



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

The Deeply Formed Life with Rich Villodas

Season 1, Episode 8 Transcript

[00:00:00] Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now, here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:21] Darryl: Welcome back to the Gospel for Life podcast. I'm so glad that you're joining us today. I'm going to be chatting with Rich Villodas about his new book, *The Deeply Formed Life*. This is a book about five transformative values that root us in the way of Jesus.

I've read a lot of books about spiritual formation, but I've never read one that talks not only about contemplative rhythms and interior examination, but also topics like racial reconciliation and sexual wholeness. I can't wait to talk to Rich about this book.

Rich is the Brooklyn-born lead pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York. He and his wife, Rosie, have two children, and they reside in Queens.

Rich, thanks for joining me today,

[00:01:05] Rich: Darryl, thanks for the invitation and I just look forward to getting to know you and having good conversations

[00:01:12] Darryl: so Rich, let me see if I get this right. I'm fascinated by your book. You're a Pentecostal who's learned from contemplative monastic traditions and who is also concerned about racial reconciliation and additional presence in the world. Did I get it right?

[00:01:29] Rich: That's just about right. I don't know what I am from time to time, but I am trying to hold all these things together.

[00:01:36] Darryl: How did you develop the skill of learning from the different streams of Christianity?

[00:01:41] Rich: It's such a great question. Not many people ask me that, and so I'm glad to respond to that. I had the great gift in the first five years of being a Christian, I'm 42 years old, became a Christian at 19, and in the first five years I was very open, teachable, moldable. And it just so happened that God kept bringing my way very different people from different traditions who were holding on to some aspect of Christianity that I did not know they don't belong together in the sense of most people do not hold these things together. I had no clue. I just thought this is the normal Christian life to talk about the power of the Holy Spirit and to talk about silence and contemplation and to talk about racial justice and reconciliation. I just thought this was the Christian life because God kept bringing people my way who emphasized these things.

And so by my fifth year, I was exposed to such a wide array of Christian tradition and history that I just thought we are supposed to hold these things together. I would find out that this is not normal, that a lot of folks don't hold it together. So I think by God's grace, I was exposed to a wide array of people introducing me to these various streams and traditions.

[00:03:06] Darryl: Do you find that that makes people uncomfortable sometimes who maybe aren't used to seeing...? We all get in our little tribal group and echo chamber, and we're not used to learning from each other. So how do people react to that?

[00:03:21] Rich: A lot of folks are disoriented by it. I think they hear me talk about contemplation, and they think, okay, that's great. But then I talked about interior examination or racial justice at that point, and some folks are a bit disoriented off kilter because of that. So for the most part, people have been, I think more than anything intrigued. I feel like, from time to time, I'm just this exotic animals at a zoo that people are looking into the mirror and go, oh, what is that? Half the time folks are having a hard time categorizing me, which I think is ultimately a gift because I think I am trying to with our congregation hold together various components of Christian faith. But yeah, for the most part, more than anything, I think it's been people have been intrigued and wanting to understand a little more. How did I get to this place and how has our church tried to hold all these aspects together as well?

[00:04:18] Darryl: Well, I love it. I love that your church is diverse. You get into the book that there're different nationalities and all the tensions that go along with that. And you've got people on the political left and political right and

figuring out how to live together one within one church. I love that struggle. I think that's what we should all be struggling with.

[00:04:36] Rich: And it is a struggle. I just want to say it is a struggle.

[00:04:40] Darryl: So, there are two images in your book that really stood out to me. There's a lot in your book that I want to touch on in the short time we have.

But two images that really resonated with me, one is the iceberg and the whole idea that we're not just about the 10% that people can see, but we're really looking at the 90% that's below the surface and that's going to come out. So we're not just after behavior change.

The other rich image that I thought you really captured well was the California redwood. And I just want to quote part of your book there.

“Redwood trees are centered and strong because their roots are robustly intertwined with each other ... I came to the realization that a redwood tree is the core metaphor for Christian spiritual formation that we need in our day ... we must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together.” And then you talk about developing lives “marked by integration, intersection, intertwining, and interweaving, holding together multiple layers of spiritual formation.”

