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Annie: Hey friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today.

Hey, we're going to talk today about singleness and the church. And I want to make sure you know that if you are single or if you know someone who's single, our open registration season for Single Purpose League is coming to a close next week on Monday the 28th. It won't open again until the new year. So make sure you come join us, especially because you're going to get to go through our Advent series, *Stay tuned*, together with some special bonus fun things just for us. You can find all the details at singlepurposeleague.com. We would love for you to join us.

If you are married and you have a single friend in your life who is not married today, never been married, divorced, widowed, they are so welcome in Single Purpose League. Please let them know it exists. Again, that's singlepurposeleague.com.

Before we dive into today's conversation though, I want to tell you about one of our incredible sponsors. This show is sponsored by BetterHelp. I know Halloween is next week and it's cute to wear a mask and costume, but we can't be masking our feelings. That's not healthy. Or pretending to be someone that we're not. We're not about that life.

Therapy can help you learn to process and accept all parts of yourself so you can take off the mask. Because let's just leave those for Halloween, right?

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Take off that mask with BetterHelp. Visit betterhelp.com/thatsoundsfun today and you'll get 10% off your first month. That's betterhelp.com/thatsoundsfun.

Intro: Today on the show, I get to talk with my friend Ryan Wekenman. Ryan's a pastor at Red Rocks Austin. He's also the author of *Single Today*, which came out earlier this year.

He is a trusted voice for single men and single women. While we typically save a lot of our conversations about singleness for Single Purpose League these days, this

was one where we knew this was for everyone, single, married, in your 20s and your 70s. Hey, friends in your 70s, we see you out there. We know you're there.

One thing we get to talk about today is how to help our churches and pastors understand how to serve the single people in their church. There's a resource that I want to give you too, that you can share with your pastor. We'll put the link in the show notes below, but it's available at AnnieFDowns.com/pastoringsingles. It's just a short PDF, totally for free, that offers some ideas to help your pastor connect with the people who aren't married in their church.

This is an important conversation, and Ryan and I get to dig into it today, along with talking about why singleness doesn't have to be this thing we wish away. It can actually be celebrated and enjoyed. We are going there today. So here's my conversation with my friend, Ryan Wekenman.

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Annie: Ryan Weckenman, welcome to That Sounds Fun.

Ryan: Annie, thank you so much for having me. It is an honor.

Annie: It is about time, is what it is.

Ryan: It's about time.

Annie: It is about time. I'm so glad you're here.

Ryan: Can I tell you how loved you are in Austin, Texas, by the way? Everybody I told I was coming on this podcast is like, "Tell Annie, we love her dearly."

Annie: Oh, that's really kind.

Ryan: So many people at Red Rocks Austin just get so much from this podcast, and so thank you for being who you are.

Annie: Thanks. Oh, that means a lot to me. I love Austin. Do you like being there? That's not where you're from.

Ryan: No.

Annie: I read in the book.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah.

Annie: You've done a lot. You've done Colorado's, California's, now Texas.

Ryan: Yeah, I've been in Texas for six and a half years, and I love it. Austin is the best.

Annie: Yeah.

Ryan: It very much feels kind of Denver meets California. I wish it had an ocean. But besides that, yeah, it's just such good people and so many good friends. It is a great place to pastor a church.

Annie: A lot of people in Nashville feel the same, like, if it had an ocean, this would be, yeah, like California. I don't feel that way because I don't... The idea that you like an ocean is insane to me. You understand we don't know anything about an ocean. We know nothing.

Ryan: What I love about it, Annie, there's so much mystery. There's so much to explore. There's so much unknown.

Annie: There's so much that wants to eat you.

Ryan: That's true. But like a good story, it reminds us that we're a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Annie: Certainly. I agree with you. I think they're beautiful to look at. My favorite doom scrolling is ocean doom scrolling.

Ryan: Oooh.

Annie: Oh, I love it. Show me all the deep things we don't know because I'm not getting in there. I love it.

Ryan: There's got to be some stuff down there that we know nothing about.

Annie: A hundred... Have you watched *Meg*?

Ryan: Wild.

Annie: Ryan!

Ryan: Wild.

Annie: *Meg* and *Meg 2* are my two favorite films because right below what we know is everything we don't know, like *Megalodons*.

Ryan: I've never heard anyone say that. I love that so much.

Annie: It's the best. Listen, if you want my best Sabbath day, it is-

Ryan: Hit me.

Annie: ...watching *Meg*.

Ryan: Watching *Meg*.

Annie: I try not to do any technology, but if I'm like really in a place-

Ryan: The Lord understands.

Annie: The Lord's like, Any *Meg*-

Ryan: That one doesn't count.

Annie: ...you can go. I'm okay. So the first question we're going to ask you. Because this is the 10th year of That Sounds Fun, we're asking at the start when I remember, because the show is called That Sounds Fun, tell me what sounds fun to you. What do you do for fun?

Ryan: Well, based off what we just talked about, I... so this past summer I got to do a three-day kayak trip and then a three-day river rafting trip. And I kind of have the bug for like extended period of time on the ocean. So what currently sounds really fun to me, I want to go across an entire ocean on a boat.

Annie: That's called the Titanic. You saw the end of that, right? Right. You don't always make it.

Ryan: Wow.

Annie: Do you want Pacific or Atlantic?

Ryan: Well, Pacific. I've always been more drawn to the Pacific. But the Atlantic just feels like the move from New York-

Annie: Go to London?

Ryan: ...and up in Europe, you know?

Annie: Yeah.

Ryan: Because the thing is I love flying over an ocean from 30,000 feet on a plane.

Annie: Agreed with that.

Ryan: You look down and you're like, what is down there?

Annie: That's right.

Ryan: But I'm also like watching *Parent Trap*. I want to be on the water going through the middle of the ocean experiencing it. That sounds really fun to me.

Annie: That is insane. That is insane. Do you want on like a cruise? Like would you do a cruise? Do cruises go across the ocean anymore? I don't think they do. Can you?

Ryan: I think they do.

Annie: Oh, great. Do you want that or do you want like a sailboat or a fisherman's boat?

Ryan: My cool answer is sailboat, realistically. That's not going to happen.

Annie: Okay. Okay. Because you have to learn a lot to do that.

Ryan: Yeah.

Annie: You have to be like a wonder person.

Ryan: It's a long time.

Annie: It's like weeks, right?

Ryan: Yeah.

Annie: I don't know, actually.

Ryan: I don't know. I have no idea. But-

Annie: Someone's telling us in the comments right now.

Ryan: ...a cruise ship across an ocean sounds really fun.

Annie: Okay. Okay. I wish you well on that adventure because-

Ryan: I'll let you know how it goes.

Annie: Listen, the new heaven, new earth has excited me in a lot of reasons. And one of them is I think exploring the ocean in the new earth is going to be unstoppable. We can go anywhere.

Ryan: Yeah. Yeah. We can breathe underwater.

Annie: For sure we can breathe underwater.

Ryan: We're just throwing out all these theological facts.

Annie: Don't you think?

Ryan: Yeah, absolutely.

Annie: Have you ever read Ted Decker? Ted Decker talks about... there's a whole... he has four books, green, red, white, black. They're a perfect circle for starters. It doesn't matter which one you start with. They're a perfect circle, which is insane to write four books like that. And the guy has gills. He swims.

Ryan: I'm reading it tonight. That sounds amazing.

Annie: You're going to read all four. Good luck on your flight back. Just get all four. I respect it. Okay, so ocean. Yeah. Well, I wish you well. You can do all that. We know more about space than the ocean. I'm going to stop now, but I just need you to know we know more about space than the ocean.

Ryan: But my heart's going like, Yeah, that's why. We got to go explore.

Annie: Got it.

Ryan: You know?

Annie: Okay. I will for sure do that with you post the return of our Lord and Savior.

Ryan: Deal. Deal.

Annie: I have a question for you about your book, *Single Today*. I went and did some research on you. What haven't you talked about in a podcast about this book? What

haven't you talked about? It feels like you're getting to talk about this a lot. Is there anything that's been left off the table by an interviewer or a friend?

Ryan: That is such a good question. I would say, practically speaking, in the church, what does this look like to implement this in the church? And where do you single people... you know what I mean?

Annie: Yeah.

Ryan: So my heart behind this book is I have always just felt very comfortable in the single space and felt very comfortable on my own and also realized that it's a struggle for a lot of people and that loneliness is real and we have these desires and we don't know what to do with it. So I just have always felt strategically placed to speak into that and sit in on that loneliness with people.

Annie: Do other people want you to get married more than you do?

Ryan: Oh yeah.

Annie: Yeah, I bet.

Ryan: A hundred percent.

