

A Chat with Rick Francis
Pastor Rick Francis
Wasilla Bible Church
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Pastor Larry: We're gonna leave the lights down here for a bit; in fact, for the rest of the service still, 'cause we're not gonna have our normal study time where you'd be wanna be reading in your texts and following along with notes or whatever. We're gonna be doing something a little bit different. And the best way for me to introduce it as we take a break this week from our summer series in the Minor Prophets is to read a verse of scripture to you. It's found in Ephesians 2, and it reads like this. The Apostle Paul is discussing how we're saved by grace. And it's not just that we're saved. He goes on and he says this about us. He says

For we...

...those of us who have been touched by God's grace...

...we are His workmanship...

...God's workmanship. The word there is the same word that we get our word 'poem' from. We're God's poem, each one of us as it were.

...created in Christ Jesus...

In other words, it's through Christ that the Father creates us into this individual poem or work that He desires us to be. And there's a purpose to it. It's for good works. There's things that He designs each one of us for, as Jesus works in our life. And good works, it goes on to say...

...which God prepared beforehand, so that we would walk in them.

In other words God prepares each one of us, through Jesus, so that there will be things that we are able to do, good things. And then He goes ahead of us and arranges opportunities to do those things.

Well, today we're gonna introduce you to an individual who's a workmanship of God, a poem that God is putting together if you wanna put it that way; a person who's been touched by Jesus and has been worked on by God, through Jesus, in such a way that he's prepared for good works. And we believe that God's arranged for him to come here and do good works among us—specifically with our teenagers. The man's name is Rick Francis, and he has spent twenty years working with teenagers. He's raised two teenagers on his own. He recently got his master's degree working, focusing on theology and working with teens. And he's joining our staff—he joined July 1st.

And I'm gonna have Rick come right on up here. And we're gonna put Rick on that stool, and I'm gonna sit on this one. And a couple things to give you a sense of the format...we have a tradition or a practice in our staff that whenever somebody new comes we get a...we spend a lunch with 'em and we ask 'em four questions, four specific questions. They answer those questions, and in the process we all get to know them a little bit better. And more importantly, we get to know how God is worked in them and desires to continue working through them.

And so what we decided to do today is do what we do with the staff, only this time with the whole congregation. And this is the first time we've done it. Rick, you're gonna be the first one who's had to do this...

Rick: Thank you.

Larry: ...answer the four questions in front of the entire audience of our congregation. And we're gonna walk through those four questions. And we also have a deal...when we're done with the four questions we always offer an opportunity to answer any three questions you might have to follow up. And we decided we wouldn't open that up to everybody...might be here all day. But Rick, we're gonna start off with an initial question. By the way, Rick comes from Portland, Oregon. You'll find a little biographical in the bulletin. And you can get those kind of details in there.

But the question I wanna start with, Rick, is how was it, or what's your earliest memories...how did Jesus become real to you?

Rick: Well, I would say that I grew up...first of all, I just wanna thank you for putting me on the hot seat today. This is wonderful. This is great.

Larry: It's just started...

Rick: Heh, heh,...yeah. Well, I...honestly, I don't recall the very first experience, other than I know that I grew up in kind of a spiritual darkness. My family wasn't the model home by any means, the "Brady Bunch" or any of those. We...I watched those on TV, but my family wasn't anything like that. But I can say that the first time that I really saw Jesus modeled to me was through a man named Dwight. And that's when I began to realize that God was real, and He was real by living out in the life of this man. And it was the first real, positive, adult, male role model I'd ever had in my life. I'd grown up...my dad left, or we left my dad, when I was 2½ years old, because of infidelity. And he...I just remember that I actually still remember it. I was 2½ and I still have a recollection of it. It was very sad, and I remember that everybody in my family was crying; so since I really didn't understand what was going on I just had to cry, too. So I just joined them. Didn't understand the full impact of what was happening.

But we went and lived with my grandparents for six months or so, and then we moved out to a town about sixty miles away. My mom was a nurse, and so she was able to provide for us. But she was...she worked most weekends, and when she wasn't working on weekends she would...we would go out to my grandparents' house sixty miles away. So there wasn't a lot of opportunities to go to church.

