fame is messing with us, and what it means for our next right thing. I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing, you're listening to episode seven. If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. Because out of the thousands of decisions you make every day, chances are a few of them threaten to keep you up at night. If you're in a season of transition, waiting, general fogginess, or if you've ever searched how to make a decision on the internet, you're in the right place.

What does fame have to do with discerning our next right thing? Well, a lot. Because every day, whether we realize it or not, we may be tempted to forfeit our next right thing for the next big thing. Are you hesitant to make a simple move because you're waiting for something better to come along? Well, let's find out. Five years ago when the singing competition show American Idol was still on the air, over 132 million votes were cast in the 2012 season finale setting a show record. I watched from my sofa as host Ryan Seacrest announced the winner, a young man from Georgia with the unforgettable name Phillip Phillips. After he won, Phillip didn't jump up and down or fall down on his knees. He didn't make number one signs with his hands or scream into the camera, he was almost nearly silent and still. His fellow contestants quickly joined him on the stage. Ryan Seacrest gave him a guitar, and they asked him to do what he does best.

He started to sing, but he didn't make it far because when the sparks started shooting out of the screen behind him and the confetti started to drop around him, it seemed nearly too much for him to take. His voice broke right after he sang the line don't pay no mind to the demons they fill you with fear, from his coronation song Home. After that line, he was unable to continue. All he could manage was to shake his head, fight back the ugly cry, stare at his shoes and keep confetti from sticking to his face. As I watched him stand there on my screen, a quote came to me that I'd heard author and counselor Earl Andrews say a few weeks before, "The human soul was not made for fame." You could see it as Phillip Phillips stood there overwhelmed his own success and attention, like his soul was turning inside out and he didn't know how to handle it.

When he realized he wasn't going to be able to finish the song, he made the only choice that made sense. He took off his guitar, bowed his head and walked down the stairs from the stage straight into the waiting arms of his family who sat on the front row. He disappeared into them, hiding in the comfort of his own smallness. The crowd and the cameras crammed importance into him by the truckload. But it seemed he

didn't want to receive it, couldn't receive it. Now obviously, I don't know Phillip Phillips, I don't know what was actually going through his mind that night. One thing we learned later is he was suffering with kidney stones during the filming of the show, and shortly after his win he had to have surgery. His reaction could be as simple as he just wasn't feeling well. But it doesn't matter because after watching the entire season of American Idol that year, months of buildup to this very moment, thousands of contestants trying out to be in his shoes, his response to winning stood out to me as a beautiful illustration of the truth behind Earl Andrew's words, "The human soul isn't made for fame."

Only a fool would open up his arms, tip his head back to the heavens and take it all in, a place meant for God alone. Still, we mill about here on earth, putting our stars on certain people and on certain skills, but our souls were not made for fame. Less than a year later, I sat on my same sofa and watched an interview that Oprah gave with former professional cyclist, Lance Armstrong in a highly anticipated conversation where he finally admitted to using performance enhancing drugs. He said every time he won a tour, he knew he was going to win because he had orchestrated it to be so. At some point in their conversation, Oprah said a line about fame, another one I haven't forgotten, "Fame magnifies whoever you really are." I think she's right. Lance Armstrong was a guy who expected to always get what he wanted. He admitted that he was a controller of outcomes in every area of his life, every area that is except two, when he got cancer and when he got caught. Our souls were not made for fame. Our souls are made for the famous one. Oh God, save us from ourselves.

The chances of us winning a singing competition or being interviewed by Oprah are slim to be sure, but there are other kinds of fame than the kinds we see on TV. For us, they can come within our own circles of influence our cities, our churches and even in our own families. Being a CEO of a company, an adored teacher, a doctor, a counselor, a pastor or a really cool mom, all carry a certain amount of respect and attention that we can become addicted to. So what's this have to do with making decisions and doing our next right thing? Well kind of everything. Because what we value will always influence our next steps, which is why it's so important to know what those values are. When I picture the shape of our soul, I imagine not aligned straight up and down, but a circle curved in on itself. Our soul needs a fixed point around which to revolve. What we put in the center is our choice to be sure, but the results will show up in how we live, how we relate, how we see the world, and in the decisions we make every day.