Why is it so important that we integrate multiple layers of spiritual formation rather than just one or two areas?

[00:05:50] Rich: Yeah, I think in short, my answer to that is because there's no one tradition and no one stream that has a monopoly on truth, gospel truth, Christian truth. It's often the case that the various traditions that we find ourselves in offer a charism a particular grace, a particular strength, and we need those, but it's also good for the various traditions we find ourselves in to also acknowledge our limitations and try to do our best to learn. And so no one tradition has it.

So, for example, in the way that I try to think about it, the evangelical tradition, and when I think about evangelical I'm thinking about it as the theological more than a political category. In the United States, it is usually seen as a political category. But the evangelical tradition really places a great emphasis on the Word, on theology, on reflection on doctrine. The Pentecostal tradition often emphasizes right experiences. The progressive mainline traditions emphasize right engagement in the world.

And I think we need all these things. The problem is, it's often segmented. Sometimes it's that we're going to focus on right thinking or right experiences or right action. I think we need all of them to bear witness to Jesus faithfully in this world. And so no one tradition, no one stream, no one branch holds the entirety of God's truth, and we need to open ourselves to that.

So to your point for me, the deeply formed life is the holding together of those two images, the iceberg and the redwood trees. The iceberg really is about depth of life. God looking to transform not just the 10% of our behavior modification, but really going down deep beneath the surface to identify the fears, the messages, the idols that God longs to heal and transform.

And then with the redwood trees, the deeply formed life is about breadth as well, so it is depth and breadth, and understanding that we have so much to learn and so many gifts in the body of Christ. And for the powers and principalities that exist in the world, the -isms that exist in the world, we need everything we can get from God to bear witness to Jesus.

And so for me, that's been my mentality. I've seen struggles in my congregation, I've seen people wounded and hurt. I need every aspect of Christian faith and tradition to help to respond to the particular forces that exist in our world. So for me, I want to see people transformed and I know not one tradition is going to have all the answers to it.

[00:08:30] Darryl: I want to get into a couple of values that you talk about that we don't normally see covered in spiritual formation books, at least in the evangelical church. It reflects maybe a bit of a weakness where we can learn from other groups. And yet it's so difficult to talk about these areas.

So one is racial reconciliation. Man, if you even bring that up these days, it's like a bomb goes off and it's really even hard to have a discussion about that. And the other is sexual wholeness, which we seem to talk about. But we're also plagued with scandal after scandal. I'd say we're not doing that great in either of these areas.

So why is it important that we actually pay attention to developing deeply formed practices in these areas?

[00:09:15] Rich: With regard to the racial reconciliation piece, I think it's so important because having a particular theology that pays close attention to this for me is rooted out of a particular understanding of the gospel. If we understand the gospel to be more than just a decision, we make more than just a soteriological transaction, more than just an atonement theory — If the gospel

is the good news that in Jesus Christ and in his life, death, resurrection, and enthronement, that the powers of sin and death no longer have the last word, that in his name a new family is created. This is Ephesians 2, the dividing wall of hostility coming down. If that is our understanding of the Gospel, then it should speak to the fragmentation that exists between us, whether it be racially, whether it be related to class, related to ethnicity, across the board there. So for me, the reason why this is such a priority is because I have a particular understanding of the gospel that goes beyond an individual decision in Jesus Christ. A newly redeemed forgiven family is being established and created. And for me, that's the starting point. I don't start with sociological terminology, political terminology. I start with the theological category of what is the gospel? So from the racial component, the gospel.

And then secondly, to talk about sexuality and sexual wholeness — and you're right, these are the two most polarizing issues of our day. And the reason why I included it in a book on spiritual formation was because of what you list in terms about the scandals, but not just the scandals. What I have seen is there's not a thoughtful, integrated way of understanding sexuality and spirituality. And, so I'm asking in these two areas, I'm basically saying the gospel is big enough to create a new family and that our sexuality need not be separated from our spirituality, but integrated into our spirituality in the evangelical Pentecostal tradition that I'm from.

