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Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to a special and I think really important episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today. Thank you for being here with us.

Before we dive into today's conversation, I want to say about one of our incredible sponsors. This show is sponsored by [BetterHelp](#). I know August means busy schedules ramping back up with all those back-to-school things. When your schedule is packed with kids' activities, big work projects, and more, it is easy to let priorities slip. Even when we know what is best for us, it's hard to make time for it. But when you feel like you have no time for yourself, non-negotiables like therapy are more important than ever.

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Intro: Today on the show, you are in for a good one. You've probably heard me talk about my friend, Jonathan Merritt. Today you're going to get to know him and his dad, Dr. James Merritt.

Jonathan is an award-winning columnist and commentator on politics, spirituality, and culture, as well as an author. His dad, Dr. James Merritt is a pastor in Georgia and the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. These two have a really special relationship as father and son, even though they do not see eye to eye on a lot of things, including sexuality.

Today, we're going to talk about their latest books. I mean, how talented to have to publish authors in a family. We're also going to talk about their relationship, how they have navigated their differences. Listen, I want you to lean in here. This is a really nuanced conversation, which is hard to do in a public setting. It's a real honor to me and to you as a listening audience that Jonathan and Dr. Merritt would agree to have this conversation with us.

This is the very first time Jonathan and his dad have done a recorded interview like this together. I have so much to learn from both of them, and I'm grateful for what I learned in this conversation. I love this family.

My ask and my hope, and what I know of you, is that you will approach this conversation with ears of grace as all three of us around the podcast table navigate topics and ideas that can be divisive and challenging. For parents, we recommend listening first without your kids so that you can decide how you want to engage any conversations this episode might bring up.

Here's my conversation with my friends, Dr. James Merritt and Jonathan Merritt.

[00:02:52] <music>

Annie: Welcome to That Sounds Fun. Jonathan Merritt, welcome back to That Sounds Fun.

Jonathan: Oh, my gosh, it's been a minute.

Annie: You were on episode 99. You were in September of 2018. Pre-pandemic.

Jonathan: It's been a minute. Was that six years ago?

Annie: Yeah.

Jonathan: Six years ago before the world changed.

Annie: Welcome back. Dr. Merritt, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Merritt: It's a pleasure to be with you, Annie. Thank you so much. Love you to death. We're fellow Bulldogs.

Annie: Oh, listen, we're going to talk about it. So I'm going to lead with crying. Okay. I love you so much. And this is such an honor that y'all would come and do this with me.

Dr. Merritt: Sure.

Annie: So thank you.

Dr. Merritt: We're honored.

Annie: It feels like such... it is not lost on me. This is very sacred to me that y'all would share your story. But first we have to talk about the Georgia Bulldogs. We must lead. Are we going to win a national championship again or not?

Jonathan: Dad's the expert.

Dr. Merritt: Well, you know, as I said, Annie, I'm on the board of FCA at UGA, so I get all the inside scoop from the chaplain and all that. I don't want to speak for Coach Smart, but from all that I know, he's excited about his team. We got a lot of people that are returning. With a 12-team playoff, it's more of a crapshoot, obviously, and more teams have a chance. But I think as long as Kirby is there, we can always make this statement. We'll be in the hunt. As Kirby said, we're not the hunted, we're the hunters. And I know that they're disappointed in the way the season ended last year with a lot of motivation. I don't bet, but if I had to bet the house, I'm going with the Dawgs.

Annie: Okay. Are you going with the dogs?

Jonathan: Listen, well, first of all, I never would bet against my dad. He follows it much more closely than I do. But I think we got a great chance. I mean, we recruit like crazy. And that's the name of the game.

Annie: That's a side part of football that the majority of watchers do not know anything about, is how much they hustle from January to August to get the right guys. I mean, year-round, but really they're working so hard.

Jonathan: That's right. Day and night on the points.

Dr. Merritt: And one of my hobbies is recruiting. And Jonathan knows. I look at everything and keep up with it. Because Kirby famously says, at the end of the day, it's not the Xs & Os, it's the Johnnies and Joes. You know, the last three or the last four years, we've had, I think, the number one recruiting class. We're always in the top two or three. And as long as you're in the top really five, at least, you always got a shot.

Annie: Because the top two or three over four years is a good team.

Dr. Merritt: That's right. That's correct.

Annie: This is going to be great. Listen, I love being a Georgia Bulldog. The first year that we won the national championship, that August, Kirk Herbstreit came on the podcast. And I said, "Do you think Georgia's going to win?" He said, "I don't know." I was like, "I'm telling you, my Dawgs, this could be our year." And then we won. I was like, "I got to have Kirk Herbstreit every year. Kirk Herbstreit is our secret sauce. But I love being a Georgia Bulldog."

Dr. Merritt: I got to ask you real quick. How do you know Kirk?

Annie: I didn't. He had a book come out and he got pitched to us. And I said, "Absolutely."

Dr. Merritt: Absolutely.

Annie: Him and Coach Richt in the same month, I think. I about fell out of my chair.

Dr. Merritt: Well, I mentor, and a good friend of mine is David Pollack.

Annie: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Merritt: In fact, we play golf quite a bit now. And I do mentor. He's really growing in the Lord. But anyway, he loves Kirk Herbstreit. I'll tell you a quick inside scoop, too. He said that one of the sweetest guys you'll ever meet is Coach Corso.

Annie: Oh, I bet.

Dr. Merritt: And here's why. He said Coach Corso is so humble, he can't believe he's in the position he's been in all those years. And so he's just a super guy.

Annie: Oh, that's great to hear. Is Coach Corso going to be another year of game day?

Dr. Merritt: I think so. Oh.

Annie: It's hard to watch sometimes.

Jonathan: We're coming. We're coming to the epilogue. I hope we get to really celebrate him this season.

Dr. Merritt: I do, too.

Annie: I would love to have David Pollack on sometime if you want to. Next time y'all are out on the Lynx, just give me a little... Let's see how this goes first. You tell him if you enjoy it or not. If you don't enjoy it, don't tell him we know each other.

Dr. Merritt: He's a great guy.

Annie: So you both had books come out this spring.

Jonathan: Yes.

Annie: That is crazy.

Jonathan: That's crazy.

Annie: So, Jonathan, your book is a children's book, *My Guncle and Me*. I mean, I know you want me to call you James, but are you sure that's okay? Because Dr. Merritt is what's true in my heart.

Dr. Merritt: I tell you what. We'll compromise. You know, my buddies call me Doc.

Annie: Oh, Doc. Great.

Dr. Merritt: How does that work? Does that work?

Annie: Yes, that's great.

Dr. Merritt: Call me Doc.

Annie: So, Doc, you had a devotional, a 40-day prayer devotional come out called *The God Who Hears*. I am so into this. We're going to be sharing all of our devotionals that we think people should do this summer. And this is absolutely on the list. I would love for both of you for a minute to talk about your prayer lives. Like give me the practical. What happens in the morning?

Jonathan: Well, you know, actually, it's changed in the last eight months. I started getting into journaling. I had gone through *The Artist's Way*. I don't know if anybody... I mean, I'm sure you've done *The Artist's Way* before. And there was all this kind of do your morning pages. And so that's how it started out. And then it turned into this prayer practice.

What I do is I almost write it like dialogue. So I'll say... I picked a name for God. The way that I experience God in prayer is Almighty Love. So I call God Al.

Annie: Oh my gosh. Al.

Jonathan: So I say, "Okay, me and Al. So I'm like, all right, I got to have my time with Al in the morning. So I sit down and I say, "JM, colon, and I'll ask God a question or I'll say something to God or I'll share something with God. And then it'll say Al, colon. And then God kind of speaks back to me. And we just kind of go back and forth until we get to the end of the conversation and say goodbye.

If I don't do that in the morning, I can tell a difference. My whole day shifts, the trajectory of my day. So now it's like the thing. In fact, I've got right here... This is my every single day has a date on top. And we chat every day and it feels very conversational, which I love.

