



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“Spiritual Disciplines for the Leader’s Heart”
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Al Lopus

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now, here’s your host, BCWI president Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us again on the Flourishing Culture Podcast. My guest today is Ruth Haley Barton, a sought-after teacher, author, retreat leader, and trained spiritual director, and she’s one of the leading Christian voices today for developing a vibrant inner life for Christian leaders. Her new expanded edition of her book titled, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible*, is just republished, and I can’t wait to hear her insight, stories, and wisdom that speak to a leader’s transformation and how it intersects with an organization’s culture. Hi, Ruth. Welcome back to the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Ruth Haley Barton: Thanks, Al! It’s so good to be with you.

Al: Great! Before we dive into your latest expanded book, I wonder if you might take a moment to say a few words about yourself so we can get to know you a little bit. What’s most life-giving for you and maybe even for your family or your work or even daily rhythms? We’re anxious to hear from the expert about daily rhythms and the spiritual direction question... *Where has God been showing up in your life lately?* There’s a lot to chew on for a start.

Ruth: That’s right! Well, I have a very full family life in addition to the other things I do. Perhaps, a little known fact is that I have three married daughters and among them all we have nine grandchildren. I’m a very, very young grandmother, though. I want to make that very clear, of course. My parents live close by, so I’m walking with them intimately in their journey of diminishment, if you will. My mom passed away Christmas Eve this last year, so it has been a big year for us as a family.

Al: This book has just been recently republished. Tell me what's new with this book, Ruth.

Ruth: Well, there are two things. One is there is now a group guide included with the book. What we've discovered in the 10 years this book has been available is pretty much everybody goes through it with somebody else. Elder teams, Christian boards of directors, groups of leaders who are getting together in a ministerium or something like that. It's just a book that makes you want to talk to other leaders because it takes you to a very honest, open place, to a place where you can just be sold in God's presence rather than the kind of networking we typically do as leaders.

Seeing that people were using it that way anyway, I thought, "Well, I love to ask good questions, and I love to create experiences," so it's more than a discussion guide. It's actually guidance for creating soul-stirring experience and soul-ish conversations among leaders. I know leaders are busy people, so to know you can just show up and use the book to create an experience with other leaders, I think, is a relief and, hopefully, a blessing.

The other thing that is included that I'm very excited about is what I call the "How Is It with Your Soul?" assessment for leaders which I've been using in my teaching for just as long as the book has been out, but I just never included it in published form. Now, there's this 15-question assessment. You can call it that, but I like to talk about gentle noticing. I think the soul is tender and needs us to be gentle with it, so there are 15 questions for helping us to gently notice what is true for us at the soul level. Both of those things are new additions to this version of the book.

Al: That's great. I really like your experience where you've seen boards of directors or groups of leaders who actually go through it. Now, you have a guide that will help them process it. Fantastic! In the book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, it comes with a question that I see Christian leaders reading and saying, "Yep, that's me." What's this question that points to the heart of the message of the book?

Ruth: Well, the question the whole book really revolves around is...*How is it with your soul?* Being willing to ask ourselves that question and to ask each other that question and to be as honest as we can before God about how we're really doing at the soul level... That question emerges from the Wesleyan tradition. When the Wesleyans got together in their Jesus Bands they would ask each other the question, "How is it with your soul?" Pretty much their whole meeting would be spent asking and answering that question with one another.

I think that's a tremendously important question given the fact Jesus is clear it's possible to gain the whole world and maybe even the whole world of ministry success or success in a Christian organization but to lose your own soul in the process. This question helps us get at that issue Jesus was trying to raise with his disciples.

Al: That's great. You also point out the statement, "I'm tired of helping others enjoy God. I just want to enjoy God for myself." You see that in other Christian leaders, I understand.

Ruth: Yes, I do. I think many of us who are involved in professional Christian work sometimes lose touch with our relationship with God, the very thing that got us into ministry, the gratitude we feel for what God has done for us and the passion we have to do what God is calling us to do in the world. It's a really good thing, but it can also wear us out.