That's not what we hear. We hear language of suppression, repression and as a result, people acting out what I'm getting at is no, I think we need a robust theological and formation will approach to hold this together because this is core to what it means to follow, Jesus in our world. And to talk about this only opens a Pandora's box, because it leads to additional questions about how do we understand human sexuality? What are the boundaries of human sexuality? How do we understand the cultural moment we're in and have important dialogue with people who might view sexuality in different ways.

Sometimes I go, why did I do this to myself? But I do believe still these are important categories for spiritual formation in our particular day.

[00:12:30] Darryl: So you're a pastor and you mentioned in your book that you within your church, you have people who believe black lives matter, and you have people in your church who say all lives matter. And, it seems like it's so difficult to have this conversation and not even to be spiritually formed in these areas, but even to bring them up. So I appreciate what you did in your book and how you handled, especially the racial reconciliation topic, which just seems so difficult to even talk about. Talk to me about as a pastor. How do we help our people be spiritually formed in this area when it's so hard to even talk about it?

[00:13:05] Rich: Yeah, I think the best gift that a pastor brings to a congregation is not necessarily or primarily theological rigor, sociological research, historical nuance, political understanding. I don't think those these things are very important. I think the best gift of pastor brings a congregation is a non-anxious presence. And if we can begin at that point, I think it sets in some ways the temperature for the community.

It just so happens that a lot of pastors have a hard time being a non-anxious presence. And what I mean by non-anxious presence, I'm not talking about just being a Stoic the whole time and unbothered, and sort of just like floating through the air without any problems. I mean, to be anxious is essentially to be marked by reactivity. To be non-anxious is to not be marked by reactivity, but to be thoughtful and prudent and present. I think that is the work of pastoral ministry in this particular moment. Whether we're talking about politics, whether we're talking about race, whether we're talking about sexuality, how can we remain a non-anxious presence in the whirlwind of our particular culture?

So I can talk about that for a while and what that entails. But I think that is how we begin these conversations. We can have all the theology of the world, but if people are not able to relate to each other and function as a non-anxious, curious presence, the theology goes out the window. So I think teaching people and modeling it how to be curious how to be thoughtful, how to be non-reactive that at its core, I think is what we need for this particular moment, and then we can talk about theology. But if we don't have that, it is the prerequisite. It's going to go in one ear and out the other.

[00:15:16] Darryl: This touches on something you write later in the book, which I think has huge ramifications for pastors. You write, "The best witness we have as the church is not our good music, nor the programs that meet felt needs, nor the quality of the edifice that people worship in. The best witness we have is our transformed lives."

And if you unpack that a bit, I know you're not writing in particular to pastors there, but I think if you apply that to pastors, the best thing that we have to offer our people is our own transformation That completely changes what pastor should be shooting for. Talk to pastors here. How can we lean into that? There's so much pressure to do great music and , put a compelling package together, but probably what we need to be offering people is that non-anxious presence you talked about and a deep inner transformation. How do we do that? How do we lean into that?

[00:16:07] Rich: I think we lean into that by making very intentional and strategic shifts in defining what success is. When I became the lead pastor at New Life in 2013, I remember having a conversation with my predecessor, Pete Scazzero as I was putting together and clarifying my job description, being his successor and all of that. We had one conversation in which we looked at my job description and made an adjustment and the first adjustment we made was that the first line item on my job description would be that I was to be a contemplative, living out Psalm 27:4: "One thing have I desired, and that will I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." That would be the starting point for me as a pastor. That the best gift I give to my staff to our community and to the world at large is my own ongoing transformation in Jesus Christ.

And so very practically, what would it look like if we changed success? Not to be numbers driven, not to be a particular quality of music. Now, I love good music, I love people who are very skilled at it. I don't like to hear people who are not skilled at all that stuff. So for me, I want to hold all that together. But the priority is my ongoing transformation in Jesus Christ. It is the best gift. So, how do we measure that? How do we think through that? How do we prioritize that with at our elder meetings? How do we prioritize that with our staff meetings, where we are checking in on people's lives? How are you doing with Jesus? Not just simply how are the numbers going? And how is the program's going and who's coming?