Annie: So where does scripture come in? Do you kind of go let me make sure... I mean, obviously, you have two master's degrees. You know your Bible very well. We're going to talk about how much Bible has played into your life. But do you kind of go, let me check that? Or for someone listening who goes, Okay, Me and Al want to talk, how do you check to make sure what you're hearing is the Lord and not last night's pizza?

Jonathan: Well, I'm also constantly in the word. And I'll say this other thing that is also really weird. You know, maybe this is a function of growing up in the evangelical tradition where scripture and scripture memory is such a huge part of what you do. It's one of the gifts, I think, of growing up evangelical is a lot of times what comes through what God is saying is from the scripture. And then I'll be like, where does that... I can't cite the verse, but I know the phrase. And then I go back and look it up.

I mean, so often I hear "I'll never leave you or forsake you". And you go like, where's that from? Let's go look that up. Let's read the scripture.

Annie: How do people do Bible study for Google?

Jonathan: Literally how?

Annie: I mean.

Jonathan: Literally how. It actually drives me back to the scripture. But I have never been in a position where I've been in my prayer life and I thought, "Wow, God just said something that feels totally contrary to the things that I know about God from the scripture.

Annie: What about you, Doc?

Dr. Merritt: Yeah. You know, as Jonathan, I mean, I think we all should be growing our prayer life constantly. You never graduate from the school of prayer.

Annie: Right. Oh, that's good.

Jonathan: But one of the things that changed my life and part of it is kind of where this book came from is I know that, you know, we all wonder sometimes, does God really hear my prayers? Am I praying the right way? Because James even said, You can ask, but ask a miss. You know, you can ask all you want to be asking for the wrong thing out of God's way is not going to answer it.

So it hit me one day and part of it came out of this book was the one prayer I know that God always hears is when I'm praying God's word back to Him. I know He's hearing that prayer. So, for example, if I'm witnessing to a person without Christ, I'll say, you know, Lord, you said you desire for all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Whether this person gets saved or not, I know that's your desire for Him.

The book is actually a book based on Paul's prison prayers. By the way, I've kept a journal since 1985. I think Jonathan knows this. It's a bit different than his. I'll give you a quick example. So this is how I begin my day every day. I begin by praying Ephesians 3:14-21. Every day before I get out of bed. "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father in heaven from whom every family on earth is named." And I just pray that prayer all the way through. And then I end up "to him who can do all things above all that we ask or think."

So I pray that specific prayer. And then I'll take some of his other prison prayers, I'll say, "Lord, today I know you want to open the understanding of my eyes. You want to open my eyes to understand your truth." So what I'm finding more and more and more is I'm praying God's prayers back to Him.

When I'm witnessing... a good example. Let's say you're not a believer and I'm witnessing to you. While I'm witnessing to you, I'm saying Holy Spirit of God, convict her of sin, righteousness, and judgment and draw her to Christ. So I just constantly pray God's word back to Him.

Annie: Wow. How often are you sharing the gospel with people?

Dr. Merritt: A lot.

Annie: I bet you are. I don't do that. So I'm listening to you and I'm like, when is the last time I talked to a stranger about Jesus?

Dr. Merritt: Well, you know, if I can speak to that. There was a preacher that lived about 150 years ago, W. E. Sangster, and he said the two most embarrassing questions you can ever ask a Christian are these two questions. Number one, when is the last time you led a person to Christ? And number two, when is the last time you tried?

The key word for me in evangelism is intentional. We're all going to talk to some people about something every day. And when you talk to someone, they're either going to try to turn the conversation where they want it to go. And I do. Jonathan's been with... I don't shove it in people's faces or anything like that. But as I get a chance.

For example, if I met you on an airplane, Annie, and we got to know each other and you said, what do you do? Well, I'm going to go. I'm a pastor. Now that gets different responses. But if I can read the body language right, then I would ask a very simple question. Do you mind talking about spiritual things? I practice permission evangelism. If you say, "No, that's personal. That's private," okay, then I know God's not moving. But if you go, "Sure," well, then we're off to the races.

Jonathan: And let me tell you, if you say yes to that question, you are off to the races. The agenda for your flight has just been set. You'll take a ginger ale.

Annie: Oh, my gosh. You'll take a ginger ale. The quicker you say yes, the quicker you're getting your peanuts.

Dr. Merritt: Well, you realize it or not, I just left and Billy Graham just said-

Annie: Yeah, that's exactly right. Jonathan, you live in New York. We both grew up in Georgia.

Jonathan: That's right.

Annie: And Doc, you still live in Georgia. How is it different evangelism in New York than it is in the South?

Jonathan: Well, I think a lot of people think that New York is highly secular. That's not exactly true.

Annie: That's not my full experience, either.

Jonathan: No. People are spiritual, but what they don't like is exclusivism. They don't like the kind of your thing is better than my thing. So that, for me, I feel like all the time I'm talking about spiritual things. I think the tricky thing is that in the South, it's sort of assumed that at the end of the day, the kind of spirituality that you're practicing is Christian. And that's not really offensive to people. That's expected. That's why people like the first question they ask is not if you go to church, but where you go to church in the south.

Annie: I mean, when I moved here and in bars, men were asking where I go to church. I was like, "I don't think I understand Nashville."

Jonathan: No, no, no.

Annie: I don't think this is... It's great. I mean, but it is just assumed everyone goes to church.

Jonathan: In New York, that's not the case there. They're fine with all of it. They're happy for you to talk about your church and they want to talk about crystals and everything, all the things.

Annie: Or there's spin class.

Jonathan: Yeah, yeah.

Annie: That's been the interesting thing to me about New York is it feels like my friends that I've met that don't believe everything we believe have gone like, Oh, Annie chose to live in this neighborhood and she chose to be a Christian and she chose to wear a coat. It's like another choice I've made. And their choices spin class, living near Washington Square Park, and where they're from.

Jonathan: That's right.

Annie: The interesting part to me also is there is... here, it seems like in the south there is an advantage to being a Christian socially, professionally. And that is not the case in New York.

Jonathan: No, no, it's definitely not the case in New York. There's no secondary benefit. In fact, because we're also busy. It's like if you now have to add another thing to your to-do list, for example, going to church or being in a small group or whatever, it's just like, "I don't have time for this." So a lot of people, it's inconvenient for them.

Whereas here for a lot of people, it's like this is the only place I'll see my friends. And so they go to church for social reasons or for community reasons, and all of those incentives are gone, I feel like.

Annie: It's really interesting.

Jonathan: It's true.

Annie: I've really actually enjoyed it because it has... everyone is very defined about what they believe. So it gives me more permission to go... Like I have a friend who grew up in the South that is not a believer in New York. So my kind of lead-in was, what was it like where you grew up with church stuff? And so he had a couple of random answers about what it was like and it kind of gave me some poking spots, you know, because of how we both grew up similarly.

Dr. Merritt: You know, Jonathan, of course, he's there. He's a New Yorker for sure. He really is a New Yorker. And I visited. I'm a big Yankees fan. And that's a whole nother story.

But, you know, when I go to New York, I can sense the difference. What I always remember is I have a saying, the darker the night, the brighter the light. And the gospel is just as powerful, I think, in New York as it is anywhere else.

To his point, he's right. It's different. You have to share it differently. And I think that in New York, and he makes a great point, what I've had to learn, if I was up there, you have to work harder at building a relationship and building credibility and earning the right to speak. So there's this balance because, you know, I take what Paul said seriously, said I delivered of it unto you that which is of first importance.

Paul himself said the most important thing is the gospel, not church, not religion, not your theology. But the most important thing is the gospel. And if the gospel is the good news that we believe that it is, in fact, I call it the best news, then there should be a point when you really realize what you're doing for them when you share the gospel is the golden rule. You're doing for them what you want them to do for you if they only knew the truth, if that makes sense.