Sometimes she would drop us off at church, as kids, and we would be just kind of dropped off in front of the church, go find your way, go find your classroom, go find somebody that can tell you about God. But there was no real instruction in my house. My mom's view of God was...she wasn't a believer yet. She...her view was kind of a mixture of fear and superstition, that God was someone that you respected, that you feared; but somehow, through superstition, if we did the right things we would be able to earn our way or get things from Him, or something. And I picked that up along the way.

I remember there was a time, growing up, things got even harder because when I was between 7 and 14 my mom fell in love with a guy and she brought him into our house. They never got married, but he lived with us for seven years. And he was an alcoholic; he was verbally abusive; and he made it very clear that he didn't like having us kids around. And I was the youngest, and I can remember at first thinking, "Oh, I got a dad!" you know. And then I realized that "I don't want this guy as my dad," you know. And it was very hard. And I remember thinking that...I kept trying to talk my mom into getting away from him, and we all did. And she was lonely; she was in love with the guy; it was hard for her. But it was just a hard time.

And I remember reaching out to God at that point. My view of God was, again, this person to be feared. If you stepped out of line too far He'd squish ya. And I tried to come up with some formula to please God. How could I please God? Because clearly I'm being punished; I mean I'm going through these hard times because I've done something wrong. And if I can just become a good person, if I can just do the right things then maybe I can please Him. So I began to go to church with a friend of mine down the street. And the church kind of helped. It was a church that kind of taught works were the way to go anyway, so it was just the perfect place for me to take up my own view of God and take it to the limit. And I wasn't very fun to hang around. None of my friends wanted to hang around with me after a while, because I was always...I wanted to be perfect. I wanted to be good. And I wanted to show God how good I was. And I wanted to make everybody around me good.

And it culminated in a weekend where my cousins...it was like our last camping trip in Montana, because I grew up in Montana, and it was our last camping trip in Montana because we were moving to Oregon because my mom was finally moving away from this guy. And in the past I had joined in with my...all the guys. There was like six guys and two girls in our group, and so I would join with the guys and my cousins. And we would go off in the woods, and we built this fort up on the hill. And we'd hang out there.

When I was younger they had me steal the cigarettes, 'cause that was my job as the youngest. If I got caught they figured I was cute enough that I wouldn't get punished. Didn't work always, but for the most part I never got caught. And then...but by this point they're teenagers. And so rather than just stealing cigarettes, now they'd also just made off with a six-pack of beer. And they were up in the woods with this. And I was livid. I was like 13 years old, and I was like "Oh, you can't do this! This is wrong! I'm gonna go tell!"

And so before I could get like three steps away from our little fort they had tackled me, and found a piece of rope that one of them had, and they tied me to a tree. And sat there and...they sat there a few feet away from me and discussed the different tortures that they were gonna do to me, and the ways they were gonna punish me for being such a tattletale. And I began to get really scared, because the one that was kind of rising to the top was they were just gonna leave me there all night for the coyotes to get. And I'm like...ok, I don't like that idea at all. So then they decided...I felt like, a little bit like...I look back and it's a little bit like Joseph and his brothers, and they were gonna get rid of him. They decided, rather than throwin' me down into a well they were gonna take me to the outhouse and just drop me in. And that was even scarier than the coyotes for me. But I remember I was fighting the whole way, and I was making...really screaming and fighting... "Oh don't throw me in! NOOO!" Like they must have taken me about a quarter mile to the...from where we were up in the woods to this outhouse. I was maybe ten feet away when my sister came to my rescue. She'd heard me screaming. So she came and scared the daylights out of 'em, and they didn't drop me into the outhouse.

But I remember, at that point, to make a long story shorter, that I really believed that I was...it suddenly dawned on me that I wasn't getting anywhere being perfect, other than being punished by my cousins. And I didn't make a lot of friends at school that way. And since we were now free of this thing that I'd asked God to be free of, now I can go on my own way.

And I did. I went on my own way. I began to live...tried to live a life without God. And eventually God came back to me in the person of this guy Dwight, who was a youth worker at a youth group. My sister was invited to go to this thing. We went, and I liked it; but I didn't like all this talk about God, because I'd left God behind and I wasn't going to be religious anymore, and I wasn't going to become this killjoy like I had been in the past.

