

Don Green Talks with John MacArthur

Questions & Answers

By Pastor John MacArthur

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Pastor Don Green. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he said, "God is my witness how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." There is something about the heart of a minister of the Gospel that carries affection toward people in his ministry. Our speaker this evening is here at Truth Community Church for the second time in six months. It is a reflection of his affection for Truth Community Church and you can listen in as I say just a word to this friend of ours. John, we return the affection. You are a friend to us and we want you to know that Truth Community Church is a friend to you as well. Our pulpit is always open to you 24/7, 365 days a year without advance notice. We have you in our hearts and, John, as I said to you just a few moments ago I want to say in the presence of many witnesses, that whatever humanly speaking, whatever happens through my ministry is just derivative of what I have learned from you, from your pulpit, from your books, from your personal example and from our own relationship. It is a wonderful privilege for us to welcome our friend, John MacArthur to the platform. Please welcome him.

So tell us how you're doing. That's a broad question.

John MacArthur. Well, I haven't had an MRI lately but superficial information is good. I had a physical recently and the doctor said, "Come back in a year." That's pretty good, I guess.

Don. Good.

John. If I don't lose my mind.

Don. You're coming up on your fiftieth anniversary of ministry at Grace Community Church in February. The time has gone by quickly.

John. It's pretty shocking to be marrying the grandchildren of the people that called me to the church. I mean, the third-generation, we are even starting to see the fourth generation.

Don. That's amazing.

John. That's 50 years at Grace Church and my dear wife has said 50 years of enduring my nonstop preaching at home and at church.

Don. And the world is better for that and the church is better as a result of your ministry. Our church, I like to tell people, is a relational church in addition to being centered around the pulpit and so I'd like to share a couple of things relationally from your life that a lot of people may not know and what many people do not know is that you had an aborted career as a traffic cop and I was wondering if you might be willing to tell people about that.

John. Well, I had, I guess, latent leadership qualities when I was even a little kid and I think I was eight or nine years old when I decided to step into a new section and stop the traffic. I had seen the policeman do it and it lookrf like, you know, a good way to exercise your leadership ability, so I stepped into the intersection and I was directing the traffic and I put my hand up as a car drove up and my dad was in that car. I mean, I got a serious whipping.

Don. Dad wasn't as excited about your police career.

John. No, no, no, he didn't think that was the choice career for me. You know, my dad had guilt feelings into his later years because he beat me so many times when I deserved it. He broke so many coat hangers and things on me as a kid and that was just one of those moments. I'm deeply indebted to him. I loved him to death, but he loved me enough to discipline me.

Don. And that's true, the Scripture talks about that, the one who withholds the rod hates his son.

John. He did not spare the rod.

Don. He loved you.

John. He did, a lot, it sounds like. He kept telling me that while he was whipping me.

Don. Now, John, that leads so naturally into one of the things that I wanted to say to you. Your dad, Jack MacArthur, I have my own memories of him of a couple of conversations with him that I cherish, but your dad was a pastor and a preacher; your grandfather, Harry MacArthur, was a man of the word, a preacher of the word; Harry's wife, Olivia, her father and her grandfather were pastors. You are the fifth in a line of pastors which is a pretty remarkable legacy to have.

John. Yeah, it is and from all that we can tell going all the way back, they were really faithful preachers of the Gospel, men of God. They had great respect from their congregations, great love. My grandfather was really deeply loved by everyone who knew him. He was a very sweet and gracious man and a very faithful man. One of the treasures that I have is his Bible with all his sermon notes in it that he wrote, and I have

his preaching notebook, and I have a whole notebook full of his sermons. He wrote his sermons on the same kind of paper that I write mine on; I think it's genetic, it just gets passed down.

Don. Kind of half-sheet.

John. Yeah.

Don. But you still handwrite your notes to this day, don't you?

John. I do. You remember when the MacArthur Study Bible came out, the LA Times said, "Man rights Study Bible by hand," like what kind of dinosaur does anything by hand in the computer age. But yeah, I still write. I do all my own sermons, research, and I write everything into kind of a first draft and then transfer them into notes.

