

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, hey everybody, and welcome to a very special episode of this podcast. No, your phone isn't lying to you. This is two and a half hours long, but I'm going to tell you why in a moment. Gordon MacDonald is back and this episode is brought to you by Pro Media Fire. Book your free digital strategy session at [promediafire.com/churchgrowth](http://promediafire.com/churchgrowth). And by Red Letter Challenge. Red Letter Challenge is back, and you can get 10 to 40% off your 40 day study that dives into the words of Jesus, practical challenges for everyone in your church. Go to [redletterchallenge.com/carey](http://redletterchallenge.com/carey).

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well about a year ago, I had Gordon MacDonald on this podcast for the very first time, and we had just an incredible reaction, response to that interview. Gordon has been a pastor and author for more than 50 years. He has written so many books, most of which live on my shelves and in my heart. He has served as the chancellor at Denver Seminary and as the editor-at-large for Leadership Journal. He speaks around the world and I'll tell you, what Gordon can bring in this world, there are not a lot of people like him. There's so much wisdom. So we will link to the previous episode in the show notes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But this one is yes, a two and a half hour conversation. And what he did, he shared with me. We struck up a friendship over the last few years, a little document called The View From 80. It is not published and he updates it every few months. He turned 80 last year and it's just 15 life principles that he thinks are the most important thing in life having lived eight decades. So I said, "Gordon, would you be willing to bring that to leaders?" And he said, "Sure." So we were going to do this in person.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We had a trip scheduled for July, but you know, COVID and the border locked down. So we did this via Zoom. You can watch it by video if you want, but this does not diminish from the conversation at all. And so it's a little bit of a different format. Gordon is going to start by reading all 15 lessons, his view from 80. He's going to read the document and then we're going to go into a conversation about it. So I think both have value and there's just a beauty to his voice and his cadence. You can tell I'm a little biased, but I just think the world of Gordon, have learned so much from him. And if you're a young leader looking for wisdom, I think you're going to find an awful lot here. And we also have transcripts and those are in the show notes, [careynieuwhof.com/episode366](http://careynieuwhof.com/episode366) if you want to look at them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Also want to welcome all of the new listeners. We had, I can't believe this, over 400,000 downloads in August last month. One week, 108,000. So I don't know who you all are, but I just want to say welcome. We're so glad to have you on board. And this is why we do what we do, to bring you people like Gordon MacDonald. Well today's episode is brought to you by Pro Media Fire.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So this is why we do what we do, to bring you conversations as rich as I think this one is. So let me ask you a question before we get started. What do all these people have in common? Marie built the creative team from ground up for Hilton hotels as a senior creative operations manager. Sam is an award winning film composer and video producer. And Kyle is an award winning graphic designer. So the one thing that these three people have in common, they've had great success in the world. They're now working for Pro Media Fire, helping churches and nonprofits. Marie left Hilton to be the creative operations manager at Pro Media Fire. Sam is leading the video team and Kyle is leading the graphics team. So your church can have an entire fleet of professionals like this providing digital strategy and a creative framework to help your church grow online. Book your free strategy session today at [promediafire.com/churchgrowth](http://promediafire.com/churchgrowth).

Carey Nieuwhof:

And Red Letter Challenge is back. So over 100,000 people, 400 churches, have been through Red Letter Challenge. And if you're looking for a way to bring people into the essence of the message of Jesus, the Red Letter Challenge is something you want to check out. A lot of leaders right now are facing a very divided church. Sometimes that's divided physically. Sometimes, yeah, it's just politically or theologically or whatever. Why not refocus your church? One church that went through the Red Letter Challenge during COVID said that even though they were distanced, they'd never been as unified. And that's what a focus on the basics can do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So the Red Letter Challenge is a 40 day study that dives into the words of Jesus, gives everyone really practical challenges based on Jesus's words. It can be done by individuals or small groups, but to get the most out of this resource, you can do it as a whole church, a 40 day church challenge that's done for you. Author Zach Zehnder has made this tool available at a discount of 10 to 40% for listeners of this podcast. And if you're a pastor, you can get a free copy mailed to you. It's all turnkey, small groups, sermons, kids materials, kids books, graphics, all done for you. So go to [redletterchallenge.com/carey](http://redletterchallenge.com/carey) to get your free offers today. [redletterchallenge.com/carey](http://redletterchallenge.com/carey). You'll get the discounts and as pastors, a free copy for yourself if you go to that link.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I could not be more excited about bringing you this conversation. It's rich and I hope it does for your soul, what it has done for mine. So let's begin by having Gordon go through the list, this little document he put together called the view from 80. So Gordon's going to walk us through the 15 life and leadership lessons that he feels at this point are most important to him.

Gordon MacDonald:

Okay? Number one, a view from 80. Put the most significant people in your life, your spouse, your family, close friends and mentors. Put them into the calendar first. Second never, ever stop growing. Stay open to fresh ways and ideas that sustain your physical and mental health, that sharpen your working skills, that increase your knowledge, and of course enrich your wisdom and spiritual life. Number three, be more a priest and less a preacher to people. Bless people with the powers of hope and grace and courage and love. Number four, always keep in mind that the time will come when you will have to relinquish your titles, your privileges and slip into obscurity. Ultimately the obscurity of death.

Gordon MacDonald:

Number five, prepare yourself for those occasions when you, like most people, will suffer, fail, fall into doubt, face conflict, experience loss. Number six, be trustworthy and dependable, a person who keeps his or her word. Don't make promises you can't keep. Number seven, be a spiritual father or mother to teachable people who may someday inherit your responsibilities. Number eight, live modestly. Stay free of debt. Be generous. Develop a financial strategy for your future. Be wary of those who use money to buy your favor. Number nine, expect to reorganize your inner life about every seven to 10 years.

Gordon MacDonald:

Number 10, receive compliments given to you or criticism or counsel with humility and appreciation. Avoid whining, complaining, self-pity. Assume that there is at least a grain of truth in the things that critics say about you and your work. Number 11, stay alert for the evils and temptations embedded in the institutional life. Number 12, be quick to say with sincerity, "Thank you." "Well done." "I'm sorry." "I forgive you." Or, "How can I help?" Number 13, always maintain a relationship with one or two mentors who can aid you in hearing God's voice. Number 14, master the art of asking the kind of penetrating questions that opens up someone's heart. And finally, number 15, retreat to the cross regularly. Express your appreciations. Name your sins. Pray for the world. Listen for God's calls to do things that are bigger than you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that in and of itself was probably enough, but then we talked about it for a couple hours. So let me bring you the rest of the conversation with Gordon MacDonald. Gordon, it's good to be with you today. And every time I spend with you just feels richer than the time before. So thank you for taking the time to be with us.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, thank you Carey, for asking me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. So we're living in a very tense time. Unlike we've seen in decades with the riots going on in the United States, as we record this. And I would love to begin by having you reflect because you began ministry in the 1960s when tensions were very high, on any observations, any remembrances you have, of leading through the situation in the 1960s.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, this has some of the similarities to the 1960s. Obviously these demonstrations often involve the younger generation. They're not thinking as much about history in the past, where these things may get you or not get you. They really don't have a real accurate sense of the future. I know I didn't in the 1960s. So what you're getting in the streets is a lot of well-intentioned people who really are hurt and angry and want to be imaginative about a new future, but they're young. And so sometimes things don't go quite as they thought they were going to go. So every day you see the unexpected happen in one way or the other. When the adrenaline gets running and anger is it as highest, and when you feel really hurt or put down or ignored or neglected, all sorts of things can happen that you never thought yourself capable of being.

Gordon MacDonald:

I came into the ministry, for all practical purposes, in 1962. I was in seminary, pastoring a little tiny church of about 60 people and trying to make sense of this. I come out of a tradition, which was at its peak, or rising to its peak in those days, which said the church and pastors are supposed to concern themselves only with issues of salvation and evangelism and getting people to come to Jesus. All of this other stuff in the streets of Chicago and other cities of the country, don't even give any attention to them. And then the Vietnam War broke out to add all of this. And I remember as a young pastor feeling very, very disturbed. Why couldn't I talk about Vietnam? Why couldn't I talk about civil rights? Why couldn't I talk about the rights of women to enter into society as equal partners with men?

Gordon MacDonald:

It bothered me because it wasn't encouraged in seminary. "Just avoid that stuff." I remember two elders a few years beyond that, taking me out to breakfast because I had dared to pray the day before in our worship service about peace in Vietnam. And their comment to me, Carey, was "You're going to talk about Vietnam a lot? Would you like to remember that about half your congregation makes its money designing and producing the weapons of warfare? If there's peace in Vietnam, your offerings are going to go down." I remember thinking about that and just being staggered by the implications and then with the riots in the streets of American major cities, my wife Gail and I invited about 30 black, young people to our home one night to eat pizza and talk about this stuff. And the next elders meeting at our church, one of the elders came absolutely furious that I had done this demanding that I apologize that I had had these people in my home.

Gordon MacDonald:

And if I wouldn't do that, he was going to quit the board. And I remember sitting there thinking, "My whole ministry is on the line this evening. This could be the last thing I'm ever going to do." And just about the time that I was ready to panic, the chairman of the elders said to this other elder, "Well, we're going to miss you if you're leaving the board because our vote is to stick with our pastor. He's done well." So those were some of the scary experiences that none of us were trained to deal with in those days. I have great regrets that I didn't go to Selma, Alabama, and march with Dr. King and all the other people. I have great regrets that I didn't say more about the issue of war as it surges in the mind and heart of the Christian. I have great regret in those early days that I didn't act more justly toward the women in our congregation. I just was taught to do otherwise. So it took me a few years to gain the courage to speak out about those things.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What was it like in the 1960s? I was three when King was assassinated. So I have no living memory of Dr. King. I know a little bit of his daughter's work through Orange and ReThink, and she's a good friend of some friends of mine, but we see him through the lens of history. But when you think back to those first years of leadership for you as a young pastor, how has Dr. King perceived? What would you want to share with this generation about that time?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I'm embarrassed to say this, but I was raised a Baptist. I was raised in a fundamentalist, traditional Baptist home. So it was easy to hear people talking all the time in the sixties. "Oh, Martin Luther King, he's a communist. You just wait, he's going to do some really bad things if we're not careful." And you know, in my own heart, I saw none of that. I couldn't bring myself to even think that way. So at first you

just kept quiet and you let people babble around you. But finally, it comes to a moment when you have to start making yourself heard. I went to a special, a Holy week service where Dr. King preached. I was within about 20 feet of him while he opened the scriptures that day, and I can't remember what the message was about, but it was during Holy week.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I remember the thrill of being in the presence of this incredible man who was rising to his peak about that time. Watching the way he preached so eloquently, so convictionally. He didn't make a mistake with his words, and his points were driven home. Like you would drive a nail with a hammer. And when I left the building that day, having heard him speak, I was a convert to the civil rights movement and felt very strongly that what this man was giving to us and from out of his call from God, was something we had to take very, very seriously.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What advice would you give to church leaders today in light of everything that you're seeing in the news right now, everything that's going on in America, in light of what you've learned throughout your decades in leadership, Gordon?

Gordon MacDonald:

There's no easy advice. Almost any pastor in the so-called evangelical world will tell you that if he or she says something of a controversial nature from the right side of politics or the left side, the words will be, "I'll split my church right down the middle." And you hear this over and over again, whether it's just imagined or not, I don't know. But the feeling that a lot of pastors in the evangelical tradition have is that this is a game changer. And so you have to be very careful about how you pray, what you preach about. What you urge people to do and not to do. I am not a young man today. I don't have to face that. I faced it in my time and it was a lot, I think, simpler than it is today. But I do think there's a place for pastors to preach the scriptures and to preach them in such a way that people are allowed to weigh what the message is and how it ought to be applied and their framework of conviction and whatever actions that they have to take.

Gordon MacDonald:

I meet with a dozen or so pastors almost every Monday morning on Zoom, and we talked about this just yesterday, how you handle the recalcitrant angry person and how it really takes great patience. You have to be thinking two or three sentences ahead. How will this come across if I say it? How will that come across? I think the most important things to be said can be said in prayer.

Gordon MacDonald:

I encourage young men to be able to articulate to their congregations as they address the living God in pastoral prayers. For example, challenging people to think and to listen more carefully and not be afraid to act when things happen, which are destructive. We're in a difficult time in the evangelical movement as I see it because we have very, very little leadership these days that are telling us how to go about these things. And it's a time when I think a lot of us feel betrayed by our own leaders. And I think we need to just keep thinking our way through this, praying our way through it, on a day to day basis. And I've said to you about the best I can say right now.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I appreciate that, Gordon. And it is a very, very complicated time, but I appreciate what you were saying about wishing you had gone to Selma to march with Dr. King. I think those are moments that I think if we all had that one to take over again, we'd all say, "Yeah, of course I'd be there," but it's very complicated in the moment. And there probably is a Selma today. There probably is something, but it will seem much less clear in the moment than it will seem in history.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah, you're absolutely right. I remember learning lessons from that when ground zero, the trade towers, hurt. On that morning, I was on my way driving from Boston to Atlanta to participate in a service and the trade towers had gone down and within hours, the northbound lane, interstate 95 was crammed like rush hour with construction vehicles and trucks and everything imaginable all headed to New York to participate in the recovery of the trade towers. And on the southbound lane of 95 that I was driving toward Atlanta, there was hardly a car on the road. And I started saying to myself, "What's wrong with this picture? Why are other people in the other lane having a traffic jam, and I'm just driving to be a part of a church meeting in Atlanta?" And finally, I heard myself say out loud as I'm driving, "Gordon, this is the story of your life. When the whole world is going North, you're going South. You've got to think about this."