But Dwight just modeled Christ to me in a variety of ways. He...I remember the first week I went, and he said, "What'd you think?" And I said "I loved it, but I just can't come back because I'm gonna be in this play. I'm gonna try for out for drama next week, and so I just can't be in..." "Well, we got our own drama group. How'd you like to be in that?" And I said, "Oh, they wouldn't let me into that." He said, "Oh yeah, they would." So the next week I'm up on the stage. I wasn't even part of the group yet, but I'm up on the stage in the skit; and I was involved with the drama group from that time on. And I went every week. Still tried not to listen to God talks. But every night on the way home Dwight would just talk to me about stuff, like he really cared about me, my life. He tried to help me figure how to get along better with kids at school, how to be a better person, and often just tell me...just started telling me about what Jesus had done in his life.

So one day he said, "You gotta go on this winter retreat we're having. You've gotta come with us." And I said, "Oh, I can't afford it." He said, "I'll pay your way." I said, "Well, I don't know if my mom will let me." He said, "We'll find out." So we get to my house, and he...I was hoping he'd forgotten about it. But he dropped me off, and he got out of the car with me, and he went up to the house to ask my mom if I could go on this trip. And of course she said yes. And that was frustrating. He paid my way and my sister's way. And I was like, "Ok, now I gotta face this thing head on."

At that retreat there was a speaker there that you just couldn't...you just couldn't ignore. He was a former football player for the Seattle Seahawks. He was a big guy, probably about 6'2" both directions, you know. And...a guy named Ken Hutcherson...and I don't know if you've ever heard him speak—he's an amazing speaker...and when he spoke, I had to listen. And at that point he said, you know, "Jesus did it all for you. There's nothing you can do to earn His love. He loves you no matter what. But you do have to do one thing. You have to give your heart to Him. You have to be willing to give up that." And so that weekend I gave my life to Jesus, and it's been a few years since then. And really...but it all started with that...but afterwards, when I gave my life to Christ, Dwight was there for me, and he prayed with me, and he encouraged me. But it was really through him that I saw Jesus being lived out. I saw God in a person. And it just lead me to Him. So that's the long answer to that question.

Larry: Ok. Following up on that—since that time there's probably some real critical points, almost like defining moments that set direction, and things like that in your life. Can you give...fill us in on at least one of those, a point that was pretty defining for you in your walk with God.

Rick: Yeah. Lots of turning points, definitely, where you learn along the way that...something new about God, or something new about your relationship. What I guess, for me...by my senior year in high school, and I'm going back to high school partly because I'm so focused on working with youth anyway that it's just kind of where my life was transformed so much. But my senior year in high school...I was going into my senior year, I was 17 years old, and I was in charge of our...I was a student leader and I was in charge of a team of like six or seven other student leaders for two campuses in our youth ministry. We had a pretty large youth ministry—it was like 350 kids.

So there was like kids coming from all over the valley, and my wife was in the group, and that's how we met. It just took me six years to get up the nerve to ask her out. She turned me down five times. But that's ok. But we were involved with this group, and as a student leader I took my job very seriously. And I wanted...I was very excited about reaching kids for Christ, and I wanted to reach the community. And I had this plan, and all summer long I worked on this plan. I got together with the fellow team members, and we were gonna have Bible studies, and we were gonna share our faith with our friends, and we were gonna really get more and more of our friends to come; because we were like the smallest school there. We had only like about 25 kids coming every week, where some of the other schools, like my wife's school, had 70 or 80 kids. And you know, I thought "We wanna get more kids coming. We want to be excited."

And there was also a selfish motivation, too, because one of the things we did is we played these really stupid games. Anybody ever play a stupid game at youth group? Yeah. We've all been there. But we did it in a real competitive manner, so that each week, each school...if you came out on top then you got announced that night as being in first place. It was very important to me, because our school was always in last place, or fifth place out of six, and it was sort of frustrating. So that year I was gonna...I was gonna at least win one of our prizes, one of our big competition periods. That was my main motivation. It wasn't just reaching people for Christ—that was kind of a sideline. The main motive was just to win this competition.