Sometimes in very honest moments we might say, "I'm tired of doing all of this stuff for God. I'm tired of helping other people experience God. I just want to enjoy God for myself." That is definitely the experience I had that actually prompted me to take the journey that resulted in this book.

Al: If a leader is experiencing that right now and listening to this, what would you recommend they do?

Ruth: Well, the first step is to be honest, and sometimes it's hard to be honest about how things really are. Even though it's uncomfortable, that really is an excellent first step, to just tell the truth to God about how you're doing at the soul level. Then, say to God, "What are we going to do about that?" What I like about that question is, first, it reminds us we're not alone with whatever it is we're seeing in our own souls.

Secondly, it reminds us it's not just up to us by ourselves to figure out what to do, that God is with us, God sees our lives as they really are, and God is there to help and to guide us into the everlasting way, into a life-giving way of life. I do recommend when leaders find themselves in this place they step back and, as much as they can, create some space for being with God with what's true and then entering into some experiences that are replenishing and renewing for them and, eventually establishing some sacred rhythms in their lives so they are always being replenished in God's presence.

Al: You know I love the title of your first chapter, "When Leaders Lose Their Soul," and that's what we're talking about here. It's not for the faint of heart I'll have to say, and I see lots of smoke here. Take us a little closer to the fire, the danger zone. What happens when not only the leader but also the church or the Christian ministry they're involved in loses its soul? What does this look like and feel like on the inside of a leader as well as in the community itself?

Ruth: On the inside of the leader, it feels like being disconnected from God, where you realize, "It has been a long time since I've been intimate with God for my own soul's sake. I'm busy doing stuff for God, but inside I'm empty." That feeling of emptiness, the feeling of wanting to run away, that feeling of escapism and dreaming about, perhaps, having another life, feeling disillusioned or disappointed with life as it exists, and sometimes people who are involved in Christian ministry are very good at

public prayers, but they have ceased praying. They've stopped actually talking to God for themselves, which is a very dangerous place to be.

That's what it looks like in the life of a leader, and in the life of a whole organization I think one of the characteristics can be a drivenness, where people are just working harder and harder for results and no one can bring their souls to the working environment. No one can admit how exhausted they are. We find ourselves reacting and responding according to secular business principles rather than responding to a deep spirituality and a deep relationship with God, so we've lost touch with the sermon and, instead, we're just caught up in strategic planning and thinking all of the time.

We stop treating people as human beings. They start to be just cogs in our own ego-driven plans. There might even be a real lack of integrity in our lives, a disconnect between what we're presenting to other people and what's really true within us. Psychologically, that's called *disassociation*, and it's not a healthy place for a leader to be.

Those are some of the things that can happen, and when that happens in an organization, the way that organization feels and how it functions and how its run sometimes doesn't differ in any real way from how things are done in a secular environment which is very disturbing.

AI: We find in our surveys the core Christian character of the leader and their ability to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit and show compassion and humility is really important and, of course, that disappears as they lose touch with their own relationship with God. Let me follow up with that. How about the leader who might be thinking, "I've heard these unfortunate stories, and I know there are personal risks to being a leader, but I have this under control"? What's your initial response to, "I have this under control"?

Ruth: Well, I think they're in a dangerous position because all of us are human. All of us have the ability to be self-deceptive, to not really be able to acknowledge what's going on, and I see a lot of people like that who really aren't able to be honest about what's going on within them. Now, there are leaders also who are living in sacred rhythms and who have good spiritual rhythms in place so they are connected with God.

Thanks be to God for those examples in our lives, but many leaders right now are just unable to be honest. When that happens, of course, then they are at risk of derailing without even knowing that's what's actually happening until it's too late, until they hit the wall, or until they make the bad decision, until they fail in some way. Then, they wonder what happened. Well, you can look back and see it, but they weren't willing to see it, which put them in a dangerous position.