I think all those things are important and need to be talked about in the meeting. But what if the first 20 minutes of the meeting, we're talking about our soul?

I'll give you one example, Darryl. At our elders meeting every month, with the first Wednesday of each month we gather. And over the last few years we've made a really important shift in how we begin these meetings. The meetings are usually three hours long, once a month. And the first 30 minutes of that meeting, I'm giving maybe a 5-7 minute reflection on a particular value of ours. Something maybe from The Deeply Formed Life, one of our five values or something from our rule of life for 5 to 7 minutes. And then one of our elders shares how this value has been impacting them, how they're wrestling with it, areas of failure, areas of ongoing growth. And then after they share, sometimes 5, 10, 15 minutes, we ask questions, we encourage them, and then we pray for them. We lead every elders meeting starting that way and it creates a particular culture, a culture that our lives matter before God and every life is incredibly important in our growth and how we're trying to journey with Jesus.

And so it shifts, but I think the biggest shift is redefining what success is. Success is not simply to be numbers driven. True success is how is my life with

God, and how am I leading others to have that kind of life with God as well? But it begins with ourselves as pastors.

[00:19:42] Darryl: One of the things I appreciate about the book is how honest you are about your life. It's pretty easy to write a book like this and present yourself as a super saint and you're transparent in there about a bus trip you have where you need you get off early because of the utter insanity going on in the bus, and marriage tensions that you've experienced, and just real life. So what you're talking about, because you're talking about the 90% that's below the surface and you're talking about you're talking about a lifelong process — help us out. For all the people who struggle and feel like they're not making progress or that it's slower than they would like, what would you say to them to give them hope and help them persevere through the struggle?

[00:20:25] Rich: I think of two things that come to mind when I think about people who are who recognize their own brokenness, yet have a hard time naming it, integrating it into their life with God. Two thoughts come to mind. One is I often think people feel this way because they have a particular image of God that needs to be healed. And we often view God maybe not theologically in our brain, but functionally and emotionally as vindictive, as petty, as waiting to get me. And for me when I'm driving in Queens, I don't know how things are in Toronto, but in Queens I don't have a parking spot in my neighborhood. It's 2.2 million people live in this borough. And so there are times when I can be circling for 30 minutes just finding a parking spot. And there are times when I'm trying to circle I go, "Is it because I didn't pray today that I can't find a parking spot? "Lord! Are you doing this to me?" Like that's what's in the deepest part of my soul. This particular skepticism about God's love that's now being revealed in my inability to find a parking spot. And in those moments I realized the image of God in my mind still needs to be healed.

So part of it, I think, is let's look at Jesus and how Jesus deals with broken people, Jesus is the one who heals our image of God. So, that's the first part.

And I think that leans into a secondary aspect of how we deal with our brokenness. I think the language of compassionate confrontation is necessary in our world. It's often the case that there is a lot of self-confrontation without compassion, or there's lots of compassion without self-confrontation. And I do think we need to hold on to this compassionate self-confrontation, so that when we recognize our brokenness and weakness, our failures, we're not beating ourselves up. But we're asking ourselves curiously and compassionately, "Why did I respond that way? Why did I try to soothe my pain through this particular way? Why did I act impatiently?" And I think if we can begin to approach ourselves with that compassionate self-confrontation and having our images of

God healed, I think it makes a world of a difference for how we deal with our own brokenness.

[00:22:52] Darryl: Well, Rich, I just have a few questions for you. I want to ask you one more question about the book and then if you're a game, I want to ask you a couple more personal questions, not too intrusive, but more personal.

Talk to pastors who want to help their churches develop the five practices that you talk about. What advice would you give them? Maybe you touched on it already, in terms of being a non-anxious presence and modeling it yourself. But what advice would you give to a pastor who wants to take these five practices and begin to see that congregation shaped by these sorts of practices?