Gordon MacDonald:

I pulled into a rest area and I thought, "What in the world can I do?" And then it hit me. I knew some of the top Salvation Army officers in the Northeast area of our country. What if I call them? And I called one of the top officers, and I said, "Could you use Gail and me at ground zero?" He said, "How soon can you get here?" I said, "We'll be there in 24 hours." And I turned that car around and went back to the nearest Hertz station, got rid of it, found a flight because planes were still flying, met Gail in Hartford, Connecticut. We drove down to New York and spent the next seven or eight days with the firefighters and the policemen right in the middle of it all looking for body parts and listening for anybody who was trapped. But I learned that from not going to Selma. I didn't go then. I wasn't going to be stopped this time.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I appreciate you sharing that, Gordon. Well, I want to drill down on something you shared with me over the last year and you keep updating this every few months, I guess. You have this document I really hope becomes a book one day called The View From 80. Having turned 80 last year, you just took some notes on just some life lessons that you've learned, and it's profound. Whenever I read the latest version of list, I'm very, very moved. And I want to work through that with you because you have a perspective. You have the wisdom of age. You've been blessed with an exceptionally sharp mind. I remember the first time I interviewed you, we went to about an hour and a half and then another 40 minutes on top of that. And then we had lunch and then we hung out and I'm like, "Wow, I don't have that stamina in my fifties."

Carey Nieuwhof:

So good for you. You've got it. Sharp as a tack. And to be able to share this with people is fantastic. So I'm just going to go through the list, Gordon, and ask you a few questions on each point and just try to plumb a little bit of what's underneath that. So the first thing is put the most significant people in your life, your spouse, family, close friends and mentors into the calendar first. When did you realize this? When did that finally dawn on you because I think this is a struggle every leader has.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, that was a very early conviction that grew up in my heart in the first years of my marriage, actually before I even met Gail, my wife. I grew up in a very unhappy pastor's home. My father, who was a wonderful preacher back in the 1930s and 40s, had no idea how to treat a woman, his wife, with dignity. I remember my mother saying to me, even when I was a small boy, she would say, "Son, someday, if God gives you a wife, treat her like a queen. Serve her. Be involved in her life. Tell her how much you love her many, many times. Help her out as she does what she does as the wife and the house." I was hearing that from my heartbroken mother when I was seven, eight, nine years of age.

Gordon MacDonald:

And then when I was in college, I came under the influence of a Presbyterian pastor and his wife that lived down the block from where my college apartment was. And they had me in for dinner one night. I tell the story often, and the food was terrific, but what I saw that night about the way they treated each other, absolutely blew me out of the water. I had never seen a man talk to a woman like this man talks so lovingly to his wife, asking her questions, asking her advice and her counsel, affirming her, laughing at her humor. And I never saw a woman who honored her husband so completely. And was there and anxious to love him, to be affectionate, to ask questions that drew him out about his part of the day.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I saw this night after night after night, and I remember saying one night on the way home, "If I ever get to be married, I want a wife just like her. If I ever get to be married, I want to be a husband just like him. If I ever get to be married, I want a marriage just like theirs." So I had these models. And then about the time that Gail and I got married, I was walking one day with an old man, an old pastor. He must've been about the age I am now. And I asked him a question, which a lot of people today would feel was stupid, but in those days it was a very important question. The question was, "What comes first, my family or the Lord's work?"

Gordon MacDonald:

That was the question that every pastor, every leader, was asking him or herself in those days. So I asked this question and this old man looked at me and he said, in a rather straight blunt tone, "Gordon, your family is the Lord's work." And that one sentence changed me. I've lived with that sentence to this day and have really tried to see my family and my close friends as the central point of the Lord's work in and through my life.

Gordon MacDonald:

Obviously I have not done it perfectly, but it's been the goal that I've reached for constantly from the beginning to this point, some 60 years later. Gail and I will be married 60 years next year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Congratulations.

Gordon MacDonald:

Thank you. I can only tell you that there's only one or two times where there have been regrets. It's been an incredible trip, but I go back and I hear my mother's voice. I see that couple that had me at their table night after night. And I hear from this old guy, "Your family is the Lord's work." And it became very

clear to me. You take a clean calendar every week. And the first thing you write into it is your time with Jesus, and then your time with your family, everything else is third place.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hmm. I wish someone had told me that when I started in ministry. It took me a few years to figure that out, and it was a painful lesson. One of the things, because it's interesting, The View From 80 ... I'm 55, so our kids have been grown and gone so to speak for about six years now, when the youngest left.

Gordon MacDonald:

You don't look it, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you, Gordon. I'll take that from you. Thank you. But you know what amazes me, Gordon is just how much time there is left. How many years have you and Gail had together since your youngest went to college or got married or left the home? It's been decades, hasn't it?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, they left about when we were age 46. So what is that? That gives you 26, 20.

Carey Nieuwhof:

35 years.

Gordon MacDonald:

How many years?

Carey Nieuwhof:

34 years. 34 years. Is that right?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, let's both agree that's good enough.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Good enough. It's close enough. Math is not my strong suit, Gordon, but the thing that gets me is you almost have, if the Lord gives you health and you live to a good age and you have a sharp mind and everything, you have more years without your kids at home than you did with your kids at home.

Gordon MacDonald:

I knew you were going to say that. And that's very true.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Do you want to speak to that? Because most of the leaders watching this, listening to this, they are in the stage right now where all they can see ... College feels like an eternity away. And what I'm learning in this season with my wife Toni is, "Oh wow. There are a lot of hours together as a couple."



And you and Gail have enjoyed decades together where it's just the two of you again. So do you want to speak into that?

Gordon MacDonald:

We did one or two things right in that area of thinking about marital dynamics. One was we never confused the family with the marriage. Something a lot of people do and don't think about the implications. And so they have 18, 20, 22 years of child presence in the home and they get all their jollies out of the children. Everything is about the children. They talk about the children and particularly mothers have in the past, made this mistake. They let the children absorb all their love. And there's not much left when the, when the man appears on the scene and somewhere along the line, Gail and I realized these kids are going to leave us. And when they leave us, we better have something that fills the void. And we almost missed that. As long as the children were home, we had a ball with them.

Gordon MacDonald:

I went to almost every one of our son's soccer games, every one of our daughter's basketball games, every one of their concerts and dramatics, because they were very active and we were always there as a spectator. Then they pulled a dirty trick on us. They both left the same year off to college and suddenly Gail and I didn't have our fun makers anymore. And for about six months to a year, we just filled all of those holes, those vacancies, with more ministry, more articles to write, more meetings to speak at. And one day we both realized separately, "We're not having any fun anymore." This is not going anywhere in terms of husband and wife. And that was probably the darkest 12 months of our lives. It just had all kinds of bad possibilities coming out of it. And I'll make this very short.

Gordon MacDonald:

One week I was reading the New York Times about an article on hiking in Switzerland, and I felt this surge of anger in me that I had always put this dream of going to Switzerland on the shelf for other things. And I turned to Gail and I said, "We're going to Switzerland next month." "Why?" "To have fun." "What will we do?" "I don't know. We'll figure it out when we get there." And we went and bless be Gail that she was willing to do this on just a two or three weeks notice, but we just disappeared. And for 31 days we climbed mountains and walked trails, ate good food, slept in in the morning, made a lot of love, did a lot of things that we should have been doing. And when we came home, we had a new marriage and that's been true now for the last 35 years.

Gordon MacDonald:

We had to learn how to have fun. We had to learn all over again how to talk to each other on an adult level. We had to learn, thirdly, how to cooperate with each other. And that's been a big one for me as a man to participate, to go over the fence, into Gail's world and learn how to do cooking and learning how to set up a menu, learning how to keep the house. All of that has been learned after the kids left. We love our children there. They've made us grandchildren now five times over, but we enjoy being friends, living alone together. Fortunately though, through that year, which could have killed us, we went the best direction and it's made all the difference.

PART 1 OF 5 ENDS [00:33:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

I agree. You either live two solitudes or you separate or you learn how to become friends. And I'm so glad for what you shared. Before we move on, because this is a big issue for a lot of pastors, a lot of leaders, how do you say no? Because you have way more demands, even at 80, on your time than you can possibly say yes to. Do you have a filter for that? How to make sure that you always have time for the people and things that matter most?

Gordon MacDonald:

Basically for the first half of my ministry, I didn't do that well. I was what they call a pleaser. I wanted everybody to be happy. And I think that's where you'll find a lot of pastors. We are driven by people-care, by lighting people up, by answering their questions, being a father or mother to them. And I was one of those in the first half of my adult life and believe me, it drained me. I reached a couple of times or just virtually total exhaustion because I just didn't know how to say no to people. And then there came a day when there was a crash in life and when I came out the other end, I had to do an assessment, "What's the baggage I'm carrying that's going to destroy me and the second half of ministry if I don't straighten some things out?"

Gordon MacDonald:

And I could tell you some of those things, but right now the pertinent one was, I've got to learn how to draw a circle around the things I can do and therefore identify the things that I shouldn't be doing. And one of the things that I learned in those days is that when people approach me wanting me to do something, be a part of something that was really not according to my sense of call, I would say to them, "Now I need to talk to you very frankly. What you're asking me to do I would like to do because I have a feeling it would make you happy. But it's not a part of my call from God. And secondly, if I did do it for you, I would not do it well because it's not in my gift mix."

Gordon MacDonald:

"Now I can introduce you to someone who can do this and do it well for you, but I will damage your case if I try to do things just to make people happy that are not a part of my gift." When I got the courage to say that and I began to say it over and over again, I almost recorded it, almost every person would say, "Well, that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Thank you for being so candid with me. I understand what you're saying. If you can help me go to somebody else, I'll be glad to do it." And almost overnight, I cut back dramatically on things that I was doing to make people happy and to do the things that I was doing that, can I say this a little bit tritely, that made God happy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon MacDonald:

So to a considerable extent, the second half of life for me has been much happier because I don't do much that's not within the mix of my giftedness. Things I think I can do fairly well, things that won't drain me and just leave me high and dry. But it took me about 30 years to figure that out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. It's a tough lesson Gordon, and a lot of us find it the hard way. I certainly am finding that the hard way, I don't think I've got it fully mastered yet, but it's difficult-

Gordon MacDonald:

Can I tell you one more thing, Carey?

Carey Nieuwhof:

... Yeah, for sure.

Gordon MacDonald:

I sat down and discussed this with our elders on many occasions. And I said to them, "Gail and I need bodyguards. And we would appreciate it if three of you would be on duty every week on Sunday at the end of our worship. Every week, three different elders. And we'd like for you to be just off our shoulders. And when people approach us that are the wrong kind of people..." There's always that group I call them very draining people, they need to have a word with you every week. They manufacture questions, criticisms to get your attention. And so what I've said to the elders is, "I need you to filter these people out and detour them so that Gail and I can spend our time praying for and talking to people who have legitimate needs."

Gordon MacDonald:

And our elders took that on very seriously and they call themselves the bodyguards. And they would come up as the benediction was being pronounced and they would be five or six feet off to the left or right. And when they saw one of these needy people coming, they would say, "Now, Mary or Joe, Pastor Mac and Gail have to really be talking to some other people, so if I can help you fine. Otherwise, let's go for another day, okay?" And they protected us and that made a huge difference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did you worry about missing out? With the advent of social media a lot of young leaders they look at all the opportunities, they see how their peers are and they're like, "But Gordon, if I start saying no to people or opportunities and the wider church or conferences or events I'm just going to miss out." What would you say to them?

Gordon MacDonald:

That you are going to miss out. I think as you get older, as the years go by, you'll recognize that little bit by little there are places you will never go, people you will never meet, things you will never do. And you have to start saying no to wonderful opportunities out there. My father used to say to me, "Make sure you don't do just good things, but rather that you're choosing to do the best." And I took that. And that was a good piece of advice. But yeah, I'm still living with what you just asked to this very day. There are all sorts of things going on in this world that I would love to do. That I actually think I could do better than maybe somebody else, but it's not on my desk, it's something else God has not led in that direction. So in the second half of life, I've learned to say no to some very good things and to good people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think we'll leave it there. Because sometimes you can drill down on that forever and ever and ever and I think you're right. I was dealing with a really strong season of having to say no and worried about missing out. And sometimes, yeah, he's got to say no. Okay. Let's get to The View From 80. Point 2, never ever stop growing! Stay open to fresh ways and ideas that sustain your physical and mental

health, sharpen your working skills, increase your knowledge and enrich your wisdom and spiritual life. So let's start here. What is your rhythm of learning these days?

Gordon MacDonald:

It starts with the fact that I have a huge sense of curiosity. And we're back to the original comment of a moment ago. If you have a lot of curiosity, you want to know everything. And once again you'll have to face the fact that if you're going to really grow and be productive in your life in a Godly sense of word, there's going to be a lot of things you're going to have to slough off and you can't do. So, I'm a great believer in periodic assessments, where you sit down and you take a day or two, and you get real honest with yourself. You ask the question, "What have the last five years been like? What have I learned? What should I have learned and didn't? What were the mistakes I made. What's likely to be the most important things on the horizon for the next five years."

