Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Al Sanders Interviews John MacArthur
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AL Sanders: Our guest today on Ambassador Express Talk is Dr. John MacArthur, the speaker, of course, on the broadcast Grace To You.

John, you've been preaching for how many years?

JOHN MacARTHUR: Well I actually started preaching, Al, when I was in my late teens and it was, I think, just growing up under my Dad's influence as a preacher and because I seemed to be able to make a conversation work pretty well somebody thought I ought to be up front giving a little talk now and then, and that started when I was in high school. The first formal sermon was when I was a college student.

AL: What was it on?

JOHN: It was really bad, do I have to say it? I mean, it was...

AL: We have a copy, we'll send it out to our listeners.

JOHN: Ay-yi-yi...I think I preached on the angel rolled the stone away and the title of the sermon was, "Rolling away stones in your life."

AL: I like it. That sounds great...

JOHN: I don't think that was really the idea of that account of the resurrection.

AL: Well now as you look back on your life and these years of ministry and preaching, suppose a young person would say, "You know, I'd really like to get in the pulpit and expound God's Word. In fact, I'd like to do it just like John MacArthur." What would you tell a person like that?

JOHN: Well, first of all, I'd say it's good to have models to follow, but, you know, you're going to be wired uniquely and you want to let the Lord develop in you a particular style of preaching. But I would say the way to develop as a preacher is to listen to great preaching, what you would believe to be great preaching. So first of all, to listen. And secondly, to read great theology. Great preaching is the

marriage of great communication and great theology. You can have great communication without the great theology, and that preaching may have a moment's glow but it's not going to be the long-term. If you're going to have a long-term ministry, you've got to wed theology. So as a young man, I think I was served well because early on I began to read great theology. And so, I wanted my sermons to be...to be rich, to have some depth and some breadth.

One other thing to throw in on the communication side is the best training ground for a preacher is young people, and the younger the better because kids have the courtesy to talk if you're not interesting. And so you immediately get the feedback. And, you know, I would say junior high. If you can command the attention of junior-high kids, you have to work at it and you have to develop and hone the skill to do that.

AL: And they know when you're real.

JOHN: They know when you're real and they know when you're just pulling the wool over...and you've got to keep them moving. They're used to a very, very fast-paced kind of entertainment and if you can keep up with that as a communicator, you've got some future.

AL: Now you mentioned a moment ago listening to your Dad. As you reflect on all of these years of ministry, what's the best advice your father ever gave you?

JOHN: The best advice he ever gave me was when he gave me a Bible when I told him I wanted to be a preacher and in the flyleaf cover he wrote, "Dear Johnny, Preach the Word. Love, Dad."

AL: Wow.

JOHN: And nothing more needed to be said. If you're going to do this, preach the Word.

AL: Now as you've been preaching the Word, you're an expository preacher, tell our listeners what that really means? Is it always verse by verse?

JOHN: Exposition means simply to explain the text. It may not be verse by verse, it may be a verse. It may be a part of a verse. It may be a word in a verse. It may be a subject in the Bible, a topic, but the topic is undergirded by the verses that teach the topic rightly divided, or rightly understood. You know what I mean by that?

AL: Yeah.

JOHN: If you're going to speak on the subject of sin, then there are number of passages that you have to address. But in order to be accurate, you have to rightly interpret the passages that you're using to teach the subject. So in the end it's explaining the Bible.

AL: What's your process of doing that? What's your discipline? How do you go about to maybe give us a cutaway of what it looks like?

JOHN: Well for me the topical sermon is the oddity in my life. For the most part, it's going through book after book after book after book, verse by verse, beginning to end. And so for me it's to week after week in my life I do one book on Sunday morning, another one on Sunday night, is to take the next paragraph in that book and that week work on understanding that paragraph, interpreting that paragraph. And out of that comes...or out of a portion of that comes the sermon.

AL: Well what do you do to study that? Does it just come out of your head as things come to your mind?

JOHN: It starts...it starts when you approach the book initially. First you have to read...I read all the introductory material, that is maybe fifteen or twenty commentaries on a book, read everything that's in the introduction to those commentaries which gives me an overview of the book.

AL: That takes time.

