

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

John MacArthur Takes the Hot Seat

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: GTY86

Hi, I'm Phil Johnson and I'm here with John MacArthur. We've brought him into our studio here at Grace To You early on a Tuesday morning to put him on the hot seat. John, good morning.

JOHN: Good morning, Phil, it's good to be with you. We had a wonderful board meeting yesterday with our Grace To You Board and eager to be back to day and join you in this conversation.

PHIL: Well thank you. I have a list of questions that I know come in frequently from our listeners and some that I've always wanted to ask you. And so, if you don't mind I'm just going to fire these questions at you, you can answer them as briefly as you like, or you can filibuster.

JOHN: (Laughs) How about a little of both?

PHIL: Great. All right, I have several lists of questions here and I've kind of categorized them by doctrinal questions, I've got questions about the church, some practical questions, questions about Christian living and so on. So let me start with the doctrinal ones and what do you suppose, John, would be the most common doctrinal question we get?

JOHN: The most common doctrinal question...boy, I don't know what the most common doctrinal question would be.

PHIL: It's about election.

JOHN: Yeah, I was going to say it would probably be on the issue of the sovereignty of God, the doctrine of election, are we Calvinists, how many points do we affirm of Calvin's theology, that would sort have been a guess of mine, but it's interesting that you would say that is the most commonly asked question.

PHIL: Yeah, the doctrine of election. You know, people say, "How do you explain this, that Jesus said to the disciples, 'You have not chosen Me, I've chosen you?'" But wasn't there a sense in which they did choose Him? What does all that mean?

JOHN: You know, just backing up from that, this last couple of weeks I have been, as I always do every week of my life, preparing sermons. And it struck me, I'm in 2 John, this little epistle of 2 John

which is not known as anything very doctrinal, it's a warning against showing hospitality to false teachers, but it just struck me how it opens. Listen to this, this is from the study Bible text, the New King James, this is the beginning of 2 John, "The elder to the elect lady." Isn't that a strange way to identify someone? You would say, if you were...this is a letter to a lady and her children, it's like 3 John which is a letter to a man named Gaius, this lady is unnamed, but the letter is written clearly to a lady. We know it's a lady because it talks about her children, talks about her home, talks about hospitality and ends up referring, get this, to the children of your elect sister.

PHIL: Wow. It does have a jarring sound doesn't it? In this culture you might think he was talking about Hillary Clinton, or something...a politician.

JOHN: Well...yeah, the person who got elected. But would you...would you stand up in a church service and say, "I want to introduce to you our elect brother?" I mean, people would go, "What? You know, we've got to keep that doctrine under wraps, guys, we can call people Christians, we can call them children of God, sons of God, believers, but we don't go around saying, 'My fellow elect.'" And why not? Why don't we do that? And yet that...that is so amazing, I'm writing the commentary as we speak on 1 Peter and listen to this, how this begins, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, elect..." I mean, that is jarring in the sense that you just pick up the letter, there's no explanation, there's no, "Well, I know that word, sounds a little tough, I'll explain it later." There's no parenthetical statement, there's no caveat, there's no...there's no deference given to somebody who might be offended. It was as if you called somebody a Christian, it was as if you called them a believer, a brother, a sister, a child of God, a fellow worshiper of Christ. That was a term used freely among those in the early church.

PHIL: It's a prominent idea all through Scripture, if you think about it.

JOHN: Right. "Israel, Mine elect....Christ, my elect."

PHIL: Yeah, chosen people of God.

JOHN: Right. So I just think we have gotten so far away from the very high level of comfort that the early church and the writers of the New Testament had with the idea of election. We haven't introduced something foreign into Scripture. We have deviated so far from this and made this into such a tortuous conflict. I heard yesterday, I was talking to a pastor on the phone, and he said that the previous Sunday he was an associate pastor, struggling in a church where he is a young guy and the senior pastor got up and was going to preach because he's preaching in Ephesians chapter 1 on predestination, so his whole sermon was the history of the conflict between Calvin and Arminius. And at the end of his sermon he said, "You know, you're free to take your choice, pick your side." And this young man was rather appalled by that. We have turned something that is an absolute fact which the

early church acknowledged and celebrated and rejoiced in and gloried in into some kind of issue that is seen as divisive and should never be introduced in polite company, should never be introduced to a non-believer, should never be introduced to a young Christian or somebody who is a novice in Scripture because it's liable to offend them, when just the opposite is absolutely the case.

So I just need to say that at the beginning. When you talk about the doctrine of election, you're talking about something that was so clearly assumed in the New Testament community that when you write a letter to somebody you say, "To the elect lady and her children." I mean, I don't know anybody who has ever written me a letter like that. To the elect, to my beloved elect, John.

PHIL: My next memo to you I'll...(laugh)

JOHN: PLEASE! Please.

PHIL: Cause, you know, I love this doctrine too. I love the doctrine of election.

JOHN: Oh, I love all the sound doctrines.

PHIL: But let's be honest. This is a difficult doctrine, right? I mean, was there ever a time when you struggled with it?

JOHN: You know, I guess in one sense that's true, in another sense, all doctrines are difficult doctrines.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: It's just a question...it's a question of how you view them. It's a question at what point do you look at them. If you said to me, "God is eternal." Is that a difficult doctrine?

PHIL: Sure.

JOHN: That's an impossible doctrine. I cannot fathom a being that has always existed, this is not possible to be conceived.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: Nor can I understand that I will exist forever. My eternity is beyond description. And if I think about it very long, I get nauseated. I really do. I can't cope with it because everything I've ever known in my whole world has a start and an end. My dad used to say, "If you think about it too long, you'll find yourself under the bed saying the Greek alphabet." You know, you will have lost your mind. So

you ask me about election, and I'm just saying there's nothing in the doctrine of election that's any more mysterious, any more incomprehensible to me than the concept of a being that is eternal. Beyond that, how am I to comprehend that God is infinite? That is to say that there is no limit on His being, there is no confining of His being. I live in a time/space environment, that's all I comprehend. Everything has time or space features. God has neither of those, that's an impossible doctrine for me to understand.

I believe that the reason the doctrine of election is a bone in people's throats does not have to do with its incomprehensibility, it has to do with how it offends human will and ego and pride. I believe that's the bottom line. It's not about its incomprehensibility because I can't comprehend how Jesus can be fully God and fully man. I can't comprehend how God can make Jesus the sacrifice for my sin. I can't comprehend how God can create. The whole of creation to me is incomprehensible, it is...I was saying to the people Sunday morning in my sermon, I was talking about bacteria, talking about bacteria in your body, and I was talking to Joe Francis who is the immunology professor at the Master's College, a brilliant scientist, and he told me that there are more bacteria in my intestines than people who have lived on the planet since creation.

PHIL: Wow, are you sick?