AI: Great thoughts! In your book, Moses makes his presence known fairly early on, and I love the way you talk about Moses' experience and his growth. What does Moses have to say to today's leaders who

are centuries removed from his own life and times? What caused you to think about and write about Moses in this book?

Ruth: Well, I had written another book called *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, and I wrote that book out of my experience of emptiness as a leader and really stepping off of the ministry treadmill for a couple of years. In Elijah, I saw a character in Scripture whose life mirrored where I was, and that was that he, too, went into the wilderness and was there for quite some time. He left all of his responsibilities behind and encountered God in the wilderness.

I did that. I had that experience in my life, but as God does, God began to lead me back into ministry, and as I was in the rigor of real life in a real leadership role and as the demands upon me increased, I realized I needed another character in Scripture to be a guide and to be a friend to me in the activity of leadership.

I believe God really drew me into the life of Moses, because Moses was a leader, but he was a leader who suffered. He was a leader who experienced very, very hard things and, in fact, the Scriptures don't shy away from talking about how difficult the people were, how challenging it was, the risks, the disillusionment, the times when Moses felt alone within the community of people but also felt abandoned by God.

It was because of the truth of his experience and the Scriptures' unflinching descriptions of how difficult leadership was that I thought, "Here is a leader I can relate to. Here is a person I want to know more about. I want to know how he endured and how he had staying power to last all of the way until the end of his life while remaining faithful to his calling." That's the question I had. How does one do that? How does a leader say, "Yes," to God and stay faithful to one's calling all the way till the end? Because I want to be a marathoner. I don't want to be a sprinter.

Al: Well, you've just talked about every leader I know in Christian organizations where they suffer in their role maybe quietly, where certainly they're working with people who might be difficult from time to time, where there are risks, where we feel abandoned, and things aren't going our way. We'll get to the crucible discussion later, but in each chapter you include a spiritual practice to help ensure the soul of the reader gets the nourishment they need. Give us an example of a spiritual practice at work. Perhaps you have a favorite story, Ruth, that you could share with us.

Ruth: Well, one of my favorite exercises in the book is the exercise that goes with the chapter on leadership as intercession, where we see Moses really functioning as an intercessor. What I mean by that is the one who stood between God and the people and was in God's presence on their behalf listening for guidance, taking his own disillusionment to God rather than fighting it out with the people.

I talk about the fact that in my own upbringing intercession was something that was taught to me in a way that felt really weighty. I would make commitments to people to pray for them and then forget. I'd have these big, long lists that felt so weighty. Yet, Moses is a real inspiration when you see that he saw as a significant part of his leadership to actually be in God's presence on behalf of those he was leading.

I feel like this is something that has been lost in our leadership conferences and in our leadership books, that we don't talk about intercession enough. In the chapter on that topic, I actually have a guided prayer experience where I guide people through different kinds of situations and groups and people who might be suffering or places that need wisdom.

I guide people beyond the words to literally hold whatever situation or person in their hands before the Lord and to literally say, "I hold in your loving presence those who need healing and hope and help." Then, just be quiet for a moment and allow the people God brings to mind to come to your mind and hold them literally in God's presence but without words and without working so hard.

Then, after a moment of silence, holding them in God's presence we pray, "May they know the deep peace of Christ." Then, we move on to another group, but it's a much more restful way of praying in which God is actually the active one. God is the one who brings people to us. Then, rather than working so hard, we just hold them in God's loving presence and trust God for them.

It's just one of my favorite parts of the book, and I guide this prayer experience regularly when I'm with leaders on retreat. Tears flow. It's very gentle, but it's very restful and very, very meaningful to hold the people we care about and the situations that are so challenging in God's presence without working so hard to fix it.

AI: I love that, Ruth. I oftentimes will encourage leaders to shepherd the flock God has entrusted to them, which is 1 Peter 5:2. I love the picture of holding those people in God's hands and your hands in God's presence. That's fantastic. I love it.