Annie: Right. Right. I wish you would have told me, you know.

Dr. Merritt: I don't have as much strength in it. He has an uncanny ability to build relationships and he builds them quickly. I mean, it's kind of phenomenal to me how he... he has that gift to do that.

Annie: And people just trust you so quickly. Yeah, it's true. Yeah, it's beautiful.

Dr. Merritt: I mean, he'd make a great con man.

Jonathan: Oh, my gosh. That's the downside. That's the downside.

Annie: The downside is I'm stealing money from people constantly. But it's working out great. You showed up with two whole pages of notes.

Jonathan: I did. I was just writing and praying and thinking and just things came out because especially, you know, I know that we want to... we've never before sat down in a forum like this and talked about our relationship. And people are just so fascinated by that. We have a rule, actually, that we will fight with each other in private and we only fight for each other in public.

Annie: Wow.

Jonathan: So one of the things that we were saying when we were talking about this is we want to make sure that we are authentic and vulnerable, but we want to honor each

other. So how do we do that? So I was like, Okay, Lord, what are the things? So I just started whatever was coming to mind, writing down and saying, like, look, if there's something that needs to be said, I don't want to forget it. So I wrote it down. I'm a notes guy, though. I'm a notes guy.

Annie: I love when people show up with those. I was like, Well, if you just want to go, I'll just sit here. That's what I'm here for.

Dr. Merritt: Annie, if I could. You know, I hope I don't tear up as well.

Annie: You're welcome.

Dr. Merritt: The thing I find a little bit interesting coming out of my evangelical background is why people are so astounded that I love my son. I don't understand that. I love my son the way Jesus loves my son. And I love my son the way Jesus loves me.

One of the ways I know... and, you know, you got to be careful with experience and I understand that. But one of the ways that I experientially know, ontologically know that I know Jesus is because of the way I love my son, because it's actually Jesus loving Him through me. And if loving your son is a felony, I'm a felon. If it's a crime, I'm a criminal. I love my son unconditionally. I just find it interesting, much more in my own evangelical tradition, to be frank. Why do you find that so amazing?

Let me give you a great example. Jesus loved the Pharisees. Now, He got pretty right with the Pharisees. He named called the Pharisees. He did not accept much of what they believed at all. They had tremendous theological differences, right? But what was so sad about the Pharisees, they failed to understand that the guy that they hated the most loved them the most.

So, frankly, I'm not trying to get on a soapbox. I just don't understand why people find that amazing. I'd feel a lot better if people criticized me if I didn't. I feel better if my tribe said... you know, if I turned my back on him, and they said, why would you do that? But the fact that even though we have our disagreements, and they are many, and some of them are very strong, and people know who I am and where I stand. The fact that I love my son, that people get upset about that, I don't get it. I don't understand it because I die for him today. I told him if I died today, he lost the best friend he ever had. And that'll be true the day I draw my last breath because he's my son.

Jonathan: And I think the thing that is so sad, and this is true, and we're... you know, it's not to set ourselves up as martyrs or victims, but particularly you have paid a huge price.

Annie: Really?

Jonathan: A huge price. And lost friends and maybe some, and a couple of church members, opportunities, speaking opportunities. I remember a few years ago, he shared a sermon that I preached on Twitter. I had sent it to him and I thought, "This will be a really abounding experience." And so I sent him this sermon that I preached, had nothing to do with sexuality or anything. And I said, "You're a preacher, I'm a preacher, you know... it's like talking football. We both have this thing. Would you listen to this and tell me what you think?"

So he listened to it and he thought it was a great sermon and he sort of, you know, do what you do when you're proud of your child. So he shared it on Twitter. This is a sermon my son preached and I'm so proud of it. And the amount of hatred that he got that resulted in... you know, he was a preaching professor at my alma mater. He had to withdraw from that and felt like that was the right thing to do. There were signing statements that came out against you.

It was just the vitriol for simply saying that you're proud of your gay son. I mean, I felt like it was a watermark that shows exactly where we are. And I have experienced some of it on the other side, but not I think...

Annie: For still being in a relationship with your family?

Jonathan: For not calling him out, for not criticizing him. I mean, we are all the time trolled on social media. We were talking about one you got yesterday.

Annie: Yesterday?

Dr. Merritt: Oh, yeah.

Annie: Geez.

Dr. Merritt: It was an innocuous tweet that had nothing to do with him. It was a good tweet. So there are always people going to try to say, well, why don't you do this? Why don't you do that? And I'll just jump in and say the sermon that he sent, if you listen, if he knows, it's totally orthodox. It was totally orthodox. He talked about the coming of Christ and that kind of thing.

And he just said to me... all I said was, Hey... I don't remember what I said. It was very just sweet. Hey, this is good. And I would defy anybody to go listen to that particular one message. I'll say to all of them and say, okay, if you show me a thing that was unbiblical or whatever, but all of that, which is to say, let me make

something clear. I'm not a martyr. A lot of these trolling, he knows more about it than I do. I don't pay attention to it.

I've learned one of the greatest things about Twitter is the word "mute". And what I love... I get a fleshly carnal delight is there are so many people that are ripping me and I don't even about and don't care.

Annie: I haven't logged onto Twitter since June of '22. And I'm the same way. I'm like, wonder what y'all think. Couldn't care.

Dr. Merritt: I'll stray just a little bit.

Annie: Yeah, please.

Dr. Merritt: I'm gonna give some [wits?]. Politics. I don't understand. I don't make the political personal. If you said to me today, I'm going to vote for Biden... Let me just give you a hypothetical. Let's say I'm not going to vote for Biden. At the end of the day, why should that affect our friendship? You got to answer for your vote. I don't. I got to answer for mine. We don't live in Russia. We live in America. It's free country. You vote for who you want to vote for.

Now, can we have a healthy discussion? Is it right for me to say, can you defend why you're voting or you can, okay... But at the end of the day, why do we have to be so mad and so angry and so vitriolic about it? I just don't think we do. You know, it's the same thing here.

But back to the price. I don't care what price I have to pay. I'm going to love him unconditionally. And that's just not going to change.

[00:24:50] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends, just interrupting this conversation to tell you about one of our incredible partners, [Thrive Causemetics](#). Y'all know I love Thrive Causemetics. Their mascara is my favorite. But they have a full line of makeup for whatever you are looking for: glam or natural, whatever you want. Their ingredients are clean and their products are foolproof, so it makes it easy for any skill level to apply.

They have thousands of five-star reviews. So it's really no wonder you see their makeup trending everywhere, including on my face. Thrive Causemetics has this new Empower Matte Precision Lipstick Crayon. Listen, y'all know I love a good lipstick. This is a two-in-one lipstick and liner, and it allows you to line and fill in with one step. And then there's a built-in sharpener included. It's waterproof, sweatproof, last up to 12 hours. Amen to that.

Listen, the package of these came in the mail when I was the only one at the office, and I thought, "Am I just going to keep all of these this time? No, no, no. I shared, I shared, but I kept the two that I loved. And oh my gosh, I wear them all the time.

One of the best parts of Thrive Causemetics is that for every product that is purchased, they donate products and funds to eight major causes. Refresh your everyday look with Thrive Causemetics, beauty that gives back.

Right now you can get an exclusive 10% off your first order at thrivecausemetics.com/TSF, like That Sounds Fun. That's thrivecausemetics.com/TSF for 10% off your first order.

That link and pretty much every other link you could ever hope for are in the show notes below, or we'll send them to you every Friday in our AFD Week in Review email. You can sign up for that in the show notes below as well. Make sure you check that out.

Sponsor: Listen, we all love something that is custom to us. Clothes that have been tailored to finish just right or makeup that's the right shade for our skin tone, a piece of art custom made exactly the way we like it. That's why you've got to check out [Prose](#). It's custom hair care. And I'm telling you every time I use Prose, I notice so many benefits, healthier, shinier hair, being some of them. And y'all talk about my hair all the time.