JOHN: I'm well. And he said the strange reality is, you can't even get to the bottom of life. The creative power of God, you can't get to the bottom of it. And Einstein, of course, died terribly disillusioned because he got all the way down to the atom, all the way down to splitting the atom and he still couldn't understand what held it all together because it was nothing that could be measured scientifically. I mean, the incomprehensibility of this is absolutely staggering to me. So when I come to something like the doctrine of the incarnation, or when I come to something like the doctrine of salvation, when I come to something like predestination, election, it is no more comprehensible to me than any other doctrine. And I think the problem lies in the fact that the pride of man and the self-will of man and the self-determination of man which is a reflection, may I say, of his warped, *amagio dei* ??, it's the warping of the image of God so that he gives himself more credit than he deserves. That's the bent that has been induced into man's nature by sin. He is offended by the fact that he can't make that choice. Ultimately, it's the offense not the incomprehensibility of it.

PHIL: That's a good insight. Well let me ask you a couple of difficult questions about the doctrine of election. If God chooses some people and not others, then how does that not eliminate human responsibility?

JOHN: Because God says it doesn't. And that also is not comprehensible to me but that's what it says. The Bible says that people go to hell because they refuse to believe. I believe that as strongly as I believe the doctrine of election. I believe the sinner is culpable, the sinner is guilty, I believe the

sinner is responsible to God and will be judged for his willful rejection. How God partners up His sovereign elective purpose with volition and human responsibility is...is maybe something God could have told me more about, but I think in the end no matter how much He told me about it I still would not comprehend it. So it's like everything else in my life when it comes to God. As Ian Murray once wrote, "In all major doctrines there is an apparent paradox that appears to us inscrutable, but that's because we're dealing with the infinite with finite minds." I don't think if I had more information on how election and human responsibility go together it would help me ultimately understand it. But I think it's wrong for people who believe strongly in human responsibility and human will and who see the call of the gospel extended universally and the culpability of sinners clearly indicated in Scripture over and over and over again, to therefore assume that the doctrine of election is in violation of that and is not true, it's also wrong for those who affirm the sovereignty of God, that the Lord does reign, that He does what He will in heaven, that His purposes are always fulfilled, that He chooses before the foundation of the world, to therefore eliminate human responsibility, to therefore eliminate human culpability, to therefore eliminate the sinner's responsibility to respond to the gospel and at the same time to fail to carry the message of the gospel to the end of the earth and preach to every creature. That's why when I'm pushed on this issue, I don't like to say publicly I'm a Calvinist, because most people have a caricature of what that is. If you say you're a Calvinist, that's caricature. Just like in the book Dave Hunt wrote, what you have in that book, What Love Is This I think is the title of it, is a what I believe to be a caricature of Calvinism and you raise up straw men and then whack them down and that's consistent with how so many people believe Calvinism exists. So I don't like to use those labels because they feed into caricatures. And labels always do that. I mean, if I said to somebody, "I'm a Baptist," whatever that person's view of a Baptist is is what I'm going to be. If I said, "You know, we have a Presbyterian form of government," immediately somebody is going to say we baptize babies and have some kind of hierarchical structure. So I just feel like labels over-simplify and tend to play into people's caricatures. So I'd rather just simply say I see in the Bible very clearly the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of election is unmistakable, down to the simple thing of calling a fellow believer the elect lady. It is also unmistakably clear that every sinner is called upon by God to live up to the light that he has, Romans chapter 1, but what they do is they reject the truth of God for a lie and they plunge into the situation of sin and judgment. That's not a problem for me to believe those. It's not even a problem for me not to be able to resolve them. I leave that with God happily.

PHIL: Why does God pass over some and not elect them?

JOHN: When you ask me why about God, you've taken me out of my zone. God does what He does because He chooses to do it and He's not subject to my evaluation. How God does things is revealed in Scripture. The means by which a sinner can be saved is revealed in Scripture. Why God chooses to do what He does puts me in the same category as Job was in. You remember when Job, you know, what happened in Job's life was inexplicable because he didn't know God and Satan had this conversation and God was going to prove to Satan that you couldn't break saving faith. Satan was going to try to prove to God that he could break a man's saving faith, he could break Job's faith. And

so God said, "Have at him." Job didn't have a clue what was going on. His friends didn't have a clue and they kept accusing Job of being evil and having secret sin and that this was their little paradigm, you know, this was all going bad because you're a bad person and where are you hiding it. And Job's looking around saying, "Look, I...it's not there, my heart is right before God." And God had even said that he was the most righteous man on the earth. But then finally Job says to God, "You know, what's going on?" And he starts crying out to God and God answers him like this, "Where were you when I made the world? Where were you when I put the stars in the sky?"

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: "Well who do you think you are? You're asking Me why I do what I do? You're not a part of the plan, except in the way that I make you a part of it. You're not a part of the discussion about what's going to happen." And He never tells him why it all happened, never, never tells him. So I just say, "Look, when you ask me questions about why God does what He does, why does He allow evil, the problem with theodicy, why does He choose whom He chooses, why does He pass by whom He passes by, why does He have mercy on whom He will have mercy, why questions are all bound up in His eternal will.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And I can't answer those.

PHIL: I knew you were going to answer that question that way, but people ask it all the time. Why does God pass over some? Really the question we ought to be asking, the more difficult question is, why does God elect anyone, right? Why does God show mercy?

JOHN: Right, well you can also ask the question, yes why did God bother to save any of us, and you can also ask the question, why should I be penalized for something Adam and Eve did? That might not seem to my fallen mind like, you know, the fair thing to do. But that isn't for me to make that judgment. I can...I can also ask the question, why does God hold every single sinner on the planet responsible for what he does with divine truth? Why if they can't do anything about it does He hold them responsible?

Well the simple answer is they are told to do something about it which they don't do. I don't understand how that all works, but I don't think God is sending people to hell after having held them accountable for what they did with His truth unless there's real culpability there, unless there's genuine gospel opportunity there. So I can never know, maybe I'll even never know in heaven because my mind even there will still be a glorified human mind and not an infinite mind, all of that. But at this point God is God and you can ask the same question about anything...why did He make

the world the way He made it? Why did He make trees the way He made trees? Why did He make water the way He made water? You know, I mean, why did He do anything He did. It's up to Him to determine that.

PHIL: Let me move on to some questions about the church. This one you could probably spend two hours answering it, but give me a really brief answer. What are the non-negotiables, if you could boil it down to maybe one to five things, what are the non-negotiables when you decide to join or leave a church?