And I remember going into that first night, and I was all excited. We had everything lined up. But the day before our first night, my senior year, this girl who I'd been working with to get his Bible study set up with after school, 'cause she lived right by the school, she came to me and said, "I'm not gonna be a team leader this year." I said, "What!?!!" She said, "I don't have time. I'm joining band." I said, "You don't even play an instrument." She said, "Yeah, I know. But I feel like God is telling me I need to play the flute." "God would never tell you that! Why would God tell you that?" And so she gracefully bowed out. And then my right-hand guy that I'd chosen to be my lieutenant or whatever...he came to me that night and said, "Oh, I can't come tomorrow night." I said, "Why?" "Well, there's this movie on TV, and I don't wanna miss it." I'm like, "What?! What priorities? I mean, we gotta win competition here! We gotta do this!" And he's like, "Sorry, man. I can't make it."

So that night I was already going into it a little depressed and frustrated. And we get there, and I walk into the room, and somebody...one of those things where you're kind of vulnerable in high school anyway...and there were these two students who were already there ahead of us as I came walkin' into the room and makin' a fool of myself. They kind of...this girl looks at me, and I'd never met her before but I knew the guy. She looks at me, and she looks at her boyfriend, and she kind of whispers in his ear somethin', and he looks me up and down and says, "Yeah, you're right. He is." You know, one of those type of things. And my whole "what did they just say about me" type thing, you know, my whole demeanor just went from being up and excited to totally "people are making fun of me, people don't like me," and I just melted. And I didn't do anything that whole night. I didn't work towards the goal. The staff had to take over for me because I just kind of had this meltdown. And I just went in back of the room and was all in this...just in this mood.

So that night I was walkin' home, and I remember praying. And this is where the definitive moment comes. I remember praying. I said, "God, it just doesn't make sense. I have worked so hard to accomplish things for You." And it was like God was saying, "Really? For Me? You think maybe it's not for you?" And I... "Well, maybe a little." And I remember praying, and really having it out with God and wrestling with my own emotions and my own selfishness, and coming to the determination that God was gonna...if we were gonna do anything right that year, God had to do it. And if we were gonna have any kind of victory it was gonna be His victory, not mine, and not the team's. And so I just gave God the year, and I just asked for...I just set three goals. I said, "I'm gonna share my faith with at least three of my friends this year. That's one goal. I wanna see...I wanna see through the course of the year ten of the students that we bring to our youth group come to Christ. And then I want to..." I forget what the third one was. There was another goal there, but I can't remember it offhand. And I remember going away just feeling like this weight had been lifted off my back. And I realized that there was nothing I could do that would impress God. And there was nothing I could do to...just like before, I tried to earn my salvation; I always tried to earn God's respect, or earn God's blessing. I had to give that over to Him.

And so, to make a long story short, that night changed the way we did everything. The next week we had several visitors come, and we went from being last place in competition to being first place that week. It was very...I expected like this long, gradual...short gradual thing. But God just the next week put us in first place competition-wise, which made everybody excited and they started bringing their friends. And we stayed in first place that whole year. We went from twenty-five kids in our campus to about seventy-five or eighty every week. And I honestly look back, and I remember looking back the day before I graduated and thinking, "Wow! I shared my faith with probably ten kids, not three. And we saw probably thirty kids come to Christ that year!" And so God had taken all my goals

and by me giving them over to Him He'd just multiplied them and made them even better. So at that point it told me two things. It said God's in charge, and also it showed me that I really felt called to working with high schoolers. And I really felt like God had gifted me and given me a path that I couldn't turn back on.

Larry: And you've been on that path for twenty years now...

Rick: Or more.

Larry: Or more. And on that path, followin' Jesus, what's been the...let's start with this one. What's been the thing that you find maybe most...and you can pick any one of these three...confusing, challenging, or a chore in your walk with Jesus?