Gordon MacDonald:

And you build a plan that's in some ways, aided by what the last five or seven years have been like. And what therefore you feel God may be whispering to you about of the next seven years. So, I've kept walking in blocks of time like that over the years and reaching a certain point where I've been ruthless to assess myself physically, mentally, spiritually, relationally, financially, philosophically. Everything's on the table in those moments. And in my latter years, I learned to invite two or three friends into the process where I reported to them what'd I learned. And then they would feed back to me, the Quakers call this a clearness committee.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay.

Gordon MacDonald:

And it's a moment when they're not allowed to criticize your life, but they're allowed to ask you tough questions. And so, I've had friends that I've permitted over these years to enter into those rearranging moments and ask me tough questions, which have led to my saying, "Well, that's something I probably need to slough off, forget about. This is something I need to know about." But the ultimate objective of these block points every few years is to make sure you're on a growth track that aides and amends the place where you are in life at that moment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

One of the things Gordon, and maybe we'll drill down on this when we look at number 15, your life lesson. But you seem to have a very sober view of self and it's something I don't see as much in younger leaders. And let me try to phrase it this way, for a lot of people today the problem isn't here inside, the problem's out there. It's the system, it's a nomination, it's the economy, it's the team, it's whatever but it's certainly not me. And when I listen to you talk and I spend time with you, I hear someone who has a very sober view of self. Can you comment on that a little bit?

Gordon MacDonald:

I think that's a fair assessment and sometimes it may even be a legitimate criticism. Gail has to push me every once in a while to say, "You're getting too serious, loosen up. Dial back." But I do think it reflects the world I grew up in. I'm a product of the Depression and World War II. I wasn't born during the

Depression, but my father and mother were, like everybody their age, were highly influenced by the Depression and its values. And they instilled those Depression values in my brother and me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

We would not go into debt, we just had modest convictions about a lot of things. So, I come out of that world where you manage your life with great care. And you're always looking around and over your shoulder, "Is there someone coming after you?" So I did have that. The second thing I grew up with is I grew up in a brand of evangelical Christianity that was very serious about winning the world to Christ. I'm a Bill Bright product to name one. If I heard Bill Bright say, "Come let us change the world" once, I heard him say it a million times. With Bill Bright, you didn't have any time for vacations, you gave every day and every night to reading The Four Spiritual Laws and confronting the next person with the story of Jesus. That shaped my college years.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I look back with some regret, to be quite honest with you, there are things I should have done, courses I should have taken, places I should have gone to and I didn't do them because people like Bill Bright were saying, "Saving one more person from hell is the most important thing to do." So I had to break free of that very deliberately and the years after that, but it left its impact upon me that life is serious. So, my friends and my dear wife and my children have helped me over the years to loosen up. Having said all that to you, I would like you to know I really do have a pretty good sense of humor.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, you do. But what I appreciate about it, it makes confession so much easier when you have a sober view of self. It makes it so much easier to say, I'm sorry, it makes it so much easier rather than to defend yourself. And I think that's actually an admirable quality and characteristic. What was your habit? And I love the Quaker approach, but when you look back, when you are in the thick of ministry, you're leading one of the first mega churches in the U.S. as these large churches are developing in the 1970s. How did you and the pressure of ministry day-to-day carve out a rhythm for learning and self-improvement and growth?

Gordon MacDonald:

If I understand your question, my response would be that in my first five or eight years of ministry, I was a pretty disorganized person. I was writing most of my sermons on Saturdays. It was nothing. Nothing different, I had nothing for me to get up at 4:30 on Sunday morning and polish off my sermon preparation. A lot of pastors live that way but they won't admit it. And I wouldn't have admitted it at the time. Those sermons, the ink was still wet on them when I got up in the pulpit on many Sunday mornings. But I was a disorganized person by nature. I'm a very artistic person and I think artistic people tend to be disorganized as they're going by the existential moment. And my father on the other hand was an engineer, so I drove him nuts.

Gordon MacDonald:

It hit for him everything was like a piece of the jigsaw puzzle going into place. And it's one of the reasons we never got along, I was the poet he was the engineer. But in my 31st year of ministry, and I remember specifically telling you about this at another time, I crashed. I was exhausted, I was devastated that I wasn't getting enough done. And I found myself one day weeping uncontrollably on the couch of our home. And Gail handled the moment very beautifully and brought me out of it. But I spent a whole day just out of control of my emotions. And out of that came, first of all, the decision I was going to start keeping a journal, this is December, 1968. I was going to keep a journal of almost every day and try to put my life in order by daily reflection on what was happening.

Gordon MacDonald:

And then secondly, I decided to submit my life to a calendar. And I broke up seven days a week into three blocks of time, morning, afternoon, and evening. And I decided that if it was a working day, the church would get two of the three blocks but not the third. And so if you're doing your math, I gave the church five and a half blocks of work a week. And Gail and I took Thursday and we named that Sabbath day. And that was the day when all things in private life were to be renewed, our marriage, our friendships, the children taking... Having fun. It wasn't a day off where you cut the lawn, it was a day to renew life. And for about 25 years, we were pretty faithful in doing that. And I would not violate that Thursday Sabbath unless something really tragic had happened or something that really demanded my myself. But that's the way I organized life at the age of 31. And I would say to you, I'm glad Gail's not in the room, I've done about a 78% job on that which I think is pretty good.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's not bad. And that moment, that day that's the opening story in *Ordering Your Private World*. Is it not that day where everything cracked? Which as a younger leader, if you haven't read that book, you need to read it. You absolutely need to read it. It's incredible. Well, principle number three, be more a priest and less a preacher to people. Bless them with the powers of hope, grace, courage and love. Can you explain the difference between a priest and a preacher?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. I'm playing with words here.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

I'm making words do what I want them to do to make my point. A preacher is a person who gets up on the stage, as they now call it a pulpit in my day. A preacher tells you everything he knows, or I should say he or she, although there weren't that many shes in that day. A preacher is telling you what his plan is for your life. And it's not unusual the preachers I see today, and I'm going to be hopeful I didn't misuse my privilege of saying this, I can't stand the notion that a preacher finishes a sermon and disappears and mainly to the green room. If you can't defend your words in the presence of people, you don't preach them.

Gordon MacDonald:

So for me a preacher is someone who just tells, it's a one way conversation. A priest is a two way conversation. A priest is person-centered. A priest draws people to Jesus. A priest sensitizes him or herself to the needs that the person is projecting. A priest gives people hope. A priest gives people a sense of renewal and a way to Jesus. A priest is got the person in mind. The preacher's got in mind, "How good can my sermon be?" So as years went by and I got older, I found myself saying, "I'd like to be more a priest than a preacher." I love preaching. If you ask me to preach tomorrow morning, I'll be there. But I love what a priest does, a priest blesses people. And by the way, that was one of the things that touched me when I was at Ground Zero at 9/11.

Gordon MacDonald:

I spent several of those days, about half the day, walking the perimeter of the pit with a Trappist monk. And he was dressed out in the brown habit and the white rope and the sandals. And one man after another in that mess and horror of the dirt and the dust and the everything was going on, people would see him and me coming and they would rush to him and they would fall to their knees in front of him and they would say, "Father, would you hear my confession? Father, would you give me a blessing?" And I watched this time after time after that, and I would say to him, "Norman, what are you saying to those guys?" And he would say, "Well, I touched their forehead, signed the cross and I say, 'In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I sign you with the cross go in peace my dear friend, and do what God wants you to do.'"

Gordon MacDonald:

Finally I said to him, "Norman, does anybody say that to you?" He laughed and he said, "No, it's been a long time." I said, "May I?" And he immediately sank to his knees right there in all the dirt and the rubble and I put my hand on his head, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I sign you with the cross, Norman, go in peace." And I started doing that to people. And I would say, "I know you're Protestant and you're going to think this is a Catholic act, but it ought not to be exclusively a Catholic act. It's for us too, I want to give you a blessing." And I've been blessing people over these years now, thousands of people. I rarely have ever gotten anything but the deepest emotion, solemnity and appreciation. We're a movement that needs to know what the priest does, and one of the things a priest does is bless people. And that's been an old man at 81 can bless people and I love doing it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Sorry. This happens when we're together. Yeah. Thank you. You know Gordon content's everywhere. And I just love for you because I think as we become more digital, content is just everywhere. And I produce content, people produce content. How do you be a priest in a digital age?

Gordon MacDonald:

There's a book out that was written and published about two years ago by a woman whose name is Virginia Sweet. She's a medical doctor in the Central Valley of California. And she's written a couple of books, the first one is called God's Hospital, the second is called Slow Medicine. And Slow Medicine is her attempt to take a hard look at how modern medicine is being practiced. The physician walks in, he looks at the computer, he looks at the numbers, he writes a prescription. And he's out of the door and he hasn't said a word to the patient in the two and a half minutes he was in the room. And Virginia Sweet says, "That's fast medicine." And that yes it may treat some of the biological realities of the body, but it's done nothing for the soul of the patient. And it hasn't done much for the soul of the doctor either.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

And so, she talks in this whole book about what it means to operate slowly. Sir William Osler, who was the Great Father of Medicine 125 years ago, he talks about touching the patient, listening to the body of the patient, asking the right diagnostic questions. And Osler and Virginia Sweet a hundred years later say, "And this takes time. This takes attention. This takes centering in on the patient and making them and that moment the most important person in your world." That's how you do it. I had Osler years ago and so I was beginning to learn that. We had a woman in our church by the name of the Marilyn Rosenthal. She was on very stiff medication for some particular mental issue that I never identified. But when you saw Marilyn coming, you knew you were into a several minute conversation because she talked at 10 miles an hour, not 60 miles an hour.

Gordon MacDonald:

And one day she came into the front of our church building as she was about a hundred feet away and I turned around, I was talking to somebody and I just yelled out, "Hello Marilyn, how are you?" And turned back to my conversation. A couple of minutes later, I realized she had made her way across the lobby to where I was and she inserted herself between me and my conversation partner. And she looked up, because she was very short, and she said in her medicated voice, this is the way it sounded. "Pastor Mac, you say, 'Hello Marilyn, how are you?' But you really don't want to know. You don't have time to find out." What do you say to a woman like that? She was right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

My church was getting so big and there were so many important people and I was them all. I didn't have time for a Marilyn. And I know this goes back and confuses what I said a little while ago about elder bodyguards, but they do fit in the largest run. And I had to say, "Marilyn, I apologize. You're a hundred percent right and I'm the one that's wrong." But if you want to have content in a digital age, you've got to be willing to stop when the Holy Spirit says stop. Where is Phillip and the Ethiopian, if the Holy Spirit doesn't say to Philip, "Stop." And he stops. I can think of times when I didn't stop and I can immediately think I'd have missed it with the Ethiopian eunuch. I'd probably have gone in another direction to somebody who was more impressive to me. So, content has to do in the digital age with, are you open enough to hear the nudges of the Holy Spirit when he says, "This one and not that one. Spend time here. Don't spend time here." That's not slow medicine, that's slow ministry.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Okay. Insight number four, always keep in mind that the time will come when you will have to relinquish titles and privileges and slip into obscurity. Ultimately the obscurity of death. That's an emotional one for me, Gordon. What's that been like for you?

Gordon MacDonald:



Gail and I began to talk about dying and the implications of the various kinds of dying there is when we were in our early fifties. We listen carefully to people, a generation older than us, and we noted several things. We were astonished with how angry many of them were, how many of them were jealous, how many of them were living useless lives after the age of 70. We saw that happening over and over and over again. And it was clear that they hadn't planned. See people are encouraged to plan financially for your older years, that's very smart. But you have to plan everything else about your life planning in terms of health, planning in terms of mental acuity. Plans in terms of how you're going to adjust your marriage because of all the things I just mentioned, your marriage begins to change at the age of 68 or 70. You begin to grow at different speeds.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay.

Gordon MacDonald:

One of you has a healthier body than the other.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

And you begin to change your taste. This is a terrible generalization, but women, for example, will be far more, it's my observation, relational in their latter years. Men want to get out and do things, they want to play golf and do all that bucket list stuff. And so, you can get some tensions going if you're not sensitive to that kind of stuff. So, Gail and I began to smell that in our early fifties. And the first question we began to deal with, and I have this in one of my books, what kind of an old man do I want to be? Because the old men that I was beginning to see around me, I didn't like them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

If I had an extra ticket to go to Fenway Park and watch the Red Sox, there was not many of those older men I wanted to take me. They just weren't fun to be with. And I said to myself, "That's because they haven't asked what's the last 20, 30% of my life supposed to look like? And how will I use it properly?" So, we started making mental and then real lists of people who were admirable and influential and followable, and then of course we had mental lists of people that we probably felt didn't have much to do it, to teach us. Then we made this decision at the age of 60, and that this is Gordon and Gail, this is not anybody else. At the age of 60, I would step out of organizational leadership. I felt that too much of organizational leadership was a young woman or a young man's game. It's people in their thirties, forties and early fifties who run the store. When you get to where we were getting, now you're the purveyor of wisdom and encouragement and hopefulness. But get out of all those meetings.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I hear you.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I didn't know we would do it as well as we did it, but at the age of 60, I met with our board of elders at Grace Chapel and said, "Six months from now, Gail and I will be gone. So, you got six months to start planning how you're going to do succession." And my argument was, "You need to go back and produce a candidate from the generation behind me. And you've got some time now to make that happen." That's 20 years ago. I have never once, never once regretted that decision. Because I loved pastoral ministry, I loved preaching, I loved the four churches that we served, but these last 20 years have been the top because I had been able to give myself, as Gail has, to younger men and women, and to be a mentor and a father. But that was all, once again, deliberate long range, planning of life like we plan an organization.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How did you disentangle your identity from your work?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, in one sense, I'm not sure I totally did. I mean, there are moments when you see you'll go to a church to speak or you're at someplace, and you watch people tell you how much they love their pastor. And there's a little bit of ache in your heart and you say, "I wish somebody has loved me." And that doesn't happen often, but it has happened. Of course, I'm a human being.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I can relate.