Prose is developed in Paris and bottled fresh in Brooklyn and has this in-house team of cosmetic chemists with an advanced AI algorithm that personalizes your formulas based on 80 plus unique factors. I get custom shampoo and conditioner, for example, and they are formulated to make my hair shiny and hydrated, and it delivers.

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Sponsor: Listen, y'all know this about me. I do not love going to the grocery store. So being able to order all my groceries and have them delivered is a game changer. I try to

stick with healthy options and that's why I love [Thrive Market](#). It makes shopping for healthy groceries easy, stress-free because I don't have to go anywhere and tailored to me and you and your family needs.

There's over 90-plus ways to filter your grocery aisles like low sugar, high protein, kid snacks, nut-free, and you'll save so much time and find exactly what you're looking for all while having it delivered right to your door. They have some of my favorite snacks, y'all the purely Elizabeth granola and gluten-free oatmeal, it is so good. And I love all the crackers from Simple Mills. They carry those as well.

Not only do I save time shopping as a Thrive Market member, I also save money on every single grocery order. On average, I save over 30% each time, you guys. Save time and money by getting it all in one place with Thrive Market. Go to thrivemarket.com/thatsoundsfun. And my friends get 30% off your first order plus a free \$60 gift. That is awesome. That's thrivemarket.com/thatsoundsfun.

Now back to our conversation with Jonathan and Dr. James Merritt.

[00:28:57] <music>

Annie: For clarity's sake, for our friends listening who maybe we haven't said this, you used to be the president of the SBC, Southern Baptist Convention, very traditional evangelical, and you are a gay Christian man. And father, son. So the story is expected to be, you have... Jonathan, you have strayed from how you grew up and now you are outside of faith. And Doc, you are waiting for him to come home. That is kind of the... that's what I... do y'all agree with that? That would be an outside story?

Dr. Merritt: Yeah, it's a little more than that. Yeah, I'm waiting. But in the meantime, what you ought to be doing is... while you're sitting on the front porch waiting on him, be throwing rocks at him. That's the story. Again, I'm not saying he's a prodigal. I'm not going to...

Annie: That's right. That's the outside story. That's not actually the story.

Dr. Merritt: But you can learn from that. So whatever or wherever you want to think about Jonathan, and I'm sitting on the front porch. And as long as he always knows, I got one guy I know I can go to, I got one place I know I can always go to, I can always go to my home, and I can always go back to my mom and my dad, and I know that they will love me unconditionally. Knowing. No, I haven't..

This is the amazing thing. It's hard to get more conservative theologically than me. I'm not a radical to the right kind of person, but I'm a solid, I'd call it, still call myself an evangelical.

So, read the end of that whatever you want to. I know where I stand, everybody does. I've not moved, he knows this. I didn't move one inch from where I was 40 years ago on a lot of issues. But the fact that I love my son, people then draw the conclusion, oh, so you've caved in or you've moved. Again, I go back to Jesus. He didn't move one inch theologically with the Pharisees or the Sadducees, but He loved them both unconditionally, and that's where I am, yeah.

Annie: Jonathan, when you first came out, which you were not given that choice to do yourself, you were outed by someone else. Does it matter if you feel loved, if you know you're loved? Did you feel loved, and does it matter if you feel loved?

Jonathan: Well, I'll say that the where we are now, and I think the way that I feel loved from my dad now is something that we've built into, and we built into it through understanding. So there've been seasons. It wasn't like the day that everything sort of hit. We were like, and now this is how we're gonna do this.

Annie: Yeah,. And here, now we have the map.

Jonathan: We've been sort of building it over the last 10-plus years. And we've been kind of realizing that there are certain principles and ideas that we have got to commit ourselves to to make this work. So I would say in those initial moments, it was just a stress response. I didn't have any idea where this was going or where it would take me. I knew that it was one of those moments where an ax falls, and it splits your life like firewood, and there is the life you had before that moment and the life you will now have to build after that moment.

And the person that I knew that I had been was now gone. So it took me a long time to even understand, like, who am I, and what is my life gonna be like, and then I think secondarily is like, how do we make this work? So it was not a foregone conclusion, at least for me, that this would work. I didn't know that it would work.

In some ways, you know, moving to New York, I was like, well, if this doesn't work out, I will have at least built another community that can kind of catch me. Because when all of it sort of broke, I didn't know, will I have a family? What will that family be? Will I have my friends? I've lost a lot of friends since then. Will I have a job? Will I have work? You know, there was a lot of open-ended questions. So I think it went for a while. We sort of... the days... well, I would say for months, months, and months after this, we kind of went into this Clintonian don't ask, don't tell season, where we just said... and it was kind of a gift, because it gave us both

space to think about this and pray about this and kind of begin to let some of the things that we kind of knew would be true settle in between us.

And then many years later, as we started to say, we really need to start talking about some of the things we're not talking about, then we had to kind of work out the mechanics of how this relationship would work and what it would mean to love across difference.

Annie: That's gotta matter so much to families that are listening and friends that are listening to hear you say, It is going to take time. This is a whole new map your family is now living off of.

Dr. Merritt: Right. He makes a great point, and I'll just segue off that, because he actually brought this up this morning, which I'll take this opportunity, Jonathan, since you brought it up. As you know, the story was outed in a very ugly way. Anyway, he called me. I was actually in Panama City Beach on vacation with Teresa, and I was gonna play golf with one of my best buddies. I was on the golf course when he called me. And he said, "Dad, I gotta tell you something. I need you to hear this from me...this is what's gonna... You know, what happened.

So he told me. Of course, the more I listened to his story, I just wept because... And I was not angry. I was not upset. Again, this is Jesus. Jesus kicked in, that's the way I put it. Jesus kicked in. The thought of doing anything other than continuing to love him never even entered my mind. The thought that, well, this is the end of our relationship before the Lord Jesus Christ, that thought never crossed my mind.

And I told my friend... I just started weeping because my guy he knew what was going on. So I got through, I said... His name's Todd. I said, "Todd, let me just kind of tell you what happened." I said, "We gotta stop. I gotta go back. I gotta get with Teresa." And I told him what happened, and I told him, he said, "Man, I hate that." And I said, "Well, I'm really concerned about Jonathan. I'm not concerned about me." I was really concerned about him.

So Jesus kicked in, literally. Here's all I knew. I didn't know how to do it. It's one thing to say, Oh, we love everybody unconditionally. That's easy to say to you, put a situation where, well, let's just put that to the test. And so the first thing I knew that God was telling me was clearly, and it's in scripture, love. If you read 1 Corinthians 13, love's unconditional.

Again, it doesn't mean you affirm everything somebody affirms or whatever, but love is unconditional. And I was telling him, I felt a lot as a dad, Annie. I felt a lot. And I'd give anything. I've told my boys, I'd give them if I could do my daddy days over again. But there's a story that happened. It was similar to this.

Jonathan's the most sensitive of my three boys. He's got a super sensitive heart. We were talking about this. He was playing basketball years and years ago, and he was... Jonathan's not... athletics was not his gift.

Jonathan: That was not my spiritual gift: basketball.

Annie: You are so talented in so many things.

Jonathan: Not basketball.

Dr. Merritt: No, no, he is. But he went on to the court. He really didn't want to. It was kind of a forced thing. And he shot an air ball in front of people. He lost it. He just started crying. And I'm telling you, my daddy, Jesus, since the day he came to me, it was one of my finest moments. I ran across the court, and I grabbed him, and I hugged him, and I held him. He remembers it.

And I said to him, I said, "Son, listen, this has not defined who you are. I'm so proud of you. I'm so thankful you just got out here on the court. That's all that matters." And I hugged him, and I walked him back to the bench. That moment was repeated that day at Panama City Beach. And though I could not get to him, if I could have gotten to him, I would have grabbed him, and I would have hugged him and I'd said, Hey, listen, I'm here for you. I love you. That's never gonna change. Again, the power of Jesus' love is unbelievable.