I trust you're enjoying our podcast. We'll be right back after this brief word about a valuable tool that can pinpoint the true, measurable health of your culture.

Male: What if you could get an upper hand on unwanted turnover, relationship conflicts, struggling morale, and unproductive staff and, at the same time, increase the effectiveness and impact of your organization? You can with the Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. This popular, proven resource pinpoints the true health of your workplace culture and ways to improve it.

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Al: All right. Now, let's hear more from today's guest.

Your chapters in the book are partly warning signs and they're also partly oasis for leaders. Some of the chapter titles include, as you've mentioned already, "Leadership as Intercession," "The Loneliness of Leadership," "From Isolation to Leadership Community," "Finding God's Will Together," and "Reenvisioning the Promised Land." There's a hopeful, purposeful progression going on here. In your mind, what's possible for the leader who pays attention to his or her soul and seeks God in the crucible of ministry? What's the upside for both the leader and his or her colleagues?

Ruth: What's possible for the leader who pays attention to his or her soul is that they make it for the long haul with their soul still intact rather than flaming out or burning out or failing and falling and to remain faithful and fruitful until God calls us home and to also have our lives be good for others rather than being destructive to others.

Many leaders accomplish good things, but you look behind them and there are bodies in their wake because they haven't known how to treat people. To be able to move through one's vocational life and ministry life and look back and be able to say, as Jesus did, "I've loved those you gave me. I've loved them well. I've loved them to the end."

Jesus was able to say that at the end of his life. He loved his own until the end. To be able to even look back on one's life and say, "I respected and I honored and I loved the people God gave me and cared for," is a lot to be able to say at the end of a life. Of course, right there you see the upside for the leader is that they have not flamed out but instead have been able to stay fruitful and connected with the God who loves them so much. There's a deep spirituality and a regular renewal that's going on in their lives.

Then, of course, for the colleagues, they are people who have been loved well. They are people who have been guided wisely. They are people who have been valued for who they are and not just used as cogs in the wheel of a driven leader. They, too, can feel they have become better people, that they've been grown up in the Lord because of the kind of leader they've worked with. It is very hopeful all the way around.

Al: I like that, Ruth, that we'd be faithful and fruitful to the end. I love that you kind of put those two together (faithful and fruitful) to really say, "I've loved them to the end." What a great way to reflect on that! At the Best Christian Workplaces, we've worked with nearly 1,000 churches, ministry organizations, and Christian-led businesses and companies, and the keys to a healthy, flourishing culture invariably come back to leadership.

It's all about leadership, leadership that exhibits trust, transparency, open communication, humility, compassion, and certainly other characteristics of Christ. What would you say is the most important thing when it comes to strengthening the soul and what might be the most overlooked or even ignored thing for the soul's well-being and strengthening?

Ruth: Well, it probably goes without saying, but we can say it anyway, that God is the one who strengthens our souls. Psalm 138 says, "When I cried to you, you gave me strength of soul." God is the one who strengthens us, so to be in close communion with God, to stay in an open posture with God, to be open to the transforming work of God so we understand at all times we are in a transformation process even while we're leading others is very, very important.

In fact, we say here in the Transforming Center that the best thing you bring to leadership is your own transforming self. It's good for you to be in the process of transformation, it's glorifying to God for any human being to be involved in transformation, and believe me, the people around us need us to be transforming. They need our transforming selves not our deforming selves. Right? The most important thing in strengthening the soul of our leadership is to be connected to God and to be cultivating our belongingness to God above else.

The most overlooked or ignored thing... Wow! That probably depends on who you are, but one of the things that comes to my mind right now is the fact that many of us see our spirituality and our leadership as being separate from our humanity, from our humanness, so to see those two things as being connected (being a spiritual being and being a spiritual being in God) involves being the best human being we can be, caring for our bodies, caring for our emotional lives, caring for those things that are broken and giving them attention, to care for the human self as part of our spirituality in God's presence.