Don. Now I wanted to build on this. You're actually named after...

John. My father.

Don. Your father on your first name and your middle name is after your paternal grandmother, Olivia Fullerton. John Fullerton MacArthur. And as I was thinking about that today, anticipating this time, there is a great weight of history given the Fullerton legacy of preaching, the MacArthur legacy of preaching, and when you do the math on it, for 150 years to this day there has been an unbroken line of your family that has been pastoring and preaching Scripture. Your thoughts about that.

John. Well, at least that long. Thomas Fullerton, my grandmother's father, was pastor of St. James Kirk which was the large Presbyterian Church in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. He was also a chaplain in the Boer war which meant that he fought with the Canadian troops in South Africa, and he was a friend of the family that wrote "Anne of Green Gables," that kind of thing.

Don. Lucy Maud Montgomery.

John. Yeah, Lucy Maud Montgomery. That goes back, and then James Stewart, behind him was a Scottish Presbyterian preacher. So yeah, our family has been carrying on the baton for a long time.

Don. In fact, John, if the Lord carries, your books, your audio will be listened to and read for another century if you think about it, and this is a conservative estimate, 250 years of family ministry, that's a quarter of a millennium that will be a reflection of the work of you and your family in ministry. Give us some perspective on that.

John. I never thought of that before. Only you would come up with that. You know, the thing that I marvel about is I can't find any place in the five generations going back where any of those men did anything that dishonored the Lord. That's the most remarkable thing

of all, that the Lord sustained us all with grace, including me, and I don't know if my predecessors were as rambunctious as I was as a kid, but yeah, the history is not only of faithful preaching but of, I guess you could say it, an unblemished ministry. There is nothing that ever came up that discredited these men. They served the Lord until the end of their lives. My grandfather had prepared a sermon and he had cancer and he had gone back to the Mayo Clinic and came back and he wasn't going to live, and he had prepared a sermon and the last thing I remember is my father telling me that his father said to him was, "I just wish I could preach one more time," because he had this sermon in his heart. So my dad took his notes, printed them up and passed it out at his funeral and it was a sermon on heaven, so he actually wound up preaching on heaven from heaven. But that's being true to the very very very end, he even prepared a sermon for his own funeral and my dad the same way, he was still teaching the Bible at 91 when he went to heaven.

Don. The interlocking of generations going back and going forward, it seems to me it's almost a microcosm. Let me put it this way, two things: one is that the stature of your ministry, and I'm not being flattering in saying that, it's just a reality, the stature of your ministry is actually a part of an even bigger story of your family, and your family is simply a reflection of a greater outworking of the eternal plan of God to bring salvation to those who believe in Christ.

John. Yeah, I mean, we're all chosen before the foundation of the world, we're all called with an irresistible call and the Lord just had a path that came down to me and I don't want to put pressure on my two sons, neither of whom felt called into ministry, but have poured their life into serving the Lord in our church, and as you know, they have been board members of Grace To You and faithful to their dad and mom and to honor the Lord in the world that they are in which is the business world, I told them either you preach or you pay the preacher. You know, either you preach or you earn money to support the church and they have been great. I think early on in their lives they struggled with the fact that they weren't preachers but I was kind of a hard model to follow because it was so intense and I don't think either Matt or Mark could see themselves doing what I was doing but because by the time they reached the age where they understood it, I had grown into it from a very small beginning and it sort of came in little increments, but when they looked at it, it just seemed so far beyond that they just poured their life into being a support.

Don. Yeah, there is a sense in which your life in ministry kind of took all the oxygen out of the room.

John. Yeah, I think there's some truth there and I never wanted to put pressure on them, I wanted them to do what the Lord, mostly I wanted them to love him and serve him and they have done that.