Annie: I bet.

Ryan: Does that happen for you?

Annie: Yeah. And seasons. You talk about this great in the book that there are times where you want to get married and times where you don't. I often find that the times where I'm like, I'm fine, there are times people are like, "Can I set you?" I'm like, "Where were you six weeks ago when I was crying? Why now?" But I would imagine what I know of single men in leadership, there's a lot more pressure on y'all of like... It's like you have more control than I do.

Ryan: Yeah. I think that's why I take such a hard line and just say, No, this isn't... I've taken this off the table. Now, I say that I've taken this off the table today with open hands and an open heart of who knows what's going to happen tomorrow. James even writes like, you don't know what tomorrow is going to bring.

But yeah, I feel like I've just had to take that off the table and that's just part of being a single person in ministry as I'm sure you can resonate with.

Annie: When I went back and watched the podcast you've been on, I watched some clips you shared and some stuff online and I was like, Man, he just keeps being asked to be on podcasts that are hosted by single women and the start is let's talk about dating and you're like... and you say it in the book and you say it in these conversations where you're like, "I'm not a dating book guy. I'm a single book guy."

Ryan: I'm the last guy who should write a book about dating.

Annie: I think that's really interesting. Because I would imagine the pressure as you're a pastor from people in your church thinking, "Well, the only reason he's not married is he hasn't met the right one."

Ryan: Yeah. We don't have a framework for singleness, for celebrating singleness. And so a sermon about singleness, a book about singleness that must be about how do you meet the right one and how do you handle relationships and how do you date and all of that. And I've wanted to just strip all of that back and go, Okay, all of that's great. I'm cheering that on. There's a space for that. I'm not the guy to write that.

What I can write about is how do you be single really well? How do you celebrate the season of life that you are in today and get the most out of today? That's where even the title *Single Today* comes from. It's like the question is always, do you have the gift of singleness?

Annie: Oh, gloss.

Ryan: Which is so gross. And what they're really asking is like, are you going to be single for the rest of forever?

Annie: Yeah. What they're asking is if we're... we've been friends long enough. What they're asking is, are you going to be okay not having sex for the rest of your life? That's what they're actually asking. Right?

Ryan: So funny.

Annie: That's what I think is true. A lot is when they're like, the gift of singleness is, are you fine being celibate? Because if you're not, then we have to contend with how you're going to live your life.

Ryan: We're going to have to figure this. We got a problem that we got to solve.

Annie: That's right. I mean, start there of like, do people have the gift of singleness? I don't like when people ask that question because it always feels like they're just trying to figure out how I'm spending my spare time.

Ryan: So funny. And you can have the gift of hospitality. That doesn't mean you're doomed to throw a 24/7 party for the rest of forever, right? But singleness is this very unique thing to talk about, to be listed on, on all the gifts because it's like what the way that our minds work is, Oh, Ryan has the gift of singleness, which means he never has any temptations and he never has any desire for companionship and he's going to be 100% fine all of the time. And that's just not true. I'm very good at it. Yeah. You know, but I'm, I'm, I'm still a human.

So for me, the way I flipped that is singleness is a gift. And by the way, so is marriage. And so is being engaged. Like these seasons of life that we're in, if we can learn to go, these actually are a gift, then you can wake up today and go, where am I at today? What are the advantages that I can take advantage of today?

And instead of just trying to always cope with all the disadvantages, which is what single people do with their extra money and their extra time and their extra resources, like what would it look like to turn that around and go, who can I bless today? Who can I help today? Who can I love today?

Being single opens up all sorts of interesting opportunities. We just need to learn to process through all of the social pressure that gets put on us.

Annie: Tell me if this is true for you. You write a lot about grief in the book and about the importance of feeling the grief that is actually... okay. Like I remember when my counselor was like, "You need to... I'm 44. She was like, you need to grieve that you will never be a wife or a mom in your 20s and 30s. You will not get those decades back."

And once I did that, it did open me up to like, well, what is good about this? Oh man, look at what I can do. But I don't know if I could have ever gotten here without the grief first. Does that feel true to you?

Ryan: So good. That is so well said. I think that is the number one thing single people need to learn how to do. The gift of marriage, and we're both huge proponents of marriage, it says right in the beginning of the Bible, it's not good for man to be alone, one of the amazing gifts that comes with that is you have somebody in your corner helping you process pain, helping you like you can grieve together.

When you're single, you don't necessarily have that baked into your cadence. And we can get into this. That's why community is so important and all of that. But I have found, I think especially for single guys, grieving isn't like... Like you don't wake up and go, "I think I should probably grieve for a while today.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: Let's take from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. to grieve everything that I've lost. But because we don't do that, it's like we're carrying around all of this pain and carrying around all this extra weight. I think that that keeps us from being fully present where we are today.

One of my good friends, Shannon, she's a therapist-

Annie: Oh man, you write about her so kindly in the book.

Ryan: So great. Because we have the same friends, right, and they're all married with kids. And so we're always like the two that aren't at all the parties and all of our friends are the best and they just bring us into all of it. But we always talk about this. I asked her once, I said, "What is one thing single people need to learn how to do?" And she said the exact thing you said, "Grieve what is lost." Because time is a wild thing. It just keeps moving forward. You know, I don't know if anyone's noticed. And as it does, it's like we miss opportunities. We lose out on opportunities. That's just true no matter... If you're married, you miss out on things about being single. If you're single, you miss out.

It's just part of life is you can't do everything. And so you have to take some time to have some funerals for the things that you didn't get to do.

Annie: I mean, our married friends, you're right... Now that Single Purpose League exists, when we talk about it, I get multiple comments sliding into my DMs of married women being like, "Grass ain't always greener." And you're like, Yo. a) I'm sorry and b) that says there's stuff to be grieved whether you're married, single, parent, non-parent, all of it.

Ryan: You and I both have such a heart for the loneliness epidemic. And when it comes to singleness, it's so clear. But I think we often forget that loneliness in marriage is real as well.

Annie: I can't imagine.

Ryan: And it's on a whole different level.

Annie: That's a whole different level. That'd be a whole different level. I think being intentional about your grieving — you write about this so beautifully — just opened you up to doing the... what are the gifts of today that are really unique?

One of my favorite things about the book, and then I do want to ask... I love that you haven't gotten to talk a lot about singleness in the church, because I think that you and I, when we talked about this over my lunch, I was eating, that we both care a ton about this, about helping pastors and singles be on the same page and get to know each other well. But you talk a lot in the book about the permission to change your mind.

And I think our single friends and our married friends need to hear your take on this, because very often it is like, "Do you want to get married?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I mean, I'm okay today, but I don't envision being 80 and not married, but I don't want to get married right now." And it feels like you're supposed to pick a lane and stay in that lane. Do I want to be a wife and a mom? Yes. No. Yes. No. And you teach about that beautifully. So will you talk about that for a minute?

Ryan: Totally. I completely agree. It clicked for me in a pizza parlor one rainy afternoon. I was hanging out with my friend, Corey, and he asked me, "Hey, do you want to be single for the rest of your life?" And I said, Yes. But he saw me hesitate. I did one of those like, "Oh, oh... I mean, yes. I think." And he just looked at me and he goes, "You know you have permission to change your mind. Like I'm asking you this question and I want to hear your authentic answer today. And if tomorrow that answer is very different, that doesn't mean that you were lying today. It means that you, like every other human, are continuing to grow, continuing to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, continuing to be open to what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our life."

So, of course, life is going to continue to change and grow and God's going to continue to move us to the left and the right. But culture, for whatever reason, there's this narrative that you have to pick. Especially as you grow and you become an adult and whatever, it's like pick a lane, stay in that lane, and then we'll talk to you when you... we'll throw you a retirement party, you know, when you're 70 or whatever.

And it's like, I just don't see Jesus living that way. He was just present where He was today and He was open to what the Holy Spirit wanted to do today. Does that make sense? Does that resonate with you?

Annie: Yeah. Yeah. You'll have to tell me this from the dude's perspective, but I think there's a ton of pressure on women to always want to be a mom. And if you don't want to be a mom, you have stepped out of the club a little bit. And so there isn't a lot of permission to go like, "Yeah, I think I'd like to be a mom. Nah, I think I'm good not being a mom." And then it feels like a club you've left. Is that pressure on men to be fathers?

Ryan: Phenomenal question.

Annie: Or to desire to be a father, I guess.

Ryan: Yeah. I think it looks a little bit different for men, but I think it's very, very much there in that for men. The pressure is, Hey, if you're not married, then there must be something wrong with you. So if you were more put together, you would be married by now. And I would imagine it's probably very, very, very similar for both sides.