If I place the circumstances of my life in the center, that's what my soul will revolve around, as evidenced by the shame and anxiety I feel when I'm left out and overlooked, or the elation I feel when I'm chosen and praised. Good circumstances lead to good feelings and experience, bad circumstances lead to bad feelings and experience. Do you ever get tired of that cycle? I know I sure do. I, a mature grown person actually told John one time how I wish I could take a pill that would make me not so moveable, like a faith pill or an apple maybe. Eat this then you will be like God, sounds kind of familiar. Sometimes the lie makes simple solutions sound like such a relief, but here's the truth spoken clearly by pastor and author, John Ortberg in his book Soul Keeping. "If your soul is healthy, no external circumstance can destroy your life. If your soul is unhealthy, no external circumstance can redeem your life." I write about the soul because I believe deep in my bones that invisible things are real.

I also believe that because the soul is invisible, it is often forgotten beneath the demands of everyday life, and overlooked when we're confronted with opportunities for advancement and attention. It's easy for me to get tangled up in a fast-paced world of opportunity, but that's a language our soul doesn't speak. I'm not saying that it's wrong to be famous. John the Baptist was famous, the disciples were famous, Jesus

was famous. Being faithful to His calling meant people knew who he was and he continued to move and to preach and to heal, and fame was a result of all of that for Jesus. He continued to do it, even though it meant He would get attention for it. But He didn't do it for the purpose of recognition or attention. Fame and attention might be a likely outcome, but they make terrible goals. What Jesus did on earth and what we saw in a minuscule shadow glimpse of in Phillip Phillips is a simple refusal to hold on to the glory that fame falsely promises.

So what might it look like to do the next right thing without secretly hoping it will lead to the next big thing? Well, here's my most favorite example from the one and the only Ron Swanson. Tom and Donna, the social media savvy characters on the NBC show Parks and Recreation, are beside themselves with excitement when they learn that their coworker, Ron Swanson, is featured in Bloosh. When Donna announces to Ron that his handmade chairs have been chosen as the must have item of the season, his response is much the same as yours probably is, what is Bloosh? Bloosh as it turns out is a weekly lifestyle email written by Annabel Porter, a local celebrity who Tom says is legit because, "She spent four months living in Kate Bosworth's pool house." I love Tom Haverford. Tom and Donna can hardly contain their good fortune because their friend Ron is now invited to attend the Bloosh party as the guest of honor, and people crowd around him to start placing orders for his handmade chairs.

When Ron meets Annabel Porter he thanks her for her kind words about his chairs. Well she tells him he's about to make a ton of money and she wants to license his designs, because she says, "We're going to put Swanson chairs in every six bedroom home in the Midwest." Then Ron says the words that crush all of Tom and Donna's dreams, "If my chairs were mass produced, they wouldn't be Swanson chairs, Swanson chairs are handmade." What does Ron Swanson want us to know about fame and success? Simply that being picked is not always good news. It can lead to great things, but it doesn't necessarily always lead to great things. Don't let the warm glow of being picked lead you away from your core purpose. Before you take your place at the starting line, take a glance into the future and make sure you have a clear idea of where this race ends up. What is at the finish line, and is that really where you want to go?

After I signed my first book contract I was scared. I was excited and overwhelmed, all the many things you probably would imagine for all the reasons you probably could guess. But I was also concerned about something I couldn't yet name, and that was the path I was headed down. When I looked at other men and women who had this job that I had just accepted, most of them wrote a book every two years or so, and also had full speaking calendars. I tried that for a while, but the problem was I couldn't figure out how to write meaningful words with a busy traveling schedule and also still be a person. When I live that way, it leads to lots of uncomfortable questioning and a constant wondering if what I'm doing in every area is good enough. Maybe you can relate to that. Before you know it you're spending so much time trying to decode unspoken expectations, and looking around at what everyone else is doing, that you don't even have the bandwidth to make two good chairs a year. You're just spitting out parts.