JOHN: There's one basic...one basic dominating thing, how do they handle the Word of God? How do they handle the Word of God. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. I mean, I'm just more and more drawn to that great reality. And that's Paul writing to Timothy. Timothy's in Ephesus and in Ephesus is the temple to Diana. The Temple of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and, you know, pyramids, and I mean it was a massive temple. It had 127 solid marble pillars overlaid with gold and studded with jewels, each one given from a different king. A hundred and twenty-seven kings had paid homage to this god Diana, otherwise known as Artamus. Also, underneath was this massive foundation and the marble pillars, 127 of them, were on this great foundation holding up this massive stone roof structure. And this was a temple to deception, this was an edifice that gave testimony to the world of Satan's lies. And Paul says to Timothy, the church is to be the pillar and ground of the truth. The distinguishing element of the church is that it rises up in society in its foundation and all of its structure to give proclamation and testimony to divine truth. It's very simple, the truth of God is the most important thing in the world because you can't know God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, sin, the future, the past, anything without the revelation of God. So I tell people this all the time, you choose a church not on the basis of the music...please not on the basis of the music, not on the basis of the parking, not on the basis of anything superficial. You choose a church on the basis of the centrality of the proclamation of the Word of God. That's the key. And when that happens, all things generally come into balance. God will be honored and worshiped because, of course, He is the one who is self-revealed in Scripture. Christ will be lifted up and glorified because He is the theme of Scripture. The doctrine of salvation with all of its range from justification through sanctification to glorification will be expressed in accurate terms. So I only ask one question, what is the role of the Word of God in the church.

PHIL: That's such a simple principle, but if you think about modern evangelicalism, that truth seems utterly lost and obscured with what so many churches are doing today.

JOHN: Well, they're pushing the Word of God out. They have a better way to do it...they have a better way to do it.

PHIL: Providing entertainment and...

JOHN: I mean, it's...you asked me the other day in another conversation we were having about anger and it comes to play at this point. You said, "Am I ever angry?" And I am angry, I'm not angry at people, you know, as such, I'm not an angry person generally, I'm pretty...

PHIL: Cause I've never seen you manifest the mood of anger any way, but I know some things deeply disturb you.

JOHN: Well I'm angry...I hope I'm angry like Jesus was angry when He made a whip and cleaned out the temple. I'm angry inside because the reproach that falls on Him falls on me, a zeal for His house has eaten me up, as Psalm 69 puts it, or as Jesus said when He cleaned the temple. I'm angry at the desecration of the church. The church is supposed to be the pillar and ground of the truth. It's supposed to be the temple that rises up in the midst of the culture and holds up the truth of God. And people, well you know this, Phil, we get letters, we get phone calls, we get e-mails, we get faxes at us all the time from people who say, "I can't find a place where the Word of God is taught...I can't find a place where expositional preaching is done...I can't find a church..." This level of frustration, and yet their cities are full of churches.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: But this is, in some cases, a den of thieves, you know, where people are making merchandise and making money and getting filthy rich, like the TBN crowd and all the phony evangelists all over the place promising healing and miracles. But more often than not it's not particularly that kind of den of thieves, it's just the shallow trivial cheap kind of messages, marginal gospel, no interest in dealing with sin and the Word of God is not central. And that, you know, that grieves me because I think it grieves the Lord because the church has been redirected, and in some cases prostituted to the world instead of staying pure to the husband who is Christ.

PHIL: It's a massive problem because we do get questions like that every single day without exception. One of the most common questions come like this, from someone who says, "Well, I go to a church but they've recently adopted a new ministry philosophy where the sermons are shorter and lighter, there's more, you know, drama and things like that and we've gone to Saturday evening services, you know, as an alternative so that people can go to church on Saturday night and get that done with and enjoy the rest of the weekend." Is there anything unscriptural about attending a worship service on Saturday instead of Sunday?

JOHN: Well I don't want to be legalistic about it, I'm not as some people would say a Sabbatarian, which I think you can't make a Christian a Sabbatarian since that's Saturday, Sabbath, anyway. But I

would say there might be an extreme situation in which a Saturday-evening service would be helpful because you can't accommodate the people. But then again it could be a Monday-night service, or a Wednesday-night, or Tuesday...if you go to church in Russia, for example, they have service Tuesday night, Thursday night, Saturday and Sunday because that's the life of the people.

PHIL: Wow.

JOHN: They come all the time. There's nothing wrong with that. You could have church every day. When I grew up as a kid we used to have revival meetings and they'd last for seven days, sometimes fourteen days. So that isn't in itself an issue.

PHIL: Yeah, what I think that disturbs me about this is that the whole idea is to get it out of the way, as if it was an annoyance and interruption.

JOHN: Well...but there's even more than that. I...I agree with that, get a six o'clock service on Saturday night, that way you can roll in in your Bermuda shorts from whatever you were doing in the day, you can get church over in an hour, go out and have dinner and whatever, and you've got Sunday free to do whatever you want. As I said, I think if there's some very strong constraints and you can't get the people in on Sunday because you have too small a place and too many people and you accommodate that on Saturday night, but I think other than that I believe, I still believe that there's a special role that the first day of the week is intended to play in the life of the church. And I believe the early church manifested that commitment to the first day of the week as a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We still live in a culture that at least has some Christian influence. The work week goes from Monday to Friday, typically. Saturday is a day, you know, that you kind of have on your own, but I think our whole nation and even Canada and other parts of the western world still recognize the uniqueness of Sunday. And I think that's sort of imbedded deep in our culture, probably now for the wrong reasons, but once in order that that day might be set aside for the worship of God. And I think that's a very, very, very important thing. You don't benefit by sticking one hour of church into your week on a Saturday night, nearly as much as being a part of worship on a Sunday morning, setting aside that day, coming back again on Sunday night for another service, which we do, different book teaching a different section of Scripture, a completely different opportunity to worship and fellowship. And in that sense you bracket that day and that day is really set apart for the things of God. So I...I do love Sunday, in fact I've suggested that if people thought it was a great idea to try a Saturday night service, maybe they'd be better served to try a Sunday night service. And at least it would be on the day when the church has traditionally set apart a day to honor the Lord. I still think there's something to be said for the concept which God built into creation of a day set apart to rest and to focus on the Lord.

PHIL: Now you've been my pastor for 21 years. I came to Grace Church nearly 21 years ago now and it's the first church I ever went to that practiced church discipline, which means you actually will stand up and read the name of someone who is living in unrepentant sin and we put them out of the church. Where I came from, Midwestern evangelicalism, church discipline just isn't practiced. And people often say, "Why do you do this and how do you reconcile that with the biblical commandments to overlook one another's faults and be gracious and loving and all of that?"

JOHN: I've never been in a church in my life that did it either. I never knew a church in my life that did it. I never heard of a church that did it in all my years of growing up, and I was around pastors a lot. I never heard anybody doing it, discuss doing it at all. But when I was studying in my days in seminary, I came across a little book that was written by a missionary, it was kind of a self-published little book, in which he was talking about the application of church discipline to the life of the church. And he did a simple little study of Matthew 18 which it just sort have been bypassed in my whole life. And it was just so obvious. Here you have Matthew 18, the first instruction ever given to the church using the term *ekklesia*. The term first appears in Matthew 16, "I will build My church." The first instruction to the church is in Matthew 18 and it's basically about the issues of sin in the church and how you treat people in the church and what do you do when someone in the church sins and won't repent. And it's clear from verse 15 of that chapter on that you confront them, then you take two or three witnesses, then you tell the whole church and if they still don't repent, you put them out of the church.

