

Doug Smith ([00:00:07](#)):

Hey, leader, and welcome to episode number 350 of the L3 Leadership Podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith and I am your host, and today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. If you're new to the podcast, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here, and I hope that you enjoy our content and become a subscriber. Know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel, so make sure you're subscribe there as well. Just look up L three leadership. And if you've been listening to the podcast for a while and it's impacted your life, it would mean the world to me if you would leave us a rating in review on Apple Podcast or Spotify, or whatever app you listen to podcast through that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders.

Doug Smith ([00:00:46](#)):

So thank you in advance for that. While leader in today's episode, you're gonna hear a repost of one of our most popular episodes ever, and that is my conversation with Gordon McDonald. Gordon is a legendary leader who is now in his eighties, and in our conversation, you're gonna hear him share his best leadership advice for every decade of life. And I just think it's gonna add so much value to your life. And I hope you had a wonderful Christmas and holiday season with your friends and family, and I hope that you're gearing up for 2023. Hey, a few weeks ago I posted, uh, an episode on how to do a year-end review. If you haven't listened to that yet, or haven't done a year-end review, please go back and listen to that and, and do one. It'll be one of the most impactful things you do in your life every year.

Doug Smith ([00:01:25](#)):

And so I hope that you'll do that. I hope you have a wonderful new Year. I look forward to a whole new year of podcast episodes in 2023. And with that being said, let's dive right in. Here's my conversation with Gordon MacDonald. This episode of the L three Leadership Podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors. The financial advisors at Beratung Advisors help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their website [Beratungadvisors.com](#). That's B E R A T U N G advisors.com. Securities and investment products and services offered through LPL Financial member Finra, S I P C, Beratung Advisors, LPL Financial, and L3 Leadership are separate entities. I also wanna thank our sponsor, Henne Jewelers. They're a jeweler owned by my friend and mentor, John Henne. My wife Laura and I got our engagement and wedding rings through Henne Jewelers and had a wonderful experience. And not only do they have great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes in engaged to their store, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage, and we just love that. So if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out [hennejewelers.com](#). And with all that being said, here's my conversation with Gordon MacDonald.

Doug Smith ([00:02:34](#)):

Gordon, thank you so much for being willing to do this interview. It's a great honor to to be with you and to have the chance to learn from you. And why don't we just start off with you just telling us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:02:45](#)):

Well, Doug, I grew up in, I was born in New York City, actually Brooklyn, so I was brought up to be a Brooklyn Dodger fan. My father was a pastor, and after a few years, he moved us to Ohio and then ultimately to Colorado where I got a lot of my education and my seminary theological work. And I've

been a pastor for, oh, about 45 years of my 60 years of ministry. I've been an author, um, writer and, uh, a mentor to young leaders and the president of a parachurch organization. So I've been around the barn a little bit. I'm 81 years of age.

Doug Smith ([00:03:25](#)):

That's amazing. And you've had quite a career. I was telling you in our pre-interview that, um, I had not been exposed to your work until I heard your interview on Carrie Newk's podcast and was absolutely blown away, uh, with everything that you shared on there. In fact, I, I bought the book pr uh, ordering Your Private World, and that was a game changer for me. And, uh, you just, for me, you came, your influence came into my life at the perfect season for what God's doing in my life, which is really teaching me everything that you wrote about in ordering your private world. And we'll certainly get into that. Um, but being that you're in your eighth decade of life, uh, I thought it would be fun to, to hear you just speak, uh, to different generations and in different decades and what you would say about that decade. And, uh, I don't know if you wanna block some of these together, but I'm just curious what your, your thoughts would be for those in their twenties.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:04:13](#)):

Well, when you hit life in the eighties, you know, I'll start from that end. It's like standing on the top of a bear bald mountain and looking down the trail for all of those 80 years. And you can spot certain events and people all the way through the years that made a difference and caused you to make a right turn or a left turn. So when, when I look back at my twenties and, and the twenties of most people, I see that often as a period of time where we're making a choice of how am I going to invest my life? What, what, you know, what directions am I likely to walk? And secondly, who am I gonna spend my time with? Namely, am I gonna marry or not marry, um, and who are gonna be my core friends might get it started at that point.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:04:57](#)):

So the twenties of that time, when we're establishing direction and relationship, then you slip into your thirties and you're doing all these things and you're busy, and you may have married somebody and you may even have a child or two, and life suddenly overnight gets very complicated and expensive, and a lot of decisions have to be made in the early thirties that one really was not that cognizant of in their twenties. So it's, it's a decade of getting organized. Our forties are a period of time where we often, we now have enough years in what we're doing, and it becomes a time of assessment. Do I really like what I'm doing? Am I effective? Am I doing too much, too little? Am I disappointed in myself? Am I'm thankful? Um, it can be a period where the marriage gets reevaluated and you have to make corrections there.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:05:48](#)):

We're now watching our children move up into teen years. So the forties are a very important period of life that prepare us for the second half of life. Our fifties are our great years of contribution. When we've put it all together and we're, um, we're really humming along with whatever it is that God has given us as a gift to do in our Christ sixties, we probably need to start recognizing there's a horizon down the road where what I'm doing won't happen anymore. So my sixties are really the question, who's gonna step into my shoes? Who can I train? Uh, who will be the people who will bear my trademark on them after it's time for me to leave Whatever I do? Um, if I hope this doesn't sound too gloomy, but our

seventies are often the period of loss. You start losing people. Uh, you pick up the phone about once every week or two and find out that somebody you love admire, um, has died.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:06:47](#)):

And, uh, so it can be a very challenging decade as we see life slimming down. Now I'm in my eighties, uh, almost two thirds of my closest bestest friends are now gone. And, uh, it makes you then begin to think, well, how much longer do I have left? And how can I, how long can I keep on doing the things that identify me? So there are these little themes that show themselves every seven to 10 years, and I wanna me make sure I'm always looking forward to what the next theme smells like, so that when I get there, I'm not surprised.

Doug Smith ([00:07:24](#)):

Hmm. I I wanna dive into to a little bit of, of each of those decades a little deeper. Uh, and I, I'm curious, you know, when I was listening to your interview with Carrie and, and just even reading, uh, ordering Your Private World, you talk a lot about ambition and how young leaders, you know, Hey, one day I'm gonna speak to crowds of 10,000. They have all this ambition. I wanna grow church to, you know, a million people, uh, attending. Can you just talk about what you've learned about ambition and leadership and, and specifically in those decades of the twenties, thirties, and maybe even early forties?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:07:53](#)):

Well, ambition is, is an interesting word because in its darkest side, you know, it, it, he speaks of a man or a woman who's all in it for themselves and wants to establish a reputation and be more powerful, better known than anybody else. But ambition can be positive. Ambition also reveals the fact that I, I have energy in me that I wanna invest. I wanna make a difference in this world. Uh, I wanna be faithful to Jesus. I want people to be able to find in me something that will help them make a difference in their lives. So the word ambition is a, is a very, very wide arc. And if you're moving, let's say to the left, uh, it may get you in serious trouble. If you're moving to the right, it may be the very thing that propels you along. Yeah, I was an ambitious young man when I was in my twenties, and I would probably begin by toting uh, pushing that back to my mother.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:08:52](#)):