Don. Let's go from chronology to geography, if we can. Looking back over your life ministry, you circled the countries in the Pacific Rim in 1988, you spent a lot of time in the lands of Russia in the 90s after the Berlin Wall fell, you've been on every continent in the world in ministry except Antarctica? Have you been to Antarctica?

John. I have not. I don't think there's a big work among penguins.

Don. Well, if there was, they would want you to do it, I know that. From your perspective of 60 years of ministry, from all of the opportunities that you've had to preach to the people of God and to evangelize all around the world, give us some perspective, you can take this where you want, on the global body of Christ, on the power of Christ to save men from every tongue, tribe and nation. Just give us some reflection from your perspective as an elder statesman in the church.

John. Well, I think we all know that life comes really fast and I don't really see what's happening when it's happening. It takes somebody like you to make me look back in retrospect, but I would say there was a rather monumental decision that somehow the Lord enabled me to make when I was very young and I don't know why I made this decision, and that was that when I came out of seminary, I decided that I was going to preach the Bible verse by verse, in-depth, slowly and mine out the theology because this was something that I didn't see happening. My dad did that toward the end of his ministry, in the early years he was more of an evangelist but toward the end he went through the book of Acts, the Gospel of John, the book of Romans, but there wasn't really any model for an in-depth theological exposition unless maybe it was David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, but he was in the text and then he was everywhere like Barnhouse was. But I just decided, my passion from the time I was a kid was to understand what the Bible meant by what it said. It wasn't so much the preaching, I wanted to know what this means by what it says. My heritage was to have absolute unwavering confidence in the word of God, high-high view of Scripture. It was everything to me, absolutely everything to me, and I needed to cut it straight, I needed to get right.

So when I went to seminary, it wasn't with a view of ministry, it was a view of getting the tools to rightly divide the word of God and then I decided that I would explain the Bible with the Bible. If you've heard me preach, now that I've said that you understand that. I don't do a lot of current events. I don't talk about what's going on in the culture. I don't preach off the headlines in the newspaper. I try to explain the Bible with the Bible because the Bible is its own best interpreter because it has one Author, it's what's called *Analogia Scripturae* in Latin, the Scripture is analogous to itself because it has a single Author. So the Bible is its own best interpreter and very young in my ministry I said I'm going to explain the Bible with the Bible and I'm going to stay out of the headlines, I'm going to stay out of the culture, I'm going to explain the Bible the way the Bible is written from the Bible which keeps it in its context, and little did I know at that time that the effect of that has been that the sermons I preached over these last 50 years don't have any cultural bounds on them. They are not dated. They are not tied to any current events, essentially they're not tied to anything happening in the culture. I'm not listening to the pundits. I'm not reading the newspapers. I'm explaining the Bible with the Bible and that's why it always amazes me, you know this for your years at Grace To You, I mean, there's what, 400,000 Vietnamese that listen to me every day because four people are translating everything I preach into Vietnamese and they are putting these little chips in little

recorders and here they are in Vietnam hearing what I preached in Southern California at Grace Community Church and it transcends all boundaries.

So that was a decision that was, I don't know that I ever ever, I had no idea where that would go, I just thought that was right to let the word of God speak and to make sure that I didn't timestamp it or I didn't bind it into any kind of current cultural limitations. The second thing was that once I began to preach expositionally, people would say, "We haven't heard this kind of an exposition. We haven't heard this," and they started sending tapes and those tapes started going around the world, and so the reason I started traveling was people around the world asked me to come and they would say, "Could you come and do a conference?" That's how it started wherever it was from South Africa to Asia and wherever, Russia or anywhere, they would say, "Could you come and do a conference and preach the word of God like that?" And I would do that and I would do it again, and I was all over the place doing that and they would come back and say, "Now look, we want to learn how to do that. Can you come and teach us or can you come and we'll have a pastor's conference and we'll teach pastors how to do this?" Then the next wave was, "Okay, I can't be going everywhere all the time so can you send some guys from your church, some of your pastors including people like you, to come to our country and train pastors?" And then it turned into, "Can we start a school here?" And that's why there are about 35 pastoral training centers now around the world all manned by graduates of Master's Seminary teaching the same thing there that we taught them at the Master's Seminary. So the only reason I went around the world was I didn't have an agenda, I went because they invited me to come and to teach the word of God in a way that they wanted to learn how to do it, so we were able to kind of spread exposition around the globe. In those days, you had to go to do that. Now our guys are there and they are located all over the planet and they've learned the language and these schools are all in the native language, and every single one of them is at the invitation of the leaders of the local churches in those countries.

