

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Way of the Wilderness

Dr. Mark Batterson

### **Intro:**

Welcome to the National Community Church podcast. We're thrilled to be able to share this weekend message with you from Dr. Mark Batterson, our lead pastor. If you'd like to subscribe, find us on iTunes or go to [theaterchurch.com](http://theaterchurch.com).

### **Pastor Mark:**

Welcome to National Community Church, all seven campuses. A few minutes ago, we sang a song at all of our campuses, 'The Hope of Glory'. It's a song written by NCC worship, we'll record that song as a part of our live album on Ash Wednesday but here's the back-story. The first time I heard that song, a little line of lyrics gotten my spirit "walking in the Jesus way". And so I caught pastor Chris after the service said, "Hey, do we have a title for our album?" We did not and so long story short, the name of the album that will record on Wednesday is 'The Jesus Way' that's the name of the series that we kick off this weekend. Over the next eight weeks, we'll talk about the way of the wilderness, the way of the vine, way the towel, the way of the child, the way of the sparrow, the way of the table, the way of the garden and on Easter, the way the tomb.

Before start painting that picture let me put a frame around this series. On the occasion of our 15th anniversary Lora and I celebrated with a trip to Rome. We hit all of the travel book destinations the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel, Spanish Steps, tossed a coin in the Trevi Fountain, and all of them were amazing but my favorite spot, the most memorable for me, was a little church off the beaten path if it had not been right around the corner from our hotel would have never found it. The church of San Clemente was named after Pope Clement I, ranks right up there with Polycarp and Ignatius as an apostolic father, served as the Bishop of Rome 88 to 99 AD according to tradition, consecrated by Peter himself eventually martyred for his faith. Anchors were tied around his ankles, and he was thrown into the Black Sea.

Lora and I explored every nook and cranny of that 12th century church, amazing altars, frescoes, statues, and then we discovered that for five extra euro's, you could take an underground tour. The Romans had a habit of building things on top of things. So that 12th century church was built on top of the fourth century church which was built on top of ancient catacombs. Walking down those stairs, was like walking back 2000 years in time. It got dark, it got dank. And when you're wandering through claustrophobic, catacombs, your mind meanders a little bit, lots of thoughts fire across your synapses in a moment like that in a place like that. We were standing on sacred ground, a place where our spiritual ancestors risked their lives to record a live album. It's in a place like that where paradigm shifts happen.

The comfort you enjoy as a Western Christian living in the 21st century make you a little uncomfortable. The first world problems you complain about little embarrassing and the sacrifices you made for the cause of Christ might not even qualify under a second century definition. Over the last 20 centuries, Christianity has come out of the catacombs we have built churches and cathedrals with all of the bells and steeples, theologians have given us creeds and canons, clergy have given us rites and rituals. We have added pews and pulpits and pipe organs. Listen, we have 501c3 status. Nothing wrong with any of those things but we have a tendency to do what the Romans did we have a habit of building things on top of things. And if you aren't careful, you end up with a version of Christianity that functions like a facade that feels like a fake Rolex that looks like cubic zirconia. It's not quite the genuine article; you end up with layers of liturgy, layers of tradition, layers of institution that bury what lie beneath. Over the next eight weeks, we descend 2000 stairs, we take an underground tour, we rediscover the Jesus way. We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know that place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding". An Anglican Bishop by the name of Mark Dyer once observed that every 500 years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. He cites the Protestant Reformation as Exhibit A; the Catholic Church was selling indulgences. I mean, that is as far as you can get from the Gospel. A parish priest named Martin Luther called the Catholic Church on the carpet nailed 95 theses to the doors of the castle church on October 31, 1517. If my math is right, it's about time for another rummage sale. In 2008, I visited the Catholic Church actually there on Reformation Day. I knew next to nothing about Martin Luther so I thought I'd better read a biography on the ride over, pretty intense. I mean, Luther prayed seven times a day in keeping with monastic practice, he often would fast three days at a time. And sometimes he would confess for six hours at a shot and I found that incredibly convicting because I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent six minutes in confession. Luther said, If ever a monk got to heaven by as monkery, it is I. Then in the fall of 1515, Luther is reading through the book of Romans, he makes it 17 verses before having a revelation that turns into this reformation six words changed everything, "The just shall live by faith". Luther said, this passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven.

The Protestant Reformation was a rediscovery of five solas...