[00:23:26] Rich: I think first, it requires a wrestling with theology. In the way that I outlined the book, the first chapter of each of these values that I write about, there's a theological component followed by more of a formation alone, practical practice-oriented component, how we live into these things here.

I think for those who want to establish a culture where these five values are taking prominent in the life of their congregation. I do think it starts very small. I do think it starts with who are the core leaders that need to be in conversation with you as the pastor. And so it might be, whether your staff is a staff of 2 or staff of 20 or staff of 200, who are the people that we need to be wrestling with this? And I think as you begin to do that, what we're looking at here are cultural shifts.

This is not just like a good sermon series. This is the way that we're functioning together. It needs to change the way that we're thinking about things like race or sexuality needs to be adjusted. And, so I think starting small who are the small group of people and then working our way outward.

The tendency that lots of pastors have is they read a book. And I say because I know that this is what I do. I read a book, I go, "Wow, this is amazing. I love it. I'm going to talk about it next Sunday." And then we move on to the next thing and when that happens is it's not integrated in me. I haven't wrestled with it thoughtfully, I just need something to preach. And, so I don't think that's the best way for something like this. I think there are certain books that you read it and preaching it immediately, it's a good thing. But I do wonder if what I'm trying to get it is that it's a culture shifting way of being the church and holding together particular aspects of it. So I do think having a more multi-month approach, six months or so, wrestling with it within smaller communities and then slowly branching out to invite the rest of the congregation into it.

But I do think it starts with theology and then a slow process of unpacking that with the people who have a lot of influence and who other people in the congregation gravitate towards. I say, a slow process like that is really important.

[00:25:53] Darryl: Let me ask you just a couple of personal questions. What are you learning right now?

[00:25:59] Rich: Two things, I'd say. One, I've been reading a lot about the concept of powers and principalities and the ways that these unseen forces impact our world. And so you see it with political hostility, racial injustice, the disproportionate ways that people are being treated unjustly. What do have you there? There's something beyond what we see with our eyes. And, so I've been immersing myself in that. This happens to before writing project for a second book that's coming out next summer. So I'm immersing myself in powers and principalities, also on trauma. I've spent a lot of time researching and writing on trauma. So those are a couple of things that I've been immersing myself in recent months.

And I think as a leader, I've been really impacted by family systems theory over the past decade, but more specifically in the past 4-5 years, and the concept of self differentiation of holding on to myself or remaining close to myself while remaining close to others in times of high anxiety. I've been really trying to tease that out and grow in that.

So I'd say powers and principalities and self-differentiation are some things I'm thinking about as a pastor in particular,

[00:27:25] Darryl: final question, what's encouraging you right now?

[00:27:28] Rich: Oh well as a native New Yorker and a huge basketball fan, the New York Knicks are encouraging me. I've been a suffering sports fan for many, many years, so I say that jokingly and very seriously, I'm very emotionally invested into New York sports. So that's one thing that's giving me encouragement.

I am also encouraged by the creativity and the perseverance of pastors. This is very difficult season we've been in the past 15 plus months, and I know there's a lot of stories about pastors who have maybe quit, or pastors who have chosen to take on a different vocation, and those are the stories that often get highlighted. I'm also really encouraged by pastors who are going through very difficult times and saying in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we're going to press through. I have lots of conversations with those

pastors and I'm so encouraged when they're continuing to lead even in some very difficult moments.

So the Knicks and persevering pastors are giving me lots of encouragement these days.

[00:28:42] Darryl: Well being a Toronto resident living through the Raptors' victory I guess two years ago, I know what it's like. So I hope you experienced that buzz. That would be amazing.

Rich. I really appreciate your writing. I appreciate your social media presence, the way that you represent on there as well. And just a bit of your personality, a bit of the character that's being shaped in you comes out there. You can tell a lot about someone's social media presence these days by what they engage in and what they don't. And your non-anxious presence there is appreciated. Thank you for your book. Thank you for your ministry. I hope to read more of your books in the future.

[00:29:18] Rich: Thank you, Darryl. And hopefully when all this is all done, we'll either connect in Queens or in Toronto. Thank you.