Annie: Jonathan, respectfully to your parents, you also got to choose whether to love unconditionally. Right, whether you were going to stay in relationship. It is not just... You get to choose, too.

Jonathan: Yeah. What does that look like for you? What's unconditional love look like for you toward your parents?

Jonathan: Well, you know, I have a lot of progressive friends who've chosen a different path. And we live in a moment where choosing to cut off your parents is celebrated, when I think it's oftentimes an act of profound self-harm. Because you're cutting yourself off from these primary relationships. I have parts of my mom and my dad are integrated into me. And it's not like any other relationship. So if I cut myself off from them, what I end up doing, I don't resolve the pain that I feel. Then I just export that pain on whomever else is in my life, right? So it doesn't go away. What goes away is the potential of healing, whatever might exist between us.

So for me, I think it came down to... we had one Christmas, actually. We had a big fight. And I got very upset-

Annie: Everybody listening is like, Us too.

Jonathan: I got very upset and I said some words that I shouldn't have said and I yelled and we got off the phone and we didn't speak for a month.

Annie: Oh, y'all weren't in person.

Jonathan: We were not. I was in New York.

Dr. Merritt: I don't barely remember this, by the way.

Jonathan: I was in New York. This was kind of a turning point, I think, in our relationship. Because I sat on it about a month later, we had not spoken for a month, and I wrote an email to them and said, "I need to apologize because the person who showed up on that call is not the person that I want to be." But there were things that I learned on that call.

And one of them is, is that I don't know you as well as I would like to know you. And I don't think that you know me as well as I would like you to know me. And so could we just set up a time to get on a Zoom together for 60 minutes? Just 60 minutes. At 61, we can talk about anything else. Well, I don't want this to become a three-hour, we're worn out, we need a nap conversation. If we need another 60 minutes next week, we'll do it. And let's just enter into a space and a time where we can intentionally get to know each other better and ask the questions that... you're afraid to ask questions, and I'm afraid to ask questions about what you think or what you're feeling.

So that began a process, I think, of beginning to bridge that divide that we had been standing across this chasm from each other. And we had a lot of things that were unspoken that were kind of maybe building up in us. And so we ended up beginning to have conversations that we hadn't had before, and I think that was a real turning point for us.

Annie: You have really chosen to keep a lot of us evangelicals in your life.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Annie: Why is that?

Jonathan: Well, there's a lot of reasons. For one thing, a lot of my progressive-

Annie: Which I'm grateful, by the way, because I would like us to be in each other's lives forever, but...

Jonathan: I have a lot of progressive friends who do not like that. They believe that evangelicals are bad people, dangerous people, they have a dangerous, harmful message, and they think that I legitimize evangelicals and evangelicalism, that I give evangelicals cover.

What I'll say, and I witnessed this among my friends, my progressive friends who I love, is this. There has been the rise of progressive fundamentalism. It's a lot of people who grew up fundamentalists, and they left behind the fundamentalist theology, but they took all the machinery with them, all the litmus tests, all the cancellation, all the us versus them, all the demonization and the villainization, and now they deploy the same tactics of fundamentalism in the opposite direction against, oftentimes, their parents, their family members, their former pastors. I have just decided that I'm not going to do that.

And for me, in some ways, I think when you cut yourself off from people who disagree with you, you cut yourself off from your greatest teachers. You cut yourself off from people who will ask you questions that will either challenge what you believe or help you to become more confident in what you believe.

That being in relationship with people who disagree with you, they will teach you to love, teach you to be compassionate, teach you to be patient, teach you to ask good questions. I mean, we have a rule where we say that in our relationship that we will seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

Annie: Oh, wow. Seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

Jonathan: That's right. So my number one, when we have a disagreement, if we can both mirror the same posture with each other to say, my goal is to understand you better, even though... what will happen with a lot of people who are like former evangelicals is we go, Oh, I don't need to be curious about what he believes. I know what he believes.

Annie: Because I knew it. I grew up in it. I know it.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Annie: Ah, interesting.

Jonathan: And so for me, it's like making sure that more statements end in a question mark than a period and I get curious rather than condemn him or to be angry with him. I

just try to get curious and say, why do you think that? Or what's behind that? Or why do you believe that? And how do you think about this? Or what about this other idea? What about that to you is distasteful or makes you feel uncomfortable?

And then he does the same to me, right? He asks me questions. And now we're working toward mutual understanding rather than trying to tear down the other person's ideas and arguments and beliefs. Because you can't control what somebody else believes. You can't police what somebody else believes. You can't police how someone else behaves.

So we have said, for us, our behavior is how we refer to each other, how we speak to each other, that we are going to behave in mutual respect and kindness for each other, but I can't police what he believes and he can't police what I believe.

Annie: It's interesting to me to hear you say that there are progressive friends of yours who don't like that you're friends with evangelicals because that's... I think, I would say, I experience people not liking when I'm friends with people different than me. So it's really interesting that that's true in every seat around this table, that when you reach out and choose to be friends with people who are different than you, who maybe believe different, but have them up close, people in your own camp are going to say, that is wrong.

Jonathan: Actually, dad and I were talking about this this morning, that I had a friend of mine who works for the Revoice Conference. So he's what you would call Side B. He's a celibate gay person. Okay. And is a-

Annie: Side B?

Jonathan: Side B is what they call it, right?

Annie: Oh, okay.

Dr. Merritt: I didn't know that.

Annie: I know. Thank you for teaching us. Side B.

Jonathan: There you go. New language.

Annie: A celibate gay person.

Jonathan: A person who believes that in order-

Annie: And it's a Christian?

Jonathan: A Christian organization, press and sprinkle, you know, that kind of-

Annie: Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, I love [press and sprinkle?].

Jonathan: So anyway, this guy took a photo with us because we're friends. We don't agree, but we're friends, and he posted it on Twitter. And then I got dragged. How could you be friends with this person? This person is dangerous. They promote this ideology. And my response was, Look, if you're offended by my diversity of friendships, just wait until you read the Gospels. That's a real barn burner. You know what I mean?

Annie: You Jesus-juked him.

Jonathan: I did. I Jesus-juked him. Just wait, that's a tough pill to swallow. Now, I mean, I guess you could disagree with who's Jesus and who's the Pharisees in the equation. But to me, it feels so strange that we are having this conversation in Christendom that people would say that somehow you are obligated to cut people out of your life who hold a different view or live differently than you would when I find that those people teach me all sorts of things. They expose things in me that I need to work on. They point to the areas where I need healing or I need greater reflection or thought or prayer. So I embrace it as a gift. It's been a gift to me.

And we say this all the time. Like we teach each other things all the time. It doesn't mean that we're changing our fundamental convictions about some of the issues that we're talking about, but we are each other's greatest teachers and that's the gift to us. If I were to cut him out of my life, that's just harming myself. That's robbing myself of the gift of what this is.

Annie: Doc, will you talk for a second to parents who are listening? I've had this conversation with a friend of mine who has elementary kids. I mean, the parent said, "My kids will never be gay. That will not happen in this house." But what that is actually... there's a fear there of what am I gonna do if this happens in our family? And what am I gonna do? Like, can I stop this, right? So will you speak to people parenting right now in a culture that sexuality is so talked about, so important and permissioned, especially outside of Christianity? Talk to the parents who feel some way about what if this is our story too.

Dr. Merritt: Sure. And it probably would not surprise you, Annie. He doesn't even know about this, but I would say I average a call at least once a month.

Annie: Really?

Dr. Merritt: I just talked to a pastor in Mississippi about three weeks ago, saying, Hey, my daughter has come out as gay. You know, what do I do? How do I handle it? You know, again, it goes back to a couple of things. Number one, I'm just looking at your little plaque right there. The greatest of these is love. That's what Paul said. The greatest of these is love, right?