Gordon MacDonald:

I lost your question. Can you-

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I was just asking how you disentangle your identity from your work. There's that stat Gordon, and I should do a little more research on it, but it's been quoted so often there must be a seed of truth, that men retire. And this is particularly a male issue apparently but, and six months later they die of a heart attack. And it's like the friends don't call, the phone doesn't ring. They were a sales person, they were a pastor and now they're who are they? Right? And to your point, the grumpy old men who you wouldn't want to take to Fenway Park to see the Red Sox play, because they've kind of lost themselves in the process of not having a day job. I mean you've always been productive. You're still writing, you're still speaking, but how did you... A lot of leaders hang on way too long because they can't imagine not being the pastor.

Gordon MacDonald:

... Yeah. And in this day and age, you start getting the message at about the age, if you last, well 65. People start rolling their eyes and they pay you a false respect, "Oh, you're so wise pastor." But in their heart of hearts they're saying, "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

But you use the word retirement. I have never retired. And I refuse to dignify that word. I don't think the word is biblical to begin with, but of course to be fair to the word, people in biblical times, for the most part, died in their late thirties, forties, a few people lived longer than that. But there was no retirement time. If retirement time is playing in Florida or something like that, Gail and I have just never had a penchant for doing that. We're happy for the people in Florida, but we have no desire to join them unless it's just for two or three days in February in New England.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, exactly. That tiny escape, right Gordon?

Gordon MacDonald:

So I didn't retire, I just moved laterally to another kind of ministry that was more 100% of who I am. I'm a pastor.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Gordon MacDonald:

I'm a mentor to young men and women. I like to speak, I like to write and the doors were open and people opened them to give them opportunities. So, here's my calendar building right now for my 81st and 82nd year. It's not crammed, I don't want to stretch the truth. But I've got plenty to do and Zoom is accelerating it in a new way. So, I've just pushed on and every day is a really happy day for me. I can't remember the last time I said, "This was a rotten day."

PART 2 OF 5 ENDS [01:06:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, that's wonderful. That's wonderful to hear. I mean, when I think about me if I live that long at 70 or 80, I honestly have a mental list too. So, I think of you, think of Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, not that I belong in that company, but these were people who were contributing to the kingdom. Really in Peterson's case or Dallas Willard's case, or even Ravi Zacharias who passed earlier this year, they were all contributing until the very end. Did you have mentors in mind when you were 60 and thought, "Yeah. Like that person. Like him, like her?"

Gordon MacDonald:

Oh yes. Dr. Vernon. Ground's former president of Denver Seminary. I knew him from age five to age 75. He was the father I never had.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

He, he was a man of books. His a library, probably numbered. I'm just guessing 10,000, 12,000 books. You can see all of them at the Denver Seminary library today. But Vernon was an incredible father to me. And he would say to me constantly, "Don't stop growing. Don't stop growing. Don't stop reading. Don't stop asking questions." And he just filled me with an excitement and an anticipation to see how much more I could pile into this brain bank of mine, or maybe say the soul bank. What was to be learned each day from each person who came along the way? And I watched him do this incessantly to virtually the day he died at the age of 96. And I kept saying to myself, "I want to be that kind of a man." So that's been the inspiration all of these years. I have his picture over here on the wall.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's amazing. All right. Principle number five, prepare yourself for those occasions. When you like most people will suffer, fail, fall into doubt, face conflict and experience loss.

Gordon MacDonald:

Kind of gloomy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, it's kind of gloomy, but it's, it's very real. You read about the rock and the sand and, these times will come. Can you talk to us about a season of doubt for you, Gordon?

Gordon MacDonald:

I can talk about several of them. I'm a doubter by nature. Once again, artistic people, broodish people, introverted people like me. We have a lot of space down deep inside of us to keep tossing thoughts over and revisiting them and seeing if we can polish them. Probably one of the great corner turner moments in my world happened in 1963. No, excuse me 1983. I'm going to make this very short. I was invited to be a candidate for the president of one of the largest Christian organizations in the world. And I remember saying to the person who was doing the, the head hunting, "How many are on your list?" He said, "About 60." I said, "Well, then I'll say yes, and I'll be a candidate because I'll just be able to tell people someday I was considered for the presidency of -." So I was on the list. Well, there came a day when they called and they said, "We'd like to come to your town and interview you and your wife." And so some professional guy came from another part of the country, spent an afternoon interviewing us. Two days later, we were told, "The list has been cut from 60 to 20, and you're on it." Well, that got our attention. Then the next thing I know, board members from this organization were coming to visit and they were asking if they could interview two or three people from our congregation. One day the phone call came, "The list is down to six, and you're still on it."

Gordon MacDonald:

Now, Gail and I knew we were into something that we hadn't saw it. But I'm of a generation that believes heavily in God's call. And my rationale was, "This is the call of God in motion, I've got to follow it to it's nth degree."

Gordon MacDonald:

Again, the story needs to be shortened. There came a day when they said, "We're down to two, and you're on it."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

I remember calling two or three of the top evangelical leaders in America that I, I knew reasonably well and saying to them, "What counsel do you have to give to me?" And I'm not going to drop names. Billy Graham told me I should never drop names, but one of them said, "If you get asked to do this job, it's a call to world Christian leadership. You have to say yes, no matter what the price."

Gordon MacDonald:

So Gail, and I took a four week vacation or a sabbatical or leave or whatever you would call it. We went to our little cabin up in New Hampshire, in the woods and all day long, we read biographers of great Christian leaders. We walked, we talked, we prayed, we sang. It was one of the holiest months of our lives because it was all centered on, "What is God saying here? I didn't ask for this. I have no ambition for this." Well, the month ended, there was one more big interview. And then the night of the decision came and there finally came the phone call. And the chairman of the board of this organization said, "Gordon we've picked the other person."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I try to say this in modesty. Gail and I had tried to do everything right. We had crucified our ambition. We didn't think ego played any part in this. We were simply trying to obey the voice of God. And then this happens. And I went the next morning to staff meeting at our church and I told people what had been going on. Because all of a sudden been done undercover.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I said, "You've watched me on many occasions when God has said yes to me now you're going to have to watch me when God says no." And for the next 10 days, I was the real spiritual hero. I went on with my work. I showed no emotion about the whole thing. You know, my attitude, "When God calls God calls. When he doesn't call, he doesn't call. Get on with life."

Gordon MacDonald:

I'll be very frank with you. About 10 days later, I woke up one morning and sat up, straight in bed. And I'll leave the profanity out. I shouted out loud, "What in the heck happened?" I was so sure I had heard God's voice. I have preached for years to people about how to hear God's call, but it didn't work for me. All of those principles and applications that Gail and I had put into this situation at the end, it ended with a total thud. And I took two or three years climbing out from under that cloud.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

Every time I prayed publicly and privately, even though people didn't realize that the first words of my prayer actually were "God, I'm praying to you. Even though I have no idea what your language is, but I'll do the right thing." It took me at least three years.

Gordon MacDonald:

Here's the end of the story, Carey. About five or eight years later, I came to a realization that was this: "If that job had been given to me, I would have said yes, but it would have killed me." I was no more fit for that job than the man in the moon. It would have killed me. I'd have been, I would have been broken in three years. But it took me five, six more years to figure that out. So what was a terrible moment of doubt and disappointment and discouragement turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. God saved me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hmm. Out of his mercy.

Gordon MacDonald:

That's my big doubt story. There were others. Not quite as monumental, but just as real.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think we've talked about this before, but your book reordering or Rebuilding Your Broken World is one of my favorites that I've read in my time in leadership. And we live in what a lot of people say is a cancel culture. So you make a mistake, that's it. You're gone. You're done. You're finished forever. Or perhaps you put yourself back in the game too early, right? It's like, "Well, I made a mistake and here I am now I'm back and you guys need to forgive me." I just love hearing your voice on restoration and on recovering from setback. So can you speak into that space because I don't know of a better voice on that, that I've heard than yours.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, thank you. Honestly it begins with what you think of God's motion in your life when a bad moment comes. And I was at a point I was in those years where I had really come alive to the notion of the mercy of God. So here's a God who watches his children sometimes do the dumbest, stupidest, horrible things in the world. And how does he receive them? You could be dramatic the story of the prodigal son and his father. My favorite story is Peter at the shore in John 21. When Jesus comes out of the fog and says, "Have you gotten any fish?" And Peter starts swimming like mad to the shoreline because somebody else in the boat has told them that they think it's the Lord. And I've imagined over and over again. What was going on in Peter's mind is he swam toward Jesus? You know, I can imagine him saying, "I wonder if when I get there, he fires me from being the leader of the disciples? Or will he tell me off and tell me how disappointed he is? What will Jesus say?"

Gordon MacDonald:

And yet he gets there. And I like to visualize the two men lock them in manly embrace with Peter burying his face in the neck of Christ. And just saying over and over again, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

And then Jesus offers Peter a return to where he was. That's me. I lived and breathed off that story. So God was faithful to me personally in speaking in ways like that, out of the stories of the Older Testament, New Testament.

Gordon MacDonald:

Second thing I got to say is I have an incredible wife, and Gail never doubted that there was a hope in the future. If we would just be obedient to the way the Holy Spirit does things. And she never left my side, we were together in this. And she, even to this day, if Gail talks about some of these things, I will hear her say, and in one sense, it hurts, but she'll say, "Our failure, the day we failed." And I'll say, "Sweetheart, it's not we, it's not I, it's we. No, It's our failure." But when you have someone walking alongside of you like that, it makes a big difference.

Gordon MacDonald:

The third thing was friends. I was surrounded by six or seven Godly people who were, in the words they would put as, "Well, sometimes Satan wins a battle, but he never wins the war. And we're going to win the war on this one." So I made a commitment. I would never make any decision in the near future without them approving it. I would totally submit my life and behavior to these men. We called them the angels, and the angels met with us every month for two years.

Gordon MacDonald:

And then I just have to say in a general sense, the mercy of some wonderful Christian leaders across the country. One of them was a man who's long been in the presence of the Lord now. Was the chairman of the board of Christianity Today, Clayton Bell. I rarely ever mentioned his name for no particular reason. But Clayton flew all the way from Dallas to our home in New Hampshire. And he sat with us for an entire day. And at one point with tears in his eyes, he said, "Gordon, Gail, you have a big decision to make. You can excuse yourself and deny yourself and complain that some people are not treating you well, and you'll get away with it. Or you can submit yourself to say, you can submit yourself to God and say, 'Lord, this is a painful moment, but we would like to squeeze this pain for everything you have to teach us.'"

Gordon MacDonald:

And Clayton Bell said to Gail and me, "Which of these two choices are you going to make?" And we went to our knees weeping and said, "We will choose to accept the pain and the consequences. If only God at the other end will whisper some new lessons to us." And that was almost like the start of a brand new ministry. I was 45, 46 years of age. And we look back at that point and say, that's the second half of life. And that's the best half. So it was Gail. It was people like Clayton Bell with the six angels. And it was the Holy Spirit himself speaking. And you get that kind of a package working in your life and you shut up your mouth and listen, one or two good things could happen.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, Gordon. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. That's so powerful and meaningful.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Number six, be trustworthy and dependable. A person who keeps his or her word. Don't make promises you can't keep. How have you learned to do that? When again, there are so many, so many challenges and so many opportunities on your time.

Gordon MacDonald:

Now we're back to this pleasing element again, in the life of many Christian leaders. We, we don't as Gail will often say to me, she'll say "You don't hear yourself. You need to listen to yourself more when you make some of these promises and commitments." And, and she's absolutely right. But in the euphoria of the moment, something deep inside of you is saying, "I'm going to get to make another person happy." So in my early years, in my twenties and thirties, and maybe even into the first year or two of my forties, I always took on about 20% more than I was conceivably possible to do. And one of the favorite things I would do, you know, I'd be standing up in front of Grace Chapel congregation. The service was over. Some person would come along that I really, really liked.

Gordon MacDonald:

And we talked for a moment and then I would say, "We need to get together more often. Why don't we try to get lunch? I'll call you." And the other guy, "Oh, yeah, that's great. I will really look forward to that." And they'd go on their way.

