



228: The Good and Beautiful You with James Bryan Smith

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 228. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you 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 for discerning your next great thing.

Today, I'm thrilled to talk to my friend, Dr. James Bryan Smith, who's been a theology professor at Friends University for several decades and was recently named the inaugural Dallas Willard Chair in Christian Spiritual Formation. He's an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and a co-founding pastor of Chapel Hill UMC in Wichita, Kansas.

He's also a bestselling author of 12 books, most notably, the Apprentice Series with InterVarsity Press, which includes *The Good and Beautiful God*, as well as his most recent release, *The Good and Beautiful You*, that we'll talk about today. One more thing about Jim, he's one of the original founders alongside Richard Foster and Dallas Willard of the spiritual renewal ministry, Renovaré.

Renovaré is a Christian nonprofit that provides resources for spiritual formation and advocates fullness of life with God experienced by grace through the spiritual practices of Jesus and the historical church. Before we jump into my conversation with Jim, I want to tell you about today's episode sponsor, which is a podcast I love from Renovaré called *Friends in Formation*.

This podcast features three very different friends who take listener questions about life and faith, with the goal of listening, learning, and helping one another go deeper with God. The hosts of the podcasts are James Catford, who's had a long career in publishing and nonprofit leadership, Nathan Foster, who's the author of *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*, and is also the director of community life at Renovaré, and Richella Parham, who wrote *Mythical Me* and serves as the chair of the board of Renovaré.

She's also one of my dear friends in real life. I love hearing these three friends share in conversation about spiritual formation, even when they don't always agree. Every episode covers three listener questions, including conversations about daily life things, like hurried schedules, friendship, loneliness, feeling out of place at church, finding time for spiritual disciplines, and a lot more.

This is important work they're doing as it brings the sometimes heady concepts of spiritual formation down to the regular life level. You can find and listen to *Friends in Formation* at renovare.org or in your favorite podcast listening app. That's *Friends in Formation* at R-E-N-O-V-A-R-E.org. Now, onto today's episode where we'll talk about fame, success, the soul, and *The Good and Beautiful You* with James Bryan Smith. Listen in.

The Next Right Thing with Emily P. Freeman

Emily:

Well, there are a few pages... When I read a new book from someone, there's a few pages that I always look to. I don't know if it's because I write books too, or maybe it's because I just have that personality, but those pages are, number one, the dedication page in a book, and number two, the acknowledgement pages in the book, essentially who was the author thinking about when you wrote the book and then who are the people who helped it come to be. Do you look at these pages when you read books?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

I do. Not as intensely as you do, but I think I'm going to now because that sounds cool.

Emily:

Now you will.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yes, because I want to be like Emily.

Emily:

I love it. Well, Jim, it's such a gift to have you today, and that is really going to be my first question for you is, in this new book you wrote, *The Good and Beautiful You*, you list four people in the very front on the dedication page. I'm curious if you would be willing to share with us the role each of these men have played for you in the writing of this book, Michael J. Cusick, Father Adrian van Kaam, Dr. Dallas Willard, and Richard Foster.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah, I'll go in reverse order. How about that? Richard Foster was my professor as an undergraduate student. Richard wrote *Celebration of Discipline*, which was a game changing book for Protestants in spiritual formation. He was a real pioneer. I had no idea what a privilege it was to study from him. From Richard, I learned to how to connect to God, how to build life with God through the spiritual disciplines, and I also learned from him what a life with God looks like.

He had a very authentic life with God and his soul was well formed in that. I got to see what a good and beautiful person looks like. And then Dallas Willard was... He's the Yoda of the spiritual formation movement for Protestants. I mean, he's the deep thinker with all the wisdom. I mean, he was one of Richard's teachers. I mean, to spend time with Dallas, which I was privileged to do, opened me up to understanding the nature of the human person, because Dallas really cared about theological anthropology, which is a fancy word for like, who are we?