JOHN: It takes a lot of time. Then...that's the hard part of exposition is when you start a book because you have to understand the whole book before you've taught it or you're going to interpret something in chapter 3 that's not going to be consistent in chapter 6. You know what I'm saying?

AL: Uh-huh.

JOHN: Or you're going to have a problem. So you have to do an overview. Introductory material helps me to do that so I read pretty extensively. Once I get an overview of the book, then I sort of break the book into general thoughts in my mind and then I just start to take it a paragraph at a time. When I start, the first thing I do is go to the original language materials and I interpret the verse, or the verses. I interpret all that, I write it down on eight-and-a-half by fourteen sheets, all that work.

AL: Good night.

JOHN: Then I bring out 15...12...however many commentaries and I read those commentaries on that section because I want to take advantage of past illumination. And the commentaries give me cross references, they give me interpretation, options, they give me theology, they give me historical background, they give me a lot of things. And I just take more notes on that. So I've got notes on the text itself in the original language, and I've got notes on all of the commentaries that I've read. And by then, I have begun to frame up and form my understanding. The next step is to find the cross references because I like to explain the Bible with the Bible...so I list all the cross references at the appropriate places, now I've got a rough draft and I can shape that into a final form, throw an outline

in after that and then produce a final set of notes to preach from.

AL: How long does that take, John, that process of preparing just one sermon?

JOHN: Well essentially, you know, that's basically a two-day process, for me a two full day. It's not as much as it used to be because I know more now than I used to know...so the well is deeper I can draw on what I know.

AL: Are there any passages of Scripture, any books of the Bible that you haven't taught yet?

JOHN: Well, I've basically gone through the entire New Testament verse by verse. The only book I haven't taught in the New Testament is the gospel of Mark. Much of that material, of course, is in Matthew and Luke so I've intersected with it and I hope when I finish Luke now to do Mark and then I will have exposited the entire New Testament and that will allow me to finish the New Testament commentary series on the whole New Testament.

As far as the Old Testament goes, early in my ministry I made it all the way to Psalm 73 and then...

AL: Not a hundred and nineteen...

JOHN: No, made it to Psalm 73 and I did that on Wednesday nights, taught New Testament books on Sunday morning and evening. So I've not really gone through the Old Testament, although I have gone back and taught some of the books of the Old Testament. I had to make a choice and I decided that I wanted to focus on being a minister of the New Covenant, the New Testament and teach the Old Testament sort of as illustrations, "These things are written for our instruction and example," and so I bring it into my New Testament teaching, but I have no hope of ever going through the whole Old Testament.

AL: Do you try to find illustrations to fill out some of those things you mentioned...illustrative material from the Scripture itself.

JOHN: Yeah, the first place I look is into the Old Testament or in to some other portion of the Bible because I like to illustrate with the Scripture for a number of reasons. One, it teaches while it illustrates. Two, it has authority. Only a biblical illustration carries biblical authority. And an illustration outside the Bible may have interest, and it may aid clarity, but it doesn't have authority. So the first place to look is in the scriptures and I believe that the New Testament says the Old Testament is written for our instruction and our example, that when you're looking for examples, that's the best place to go to find them. And then after I've done that, if I feel like there's some other kind of illustration from some issue of life, or some book I've read, or some secular thing I might bring that in at the end. I rarely ever use myself as an illustration.

AL: Why is that?

JOHN: Almost never.

AL: Why is that?

JOHN: Because...

AL: You don't want to get in the way?

JOHN: Yeah, because I'm not, I don't like to offer myself as the model, I don't like to...I don't have...I don't want to confuse people. It's a delicate thing, Al, I don't want people ever to think that my life is the authority. The truth of God's Word is the authority. I'm not the authority. And as a preacher because I bear authority when I proclaim the Word, I start using myself as an illustration then I think people have a hard time drawing the line. Another element of it, too, is I can't expect people to set my life as the model for them to follow because my life is so different than their's is. So I don't like to use myself as an illustration, even though in a sense, as I follow Christ they need to follow me, as Paul said. I keep that kind of at a distance, I guess.