Uh, my mother was convinced when I was born that I was, I was gonna be her preacher, and she had these great dreams for me. Uh, I have an eight by 10 photograph in my fourth birthday party of standing in front of the family with a Bible that's as big as my whole chest. And I'm preach, my babysitter of those days, whom I met many years later, told me that my favorite form of play when I was 3, 4, 5 years of age was going over to the church with her. And she'd sit in the pew and I would conduct a whole morning worship service at the age of four up on the pulpit. So you can see that there was this, can you wanna call it ambition built into me, um, in the twenties that prob in in my twenties, that probably did. There was a period of time when the ambition needed to grow up and be more mature.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:09:41](#)):

And like a lot of young men and women who communicate for life what, as a preacher or whatever else, you wanna be the biggest and the best. That's a, that's a very youthful instinct. Um, it better start wearing off, or in my case, when I married my wife Gail, uh, she looked at this ambition in me and recognized some of it need to be shaved away. One night I, and I tell this story all the time, one night I

said to her, have you thought about how few truly great speakers there are in this world? And she looked at me and said, yes. And there's one less than you think there is

Doug Smith ([00:10:18](#)):

<laugh>.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:10:20](#)):

If you have a spouse who's looking at your ambition and helping you to launder it from the unrighteous side to the righteous side, um, then, then you've got somebody, you know, that God's gonna really use that. And, uh, I, I'll just tell one other brief story that's a little bit truer. When Gail and I were engaged, uh, she came to hear me preach for the very first time at a little small service on a Wednesday night. And when the evening was over, and I preached this 23 year old sermon, the room emptied, and it was just Gail and me, and she came up to me, and I'll never forget this, she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. And then she said, quietly in my ear, I want you to know that I believe God has got a strong hand on you and I I'm gonna be at your side to make sure that everything good happens. It's possible. And I often, when I tell that story, I say, that kiss and that hug and those words made me a preacher because I had somebody alongside of me who, who would not permit my ambition to get outta control.

Doug Smith ([00:11:26](#)):

So good. You, you made a statement in the book that, uh, drivenness in other word for ambition must be consecrated daily. Do you have, uh, outside of having maybe a spouse or you know, friends come into your life and, and kind of take that away from you when you're in an unhealthy place, do you have any other tips for, for battling unhealthy ambition or drivenness?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:11:46](#)):

Well, you, you, a lot of us were very blessed by God to have a spouse that played that role you just mentioned. If we were smart and wise, we also surrounded ourselves with what I call five or six Capital F Friends. Um, these are people who know your heart and they can very quickly see when your ambition or your drivenness is going, going in the wrong direction. Then there's a third group, and that's your mentors. Mentors are different than capital F friends, mentors are people who are usually older than you, have considerably more experience and can spot those things in your life, which are either moving towards God's best or maybe taking you away from God's best. And every one of those groups has a unique contribution to make. I'll add one more. You gotta be a reader if you're gonna be a leader. And I long ago discovered the value in being a student of biography. So that probably for every four books I read, one of them is a biography of somebody in history, um, hopefully a Christian, but not necessarily, but a Christian thinking person. And so I've read hundreds and hundreds of biographies over the years, and they give you insight as to what's going on in the inner life of the leader, and you are able to check yourself against that. So, you know, there are five different examples of what bad, which, which expose bad ambition and, and correct it, uh, when you're moving in a troublesome direction.

Doug Smith ([00:13:20](#)):

Do you have a, just speaking of the biographies, do you have, uh, two or three that you always find yourself recommending out of all the ones you've read?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:13:27](#)):

Yeah, that's not a, that's a no-brainer for me. Uh, my, my number one model or hero was a man by him of Charles Simeon, who came to Cambridge to study at the university in about the year 1774 or something like that. He came a believer in his first year there, and he came into the thro of a couple of wonderful mentors. And Charles Simeon went on to be the pastor of a church in the marketplace at Cambridge, England for 55 years. He was an amazing preacher and an amazing leader and a godly man all the way to the, from his toes to the top of his head. I probably read, there are five biographies there, Charles Simeon. I probably read each one of them once a year to once every year and a half. But he was the man who gave me a lot of courage to look at in the face of the pastoral ministry and say, that's what I wanna be like.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:14:25](#)):

Uh, so he, he would be, uh, very much number one. Another pastor of that type was John Wesley, who was not as much a pastor as he was a, um, uh, an evangelist of a type. And he spawned a whole movement of churches and pastors that we know as the Methodist today. But John Wesley was one of the most important men in church history. Um, so I've, I've followed a lot of Wesley, uh, too to, uh, those would be two that I would raise up very quickly. William and Catherine Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, have always been heroes to me. Um, they had a view of the world that was very unique back in the mid 18 hundreds, and, uh, they really taught the modern leader how to do it to this day. The Salvation Army 150 years later is true to the very mission, uh, that William and Catherine set for it all the way back then. That's very rare in church history.

Doug Smith ([00:15:22](#)):

Hmm. Wow. Well, we'll make sure that we, uh, share all those in the show notes for everyone to read, and I'll be picking up a copy of each of those. So thank you. Um, we were, you were speaking to, to ambition, and I think in our culture, something that comes along with ambition, especially when you're young, is making an idol out of being busy. You know, if you ask anyone how they're doing in today's culture, Hey, I'm, I'm busy, I'm busy, I'm busy, and we find all of our worth and, and busyness. I'm just curious, what are your thoughts on business busyness and time management for leaders?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:15:51](#)):

Well, anybody who has known me over the years knows that, that this is a very important topic to me. Um, the, the notion of ambition or in ordering a private world, I called it drivenness. Um, that, that, that was pretty evident in men my age. From age 23 to about 30, early in my 31st year, Doug, one Saturday morning, I hit the wall. I had, um, I'd been living at a high pitched speed for seven or eight weeks, give or take. And, um, up late at night, getting up early in the morning, working seven days a week, doing much more than I should be doing, uh, really allowing any personal inner encounter with Jesus to just kind of be sidelined. For a while. I was just too busy for Jesus. And that morning I came down on Saturday morning and I said to Gail, she was making breakfast.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:16:45](#)):

I said, uh, I won't be here for breakfast. I need to get to the office. I'm way behind. I don't even know what I'm gonna preach about tomorrow, tomorrow morning. And she said something like this as I was going out the door, she said, well, if that's the way you think you wanna live, um, okay, you just have to understand there were consequences because I never signed up for the kind of life that you were living. Um, about that time. You know, I heard the children coming down the stairs, and what Gail had said to me was profound. It, it, it was like sticking a dagger into my heart cuz she was right and I knew it. And

the only thing I could do was go out to the living room and I threw myself on the couch. And for the next four hours I wept uncontrollably. I just lost it. I remember thinking at that time, is this what happens when somebody loses their mind? Are they gonna have to hospitalize me? It was that bad.