So what I tell people is, look, there's some things in your relationship that has not changed and never will. She's still your daughter. You're still her dad, okay? Number two, again, you need to love her exactly the same way, not only the way that Jesus loves her, but that Jesus loves you.

I mean, you think about this. If there was even one condition to Jesus loving us, not one of us would be loved by Jesus. Just take one. Jesus wouldn't have to look hard in my life for a reason to say, Yeah, I don't love you. You're that way, or you think this, or you do that, right?

One of the things that's helped me to learn, I've had to learn experientially what does unconditional love look like? And by the way, let me tell you something. It's much easier emotionally to love conditionally than it is to love unconditionally. A lot easier. That's the easy way out. It's not easy, you know?

But having said that, I tell parents two things. I say, number one, you don't have to compromise who you are or what you believe. And that's not the way to do it. That's not gonna get you anywhere. We had a conversation one time, and he paid me one of the greatest compliments he's ever paid. He may not even remember this.

We were talking about something, I don't know what it was, but anyway, I said, "Jonathan, you just need to understand, this is not just you, this is Teresa, this is all three of my boys, this is my grandkids, this is my church. If I have to come down between what I believe Jesus and the Bible is and where you are, I'm gonna go with Jesus and the Bible. You just need to understand that."

I will never forget when he looked at me, he said to me, and it meant the world to me, he said to me, Dad, I wouldn't expect anything less. That doesn't mean I'm right. That's not my point. But just like he's gotta go with his core convictions, I gotta go with mine.

But what I tell parents is great love overcomes a multitude of sins. You need to be honest. You need to be truthful. You know, I don't accept this. I don't think that this is best for you. On the other hand, I hadn't changed anything between us as far as I love you, you're my child, I'm your dad, this home is always gonna be your home, you can always come home again. You know, they'll say, you can't go home again?

Well, you can go home again, and we want you in our life. And then you fight for that.

And then I tell them the last thing is, look, if what I say to you sounds easy, it is not easy, but you will grow more through understanding and practicing unconditional love than anything else you'll go through in your life. So, if I die today, he could write a book on the things we disagree on. He could write a book. I tell people, we don't have arguments, we just have discussions you can hear a mile away. To this day. To this day we do. Now, we don't yell and scream... I mean, text, yeah. We get after it, right?

But at the end of the day, when I die, he's gonna know one thing about me, whatever else he believes, my dad loved me to the day I died. And I told him, I just lost my best friend, and that will be true. I don't care what he does, that will be true the day I die.

Jonathan: And there's something that you've said before, which I think is so poignant. You've been inspired by this Billy Graham quote.

Dr. Merritt: Oh. Can I tell this story real quick?

Annie: Yes, please.

Dr. Merritt: Billy Graham... in fact, I just spoke at the Cove, and Billy Graham, I got to spend time with him, Jonathan got to spend time with him.

Annie: Did you?

Jonathan: Yeah, yeah.

Annie: You and Bill? Old pals.

Jonathan: Yeah, me and O'Bill, me and O'Bill.

Dr. Merritt: Yeah... I'm gonna say three names that'll make... one'll make people mad, sorry. The three greatest men of God I've ever known are Billy Graham, Adrian Rogers, and Jerry Falwell. John Falwell is false, but he was a great man. He really was.

Anyway, someone asked Dr. Graham one time, if you found out that your son was... I think they called gay or homosexual. If you found out your son was, let's say gay, if your son was gay, would you still love him? And Billy Graham said, "I would love him even more." I don't love Jonathan more than I love my other two sons, but

I love Jonathan exactly like I love my other two sons. And he loves me exactly like my other two sons love me.

Annie: What other bullet points you got? Anything else, y'all...? I mean, this is such a game...

Dr. Merritt: Hey, Annie, let me tell you something. If there's no saying.. you talk about seek first to understand, then be understood. That's a Stephen Covey quote. It's one of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. But let me tell you this, and this will make some people mad and I really don't care. The people I care about the most and I value their opinion the most are the people who will cry at my funeral. That's why 98% of the trolling out there, I couldn't care less. Some of those people even be glad and throw a party when I die. It's okay. He'll cry at my funeral. That means the world to me.

[00:52:16] <music>

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Annie: And now back to finish up our conversation with Jonathan and Dr. James Merritt.

[00:53:25] <music>

Jonathan: We're talking about accepting some of the things. There are things about me everybody knows. There are things about me that he wishes he could change. There are things about him that I wish I could change. A lot of people, I think, enter into these kinds of relationships and what the posture that they take is, is I want you in this relationship to be open to changing your mind, but I'm not gonna be open to changing my mind.

So both people come from that perspective, right? You need to be open to changing, but I've already arrived. So what we've decided is, is that we're gonna stop trying to change each other. He knows what I believe, I know what he believes. Why do we need to keep repeating that over and over and just drive each other crazy?

Annie: Like sometimes the scale's gonna tip.

Jonathan: That's right. So we've stopped trying to do that. I'll tell you too, you're a big OnSite fan, I'm an OnSite fan, and dad knows I went to OnSite, which is not too far from where we are right now, I suppose. I remember there was a point in my OnSite group that really changed the way that I thought about our relationship, because at the time I was so hoping I could change him in some way, and it wasn't happening. Then I was living with this kind of chronic relational disappointment.

I remember my therapist, Courtney, she loved props. She was one of those therapists that loves props.

Annie: Experiential?

Jonathan: Experiential. So she went and she got a poster board. This is true, by the way. This is not just true of our relationship. This is true of every parent and child. She took a poster board and she threw it on the ground, and she said, "This poster board represents all the ways you wanna be loved by your parents." And then she got a piece of notebook paper and put it in the middle, and she said, "This notebook paper represents all the ways your parents are capable of loving you. And so now you have a choice. You can spend the rest of your life trying to tear at that page, trying to stretch it to the borders, or you can accept that there are limited human beings who are doing the best they can to love you to the full capacity of who they are, and you can build the most beautiful relationship possible within the confines of that notebook paper. So the choice is yours. What do you wanna do? How do you wanna live?"

I feel like when I left that I came back and I said, They are loving me in the fullness, and it's really beautiful. But if what I try to do is say, you have to love me by changing your beliefs, and I keep pulling at that paper, all I'm gonna do is tear this relationship apart. So if I can instead accept that he... I really believe he is doing... he reads the word, he's not an idiot. He's got a PhD in New Testament. Hello. He's interpreting. He reads his Greek New Testament. I can't. I didn't do this. He's doing his best.

What he believes that God has taught him through the word, he's living according to that. Guess what? I've done the same thing. In some ways I feel like... One of my brothers is an attorney, and one of my brothers is a pilot. In some ways I feel like it would be easier for him if I had chosen either of those routes, because it's so easy to love somebody who's totally something other than you, than a different version of the kind of thing that you are.

Annie: Oh, sure, sure, sure.

Jonathan: So we kind of made on this plane.

Annie: Right, because you're both pastoral in your-

Jonathan: That's exactly right. I went to seminary, he went to seminary. So it's a fair fight.

Annie: Yes, yes, yes.

Jonathan: It's a fair fight.

Annie: Whereas if he'd been like a soccer goalie, it'd have been totally different.

Jonathan: Exactly. If I'd have just gone off and done my own thing, then it would have been different. But I really trust that he is doing what he believes is right by God. And so I just trust if... in fact, this is a story we were talking about when we met with Billy Graham one time. And I remember when he said this, because I was asking... he told this story about how... and this is apropos to this conversation.

Billy Graham told a story, he was very old when we met with him that day. And he told a story about when Bill Clinton was being honored at one of the Time Magazine's People of the Year kind of, they brought all the people who had been Time Magazine People of the Year, and Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton asked for Billy Graham and Ruth Graham to sit at their table. And this was right in the middle of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. And Billy Graham took all this hate. How dare you?