AL: Well over these...over these many years of ministry, four or five decades, have you been misunderstood about some of the issues that you've been teaching? And if so, what are those issues that people don't really understand what John MacArthur's all about?

JOHN: I think, Al, in all honesty there are two reasons I'm misunderstood. One is people are told something about me that misrepresents what I teach.

AL: Does that hurt you?

JOHN: Well if it's ignorance it doesn't. I can't...I can't get to that all the time, but there are people who for whatever reason will misrepresent what I teach. The truth of the matter is, no one needs to do that because I'm over-published and over-preached on tape, so anybody who wants to know anything about what I believe could certainly find out. But there are people who are just ignorant and they assume things that they've heard, or they assume things because of some part of what I said they heard and didn't hear the whole thing.

I think the harder thing is that I am...I am misunderstood because there are people who have an agenda who want to make sure that people think I teach heresy.

AL: Why would they do that?

JOHN: I don't know. There are just people who want to discredit me. And that's probably true of anybody as a Bible teacher, for whatever reasons people have they set out an agenda to be destructive. And in an effort to be destructive, they misrepresent what you say purposely.

An interesting illustration of that, I was at Founders Week at Moody a few years ago, and the great Moody church was packed with four thousand plus people at evening at Founders Week and I was...I was speaking that night. I had been ill for two days, been hold up in the hotel trying to get well enough from a flu bug to preach. I came down there ready to give my message and as I approached the building, all these people were flowing in, there were people ringing the building passing out leaflets, eight and a half by eleven leaflets, which essentially attacked me so that...

AL: Why?

JOHN: Well everybody going into the building got one of these things and it was a...both sides of an eight-and-a-half by eleven page folded, you know how people sometimes run to the top and the back and the sides, full of all of the heresies of John MacArthur.

AL: Were there some specific heresy?

JOHN: Well it was all...all half truths, innuendos, isolated quotes taken out of context, all lined up. You know, in the end I denied the trinity and denied the deity of Christ and denied the gospel and denied all these things.

AL: Why would they be after you?

JOHN: Well I guess the strange part of it was everybody coming in had one of these in their hands. And so they were pretty excited to hear what I was going to say. But the strange part of it was, this was a guy...I found out later...the guy who had set all this up was the father of a young man who in a weak moment, I guess, his son had come to me and asked if he could come to the Master's College, said he didn't have any money. I have him a scholarship, just...I don't know...out of the kindness of the moment, and he came to our college and we provided an education for him. And his father was the one doing that. So, I mean, I don't know what kind of person does that but you just have to...just have to sort of say I'm in good company over the long haul, you know, Saul persecuted the prophets.

AL: So you don't specifically try to get an issue and say, "Boy, this is going to get people upset?"

JOHN: The last thing I want to do is upset the people who love the truth. The first thing I want to do is upset the people who don't. I mean, I'm about the truth, I think you know that. I...it's the truth, it's...I don't want to pick a fight, I just understand the truth brings conflict.

AL: So as you look back across these four or five decades, John, has there been anything that has come into your life that...well, has broken your heart?

JOHN: You know, I think...people have said to me, "You're not as funny as you used to be when you preached." They've been saying that to me for the last fifteen years. I was pretty funny when I first started out.

AL: Does Patricia think that?

JOHN: Yeah, yeah, she does think that. And I...I'm not as much fun as I used to be. And I think what that is, Al, is the answer to your question, is that I don't...there aren't things that break my heart, there is just a dull ache that stays there all the time. And it...

AL: Because...

JOHN: It mounts through the years because you just accumulate the pains of...as a shepherd, you know, I mean...I just live with the pain of your people. You live with the disappointments. You live with the, you know, as I was saying on our broadcast today, you know, how long do we have to fight the battle for the purity of the gospel? How long to we have to fight to fight to prop the church up as it weakens itself by a failure to be faithful to sound doctrine. You know, it's the weariness of fighting the battle, the battle...and then how long do you have to be disappointed by people who sit in your church and hear the truth and then behave in a way that demonstrates that they don't seem to be able to apply any of it? And there's just this...it's not the one or two things that shatter you, it's this accumulated sadness of...you can understand why Paul would come to the end of his life and say, "I'm ready to be offered. You know, I'd like to go if I could, Lord, because of the care of all the churches." I mean, after all the beatings and the whippings and the real pain in ministry doesn't come from the persecution, it comes from the disappointment. That's why people talk about burn out, burn out doesn't have to do with hard work, it has to do with unfulfilled expectations. And so you get weary of the effort, you have to be careful of that kind of thing. It's just the weariness of wanting the truth to take hold and to flourish. I mean, it's the same weariness that Jesus must have felt when He said to the disciples, "O you of little faith," or we looked at Judas, it's those kinds of things.