You follow that up with the teaching of the Apostle Paul who said that, you know, if you have an elder who sins, it has to be confirmed before two or three witnesses and he follows up the very same pattern which is a Deuteronomic pattern of never having an accusation stand unless there is two or three witnesses. Then you go to Paul's discussion of the heretic, the factious man, and again after two or three admonitions, you put that guy out of the church and while excommunication has been abused through the years by the political power of churches, both Catholic and Protestant, it is still a biblical principle that God wants His church pure. First Corinthians 5 says, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump," how in the world, Paul writes to the Corinthians, can you keep that man who is living in sexual sin with his father's wife in your church and not deal with him? He needs to be put out, turned over to Satan to learn not to blaspheme. The destruction of the flesh may come but his soul will be saved, which is assuming he was a believer.

So all of that Scripture just made it crystal-clear to me what we needed to do. And people...when I said, first came to Grace, I told some people I was going to put this into place because it was right, they said, "You'll empty the church, absolutely empty the church. People aren't going to allow you to do that. Nobody is going to come to that church if they think somebody might be spying on their spiritual life."

I said, "Well, maybe nobody is going to come to that church who is not interested in holiness, who's not interested in purity. It might be like Acts 5, none dare join himself to them, you know, that's what the pagan said after Ananias and Sapphira fell dead in the church because they lied to the Holy Spirit. But then again, the design of the church is not to make sure that the sinners all feel welcome, it's to make sure that the people in the church are pure so that when they go out of the church they'll have an effective witness in the world." So at the very outset, my view of church discipline opted me out fully from the seeker-friendly movement. It took me right out of that movement.

PHIL: Of course, it's practically antithetical to it.

JOHN: It is antithetical to it. And the reason the seeker-friendly movement works is because they're disobedient to the text of Scripture with regard to church discipline. Because as soon as you begin to put church discipline into place, and people know that there is an accountability for the way they live their lives in the church, the people who don't have a commitment to live the way they should live aren't going to be there.

You say, "That's too bad, then they miss the church." No, that's good, because they don't pollute the church, they don't corrupt the church." Back to 1 Corinthians 5, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." And that's what I see in the seeker-friendly movement. I see a leavened church. I see what the Anabaptists, for example, called the fallen church...the fallen church. And I think this whole issue of discipline is a factor in it. But anyway, I was told that it would empty the church. I said, "If it empties the church, then it empties the church. What am I going to do? Not do what the Bible says? This is not...this is not acceptable, I'll do it because that's what Scripture says." We've been doing it now for 34 years, two days ago was a Sunday and I had to mention the name of a man who had abandoned his wife and family and would not repent and would not come back. I mentioned him by name, encouraged people to pray for him. Third step of discipline, to go after him, call him back. And again, we've done this now for all these years and, you know, we've gone from 400 to 10,000 people. So...and you know what? It's also interesting to me too, Phil, and you know this as well, that our church is full of young people, young people who are at their point in life where they're tempted by all the sins of the flesh and the world. And when you...we had 90 people join our church last month and we have the Right-Hand of Fellowship, there were 90 people there, 89 or 90 people, no one was 40, none of them was 40.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And for five years we ?????? about 85 percent of the people that join our church were below 40. These people...they're really the target of all the evil in the world in some ways. I mean, they're the target for all the advertising, all the movies, all the music, everything. They're saying, "We want to be here because we care about an environment that is concerned with how we live our lives." And so

here are these...they tell us, you know, the seeker-friendly experts, the church experts say, "You can't reach those people...singing hymns and worshiping God, and having magnificent beautiful music and preaching hour-long expositions of Scripture, they won't come. They're used to sitcoms, they're used to 15-minute sermons, you've got to entertain them, they need to have lattes, you know, every 20 minutes." And all I'm saying is, "Well come and look, here they are." And this is not an unsophisticated culture, this is southern California, this is Hollywood, this is L.A., this is Corinth, if you will, right? This is the modern Corinth and they're pouring in, pouring into the place. And they know what we do and they know what the price of unrepentant sin is because they see it every time we break bread at the Lord's table, that's at least once every month when we do the discipline. So I think God honors the truth, He honors His Word. And I've always felt that if you tried to preach the truth and didn't implement some of it or you selectively preached it, you undermine completely the authority of Scripture. If I will only preach selected elements of the Bible, I in effect said this is not an authoritative book, it's a book you kind of have to pick and choose from...

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And which is what most people do...they pick and choose. But if you go through the Bible expositionally chapter after chapter after chapter, verse after verse, you're saying to your people every single thing this book says is from God and you're accountable for all of this truth. And when you come to Matthew 18 and you talk about discipline, if you didn't do it, they'd feel like you just abandoned the faith and you were a hypocrite.

PHIL: Yeah, as a matter of fact, it's interesting that you said that you've never in your life until Grace Church implemented church discipline, you had never been in a church where that was practiced, that is a relatively recent phenomenon, really. It's a twentieth-century thing, no church discipline. Because if you go back in church history to the Reformers, Calvin for example, in identifying the marks of a true church, he said there are these elements you look for, the preaching of the Word, the observation of the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's supper, a biblical structure of authority where you've got godly elders in charge and so on, and church discipline. And he said if...and most of the Reformers agreed with this, if any of those elements is lacking, it's not even a legitimate church. Would you agree with that?

JOHN: I would agree with that, absolutely. I would agree with that absolutely. The Word of God is central, a priority of leadership on the part of godly shepherds who are feeders and leaders of the flock, and the exercise of discipline which is critical to the purity of the church. And in the middle of all of that is the appropriate worship of God and the exaltation of Jesus Christ and the pursuit of holiness by the people. Those are the things that make a church and one would say, would have to ask today, if many of these so-called churches should just drop the name "church" because ...

PHIL: Some of them actually have, haven't they?

JOHN: Yes they have. And they should be called something like, "The Place," or, you know, "The Group," or "The Gathering," or whatever they call them.

PHIL: Interesting, you know, I was going to ask you about the seeker-sensitive movement but you answered that question already. And what you're really saying is that this movement which is so wildly popular and has resulted in so many massive gatherings is really undermining the legitimacy of the church.

JOHN: It is undermining it. It is undermining subtly the authority of Scripture because the full...you know, Paul said, "I have not failed to declare unto you the whole council of God," it was as if he would have been unfaithful if he hadn't done that. And it is true, you have to declare the whole council of God. But, you know, I...this may be a little strong to say but I think many of these churches are led by the uncalled and the ungifted and they are the unchurch. They are the gathering of something but this is not where God is honored and worshiped and adored, Christ is lifted up and exalted, the Word of God is formidable, powerfully, consistently and thoroughly presented and holiness is pursued to the degree that the Bible lays it out that it should be pursued which involves the high priority of the Lord's table, the high priority of baptism, and the high priority of church discipline.