- Sola Fide by faith alone
- Sola Gratia by grace alone
- Sola Scriptura by scripture alone
- Solus Christus by Christ alone and
- Soli Deo Gloria to the glory of God alone

You want a fun fact? George Frederick Handel signed his compositions SDG shorthand for Soli Deo Gloria. Johann Sebastian Bach did the same. Not sure who did it first, both of them were born less than a month apart in 1665.

Now, I am too old to get a tattoo and it not seem like a midlife crisis. I'm not gonna lie there's a part of me that wants an SDG somewhere on this composition. But I digress. We have a core conviction. There are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet. We believe that as it relates to methodology. That said revivals and reformation are not the result of discovering something new. I think those are called cults. So how do you experience a revival, a reformation? Listen, it's by discovering something that has been buried by time and tradition. Over the next eight weeks, we rummage sale. We clean out the closet, clean out the attic, we go back to basics. We rediscover Jesus in all of his divinity, in all of his humanity, Son of God and Son of man. Yes, we will look at what Jesus said, what Jesus did, but we will focus on how he did what he did, why he did what he did, and who he did it for because that is the Jesus way.

I want to pick up where we left off last week in Exodus 33. Moses pitches a tent outside the camp. He calls it the Tent of Meeting. This is when and where and how Moses would seek God with consistency and intentionality and priority. This is where the Spirit of God could speak to him were promptings and stirrings and counseling and convicting and quickening would happen. Moses in Exodus 33 prays this prayer. "If I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways. Show me your what? Your ways. The Psalmist puts this on repeat, "show me your ways, O Lord." Prophet Isaiah, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying this is the way walk in it."

Now listen, we spend most of our time trying to discern the will of God. The ancients spend most of their time trying to discern the ways of God. These are not the same thing but its both and. Listen to me you have to do God's will, God's way. It's got to be on his terms, on his turf, on his timeline. So much for the next eight weeks will be focused on rediscovering the way of Jesus.

Now let me back up just a little bit. At a burning bush on the backside of the desert God appears and says, reveals himself to Moses as 'I Am'. And if you aren't careful, you read right past this. But this would be like me introducing myself 'my name is'... And just kind of leaving it hanging out there. My name is what? My name is who? This is a hanging chad. This is a dangling participle. This is an incomplete sentence, an unanswered question and unresolved chord until we get to John's gospel and Jesus finally fills in the blank with seven I Am statements. He says, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the vine. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. And finally, I am the way, the way, the truth and the life. If you're taking notes, you can jot this down the Jesus way plus the Jesus truth equals the Jesus life.

Eugene Peterson said it this way, "The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life." And then he adds a little editorial he says, Jesus is the truth gets far more attention than Jesus is the way. Jesus is the way it's the most frequently evaded metaphor among Christians with whom I have worked for 50 years as a North American pastor. I'm just going to say it like I see it. I think most people in most churches are more in tune more in touch with the American way then the Jesus way.

Let me take a hard right turn. If you have a Bible you meet me in Luke's Gospel, we'll get there in a minute. I know I'm talking fast. Let me give you one more equation, and then we're going to juxtapose it with the Jesus way. Deliberate practice, plus desirable difficulty equals durable learning. Anders Ericsson famous for something called the 10,000-hour rule, simply put; it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to achieve expertise in anything. That rule I think, you know, it's been misinterpreted and misapplied kind of all over the place because it takes more than 10,000 hours of practice. It takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. Ericsson makes a distinction between two kinds of practice. He says, naive practice is random, it lacks rhyme, it lacks reason, it's going through the motions and it's actually counterproductive. If you practice something the wrong way, you're going to develop bad habits while you're trying to build good habits.

Deliberate practice is three dimensional. The first dimension is well defined goals. This allows you to measure progress, and it facilitates a feedback loop. The second dimension involves reverse engineering. This is hacking best practices of best in class and then adopting them and adapting them to your unique situation. This is what we're doing during this series; we're reverse engineering the Jesus way. The third dimension is effort. Deliberate practice requires near maximal effort which is neither fun nor easy. You have to stress your body beyond its ability to maintain homeostasis This is critical. Anything less than 70% effort maintains the status quo. I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but could we afford to be a little bit more deliberate when it comes to practicing spiritual disciplines?

Alright let me add desirable difficulty to the equation. Now it sounds like an oxymoron, right? There is nothing desirable about difficulty, right? Wrong. This is as old as the Apostle James, "Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind. Why? Because it produces perseverance and perseverance must run its course so that we will be complete, not lacking anything. So this concept of desirable difficulty coined by Robert Bjork, 1994 it refers to learning tasks that require considerable effort. Now, I think probably 70% would be a good insertion right there. Desirable difficulties, listen to this, they slow down the learning process initially but the long term benefits are greater than easy tasks. If something is too easy, we get bored. If something is too difficult, we call it quits. And so there is this idea of 'jmd' just manageable difficulty. You've got to set stretch goals but they have to be somewhere in between status quo and impossible, right?