But the pressure for me was always, okay, I must have some like unprocessed something that's keeping me from opening my heart to another person, you know, or I must not truly understand love or be ready for the vulnerability that requires-

Annie: Commitment.

Ryan: Commitment. And so I think for men, the game becomes, hey, just because you're not married, you may not be married, but what does it look like to look like Jesus who, by the way, was single? And to realize that marriage can be a great sanctifying part of the journey. But guess what? So can singleness. You just have to learn to be more intentional because for us, like the quote-unquote, stereotypical single guy later into his 30s, 30s, whatever, is like the porn-addicted guy in a basement playing video games all day and like kind of just barely scraping by to live.

And I just reject that notion that those are the only two options. I go, "Or it's the guy who's living a full abundant life and is thriving and has community where he is both needed and known and he knows how to be vulnerable and he knows how to be his authentic self and he's walking and everything God has for him." I believe that that's true. And marriage is not a prerequisite to step into that. You've done such a phenomenal job over your life of walking that out and playing that out.

Annie: It does feel easier as a woman to do that than I think for men. I mean, I think if you look at the church, the church looks like it's much more inviting for single women than it is for single men.

Ryan: We should get into this. It's an interesting thing I've noticed is when it comes to... if we're just talking about single people in the church, somewhere around 30, I feel like it becomes all female.

Annie: Until it's widowers or divorced dads.

Ryan: Good.

Annie: And then there's... but yeah, I think you're exactly right. Where do they go?

Ryan: So it's like guys are showing up because they're trying to be a good husband or a good father as opposed to just trying to follow Jesus. And so it's a very interesting question for me and something I'm really passionate about is how do we continue to disciple men through their single years as 30-somethings, as 40-somethings, as 50-somethings who are still chasing after becoming more like Jesus.

It's almost like oftentimes you see a woman who is single be pushed further into her faith and further towards Jesus. But then you see men feel like they're being pushed away from it. And it's just a really interesting thing that I would imagine creates a lot of frustration for a lot of single females who are looking and honestly desiring a husband and they're looking around like, well, where are they? Where do they go?

If we can get to the bottom of that, where are all the guys at?

Annie: Where are all the guys?

Ryan: Where do they go?

Annie: Because the option is not married or a video game guy. There are a lot of guys in the middle of that. It is harder to see them than if an alien came down and said, look at the church and find the single guys and look at the church and find the single girls, he'd have an easier time finding single women.

Ryan: Absolutely.

Annie: Fair?

Ryan: Yeah. No, absolutely. 100%.

Annie: So we just need to figure out where those guys are.

Ryan: Where those guys are. And why is the message... This is the real question. Why does the message stop resonating with single guys in their 30s and their 40s and their 50s?

Annie: Because in the majority of churches, it's men that are preaching. And the men that are up there, you would think single men would want to keep listening. It's not like they're listening to a type of person that they do not want to hear from. They're not hearing a child.

Ryan: You're right. You're right.

Annie: They're not hearing like a scary old teacher. It's a man that you hopefully trust and respect and want to follow as he shepherds you toward Christ. And women sometimes mean that.

Ryan: And it really does-

Annie: It's weird, isn't it?

Ryan: Well, it reminds you that it's not good for a man to be alone. That's such an interesting verse for me because the way that I live my life is I'm very much alone in that I don't have a wife. But I push people towards marriage all the time and I push guys to ask girls out all the time. And I always say, "Do as I say, not as I do," because it's an individual path for me. But I don't want that for people, especially for guys. We need to have...

There's a reason why God designed it this way. And I just feel like guys can get really stagnant in life when they don't have a wife or they don't have kids to look after. And by stagnant, I mean days start to turn into like a less fun rerun of the day before. And you have the same haircut and you eat the same food and you have the same routine and everything just sort of gets monotonous and slowly it's like the hue and saturation is getting turned down. And it doesn't happen overnight. But a couple of years later, you look in the mirror and you're like, wait, what happened?

Annie: A funny thing I'm seeing is now that some of my single male peers are mid-40s, there's women that they have hung out with but not dated or married, and suddenly they've decided they want to get married. And she has been along the ride and she's not who he picks, right? So accidentally she — and "she" is me sometimes — becomes part of the monotony thinking eventually this will... we've seen this movie.

Ryan: It's always the movie.

Annie: He wakes up one morning and he loves me. What I'm watching happen with two people literally right now is it was someone else. And then someone else awoke him and walked him toward who he wanted to be. What is that? That monotony I'm noticing, man, Jesus is in that, but there was healthier for everybody five years ago.

Ryan: So interesting. It's like there is a higher need for intentionality in all of this because the monotony will just lull us to sleep.

Annie: For females too. Because we will ride that same rollercoaster thinking it's taken us somewhere and it's a circle, right?

Ryan: Wow. That's very fascinating. There's something going on here where it's like we're getting worse at communicating and we're getting worse at just being honest and open about where we're at and what our intentions are. I remember back in the day it was always like, you know, ask somebody out and then be very clear about your intentions. And that's important.

But it's almost like it's gotten a hundred times worse in the last few years where it's like everything is just gray area and everything is just kind of in limbo. And when it works out, great, but 99% of the time it doesn't work out. And then the person on either side who gets left out is like, Well, we'll wait a second. And then the other person's like, Well, you never said anything. And they're like, I was waiting for you to say something. And then it just goes back and forth.

Annie: And then it's happening in a church. And now he's a worship leader and she's on the, you know, volunteer.

Ryan: That never happens, Annie.

Annie: Oh, it doesn't. Weird. Weird. That may be Nashville-centric. That may be a Nashville-only problem that it's people in the same community. I think people are more afraid to pursue things as well inside community, even though that's where... We did a survey of Single Purpose League and we said, do you feel like the church takes care of you? Over 60% said no. And then we said, where do you want to meet somebody? Top three places all had to do with church. And you're like, weird. The place you feel least cared for is the place you want to meet someone. And it's also where we're afraid to do it because we don't want to mess up stuff. We don't want things to get awkward at church.

Ryan: I just had that conversation yesterday with-

Annie: I'm sure. On a Sunday, for everyone.

Ryan: Yeah. It was a Sunday. It was two key leaders. And the guy was like, "Should I ask? I don't want to mess it up." It's like, "Yeah. Why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you? Why are we so... What does "mess it up" mean? It's like we've put so much pressure on this that even telling somebody, "Hey, I have feelings for you is now like social suicide in the church.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: Because suddenly it's kind of like a supply and demand problem. Nobody's asking people out. So now there's less supply. So there's a greater demand, which means

there's way more pressure on that demand. And so one person does it and all of a sudden 100 people hear about it and they're all whispering about it. And that's why you feel like you have to figure it out. Like, are we going to get married before we finish our Americano?

Annie: Right. Right.

Ryan: And it's like, if we can just take the air out of the balloon. I'm turning into the dating guy now all of a sudden.

Annie: I didn't mean for us to do that.

Ryan: No, it's great.

Annie: I didn't mean for us to do that.

Ryan: But it's like, we need to take the air out of the balloon. It's so overinflated that like one wrong word or one wrong move and it's done.

Annie: Well, that's the problem. I mean, you talk about Shannon in the book. I have guy friends. You and I are friends. I mean, that's one of the challenges is for those of us who are single, I don't want to not have men in my life and I don't want to not have single men in my life. But there is an external pressure, an internal pressure. Am I supposed to fall in love with him? I don't really want to fall in love with him, but we're the only two sitting at this table of all of our friends. And then the pressure of, well, I should just keep it all status quo. And so I don't need to say, uh uh uh.

Ryan: Yeah. We put up all these walls.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: And all of this separation.

Annie: Where do you think, particularly for people of faith, friendship between single men and women, how do we do that well?

Ryan: Unfortunately it requires, what if I was just like, no, you don't do it. Never.

Annie: I mean, Billy Graham said-

Ryan: Never. Yeah, right.

Annie: ...Don't ride in the car together.

Ryan: I think we need to over-communicate and that's a bummer to say because it's an awkward thing to do. But I do think both through our words and through our actions, being really just open and honest and clear. That's one of the things I've had to learn how to do is just say like, "Hey, I am not interested in" I've said this from the stage, "in getting married." And I'm very interested in community, but I'm not interested in pursuing a relationship.

And I'm doing that, probably taking too hard of a stance on that, but I'm doing that on purpose because I've just learned that clarity is kindness.

Annie: We say it a lot. So does that allow for friendship though?

Ryan: Yeah. I wouldn't say I'm an expert at it, but I would say that I'm fairly decent at it and getting better and growing in it. I've had some really good female friends in my life who I've been friends with for 10 years, 20 years. Shannon's a good example. And that is something that has required us to have a lot of those conversations of like, Hey, so this is what this is going to be. And that's never comfortable.