Opening those aspects of our lives up in God's presence as well seems to me to be really necessary as well as the rock-bottom commitment to discerning and doing the will of God. I think, again, in our current culture, the church culture, the Christian Workplace culture has often simply adopted secular workplace principles, and there's nothing wrong with that unless we do it without thinking about it and doing some critiquing.

Many, many Christian leaders have lost sight of discernment as the heart of spiritual leadership, so they're really big on strategic planning and visionary thinking, but they don't know so much about discernment and how we discern and do the will of God and how that's a commitment that characterizes a truly spiritual leader.

I think there's a resurgence of interest in that topic. I'm getting many, many more requests to come and be with leadership groups around the topic of discerning and doing the will of God, and I find that to

be so encouraging because that is the heart of spiritual leadership and it's very different than mere strategic planning.

Al: Wow! That's really insightful. Ruth, help us out. Name a couple of things leaders can do to help discern the will of God and maybe point us to... I know you've written a book on this. What are a couple of things that would be helpful for leaders to help discern the will of God?

Ruth: First of all, commitment to do it, as habit and practice, and to begin to define their leadership around discernment I think really changes how one views one's leadership. Then, certainly cultivating friendship with God, developing the prayer practices that go along with discernment, prayer for wisdom, the prayer of quiet trust, the prayer of indifference, where we ask God to make us indifferent to anything but the will of God. Those are the prayer practices that go along with discernment.

The ability to notice everything without judging and without being too tied to any kind of grandiosity in our lives, because oftentimes the wisdom of God is the foolishness of this world, and that's a hard pill for some leaders to swallow. "What if what God is leading me to makes me look foolish in the eyes of others?" That's a big question. Right? What God might be calling us to do could look foolish to secular wisdom, but am I still willing to follow God if that's what he's calling?

What I have discovered, though, is God's wisdom is often strategic in a different way than what I might have thought my way into with my own intellect and with my own mind. A deep-seated belief that God's will is the best thing that can happen to us under any circumstances... Those are all things that go along with the discerning lifestyle.

Al: I love your ideas of these various prayers (the prayer of wisdom, the prayer of quiet trust, and so on). That's very insightful. Thanks for sharing that. As we go forward, tell us one of your favorite before-and-after stories about how the organizational culture in ministry came to life through the influence of a leader who possibly and essentially lived the message of your book. Does anyone come to mind?

Ruth: So many people, and I think the discernment topic is the way in to many of those stories. I can think of a leader who entered a deeply transformational journey and began to practice solitude and silence himself where he could be more in touch with the voice of God within as being distinct from cultural voices, someone who began to cultivate their friendship with God, someone who was able to become more honest about how they were living their lives in driven ways.

They became more discerning personally and then began to share that within their organization and realized there were lots of people around the leadership table who were longing for deeper levels of transformation and who were longing for the intimacy with God that this person was experiencing. Lo

and behold, they were longing to engage in discernment rather than strategic planning and strategic thinking.

So out of that person's transformational journey, out of their example, and out of the reality of what was happening in their lives, the other leaders were enlivened to want to pursue transformation for themselves and also to commit themselves to discernment at the leadership level. Because that can't be done just by one person. Corporate discernment is done by everyone together.

What's interesting is at first it can feel like kind of a subjective process, but the practice of discernment is one of the ways in which we begin to experience God as being real around our leadership table and in our organizational life because we discover God does want to lead us and when we create space leadership gets really exciting because God shows up. God is longing to speak and to lead us as his people.

The leadership meetings, rather than being so burdensome and laborious, actually become times of peace and deep sharing and excitement about what God is doing and deep unity as well. Discernment fosters a very deep kind of unity, a kind of unity that many groups have not yet experienced.

That has been the most exciting thing. I have heard many stories of groups that had been polarized, and through the practice and process of discernment they're actually unified around their commitment to discerning and doing the will of God. God the Holy Spirit moves and works in bringing them to the unity their hearts are seeking.