Now my job as I see it as a pastor is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. You tell me the last time you were uncomfortable, and I'll tell you the last time you grew. This is why mission trips are so good they get us out of our comfort zone. If you're an introvert, this is why small groups are so good because it's uncomfortable. If you like sleeping in on Sundays, this is why serving is so great. These are desirable difficulties make no apologies for it.

Side note, this has helped me so much as a parent, as a helicopter parent. If you don't let your kids fall down, they'll never learn how to get back up and stand on their own two feet, nothing harder than seeing your kids struggle. But guess what? They have to learn the same way you did through trial and error. If

you help a caterpillar escape its cocoon it will never go through chrysalis. The only way a caterpillar becomes a butterfly is desirable difficulty. And so, deliberate practice plus desirable difficulty equals durable learning.

Now, the very first thing I learned in my master's of education program was the Latin root for the word educate. It means to draw out. And I remember laughing because I remember thinking to myself, you know, based on the way that we teach, it sure seems like it's more like cramming in, right, than drawing out and yet that's what true education is. When you cram for finals you are using rote memorization. Listen, that's great for short term memory, generally good for grades but not good for durable learning. Durable learning is not head knowledge. It's not an Ivy League or Ivy tower education. It's the school of hard knocks. It's not information, its transformation. It's not just facts, its convictions. It's not just knowing it's knowing what you know that you know? And then the more you know, the more you know how much you don't know. It's something that has gone from your head, to your heart and into your gut. And it becomes these core convictions that we operate by. Reality is this most of us are educated way beyond the level of our obedience already, we don't need to know more, we need to do more with what we know.

Alright, deliberate practice plus desirable difficulty equals durable learning. Now let's sola for x (?) Luke chapter four, verse one,

*"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them (I love this) he was hungry."*

Aye, aye, Captain Obvious. The tempter says if you are the Son of God kind of comes at his identity right here. If you are the Son of God tell this stone to become bread. Jesus answered, it is written, Man shall not live by bread alone. We don't have time to deep dive these temptations, but I don't want to read right over them either. If you're taking notes, you can write this down. Sin is meeting a legitimate need in a illegitimate way. Hunger is a legitimate need but how that need is met is critically important. Okay, news flash, the enemy targets our weaknesses. And those weaknesses usually fall into one of two categories past tense hurt or present tense need. The father wound it's a betrayal by someone you trusted. It's emotional abuse when you were helpless to do anything about it. Those things can alter the algorithm of our lives. Why? Because hurt people hurt people, that's why. Listen to me, the solution to temptation, in many instances is God healing those past tense hurts.

Now, temptation also targets present tense need. This is rationalizing pornography or adultery, because you feel like your needs aren't getting met in your marriage. If you haven't eaten for 40 days let's be honest, turning a stone into bread sounds like an excellent idea. And what's wrong with that? Why not end your fast with fireworks. I mean, Jesus performs the same kind of miracle; feeds 5000 with five loaves and two fish not long after. He's quite capable of doing this, and it's a legitimate need. But he

doesn't take the bait. Why? Because the ends never justify the means. The Jesus way, is making decisions against yourself.

Now, I think the American way and listen I'm proud to be an American. But I think the American way is more about exercising our rights. I think the Jesus way is more about making decisions against ourselves, sometimes laying down our rights for the sake of loving someone else. By not turning this stone into bread Jesus reveals a willingness to be denied and a commitment to do God's will, God's way.

Verse five: *"The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in and the instant, all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor. If you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus said: "It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only."*

The second temptation is instant gratification. When you shortcut God's will, you short circuit God's way. And you shortchange yourself. This is the mistake that Moses made. Yes, he was called to deliver Israel but not by killing an Egyptian taskmaster in cold blood. He was trying to expedite God's plan. When you get ahead of God there's going to be a delay in the process, it might even cost you 40 years. It's got to be on his terms on his timeline.

Verse eight; *"The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple." "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." Isn't it interesting that the devil here starts quoting scripture right back at Jesus. And Jesus says, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

Now, if the first temptation is meeting a legitimate need in any legitimate way. And if the second temptation is instant gratification, I think the third temptation is trying to prove yourself the wrong way, for the wrong reason. If you have to compromise your integrity for an opportunity, guess what? It's not an opportunity. It's a temptation. May the Lord help you.