Gordon MacDonald:

And on the way home, Gail sitting with me in the car and she'll say, "Now I heard you tell Jim that you'd like to have lunch with him. Let me tell you what's going on in Jim's life right now. He's on his way home. And he's telling his wife, 'Gordon wants to have lunch with me. He wants to talk with me. He wants my advice.' And you know what? Tomorrow morning, you're going to make another lunch date and Tuesday, you're going to make a third lunch date. And you're going to forget all about Jim by Wednesday. And he's going to realize a week or 10 days from now. You didn't mean what you said. Gordon's a fibber. How can he trust you when you break your promise?" If I heard that from Gail 50, I heard it 5,000 times, "Don't make promises you can't keep. Your integrity relies upon it."

Gordon MacDonald:

It took me almost 45 years to get that lesson learned. That's why it's in a list of things at 80, because I was just so driven to want to do or say the nice thing, but you just have to. A good person will accept your no with the recognition you're being as honest as you possibly can.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's very true.

Gordon MacDonald:

So it took a long time to learn that though.

Carey Nieuwhof:

All right. Number seven, be a spiritual father, mother to teachable people who may someday inherit your responsibilities. I'd love to know some best practices on that. How do you become a spiritual mother or father to people that really will take over for you one day?

Gordon MacDonald:

I wrote an article on call to Christian service or leadership. I think back when I was 64. And it was your typical article that you've read a hundred times about how you hear God's call to this out of the other thing, nothing spectacular. There just good Orthodox treatment of the subject of call. But when I got



through the article and send it off to the editor of leadership journal, I began to think about what I'd written. And I thought, "It's been years and years and years, since I have thought about my call, my call doesn't play any front position. My call doesn't play any significant role in my life at all. It's something that I had when I was in my teen years at camp, in the campfire. And I haven't really thought about it much since then." Why don't we talk so much about call then?

Gordon MacDonald:

So I began to think about it. Does God ever update his calls to his people? Does he freshen a call? Does he change a call? I've never heard anybody talk about that. I didn't know where you look about it in the scripture. So I began to pray, "Lord, you have fresh brand new calls for people when they're 64? Because I'm tired of the old call that ain't working anymore." And I prayed that prayer as kind of the upfront prayer each morning in my devotions. Some weeks later, I went off to Germany to speak at a number of daily pastors conferences in various German cities. And at the end of several of those days, young German men who spoke English came up to me. And one by one, they would say almost this very same thing. "You talk to us today, like a father does. You talk like a father."

Gordon MacDonald:

And I would say, "Well, what does that mean?" "Well, the old German professors and pastors, they shout at us, they scold us, they teach us theology and philosophy, but they never open up their hearts and tell us about themselves. They never tell us where they've hurt, where they failed, how God's spoken in their life. And that's what you did all day long today. And that's what a father does." So I heard that several times, I was very thankful. Came back to the US went out to California to speak for an Asian pastors conference, Japanese, Korean, Chinese pastors. And this was a two day conference. And when I got through the leader got up to thank me, and he said this, he said "All day long today, yesterday, I've been listening to Gordon speak and I've been on the edge of tears the whole time." He said, "I can tell you the tears weren't because he's a bad speaker." But he said, "I've been on the edge of tears because I feel like a father has been speaking to me. And so many of us in this room don't feel like we have fathers."

Gordon MacDonald:

And in that moment Carey, it was like, the Holy Spirit fell upon me. And what I heard the Holy Spirit say to me is, "You asked for a fresh call. You've got it. Spend the rest of your life just being a father to young men and young women who come along and have questions and want to know what God is saying."

Gordon MacDonald:

That's a great call.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's a great call, and...

Gordon MacDonald:

And it fits life in the last 25% of it. So that's why life is exciting to me to this day, because it's not infrequent that I get out of bed in the morning. And one of the first things I ask myself is the question, "And who shall I get to be a father to today." And when I go back to Germany, so many of the pastors

over there are so kind to me and they'll say, "Well, father, we're glad you're back in Germany today. May I have my blessing?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

It is an anointed calling like the time that we have spent together, even our email friendship. We email back and forth a few times a month. It's very emotional. And in the best possible way as this conversation is. So I just want to affirm that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Principle number eight, live modestly, stay free of debt. Be generous, develop a financial strategy for your future and be wary of those who try to buy your favor. So we touched a little bit about being raised in the Depression generation and stay out of debt and everything. I find in the church, pastors are either underpaid or overpaid. There's not a whole lot of middle ground there. Let's speak to those who are underpaid, how, and I'm sure ministry did not pay in the sixties and seventies, even what it does today. How did you embrace that principle when times were tight?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I think you've raised several bulleted issues there. Some of which I honestly cannot fully answer to please everybody. I know that there's an enormous number of pastors out there that are terribly underpaid and they're really suffering or struggling. And they're doing three jobs. They're driving a school bus and they're mopping floors and spouses that have to work. And they're trying to mother two or three children at the same time. So it's a mess out there for a lot of those kinds of people and bless them that they're so faithful. Gail was the keeper of the cash in our house from the day we got married. She's a very detailed person, very orderly person. And she appreciates the structure of money. I'm the one who gets the money, is paid the money for doing ministry and Gail is the one who does the expenditure of the money. And it works very, very well.

Gordon MacDonald:

In about our third year of marriage. A missionary came to visit us for a weekend and he was incredibly poorly dressed. His sport coat had holes at the elbows and he's not the kind of guy who would deliberately do that to make an impression. But I said to Gail, somewhere during the weekend, "We've got to buy this man a new sport coat." They only cost \$39 in those days. And Gail came back to me and she said, "We can't do it. We've spent next week's paycheck already." But for some way, and I've never yet figured out, she found the money. And before that missionary left us on Monday, he was wearing a brand new, rather cheap, but nice sport coat.

Gordon MacDonald:

And that had an incredible effect upon me. I had heard God's leadership and we had responded and we sat down and I said to Gail, I think I was the one that said it, "We have got to come up with a lifelong strategy as to how we're going to manage money, because I don't want the Holy Spirit ever again to nudge me about being generous and we can't afford to do it."

Gordon MacDonald:

So we set out four or five principles. One, we would live at 80% of our income, no matter what that card cost us. Two, we would put money away every month for our here he goes retirement Three, we would

put money away so that our children would get a debt free college education. Four, we would be as generous as we possibly could on a regular basis to situations around us.

Gordon MacDonald:

I guess I mentioned them all. Stay out of debt. And don't buy anything you can't pay for within 31 days with the exception of a necessary car or a house mortgage, if that would come along. But otherwise it was going to be a cash deal. We've lived that way, Carey now for 57 years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

We have never gone to bed worrying about money. Not because we're wealthy. We just haven't put ourselves up to the stretch zone that so many young people do today. I'll tell you one other, there was one other decision we made. We would not opt out of social security. Ah, yeah. And particularly in those days, all of us guys in my generation, the government was giving us this option to opt out of paying social security payments as clergy people. And at the beginning I did opt out, and then I started writing books, and the internal revenue service said, "We'll give you your privilege for the pastoring, but you've got to pay social security tax for writing and for outside speaking."

Gordon MacDonald:

So I completed the full course of social security payments down through all the years. And that's one of the best things that ever happened to me. I don't care where you are on the aisle politically. Social security is good, and there are thousands of older pastors today who are dying financially because they didn't take social security, and God saved us, you could say in that way. So we have lived strategically and it's meant that many, many, many times we have said no to things that our peers have gone off and bought. Because if we couldn't take cash where we weren't going to do it or buy it.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I just think that pastors, Christian leaders need to be very careful about this. The way you handle your money is one of the ways your congregation judges you. They notice the kind of clothing we wear, the kind of house we buy, the model car we buy. And we can do all we want in saying, "It's none of their business." But if you're going to be a pastor, this is Gordon speaking, it is to some extent their business.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

Because it's a statement about how you live and how important material things are to you. So that's why that point is in there. It's all of our life, we've lived pretty carefully according to those financial principles. Our children graduated debt-free from college. We're into years where we're not earning a definite income. It's all worked out beautifully. Now where we go from these days, that's God's problem.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. I mean, we could literally spend five hours talking about these things, which we'll probably set up the next conversation. But I do want to, before we move on, talk about "be wary of those who try to buy your favor" Can you expand on that? How did that show up? How does that show up?

Gordon MacDonald:

It shows up in almost every situation, unless maybe you're in a church or an organization where, where everybody is desperately poor. But there are always people in any collection or our crowd of folks who have more than other people do, and they can afford to do things that no one else can afford to do. It's kind of like the Corinthian situation. And there have always been a few in our lives from the very beginning who had greater financial needs and they didn't mind to throw it around. I remember a little club of people in an earlier church that I pastored in another part of the country. And compared to the rest of the congregation they were pretty well off. And every Sunday night we were Baptist we'd have the evening service. And then this group would go to one of their homes and they would eat late into the evening.

Gordon MacDonald:

They might've wanted as well have been alcoholics, the way they consumed their food. But the table would always be set with the most beautiful foods and expensive foods. And they would invite Gail and then me to join them on the Sunday nights after church. And now here we are a young couple 29, 30, 31 years of age. And we thought, "It was wonderful that this fat group was inviting Gail and Gordon." And the food was so good. And the laughter of the jokes was great. But you know what? We discovered one day that whenever, we needed people like that to make an extra commitment in the life of the church, not just money, but to do things and, and fill responsibilities. These people can never be counted on. There was no growth. There was no depth. The church was just a social situation for them to meet over.

Gordon MacDonald:

And finally, Gail and I said to ourself, "We really got to get out of this. We need to be spending our time with people who are teachable and really want to be near us for the reasons we came to this church." But they were some of the first people who fit that category. I'll just tell you one more. I think of a company president who was fabulously wealthy, and he was used to commanding the situation, every place around him, his company, which was big, the church, the neighborhood, the community. Everybody did with this man wanted. And he would call me about one o'clock or two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. And he would, he had a deep voice. "Gordon, he said, I could still hear, "Gordon, why don't you and the Mrs. come on over for dinner tonight, I've got some really thick steaks. You're going to love them." And you couldn't say no.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

And so we'd go. And the steaks were incredible. You know, I just can't describe them to you. The greatest steaks you could ever imagine on the barbecue. And he was good at what he did. And then while we were eating, he would tell me how the run the church. "You know, you've got to do more of this. You got to say no to that person. You shouldn't be doing this whatsoever. And you shouldn't have mentioned that in your sermon." And I would take it all in, and why? Because he had bought the privilege. And I love this man. And I think he, in his own way was a Godly man. But I would drive home

Saturday night after Saturday night, pounding the steering wheel in frustration that I had allowed him to get into my heart that night when I had to preach the next morning.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah. How did you learn to say no, eventually? How did you learn to spot that and then say, "Hey, thanks so much. But we have dinner plans."

PART 3 OF 5 ENDS [01:39:04]

Gordon MacDonald:

I think I just got busy doing other things on Saturday nights. Just diplomatically, "I'm sorry. I can't come. We have a commitment this evening." And we just slowed the whole thing down a little bit by little, and I think he got the message.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Expect to reorganize your inner life every seven to 10 years. Why seven to 10?

Gordon MacDonald:

It's a nice round number. No, there is some genius to it. It's my theory that as we move up from life from childhood age 10 or 12 up that life goes through basic definitional changes in 10 year increments. From 12 to about 21, you're getting hit by puberty and you're in your last half of your flight to formal education. So, things between 12 and 21 are pretty continuous. And then maybe pass 21 to 22 life changes. Now you were thinking career, you're thinking the possibility of spouse. In your 30s, you're thinking about children, about house mortgages, car payments. In your 40s, you're asking the question, "How am I doing? And why isn't life going exactly like I expected?" In your 50s, the question's coming, "What do I do with the second half of my life?" In your 60s it's, "How long can I keep doing the things that have defined me?" In your 70s, "How do I live with all the loss that I'm facing as my friends are dying off?" In your 80s, "How close am I to heaven's door?"

Gordon MacDonald:

So, your spiritual life is going to change as it corresponds to each of those questions and those decades. Let me put it this way. One of the parts of the spiritual life are the heroes you have. When I was in my teens and 20s, my heroes would have been Joseph, Daniel, Esther, these flashy young people with lots of vision and strength and all that. My friends at 80 are Caleb, Hannah and Simeon, Zachariah, and Elizabeth, the age of Paul. I love those guys, but they're considerably older. So, the heroes I'm following as the years go by have changed because of the vicissitudes of life. Even this whole area of sexual sins, like sexual temptation, talk to young people in their teens and 20s and they'll tell you that they're thinking about these temptations all the time. Listen to any pastor who's preaching to younger people, when he or she brings up the subject of sin, it's almost always sexual. But try talking about that to 75 year olds.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. Now the issues have changed. What are the sins of a 75 year old? Could be that that person struggles with jealousy, with anger, with unresolved regrets, fear, things that you never thought about when you were 32. So, my temptations, my heroes are changing. The things I pray for and the way I pray

is changing all along the line. The places I go to the Bible for solace and for direction are going to change. So, I've become an advocate in my own journey that every seven to eight years there comes that major reassessment moment, when you really have to in effect say to Jesus, "How are we doing? And what needs to change? And what do I need to alter in my life, so I am a faithful person at this age?" That's what's all under that principle. And it really makes a lot of sense to me.