Don. Great encouragement to you, no doubt, to see that exponential multiplication of the ministry philosophy that's guided you from the start.

John. Yeah, and a typical illustration comes to mind. We had a guy who came to our seminary from Madagascar off the coast of Africa, the native language and then French would be the business language. We have now a student from Madagascar, this guy came out of nowhere with his wife and three kids, and that's not easy to come from Madagascar to Southern California. What does he want? He wants to learn to handle the word of God; he wants to go back to the church that he was in and they want him to be the pastor and he wants to start a training center. So he comes, four years later he's back and he has taken two graduates and their families and now there are three families back in Madagascar running a pastoral training center. That's a model for what happens. The same thing has happened in Lebanon, now we have opened a pastoral training center in the Arabic language in Lebanon. That just keeps happening. There are probably 50 different cities now around the world that have asked us to come so we're trying to pump out enough graduates to meet that need in the future. And again, if you handle the word correctly and you let the Bible speak, it's timeless and it's not bound by any culture and

that's what's been so.... and that's why people around the world download sermons because in any culture the word of God is the word of God.

Don. One final thing for me that I want to give you an opportunity to just say whatever is on your mind. Your longevity in ministry has straddled different generations of preachers and in the past, you've fought battles alongside men like James Montgomery Boice, R. C. Sproul for the inerrancy of Scripture, on Roman Catholicism, and these guys, these men I should say, are now in heaven, they were men of granite. They did not move. Today, it seems to me like the environment is a little bit different and I'll tell you what I'm thinking about when I say that. On September 4th you published an article that appeared on the Social Justice website titled "No Division in the Body," and you were addressing without naming names, the way that men that you've served alongside in this generation seem to be going after a different agenda and you said a line that was very poignant to me where you said, "I thought we were together for the Gospel," indicating, "Where did you guys go?" And it seems like there is a difference for some on some issues anyway, compared to the shoulder-to-shoulder unwavering support that you had from men like Boice and R. C. Sproul. Give us some perspective on that. It seems like these are treacherous times that we are in the midst of and just point us in the right direction as we look at what's happening around us.

John. The original issue with Jim Boice was the inerrancy issue. He set up that Inerrancy Congress that ran for 10 years, but there was another issue with Jim Boice that was deeply deeply concerning to him and that was the Lordship issue, and most people don't know, they don't associate him with that but he wrote a book on discipleship that just nailed the issue of the Lordship of Christ...

Don. He wrote a forward for "The Gospel According to Jesus."

John. ...and then that's why he wrote the forward for "The Gospel According to Jesus," and he came to Grace Church and he preached at Grace Church. In fact, my dad was there and he was so moved by that that he put a picture of Boice in his office on his desk so that he would remember to pray for him. But Boice was a champion for inerrancy and a champion for the Lordship of Christ, something that we assume is very basic but was under attack.

Sproul equally on those two doctrines, but Sproul, I mean, I was kind of an outsider because he was a Presbyterian and I was not and he was, you know, basically nurtured in the Reformed creedal kind of environment and I was just a student of the Bible. But he had the heart of a warrior like Boice did and you couldn't move him. He had a huge huge heart of love and compassion. Sometimes you don't see that in strong strong men but I remember when he called me one day and he said, "I want to debate you on infant baptism," and I said, "R. C., you've got to be crazy. You don't have a prayer in that debate. There's not even one Bible verse you can lean on." And it was just his wonderful nature, he said, "No, I think it will really help people if we discuss it and I'm ready to do that." And he did that at a Ligonier conference and it's been a famous thing and that was the openness of his heart. But he used to call me Boris, that was his nickname because

one time Boris Yeltsin, the Russian premier stood up on a tank and stopped the troops and he said, "That's MacArthur, he stands on the tank and stops whatever's coming. He stops the enemy, I want him in my foxhole," he would always say. Interestingly enough, last week I received a handwritten sweet note from Vesta, R. C.'s wife, thanking me on his behalf for the stand I took on social justice and telling me she was sad that he wasn't here to stand alongside of me.