Doug Smith ([00:17:43](#)):

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:17:43](#)):

And finally about noon, the tears cleared up and Gail had been so wise that morning, she got the kids off to a, a neighbor and she just sat and held me in her arms while I had this catharsis. And then she said, at noon, she said, why don't you just sit quietly for the rest of the day and ask yourself, what's the message that's happened this morning? What, what's God's message? And I did that. And somewhere during the afternoon, I wanna be very careful how I say this. I heard God speak. Um, it was almost as if he spoke it right in my language and out loud. And the word I heard was this quote, now you know what it's like to live out of an empty soul. And therein we had the problem. I was a man with a lot of personal, individual natural talent.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:18:36](#)):

I had a good speaking demeanor. I could charm people easily. I could think fast in my feet, but I was empty inside. And that was the day that my whole life began a turnaround in a new direction because I began to discover if I continue to live this way with an empty soul, life will be over for me in 10 years and I'll be doing other things like selling encyclopedias or something <laugh>. Wow. And so over the next days, I made some very, very important vows, which I can't say I kept perfectly, but that's the day of my inner life, really got off the ground and got started. And that's when the drivenness started to get checked. But among the things that I determined was I was gonna take the law of Sabbath very seriously. In other words, one day of the week I was gonna do no work and I was gonna make sure that that day was targeted, first of all at my walk with Jesus. Secondly, in my walk with Gail, and then of course with the children, and then the development of any friendships that would help me along the way to straighten this thing out. Now it didn't go perfect and I didn't go mistake free, but that was one of the most important single dates of my life. And outta that came an inner journey, which I've been observing to this ver this very day.

Doug Smith ([00:20:00](#)):

Can you talk more about, uh, what your Sabbath looks like even to this day? And I'm just curious.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:20:06](#)):

Well, it's, it's a good curiosity and a good question. The problem is that no two Sabbath are alike. In order to deal with that question, you have to start with the backend and say, what is a Sabbath supposed to accomplish? And we, you know, we have a teaching of that in the older testament as it was to accomplish for Israel. But as you move through the New Testament and then as you read, uh, people down through the centuries, you begin to realize that literally Sabbath is a day when you break with all your routines and you establish a day of restfulness and quietness. And what should happen at the end of that period is that you should have a sense of spiritual, mental, and physical renewal. So when you ask me, um, what's a Sabbath look like? I have to say back to you, anything that gets me to meet those three goals, physical, mental, and spiritual, I should add a fourth relational because you ought to be able to come out of a Sabbath day with the most important things in your life's core, all now renewed.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:21:08](#)):

So Gail and I began to take Thursdays off. A lot of pastors take Mondays off, but they're just giving everybody the worst day of the week. Um, you can't take it off at the end of the week cuz you've got a weekend to look forward to. So we felt Thursday would be the day that we would break away and we would emphasize quietness during the mornings where we would read and journal, pray, and anything that would renew either one of us. Then Thursday afternoon and Thursday evening were for play, uh, to have a good time to laugh, a lot to do things that broke us out of the, uh, whether it was the boredom or the pressure of ministry as it was moving along. And, uh, I would say a preponderance amount of times when we got back to our place on Thursday night from wherever we'd been, we were different people. And I went into Friday and Saturday preparing for my preaching with a renewed heart and a and a lively soul.

Doug Smith ([00:22:09](#)):

Hmm. You, uh, I'm curious, you mentioned the, the pressures of ministry and a question that I always like to ask leaders is, uh, and I guess along these lines, a lot of times people can't sabbath or say they can't cuz they're so busy and they feel like they have so much, um, to do, but, um, but they're, they, so they can't take a day off. And so I'm just curious, how have you dealt with the weights, the pressure and demands that come with a ministry position and yet still take a day off to, to rest and, and re-energize?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:22:38](#)):

Well, if you can't get your work done in six days, um, then you're either doing too much or what you're doing, you're doing the wrong way. You know, God didn't make exceptions for your generation or mine. He, he should be believed in this Sabbath thing ever since the very first days of creation. So God wouldn't ask us to have a Sabbath rhythm in our lives and then say, but I want you to do a job that crashes that Sabbath. There, there's, there's an insensibility in there. And that's something that particularly young pastors where they make a mistake, they, you, you used this word ambition. They, they wanna grow a large church and they, they wanna have all the symbols of ministerial success and then they wear out. I have a lot of young pastors, more men than women come at me at about the age of 38.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:23:31](#)):

Now that would mean they've been in ministry, let's say six to seven years. And they'll come at the age of 38 and they'll say, uh, pastor, I, I'm absolutely, I've ideas, uh, my wife doesn't like the ministry anymore because it's dividing our family. My children don't even know me. What do I do? And I'll say, how old are you? Well, I'm 37, or I'm 38 and a half, or something like that. And what, what they're doing is they're breaking all the rules. God, it's not God's will for us to be all pastoring megachurches. Um, and you know what, what's to be profited if I grow a megachurch and at the same time I destroy myself and my family? It doesn't, there's no logic to that. So I need to know what kind of a schedule is kept to get the work of the church done, but in a sense re strengthens the model that I am as a godly man, um, to my family and to the congregation.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:24:34](#)):

By the way, those same guys at the age of 38 show up at the age of 48. And now the questions have slightly changed. Um, I'm so disappointed. I have not reached my life goals. I'm not the man of faith. I thought I was gonna be, my marriage is in a little bit of a struggle. My kids are leaving home and, and they're saying, I never knew dad. My parents are getting ready to die on me. Um, the church begins to

think that I've been here for 10 or 12 years, maybe it's time for a change. What do I do? Then at the age of 62, the question changes. Again. I'm looking at retirement. My church is beginning to smell that they would like a new guy. Um, how much longer can I keep on doing the things that identify me? So there are these periods of questions that are coming along and we need to get ready for them and train for them so that they don't ambush us.

Doug Smith ([00:25:33](#)):

Yeah. I'm curious as a, as a follow up to that, uh, in the, in the book you said, you talked about fast starts, uh, fast starts fit the vocabulary of perceived success, large numbers, big bucks, sudden victories, quick recognition, meeting important people. And in the book you said, these are things that I see as rather insignificant today, but in times past was tempted to take rather seriously. And I'm just curious one now at 81, how do you define success now and has your definition of success changed over the decades?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:26:04](#)):

Oh, yeah. Changed. It's, it's trying change dramatically with each decade. There were things that were legitimately really important to me. For example, in my thirties, forties and fifties, preaching was very important. I loved to preach the Bible. And, uh, you know, I preached four times every Sunday for about 15 years. And, um, yeah, it hired me out from time to time, but I loved doing it. Um, I, I loved, um, you know, being a leader of a church here in New England, uh, where it's, you know, a lot of guys don't make it here. So when you meet somebody who's been around New England for a while, you know, God has really sustained that person because some of the better preachers in this country failed in New England and had to go other places. Um, but now, now I, I'm off my own track here except to say that success was changing over the years.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:27:00](#)):