Gordon MacDonald:

I started as a Baptist when I was a kid, because my father was a Baptist. If they'd been a Presbyterian, I guess I would have been Presbyterian, but I started out a Baptist. If I had life to do all over again right now, if someone said, "Make any changes in your life you want." I wouldn't be a Baptist, I would probably be a Quaker or an Anglican. Because as the years have gone by I've inherited this hunger for the liturgical and the truth that's embedded in the ancient prayers and creeds, the dignity of a good liturgical service. Where the Quakers sitting in silence and letting God speak to each other in various way.

Gordon MacDonald:

The Quaker view of learning, the Quaker view of mixing it up in this world and making a difference at the highest possible level, I really admire that. I didn't get that stuff when I was a kid in the Baptist church, then it was all about... And I'm very thankful. It was all about Jesus. Being faithful to Jesus, talking about Jesus, singing to Jesus. So, life has changed for me and even in my spiritual life, my tastes in worship and devotion has migrated as the years are going by.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I wanted to ask you, it's a question under the question, but when you think about recalibrating every seven to 10 years, in my mid 50s I'm noticing some big shifts over the decades, 20s, 30s, 40s, now 50s. How does wisdom work? I would consider you to be a sage, someone who is able to connect the dots, how has that changed and evolved over the decades for your wisdom?

Gordon MacDonald:

It's interesting. This is kind of a joke, but when I was a young person and I'm sure it's true for you, people will clap and say, "You're so smart." Then when you get to be old they say, "You're so wise." And I keep asking myself, what's the difference in, how did I get from smart to wise? Interesting question. I think as you grow up through the years at least... Again, this is Gordon speaking, by midlife you begin to realize you can't do spiritual life alone. And that's what I did for the first 20, 30 years of my adult Christian faith. I did it alone for the most part. And then in very vulnerable moments I began to realize I need some capital F friends who will walk alongside of me as we walk with God together, and who will mediate to me what they hear God's saying in my life as I mediate back to them.

Gordon MacDonald:

So as I get older, I realize that wisdom is a community's thing. The wise leaders of the village in the tribal societies, the wise men never operate alone, they have a collective of people who sit in the gates of the city and brewed on the wise things. And that took me about 45 years to learn. So I really value relationships where when you're with a particular person, the conversation is elevated. The things that generate wisdom and insight, and you have to go for it like a dog goes to red meat. That was an interesting paradigm, wasn't it?

Carey Nieuwhof:

That is a really interesting paradigm. What does that mean?

Gordon MacDonald:

I won't back away from it because as I get older I find my hunger for wisdom increases all the time. I want every person I need to tell me their story. I want to know what's hot on their plate today in terms of learning. What are they curious about? What are they struggling with? That's been a part of my older years. I want to accumulate the wisdom that comes out of connections like that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. Number 10, receive compliments, criticism, and counsel with humility and appreciation. Avoid whining, complaining, self-pity, assume that there is at least a grain of truth in the things critics say about you and your work. Well, we could literally spend an hour on this, but please walk us through... Can I focus on self-pity? That one's been a tough one for me, I can end up in the self-pity pit too often.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, again, I would tie it back to something we've already mentioned two or three times, and that's the Pastoral Temperament. For anybody who knows Myers Briggs. I'm an INFP. I wouldn't be surprised if you were close to that but I could-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm an ENFP but almost bordering I these days.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah, Gail who's a real student of Myers Briggs she's taken all the testings and stuff. She tells me that a huge percentage of the pastoral population are NFPs.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Really?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. They migrate toward this because it's all about people. It's all about feelings. It's all about correcting false and getting back on the straight and narrow road, where my father would have been probably an ENTJ. He comes out of a engineering family line that I must've disgraced, but for him it's putting the pieces of doctrine together, figuring out people's problems and giving them the solution, just like that.

Gordon MacDonald:

It drove me nuts because he had this fix it mentality in that way. But we pastors we care too much and so, when somebody says something that's hurtful, or we hear about gossip that's been projected in our direction, it immediately stabs into the deeper parts of us. Because we want people to love us, to respond to our ministry and know that we care for them, and when we find out it's not that way, it hurts like everything. So, it's something you have to beat at all the time. And if you're a couple, a husband and

wife, and both have the same temperament in this area, it can often be devastating because one of you needs to be able to pull the other out of those dark moments.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that's a good point. Anything else on hearing the truth from your critics?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. The founder of The Navigators was a man by the name of Dawson Trotman. And I had the privilege of knowing him very briefly in his later years, he died at Word of Life Camp here in New York State and here up in the New England area. But Dawson Trotman had a state in which Gail and I heard way back and it was this, "Inside of every criticism, legitimate or illegitimate, is a grain of truth. Assume that grain of truth and look for it." Well, you see what that did, that reverses your perspective, because when I was young my assumption often was, "You disagree with me, one of us is right, and one of us is wrong." But what if I start now with the assumption, "Okay, I'm hearing you, you're hearing me, and in the things that we say to each other in the converse of it all, you may have a truth I need to hear. It may not be as big as you wished it was, but it's there, and if I find it, I'm going to go away a better person."

Gordon MacDonald:

So, Gail and I adopted this principle and she reminds me of it all the time. Always in a conversation, look for the grain of truth. Everybody has something God has planted in them for you. So, as long as I can keep repeating that to myself, I'm able to deal with most conflict. There are the extreme ones where you finally have to say, "This is going nowhere." But you can really take in a lot of conflict if you have convinced yourself that the grain of truth is there to be found, and if you get it, you will profit from it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. This one intrigued me. Number 11, stay alert for the evils and temptations embedded in institutional life. What are the evils and temptations embedded in institutional life?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, first of all I asked the men that built the Tower of Babel. And they were trying to form a corporation that would build something that God was not welcome to. And so, when God walks among them and sees what they're trying to do, he curses their effort by giving them all individual or diverse languages. And so, they stopped the work and they scatter in all four directions because they can't communicate.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Gordon MacDonald:

I don't want to overdo this point. But if you think about it, one of the greatest problems in all institutions and organizations is the failure to purely communicate. It leads to a lot of our mistakes, our misunderstandings, our conflicts, because we just didn't say or do what was absolutely and necessary for the other person to get the point.

Carey Nieuwhof:



Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

So, I've often called that story in Genesis 11, The Curse of Babel. And I have formed this theory if you please, that every time two or more people connect with each other, for any purpose, marriage, family, church, business, army, anytime two people come together for any period of time, before long, something evil is likely to burst out from the innards of that connection and threaten the organization. You can say that about marriages.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

A man and a woman walked the aisle and you watched them holding hands and kissing at the end, loving each other, it's their perfection. But you go back 10 years you'll discover... go forward another 10 years, you'll discover that this relationship has been pounded in all sorts of ways and good ones have outlasted the pounding, others have capitulated, but every relationship has flaws in it, and good management, good leadership is looking and assuming that there are probably flaws in this organization, and I must always be aware of when they might show themselves and what I as a leader would do to bring it under control.

Gordon MacDonald:

Those people that at Babel, they didn't know that if they'd sent their workers off to Harvard Business School they could have solved all their problems, but they didn't do that. I think that one of the marks of Christian leadership is the Christian leader is not negative, but he or she is always looking at the organization asking the question, when will some of the flaws show and how will we deal with them?

Carey Nieuwhof:

So it's almost a vigilance, a state of alertness that you're watching for this. That's helpful.

Gordon MacDonald:

Let's put it in other way Carey. We have no problem as evangelicals be leading that in the heart of every person is an old nature. And in devotion and worship, we're looking for the old nature to work its way out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

If you have an old nature as a human being, why can't an organization of many human beings also have an old nature? Is this not what happened to the temple in Jerusalem? It had an old nature and it went from what it was under Solomon to being corrupted as the years went by.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, that's so good.

Gordon MacDonald:

Here's Israel, when Moses leads them out of Egypt, the old nature is there. You might say the whole Older Testament is really about Israel dealing with its old nature, and it's the capitulations of slavery and what that had done to them. So that it's a redemptive whole Testament leading toward the Cross because we've got these issues to deal with.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Okay. That's something to really think about and encouraging in the same way. This is something you are just wrestling with as long as you're alive. All right. So number 12, be quick to say with sincerity, "Thank you." "Well done." "I'm sorry." "I forgive you." And, "How can I help?" Why those five? Why did you pick those five as one of your principles?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, to be honest I've been fooling with this piece of paper we're working with for about a year now. It's about a year ago that I did the first draft of it. And I have put these five to the test in my mind over and over and over again. Is there more?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

Are they too many? And the answers so far I haven't found any. What they represented to me is, they're the five inner core transactions in all relationships. And if any one of them is missing, you get a boss who doesn't know how to say, "I'm sorry." You worked for a person who never says, "Well done." And you go home every night asking, "Do I have any value to this organization, to that person?" If they don't say, "Well done." If someone doesn't say, "I'm sorry." When there's been an abrasion in their relationship, if someone doesn't say, "Thank you." You're left high and dry to know whether you have any contribution to make to that situation. So, I've kept test firing these five over and over and over again, and I keep coming back and saying, "No, every one of them belongs there." And to the extent that you neglect to give one of them to the people around you on a regular basis, you have a hole in your organization.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that's really true. I mean, I asked the question not realizing there'd be such a powerful answer behind it, but you're absolutely right. And somebody who just says, "Thank you." But never really affirms you as whether the quality of your work was good or apologizes, or even ask you how they can help. That's a fascinating list. What has made you not want to say those things over the course of your life?

Gordon MacDonald:

I would resist saying that... and it happens more than once, because to compliment or praise you might take something away from me. I may be giving you a leg up on me, especially if I've smell some competition between the two of us, I'd like to keep pushing you down-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

And when I was young I probably was guilty of that a lot of times. And my mentor, Dr. Grounds would have been one of those that would have taught me a better way. Always be looking for the thing you can find in another person that's worth praising. Gail often says, "Hold the crown six inches above someone's head so they can grow up into it." That, I believe, is a Quaker statement by the way-

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a great statement.

Gordon MacDonald:

These five as I have exercised them the best I could in my own life, have made a huge difference. In our home, if you live here very often, you become a person addicted to giving thank you's out. When I married Gail, I discovered in the first week of our marriage, that there were 30 to 35 thank you notes going out of our house every week. Gail thanks everybody.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

I'll look over her shoulder and she'll be writing a letter to the usher in our church. "Dear Joe, the other day in church I was watching as you escorted Mrs. so and so who's 90 years of age to her seat. I was so impressed with how tender you were to her and how you stayed there and paid attention to her until she was thoroughly comfortable. I wanted to say thank you. Gail." That's typical of the letters that are to this day, to this very day. Gail spends time writing thank you notes or affirmational notes to people. So, if you're going to live here you have to do it, so I do it, not as much as she.

Gordon MacDonald:

I'll finish this. People have come up and they'll take out their billfold like this and they'll say, "I want you to see something." And I looked up the billfold and it will be a yellow piece of paper or card, and they will say, "Gail wrote this to me 10 years ago. And I've kept it in my billfold all these years. Whenever I need a word of encouragement, I take it out and reread it."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

I hear this all the time Carey. And it's made me realize that in the Christian world, and Paul does this to the Colossians five times, being thankful, overflowing in thanksgiving, thanking. "Thank you. I thank the Lord my God." Thanking is one of the most Christian acts there is. But we don't teach each other to do it, and we don't respond as well as we should, so it becomes a lost art for some people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Well, I'm going to pay attention to those five. Number 13, and we talked about mentorship and the voices in your life, but I want to drill down on it. Always maintain a relationship with one or two mentors who can aid you in hearing God's voice. You talk about the angels. You talk about the two or three people that you'll do your recalibration with and check in with, how do you select those people, Gordon? What do you look for?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, and I'm not trying to be funny when I say this, how did you select your wife? Basically you date her. You knew some women and you had a list. I once said to Gail, "I'll have you know when I was at college, I had many women coming after me." And she said, "I can understand the high turnover." You can erase that. You date. In terms of men as mentors, you look at the men around you and over a period of time you select out of your mind 10 or 12 of them that have qualities and traits that you would like to learn from and know about. And you invite them for breakfast. You say something like, "Could I ask you a few questions? I'm wondering about you seem to have it all put together in this area." "Well, sure." And the conversation goes and at the end of it you're saying to yourself, "Would I like to meet this guy again?" If so, "Could we get together again for breakfast in a another month, I'd be glad to pay the bill."

Gordon MacDonald:

As the weeks go by and you have these times, a relationship develops. You don't say to this guy, "Would you be my mentor here to death?" You just do mentoring one way or the other and maybe a year and a half down the line the other guy says, "You and I have something going here don't we? I love these. I look forward to these dates every fourth, Saturday of the month." And that's the way it works. You do it the same way you would on a get a relationship going with a woman you marry.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I probably have had a hundred mentors. If you start picking very detailed ones. But I have a piece I've written. I don't think you've seen its called Nine Who Stood Out where I've listed and described the nine top mentors in my life. The first one came along when I was four and five years old.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I haven't seen that piece.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I'd be glad to send it to you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would love to get it. Yup.

Gordon MacDonald:

But those nine mentors and two of the nine was that couple I told you about that I went to their house. They were the ones who taught me marriage. There was another man who taught me how to be a gentleman.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I remember that story. That's great.