Sometimes I'll say that and they'll be like, yeah, no. I knew that. You didn't have to say that out loud. And then you feel weird and you feel awkward.

Annie: And then you don't know if she's lying or if... right. I know.

Ryan: It's hard. It's hard. So it's certainly a tension to manage.

Annie: The only way we're going to get real relationship and friendship in community is if we just are direct.

Ryan: Just direct.

Annie: You just have to.

Ryan: You have to be.

Annie: Especially when you're sharing a faith community where you're like, "If I change my mind later, I'll let you know. But for today, we're just going to be friends. I would love to be your friend. And it's so fun."

Ryan: And how about this? Let's give each other more grace when somebody is brave enough to step up and say that, instead of immediately going, why did you say that? That's weird. You just made that... you know, and making them feel insecure. Just

go, "Hey, I honored that you say that. Thank you for bringing that to the table. We're on the same page. We're good."

Annie: Is there a place that this is more complicated than the church right now? I don't know that there is.

Ryan: Well, the hard part about the church is that everybody is trying to, on paper at least, be more like Jesus. Which means that community is something that we value very highly, which means we believe that we need people. And I feel like outside the church, painting with broad strokes here, there's more freedom just to be like, no, whatever. We can have a hookup. We can have whatever.

And there's not as much pressure to do life together as Christians love to say. And so we are kind of in this between this rock and this hard place where it's like, "We need each other. We know we're supposed to be in community together. However, we need to take this one option off the table if it's not there. But then if we take it off the table and then you get feelings for that person, and then is it going to get weird?" It's just not a problem to solve, but a tension to manage that requires a lot of clarity and kindness. I'll say it like that because I said earlier, clarity is kindness. And sometimes I go, Not the way you just said it. You can be clear and not kind.

Annie: Yeah, that's exactly right.

Ryan: And so be clear, but also do it in a loving way where you are kind.

[00:32:43] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends. Just interrupting this conversation to tell you about one of our incredible partners, [Lumen](#). I am fascinated by my Lumen. It is like a science experiment.

Okay, if you don't know what it is, it's the world's first handheld metabolic coach. It's this device that measures your metabolism through your breath. And on the app, it lets you know if you're burning fat or carbs and gives you tailored guidance to improve your nutrition, your workouts, your sleep, and even stress management. It is so cool. I love my Lumen.

All you do is breathe into it first thing in the morning, you'll know what's going on with your metabolism. And then Lumen gives you a personalized nutrition plan for that day based on your measurements. You can also breathe into it before and after workouts and meals so you know exactly what's going on in real time. Mine sits in my kitchen and I breathe into it kind of whenever I think about it. I love it.

Your metabolism is at the center of everything your body does. Optimal metabolic health translates to a bunch of benefits, including improved energy levels, better fitness results, and better sleep. So if you want to take the next step in improving your health, go to lumen.me/TSF, like That Sounds Fun, to get 15% off your Lumen. That is lumen.me/TSF for 15% off your purchase. Thank you Lumen for sponsoring this episode.

That link and every other link we've talked about, Single Purpose League, the Pastoring Singles Resource, all of that is in the show notes below, or we'll make your life real easy and we'll send it to you on Friday and our AFD Week in Review. We hope it's the best email of your week. And you can sign up for that in the show notes as well.

Annie: One of the things we love about Single Purpose League is that it has become this community of friends that we get to process with and ask hard questions together and encourage one another. As Advent approaches, the question we often wrestle with is how to wait with anticipation for the birth of Christ when we're already waiting for God to answer our prayers.

This is why we created this year's Advent study, *Stay Tuned: An Advent Series For Those Already Waiting*. And as I wrote this study, I was thinking about how so many of us have unanswered prayers and how long we have been waiting. Whether you're married or single, you have unanswered prayers is my guess. I was specifically thinking about our single friends and our friends in Single Purpose League.

It's time for us to talk about the unique challenge of entering the holiday season without your prayers answered and with your hope on the line. *Stay Tuned* is for anyone who's waiting for God to answer their prayers, but there is specific attention and heart in this study for our friends who are not married today.

So if you are single today, this is your invitation to grab our *Stay Tuned* Advent study. It's available in digital and in print this year. Come join Single Purpose League because we're going to go through this study day by day together. It's audio, it's video, it's a guidebook. I think you're really going to love it.

You can find all the information about Single Purpose League at SinglePurposeLeague.com and all the information about Advent at AnnieFDowns.com/Advent.

Micah: Hi.

Sarah: Hello.

Micah: Oh no, I was talking to them.

Sarah: Oh.

Micah: Yeah. We're supposed to be telling them about our podcast.

Sarah: Okay, can you start again?

Micah: Yeah. Hello, we are Micah and-

Sarah: Sarah.

Micah: Hosts of the Fortitude Podcast. You may know us from TikTok or Instagram where we love to have fun and bring joy to people.

Sarah: But we've also been through some life experiences that have tested and strengthened us as individuals and as husband and wife.

Micah: Yeah, like grief, addiction, gay husband, miscarriage.

Sarah: And that's just to name a few. But we believe we are called to share about the ways our faith has pulled us through difficulty and the lessons we've learned along the way.

Micah: We're going to be answering your questions and having guests on to talk about relationships, faith, mentality, ultimately all the things in life that make up the human experience.

Sarah: Because when you're in a tough season, it is so important to know that you're not alone and you are capable of making it to the other side.

Micah: You can follow and subscribe to us on YouTube, Spotify, Apple, or anywhere you can listen to a podcast.

Sarah: We love you all and hope each week you will come away encouraged, hopeful, and equipped with something that helps you grow.

Annie: And now back to our conversation with Ryan.

[00:36:51] <music>

Annie: Okay, so Ryan, one thing I want us to be sure we hit from your book is when you talk about shame from the past. Because I do think the book is set up so cool because it's like here was... I mean, also your poetic stuff about the water is beautiful, by the way.

Ryan: Thank you.

Annie: But you talk about stirring up waters from the past, still in the waters from the future. So talk a little bit about how shame from the past is such a powerful force. I mean, for everybody, but I think it is for singles.

Ryan: I've been doing a lot of *Single Today* events where I just hold conversations, facilitate conversations for people of every season of life. And the first question I ask is, is it typically thoughts from yesterday or fears about the future that you give more of your attention to?

Annie: Wow.

Ryan: Because the goal is to be present here, to be present now. That's not if you have a pie chart of that. None of us have 100 percent like here. Right?

Annie: Right.

Ryan: And so we all have a little bit of both. But which one is it? One of the things I've noticed is that married people, especially with kids, are all future-focused and worried about the future. But for the most part, 80% of the time when someone is single, it's shame from the past, it's regret from the past. It's, "Well, I can't believe I did that back then. That is the reason that I'm in this place now. And that disqualifies me from ever having a good marriage or whatever it is." That is a heartbreaking reality. That completely contradicts the gospel and the whole message.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: But to the one who is having a hard time being single today because of shame from yesterday, I think I just really, really, really wanted to write to that person and say, "Hey, yesterday is yesterday and mistakes are real and consequences are real. But you're a human being. Like part of the journey of growing up is making mistakes. And what happened in the past doesn't disqualify you from today. And that that shame is a lie and it's unhelpful.

And so it's almost like when you can learn how to remove the shame, I think especially surrounding sex and that entire topic. One of the reasons people have

such a hard time thinking through it and navigating it is because shame just covers it all up. And so a topic like porn is almost impossible to actually find any true freedom from because you're just in the cycle of shame.

And then you're like, well, maybe, you know, if I can stop for like a month, then I can confess it to my friends. And then maybe... but then, you know, it just repeats and it keeps you stuck. So I think one of the most important things to do is to learn to outsmart that shame, to realize that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. And let's start from a place of when... like when Jesus sees the woman caught in adultery, He doesn't start with like, I can't believe you did that.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: He gets down in the dirt with her. And to realize whoever's listening to this and needs it... like on your good day I know you understand the grace, but you know, that's equally true on your bad day. So right in that moment, Jesus is there with you going, "Hey, I see you. I'm with you. I've got more for you. You aren't better at sinning than I am at saving."

And so let's get over ourselves. Let's take shame off the table. And when we do that, we'll be able to see more clear of what's actually going on. Because all these vices that we have it's just us trying to medicate pain that's there. It's just that we never get to that point because we're too busy caught in the shame cycle.

So the more important, interesting question to me is, hey, what is the deeper pain that you're trying to medicate? For me, oftentimes, when I feel myself not being who I want to be, it's because validation is something that I always work so hard for. So when times are good and ministry is good and the sermon went well and all the emails are coming in, like I'm good.