He wrote *Renovation of the Heart*, and that book was his way of trying to explain the nature of the soul and the body and the will and the mind. That opened up that world to me and that stayed with me. And then I started reading Adrian van Kaam, who's a Catholic spiritual writer, 20th century, fascinating guy. He wrote this seven volume set on spiritual formation. He was thinking as deep as anybody about formation. His understanding of the human person and the soul really influenced me.

And then Michael J. Cusick, he was my counselor, therapist, spiritual director. Michael was a person I could just lay my soul bare and just say, "It's not well with my soul for whatever reason," and he was there to just guide me through a season when I needed some soul restoration. That's what happened. Really all four were playing different roles.

Emily:

That relationship and that gift of Michael's presence with you helped to birth this book in many ways. In

fact, you wrote in the book, I love this line, “Writing this book has helped me live the kind of life my soul has longed to live.” Can you say more about that?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah. I had no idea that really the problem that I was dealing with was in my soul. Briefly what happened was with the publishing of The Good and Beautiful Series, the first three books in the series, Richard Foster, who’s very close, were prayer partners and so forth, he just said to me, “These books are going to change your life. I mean, they’re going to be popular, and with that comes a downside that you don’t see. You have to guard your soul.”

I had no idea what he meant, because I had written books and I had done public ministry, but I was happy to be just in the background of things. But that’s what happened is that over the course of the next few years, that was a problem. I didn’t see it coming because you never think that success is going to hurt you. But I was talking to William Paul Young, who wrote The Shack, and he said, “Success is far more difficult to deal with in the soul than failure is. With failure, we kind of learn how to rebound and figure things out.

But with success, you just get lured into something.” Richard was absolutely right that that was happening. I didn’t have a moral failure. I didn’t have an addiction or a breakdown or anything horrific. I just lost my joy. I decided I need to talk to someone, and I ended up finding Michael. He was the perfect person for me. He was someone I could just say, “Here’s me. Here’s my junk. I don’t know what’s going on,” and he could walk with me and help me see the dignity of my soul.

I had no idea that that was what the issue was. But once I was able to move along through that, then I was ready to write this book, because I couldn’t have written this book before that.

Emily:

Well, and for those who may not know about The Good and Beautiful Series, could you give a brief overview of the first three books that you thought would be a trilogy unto itself and it was finished. But what were those three?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah, so The Good and Beautiful God is the first book in the series, and it’s discovering the God that Jesus revealed and falling in love with that God. That was the whole point of the book is I discovered, Emily, through teaching people spiritual formation that many people had very toxic views of God, really negative narratives. That was something Dallas kept telling me, “You can’t plow around bad narratives of God.” Even the spiritual disciplines can make you worse if you don’t have good God narratives.

That book was, I think, front and center to help people. Because if you don’t love God, the whole thing, it just falls apart. That was the aim of that book. And then The Good and Beautiful Life is about how to live out the most important teaching of the most important teacher, which is Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. I thought of all the books that was the most important because we don’t really try to live out the Sermon on the Mount.

It just seems too hard. Like how can I really love my enemies? Was Jesus kidding, or were we supposed to do that?

Emily:

Is that a cosmic joke?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah. I mean, it’s so hard, but when you understand life in the unshakeable kingdom, then those become

possibilities. That's how you develop *The Good and Beautiful Life*. And then *The Good and Beautiful Community* was a way of saying God's always designed us to be with each other. The church has always been God's best arrangement for his people, and yet we struggle. Community's hard. I thought, what would it look like if we had a community that was good and beautiful?

What would that look like? It would look like a generous and forgiving and healing kinds of communities. You're right, Emily. I mean, after I wrote those three, I thought, well, that's it. There it was. I didn't think there would be anymore.