Annie: For saying yes to that, for sitting at that table.

Jonathan: How could you sit next to him? How could you lend him your credibility? How could you do that? So I said, "Well, Dr. Graham, what did you say?" And he said, "I said that God's job is to judge, the Holy Spirit's job is to convict, and Jesus' job is to love. We are called to be like Jesus, and some people try to do all three."

Annie: Wow.

Jonathan: That really left an impression on me. That you know what, God judges. I'm not called to judge you. And the Holy Spirit doesn't need my help to convict you if that's what needs to happen. But I'm called to be like Jesus, which is to say to love you as best as I know how for as long as we live on this earth together.

Dr. Merritt: Annie, if I could just say this. I'd forgotten about that story because we're tracking so much here. My mentor was Adrian Rogers. Dr. Rogers used to say something, and this has really helped me with John and others. He says, Listen, anything I can talk you into, somebody else can talk you out of.

Annie: Oh, wow.

Dr. Merritt: But anything God talks you into, nobody can talk you out of. Which leads me to say... and I've never felt this way, but I've had it more affirmed to me. Even if I could change it, which I can't... It's not my job. It's not my job. My job's to love him, first thing. Second thing, and people don't understand this, one of these days we're, I believe, we're gonna all stand before God, okay? If he was right and I was wrong, I'm prepared to do that. If I'm right and he's wrong, he needs to be prepared to do that. I don't have to answer for him. He didn't have to answer for me.

But then there was one other story, and I hope people hear this, if there's anything else, some of the dads out there. Dr. Rogers told a story about who... there were two neighbors, and they were talking across the fence. One of the boys, one of the neighbor's boys had gotten arrested for drunk driving, and he was a drug addict or something. Well, this dad was telling this, "And I'll tell you what, if that was my boy, I'd do this. If that was my boy, I'd do that. If that was my boy, I'd do that." The neighbor never said a word.

When he got through, the neighbor looked at him and said, "Maybe you would if that was your boy, but that's not your boy, he's my boy. And this is the way I'm going to do it. And there are a lot of guys out there that throw rocks at him on one side, at me at the other side, and the reason why they are able to do it, they've not been in our position. It would be very interesting to see if they were, it'd be a different ball game.

Annie: Yeah, that's right. I think there are a thousand gifts to being your friend. One of them is being up close to you has done that for me. It's put me on the same side of the fence and helped me to be who I want to be and to really pursue looking like Jesus in friendship. It is so much easier to have hard stances when you're far away or when you do not love someone who is the boy in the story.

Dr. Merritt: You know that scripture that says there's a friend that sticks closer than a brother? I've never heard anybody say this, but I think it's a two-edged sword. There are friends that sticks closer than a brother. But that's a sad statement about a brother. I don't want anybody to ever say, well, there was a friend that stuck closer to you than your dad. That's impossible because nobody will ever be a better friend to him than I am. And I'll spend the rest of my life proving that.

I will not compromise my convictions. I will not compromise my core beliefs. I can't. I can't do it. At the same time, I think it enhances our love because he just said, he knows what I believe, but I love him. I know what he believes, but he loves me.

So I think that at the end of the day, the most important thing about me, and this is not just true about him, I want Annie Downs, if she can say about somebody, Hey, you know, James Merritt? Yeah. You know what? I really see Jesus in James Merritt. I'd rather have you say that about me than, you know, he's a great preacher. He's a great author. He's quick on his feet, or he's a nice guy. If at the end of the day, my son can say, I'll tell you something about my dad. Was he perfect? No. Were there changes about him? Things about him I wish I could have changed? Absolutely. But do I believe he loved Jesus and then I see Jesus in him? That's all that matters to me.

Annie: What do you want your dad to say about you?

Jonathan: What do I want my dad to say about me? I think the same thing that we say about each other is that, you know, we talk a lot about this. One of the difficulties of being a father is, is we get to talk a lot about his flaws, right? Because, well, he was my dad.

And we don't get to talk as much about my... nobody says like, let me tell you, can we talk about all your flaws as a child? Like I'm in therapy because of all your flaws. You go to therapy.

Annie: Ya, the parents should really go to therapy because of the kid.

Jonathan: That's right.

Annie: I wish I would. I probably should pay for it.

Jonathan: But I have failed a lot of ways in the way that I have loved as a son. And I think the thing that we have done with each other is we've given each other a lot of grace and we have said that you have done, you have done the best that you knew how as a father and I have done the best that I have known how as a son, and we have forgiven each other for the ways that we have fallen short. And there are a lot of those. A lot of those.

But we have decided that rather than change the past, which we can't do, we can make a commitment that however many days we have left, that we will continue to make up for lost time to make up for our failures and to love each other as best as we know how.

Dr. Merritt: And Annie, I think one of the marks of spiritual maturity, you know, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 13:5, Examine yourself to see whether you're not in the faith. He didn't say examine somebody else. He said, quit looking out the window and look in the mirror.

I'm not concerned... I never think about whatever faults he had as a son. I don't even think about that. I just think about me and I think about how I have fallen short. And I realized I got a full-time job just dealing with me. Doesn't mean you don't call wrong, wrong. It doesn't mean you don't speak it. Please speak the truth and love and all that. But at the same time, I've just found that, you know, I'm a much happier person and a much more of a peace person when I just keep remembering, remembering "your job's to love him, his job's to love you. You're going to be the best friend he's ever had. And at the end of the day, we'll let God sort whatever God wants to sort out.

Jonathan: I remember coming when I was a kid... You don't remember this. My mom would remember this. But I would come home and like mom would have the TV on, you know, as moms do and Dr. Phil would be on. And I remember I would watch because what are you going to do? The tv is on.

Annie: Yeah, it's just on the living room, you know, your snack.

Jonathan: I remember this happened a lot of times and Dr. Phil sort of famous for this, I suppose. But he would be there with inevitably some married couple who had these deep disagreements who were, you know, at each other's throats. And he would eventually get to a point where he would ask a question and I've never forgotten this question. He said, "Look, do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?"

And you get to choose. You can continue to fight with each other so that you can prove that you're right and he's wrong, or you can choose happiness and peace and love and relationship. That's the choice. Once you understand what you're really choosing, it's an easy choice. I think we have really sized this up and said, okay, two roads have diverged in a wood, which one will we have? Do we want to have a loving relationship with each other, or do we want to be right? And we've chosen, I think, the greater path.

Dr. Merritt: You know, Jesus... I just preached on this. He reads my sermons and I just preached on the broad way and the narrow way. And I quoted that famous poem of Robert Frost. Well, I'm floating more and more. We've taken the road less traveled. But you got to take that road to follow Jesus as well.

A little funny note. I got to get this in. So we talk about his faults. Let me tell you the biggest fault he had as a son that to this day irritates me. If he tries to deny it, he's lying. Every time I go to a restaurant with him, I'm telling you, he knows this. The memory comes back. Right?

So we ate at a real nice restaurant last night and it was pretty pricey. Again, it gives me the [inaudible 01:06:12] We would go to a restaurant... I'm not making it... So help me God. He never looked at what to eat. He looked at the price and he always picked out the most expensive thing.

Annie: Really?

Dr. Merritt: It didn't matter if he was eating hog guts. It didn't care.

Annie: I've never known that about you.

Dr. Merritt: That is absolutely... It would irritate the fire-

Jonathan: When he's paying.

Dr. Merritt: So we got there last night. We were with Ali. I told Ali last night, I said, "Can I just be honest with you?" I said, "He's not going to look at the menu." "What do you mean?" "He's going to look at the dollar signs."

Jonathan: Like I said, it has cost you. It has cost you physically and metaphorically.