Rick: Yeah. I think that...I was tryin' to think of these answers, and it came to me this morning. I realized that...John Ortberg talks about something called 'shadow mission.' And the idea behind a shadow mission is that we all have...like a lot of organizations have missions—what they're trying to accomplish. And as people who are human—we're fallen—that sin nature is in us still, so the sin nature has a shadow mission in our life. And my shadow mission is just to kick back and be lazy and indulge myself in pleasure, like just hang out watching movies, doin' nothin', watchin' the world go by and not even care about it. That's my shadow mission, is just to indulge myself and be selfish. And another shadow mission, kind of off the side of that, the opposite, is to really try and prove myself to everybody, or try and prove myself to God. So I...so the frustrating thing about my walk is no matter...that's like two sides of the road. One is do totally nothing; the other is do everything out of wrong motivation. So it's hard to keep in the middle where you're letting...you're actually walking down the road doing what God wants you to do, and you're doing it in His power, not your own power. So it's a struggle for me to stay focused and in my reading and my prayer life to keep remembering to give it to God and take myself off the throne or the Lazy Boy, or whatever it is.

Larry: Ok. Opposite question. By the way, anytime you're watching a movie we just say 'shadow mission'?

Rick: Yeah, I know. I was a little worried about sharing that. That's why I didn't mention video games.

Larry: Ok.

Rick: But now I just did.

Larry: Ok. Last question—what's exciting? What's enjoyable? What do you just get...you can't get enough of it in your walk with Jesus?

Rick: Well, God's...I guess my primary gifting is the gift of exhortation, which is just kind of a two-edged sword. One is confronting people, which I don't always enjoy. But the other part of it is encouraging people. I love just watching people and seeing what they're doing for God, or just... I love encouraging people who I see that... I'll be in a store, and I'll see someone doing a good job with their kids or something, and I'll be like, "Hey, that's great! You've got a great relationship with your son (or daughter)." I like encouraging people to move forward towards doing things right in their relationship with Christ. I like finding young men and women that have this spark of...it's like they're diamonds in the rough, so to speak...that I can see working with students that they have the gifting for it, they have the skills, they need to be encouraged. I like to encourage them and develop them, and help them find the skills they need to go further. That's my joy—is helping others.

And also, just in general, worship. I love singing and praising God. And I enjoy that.

Larry: We're not gonna do the three questions...

Rick: Yeah, I went nice and long...

Larry: But what we're gonna do is we're gonna bring Cathy up here; we're gonna have you two stand like about two steps down, ok? This is Cathy, and you'll get to know her, and her story, later. And then, where's Joel? I need Joel.

I just finished a...earlier this summer I went on a retreat with our seniors, then I went on a trip with our juniors. In both places I heard something that I always hear from the college kids returning, and that is, "Larry, why don't we sing the blessing anymore?" And I tell 'em I've been intimidated in this big room, because I'm the one that always has to start that. And I'm afraid in this big room it's just not gonna fly. And yet the pressure's been on.

This is a song we used to sing all the time at the end of every service. And we're gonna sing it again; but I brought Joel up here, because I'm too intimidated...

Joel: I think this would be a good time for you to confront your fear...

Larry: I'm not gonna confront fear. I'm gonna run from it. Ok? ☺ I think we got the words. Do we got the words, Joel? Let's put the words up there [*gestures to the screens*]. This is a descant, right? Which you sing something, and others reply. Is that the way it goes?

Joel: It's a 'call and response.'

Larry: Call and response. Joel will lead us. Many of you will remember it. The men...we sing with Joel. Women, you're on your own. You don't need help. ☺ Ok? We're gonna stand. I'll ask you all to stand. There's a thing I do at the end, when we hit the 'Peace' part—I hold my hand out over you...ok? And the kids all want that, too. They said, "Larry, you used to do that." And so we're gonna do that. But we're gonna sing very specifically as Rick and Cathy come into this new ministry. I wanna sing the blessing on them.

[*Note: The words to the blessing are included here but are not on the taped recording.*]

Men: The Lord bless thee
Women: (The Lord bless thee)
Men: And keep thee
Women: (And keep thee)
All: The Lord make His face to shine upon thee.

(repeat)

All: And be gracious unto thee, and be gracious unto thee.

Men: The Lord lift up
Women: (The Lord lift up)
Men: His countenance
Women: (His countenance)
All: On thee and give thee peace.

Larry: Go in grace.