But then when the critique comes or the whatever, or numbers are not, you know, all the silly games that we play, those are the moments for me where I have historically found myself looking elsewhere for that validation. And of course, that validation isn't real true validation. It's counterfeit versions of it.

Annie: Right, right.

Ryan: But it wasn't until somebody helped me, "Let's wipe away all the shame. And now let's ask the question, what are you trying to medicate?" that I learned to find any true freedom. And that abundant life that Jesus talks about is true. It's possible. But you got to be able to do the work to get down there, to heal some of those deeper wounds that come.

I know we could go for 10 hours on that. But that's one thing that I will say is shame from the past doesn't have a seat at the table anymore. Conviction does. "Hey, let's get better. Let's turn things around." That's all great. But the shame that says not just that thing you did was wrong, but that you are wrong. We got to get that out. And especially for single people. Because it can be a very lonely, lonely place.

Annie: Because I think everyone who ends up single longer than I thought they'd be is trying everywhere desperately to figure out why. And shame gets such a vote often in that question. Right?

Ryan: Yes.

Annie: Because you're like, well, that must be why. If I'm the only single person left from our college ministry, if I'm the only single person left in our church, if I'm the only single person left in our family, surely I did something.

Ryan: "What did I do wrong?"

Annie: "What did I do wrong?"

Ryan: It's like that conversation the disciples have with Jesus. "So who sinned? Was it him or his parents that he's born blind?" And Jesus is like, "What are you talking about?" You're completely... that's not how it works.

Annie: That's right.

Ryan: You don't have to string together a couple of good years for God to bless you with a spouse.

Annie: Right, right. I used to make a joke a lot like when I would... if I was gossiping about someone, I'd be like, Oh, the Lord just moved my husband two days down the calendar. Like I used to make that joke all the time. And I was like, You've got to quit doing that because that is becoming your theology. That's more than just a joke. That is your theology.

Ryan: Yeah, that's so real, isn't it?

Annie: It is so bad. Yeah, because I think everybody's trying to... everyone thinks, everyone, the broad paintbrush. Everyone thinks if I could sort out the reason I'm single, I wouldn't be anymore. If I could figure out that one thing. And then you think it's this one thing and you fix that one thing and you're like, Oh crap, I'm still

single and I fixed the thing. "I cut my hair. I changed my body. I changed my career. I stopped that sin. Wait, what? I moved cities. Wait, what?" And it is.

Ryan: "You owe me, God." It's the be single for a year. Put down dating for a year. It's a great exercise. I'm a huge fan of it. I'm on like my 35th lap.

Annie: You're like, "I keep trying."

Ryan: But the problem is when somebody does that exercise and then they circle the day on the calendar, that's one year.

Annie: Thinking.

Ryan: And they have their outfit picked out. And they have their whole strategy. And then they walk out their front door expecting their partner to be hiding behind the tree, like, "Here I am." And then that doesn't happen and they feel this letdown. And it's like, "And also what you should be feeling letdown on is you completely missed the heart of the whole exercise.

Annie: You wasted that actual whole year. Yeah, that's exactly right. That's exactly. I think our friends listening have probably heard me say before, but I think I'll put it in this context too. Often I use counseling as like confessioning and counseling where I'm like, You're one of the people I'm going to tell all the things.

Ryan: Of course.

Annie: And I remember multiple times she has said to me, "Okay, I'm glad you're saying this out loud. Don't keep sins in, doesn't serve anybody." But I care more about why you're doing it than what you're doing. So often if I'm in the middle of something, I'll go, "Okay, hold on. Let's pause. Why are we doing this?" It's the question you're asking of like, what am I actually trying to medicate? Often my terrible example is Dairy Queen. Oreos. I love Oreos.

Ryan: That's not a terrible example.

Annie: Well, I mean, it's just-

Ryan: That's a delicious example.

Annie: Yeah, it's a delicious one. But it is a true example of like, if I'm hiding this from anybody, you don't have to not get a blizzard. Why are you hiding? What do you think this is saying about you? And what are you actually feeling? And so I can still have my blizzard. I just need to also tell the truth.

Ryan: So good.

Annie: I think there's a lot of us, whether it's porn or blizzards or both, or everything in the middle that the shame would say, "Just don't tell anybody and just don't do it again. If you don't tell anybody and don't do it again, it's gone." And it just isn't because you're still medicating. The reason you need medicine has not been healed.

Ryan: And you can use logic in that moment when you feel... when you're in a fairly good place, but there's going to be another moment where you want that Dairy Queen again.

Annie: At noon, logic for days. At midnight, not helpful, right?

Ryan: Totally.

Annie: I mean, one of my dating tips is don't text at night. You are not who you want to be between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m.

Ryan: That's so funny.

Annie: You're not who you want to be. So put your phone down because you are going to... When you're unhealthy, you know? I mean, when you're dating someone, it's different. But you know, like rationale is not the king of the castle from 10 to 5.

Ryan: And how important then to have community and to have people in your circle who know that and somebody in your circle who you can call and just be like, "Hey, I really want Dairy Queen right now. And then you go, okay, let's talk about it. And maybe the solution is still you go get Dairy Queen together.

Annie: Yes, we go. Yeah, that's right.

Ryan: But let's just be really clear about our intentions.

Annie: Yeah, that's right.

Ryan: You think about something like alcohol. And everybody has their own theology, whatever.

Annie: Yeah. I love talking about alcohol.

Ryan: There's a very big difference between like it's Sunday evening and church is done for the weekend and my friends are coming over and I'm grilling steak and I open a

bottle of wine and we have a glass and we celebrate. That's very different than I have a really hard Tuesday and I come home and I need to escape.

Annie: Yeah, that's right.

Ryan: It's the same thing-

Annie: Same tool.

Ryan: ...two very different motivations. And so just learning to get curious, whatever the vice is, learning to get really curious about asking why. Why am I doing this?

Annie: Yes. And when you're single and you're by yourself a lot, it is easy to secretly do a lot of things. Right? Don't you think?

Ryan: Say more about that.

Annie: I mean, it's one of the reasons there are a few friends of mine that have my location all the time.

Ryan: All the time.

Annie: So every time I drive to an [Erie queen? 00:48:02], I can say to myself, "You recognize then this moment, you may not be the only one who knows this. You're all right with that? Because you can't go anywhere." And then when people turn off their location, red alert.

Ryan: Red alert.

Annie: Red alert. If there's a reason you don't want me to know, there's a reason you don't want me to know.

Ryan: And have friends in your life who will call you on that.

Annie: Oh, right.

Ryan: I'm sure you do, right?

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Ryan: But I think that's really important is like, when's the last time your therapist disagreed with you or told you no?

Annie: Right, right.

Ryan: I remember the first time I said something to a therapist and they pushed. And I almost felt like, You're not supposed to do that.

Annie: You're supposed to tell me I'm doing this right.

Ryan: Like I pay you to just be like my yes person. It's like, that's not therapy.

Annie: Totally, totally.

Ryan: So I don't know. I just feel we may be single, but we're not alone. And we're not supposed to be alone.

Annie: If we don't want to be.

Ryan: And you have to be a little bit more intentional about it. And you have to take some steps. And there's going to be some times where a friend betrays you or you go your separate ways or whatever. But it is a continual process of chasing and pursuing community and finding people that you can just be yourself with and be real with.

And let's just say this. All of my married friends actually want me to be around. It's just that there's this disconnect where we've had to, through intentionality and conversation, say like, Hey, I want to be there. And I'm saying like, hey, yeah, we want you to be there as well. And we actually bring something unique to the table because I'm not chasing kids around during the whole barbecue.

Annie: Right.

Ryan: So I can actually chase kids around and give them a break. Or I can do the dishes or I can whatever. Nobody stumbles into community. You have to be very on purpose about it. And so like, yeah, I don't know.

I got a text from my good friend this morning. I go over to their house. They have me over for dinner every once in a while. They're a married couple with two kids. Our lives look very different. And at the same time, the three of us are all humans. So we do this thing where we... Matt and Reagan are their names. We do this thing where we make lists of our favorite things. So like top 25 songs. And then we bring the list and we tell the stories of why. You know?

Annie: Great. That's cool.

Ryan: Top 10 episodes of all time and why is it that episode in the bear with the forks.

Annie: Yeah, the forks, we know.

Ryan: We all know that's number one.

Annie: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ryan: So I just got that text this morning and we're going to set up another one. And they have a first-grader. So I am not doing back-to-school stuff with a first-grader this week. But I do have a favorite song and a reason why. So it's all about finding that common ground and realizing at the end of the day, we're just human beings. And we all have this common ground.