PHIL: Wow!

JOHN: Church discipline is not for the purpose of putting people out. Church discipline is for the purpose of keeping them in pure. The last thing you want is for them to go out because you have four-three steps, really, before the fourth to call them back.

PHIL: And, in fact, I think you'd say that as this has been practiced at Grace Church, that has been the predominant result. Occasionally we put people out...

JOHN: Oh yeah.

PHIL: But for the most part, when people are pursued they do eventually repent.

JOHN: Well they do, and that goes on in the congregation, you know, day in and day out where one of the elect sees another of the elect, to use that term, in a sinful pattern and confronts them and there's restitution and restoration at that very point. It's unusual that it would go to the two or three witnesses stage and then it would ultimately go to the whole church.

PHIL: Well, that's a good point to segue way into some of my practical questions that I have because that's...really you're saying discipline itself is a very practical doctrine to implement. Let me ask you some practical questions.

First, about divorce. We get questions about divorce all the time. Does Scripture permit divorce under any circumstances? Because some people say no, what's your response?

JOHN: No, I think Scripture acknowledges the reality of divorce. And the great illustration to me is, I think it's Isaiah verse 1 where God gives Israel a bill of divorce. You know, God called and called and called and called and called to a wayward unfaithful Israel, like, you know, Gomer was to Hosea, the unfaithful harlot wife. And finally gives her a bill of divorce. Now there's going to be a day in the future when God takes her back, as Hosea took Gomer back. And the reason for that divorce was, of course, the adultery, the spiritual adultery. That's consistent with what Jesus taught in the New Testament in Matthew 5, Matthew 19 where He said if you put away your wife for anything other than fornication, *porneia*, the whole category of sexual evil, you cause her to commit adultery when she remarries. So I think there is that exception that where there is adultery, there is the possibility of divorce.

I think at the same time, however, that patience needs to be exercised at that point and should a partner commit an act of adultery, come back penitently and plead for that union to continue and confess the sin and repent of the sin and desire to take a person to be taken back, I think that a believer would want to be gracious and merciful in that case as Christ is to us over our many dissimulations. So I don't think that it's, "Oh good, my husband committed adultery and now I can dump him," kind of attitude. But I do think that where you have a sort of impenitent adultery or where you have chronic adultery that just devastates that union, that there's the freedom for divorce. And I think that wherever you have the possibility of divorce you have then the right to remarriage. And I think there are elements of 1 Corinthians 7 that help when you understand that there are virgins there and then there are those who were formerly married and I think that does refer to those who may have been divorced. So there's categories for that in the Scripture.

It is also true, 1 Corinthians 7, and this is kind of where I'm going with that passage is, that if an unbeliever departs, let him depart, you're not in bondage in such cases. The term bondage is a term connected to the breaking of the covenant. So if you're married to an unbeliever and they want out and that too frees you from that marriage. So in either case I think the freeing up concept is so that you can marry someone else, only in the Lord he says there.

There's one other element to it as well. If a person is in chronic sin and they are disciplined in the church, it says in Matthew 18 that they are to be treated as a tax collector and an outcast. This is...this probably comes up as much as anything. Somebody says, "I thought I married a Christian, I don't know if this person is a Christian. But this is an evil person, this person is a sinful person, the

person has gone through church discipline...I don't know if they're a Christian or not, and the church is saying we don't know either, but we know because they will not repent they are to be treated as a tax collector and an outsider." And I think that in cases like that the only way we...the only way we can designate them is that they're conducting themselves as a non-believer so we assume that that's a category that they've...we have the right to put them in, the person would be free to remarry.

I mean, you have a case...I can remember a case where in our church we had a guy who was a criminal and he committed crimes. This is an intolerable situation for a Christian wife. Of course he wouldn't respond, wouldn't respond, the church confronts, the church confronts, he ultimately ends up in prison. The question is...does she have the freedom to divorce the guy? Well based upon the fact that he wouldn't repent, etc., etc., you could categorize him as a...he's categorized as an outcast and a non-believer, she's free to remarry. Those are touchy issues and I think we want to always err on the side of grace and restoration and be patient that even a sinning spouse might be repentant and we might be willing to take them back. But...

PHIL: Right, because God hates divorce.

JOHN: Yes, God hates divorce, Malachi says, yeah.

PHIL: But that's another area where if church discipline is not practiced, all those questions become so much more complex, don't they?

JOHN: Well sure, and you're also in effect saying, "Well, you know, it's not as big a deal as the Bible seems to make it out. We're not going to deal with it." I talked to somebody just the other day who is telling me about someone in their family going through a divorce and the church refused to do anything. The wife is just dumping the guy without any grounds, and at the same time trying to destroy his reputation and the church refuses to do anything.

PHIL: Right...and that happens all the time.]

JOHN: Oh yeah.

PHIL: You know, we get requests here at Grace To You from people who say, "Can you help me with this? My church won't step in and do discipline at this point." And often when you contact the church, they'll admit...Yeah, you know, we're not going to do this, we don't do church discipline...they'll say.

JOHN: Well I get letters like that. You know, would YOU call this pastor and tell him to do this?

PHIL: Right. Well let me ask another question. In your favorite series, probably the best-selling series of all time for Grace To You, "The Fulfilled Family," you make some statements about the role of

women that have been very controversial, specifically that women are called by God to be workers at home. So what about single mothers? Is there ever a place for a single mother to be employed outside the home? Does Scripture allow for that?

JOHN: What you have in the principles that are given, you're talking about Titus chapter 2, is very, very clear. The woman is to be a lover of her husband, a lover of her children and a worker at home. She is to...it just says a worker at home. She is responsible for the family. She is responsible for the home. I think that's one of the interesting things in that little letter of 2 John that we talked about where here is the Apostle John writing to a lady and not the man to tell her about hospitality and to whom she should render that hospitality in the home. So it's pretty clear that she's the *oikia despotes*, she is the leader of the home. This is not some esoteric far-out reality. How obvious is this? I mean, the women bear the children, the women nurse the children, the women are given the tender and compassionate nature that cares for the children and the women are the weaker vessel needing to be sheltered and protected and cared for by their husband, you know, not given a briefcase and an SUV to get into the morning commute and go off and work with a bunch of other men. I mean, so...it's just obvious the way God has designed the women that they're to be home. Once, however...and that is not to say she cannot be enterprising at home. I mean Proverbs 31 woman was very, very enterprising in the home. She is in the home, she doesn't waste her time. She's making clothes for her family. She's up before dawn to prepare food for the family, household and the servants. She's...she's saves money, she buys a field, all of those kind of enterprising things. But it is to say that the focal point of her life is in the home under the leadership of her husband.