Um, but, but what happens over the years, Doug, is that every once in a while, and, and again, you're gonna think I'm mechanistic for saying this, but you need some kind of language, but about every seven years your dreams get tested either because you, yourself have failed or because someone's turned against you or something hasn't worked right. But every seven or eight years, you, you have to, you know, redraw the picture and say, what's God saying here? As the years went by, I discovered as much as I loved to preach then, and now preaching became less and less important. And what became more and more important was training men and women for ministry to, to sit down and have conversations like the one we're having right now that helps another person to think through what track they're on as they exercise their ministry obligations. So if you ask me at the age of 81, what's the thing I most revel in? The answer is easy building people.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:28:04](#)):

I, I have about 15, 18 younger pastors here in the northeast that I'm in touch with every week. And we get together on Zoom on Monday mornings and, uh, you know, take this right way. These are my guys. Uh, I, I love, you know, when we pray, uh, I see footprints that are developing in them for the things we've talked about. I'm, I'm one of their go-to guys when they need some wisdom from the old guy when you're old and you, you still have a, an open door to younger men and women that it doesn't get any better than this. So my call from the age of 64 on has been to see myself as a spiritual father, uh, to a younger generation. And, and that's success for me today.



Doug Smith (00:28:52):

Yeah. And I want you to talk about, uh, cuz I've heard you speak on this when you were 64, uh, cuz there's leaders listening to this that are in that season. And I think it was so interesting. Two things I want you to talk about. The first is you intentionally, I forget what age you said, but you intentionally handed off your church in your early sixties. Can you just talk about that and why you made that decision decision intentionally?

Gordon MacDonald (00:29:15):

Yeah, I can, uh, I'll try to make it very, very quick. We made a decision when I was about 55 that we would try to get out of organizational and institutional life at the age of 60. Not because we were unhappy, but because we knew that after 60 I would start to begin to run out of gas, you know, emotionally and spiritually, well, not spiritually, but physically. And at the age of 60, you still have your, your joy. You have your desire to make, to take risks, to do something new. So we said, let's make 50 our target, and we hit that target perfectly. Um, and I told my church that in six months I would be gone and I plan to sustain my life as a writer and as a professor at a seminary and a few other things. So we were able to make that decision and step away.

Gordon MacDonald (00:30:11):

And I've really believed more than ever that running organizations is for young men and women in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties. But once you get to 60, you better start looking at the horizon because you have a potential of about 30 years left if you pick the right things to do. Now, when I was 64, my editor at Leadership Journal, which I used to write for every edition, um, he asked me to write an article about call and ministry. So I wrote it and shipped it off and thought to myself, I really haven't thought about my call to ministry for 30 years. Um, that's something that hear young people talk about in their teens and early twenties. I feel a call to be a missionary. I feel a call to be a pastor, but old guys don't normally talk that much about it. And so, you know, what does that mean that the call idea has gone outta date or we've missed something?

Gordon MacDonald (00:31:08):

So I began to pray, Lord, do you ever give a fresh brand new call to a 64 year old man? And I prayed that prayer daily for several weeks, and then I went off to Germany to speak at a number of pastors conferences over a 10 day period. And frequently at the end of those days, some of the younger German pastors would approach me and they would say something like this. Then you talk today, you talk to us like a father. And I would say, well, what does that mean? Well, our German old men and professors and pastors, they shout at us, they scold us and they talk about philosophy and theology, but we need someone who's older who will open his heart to us and tell us what life is really like as we come out to serve Jesus. And that's what you've done today.

Gordon MacDonald (00:31:58):

You you've told us what we can anticipate. Oh, I thank them very much. And after I'd had that happen several times, it was, it was nice. And I came back to the United States and went to do a similar conference in California for Asian pastors. And at the end of the second day, the, the moderator got up and he was gonna thank me. And he said, for these two days I've been on the verge of tears over and over again. He said, let me tell you why the tears. He said, because so many of us room, oh, he, no, he said, so many of us need a father and go, Gordon has talked to us like a father. So many of us feel

fatherless. And that's why I have the tears. And I'm sitting on the front row hearing him say this. And it's like the Holy Spirit kind of nudges me at heart.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:32:49](#)):

Loved one says, you want a fresh call? There's your call. Spend the rest of your life being a father to younger women and men who feel called to ministry. That's your new call, Doug. That's a great call. I get up every morning and somewhere along the line, in those early moments, I ask myself, who will I get to be a father to today? And more often than not, somebody comes on the horizon virtually every day, um, who wants to have a conversation like a father and a son has. And so from the age of 64, that's become number one preoccupation, uh, in my ministry life.

Doug Smith ([00:33:31](#)):

Absolutely love that. And so I think the takeaway there is even if you're in your sixties, you may feel like God's done with you, but pray for a fresh calling and, and watch what God will do. And I'm curious, uh, because I think a lot of people in there in their sixties, I'm, I'm thinking of leaders that I specifically know who have a heart to be that father to the next generation. Uh, but they may just say, well, I don't, do I, do I call young leaders? Like, did you intentionally seek out relationship with young, young leaders or did they just start showing up as a result of you just being obedient to God's call? I'm just curious.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:34:02](#)):

Well, well, of the choices you just gave me, I'd say they started showing up. Um, if you wanna be a father, as I'm using that term, you don't get it by boring people to death with your stories, which is the pro the problem that we old guys often have. We think the whole world wants to hear our story. They wanna hear about what we did 25 years ago, what I preached on in a certain Sunday night. They don't wanna hear that stuff. They have questions and they wanna hear you relate to what they're dealing with. So a good father or mentor knows how to ask the right questions at the right time questions, which open the heart of the other person and let you win. So you ask questions, you do encourage, you encourage young men and women. You, I, when I was a younger man, I had a older pastor who called me almost every Saturday night for five or eight years, and he would greet me and he'd say, Gordon, what are you preaching on tomorrow morning?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:35:01](#)):

And I'd give him maybe two minutes of a, an idea. Oh, he would always say, what a great sermon that's gonna be. I wanna pray that the Holy Spirit's gonna really anoint that and he'd pray for me and then say goodbye. And, you know, here was a man who could have said to me on Saturday night, oh, I preached on that protects five years ago, and here's what I brought out of it. You ought to try that. Never did that. Always affirm what it was that God was leading me to do, to cheer me on, to let me know that he thought the world had me, and that he anticipated a great outcome for what would happen on Sunday. That's what a father does. Um, a father asks key questions like, what are you reading this week? Uh, and and when somebody says, oh, I'm reading this and such, then the follow up question might be, and what is God saying to you? Because a lot of people can give you a book title, but they may not be able to follow up and say, this is what God is saying. So I learned to ask a question like that, how's your morale this week? What, what's important to you? What have the disappointments been? What are you praying about? How's your wife doing? Do your kids still like you? Those are all the kinds of questions a father asks a son and ministry. Or if you read the books of First and second Timothy, you see Paul asking questions like that,

Doug Smith ([00:36:24](#)):

I'm more than willing to bet that there's leaders listening to this right now, that that feel fatherless. Right. We live in a fatherless generation. What would your message be to them?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:36:33](#)):