Annie: I have two families that we eat dinner once a month. And before I leave, we put the next one on the calendar. And so it's just like, I know every month I'm going to see these two families. And we've done it for... I think one of them, we've done it for eight or nine years, almost every month for eight or nine years. And the other one's at six years since before the pandemic.

Ryan: What have you learned through those years?

Annie: I've loved watching the kids grow up. Because sometimes they're really annoying because they're loud and they're busy. They're not annoying as humans. They're just annoying because they're loud and busy. And that's not my life. And then as they're getting older, I'm kind of like, Oh man, I miss now y'all-

Ryan: I miss the shouting.

Annie: ...all watch TV or you go and watch, you're able to watch a movie independently now. And so the parents and I want to talk. So you go watch movies and we used to wrangle you for an hour after dinner.

Ryan: Hilarious.

Annie: And so I'm kind of going through some of that.

Ryan: You're watching it happen.

Annie: And there's just something about the consistency of these people in my life that I'm like, Man, they've seen me date a lot of people. I've seen a lot of sadness. They've seen a lot of joy, a lot of professional excitement, and professional disappointments.

And then you kind of also go like, Oh man, they don't care about my job at all. Isn't that the best?

Ryan: Isn't that the best?

Annie: Don't you love people who are proud but not impressed? Proud but not impressed is what... that's an open gate to me. You are coming in my life if you're proud but not impressed. I love it. So that's who they are.

Ryan: My brother is part of the church with me.

Annie: Older or younger?

Ryan: He's two years older and has three kids. One of my favorite things to do after a preaching weekend is to go over, I bring steaks over and we hang out at his house. Because you know this, when you preach, you get enough affirmation to feel like royalty and enough critique to make you want to crawl into a pit and never do it again.

Annie: That's right.

Ryan: And like in one line.

Annie: Within an hour. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's exactly right. Do y'all have an evening service? Y'all are Saturday and Sunday?

Ryan: Saturday evening and Sunday morning. So I can fix the sermon Saturday night before it gets recorded on Sunday morning.

Annie: We have a 5.30 Sunday night. So my most vulnerable night of my ever is that like 7 p.m. after.

Ryan: Totally.

Annie: I can make terrible choices.

Ryan: Dairy Queen.

Annie: Oh, Dairy Queen and stupid texts. You feel so lonely and you feel so vulnerable and you've poured out all day and then everybody else is going home to their people and you're going home to your couch and... oh, it gets...

Ryan: It's hard.

- Annie:** It gets so bad if I'm not... But now I've done it... Now, here's what we're talking about. I've done it enough that I've learned, Don't go straight home after you're done preaching. Go to somebody's house like you go to your brother's. Call somebody on the way home from... Or go to bed.
- Ryan:** Just go to bed.
- Annie:** Either go to sleep or go somewhere. But if you go sit by yourself, you are not your healthiest and there is no buffer. There's not enough maturity. There's not enough... There's not enough.
- Ryan:** You think it's going to be rejuvenating. It's not.
- Annie:** Not for me.
- Ryan:** Even if you're just doom-scrolling for three hours while *The Office* plays in the background, you're not going to get to the end of that and be like, "Well, I'm rested up."
- Annie:** "I feel better."
- Ryan:** "I'm ready for the week."
- Annie:** No. Same. So you go and do steaks with your fam.
- Ryan:** Yeah. Because to your point, I get over there and my nephew doesn't give a rip about the Sermon.
- Annie:** Right, right.
- Ryan:** He doesn't care how it went. He just wants me to get on the floor and play Legos with him. And it's the best thing in the world. Or let's go to the pool or let's do something. Because it reminds me as important as we tend to think we are sometimes, we're not. We're not. We're not nearly as important as we think. And we're infinitely more significant than we can imagine. Kids seem to understand that a lot better than us adults.
- Annie:** Yeah, that's right. That's why I love, even though I don't have my own, being around them. I'm like, get around kids. God made us for a reason to start small. There's something beautiful about 0 to 10 that we're going to miss if you're single and you aren't having any kids in your life.

Ryan: That's it. I think that's why you write children's books.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Ryan: Isn't it just the best?

Annie: It's the best.

Ryan: The most fun thing ever.

Annie: Oh, kids are just the dearest best. I mean, I think they're the best people.

Ryan: It's like there's a simple message and then it gets very complicated. And then if you keep pushing through it, there's a simplicity on the other side of that. And that's what children's books are when they're done really well. I think that's why I'm drawn to that so much. It's like, you get it. Kids get it.

Annie: Right, right. Kids get it.

[00:55:20] <music>

Eric: I'm Erick Stakelbeck, host of the Stakscast podcast. If you want truth and a bold take on what's happening in our world, then listen to the Stakscast now. From thought-provoking conversations about the current state of America, the impact of global events, and issues facing the body of Christ, this podcast brings you today's biggest topics that affect your life. Make sure to follow the Stakscast on your favorite listening platform and join me every Tuesday as we have candid, thought-provoking conversations on issues that matter to you.

Greer: Hey, I'm Greer. Together with my husband, we have two boys and two dogs and raising a child with additional needs. Our day-to-day experience isn't being talked about in everyday life, and I see a gap in those leading people who are neurodivergent. Whether you're a parent, a friend, a teacher, or a neighbor, we can all journey together to better understand the neurodiverse world.

I created this podcast to have conversations over a cup of tea or coffee, helping to bring awareness about how neurodivergent people experience the world, as well as families who are raising children with different needs. This podcast will share practical help, tips, and the joys, struggles, and differences in being neurodivergent or raising a child who is.

Each week, I will spend 30 minutes talking and interviewing others in a neurodiverse space and giving you the opportunity to learn and grow and feel seen

and heard by how we interact with each other and the world. We are so glad you're here. Make sure to hit the follow button so when our first episode drops on October 17th, it will automatically come straight into your podcasting feed.

Annie: And now back to finish up our conversation with Ryan.

[00:58:13] <music>

Annie: Let's talk about the church, particularly let's talk about pastors and what they're dealing with having suddenly, I would say, it feels kind of suddenly than the last 10 years, the church you pastor, the church that I'm on the teaching team, the churches in a lot of places, particularly... Well, I don't know that. Churches in a lot of places are 20 to 40% unmarried: Never married, divorced, widowed. What are you learning about pastoring? What are you saying to your co-pastors when they're teaching on a Sunday morning when possibly a little less than half of your crowd isn't trying to figure out how to be married?

Ryan: I think that's a really, really important point that to the church leaders listening to this, one, I get it.

Annie: We are on your team.

Ryan: You and I sit in sermon series planning and sermon prep, and we have 35 minutes every weekend, 45, but we'll say 35, to speak to a big room of people who are all in different life stages is hard to reach everybody. 10, 20 years ago, it was true that focusing on single people is not the best bang for your buck, and that's just not true anymore. It is now more relevant than ever.

There is a rise of singleness. Those numbers continue to rise, which means there are people in your congregation who are single and who need help and need some encouragement and really just need to be seen.

And so first I would say to the church leader, don't be afraid to talk about it. It's not as irrelevant as you think. You think you're going to talk about it, and then all the married people are going to be like, Oh, I shouldn't have showed up today. No. The way I do it is I just talk about contentment. I talk about singleness, but a lot of it's contentment, which means married folks, you need to hear this too, because last time I checked, you're not content either.

Annie: And we're asking our single friends to sit through parenting series or marriage series because you're part of a village.

Ryan: Part of a family.

Annie: Yeah. So I want to know how to do marriage well because I want to walk my friends through it, even if I don't ever do it.

Ryan: Totally. Yeah. And then I use this line: "You may not be single, but I bet you know somebody who is, let me teach you how to talk to us." So little things like that go a long way. And then just acknowledging that they're there. Nobody likes to show up to a party that they're not invited to. You show up... It's already scary going anywhere, but you show up to a party and everyone's looking around like, why is this person here?

So single people are going to naturally assume that events, especially family-oriented events, are not for them, that they're not invited. And the pastor may go, No, I would love for you to hang out, but you got to say that. And it can be as simple as, Hey, whether you are single, dating, engaged, or married, we would love for you to show up to this dinner. Something as 10 seconds, as simple as that goes a long, long way.

That's what I would say to the pastors. What I would say to single people just in the church who maybe are frustrated with the lack of support they feel from their church, I get it. And the church can't make people fall in love. You know, like the genie in Aladdin?

Annie: That's a really good line.

Ryan: When he's like, "I can do anything. Robin Williams is like, I can do anything, but I can't bring people back from the dead and I can't make people fall in love. The church can set the table, but the church can't make you fall in love. And that's really important to hear because I know it can be difficult when you're trying to meet somebody and it doesn't seem to be happening and you get frustrated.