Now the question you're posing is what happens if there's not a husband? What happens there? Well she is, in effect, as a widow. I mean, she becomes as one without a support. And the Bible would say the first responsibility then falls to another male in the family, a brother, a brother-in-law, a father, an uncle, a grandfather and somebody who doesn't take care of his own household is worse than an unbeliever, Paul says. So we've always taught through the years that where you have a single woman, you have a virtual widow if there are children. What do you...they've already lost their father, now what are you going to say? We're going to send your mother to work so now you lose not only your father, but you lose your mother? I would think that in a single-mother situation the stakes are even higher for that...for that mother to stay home because she then is the only parent that those children have. And so somebody in the family needs to come alongside. If there isn't anybody to do that, the extended family of friends and those who know and love her, this would be drawn into the church as well comes into responsibility. And beyond that, if that's not happening, then I believe it is the responsibility of the church to take care of those like they were real widows. So I think it's the church's responsibility to shepherd in those kinds of areas to make sure that we do all we can to be Christ, as it were, to that single parent. There may be ways...we do this all the time at Grace Church, we have funds that we provide for them, there are resources that we know of in the community for them. There are times when we give them part-time work at home, when we allow them to participate

in various kinds of things that can bring them a little income, when we actually give them money out of our Deacons Fund and things like that. And there are some tolerances for them to be employed if there's no detriment to the family. It's not an ideal situation, but, for example, it may well be that the children are 12, 13, 14, they're going, for example, to our Christian school, and the mother could come in with the children, do some work in the mornings in the Christian school and still be a part of the children's life. That isn't an ideal situation but in some situations where the ideal has been lost because not a husband there, the church can step in to accommodate that.

PHIL: Humph. You've written a number of books that deal with the gospel, and probably the most controversial is *The Gospel According To Jesus* where you took on easy-believism. And one of the sort of ramifications of that...

JOHN: Can I just kind of straighten that out?

PHIL: Sure.

JOHN: I was not the controversial person. Is that not true? Wasn't I taking a historic position?

PHIL: That is true.

JOHN: I didn't start that controversy, I tried to correct the deviation.

PHIL: That's true.

JOHN: I just want to set the record straight.

PHIL: Okay. One of the ramifications of that issue has to do with child evangelism. And you went into it a little bit in your book *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, but there is a tendency, I think, today for parents to evangelize their children with the kind of deliberate easy-believism. A mother will set a little three-year-old on her lap and lead him in a prayer to invite Jesus into his heart, and then often...and I've encountered this frequently and I know you have as well, those parents will assume they've done their spiritual duty with regard to evangelizing that child because at three years old he parroted this prayer and invited Jesus into his heart. And you've cautioned against that sort of superficial approach to child evangelism. But let me ask you...

JOHN: Yeah, another way to do it is just to say I'll give you a package of M & Ms if you'll just say this prayer.

PHIL: Yeah, in fact you see this often in evangelistic meetings for children, everybody raise your hand and all...

JOHN: Yeah, and if you motivate them, you know...

PHIL: But let me ask you this. At what age do you think it is possible for a child to be saved?

JOHN: Well I don't know that in every case it's the same but I always go back to the Bar Mitzvah, the son of the Law in the Jewish community where the child was 13 years and then they became accountable for the Law on their own. They could actually and did, you know, get married at 13, 14, 15 years old, start their family. So I think a child, every child is different. I mean, it could be at nine, for some, or ten, or eleven. But I really do tend to think that there's something that happens in that period of time around say 12 years old, 13 years old when they come to a more mature point in their life that they begin to internalize something as their own and not just something that they do because their parents have done it, because of familiarity or because of a desire to please their parents, or because they've been told that heaven is a wonderful place and wouldn't you like to go there, or because they've been corrected so many times and told that they were going to go to hell if they don't shape up. And so I think it could be better intentioned than that as well, but I...we're reluctant to embrace a conversion of a child before the real evidence of fruit can manifest itself in the independent conduct of that child which starts to manifest itself say around 11 or 12 years old. So we...in fact an ideal situation, and this is what we're kind of working on in our church is in the sixth grade when they're eleven years old in the Sunday School curriculum to prepare them for the significance of baptism, to prepare them for the significance of beginning to walk the walk of faith in a true commitment to Jesus Christ. And then after they gone through some of that kind of training, to baptize them at that particular point.

I think there's a process to get them there and it's an old process. I was talking to my son, Matt, last night at his house and he was showing me the catechism book that he's taking his kids through. And his kids are...the oldest one is Johnny who is 13 and he was just baptized not long ago and gave a wonderful testimony on a Sunday night in our church, the next little one is Ty, and Ty, I asked him, you know he's now in the sixth grade class going through and he's learning the Bible and he's learning the catechism and so he's reciting some of it to me, it's a wonderful device. It's a time-honored way of repeating...his dad asked him the question, "What was the condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden?" And he says, "Before the Fall they were holy and happy." "And what was the condition of Adam and Eve after the Fall?" "They were unholy and miserable." And, you know, just those little...you know, this is so important to embed in their little hearts so that it's not a...it's not just a response to "mommy would like you to pray this prayer," but it's...they're starting to grasp the range of this. So...so, I think in my life I've seen too many...I've heard too many thousands of testimonies, "You know, I prayed this prayer when I was eight-years-old, but, you know, then I paid no attention and I lived this way and blah-blah-blah, and then when I went to the university I met somebody there and for the first time I really began to acknowledge the truth. I think...I don't know when I was saved, I

think it was a re-commitment." You know, we've all heard that over and over and over. So I think it's better to be patient. You don't know when the miracle of true regeneration has taken place because it is a supernatural thing. But I think the time you're going to be able to see its manifestation which is the only way you can tell is when they begin to act independently. And that's about that time of their lives.

PHIL: You've just written a book called *Hard To Believe* which deals with the gospel and makes the point that the gospel message is not all light and sugar. There are some hard elements in the gospel.

JOHN: Well...ad it's not a message for kids.

PHIL: That's just what I was going to ask. Is there any aspect of the gospel we ought to shelter our children from?

JOHN: No.

PHIL: Should we not tell them about hell, or not tell them about...

JOHN: No...no, preach hell strongly to them. No, all of it. But the understanding of self-hate, the understanding of a deep remorse over sin, the understanding... See this is one, when you look at the big picture, children, I believe, are the special care of God. The little book *Safe in the Arms of God*, what happens to the child that dies...

PHIL: Yes.

JOHN: I believe God takes those children to Himself because they're not ready or capable of the necessary penitence and faith. And so they're covered until they reach the point and, you know, you can take the model of Scripture...Jesus at the age of 12 goes into the temple. And why did they pick that? He lived 30 years of His life and we have no incident out of all 30 years until He shows up to be baptized by John, except one incident, 12-years-old, goes to the temple and independent of His parents He's asking questions to the doctors. There's got to be some significance in that. And there He is growing not only in wisdom and stature but in favor with God and man. So He's reached the point of independent development spiritually. And I think that just...that's a very important touchstone for that age and I think God cares for those children up to that point, that becomes critical mass(?) time, if you will.

PHIL: Is it a specific age or is it a stage of development that's different in each child?