Well, if it's a practical question of, you know, how do I find those sort of people? I say to them, how did you find your wife or your husband? And, uh, they haw, you know, what's that got to do with it? And I'll say, well, you dated, didn't you? Yeah, that's what I did. I did. In other words, you had a mental list of five or eight men or women depending on who you are, and you did things with them and watched how they reacted. They fit in with you. Did you fit in with them? Uh, you know, did you feel special in their presence? Well, when, when I needed mentors, I, I looked around and, and sized up some various people that I'd like to get to know. I invited them to breakfast and I paid the bill, and I would listen to our conversation, asked questions of how they reacted.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:37:20](#)):

And every once in a while, one of them would really click with you and you'd say, you know, this has been a wonderful morning, farka, we get together the same time next month. You don't say, oh, would you be my mentor? Because most guys will run. But what you do is you date your potential mentor and each month you, you re-up and get another breakfast for another lunch. And after about a year, one of you will say to the other, we've got something special going here, don't we? We gotta keep this going for a long time. Because it's, it's, it's not just one scoring to one and that it's both people in both directions recognizing this, this value. My, my younger mentees, bless me abundantly, they don't, they don't realize how much they give me, uh, because they think I'm the one that's on the giving side and I'm probably not gonna change their mind.

Doug Smith ([00:38:12](#)):

You, um, I, I want you to just talk a little bit about leadership and longevity. You're clearly not at your finish line, but you're in your eighties, which is pretty remarkable. And I'm sure for the thousands of leaders that you've known over the course of your ministry, um, not everyone has made it to their finish. Well, uh, finish line well or intact. And so what would you tell leaders who wanna make it to the, their finish line? Well,

Gordon MacDonald ([00:38:33](#)):

Well, making to the finish line takes on different faces as the years go by. When you're in your twenties and thirties, you know, you're, you're a person of vision. Uh, you want people to follow you and, um, embrace all the things that are important to you. Um, but as you move through life, you have to recognize that you can't always be doing that. There'll come a day when another generation will take vision over you. Think about it, even in your own lifetime, every generation has its own music. It has its own themes, it has a different kind of preaching. It wants a different, slightly different kind of church. So as you're moving up through the years, you've had your shot to give some shape to the church. But there comes a point later on in life where you have to start saying to the younger men and women behind you, it's all yours.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:39:25](#)):

May God have his hand upon you. Call me if you need me. And when you get into the upper years, uh, you now your leadership is not running the organization or raising the money as much as it is cheering

the leaders on being there. When they ask for a piece of wisdom, and believe me, they will ask it. They, uh, younger men and women are desperate for older voices where there's some wisdom. I laugh sometimes when, when I was young, sometimes people would come up and say to me, uh, you're so smart. And, you know, that's, that's nice to hear. Now they, they don't say you're so smart anymore. They squint their eyes and they say, oh, you're so wise and <laugh>. So wisdom is for us old guys, smartness is for young guys. Uh, but you, you just gotta know in the last third of life, uh, you, you're gonna start embracing obscurity.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:40:24](#)):

Um, you're not invited any longer to the big conferences in the planning situations, but you're the guy that they come to when somebody is screwed up, when something's going wrong. When something is missed, then they wanna hear from the old guy. You, you'd be amazed at how many young pastors want to talk to a man like me these days. Not because I'm really that good, but because they smell in this, uh, virus crisis. Nobody knows what to do with this. What's the church gonna look like when this is over? If you're young guy, you have no experience. You, you're, you're just getting your feet wet and what ministry's all about. So the young guy says to himself, well, maybe Gordon's knows something I need to know. He's been around for 50 or 60 years. He must have seen an epidemic before. Or something like, what's, what do I do when my church is splitting? Because half the people wanna wear masks and the other half don't. Uh, you know, what do you do about things like this? Well, we all guys just may have had some experience in those levels. So, uh, what I've learned in my last 25% of life is don't try to run things. Don't try to make a name for yourself. It's time to step aside and let everybody else pick the ball up and run with it.

Doug Smith ([00:41:41](#)):

What, what are you challenging and encouraging leaders with about the crisis? I'm curious, what do, what's your advice to those young leaders?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:41:49](#)):

Oh boy. It, it's, um, it, it's really hard for me to deal with that question because it's so different from place to place. I've, I've, I've encouraged younger men to think about their preaching. Is there, are they preaching into the realities that people are facing Monday through Saturday? Um, are we preaching about issues like what overcomes fear? What brings people together when they have strong opinions that are different from the other person? What kinda priorities are we gonna set in this period where the old way of doing church, uh, can't work anymore? You know, when we don't have our buildings and we don't have our, our programs. Um, and then I encourage young men and women to pick anywhere this just a rough number. Pick five or eight people, men and women in your church who have remarkable signs of wisdom and can look with you and sit with you regularly and just talk about the future.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:42:50](#)):

Where do we think this is leading us? Where do we think we're gonna be eight months or 10 months from now? Get your people participating in the church-wide discussion. Just don't hold this to the chest of the, of the staff. Everybody's gotta get involved because we are headed into a new era in the life of the church. This is what they call a 300 year storm, which means that nothing of this critical nature has happened so dramatically for 300 years or 500. Uh, so we've got, we've gotta get the whole church working on the future. Um, and one other thing is I wanna ask myself, how are deeply spiritual men and

women built and, and raised up in a time like this? Never ever waste a crisis. A crisis always produces new answers and new insights and new people. Um, so, you know, those are some of the things that we're talking about.

Doug Smith ([00:43:48](#)):

I'm curious, how has failure shaped your life?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:43:53](#)):

Uh, well, first of all, that always generates humility. Um, in one of those moments when you have, um, not only disappointed everybody else, but disappointed yourself, it's a time to stop. And first of all, don't dare put re blame and responsibility on anybody else, but take it fully upon yourself. It's not a time for excuses. It's not a time of being defensive. Um, it's rather a time to examine one's heart and say, how did this thing go off the rails? And, you know, what is God saying in the middle of it? It, um, failure is obviously a, a a a time when we, we have to ask ourselves what, what's happened here and what can be done differently? And how will I use this story as I come out of it, uh, for the benefit and the redemption of other people who are going through similar stories. So those are some of the things I, I think about, um, in a space of 60, 65 years, every one of us is gonna fail. Some of the fails will be more dramatic than others, but there will be failures. And, um, we just, we better not cover them up. We, um, that are spend that time exploring the deeper graces of God.

Doug Smith ([00:45:15](#)):

And what would your advice be to someone who's failed and maybe they feel like their best days are behind them, God will never use them again. What would your encouragement be to them?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:45:22](#)):

Well, what you just said is, is certainly a, a possibility and, and often happens, um, when someone has failed in whatever the category of failure may be. There's not probably gonna be a comeback if there aren't people on either side of that person committed to their redemption. Um, if you don't have people who are out there ready to walk in lockstep and help the person, um, whose life has collapsed, um, you don't have a ballgame. And that's one of the problems with the so-called free church or evangelical wing of the church. It, it often has no preparation or planning for what to do when someone fails. So, uh, an elder fails, um, a teacher fails, a member of the church, a lead pastor. Um, what often happens that the, the best solution to the problem is just get rid of them. Tell 'em they're not welcome back. And one of the, one of the most important conversations that pastors and lay leaders ought to have is let's talk ahead of time about what we do when someone drops the ball. Uh, how do we sling into action? How do we prepare the congregation? How do we prepare the person in question so that this is not a surprise and we're not working off the top of our head.