Emily:

Yeah, there it was. And then how long was it after the publication of the third book and the conversation with your friend, Joe, who made a suggestion for you?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Well, I think it was 2015, 2016. 2012 is when the last book came out in the series, *The Good and Beautiful Community*. I was with Joe, a pastor in England, who's used the books in lots of ministry settings. He was very kind saying, "The book's really helped a lot of people, Jim, thanks, but you're missing a book." That's a weird thing to tell an author.

Emily:

Yeah, right?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

When you poured your heart into something. But I said, "Okay, I trust you. You're my friend. What?" And he said, "The Good and Beautiful You." And I said, "Why is that?" And he said, "Well, just as many people have very toxic views of God, people have equally toxic views of themselves." He said, "I see it in ministry all the time. The inner dialogue people, even Christians have, about there's so much shame and self-hatred and guilt.

Even some of our churches perpetuate some of those narratives, that we're a slimy rotten, awful." I knew when he said it, I knew he was right, but I wasn't ready to write it. That's when I needed to go through my own little dark night and come up on the other side.

Emily:

You mentioned something before about the human soul and what happens when we talk a lot about failure and wanting to avoid failure, but then sometimes success can actually be bad for us at the soul level. I once heard a counselor in Nashville, Al Andrews, say the human soul wasn't made for fame. And as I've paid attention, man, that really seems to be true. It sounds like you can speak to that.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah. I mean, you wouldn't think it. I mean, I think everyone thinks, "Gosh, wouldn't it be great to have money and fame and success and everyone applauding you," and all that sort of thing, but it's very seductive and it's damaging. You don't really see it coming. But like I said, failure and loss makes us kind of us regroup and we think, "What can I do here?" We tend to lean into God. Success... What I found for me, Emily, is I leaned away from God. I just assumed, well, I'm God's person.

I've been writing about God, but I let my own relationship with God begin to slide, my own soul care. I just thought, no, I'm doing ministry. I don't need to care for my soul. I don't need to do these things that made me who I was anymore, because, well, I'm successful at this. It really is shockingly damaging and you wouldn't guess it. I mean, Paul Young said to me, he said if he wrote *The Shack* when he was 40, it would've destroyed his life.

:

He wrote it when he was 50 and that was after his life just fell apart. He did a lot of inner work over those years, but he said, “It would’ve crushed me,” because that book that... I mean, that’s, what, 22 million copies. I mean, some crazy success in the publishing world.

Emily:

Crazy success. You too, Jim. I mean, you have said, and maybe it was in your first book, how you’re kind of the Forrest Gump of the spiritual formation world, where you kind of had this front row seat to a lot of these names that we’ve all heard of. You are one of those names for us, but I know you don’t see yourself that way, but Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, and Rich Mullins, Richard Foster, all these people who from the outside you think, “Wow! Those are big names. We’ve read their books.”

Even though you had kind of had this front row seat to these people who it seems like they were living in such a way that they were fighting against that pull of fame and notoriety and attention.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

All of those people that you mentioned were very uneasy with their success.

Emily:

Yes.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

They didn’t wear it well, and they almost wouldn’t let you treat them that way. I got to watch that firsthand, which was a beautiful thing, because I would see... Richard and I would do a conference. During the break, a hundred people would line up with their books wanting him to sign Celebration of Discipline. He was very gracious with them. When people would say, “Your book’s changed my life,” and this and that, he was able to receive that. But it’s very hard.

I mean, I mentioned it in the book that I eventually went back to Richard and said, “Why did you predict that for me? How did you know that would happen?” He said, “Because it happened to me.” I mean, he went through it himself. He knew firsthand that those things begin to get to you.

There’s a story that when the Roman emperors would have some great victory and they’d walk through the town with a great parade, like a ticker-tape parade we’d have today, but they would put some servant behind the emperor who would just whisper the words memento mori, which is remember your death. That was the way to sort of counter like, yes, the people are applauding and all the fame, but you’re going to die. Remember your humanity. You are dust and to dust you will return, as we say on Ash Wednesday.