And it's really easy when we're frustrated to throw stones. And I think a lot of that stone-throwing is directed towards the church where it's like, well, if the church just made more space. It's like, hey, the church should make more space. We'll talk about that in a second. And you need to take the step and you need to be brave enough to embrace it and to ask questions and to introduce yourself to people. You have to be the one to go do this.

One of the things we do at Red Rocks Austin is every Saturday in the summer, we did a volleyball tournament, a sand volleyball court in downtown Austin. And from 6 to 10 p.m., there's a couple hundred people who are showing up and half of them are there to play, half of them are just there to hang out. And creating space like that. For us, we don't label that. Here's a singles hangout thing. We just set the table

and trust that single people are going to show up and married people are going to show up and whoever is welcome. And even if you don't play volleyball, I bet you like to eat food. And so show up and eat some food and meet some people.

But doing simple things like creating space for single people to meet, that's really what we're talking about here. And from the stage and in person, pushing people and celebrating marriage and saying, this is a good and holy thing for you to meet somebody. And even the awkward pieces of like, I want to introduce myself, but I don't know how, and then I stumbled over my words, like that's all part of it and we can laugh about it. That's all a very holy thing that I just believe we need to be creating more space for.

The problem is I say that and then I get email after email that's like, "You should set up like some speed dating thing," you know? And I'm like, "No, we're kind of missing it." There's anything wrong with that. I think that's great. But I really do just think that creating space for people to come together and then letting it naturally happen and encouraging it is a huge, huge step forward.

Annie: Is it important for churches to plan events for singles like that? I mean, does there need to be that next step past changing your language on a Sunday morning or offering small groups that anybody can join?

Ryan: I think it's kind of similar to serving and loving our neighbors. On paper, everybody would just be loving their neighbor.

Annie: Right. So why do we have a serving Saturday?

Ryan: Because you have to help them take a first step. That's what being a shepherd is. In a way, I think it's very similar. Like in a perfect world, people would just be meeting each other and initiating conversations and getting to know each other and asking people to coffee and being very clear about intentions and whether or not there should be a second date and all of that. That doesn't always happen.

And so I do think one way that the church can step in is just like we have serving Saturdays, let's create ways to encourage that first step to happen in the hopes that ultimately we'll get back to it just happening naturally. I just think, especially post-2020, there's a lot of social IQ that is missing. People have lost the ability to connect. And so we do. I think it is important to hold their hand through some of those initial steps.

Annie: I think that is so important to me when I'm listening to a preacher, when he's making a list that one of the person that he lists from the Bible is a female. There's

a couple of things like that that I go like, when you were making this sermon, were you thinking about everyone in the audience?

Like one of the things we do at Crosswind... I'm teaching on Sunday. So today I turned in my outline to six different people who are all different, married, single, different races, different ages. And I said, "Tell me what I don't know, make it better."

And my hope is, are my examples as relevant to a single female as they are to the married guy that's three campuses out of where we are. And so my question for you from the pastor seat is what do pastors need to hear from singles? Not everybody can say, "Hey, pastor, can I read your outline before you preach on Sunday and make sure you can talk about single people?"

Ryan: Can you imagine?

Annie: Oh, gosh. Wouldn't that just ruin every pastor's life? But there are pastors who have built teams. I think of one of my buddies in Austin, Luke Norsworthy. Luke has a team that he preaches in front of every Thursday before he does it on Sunday.

Ryan: Wow.

Annie: So talk to me about what pastors need from singles to help them see them. Does that make sense?

Ryan: It makes total sense. Here's the really good news. I don't think we're as far off as we think we are.

Annie: Great.

Ryan: You know, when you have a pain in your shoulder or whatever, and you're like, "This is it for me, right? This is for the rest of my life." And then you go see a chiropractor and they're just like, Qh and you're good. I think there's some really simple adjustments here that will really help. And I think one of those simple adjustments is just for the pastor who got married when they were 22, they just need to hear that the dating world is very different than it was for him or her. And they just need to hear— it's one of the things I'm passionate about saying — that there is this rise of singleness that you're seeing, that single people really are in the church. And that singleness can actually be a very, very lonely time and a lonely experience. And isolation is really dangerous. And oftentimes, when you're single, it can be very difficult to take some of those first steps. So I think what pastors need to hear is we could use some like step one type courage.

Annie: Yeah, interesting.

Ryan: You know, when you're trying to start a project and you have a million ideas for it, and so you never get started.

Annie: Yeah, that's right.

Ryan: And like any book writing or whatever, it's like you got to just...

Annie: Or like cleaning out the garage. Feels massive. Where would I even start?

Ryan: It's like with one box.

Annie: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ryan: That's what I think we need to help single people do. Meet one person. Introduce yourself to one person. Go hang out with one group, you know, and get to know the people there. Maybe take one step and ask one person to coffee. These like little steps. I feel like we're just so paralyzed by this whole rise of singleness and, oh, no, there's not going to be any people left on earth and all of this... like such a huge problem. And it's like, actually, the solution is to start really small.

And to the person listening, maybe it's time to take one little step of courage.

Annie: Yeah, that's good.

Ryan: And to put yourself out there and be vulnerable and just trust that no matter what happens, it's a win because you're taking a step.

Annie: I think the other thing I would want pastors to hear is some of the single people in your church are very happy with their lives. So don't just teach how to get married. Teach how... What does sexual purity look like for all of us? What does generosity look like for all of us?

If there are people choosing to be single for their whole life, they also need to be taught not just until you get married. It just removes the finish line. We got to remove the finish line.

Ryan: Say more about that: Remove the finish line.

Annie: I mean, I grew up in church, and it was you don't do this, this, this until you get married. Not just sexually, but like that's when you... And you'll find your purpose. And you and your husband will go to wherever you're going to go and serve God,

right? So it just set up from the get that there was a line we were going to cross, and then we'd get to do everything and know everything.

And then your need to have high sexual integrity goes away because now you're married. I was like, no, you still need to... Sexual purity was not just about singleness. Sexual purity is who you are from birth to death.

Ryan: Yeah, because married people never struggle with it, right?

Annie: Right.

Ryan: That's so good.

Annie: As a teaching pastor, and as someone who gets to talk to a lot of teaching pastors, I want to figure out how do we remove the finish line.

Ryan: That's so good. That means that you don't have to be married to begin your ministry and that you and I are in this pre-season as we're waiting to cross this finish line. 5

Annie: Can you imagine if this was pre-season? I'm like, I don't have time for this to be pre-season.

Ryan: Dude, I can't plant more than one church, I'll tell you that.

Annie: One and done.

Ryan: This better not be pre-season. It is so funny, especially biblically, when you look at... Okay, so Paul was just in pre-season? Jesus was in pre-season? John the Baptist was in pre-season? Martha was in pre-season? No, that's so silly. We know that's not true. You don't have to be married to begin your ministry. And if marriage is the finish line, your finish line is way too small.

Annie: Hey.

Ryan: And if that is your finish line, you're going to really struggle with your first year of marriage, because then you get to the finish line, and you're looking at your spouse, and the honeymoon is great, but after that... I just go into marriage advice. That's not who I am at all. But what if the finish line was to make disciples of all nations? At Red Rocks Austin, we say make heaven more crowded.

So I say marriage is a good thing. It's God's idea. It's God's design. That's number one. Number two, I want you to meet somebody at Red Rocks Austin. This is a great place to meet people. Number three, I genuinely pray for that to happen. And

I do. That's in my prayer journal. Every single week, I'm praying that that happens. Number four, and this is important, we don't exist to make Red Rocks more married. We exist to make heaven more crowded.

Annie: Wow.

Ryan: And so the finish line for us is not to get people to the marriage altar. The finish line is to paint a picture of what New Heavens and the New Earth looks like and work on this side of eternity to make Austin look more like that.

Annie: That's really good, Ryan.

Ryan: And that is a much more compelling vision that whether you are single, dating, engaged, or married will help you get out of bed this morning. And if you do that, you may look to your left or look to your right and notice somebody else doing something very similar. And you may realize, oh, we could actually like run a lot faster together and further together. And if that happens, we celebrate that. We want that to happen. It's just we have to be on the same page about what the finish line actually is.

Annie: That's so good. In my like 1990s guts, I can still feel this like, well, the big revelation will come, and I will run faster, and I will when I get married. And it's like, no, I run as fast as I can run. There is not going to be a world where I have this new speed if I get married, right?

And I think somewhere in me, I still think there is. I still think there's a bigger vision and a bigger... And then you're like, no, there is nowhere in the Bible that it says that. In fact, Paul's like, if you cannot do it, don't do it, because you got more time and more energy. And so I go back to that a lot of going like, yeah, I'm not like... I don't have to get married today. And so I won't. I'm actually not going to get married today.

