



## 11: Wear Better Pants

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 11, Wear Better Pants.

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. This is also a place though for those of you who may just need a little white space or a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, or the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment. You long for thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

Like most of these episodes, today's episode is personal, touching on something I think a lot of us can relate to, but maybe haven't considered how it impacts our spiritual life. In these next few minutes, I hope you'll be able to take a long, deep breath because the truth is, in the midst of a busy schedule, a load of laundry, a painful diagnosis, a confusing conversation and prep for that upcoming trip, it's easy to forget your center. It's easy to forget who we are. Some of ourselves remains hidden beneath piles of daily activity that we can see and shadows of shame that we often can't see.

Perhaps today, your next right step is simply to release something you no longer need so that you can move one step closer to becoming who you already are.

When I graduated from high school, my youth pastor gave all of the seniors a book on the spiritual disciplines. Good girl that I was, I marked that book up in all the best ways, determined to tackle a discipline a week for however long it took to become the best possible version of myself, prayer, scripture reading, fasting, whatever. I knew I couldn't be perfect, but I thought it would be all right to get close than anyone else.

Several years of Bible college, marriage and mothering later, I realized that good girl in my head was a perfectly annoying mirage. And if I wanted to really know Jesus and be a sane person, I had to let go of my constant attempts at trying to earn acceptance and the ridiculous idea that I could perform my way into being loved.

One of the casualties of my good girl detox was shedding my misconceptions about discipline and spiritual practices. I think this is okay. I think maybe it's even necessary. I needed to give myself permission not to practice some things for a while because I couldn't figure out how to do them without thinking I was earning something.

The past five to ten years have been a reentry of sorts into the world of the spiritual disciplines for me. It's different now, kinder, gentler, tender, and more free. My definitions have changed, as has, I hope, my demeanor. I now understand the fundamental truth beneath the spiritual disciplines that as author and Pastor John Ortberg says, if a discipline is not producing freedom in me, it's probably the wrong thing for me to be doing.

Practicing a spiritual discipline is not about trying to earn something, prove something, or win. Practicing a spiritual discipline is more about receiving power to live in the kingdom. It's about training my mind and my will to practice what my heart deeply believes. It's about knowing that each moment is packed with grace, but sometimes I need practice to see it.

It's about becoming the person I already am in Christ. Really, anything can be a spiritual discipline when we recognize the presence of God with us in it. It could be something we do, but I'm also learning a discipline can be something we undo. I confess I have had to unlearn some things I've always believed about spirituality and the spiritual disciplines. Aside from the false belief that I thought I needed to work for my own acceptance, I've also made spirituality too small. I've put it in a box labeled "invisible things", which may in some ways be true, but it is also in many ways untrue. This came to the surface for me in a most unexpected way on the floor of my bedroom as I cleaned out my closet.

I did exactly what any respectable woman would do who has writing to finish and deadlines to meet. I set my face like a flint in the direction of the messiest corners of my house and decided now was the perfect time to do a good purge. My closets are never more organized than when I have a writing deadline.

I started in my bedroom and began to sift through clothes. At the bottom of one of my drawers, I found some jeans I love, but had forgotten about. I pulled them on and continued to tidy up around the house, moving from room to room without a plan really, but with an eye for tidying, straightening, and getting rid of trash and clutter and the things that pile up.

As I moved around the house with a trash bag tackling the piles and purging the clutter, I noticed a shift ever so slight. My energy and my motivation had started to sag and I felt irritable and discouraged on the inside. Usually decluttering and straightening gives me new energy. I know it's weird, but it does, so this time I paused for a moment to consider why my shoulders were drooping. Why are my eyebrows furrowed? Why do I feel so fussy?

When I retraced my steps, I found it. It was the jeans, the favorite ones I pulled on from the bottom drawer. They were making it hard to breathe. And because I'm always aware of how the outer life affects the inner life, I quickly made the connection between breathing in my soul and breathing in my body. We are not portioned up and parceled out people. We are whole, mind, body and soul. Each part of us affects the other parts of us. And in order for my soul to breathe, I have to be able to actually breathe literally in my diaphragm. I've been wearing clothes that hurt me and it has got to stop.

In that moment, I went upstairs and had a DTR with my closet, and we came up with an understanding we could both live with. I will keep her clean and organized if she will stop harboring the enemy in the form of clothes that are too tight.

There's an author, one of my favorites actually, who talks about this very thing. Her name is Leena

Tankersley and she wrote a book called *Breathing Room*. In it, she says this, “Isn’t it amazing what we will do at our own expense? I’ve decided that even if I have to wear something with a stretch waistband, the rest of my life, I’m not going to demean myself by wearing clothes that hurt me. No more bad pants.”