Gordon MacDonald:

There's a third guy that taught me how to be something of a scholar. And there's another guy who taught me dignity and discipline. And then there's my grandmother who teaches me how to get around in New York City and how to be compassionate in praying for the children of Germany in World War II. And then there's... Well, it goes on like that, but each one of these was a mentoring relationship that fit the time I was in the at that moment. Now, all my mentors are gone except I think of Gail as a mentor sometimes, the other they rest as they say in glory. But each one of them left something in me from which I build off of every day of my life. And I'm terribly thankful for them all.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you deal with the death of your friends?

Gordon MacDonald:

The death-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Deal with the death of your friends? You reminded me of early in my ministry. I was like 30, 31. I just moved up here. Churches were really small. There's a gentleman, maybe 78 years old, his name's Walter. We're standing by the grave side one day and he looked at me and he just said, "You're so young." And he said, "All my friends are in there." And he pointed to the tombstone. I've never forgotten that. What's that like? How do you deal with that?

Gordon MacDonald:

I understand that. My friends are all dying, and it leaves you with a bit of loneliness. It leaves you vulnerable. I find myself saying every once in a while, "Gee, I'd really love to talk to so-and-so about that. I wonder what he would say." And so, you have this moment of nostalgia of pain, and life can get very serious for a while because you... People don't like me to say this sometimes, but I'm not far from that. And statistically, Gail and I are now in a box where in the next four years, people our age die. And so, you thank God and when we go to bed at night we take turns praying. We always thank God he has given us one more day, and if he will would he give us one more tomorrow to do what he wants us to do?

Gordon MacDonald:

So, the greatest fear if you love your spouse as much as I love my Gail, the thought that one of these days one of us is going to leave the other, your brain can't get around it. It's a thought that's out of control. And you feel the fear of it. "What would it be like to be in this house if she wasn't around the corner?" But apparently and people have been facing this for millions of years and it's doable. So as Gail would say if she was sitting here with us, she would say something like, "You just got to hold everything loosely. And then essentially you'll even have to hold the one you love the most loosely too, because one day God's going to take one of us."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would think that gets harder. Toni and I've talked about it a little bit and I'll say to her, there's songs I'll never be able to listen to again, there's food I can't have because it would remind me too much of the time we spent together. I can't imagine that intensifying overtime.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. You'll hear widows and widowers who will say, "I keep expecting them to come right around the corner. When I'm in the shopping mall and I look ahead about 50 feet and I'm sure that they're right up ahead and I can see them." Or they'll say, "I can't wait to get home and tell Gail." So, God didn't make us to die. It's the first major place where you're totally out of control with the experience. I cannot control the messenger of death.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you. Well, master the art of asking the penetrating questions that open someone's heart. I love your curiosity, Gordon. We've talked about this before. Just the art of question asking seems to be dying. How do you form a penetrating question?

Gordon MacDonald:

That's a really good question. And I'm not sure I'm adequate to the answer at all. That I do it, I feel like I do it and do it really well. It's because I practiced and because I think it's so intuitive. Again, my mentor Dr. Grounds, I watched him ask these questions of people down to the years, to strangers, to the waitress who came to bring our coffee to the table. He had just the perfect question to open her up as she put the coffee down on the table. Where most people would ignore her, he would have just the perfect thing to say. And as I watched him that I began to realize that he was like a surgeon. He was digging down into a person at the right speed, in the right place. He was going from one question to another, and he was always watching, for example, with the questions making that person feel uncomfortable, then you stop. If they seem to welcome the question and enjoy reflecting on it, you keep going deeper.

Gordon MacDonald:

I've noticed for example, when I talk with people and I unleash questions, you know that something good is happening when they'll say something like this, "Boy, you really ask good questions." Or, "Wow. Nobody's ever asked me that before." Or, "I've never thought about that." When you get those kind of responses, this person is welcoming you to a place that's near to their heart. They're inviting you're digging because you're teaching them things about themselves.

Gordon MacDonald:

You're also letting them know that they're valuable as human beings, and that you want to know the better. You just don't want to know the surface and what model of car do you drive? Who do you root for in baseball season? So, now you're going to ask questions and this is a pretty deep one, and I would ask it mainly of a man. Have you ever had your heart broken?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gordon MacDonald:

Do you ever look back at a time when God was so real to you that you will never forget it? Speculative questions of that type, and it gives people a lot of wiggle room to go deeper or to back away. I rarely meet people who want to back away. People are fascinated when you show interest in their lives because not many people do. And Gail and I both feel badly about this among Christians, because we

often will... we go to a gathering or some meeting. And on the way home Gail will say to me or I'll say to her, "Anybody ask you any questions tonight? No, nobody asked anything. I just spent my night asking them."

Gordon MacDonald:

And what it says to both of us is there are very few people who know to ask questions, or secondly, they're interested enough to ask the question. They just want to stay on the surface level. So, we've tried to work hard on this, you've got a list of questions like, one of my favorites and it sounds bizarre. "Tell me the story of your whole life in four minutes."

PART 4 OF 5 ENDS [02:12:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a great question.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. People will do exactly what you did. They burst out into laughter. They'll say, "Four minutes. Are you kidding?" And then, you know what? Their mind immediately begins to run. And within a minute or two they'll tell you four or five bullet points that encapsulate their whole life. "Well, I lost my father at the age of seven." "You did? What was that like? What did that do to you?" "Well, my mother made the mistake of saying I had to be the man of the family, and I've been living with that burden ever since." So you're leaping, step-by-step, into areas of the heart where this person may never have talked about this before.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Gordon, when we talk about this, it just makes me feel like we are hanging on to something that perhaps we're in danger of losing in our culture. And this whole art of question asking, of truly being interested in the other rather than ourselves, of curiosity. Any words to young leaders who are watching or listening, who would say, "This almost seems like a foreign land you're taking me into." Where would they start with asking great questions? Because I think you're so right.

Gordon MacDonald:

The first place I guess I need to go back is to Dr. Sweet's Slow Medicine. If you want to be a person who's known for being interested in other people, like my friend Dr. Grounds, you're going to have to give something up. You can't keep cramming life with more and more things to do and then say, "Oh, I think I'll add this one more thing." Something down here has to go.

Gordon MacDonald:

And that's not going to be easy because this will be a sacrificial act down here, most likely. But if you want to be a pastor, a priest to people, then you have to have a priestly calendar and you have to be willing... When you ask a Marilyn Rosenthal something about how she's doing, you've got to stop, then, and hear her answer. You can't blow her off like I tried to. So it starts with, do I have time to stop and talk to people? Secondly, who are the people that I could benefit the most by talking to them? Then, what questions will I ask and how will I deal with the answers? Because I may be surprised with some of

the answers I get. We ought to be teaching that. We ought to have a whole course on question asking in seminars.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

Gordon MacDonald:

Maybe there's a bigger thought here: a whole course on how do you dig into people's lives so that they will show you the self that Jesus wants you to know? But most people will stay on the surface.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, one of the things I wonder, Gordon, if it's tied to it, is just quantity of time. Here we are two hours into this conversation at this point.

Gordon MacDonald:

Two hours?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. But it's unhurried. It's unrushed. It's focused. There's nothing going on in the background in your room, in my room. And how often do we actually get to that point these days? Do you think that there is something about an unhurriedness, a focus, a lack of distraction, that is critical to this?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. I think one more thing, too. We're going to have to be content to have smaller churches. You can't tell me that the majority of people going to a huge mega church really feel heard when the program's over. There's something good about it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, you led one, right?

Gordon MacDonald:

And I loved it. I loved ministry. But I can't begin to tell you how many times Gail and I would walk across the parking lot at the end of the third service on Sunday morning. And one of us would say to the other one, "You know anybody today?" "No." And, Carey, I would stand at the back door sometimes and shake maybe 800 or 900 hands and not know one name.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know that feeling, yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

Now I knew the core of the church. It took about, I'm guessing at this, 700 people to run our church on a given Sunday. I knew most of those people. But it were the other hundreds and hundreds that came and heard you preach, sang the songs, and walked out the door the minute the benediction was pronounced. And they stay for one to three, four years, and then they're on their way. And who knows



what that's going to mean when the church doors open up in this season of time. How have the loyalties of people sorted out during these many weeks?

Gordon MacDonald:

I am hoping there's a whole series of strategic conversations that come out of this time with the virus. That people are going to sit down and ask themselves the question, "What has Zoom taught us, and how has that changed us? And where will it take its place in the new church? What have we learned about people's choice of music? What have we learned about what's important to preach about in a time like this when life is so frantic?" We have got to bring some lessons, pull them out of this time, and sit in places where time is not a factor and ask ourself, "Did God mean for this to be a game changer of a period of time?" When Luther came up with the printed text, from the printing press, and established this great idea of justification by faith, the world went through a 500 year storm.

Gordon MacDonald:

When John Wesley discovered longitude and latitude and changed the ability of missionaries to go around the world and preach the gospel, we got the modern missionary movement. When we found the automobile, when we found the radio, television kind of, when we found the interstate highway system, it was a game changer. And something changed and we've never gone back. Now we need to ask the question, "What's the game changer in 2020, when we come out of this thing?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

What are the questions you would be asking?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I think the first question I'd want to know is, what does satisfying worship look like to God and to God's people? I think we've turned worship too much into an entertainment format in the last 25 years. One of my favorite little verses in the Bible is the comment that's made between the two disciples on the road to Aeneas when Jesus disappears and they've had communion with him. And one of them says to the other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us when he spoke to us?" What does a burning heart look like or sound like? When was the last time you went any place with a gathering of believers and you felt your heart burn because the song was sung in a certain way? And I'm not just vying for old hymns. Or the pastor unloaded a sermon that was so full of the spirit of God that you just sat there in awe taking in every word? Or a prayer. How many times does that happen in a lifetime these days?

Gordon MacDonald:

So I'd want to know, what has this period of time taught us about worship and our connection with God? What's it taught us about the practice of koinonia, fellowship, and community? I have a feeling that one is going to be a biggie.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How so?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, we've gone through now how many weeks without going into our sanctuaries?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, it's pushing 12, 15.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, a lot of us are discovering that we could go on as Christians without a sanctuary.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

Gordon MacDonald:

Okay. I hope that doesn't happen, but what if it did? What if the government says, "You can't open up these church doors fully until the end of the year?" What will it do to the habit patterns of people when it comes to going on Sunday to worship? Can we get more out of a small group of 10 or 12 people? And will there be a marriage of Zoom technology with people in local groups, sharing life together? Solve a lot of problems, including the babysitting problem.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Gordon MacDonald:

So that's something. This one may not be welcomed, but I think this period of time is going to change our theology. And just as has happened in Luther's day, in Saint Francis' day, in Patrick's Day, in Wesley's day, we're going to come out of this with a new way of saying the gospel. Billy Graham's way of saying the gospel doesn't work anymore. Bill Bright's doesn't work anymore. So get ready for something new.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How would you recalibrate that? I had the chance to talk to Tim Keller earlier this year and he said if he was starting over again, he would frame everything around identity, because he thinks identity is so important. Identity is our defining characteristic. How do you think we will rearticulate the gospel?

Gordon MacDonald:

Oh, whatever Tim Keller says is right. He's one of the smartest guys I know.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, my gosh. I'll tell ya. It's crazy. But no, he had the same point, and I think you're right, that sometimes the framework in which we cast vision... And Paul uses multiple metaphors for the gospel in the New Testament. I mean, we have, from one writer, numerous ways of phrasing it depending on his audience. So I'd love to pose that question. If you were starting your preaching over again, how would you articulate the gospel differently?

Gordon MacDonald:

I really wish I had time to think of a good answer to a good question. I was talking to a man yesterday, who is the president of Walk Thru the Bible. And, by the way, he is a friend of yours if I remember right. But anyway, we were talking about the value of the story of the gospel, and I, for one, have always been

a storyteller and think everybody else should be. That the gospel transits across cultural lines through story form. Keller's comment about identity is probably right. I'm not sure I know what he means totally by identity. For me, the key word would be community. That the Christian journey is not a journey alone. It's a journey in fellowship we lead. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

Gordon MacDonald:

Those last two or three words have been ignored by evangelicals for many, many years, because we've put our emphasis on the individual coming to Jesus. But if you read history, people came to Jesus in groups in those first years. A family came to Christ, a tribe or a village came to Christ. Read Vincent Donovan's book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, which is about 20 years old, but it's still a very informative book talking about that much of Christianity is lived in concert with other people and we've put too much of an individual emphasis upon it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would say that's very accurate. No, thank you for going there. And then number 15, retreat to the cross regularly. Express your appreciations. Name your sins. Pray for the world. Listen to God's call to do things that are bigger than you. I'd love for you to drill down on that. Go back to the cross. I feel like we've been bumping up against that throughout this conversation.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, one thing I thought you might say toward the beginning of our conversation... You didn't and that's not a problem. But I thought you might ask me, "What's the order of these 15?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that would have been a good question. A better interviewer would have gotten that. So you tell me, what is the order of the 15, Gordon? That's great.

Gordon MacDonald:

And the answer back is, purposely, there is no order. Totally random.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Trick question. There you go.