Al: From polarized to unity is a vision. I love it! If we come back full circle to Moses for a moment, where did he begin to value the experience of the soul of his leadership? How did Moses start? What practical things can I do or can you do or can leaders do to deepen their own journey with God much as Moses did?

Ruth: Well, the answer to that is a little tough. The first place Moses started was by seeing his false self, his undisciplined and out-of-control anger. He had to see that he was ineffective as a leader first, which is a hard word, but we all know Moses' story, that he wanted to do good, he wanted to make a difference in the world, but in his desire to make a difference he killed the Egyptian because his anger was out of control.

The beginnings of his life in true spiritual leadership began with actually owning a terrible mistake, a sin, and he ran into the wilderness. He ran into solitude. God began to do his purifying work, and while Moses was alone and quiet, he began to hear God calling him to go right back to the place of his greatest pain and to call the people of Israel out of Egypt.

As we know, Moses was convinced he was not qualified. I think he probably also thought his sin had disqualified him, not to mention the fact that he didn't feel he had the gifts and the abilities and competencies to do what God was calling him to do, but when God calls you have two options. You either say, "Yes," and answer, or you become like Jonah and you run the other way.

Moses and God argued, and Moses decided to trust God, that God's presence would give him what he needed. It's interesting to note the leadership journey often begins with a more honest assessment of who we are, where we can move beyond the brokenness of our humanity to a place where God begins to heal us and bring something truer through our lives.

That's how it all started for Moses, and that's when he got in touch with his soul, that place where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit and where God was saying, "This is who you are. This is what I'm calling you to do." That was a soul experience. That kind of thing happens at the soul level, and that's how it began for Moses.

Al: Ruth, we've really enjoyed what we've learned today. Thank you very much. Given all that you continue to experience and witness among leaders you work with whose spiritual transformation means discerning and doing the will of God, give us one final thought you'd like to leave with our listeners.

Ruth: Well, I mentioned the best thing you bring to leadership is your own transforming self, and that's just a deep truth I'm trying to live out and I would want our listeners to live out as well, but perhaps the other thing I would call our attention to is coming into a right relationship with our vision. I think for many leaders we are very driven by our visions.

Yet, sometimes our visions become more important to us than our relationship with God. The final chapter in *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* is about re-envisioning the Promised Land and realizing the Promised Land is the nearness of God, and we already have that. Cultivating that nearness with God is our greatest good as leaders, and when we know that deeply, that can't be taken from us.

We can serve God to the end of our days with all of our strength, but we know while the vision is a good one and the vision is a God-given one, it is our relationship with God that matters the most. Moses was very brave in saying to God in the middle of his journey, "If you don't go with us, do not lead us up from here."

I see leaders all of the time who are more committed to the vision while their relationship with God is slipping away, so to stay in right relationship with the vision, while it might be good and while it might be God-given, it is not more important than your relationship with God. When it becomes more important than our relationship with God, we are in danger. That's what I would say.

Al: I love it! The best thing you bring to leadership is your transforming self, but having the right relationship with your vision and with the organization's vision is really critical. Really, ending up with our relationship with God is the most important thing. I love it. Ruth Haley Barton, founder of the Transforming Center and author of the book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeing God in the Crucible of Ministry*.

Thanks for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories, and thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you shared with us today. Ruth, I understand you have a book coming out soon.

Ruth: Yes! Next month. It's called *Invitation to Retreat: the Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God*.

Al: Great! We look forward to seeing that book. Maybe we'll have a chance to talk about that in the future.

Ruth: That would be great!

Al: To our leaders, I want to thank you for listening to the Flourishing Culture Podcast and for investing this time in your workplace culture today. If there is an insight, story, or action step you've enjoyed in this great discussion in the past few minutes, please share it with others so they can benefit as well, and please review the show wherever you listen to podcasts.

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