Annie: Oh my gosh. I want to end with this. I'm going to ask you what sounds fun, but Jonathan, I do want you to take just a second, if you don't mind Doc got to speak to the parents. Will you speak to our friends listening who are wrestling with their sexuality? The DMS I get of people saying, can I be a part of this, even though I'm wrestling? And the answer, by the way, everyone listening, you are welcome here. You are welcome here. So talk to them for a minute who are afraid of what will happen when they tell their parents or who are just trying to figure out who am I in this?

Jonathan: Oh gosh. Well, the first is the question of self-understanding. And then there's this faith component. I posted a video actually on social media this weekend because somebody had asked me like, what is it like? When did you know? And I said, you know, for some people it's like turning on a light switch, right? They had a moment and they felt a thing and they were like, this is who I am. I don't have an ability to tell that kind of story.

For me, it was like watching the sunrise. And over time, there were all these moments that a little more light came in to where I kind of understood who I was. So for a lot of kids who were just kind of wondering, I just say, be patient and you will know. And don't exclude God from that conversation because God made you, God knows you better than you know yourself.

Even in my book, I have a whole scene in a church, which has really confused a lot of reviewers because they're like, why is there a faith component in this? And it says at church the next day, my Guncle sings loudly. He prays and gives thanks and he does it devoutly. His bright-colored outfit makes two women stare when we pass, they both snicker, but he doesn't care.

And the idea is that like a lot of people say, look, you can either be who you are as Jonathan Merritt, or you can be a Christian. And I say, I don't have to choose. And I can hold those things together, even if you can't and that's okay. So for me, that's another real encouragement that I give people, is a lot of people walk away from the faith because they're given a false choice. I don't think that people have to choose. I think that God... you know, people will often come to me and they'll say, you know, they read the Bible, maybe like dad does in a more literalist way and we come to very different conclusions on what the Bible teaches and says about this. That's not a surprise to anyone.

But I always say the starting point of this conversation for me is not whatever Romans 1 says. It's who is God? The Christian tradition has been very clear, despite our many disagreements about this one thing, that God is love. God doesn't do loving things. God is love. That the essence, the ontological essence of who God is, is love.

God loves you because God loves you, because God is obsessed with you, because God will never stop loving you, because you can't do anything today to make God love you one iota less or one smidgen more. And if you begin with that, all of the anxiety that we feel about how do we rectify what we believe or who we are and with our faith, with our identity is, I always know that despite all of the disagreements and the debates, I come back to that one thing, that God loves me. And that's what I would say to everybody else. It come back to that one thing.

Dr. Merritt: Annie, I would just add, and this is what I'd say to everybody. I would say at the end of the day, if you read the New Testament, you shouldn't find your identity and your sexuality, your theology, your upbringing, you find your identity in Christ. And God is love. God is holy and his love is a holy love. So that's my big thing.

When he walks into my house, when he sees his two brothers walk into my house, I'm not like, well, there's my two straight sons, there's my two gay sons. He's my

son. My desire for all my sons. John said it perfectly. I have no greater desire than my children walk in the truth.

Well, the truth, if you read the New Testament, is my identity is solely in Christ. Pastors have a lot of problem with stepping away. We've talked about this. Pastors have a lot of problem with not retiring, but leaving because all of a sudden they realize my identity is as a pastor. No, it's not. My identity is in this church. I founded the church I pastor. I founded the church. It makes it doubly hard.

Well, I realized my time's coming and I'm praying that through now. And I've told some leaders in our church, I'd rather leave a year early than a day late. But my point is, I've had to come to grips in my own life, realizing my identity is not in my marriage. My identity is not in my family. My identity is not in my vocation. My identity is in Christ. And if everybody can say at the end of the day, regardless of where you are, who you are, I've got to find my identity in Christ, that solidifies everything.

Annie: God is love and our identity is in Christ. Anything we didn't say that y'all want to say?

Dr. Merritt: He's got the notes. I don't know if he left anything else. He better check his notes. You know, he told me something. Full disclosure. He's always coaching me, which he should. And he's a great coach. And he said, Dad, he said, you might want to write some notes down and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I'm listening. And he said, But the biggest thing is to be authentic. That's what he told me. You be authentic. And I say this with all respect. I don't want this to come out the wrong way. But you know, I don't know what else. That's who I am. And so is he.

And here's what I said to him. I said, "Jonathan, I don't need notes to be... not that he does, but I don't need notes to be authentic. And I've been very authentic today. I think you've done a marvelous job. It's been an honor to be with you. And I just, again, reiterate that, you know, at the end of the day, if I know I'm following Jesus in the way He loved others, I'm at peace with who we are in our relationship, not just as dad and son, but as friend to friend. And I'm totally at peace and full of joy.

Jonathan: You know, I'll tell you something that comes to mind. I mean, one rule, and this may be, will help a lot of people who are listening to this podcast. I mean, one rule we've had to live by is we do not recruit other people in the family to our sides when we have disagreements. So our disagreements stay between us. So I don't go, well, you know, James agrees with me or Joshua agrees with me, or I talk to Mom about this and she thinks you're wrong.

So what we have done is we've, we've allowed our disagreements also to stay private between us, even within our family. We don't drag our family into it because the other thing that can happen is, is it can become kind of like the thing that tears the family apart.

Annie: Then suddenly your sexuality is the center of the whole family.

Jonathan: Exactly.

Annie: No, I wouldn't want that.

Jonathan: So we don't do that. We don't discuss our disagreements even with others in the family.

Dr. Merritt: That's a great word.

Annie: That's really smart.

Dr. Merritt: I'll add one other quick thing.

Annie: Yes.

Dr. Merritt: I've heard this all my life and I heard somebody learn this about a year ago and I thought that's so right. We like to say we agree to disagree. No, we agree that we disagree. When you say we agree to disagree, then it makes it sound like your relationship is a disagreeable relationship. It's not. We have agreed and it's really helped us. There are certain things like he said, perfect, no need to talk about this, Jonathan. You're here, I'm there, you're not going to change my mind. We say that often. Jonathan, you're not going to change my mind. Dad, you're not going to change my mind.

So we agree that we disagree. But again, when that boy comes home, he doesn't come home enough, I'm going to fuss at him right now.

Annie: Don't you know that that basement is full of Georgia boys, a toilet seat that sings the fight song?

Dr. Merritt: But when he comes home, every time he comes home, I'm that dad on the front porch that man, it's great to have you home.

Annie: Well, I honor you both. And I'm so thankful that you would trust me with this today. It is very sacred to me. So thank you for doing this. And thank you for doing this. I love you so much.

Jonathan: Thanks a lot.

Dr. Merritt: We love you.

Annie: So thankful.

[01:15:32] <music>

Outro: Oh, you guys, aren't they great? What an actual literal gift that these two men have brought to us today. If the two books we talked about today, *My Guncle and Me*, or *The God Who Hears* would serve you or your family, I invite you to pick up a copy.

And head over to social media, please thank Jonathan and Dr. Merritt for being on the show. This is what I'll ask of you too. If you have any feedback, please send that straight to me. You can email it to me. I will read every one of your emails at tellmemore@Anniefdowns.com. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for being a part of this conversation and this episode with us.

As we said in the intro, it is hard to do nuanced conversations in such a public way, but I feel like Dr. James and Jonathan really gave us such a gift today. So thank you again to both of you for the gift you offered us today of hearing inside of your story and your family and your life. So I'm just really grateful, and I love you both.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs, Instagram, X, Facebook. Anywhere you need me, that is where you can find me.

And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you and I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is some meetings we are having getting ready for our show at the Ryman next weekend. I cannot believe it's here. So I hope you're coming to town. I hope you're joining us. It is going to be a fun, fun weekend.

And I hope y'all have a great weekend this weekend. We'll see you back here on Monday. Y'all we are in a parent season. We are in our parent era on That Sounds Fun because Monday we're talking with Melissa Urban, the co-founder of Whole30, and my mom, Mrs. F. Downs. So we've got another parent on the pod coming on Monday. Get ready. Mama is bringing the heat. So we'll see y'all back here on Monday.