You just have to have that. Richard and Dallas and Henry and Eugene Peterson and Brennan Manning, all of those guys, I saw this incredible humility within them, which is great hope for the spiritual formation movement, because I think our leaders will naturally be people who are connected to God. You can’t be a leader in this movement and not be someone who has a personal inner life with Jesus.

Emily:

This brings us to an important distinction that you make in the writing of *The Good and Beautiful You*, which is the distinction between the self and the soul. I love this line. You write, “Your soul is your deepest nobility.” Can you speak some to how we’ve confused those two, the self and the soul, and what an important distinction really is?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. In the 20th century, which has been called the century of the self, that’s where you see the emergence of people talking about themselves as a self. And for many people, the self,

you refer to that as the secular side of who you are. That's what happened in the 20th century was thanks to the work of a lot of philosophers and thinkers and Freud and Darwin and Marx and Nietzsche and all these, that we came through that thinking, "I'm just a carbon-based life form that's going to die.

I'm a little lump of cells. I got here accidentally. One day, I'll die and go back to the earth that won't exist." When you think of yourself as a self, then you're just an isolated individual in competition with other people. Now I have to establish my worth on the basis of how I look and what I do and what I've accomplished and what social class I'm in. That's the way that this world works. But when you begin to think, "No, let's begin thinking that I'm an embodied soul," now that's talking about there's a spiritual dimension to me.

I'm an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe. That is the core of who I am. The soul, the fact that I have a soul tells me that God designed me before the foundation of the world. There's a spiritual side, there must be a God who created me, and that God knew me and wanted me to be, and created a soul that is eternal. Again, I'm an unceasing being. When I begin to think about that, that's my inherent dignity and it's the great hope for the world.

Because if I can begin to see myself as a sacred, divinely designed, divinely desired being, then I'm going to see everybody else that way. If I could see everybody else that way, there wouldn't be any harm and destruction. You can't hurt someone if you think of them as a sacred soul who's cherished by God. You have to think of them the way we did in the 20th century as a lump of cells.

That's why all the genocide in the 20th century, you have to reduce people in order to exterminate them like we saw in the camps and whatnot. You have to reduce them to that. But if you think, "No, I'm a soul. I'm a sacred soul," now that changes it all. We wouldn't need the #MeToo Movement. No one would harass anybody if you believe that.

Emily:

Why do you think it is then that we seem to have lost some of that language in the church? Because you make a great point in the book with this... Even just the word soul, it's almost like the culture has kind of, in some ways, hijacked that word. Even just for example in the music that we listen to, you mentioned in your book Huey Lewis And The News, Heart And Soul, All That You Have Is Your Soul by Tracy Chapman, Who Will Save Your Soul, Jewel, one of my favorites, by the way, but we hear this soul language, soulmate, in popular culture, in songs.

We accept it and we embrace it. But then sometimes, I mean, we don't talk about it or at least we don't understand the language or what it means, this expansiveness, the way that you talk about the soul, in the walls of the church. I wonder why that is.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

We don't know what... I mean, in one sense, let's just say this, there's a mysterious dimension to our soul. It isn't easy to... I mean, even if you read Dallas Willard, who really worked a lot at this as a philosopher, you still walk away with some... Because it's a mystery. But the reason I think, and as you mentioned, Emily, it's a popular word in our culture is because we all know instinctively. There's this really deep part. I don't have a word for it. I don't know what to call it.

When there's this food that somehow connects with me at some deep level, it's like that's soul food, or a music that hits me somewhere I can't name, I'll call it soul music, or I meet, in my case, my wife, Megan, that I just thought, "She's my soulmate." There's some connection. I need a word. I don't have a word and soul will work. It does work in that sense. But in the secular sense, it's like this really deep part of me, but we have to recover the spiritual dimension of it. It's a nonphysical reality.