Doug Smith ([00:46:51](#)):

Thank you for sharing that. Um, yeah, I I I'm curious, you had, uh, you had the opportunity to consult Bill Clinton, uh, when he was going through everything, uh, with his moral failure. And I'm just curious, what did you learn about leadership at the presidential level and at the same time the, the human level, uh, through that experience?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:47:10](#)):

Well, one thing that has always occurred to me as I look back on that time is that, um, everybody thinks the, the president probably is the freest person in the world. I mean, he is got this big airplane and this helicopter, and he can go any place he wants in a moment's notice. So we say to ourselves, man, that must really be quite the life anyone of the president. Jimmy Carter used to say that the White House is the queen jewel of the penal colony of the punishment, the punishment, uh, organization of this country. Because the, I mean, to be rather crass about it, the President Isaiah can hardly even go to the bathroom without the secret service having to make 10 different maneuvers, uh, to make sure that everything is protected. Um, so there, there is a sense in which a president lives very closely hamstrung in any decision he wants to make.

Gordon MacDonald (00:48:08):

Um, you, you could, you could say that, uh, I discovered that when a president wants to make a decision regarding his own personal life, um, he has to, he has to have that vetted through all kinds of people. One of the things that President Clinton and I and the, uh, other two men who were his spiritual advisors, we worked on how, how would he be able to talk to the country about his repentance? And, um, and we discovered in that process, uh, I, I wrote him a speech one day, which in some senses he did give, uh, in the Rose Garden one afternoon on national television. But the sermon or the, the speech was considerably different than the one that I'd helped them write. And the next time I was with them, a week or two later, I said, you know, what the ha what the heck happened to this word and that sentence, and that thought, you know, where did they go?

Gordon MacDonald (00:49:06):

He said, well, Gordon, I'm sorry. He said, you have to understand, when I write a speech, the first people that have to look at it are all of my political advisors. Then my lawyers have to look at it to make sure there's no admission of guilt. Then members of my political party have to look at it to make sure it's squares with party discipline. Then my friends have to look at it to see if it implicates them in any way. So by the time all of these people have passed through this speech, it's about 60% turned over from what I intended it to be. So I also, I used to listen to certain evangelical leaders be so hard on, on him, you know, why doesn't he talk more about repentance? Well, he'd talk about repentance in the, he, well, he didn't say it strong enough.

Gordon MacDonald (00:49:52):

And I was, I would finally, if I had the guts in some cases, say, you know, you just weren't in that room when that speech of his got written, you don't realize how many people had to vet that speech before he was free to give it. There's just a, I don't ever wanna defend Bill Clinton or anybody else, but there's just a lot of things that we don't know about what goes on in that Oval Office. Jimmy Carter once said, the Oval Office may be the most evil room in the whole world. And what he was trying to say in exaggerated form is, there were decisions made in that office day after day after day that result in the killing of people, scandal, of people taking down whole nations down through the decades. Some horrible decisions have been made in that womb, and if Satan doesn't have some control there, I'd be mighty surprising.

Gordon MacDonald (00:50:46):

So Carter used to say, every day I got, every time I got into the helicopter and took off for Camp David, the minute we left, I felt like a free man. So I've kept that in mind over the years. Um, I loved Bill Clinton and, uh, I would never defend, um, the things that he did. He doesn't need me to do that. But as a

person, I really loved him. And, um, I really tried to care for his soul. And, um, you know, I, I like some of the things that happened, uh, but there were limits to that also.

Doug Smith ([00:51:22](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that experience. Uh, one more question before we dive into what I call the lightning round. But, uh, I'm a huge fan of journaling and I love the way that, um, I know you are as well. I just wanna hear you talk about journaling and leadership.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:51:37](#)):

Well, when I told you that story about the, the Saturday morning hitting the wall, that was the day that my journaling started. Uh, late that afternoon, I went up to a supply store and I bought a spiral bound notebook and I started writing, and I've made entries in almost every day since nine December of 19 60, 68. So that's a little over 50 years in which I can account for something that's happened virtually every day. 365 days a year. A journal becomes a, a kind of a best friend. You can tell the journal things you might not feel good about telling anybody else. It's a place where you can concretize your thoughts because a lot of us have thoughts and they go in one ear and out the other. If you don't write them down, sometimes you're struggling to concentrate. And so I write my prayers into my journal.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:52:32](#)):

I write events. When our children were home, I wrote about their childhood. My son's soccer scores are there to be simple with that. Um, everything imaginable there, there were no rules about the journal except say anything onto the pages that you wanna remember and thank God for or that you're sorrowful for. So there are prayers of repentance and repairs of Regi. It's, it's all there. And back of your head as we're sitting here, this would be one of my journals right here, there, there are 104 of these right now. And, uh, which you can see is we got it up here.

Doug Smith ([00:53:12](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:53:13](#)):

Since 1990, uh, all of my journals were typed. And then about every six weeks, I print them out and take them down to FedEx and, and they're spiraled down. So that where you, you can see behind you, there's 104 of these, uh, day by day by day, uh, that are very important to me. The question is, when I die, what do we do with them? And, um, that's been a family conversation recently.

Doug Smith ([00:53:40](#)):

Do you go back to them often? I'm just curious how you, do you do anything to look back

Gordon MacDonald ([00:53:44](#)):

Often? That would, is a strong word. I go, I go back to them. For example, if, if I'm gonna preach at a church that I preached at five years ago, I'll go back and read my entry from five years ago. So-and-so picked me up from the airplane. I had lunch with so-and-so and their spouse. I preached in this subject, I told this joke, I told this story. It's, it's all there. So that when I get off the planet and say, hello, Doug, it was great to be with you five years ago and now <laugh> and you're wearing the same green shirt you wore then. And they're saying, this man, this guy has an incredible memory. He really cares to know you.

Well, it's, thank God for the journal. You see, uh, I have a lot of quotes in here. If I read something during the day that I think is worth quoting it. It'll go into the journal cause I wanna keep it and I'll yellow high market and then maybe put it into a file some other place. But, uh, anything I'm reading to grow spiritually, intellectually, that's gonna go in there too.