JOHN: It is not the age of accountability, it is the condition of accountability. But I think it's generally around that area. Some kid may be precocious and it might be earlier, some may be a little slower it

might be later, but I think in that zone somewhere. I don't want to say there couldn't be exceptions. And, you know, in my case I look back and there was never a time when I didn't believe the gospel, never a time when I ever rebelled against the gospel. There was, however, a time in my life when I felt the weight of sin. I remember that incident very carefully.

PHIL: It was a specific incident?

JOHN: A specific incident that just crushed me and I think I was about ten years old and maybe a little older and I sat with my dad and went over it and I said, "I need...I need salvation, something isn't right in me. I know what I'm doing is wrong, but there's something...it isn't right in me." And I don't think I was particularly precocious, so I think it was around that same time for me. I think to say six, or seven or five would be a very, very unusual that somebody would come to a point where they really understand what is going on.

PHIL: Let me shift in to some personal questions about you and your ministry. Here's something people often ask, and you don't get personal very often. I know you don't like to talk about yourself. But is there ever a time when you feel spiritually dry? And if so, what do you do when that happens?

JOHN: You know, I guess maybe there's a time when I'm always nourished and replenished because I'm preparing in the Word of God every week of my life. I mean...I mean, I have the best possible job, calling. I mean, if I had an...and I was an evangelist with ten suits and ten sermons...I'd be living in a world of dryness because I can't just go around repeating the same things all the time. But because I have to preach to the same people, I mean if I went to another church, I'd have 30 years worth of sermons, I wouldn't have to do anything but pull them out. But because I'm in the same place, I'm just...my soul is refreshed again and again and again...but when I hit those kind of points where there's a bit of a staleness or a flat spot, I really look for a good biography.

PHIL: Hum....

JOHN: I look for...I get a spiritual lift from...it washes my soul to...

PHIL: What are some of the best biographies you've ever read?

JOHN: William Carey by Pierce Carey, I'm talking about recent, by Pearce Carey. David Daniel's book on William Tyndale. I've thoroughly enjoyed God's Secretaries by Adam Nicholson, the book on the guys that translated the King James because it's got little biographical glimpses in it.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: I've written...I've read a number of books on the Reformers, Luther and Calvin. I've enjoyed John Piper's(?) little books, The Swans are not Silent, the little series which he deals with brief biographical sketches of these men, really great, great, well-written material, just wonderful.

PHIL: I have your copy, I've borrowed it from you and never given it back because it's a precious book. In fact, I gave you a replacement for it. I have your copy of Ian Murray's biography of Jonathan Edwards.

JOHN: Yeah...

PHIL: Which you marked up copiously in the margins and I gather that book made quite an impression on you.

JOHN: Quite an impression on me. Of course I love Ian Murray anyway. Ian Murray's book on Martyn Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, profound effect on me even though it's like 800 pages, two volumes. There's a great book on Arthur Pink. I'll never forget reading that book. And even though the story ends in horrific sadness, it makes you cry at the end because his life became so sad. I need to...because I spend so much time in the Scripture, it helps me to refresh my own soul to get out and to get in the struggle of somebody else, the highs, the lows, the triumphs. I think that's why, in a sense, I'm drawn to the Apostle Paul because the Apostle Paul more than any other New Testament writer obviously lived and died with the church. I mean, Peter is very preliminary in the life of the church. I mean, he's out of the picture by the twelfth chapter of Acts and there's not really the spread of the church until you get to the next chapter and Paul starts to take the church to the world. John's role in the church is limited because of the limited epistles and because of his absence as a factor in the book of Acts. So you can't really track him. And the same would be true of Jude and even James.

So the big dominating profile biographically in the New Testament, apart from Christ, is Paul. And I think I'm drawn to him because it gets me beyond the theology. There's this living flesh. I can't always find John in his epistles, or I can't find Jude in Jude and I can't find James in James. I can't even really find Peter in Peter very often, a few glimpses like when he says, "We were on the mountain with the Lord." I find Paul all over the place in his epistles.

PHIL: Yeah. That's a good insight. You know...

JOHN: I don't think I ever said that before.

PHIL: No.

JOHN: Or even thought it, but...

PHIL: I read a lot of biographies myself and one of the things that a lot of famous have had in common is they struggled with depression. Spurgeon had a lifelong bout with depression. Lloyd-Jones had a famous episode where he was in depression. And I think it's common of preachers to struggle with depression, and yet I think you would say you don't. Right?

JOHN: No, I've never been depressed. I don't even know what you mean by that. I...I'm not depressed. You know, in the first place, I don't know about the wives of these guys, but I married a woman with whom it is impossible to be depressed.

PHIL: (Laughs)

JOHN: I mean, life is one big adventure with Patricia and we have such a great time and so much fun. And God has so blessed our children, you know, we have our children are in Christ and now our grandchildren. I have wonderful friends like you and many others. I mean, what would I be depressed about? I think the biggest thing you struggle with is your own failures, your own...you know, debilitating elements of your own human weakness and wanting to do more and be stronger and be more faithful. And I think the thing that's hardest for me is I rarely ever feel that I couldn't have prepared better for a sermon. And that's...that's relentless because I have to preach all the time and I always feel like I could have prepared better.

PHIL: Huh.

JOHN: And there's a sort of nagging thing in my mind that I don't ever want to let my preparation slip so that I'm just kind of flying by the seat of my pants on the basis of what I know. But as far as...

PHIL: What sort...

JOHN: Sort of clinical depression or moping around or feeling sad, it would take more than I've had to endure. I've had suffering in the family with, you know, crisis with the children and with Patricia. The result of that was I was driven in the direction of God, not driven into depression.

PHIL: Right. You're talking about when Patricia was nearly killed in a car accident..

JOHN: Yeah, and then when Mark had a brain tumor and there are a lot of other issues like that but it isn't about depression for me.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: It goes the other way, it sort of drives me to...I think partly, and I've told you this before, I'm not a person given to melancholy, I'm not a person given to moods and my theology, my confidence in the sovereignty of God precludes me becoming depressed because it's not as if I have that much effect on anything anyway in one sense. I've said this, if God shut down Grace To You, if He took me out of Grace Church, if He said you're not going to write another book, I mean, I don't...I'm not compelled to do that, I'm not... People think that, you know, I must be a driven person. I'm not really a driven person, I'm not a person who has any stress, you know.

PHIL: But you talked about the focus of your discipline to study and you are THE most diligent person I've ever encountered. To what do you attribute that? I mean, you...it amazes me to hear you say that you sometimes feel that you could have studied better because I know how many hours you spend in study and I know how careful you are.