There are warriors and I felt like the last man standing, you know, because all these guys are going and we're glad for young men like you and others that the Lord is raising up, but this is a generation that has decided to chase the culture and I'll tell you what happens: you start to chase the culture and you say, "Well, they don't like the old church music, they don't like exposition of the Scripture, they don't like serious worship, so we're going to adjust the style." And we've all seen that, they adjusted the style to reach the culture, and I've been saying going back to "Ashamed of the Gospel," they're not going to be content with you adjusting the style. Do you understand what you're doing? That is the slippery slope. That's the downgrade controversy of Spurgeon, once you adjust the style, they've got you. The next thing they're going to do is make you adjust the message. So the social justice issue is a cultural message they are forcing on the church because the church has already said it's going to chase the world.

Just as a comment on that, if there is one word that doesn't need an adjective it's "justice." That doesn't need an adjective. Justice is justice. So what they are talking about is not justice, they're talking about social issues but to try to make that part of the Gospel and if you don't make it part of the Gospel they're not going to accept you, this is a trap and they are all caught in the trap and they are not done. They are allowing the Gospel if you add this, but pretty soon they won't want the Gospel and they'll go exactly the way all the liberal churches went: first they wanted to adjust the style, then they wanted to accommodate the culture and keep the Gospel, and eventually the culture wouldn't let them even keep the Gospel and the Gospel was gone.

Don. The Gospel gets in the way of those agendas. That's the problem for them.

John. If you're going to take your cues from the world, they hate the Gospel. They hate it and they're going to let you give them all the ground you want to give them and pretty soon you're going to wake up like the frog in the kettle and you've been fried.

Don. We're grateful, John, to be able to be here in a time when your presence in the broader body of Christ is still felt, it's still a living voice to those to the truth of Scripture, to the truth of Christ, the truth of the Gospel, and in a secondary horizontal sense, to have your voice joining with Boice and Sproul and other guys like that. It's a privilege to have you in our church for the second time in six months.

John. Well, thank you and, you know, it just woes me if I preach not the Gospel and I don't understand how anybody can do any other than preach the truth. Whatever the climate, whatever the tolerances or intolerances are, I can honestly say I have never been shot at more than I'm being shot at now with false accusations, things that are not at all

true, and the only thing that provides some measure of defense is that I'm so old and there is a track record of preaching the word of God and ministry that sort of stands in the way of making all the accusations credible. But as I told you earlier, Don, I worry about young pastors who go out and try to take a stand, people take shots at them, they don't have any history to convince people that they are trustworthy. It's not going to be easy for them in the future.

Don. John, I know that people want to hear you preach and I need to get out of the way of that. Just you have the floor. Final thoughts before you come to our pulpit.

John. Well, thank you for your faithfulness. I thank the Lord that he picked you up out of the lawyer world and deposited you at Grace Community Church. I was telling Don earlier...

Don. I am wondrously saved, to be a former attorney.

John. Yeah. But I told Don earlier, there are so many people at Grace Church that love him because he shepherded people and I hear from them all the time. When you think of Grace Church, you probably think of a big place where I preach but Grace Church, my role is, of course, to do the preaching and provide some leadership but it's an amazing amazing place because of the real life-on-life shepherding that goes on, and once you shepherd somebody, once you nurture somebody through life in a spiritual way, you have a friend for life and so I bring you greetings from your friends.

Don. And take my greetings back to them.

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