Doug Smith ([00:54:46](#)):

I love that. Thank you for sharing that. Okay. Um, so with the time that we have left, I wanna dive into the lightning round. Just a bunch of fun questions. I love asking leaders. And the first is, what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:54:59](#)):

That's a good, interesting question. I don't think anybody's ever asked me that before. And so I struggled because I could think of a number of occasions and which was ascended to the other. And the one I arrived at, it may be different if you call me tomorrow, <laugh>. Um, when I was about 16 years of age, I was just beginning my life as a track and cross-country athlete. And I had a very godly track coach. And one day I came up to him and I complained to him about the hardness difficulty of the workout. Uh, I mean, it was hideous. And he said to me, Gordy, he called me Gordy, he said, I want the practice to be painful so that the race will be a pleasure. Hmm. Wow. And I have heeded that advice all the way through my life. When you prepare a sermon, the preparation ought it be painful so that the delivery will be a pleasure. And it becomes a law of life that if you prepare diligently in the practice side of things, then God will be all that freer to anoint you. When it comes to the, the moment where you bring it to the table,

Doug Smith ([00:56:04](#)):

If you could put a quote on a billboard for everyone to read, what would it say?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:56:09](#)):

Um, <laugh>, I I lemme see if 30 seconds here cause I wrote it down.

Doug Smith ([00:56:20](#)):

Sure.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:56:27](#)):

I picked a quote out of Aristotle. I, him braver who overcomes his desires than he who conquers his enemies for the hardest victory is over self. Now, I could have taken something out of the Bible, but I get a kick out of taking Christian truth out of non-Christian writers. Um, and that's a, that's a sentence that I would willingly broadcast any place You want me to read it again?

Doug Smith ([00:56:55](#)):

Yeah, that'd be great.

Gordon MacDonald ([00:56:57](#)):

I count him braver, who overcomes his desires than he who conquers his enemies for the hardest victory is over self. And believe me, at age 81, I know that to be absolutely true.



Doug Smith ([00:57:13](#)):

What's the best purchase you've made in the last year for a hundred dollars or less?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:57:17](#)):

Two dozen roses from my wife on Valentine's Day.

Doug Smith ([00:57:20](#)):

Boom. Uh, I know earlier we talked about some biographies that you recommended. Are there any, uh, other books, non biography that you'd recommend often to leaders?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:57:32](#)):

A book that changed my life many years ago was, and I'll have to spell the title, is called Chan Compound, s h a n t u n g, Chan Compound. It's a story written by a professor from the University of Chicago, who was one of 2000 white western people who were captured and spent three years in a prison camp in for the J Japanese, under the Japanese during World War ii. The book is remarkable, and I've read it probably two dozen times because I've made all my graduate school students read it over the years. But it gives you a microcosmic form how people get along together when they're living under great restrictions. In many ways, that book tells me what life ought to be like under this crisis with the virus because the strangest things start coming out of people. People who on the surface seem to be very good and righteous. Suddenly when the crisis springs up becomes selfish and contentious and you begin to discover that maybe five inches below the surface of our skins, there's some really dark stuff that's never been fully redeemed. And, uh, so I I I think that has been one of the most important books that I've ever read because it, it, it's reminded me over the years of the role of the preacher or spiritual leader and what we have to do to keep each other growing in Christ as the years pass.

Doug Smith ([00:59:04](#)):

If you listen to podcasts, do you have a, a podcast or two that, uh, you listen to on a consistent basis?

Gordon MacDonald ([00:59:10](#)):

Doug, this is gonna kill our friendship. I I really can't honestly say I do podcasts, <laugh>, so I can't answer your question.

Doug Smith ([00:59:20](#)):

Hey, no worries there. Um, what are you passionate about right now in 81

Gordon MacDonald ([00:59:25](#)):

Building people? Uh, my young men and women friends who are in their first years of ministry and, um, uh, enjoy conversation with me. My, my boom schedule, zoom schedule every day is filled with people scheduled for certain hours. And I, um, just before you and I talked, I had a wonderful conversation with a pastor that I love very, very much. And it's just good to ask those questions that open the heart and give the chance the two of you to share life with each other. I don't feel like I've gotta do anything new these days. I'm just doing old stuff the same time over.

Doug Smith ([01:00:06](#)):

What do you wish people knew about your journey? That they may not know

Gordon MacDonald ([01:00:13](#)):

That if I have any chance, I still want to climb mountains in Switzerland.

Doug Smith ([01:00:18](#)):

Hmm. That's the bucket list there.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:00:19](#)):

That's my bucket list. Um, my last time in cl I solo hiked a mountain trail two years ago in Switzerland and almost fell off a cliff to kill myself.

Doug Smith ([01:00:31](#)):

Oh man.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:00:32](#)):

My wife Gail has made me promise I will never solo hike again. I'm too old for it. So maybe next year when this thing is over, I can get back to Switzerland and do a couple of my favorite fonder Vegas as they call them.

Doug Smith ([01:00:45](#)):

Yeah. I love asking what's left on your bucket list on the other side. I'm curious, uh, what's something that you've crossed off your bucket list that you think everyone should experience?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:00:55](#)):

Jumping out of an airplane and parachuting of the ground

Doug Smith ([01:00:59](#)):

<laugh>. That's awesome.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:01:02](#)):

Yeah. You have to understand at age 81, you're beginning to measure life in potential days. And, uh, you know, I may live for another 15 years. I may live for the rest of this month. Um, so you, you have, you wake up each morning and you ask yourself the question, am I loving this woman next to me enough that she feels loved the right way? And am I growing in Christ in a way that will please him? Am I making any kind of difference to my generation? Um, that, you know, those are the questions I start almost every day with,

Doug Smith ([01:01:38](#)):

Um, just, just that time check. Uh, I'm, I'm okay with going a little over two if you still are. Sure. I don't, I don't want this to end. So, um, you, you've, over the course of your career, get to sp gotta spend time with thousands of leaders. And I'm just curious, when you meet with a leader, do you have a go-to question or two that you always ask?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:01:58](#)):

Yeah, I, um, I should, I should preface that by saying one of the most important mentors, mentors in my life, I had nine of them sometime, if you wanna have an interesting conversation, let me tell you about my nine mentors. Uh, but one of them was my mentor from age nine to 96. He died about three or four years ago. The most unusual man I ever knew, knew in my life. And, um, he was a master at asking questions whenever I was with him, I just felt like he was doing surgery upon my mind and my soul. And in a years and in an hour's time, he would, he would clean me out like a fish. And, and his questions were not intrusive. You didn't mind them. In fact, you, you, you wanted to say, you know, bring it on. Bring it on. Because when I get through with your questions, I'm gonna be a, a a different kind of guy.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:02:51](#)):

Right? So I learned from him how to ask questions. And to this day when I ask questions, it's frequent that I'll hear people say, man, nobody ever asked me that question before. Well, that's a question I got. I've gotta go home and discuss that with my family. Uh, man. Uh, and, and so I love those kind of questions that make people feel that they've been exposed. Well, one question to ask somebody when you're meeting them for the first time at a breakfast or a lunch, and it sounds a little bit innocuous, but I'll say, tell me just to get to know you, tell me the story of your whole life in four minutes, <laugh>, and people will look at you astonished, you know, four minutes. I couldn't do it in four days. And I'll say, well, just try. And you know what? They try, they try to do it and they'll, and what they almost always do, uh, and I suspect if you and I were doing this, one of the very first things you would talk about is the loss of your mother.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:03:52](#)):

Hmm. Yeah. And you would say That was one of four or five things in my life, uh, that made a huge difference. So I might come back then, if you don't mind, by using you as an example Sure. And follow up with a question, what did it do to you when you lost your mom? Did it change your life? Did it bring any new thought into you? You know, where did you come outta it? And I'm listening very carefully to how you deal with that because in about 45 seconds, we have jumped a mile deep into your life and you've made a choice to tell me things about your life that you'd probably not tell very many people. So that question is very useful. Tell me about your whole life in four minutes, because what I'm gonna hear are the four or five things that are most important to you or that you think shaped you, and that's gonna give me an opportunity to know you better by picking one or two of those and saying, run with that. Tell me, tell me what, what that's all about.