JOHN: Well, I don't know, I think it's a combination of a lot of things. First of all, it's the tyranny of next Sunday I have to be ready and I have a formidable responsibility to rightly represent the Word of God and I don't want to put words in God's mouth or misrepresent what He said. It's more than that. As Dick Mayhue always says, I'm the most curious person he's ever met in his life. I do have a great amount of curiosity. I'm very, very curious. I mean, I want to know everything I could know about just about everything. I mean, I'm not just talking about the Bible, I'm curious about lots of things. But I'm most curious about what's most important and I think I'm partly driven...I mean, it's not about making sermons for me, there's just something about the joy of discovery in the Bible of getting to the core of something.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: That's sort of built into the fabric of who I am.

PHIL: I see that in you. You said...you said if you went to another church you could pull out your old sermons and just preach them. You wouldn't do that. The truth is...

JOHN: I would not.

PHIL: Here at Grace Church you've been here...what?...nearly 35 years and most of the people who were here when you began aren't still here. The church is transient enough that it turns over...what?...every ten years or so. So you could preach old sermons, but you don't. You don't go and pull those out and just redo them.

JOHN: They aren't nearly as energizing and until I've finished the Scripture, which I never will, going through it once I'm somewhat reluctant to go back through it again, and again I think my dad is that

way. My dad is in his ninetieth year and his mind is really good and he still teaches his Bible class every Sunday and has a radio program called Voice of Calvary out here on the west coast, been on the radio 63 years or something.

PHIL: Wow.

JOHN: And he said to me, you know recently, for the first time I don't...I don't think I'm reading as much as I used to.

Well my whole life, I grew up with this. He was in the middle of a pile of material reading and I would say to him, "Why do you need to know all that?" I mean, fascinated by all kinds of things. And even now when I go to visit him, he's got stacks of stuff and he's still reading but he thinks it's diminished a little bit. And I guess as you kind of see the end coming, you ask yourself, why am I absorbing all this information? What am I going to do with it? But I guess there's an element of curiosity that is a benediction to me. In some ways you could say it's a curse because you never are content with what you know. I mean, that's what drives me to books. I've got books all around me all the time because they're...and particularly about the things of God because I don't want to miss anything.

PHIL: Well keep it up because it feeds us and it's a blessing to all of us who sit under your teaching.

JOHN: Thank you.

PHIL: To what do you attribute the explosive growth of your ministry, in particularly Grace To You, in the past decade and a half?

JOHN: I don't really know, Phil. I mean, I've asked that question many times when, you know, when I'm asked to teach preaching at the seminary, I can talk about what I do, but I don't really know why what I do creates interest. I don't know why people listen to my preaching. I don't know why it's different than some other preaching. You know what I'm saying? I just do what I do. I don't know...I mean, I don't know that there's a formula here. I can't put my finger on why I do what I do or why people respond to it or why, you know, something happens. But on the other hand, I also ask myself the question...you know, Grace Church, we have such phenomenal ministry there, such glorious ministry there, you know, we have this wonderful music and worship and children's ministry and youth and adults and preaching of the Word of God, and we're surrounded by five little churches where people go every week, that they could walk to Grace Church. And I'm saying to myself...and I know nothing's going on there, so I'm saying, whatever level of success we may be having, we're also faced with real failure. And then all around our church, take away the churches, are houses full of people who have never darkened the door of our church and they've been living in there for 20 years. So whatever it is that we're doing, it certainly isn't compelling everybody.

I met an unsaved person last night who had been to our church and she said, "Yeah, I came to hear you and it was very inspirational, very inspirational. I came...I think a couple of times, but I haven't been in a long time and it probably would be good to come back because it was inspiring." And when you hear that you say...there's somebody who could take it or leave it. You know. So I don't know in the end but I would say this, I do think God blesses His Word, He doesn't always bless it by making the church big but God does what He does. And I think there are some components. I'm committed to doing things excellently, I'm committed to pulling around me very highly gifted men and women to multiply ministry and they have their own effect and their own impact. I think that's part of it. But again, I feel like we should have more people hearing the Word of God in our church than we have. We should have far more than we have, far more. I wonder how, you know, how someone could come and be in our church and not want to come back every week. Not to hear the preacher but just the joy of the fellowship and hear the music and go to the classes and have their kids involved. I...I'm saying how can people come once or twice and not come back? I don't...so at the same time you have a measure of success, you are always faced with the reality that some people can be completely indifferent to what some people think is so wonderful.

PHIL: And there's still a lot of work to be done.

JOHN: Still a lot of work.

PHIL: Do you plan to stick at it for a long time?

JOHN: Yeah, I mean as I said, my dad's in his ninetieth year and he still teaches every Sunday. The day will come when they'll want to bump me out of the pulpit and put somebody in to take my place, but...

PHIL: Not any time soon.

JOHN: Well I can't imagine myself...I'll never retire as such, I mean whatever that means. I may stop doing ten things...

PHIL: I can't imagine you retiring.

JOHN: No, when I lose my mind or...

PHIL: You have a hard time taking a vacation, don't you?

JOHN: Yeah and when I take a vacation all I ever do is edit the books and the commentaries that I'm writing so my wife says, "This is no vacation."

PHIL: John, this dialogue that we're having is going to be out by CD and tape to Grace partners and friends of our ministry who support and help us pay the bills, so if you could speak to them, what message would you have for them?

JOHN: Well I know that probably people give me more credit, far more credit than I deserve. My responsibility is to teach the Word of God but that in itself really doesn't accomplish much because it has to be taught to someone. I'm in profound and everlasting debt to the faithful fellow pastors and elders and leaders and members and family of our church because they really are the church. They're the ones who are there bringing their friends, their unsaved friends. They're the ones serving and ministering alongside of me that give this ministry life and that give the truth life. And the same is true with radio. I could preach till I'm blue in the face and nobody in the world could hear it if it weren't for people like you and all the others who are a part of our team here at Grace To You and most importantly Christian radio stations everywhere. And then beyond that what makes it all work is the faithful prayers and gifts of those who listen. This is a completely 100 percent listener-supported ministry and we have no resources beyond that. We have zero endowment, we have nothing to turn to except our listeners. This ministry will be whatever the people who listen and support it allow it to be under God's providential leadership.

And so, my debt is to the Lord for the gift of teaching that He's given to me. My debt is to those who trained me and set examples of what a preacher and a teacher should be and a pastor should be. And my debt is also to those who labor with me. And my debt in particular for the greatest range and reach of this ministry is the people who support it cause it's theirs, really, it's theirs. And when they don't support it, I won't be there to do it. I'm only there because you make it possible.

PHIL: Well, John, we love you and thanks for your diligence. I'm Phil Johnson, I've been talking with John MacArthur. John, we've gone nearly a half-hour longer than we intended to do and I still have a lot of questions to ask you. Maybe we could do this again some time.

JOHN: Well, Phil, you're in charge of this part of my life so all you have to do is set it up and I'd love to do it.

PHIL: It's done, we'll do it.

JOHN: Yeah, thank you. Thank you for being my friend and my co-laborer and partner and fellow elder and fellow pastor and preacher and theologian. This partnership is precious to me.

PHIL: Me too, it's a privilege.

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