Now, let's double back to verse one.

*"Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil."*

This week Lynn Weatherby handed me a book by Ian Thomas "The Indwelling Life of Christ, I started reading it. I love good opening sentences and this is a good one. He says, "I know of nothing quite so boring as Christianity without Christ." Let me piggyback I know nothing so quite so boring as spirituality without the Spirit. Okay, you can't spell Christianity without Christ and you can't spell spirituality without spirit in both cases, first six letters of those words. Yet that's what many people are trying to do. Listen, anything less than spirit filled and spirit lead is dead religion.

At the turn of the 20th century William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army issued a warning. He said the chief danger that confronts the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost. Halfway through the 20th century, AW Tozer leveled this indictment, "If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference."

Jesus was filled with and led by the Spirit of God, there is no way you can follow the Jesus way any other way even Jesus Spirit filled, Spirit led. Now, here's the catch. Jesus ends up in the wilderness in a cage fight with the devil on an empty stomach. I mean, that seems like a wrong turn. When have you ever been in that situation and felt like, ah, God has me right where he wants me, right?

Let me go ahead and get this out of the way. Holy Spirit will sometimes take you places you don't want to go. You'll feel like you took a wrong turn. You will wonder where God went. You will ask God's you will ask God to change your circumstances, the very circumstances that God is using to change you. This is when and where you are either going to fall into temptation or you're going to fall into God's kindness. Would you fall into God's kindness this weekend?

That funeral for Kealan was the hardest things I've ever walked through. I love Chris and Kat. I mean, that song comes from such a deep place. I mean, those are moments where you're going to go one way or the other and I just... The way that they fell into God's kindness it's a powerful testimony. Chris said it in that song video. He said, God doesn't always promise to deliver us from but he always promises his presence with. Would you rest in that today? The Holy Spirit will sometimes take you places you don't want to go but he'll go with you.

In terms of tactics, the timing of this temptation it's terrible. You just got baptized. Spirit descends on you like a dove. A voice from heaven says is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Oh, come on, it's time to make your move. You start preaching right now you start performing miracles. But no, the first thing Jesus does is a disappearing act. We need to lean into that and figure that out. And listen, this should come as no surprise, he had been doing it since he was 12 years old. I mean, we blame Mary and Joseph for Jesus getting left in Jerusalem. This is not 'Home Alone'. This is the Jesus way he withdraws all the time.

The way of the wilderness, it's making decisions against yourself. The way of the wilderness is getting off the grid and getting with God. The way of the wilderness is not the path of least resistance. If you're taking notes jot this down. The obstacle is not the enemy. The obstacle is the way.

Three years ago Lora was diagnosed with breast cancer. It's a wilderness season for us. Praise God, we caught it early. I think Lora is healthier than she's ever been. And yeah, we can celebrate that. Thank

you. I attribute a lot of her healing to a question that she asked of cancer. What have you come to teach me?

Listen, if you find yourself in the wilderness, if you're in the wilderness this weekend, you have to fight. You gotta fight for your health. You gotta fight for mental health. You have to fight for your marriage. You have to fight for sobriety. You have to fight for sexual purity. You have to fight for what you believe is right. There's nothing easy about any of those things. You may not be where you want to be but I would challenge you to ask that same question. What have you come to teach me? Sometimes we're so anxious to get out of difficult situations that we never get anything out of difficult situations.

John Milton, the English poet who wrote 'Paradise Lost' believed that the hinge of human history was not the crucifixion but the temptation. Why? Because this is where Jesus gained the high ground. This is where Jesus won the battle that would win the war on sin, and death. The wilderness is where we prove ourselves to God and God proves himself to us. The obstacle is not the enemy the obstacle is the way, the Jesus way. Opposition doesn't mean you're doing something wrong, it probably means you're doing something right. It is desirable difficulty.

Now, let's put it in deliberate practice. This week, we begin a liturgical season, called Lent. It starts with Ash Wednesday ends with Easter Sunday. I said it last week; I believe it's a season for us to seek God with greater consistency and intentionality, and priority.

I want to challenge you to deliberately practice something called the Daily Office, and I going to spell it out. Our discipleship team has put together a digital resource called the Jesus Way, a daily practice. If you subscribe, we'll send a daily devotional, you'll get a reading plan that will take you all the way through all four gospels, and then you'll get some reflections. Questions - [NCC.re/theway](http://NCC.re/theway). Many people trace the daily office back to a book written in 516 AD, The Rule of Saint Benedict. Now, he divided the day into eight prayer periods.