AL: Wondered how much love would it take. So you have over the years had a great compassion for fellow pastors and as a result you have what is called the Shepherds Conference. Why are we as individuals in the congregation, why are we so tough on pastors? Why do we...

JOHN: You know, Al, I'm glad you brought that up. I really hurt for pastors. I mean, these dear men are beleaguered, to put it mildly. I mean...

AL: Are they depressed?

JOHN: Oh, I think they are. Paul was depressed as he said in 1 Corinthians...2 Corinthians chapter 7, he was depressed. He was depressed that the failure of his church in Corinth, he said, "I was depressed." And it was the Corinthian mess that depressed him. I don't think it was quote/unquote clinical, I just think it was...it was just a heavy, heavy, heavy oppressed sadness that the church was so hard to keep on track. And here you've got pastors who take the best gifts that God's given them, make the best effort they can and they're very much beaten up by people in their churches, misunderstood, misrepresented, under-appreciated, under-paid. You know, we bring them out here and it's grown, I mean, I think it was two years ago...three years ago we would have five or six hundred pastors, you know, we could have three thousand this year. In just the last couple of years this thing has just exploded.

AL: Plus it's going to be extended via the Internet.

JOHN: Yeah, in fact I just heard the other day that not only in English but people who speak Spanish can pick up the entire Shepherds Conference in Spanish anywhere in the world live on the Net. So we want to encourage pastors that...I was talking to a guy the other day and I said, "You know, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4," this is where you have to go eventually, "It's a small thing what men say of me." He said, "Even if I know nothing about myself, herein am I not justified?" In other words, it has to matter little what men say and it has to matter little what I think, but "I have to wait for the day when the Lord reveals the secret things of the heart, then shall every man have praise from God." I have to let the Lord in the end be my defender. I can't look to men, there's too much disappointment there. I can't look to myself, there's too much ego there. I just have to wait and let God put the value on.

So for me it's just a question of faithfulness to the truth and to be the shepherd God wants me to be. But it's really hard for pastors. We hope that by building a sort of unofficial camaraderie and support base and friendship and fellowship and association that has developed through the Shepherds Conference we can bring some of that encouragement to these men.

AL: And oh how they need it. I bet they hate to go back, some of them, when they realize what they have to go back to.

Again I'd like to talk some more about your legacy, not only of the Shepherds Conference and the Grace To You radio broadcast, and the church, and also the Master's College and Master's Seminary, but maybe we could come back another time and do a little bit more of this, John, because I want to turn the corner and conclude our time together by asking you some personal questions, if I may?

JOHN: Sure.

AL: Questions, first of all, about that happy lady who is known as Patricia MacArthur. Where did you meet Patricia?

JOHN: Well actually her family was in to my Dad's church. When I was a young guy in college, her family joined our church...wonderful, wonderful family. And I first got to know her because she became a friend of my sister. And so she started hanging around the house, and that's when I got to know her. You know, from the very start, kind of had my eye on her.

AL: Yeah. But wasn't she interested in someone else?

JOHN: Oh, more than interested, she was engaged. So by the time...I was a college student, she was engaged to a guy who in the providence of God went away to medical school, which was good.

AL: Do you remember that first date?

JOHN: Oh yeah, very well.

AL: What was it?

JOHN: Oh, very well. I...

AL: Did you preach to her?

JOHN: No, no, I didn't preach to her, but I was her Bible study teacher. At the time I was in college, I was playing football, I was involved in a lot of things, but on Sunday I was the teacher of the college Sunday-school class in the church and she was in the class. So, you know, being her Bible teacher gained me some ground because the Lord used the Word. So eventually one time we were...we did a college class function and I was taking some kids home after that and I determined that I would take her home last.