I used to wonder if there was something wrong with me that I couldn't keep up that kind of pace. Then I thought of Bloosh, and I realized oh, maybe I don't actually want my chairs to be Bloosh chairs. Maybe I just want to make two chairs a year and maybe that's okay. Your pace is your pace. Imagine if you were a person who made decisions based on who you are and who you know God to be with zero fear of missing out. My best advice on how to do that is twofold. Discern your purpose in the dark, and make your plans in the light. If I don't have a clear vision or purpose for my work or my life, either short-term or long-term, I feel like a crazy person. Then I'm easily seduced by opportunities and the possibility of fame and

attention. To avoid that, I found it works best for me to craft my purpose and vision in the dark hours. So that would be either early morning before anyone wakes up, or in the evening after everyone else has gone to bed.

Then when John and I schedule our week together while the kids are eating breakfast or after they've gone to school, our step-by-step plans can be made and followed in the daytime. Because if I try to craft a plan for my day before I've developed a vision for my work, I'll be planning for stuff I might not even value. It's like trying to organize your house full of clutter. Where do I put this sock that has no match? Instead of that craziness, clear out the clutter first, discover your purpose and vision in the quiet hours, so that you can execute a plan that aligns with your vision in the daytime. It's a simple tip, but it helps because every day whether we are aware of it or not, we may be tempted to avoid obscurity and to look for the next big thing. That's why our next right thing doesn't always feel so right, because it seems too small and just not enough. We can make our decisions based on who we are and who we know God to be with zero fear of missing out.

Because if the light of a regular Tuesday morning candle isn't bright enough to light the room, a spotlight won't be either. If the home where we live doesn't satisfy, we'll find ourselves always searching but never quite finding. If the work we do on our Tuesdays doesn't feel important, we'll find ourselves slave to comparison forgetting compassion. If the people we live our lives with now aren't sacred companions for us, we'll find ourselves competing with everyone and connecting with no one. If our souls long for more and bigger and refuse the small way, how will we ever fully share in the life of Christ who became less and arrived small? Acorns become oak trees, life starts with a breath. Love begins with hello. So let's take back quiet conversation with friends, whispered prayer over sick babies, belly laughter around the dinner table. Let's take back the honor of small donations, small care packages and small movements toward fellow image bearers, because love isn't measured in inches, grand gestures or dollar amounts.

Let's take back moments that are lovely, even if they are imperfect, words that are powerful, even if only one person hears them, company that is meaningful even when we don't say any words at all. Let's take back our Tuesdays, the smallest day of the week, because this is where we live and where our people live. Let's release our obsession with building a life and trust in the life Christ is building within us, one small moment at a time. Help us to accept the beauty of smallness, hiddenness and the secret work of Christ in the deepest part of who we are. Be gracious to remind us Lord that our souls aren't made for fame (silence). Thanks for listening to episode seven of *The Next Right Thing*. You can find that Tuesday manifesto in my book *Simply Tuesday: Small-Moment Living in a Fast-Moving World*. Where I also share more about what it means to receive the gift of obscurity, and faithfully walk the downward way with Jesus in a fame and success obsessed world.

You can find out more about that as well as get access to the show notes and a full transcript when you visit thenextrightthingpodcast.com. As always come find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and @emilypfreeman.com. PS thanks so much to all of you who have left reviews on iTunes, reviews really help other people find the podcast, and so I encourage you to take a second and leave a review it means so much and is super helpful. In closing consider these words from the Message translation of Colossians one verses 15 through 18. "We look at the Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels, everything God started in Him and finds its purpose in Him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, He

organizes and holds it together like a head does a body. He was supreme in the beginning and leading the resurrection parade He is Supreme in the end.” This is the word of the Lord.