I can't slice you up and find your soul. There it is right by your spleen. There it is. I mean, it's nonphysical. It's spiritual, but it's running everything about us. That's why in the Psalms it's kind of weird because the Psalmist will often speak to the soul. Why are you downcast, oh my soul?" Talking to his soul. But it's the integrating factor in the human person. It's nonphysical. It's eternal, and it's very needy.

And that really is what unlocked the book for me is that I spent three years working on this book and couldn't figure out where to go until I realized we have this amazing soul. It's incredibly resilient, but it suffers when it doesn't have a number of things. Wellness of soul, because we sing that, right, it is well with my soul, wellness of soul comes when these needs are met, the need to be loved and desired and forgiven and to be holy and to have a sense of calling.

All these needs are there in our soul and they refuse to be ignored or neglected. If we try to, the soul goes, "Nah. You can't ignore me. You can't neglect these needs." And then of course, the whole book, which I'm giving you the rest of the book now, is in Jesus we get all those needs met. I mean, in Christ, the Christ story, the Christ event, everything that my soul longs for is found in the work of Jesus.

Emily:

We are all hardwired with deep needs that we cannot ignore, and it's a gift and a burden in some ways that our soul won't let us ignore them. But a gift in that we're going to look to get those needs met and the invitation is bring those needs to me. I mean, I think from God, God's invitation to us is, I can meet your needs, but first it might be helpful to know what they are.

I think you do a really beautiful job of laying out the things our soul can't tolerate, and then the ways in which our friend Jesus meets those needs for us in real and tangible ways. And one of the ways that you, and you've always done this in all your books, but I especially love it here, one of the ways that you help us get in touch with the ways we can meet God in these deep places of need on a soul level are in the soul training exercises.

Some might call them spiritual disciplines, spiritual practices. You like the term soul training exercises. Can you briefly just share why that term? Why do you prefer that one?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

One of the reasons is that... The popular term we use is spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster coined that term, right? My mentor. But Dallas would be the one to point out that the disciplines aren't spiritual. We are. One of the dangers of calling them spiritual disciplines is that we will elevate these practices to make us think, well, if I do them, then I'm more spiritual. No, you're already spiritual. Don't elevate these practices over another.

Richard would agree with that, by the way. Dallas would call them disciplines for the spiritual life. He was careful with that, but I like soul training exercises because I want to emphasize that we're not finished. An athlete trains, a musician trains so that they can on the spot do something better. I like the idea that I'm training my soul with these exercises. That just kind of works for me.

Emily:

I love it. I love it, and I love that it has the word soul in it. It's very on brand, Jim. I appreciate that. Well, I'd love to camp out on two of them, and it's the first one and the last one. The first one you mentioned is holy leisure, the difference between killing time and investing time. Tell us more about that one.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah. Holy leisure is a practice that... Dallas Willard actually was the first one to teach me about this, and essentially it's doing nothing for God's sake. That's just the way I say it. Do nothing, pause, for God's sake. Meaning that it's about being and not doing. The rule of thumb with the practice is for however long

you can do it, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15, a half hour, an hour if you can do it, but it's one of the hardest disciplines because everything in us wants to accomplish.

We don't only try to get a lot done, but we multitask and someone talked about omni tasking. I don't even know what that is, but I guess we're doing a million things at once. There's something in us that the world has put on us to think, "I'm establishing my worth by all the things that I am doing." Holy leisure is no, just be. I have this as the first practice in the book because the chapter is you have a soul and the truth is you didn't do anything to merit your existence.

You didn't create your soul. You didn't create your body. You just were. By Divine Fiat God said, "Let Emily be," and she was. You didn't do anything. The practice of holy leisure gets me in touch with the fact that I'm loved, I'm valued, I'm important if I don't do anything. That's what holy leisure teaches me. It teaches me to slow down, break that grip that the world has on me so that I can just value my being. It tends to bring real peace to the soul.