AL: Aha...

JOHN: I didn't want to compromise her engagement by asking for a date but I...

AL: What were you driving at that time?

JOHN: A Volkswagen...

AL: And she was going to go home last...

JOHN: So she wasn't...yeah, we had packed it and she was going home last. Anyway that's when I introduced the thought, you know, that are you really certain about this guy because...by that time...

AL: That's the voice of God.

JOHN: Oh yeah, well I had found out that she had...the wedding date was set, the invitations were addressed, they were in the trunk of her car and she couldn't mail them. She was restrained. And I don't know why...she just said, "I have no peace." And the guy was saying...Look, the wedding is coming, the families were concerned. And she finally said, "I can't mail these." And so she...she said, "We're going to have to postpone this wedding." This was pretty traumatic when the invitations are addressed.

At that point, that's what prompted me to say, "You know, there may be a reason for this. And it may be me."

AL: That's wonderful.

JOHN: As it turned out, it was.

AL: You know, as we saw recently a picture of all your grandchildren and you have how many of those?

JOHN: Eleven...

AL: Eleven...you have four children and eleven grandchildren. What is the best thing about being a grandpa?

JOHN: Well for me the best thing about being a grandpa is...is watching my kids teach these little ones to love Christ, because, you know, when we get together they...in the car...they sing songs about the Lord and they ask me questions about the Bible and...it's so funny, they all have MacArthur's Study Bibles. They can't carry them or read them, you know...

AL: Grandpa did them.

JOHN: But I've written a couple of children's books really for them in mind...

AL: And your daughter illustrated them.

JOHN: Yeah, and the little kids have been...their parents have read them through the book on Theology, A Faith to Grow On. I think that's the best. Another thing, I keep saying this all the time, is I live in a world of conditions. Everybody around me wants something out of me in some way or another, and there are certain conditions in all relationships that you have...you know, you have to fulfill certain expectations. The thing that is really fun with grandchildren is this thing we talk about a lot, unconditional love...just this blind affection. And because I'm not a parent, there's not a component in there that's in there when you're a parent, there's that sort of fear factor that doesn't exist with grandparents. And so it's...

AL: And you're not the Christian superstar...you're just Grandpa.

JOHN: Oh, anything but...anything...anything. They have no time for

AL: They see you for what you are.

JOHN: They have no...you know, their response to my superstar status is...PaPa, we come to church, we came to church last Sunday but we didn't like it because you talk too long. I mean, that's their...that's their view of my superstar status.

AL: They'll appreciate that when they get a little older...that's for sure. I do want to do this again some time.

JOHN: Please, I would love to.

AL: I know our listeners would appreciate it because there are a number of other questions I wanted to ask you. For instance, I'd like to know what gives you the most satisfaction in ministry...I'd like to know whether John MacArthur ever thinks of retiring...I'd like to know what we would like to know about you that we don't know enough even to ask the right questions. But I think I'll close by asking you this because none of us are immortal. And I appreciate the fact that we have this opportunity of talking face-to-face because normally the radio listeners get to hear you as you're preaching the Word, expounding the Word from the pulpit, and they don't see the interaction that we've enjoyed here in the studio. So when God calls you to be with Himself, I guess the question that I'd like to ask is for what does John MacArthur want to be remembered?

JOHN: Well I think that's really pretty easy for me. I would just want to be remembered as having been faithful to the truth over the long haul, faithful to proclaim it and to live it. My Dad said to me many years ago, he said, quoting from Ephesians 6, "And having done all to stand," he said, "There are men who have done all but in the end they weren't standing." And that made an indelible impression on my young heart. I want to do all to defense of the truth, proclaim the truth, but in the

end I want to be standing when it's over. I don't want to be crumpled in the dust because of some, I don't know, failure, default, or some demise at the end. I just...I want to be faithful to proclaim it to the end and to live that truth as much as possible to the end. And generally speaking, Al, the best barometer on that is the people who are closest to me, who know me most intimately, who it's important to me will all believe to the end that I love the truth that I proclaim because they'll see it in my life.

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