I would argue that this idea traces all the way back to Psalm 119:164. David says, "*I will praise you seven times a day.*" Now, listen to me, if you can pray seven times a day more power to you. You might need to be in a monastery that follows that rhythm to hold you accountable. I think Daniel is a little bit more doable. Three times a day he knelt and prayed in his bedroom. All indications are that this was his regular routine. This was his deliberate practice. This was his Daily Office.

Mark 1:35, "*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark Jesus got up left the house went off to a solitary place where he prayed.*" This is not random this is routine. This is part of that disappearing act that he did. And I might add praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal was not an anomaly. And the apostles followed suit.



In Acts three there's a man crippled from birth, Peter said silver and gold have I none but what I have I give you in the name of Jesus of Nazareth walk. This unbelievable miracle happens. Question. When? It says Peter and John; we're going up to the temple at the hour of prayer. When? At the hour of prayer at the ninth hour. That is the pattern that's then repeated in Acts 10. Cornelius is praying at the ninth hour when he had a vision. We read these as random. These are not random there is a rhythm and a routine to the way that they prayed.

Let me get where this is going. Deliberately practice the Daily Office for 40 days, six days a week during Lent, that's the challenge. Nothing magical about 40 days. I love the fact though that we're following the example of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Now listen, the timeframe is up to you. If you do an hour a day, that's 40 hours over 40 days. Now, that might seem like a lot, especially if you're going from zero to 60. You can start with five minutes of silence or 10 minutes of Scripture and you'll get off to a great start. Part of why I'm pushing an hour is desirable difficulty. I don't want to set us up to fail but the reality is this the average person 142 minutes on social media, 238 minutes watching TV. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Right. Wait a second. Are you asking me to give up screen time? Ha! Yes, I am.

The whole idea behind Lent giving something up, it's a rummage sale. There are some things that are not producing fruit in your life. But what did we just took a few minutes; identify a few of those things. Create a little bit of margin again, you're not gonna find time you have to make time. You figure out when and where. And you practice a daily office. Well, what do I do? Well, I think the digital resource our team put together is a great place to start. But I would encourage you to include scripture and silence and meditation and prayer. You might want to do a 24 hour silent retreat towards the front end of it. I'm going to incorporate fasting one day a week from sundown to sundown.

I think worship is a key piece of this puzzle. This week, a staff member shared about a wilderness season that she went through and I love what she did. She put together a worship playlist 22 songs, and she listened to that playlist every day on the way to work. Well, what a wonderful way to practice a daily office.

Let me invite our worship teams to come at all of our campuses so you believe me, I'm almost done. In 1965, a study was done at Yale University. Graduating seniors were educated about the dangers of tetanus given an opportunity to get a free inoculation at the health center. It was free 99 and the majority of the students were convinced they needed to get the shot, yet only 3% of them followed through and got the vaccine. Why? If you don't define when and where - 3% chance of success.

There was another group test group given the same lecture with one caveat. They were also given a copy of the campus map with the location to the health center circled on it so they knew where and then they were asked take out their calendar. Well 1965 didn't look like this, but take out their calendar and schedule an appointment as to when they would get the shot. Nine times as many students in the test group got inoculated. This is not rocket surgery. Good intentions are good, but not good enough.

As our worship teams begin to play, we're not going to sing today. We will at the very end, but not right away. Because I want us to do two things, two questions. When are you going to meet with God? Where are you going to meet with God? I want to ask you to just a couple of moments and say, Hey, during Lent, when is this Daily Office gonna happen? And I'll tell you when I'm going to do it, 6:33am. If you know me, that should not come as any surprise. Why would I pick a normal time right? Why that? Matthew 6:33 "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." And so for me it's just a way that I'm going to take it literally, I'm gonna seek God first. Listen, take a shower, brush your teeth do what you need to do. But if you're going to seek God first you're gonna have a Daily Office might want to start at first thing in the morning. And if you're a night owl, listen, leverage those late night hours you got to figure out what works for you when and where. I'm going to encourage you to take out your phone, take a few moments figure out on Ash Wednesday, when is that Daily Office going to happen? You have permission to go subscribe to that digital resource [NCC.re/theway](https://ncc.re/theway).

Last thought the only ceiling on your intimacy with God and your impact on the world, I think is deliberate practice of spiritual disciplines with a little bit of desirable difficulty. And you see what God does. Amen