Doug Smith ([01:04:48](#)):

That's so good. I'm gonna add that to my arsenal. That's a brilliant question. So thank you for sharing. Uh, I'm curious, do you, uh, what is your biggest leadership pet peeve?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:04:59](#)):

Well, we probably have touched it in one way or the other. Uh, um, how do I say this? I'm a little bit worried about leadership. Um, when you think about it for the last 25 years, and I've been a part of this, um, almost every seminar, every conference in North America has been about some form of leadership. And most of that conversation has been about organizational leadership. You know, how you run a bevy of people to accomplish a particular task, how you organize to build a great building, uh, all of that kind of stuff. Leadership is rarely about the inner life. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and how a person becomes strong in their walk with Christ. Um, in, in the, the inner life, the people who know this almost better

than anybody else of the Quakers. And one of my interests over the years in a scholarly way has been how Quakers have fought over the last 500 years.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:06:01](#)):

And, uh, you know, that's a, that's a leadership that comes from the soul. They talk about speaking truth to power. Um, so my, one of my pet peeves is that we've had all this teaching on leadership, and yet when we needed it most, it didn't seem to work very well. Wow. And, um, that really bothers me because I drunk that Kool-Aid. I had my own talks on leadership and love talking about and quoting Peter Drucker and, um, a bunch of the others. Uh, and now I'm, I have a little bit of regret because I think that emphasis on leadership taught us, or, or led us to build these big, big megachurch buildings, everything like that. And now some people are beginning to struggle with what the heck we're gonna do with them. Hmm. Because we may come out of this virus, um, and the so-called megachurch may have taken a hit that nobody anticipated. And we're gonna, we're gonna have to reframe the church and how it does its business and what it truly believes and what its contribution is gonna be in the next years of, of our country's life.

Doug Smith ([01:07:10](#)):

So the, the challenge in that would be don't just focus on developing yourself as a leader so you can grow something big. Really just focus on developing your character as a leader.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:07:19](#)):

Well, yes. Or redefine the word leader, um, to mean something that it, that it often is meant look, you know, just look down. Um, when, when organizations say we're gonna have a conference on leadership, and the number one speaker isn't even a known Christian, you're saying to yourself, what's wrong here? Um, you know, what, where do we have to re re principle this in one way or the other? But what I'm saying here is really not thought through. So I, I might wanna buy it back.

Doug Smith ([01:07:50](#)):

<laugh>. Okay. Uh, if you could go back and give your 20 year old self or have coffee with your 20 year old self, what would you tell 'em?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:07:57](#)):

What would I tell them? I thought that was an interesting question too. And I wrote down two words, education, um, and mentors. Uh, one of my own personal regrets. I don't have a lot of regrets in life that, that are reasonable and manageable, but I wish I'd done much more with my intellect. Uh, I, I viewed education in my younger years as a set of hurdling posts. You had to jump over and reach the goal and get on with what you really wanted to do. Um, now these days, I wish I'd taken my education far more seriously that I'd learned how to think at a younger age lot. A lot of, a lot of young people don't know how to think. They've got a brain inside their heads and they've never used more than 5% of it. And fortunately, God surrounded me with some men and women has mentors who in effect just forced me to learn how to think.

Gordon MacDonald ([01:08:56](#)):

And even to this day, I'm not satisfied that I'm a good thinker, but thanks to my mentors, I'm a way beyond where I would've been if they hadn't been around. So I say to young men and young women, make sure you've maximized your educational opportunities. Don't pick the lowest schools, but pick the

highest possibilities and make sure that in every stage of your life, you've got three or four men and women who are advanced from you to whom you can turn. Uh, and who will interpret to you what life is gonna be like in the next years.

Doug Smith ([01:09:31](#)):

Uh, on the other side of your life, you know, when you reach a finish line, what do you wanna be remembered for? What do you want your legacy to be?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:09:40](#)):

Well, again, I'm probably repeating myself, but I, I really want people to feel that I have modeled for them what it means to get my attention off myself and my attention off the people around me that Jesus loves I, and that begins with the kind of husband I am, uh, to Gail. What kind of a father and grandfather I have. I have five grandchildren. I'm thoroughly committed to them. Um, they're splitting and going all over the world now because they're outta school. Um, I just hope that there's something of Gordon in each of them that was worthwhile in those years that they were exposed to me. Uh, beyond that, I just hope there's a handful or more of young men and women who are gonna know how to pick up the gospel, interpret it the next many more years, cuz the gospel's gonna be changed in, in its forms of delivery. Uh, we're gonna be challenging people to follow Christ in new, new ways. And, uh, uh, I'm not sure that I'm smart enough to figure out what those ways are, but I can cheer on the people who are. So when I leave, um, this world, hopefully, um, the next world isn't too far and off. But when I leave, um, I'm hoping that I've set a few people up to think through with the future holds.

Doug Smith ([01:11:08](#)):

And Gordon, as we close, is there anything else you wanna leave leaders with today?

Gordon MacDonald ([01:11:15](#)):

No, we've probably pretty much shot the wa on <laugh> whole things. Uh, I just, I, I'm worried for our millennial generation. Um, I admire them. I love them. I love being around them. I love their enthusiasm, but I, I'm not sure that a lot of them are willing to pay the price that it takes to be the sound models of Christlikeness, um, that it demands. And, uh, I just wanna push our younger men and women like a coach would push an athlete, um, you know, take the pain now so that the race will be a pleasure. And, uh, if they will do that, then, then the church, the Christian movement in North America has a great future. If they wanna join the people out in the beach who don't worry about catching the, the, uh, the virus, then I'm afraid that our future is not gonna be a very happy one.

Doug Smith ([01:12:15](#)):

Well, Gordon, thank you so much for this conversation. It's been rich. Thank you for your faithfulness to, to call on your life. It's impacted so many in the body and so appreciated this conversation and we hopefully we get to do it again someday. Well, leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with Gordon McDonald. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with him and links to everything that we discussed in the show notes@lthreeleadership.org slash three 50. And as always, I'd like to end every episode with a quote, and today I'll quote Craig Rochelle who said this, he said, you'll never be a leader. Others love to follow if you aren't a leader who loves people. I love that. Hey, Lauren, and I love you. We believe in you. We hope you have a wonderful New Year, and we say it every episode. But don't quit. Keep leading the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next year and next episode.