Gordon MacDonald:

If there's an exception, it comes in number 15, which I think eclipses all the other 14. It's my way of saying, "Ultimately this is all about Jesus." Got to find the core way I approach Jesus on a regular basis, and I left that to last. And I chose deliberately a few words that are not normally used just to bring some freshness to the concept like, "Retreat to the cross." Someone has to digest that for a moment to see what it means. A lot of people would say, "I've never thought about going into my devotional life as retreating to the cross. Isn't that awfully Catholic?" But I love the notion in my mind of approaching the cross on a regular basis. And I put it this way: I've been converted over and over and over again at the foot of the cross, renewed my conversion, if you please. Just like, I renew my marriage to Gail on a regular basis.

Gordon MacDonald:

So retreating to the cross is a way of saying, "I'm stepping out of the noise of culture and life and conflict and dissonance. I'm going to the quiet place where the savior will meet me." And then, "Express your appreciations." I could have said something like, "Say more thank yous." But I see in the New Testament, particularly from Paul on a number of occasions, his emphasis upon thanksgiving. You have this interesting verse in Colossians chapter two, "As you've received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him as you have been taught, that you might be rooted, grounded, structured, and overflowing with thanksgiving." I really blew the verse. I usually have it memorized. Why did he tack on that fourth one? The first three make a beautiful, sweetest, three-point sermon: rooted, built up, structured in the faith. I can understand that.

Gordon MacDonald:

Then he goes, "overflowing with thanksgiving." And I can only think he's thinking about the metaphor that the river in Colossae probably overflowed every spring. So he's got that word picture as something overflowing. And he then applies the word picture to being thankful: overflow in thanksgiving. Thank people far more than they deserve. And I can only then say, "I bet that the Paul is writing that because they weren't very thankful people." Maybe they were greedy people. They were dishonest people. But something was there that compels Paul to say four or five times in the Book of Colossians, "Be thankful, be thankful, be thankful," be an important part of his Christian life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Name your sins. Name your sins. I want you to go there.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, that's repentance, isn't it? Sin is a condition of the heart, the Bible person believes, but it's also a word we use to describe hacks that are going on all the time. And my understanding of the New Testament is, those sins need to be named. When the Holy Spirit brings conviction, we can't bat it around and try to play it down so it isn't real anymore. We need to say it. So name your sins at the cross. Apparently Jesus has promised to bring forgiveness and mercy to confessed sins.

Gordon MacDonald:

Pray for the world. Gargantuan idea. Richard John Neuhaus once described standing at the door of the pope's private chapel in Rome. He was going to be a guest at the mass that morning. And the door opened, and he said, "I looked in and there was the Pope at the altar with his crosier pressed across his cheek. And he was fervent and praying." And Neuhaus said to himself, "Interesting, we Protestants give our pastors offices to work at. The Catholic Church gives the pope a chapel." And I think about that, the pope was in the chapel. And when Neuhaus said, "What's he doing?" They said, "He's praying for the world."

Gordon MacDonald:

I haven't done much of that, but the world needs praying for. And then, things that are bigger than me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, what is bigger than you at 80?

Gordon MacDonald:

Eternity. Heaven. It better be part of my time at the cross to somehow express that I am looking forward to heaven. I'm imagining what heaven might be. I think it's going to have a lot of beauty. I think it's going to be a lot of artistic activity there. I think the community, the fellowship is going to be unbelievable and we'll be able to sit and linger and talk like you and I have talked, endlessly and not feel any fatigue. And we will go away with our minds blown by what we created in the conversation. That's bigger than me. And so I think about those things.

Gordon MacDonald:

Sinek, in this book, ends in a game. Talks about the infinite organization and the infinite leader. And what he's simply saying is, "You don't build a good organization if it's not bigger than you are." And you see that, CEOs and presidents and athletes who can't think beyond themselves. So that's why that's there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Gordon, this has been so rich. Thank you.

Gordon MacDonald:

I've loved it. You've given me a chance to trace all my own thoughts about some of this stuff. And there's been a few places where I've said to myself, "That's crazy."

Carey Nieuwhof:

What do you think is crazy?

Gordon MacDonald:

I don't know now, but I'll write you and let you know.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Let me know. I mean, after two and a half hours, is there anything else you would want to share? It's been so rich.

Gordon MacDonald:

No, I think my mind is reaching the empty part of the tank.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, it's been rich to the end. Gordon, just thank you so much for being with us today. You are a gift to me. You are a gift to just so many leaders and I'm so grateful for this huge investment of time, wisdom, energy, prayer, insight. And I'm so grateful that God has preserved you and Gail into these moments for all of us.

Gordon MacDonald:

And I can't let you say those things without turning it around and saying you have been a wonderful gift to a lot of thousands and thousands and thousands of people. So thank you for what you do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ah, Gordon, thank you.

Gordon MacDonald:

People will be profiting because of it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Every once in a while you feel like you have done an episode where you can just hang things up and go, "Okay, I think I did what I was called to do." And this feels like one of those episodes. Hey, we're going to continue this podcast. But like, if this was it, wow, what a legacy. Gordon, thank you. I know that won't be our last conversation and I'm so grateful. And man, our world needs more voices like Gordon's, does it not? And actually in the What I'm Thinking About segment at the end, I'm going to talk about some of the principles. Like if you notice how many great leaders have passed away, people that we admire and respect. Everyone from J.I. Packer to Eugene Peterson, to Ravi Zacharias, to Dallas Willard, to others, it's like, who's going to replace them? So I have some thoughts on that, particularly for young leaders, what are the qualities and characteristics that make people in that category, including Gordon MacDonald, so valued.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I'll be sharing that in a moment. In the meantime, if you want transcripts, you can go to [careynieuwhof.com/episode366](http://careynieuwhof.com/episode366). Yes, we did transcribe all two and a half hours of the episode. I like to read that stuff. And we have show notes with some quotes, too. And I kind of joked earlier that, "Hey, nobody looks at the show notes." Well, that's changed. Lots of you are looking at the show notes now, and of course that's all available free. We have a new episode coming up next time. And I'll tell ya, I love being able to do this with you, but on the next episode, here's who we've got. We've got Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, and we are going to talk about mergers and multi-site and all of that. And why church attendance might be a little bit lower post COVID. Here's an excerpt.

Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird:

And then the time where the president of the congregation stood up to Pastor Mark Jobe and said, "Now at this point in the ceremony, I'm supposed to give you the keys of the building, but I'm not going to do that." Dead silence. Uh-oh, is there a big surprise coming? He reaches in a paper bag and he pulls up a little plaque. And he said, "You know, about 20 years ago, when it was very popular for everybody to develop a mission statement, we developed a mission statement. And our says..." And he read it and it's, in essence, love God, love your neighbor. And it's very similar to New Life's mission statement. "So I'm not giving you the keys without giving you the mission statement. And you take this mission and agree to do it for a new generation. And we'll give you the keys, our support, our prayers, and everything else." Not a dry eye in the place. And that's the best of what a merger can be.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, that's coming up next time on the podcast. We also have ahead of us, for those of you wherever you're listening, if you subscribe, you're going to hear from Chris Hogan. You'll hear from Lecrae, Brad Lomenick, Harris III, Anne Graham Lotz, Lysa TerKeurst. Beth Moore is coming on the podcast, which I'm really excited about. Scott Sauls and Sarah Anderson. Angela Santomero, who created Blue's Clues, among other things. And, well, a lot of others. So super excited for that. We've got a great fall lined up.

It's just about time for What I'm Thinking About. And this is brought to you by Pro Media Fire. Book your free digital strategy session at [promediafire.com/churchgrowth](http://promediafire.com/churchgrowth). And by Red Letter Challenge. Get 10 to 40% off a done for you, turn-key, 40-day study that dives into the words of Jesus at [redletterchallenge.com/carey](http://redletterchallenge.com/carey). So here's What I'm Thinking About.

Carey Nieuwhof:

When Eugene Peterson died, I was really rocked. I had an interview with him. We'll link to that in the show notes as well. It was short, but it was powerful. And he really spoke into my life and I thought, "Wow, they just don't make them like that anymore." And I got thinking about, what are the qualities and characteristics of people like Gordon or people like Eugene Peterson, that they can live a legacy, make some mistakes along the way, and yet have so much wisdom to offer. And we live in what feels like a really different era. So for a voice, I think, to endure, to have real significant, it needs depth, not just breadth. And we live mostly in an age of breadth where everybody is trying to find followers and get a bigger platform. A lot of leaders that you admire and that I admire, I think they live in the depths and that's where their legacy comes from. So a few things to think about if you're forming the kind of life or character that will produce an outcome like a Gordon MacDonald.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Principle one, your input should always exceed your output. For most of Gordon's life, you had to go to a publisher, have a major outlet where you published your material. And now you have the internet, you have your phone, so you can jump on Reels or TikTok or Instagram or blog like I do or podcast. It's pretty easy to do output these days. And I have to really make sure that my input sources are strong. And that includes spiritual, but also intellectual. Be a reader, be a listener, be a cross disciplinary learner, because in the financial realm, when your output exceeds your input, you go bankrupt. And I think intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, it's kind of the same. And a lot of people are living on output but not on input. So ask yourself, "What are my inputs spiritually, emotionally, intellectually?" And try to make sure that they outpace your outputs.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. Principle number two, your private walk needs to be far deeper than your public talk. Again, super easy. I follow people on Instagram, they're always talking. I do a lot of talking. But what's your private walk like? And when there's a gap between your private walk and your public talk, you need to address that. I look at Jesus, for example. He had no public life for 30 years. He simply prepared for three decades, did his ministry for three years, and we change the world. That's a 10 to one ratio of preparation over accomplishment. If you want your public talk to truly resonate, deepen your private walk. So I think that's important.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Number three, make the work the reward. We live in a world where everyone wants instant gratification, instant results, and we're just motivated by reward. Well, I think you need to have a work that outpaces the reward. To many leaders, the fame, the sale of a startup to whatever, or 70 bajillion downloads on your podcast, whatever, people want to be famous. And you may find your fame for a few minutes here or there, but for any legacy that lasts, just know this: the work has to be the reward. So ask yourself this question, okay, "What happens if I get a million downloads? What happens if my bank account is bigger than I ever thought it would be? Would you continue the work?" And if the

answer is yes, then the work is probably your reward, because you're going to do it whether your bank account is small or whether you have 10 downloads. You're like, "No, this is really meaningful work."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I think that's something for me that has to motivate me. Yeah, we've got record downloads on the podcast and everything, but I actually really enjoy the work and I want to do it. And as long as it serves the audience and honors God, I want to keep doing it. So make the work the reward. We could go way down the rabbit hole on that one. And again, if the success doesn't come, just know this: that you're already got your reward because you're doing the work, right? You're doing work that matters. That matters.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How about number four? Don't offer your opinion on everything. Now, sometimes people will say, "Well, I got to comment on this, and I got to comment on that. And I got a comment on this." In my interview with Eugene Peterson a few years ago, he said, "I don't read the newspaper much. I can't find much about God and Jesus in them." I thought that was really interesting. And what he was doing was trying to figure out what the scripture would speak into the violence in the 1960s and the race riots and the tension. And he said one of the most meaningful thing, a lot of people in his congregation were upset about the race riots in Baltimore in 1968. And Eugene Peterson said this. He said, "During the 1968 race riots in Baltimore, people were worried about what was happening in the city. I was worried about what was happening in people." I thought, "Bingo, bingo, that makes sense."

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, giants will speak out on major issues. You can think about Bonhoeffer in the second world war or Christine Caine or others on human trafficking. But mostly they're not reacting. They're actually taking a stand and following in different tracks. So you don't have to express an opinion on everything. Rather spend more time forming an opinion that actually makes sense.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And to that end, next idea is to focus on the timeless, not the timely. A timely word is almost always a timeless word. So if you can anchor your thinking, your belief, your spirituality, to things that are deeply eternal, they're going to outlive you. C.S. Lewis is being read 60 years after he died, because he speaks into the human condition and eternity in a way that resonates well into a world he never lived in. So a word that makes the best sense of the times always roots itself in what's timeless. So focus on that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You've heard me say this before. I say it a lot, but just work twice as hard on your character as you do on your competency. Your character ultimately is the lid on your career. Competency gets you in the room, but character keeps you in the room. And every once in a while, you may have some things you're not particularly proud of and that's okay. Recover, repent, redo. In that first interview with Gordon MacDonald, I talked about recovery from failure. How do you do that? He's got some of the best stuff I've ever read on that subject in his book, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. And we cover some of that in the first interview, so I'll link to that.

Carey Nieuwhof:



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And then finally, just choose purpose over platform. I hear from young leaders all the time who are like, "I want to build a platform. I want to build a platform." Yeah, that's great. How about just finding a great purpose and then maybe that'll get you noticed, maybe not. Don't worry. Just find a really good purpose, and I think you'll be a lot better off.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So those are some thoughts, man. I bet you we're pushing the three hour mark at this point. Yeah. Okay, Joe Rogan, we're coming for you. Anyway. Hey, thanks so much for listening, guys. We're back. We're going to do this with perhaps a shorter episode next time, but I hope you have found this one as rich as I have. It's a privilege to have these conversations. It's a privilege to be able to learn from people like Gordon MacDonald, and I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth to help you lead like never before.

PART 5 OF 5 ENDS [02:44:26]