The first practice in *The Good and Beautiful God* is sleep. There's another discipline exercise that teaches you, you don't have to do anything. Just you exist and God is very happy about that.

Emily:

I think I would know the answer to this, but I'd love to hear it from your perspective. When you engage in the soul training exercise of holy leisure, what difference does it make in your actual day for you?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Great question. It has a huge impact. I find myself more at peace. I find myself more attentive to people. I'm not finishing their sentences or trying to get ahead of things. For whatever time, let's say it was 20 minutes, for 20 minutes, I just sat on my deck and existed. I didn't write my journal or read the Bible or write a lesson. I didn't try to make the most of my time. I just was. And that slows me down to the speed of life.

I think your soul moves at a certain pace and modern life today is just way too fast for our soul. When I can get back to soul speed, which holy leisure helps me with that, then I'm able to be more present with people. I find I'm a better listener. I find I can pause more and let God be involved in my day. It has wide ranging impact.

Emily:

The final exercise at the end of the book is celebration. Can you tell us more about that one?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Yeah. Well, the last chapter is that you are designed for glory. You'll be glorified. That you and I are, as I said earlier, unceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God's great universe. I think sometimes we don't have a great view of heaven, of the next life. Christians have sort of ruined it with cartoons. It looks like we're going to have harps and float on a cloud or something. But it's going to be magnificent. It's going to be greater than what we can imagine.

I think that celebration is something that we ought to be doing more of. My friend, Michael Wise, he's a Bible professor, I said to him one day, "Where do you go to church?" And he goes, "In heaven." I was like, "What?" He goes, "You know." He quotes Colossians 3 to me, Emily, which that Colossians 3 is my jam.

Emily:

Oh, that's totally your jam.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ and God. He's like, "I'm already in heaven. I'm already there. I want to rejoice and reflect with, and that worship service is going on 24/7. I'm always connected to this life." For me, celebration is a way of just enjoying that life is grand as best we can, because there's darkness and pain and suffering and that as well. I try to arrange my Sabbath time with celebration. To me, that's just a beautiful thing and I think God is glorified when we are enjoying him.

Emily:

Yeah, that's beautiful. Jim, I would love to close. This is something I don't normally do, but I'm going to ask, do you have your book there in front of you?

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

I do.

Emily:

Okay. I would love for you to read the hope that you have for the reader here in the first chapter of the book. It starts with my hope for you and it ends with divine origin.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

My hope for you as you read this book is that you will discover the good and beautiful you that Jesus created you to be. I pray that you will see yourself with wonder, see yourself as sacred, even though you're flawed and broken. I long for you to know that you're loved by God, forgiven for what you've done, and made alive by the power of Jesus' resurrection. I've written this book in the hopes that you will see that you have a sacred story, a sacred body, and a sacred longing for God that is at your core.

I hope and pray that you come to know your unique calling in this life and your divine destiny for glory in the next. But there's one more desire I have for you as you read and engage with this book, that you will see your neighbor in the same way. I pray that you will look at those you interact with, your friends and coworkers and family members, as well as those people you disagree with politically or socially or culturally as sacred beings loved by God who are worthy of your compassion and kindness because they too are of divine origin.

Emily:

Amen. May it be so.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Indeed.

Emily:

Thank you, Jim.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

It's a good hope.

Emily:

It's been lovely to chat with you today.

Dr. James Bryan Smith:

Always fun, Emily. Thank you for having me.

Thanks for listening to episode 228 of The Next Right Thing. I hope the simple practice of seeing yourself

as good and beautiful is just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @EmilyPFreeman.

You can find him on Twitter @JamesBryanSmith, that's Bryan with a Y, or at apprenticeinstitute.org, where you can also find his wonderful podcast, The Things Above. His new book, The Good and Beautiful You, will release on June 14th, 2022, but you can pre-order it right this minute wherever books are sold. In closing, I'll share one of my favorite Jim Smith quotes. It's a power narrative about us and about our good and beautiful God.

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