Ryan: Oh, today's not the day.

Annie: No, today's not the day. I'm not getting married today. I think what you're saying of like, Red Rocks Austin exists not to get people married, but to get heaven-crowded. It's such a like "I don't exist to get married. I exist to make heaven crowded," right? I want to personalize that because that feels very shifting in some ways that I'm embarrassed I have to still shift at this point.

Ryan: The verse is on my heart, Hebrews, the writer of Hebrews says, so, therefore, throw off everything that so easily entangles you and let us run with perseverance this race marked out for us. And we know like the way we preach it is always like these

vices, you know, and that's the sin that entangles us. And that's true. But I also wonder if this narrative that I have to be married before I'm ready to do this is another thing we need to throw off that we may run with more perseverance. And so to the person watching this right now who has just never been given permission to run and feels like they're in a holding pattern. It's just not true. Throw off that internal belief or wherever that belief came from and realize that God sees you, that God loves you, and that God has a plan for your life. And that starts today, not when you get married.

Annie: That's happening right now. That's good, Ryan. Man, I could just talk forever about how we make sure pastors and singles feel like they're for each other. I think that matters so deeply. But you're doing that. You're saying that.

Ryan: Well, let me add this to the single person who is frustrated with their pastor and feels like they're not getting support for these single events or whatever it is. Just know your pastor is a shepherd at heart. That's why they became a pastor. So he or she is so passionate about shepherding the flock. And what that means is yes, shepherding the sheep. It also means watching out for wolves. And unfortunately, it's just something that we have to think about in church leadership is that not everybody's intentions are pure. And so cut your pastor some slack.

One of the fears that may be there, and it may just be wisdom, is they're trying to avoid the type of event that's going to attract a whole lot of people who aren't there for the right reason and instead very naturally create space for the people who are there for the right reason to meet each other in that regard. So just know your pastor thinks about this stuff more than you probably think that your pastor does.

I don't know who that's for, but if there's somebody out there that maybe needs to give some more grace to their pastor.

Annie: And be a part of that. I mean, we say a lot to our single friends in Single Purpose League, but you get to be a part of your church serving single people the way you hope they will. You get to be a part of that. Start building it. Go.

Ryan: And you want to know what the best speed dating is ever? Volunteering at a church.

Annie: Volunteering. Our greeting team people marry each other all the time because they're extroverted.

Ryan: You're not there to actually make the coffee for everyone. You're there to be in community.

Annie: 100%.

Ryan: And we all benefit from the coffee. So thank you for that.

Annie: Listen, I roam around every Easter looking for new volunteers. I'm like, I've never seen him. I've never seen him. I'm like, that is where I look too. I'm looking for the volunteers too.

Ryan: It's right there. It's right there. And just know that we all want that for you. And sometimes I feel like the world that we're living in, people are moving away from a desire for marriage. Inside the church especially, this is a God-ordained thing. It's a really beautiful thing that we celebrate. It's just that you and I are also passionate about saying there's also the singleness route that needs to be celebrated. But so is the marriage route. And so we want it for you. And let's throw off any shame around that that maybe makes people feel like they're not supposed to or whatever.

Annie: Let people change their minds. They don't have to want it today. They can want it tomorrow.

Ryan: That's it.

Annie: That's beautiful. Okay, Ryan, what's next for you? Are you going to keep writing in this vein? Do you have more writing in you?

Ryan: I love to write.

Annie: I hope so.

Ryan: Writing is my favorite thing. I'm working on some more books and tackling some more topics and just really enjoying that. It's one of the ways I just like to process the world and help us try to make sense. I love trying to put simple language to complex problems.

Annie: It's a gift. I think one of the gifts of this book and always... our mission statement is that we bridge people. If they stop with me, I've done this wrong. But we bridge people to creators and pastors like you. And so that's the other reason this was a yes today to have you on is that the is good, but it is the gateway to you. And you have a lot of great resources and a lot of great sermons and a lot of great interviews. That's why my first question was like, what haven't you talked about? Because I'm like, go listen to him and everyone else's podcast. It's so good. You've said so much good stuff.

Ryan: Thank you.

Annie: But I really appreciate the work you're doing. You are a more willing participant in this than a lot of people are, probably including me. And so I'm just really grateful. It must feel like you're one of one sometimes, huh?

Ryan: It does sometimes. And I kind of hope and think that everybody is that and that everybody has their thing that God has strategically positioned all of us to be alive today for such a time as this. And so as lonely as it feels sometimes, I'm just reminded that that's actually everybody and that we all in our own way and that actually pressing into that pain point is where the best stuff comes from. And so whether that is in creative work or just in life in general, we're kind of wired to run away from our pain and run away, shy away from our weaknesses. And I just think the much more fun thing to do is to run straight through it and embrace it and realize that when we're weak-

Annie: We are not built the same.

Ryan: We're actually strong. Doesn't that sound fun, Annie? Doesn't it sound fun to just embrace our weakness?

Annie: This is when you realize an Enneagram seven and Enneagram five are having a conversation.

Ryan: Hey, I'll say this. I don't know if you've noticed. A lot of my best friends are sevens. And it's interesting to me because we're wired completely different. And I've just always understood. I think you bring out a piece of me that I wish that came more naturally to me.

Annie: Yes. And when sevens are their healthiest selves, we are thoughtful like fives. I mean, we go to five when we are our best selves. And so it's exactly the same. I feel like when I'm around fives, I get.... your pace and your thoughtfulness invites me to have a slower pace and more thoughtfulness. And so I'm thankful to be around fives as well. Let's stay friends.

Ryan: Deal.

[01:20:01] <music>

Outro: Okay, you guys, isn't he awesome? I am such the president of his fan club. I like him so much. What a good dude! And what a fascinating book!

If you have not read *Single Today* yet, I would really suggest it. I really love the read. I thought he had a lot of important concepts and ideas that he shared in that book. I think you will really like it.

And go follow Ryan on social media. Tell him thank you for being on the show. If you're in the Austin area or somewhere close, or if you're there vacationing one week, I would really encourage you to stop by Red Rocks Austin and be a part of their congregation for the weekend.

If you've been thinking about giving Single Purpose League a try, now is the time because next week we're getting ready to close registration for the rest of the year. And we have a meetup day happening this weekend where our SPL members are getting to meet up and hang out in their own cities. Y'all, there are over 50 different meetups happening this weekend. I think that is so cool.

And if you sign up today, you'll still have a chance to see if there's one happening in your city. And you can go and meet some really fun Single Purpose League new friends. We've even got them international. We see you, Australia, with those meetups. Y'all just head over to singlepurposeleague.com to join and to learn all of those details.

Like we mentioned earlier as well, if you are a pastor or you want to share this pastoring singles resource with your pastor, you can find that at anniefdowns.com/pastoringsingles. There's a video there at the top that I kind of share my heart behind this. But I want you to hear me say we feel very positioned and called and hopeful about the work that can happen between the church and singles, for singles to keep digging in, for pastors and leadership at church to really see the singles in their community and everyone in this conversation. The pastors, the church staff, the singles, everyone wants to be on the same page.

That's what I keep hearing from singles and what I keep hearing from pastors. And so any way that we can serve the church and serve our single friends we want to do. So again, it's totally free. It's a resource for you. Download it, share it, send it, just whatever you want to do with it, send it [anniefdowns.com/pastoring singles](http://anniefdowns.com/pastoring_singles).

And if you enjoyed this episode, which I'm sure you did, I think you'll also love Episode 857 on singleness in the church with Pastor David Platt.

If you have any questions from this episode — I would love to hear them — just drop them in the Q&A box on your Spotify app. If you're a Spotify listener like me, or you can send them straight to us on Instagram @ThatSoundsFunPodcast, we will do our best to answer all of them there.

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

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you, please, I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me? I'm finishing writing a book. So that sounds really fun to me to have draft one done that you will get to read in February of 2026.

Y'all have a great weekend. We'll see you back here on Monday with one of my favorite pastors talking about, again, what's going on in the church, what's going on in our lives, what's going on with men and women. I think you're going to love this one. This is a special conversation coming on Monday with Pastor Phil Manginelli. We'll see y'all then.

Raj: I'm Raj Nair, host of the Can I Trust the Bible? podcast. Now did the events recorded in the Bible actually happen? Is the Bible trustworthy and reliable? Well, join me on this comprehensive Christian apologetics journey as we talk with experts and renowned apologists to provide compelling evidence that will strengthen your Christian faith. Make sure to follow Can I Trust the Bible? on your favorite listening platform and join me every Tuesday as we discover why you can have rock-solid trust in the Bible.