She also says that one of the ways we punish ourselves for not being more or better or thinner or stronger is by trying to squeeze ourselves, force ourselves into all kinds of ill fitting relationships with other people, with ourselves, with our pants. I’m grateful for her words and her perspective because I recognize how true that is in so many areas of life.

Those favorite jeans meant something to me, more than I had perhaps realized. They represented something and I wasn’t ready to let them go, even if it meant I would suffer for it literally in my body. I had found a new spiritual discipline.

And so I started to make a pile of pants and a few shirts that either physically hurt me to wear or cause me to feel badly about myself when I did. As the stack grew, so did my confidence. I even logged into my Stitch Fix account, which is an online styling service I’ve used, to inform them that I have moved one size up in pants and I might not be going back.

In those few moments in my bedroom, I was profoundly aware of the kind presence of God with me. He doesn’t stop being relevant just because I’m cleaning out my closet. And while I of course value taking care of my body and engaging in other practices to maintain my health, I also want to be really honest about my own expectations of myself and be careful not to compare my health to the world’s idea of what healthy is. I have to be careful to remember that being healthy isn’t just about what you can see on the outside.

I have to be honest, I struggled with feeling oddly guilty about making something as trivial as getting rid of pants that are too tight into a spiritual practice, but then I remembered how life with Christ is about being a whole person, not pieced out into important parts and non-important parts. In this one day, I can carry both serious concerns in my soul and a pile of old clothes to the car.

Making that pile of clothes was a spiritual practice for me that day, finally taking the time to honestly confront some of the small ways I’ve been disrespecting myself by keeping clothes that don’t fit. So I’m calling a truce with my jeans and practicing the spiritual discipline of wearing better pants.

I wonder if there’s anything you need to call a truce with. Nothing is off limits here. God is with you in every ordinary moment, no matter how small. Is there an unconventional spiritual practice you might need to engage in in order to remember that? When it comes to self-acceptance, what is one thing you can do today to practice your own life, the one you want to be living? What is your next right thing?

Though we may saunter into this week as people who have it all together, God, you see how we stumble on the inside. When will we learn to stop trying to hide from you? Gently reveal the complicated narrative of self-rejection that we have told ourselves all our lives, bring the false stories to the surface, we pray, because for all the ways we have experienced healing, we know there is still so much within us that remains unseen. Shine the warm light of grace into the shadows and be the courage we need to respond. Hold back shame with your powerful hand and extend to us your father kindness, we pray.

Though we are grown on the outside, we are small within. Embrace us in our littleness. We confess that we are seen and we are loved. This is our truest story. As we turn our face to you, may we see our true selves reflected in your gaze. Open us up to a new way of practicing our life. Then, spin us back out into the world as people who know who we are. Surprise us with a joy we cannot explain. Give us the courage to show up as ourselves.

\*\*\*

Thanks for listening to episode 11 of The Next Right Thing.

If you'd like a copy of that prayer for self-acceptance to print out and keep nearby, visit [thenextrightthingpodcast.com](http://thenextrightthingpodcast.com). Click on episode 11 and you can grab it there for free.

You can also find a shortlist of the books I mentioned here in this episode and other notes that might be helpful.

As always, you can find me on my favorite social media platform, Instagram, at Emily P. Freeman.

To those of you who have left reviews, thank you for that. It's incredibly humbling to read what you're saying about how this podcast is helping you, like these words from Kimberly D. Henderson, who says, "I have long loved reading anything written by Emily, and I so love that I now get to look forward to listening to her podcast each week. Listening in the midst of my busy week always feels like being kind to my soul." Well, thank you for that, Kimberly, and I sure hope that's true for you who are listening.

Creating these episodes have become for me a necessary rhythm in my week, and my prayer is that these few minutes that we have together each week are becoming a sort of spiritual practice for you as well, a way to pause and give yourself a 15 minute break in the midst of the weekly chaos.

And P.S., if you find yourself struggling with some version of the good girl who lives in your head, who tells you that if you could just try harder, then you would be a better version of yourself, you might enjoy my first book. It's called *Grace For the Good Girl* and it's all about learning to let go of your try-hard life. There's a version for women and there's also a version for teen girls, mainly high school students, called *Graceful*. You can find that and all my other books at [emilypfreeman.com/books](http://emilypfreeman.com/books).

As we consider how we are practicing our own lives, specifically how we are engaging God in our soul and in our body, I'll close with a short, simple prayer from Macrina Whitaker, one that has had a profound impact on me. Oh God, help us to believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how beautiful it is.