



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Stability with Nathan Oates

Season 2, Episode 7 Transcript

[00:00:01] Intro: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples, and now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:20] Darryl Dash: Hey it's Darryl, and welcome back to the podcast. In this season, I'm working through some of the themes from my new book *Eight Habits for Growth*, and I want to talk to people who actually thought a lot deeper about each of these themes and how it relates to us today. And today I want to talk about the seventh habit simplify and prioritize. This is really a habit about getting rid of the clutter and focusing on what matters most.

And to do that, I wanted to maybe look at that from a different angle. I want to talk to Nathan Oates who is the lead pastor of Emmaus Church Community in Lincoln California because he's the author of a new book called *Stability: How an Ancient Monastic Practice Can Restore Our Relationships, Churches, and Communities*. This is almost an extreme version of simplifying and prioritizing; really getting to a different way of life. I think he's going to talk about it's not just a way of life that's focused on behavior, but that gets to some of the hard issues of why we're always in a rush, always on the move, and always feeling restless.

Nathan is a practitioner of community restoration. He believes that there is a way to push past consumerism and its destructive influence on our hearts that is part of our society today. And to combat some of the effects on our families, our churches, and our cities. He's going to talk about something called the ancient benedictine vow of stability. He's going to argue that a movement that is really rooted in an immovable commitment to a people, a place, and a purpose. Embracing stability he says, is the path to restoration. And so I'm excited to talk to Nathan about his book and some of his background, how he got interested in this, and his experience living with monks. So Nathan, welcome to the podcast. It's so good to have you on with us today.

[00:02:21] Nathan Oates: Thanks Darryl, so glad to be here.

[00:02:24] Darryl Dash: Nathan, I'm really curious how you got interested in the rule of Saint Benedict. I think it's become a little bit trendy among some people, I've certainly seen books on it, but it's still not really that mainstream. How did you get interested in it?

[00:02:39] Nathan Oates: Yeah, that's a great question. I studied spiritual formation in college and grad school, so I've been wired towards this direction for a long time and really fascinated essentially with the process of change, how people change. I got to witness my family convert non-Christian to Christian at a real formative age in my adolescence and that really was a fascinating and powerful experience for me. And since then, I think I've been really interested in the influences that catalyze change. The factors that sustain change so that it's not just a flash in the pan, but actually a shift in value, in desire, and people actually become something else, we actually can become saints.

So that was in my mind and in my education for a while and then about 15 years ago I was at a retreat house and I was waiting for a ride and there was an old library there, mostly Eastern Orthodox books. And I pulled out this little teeny red book from the shelf and it said *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, and I didn't know anything about him. I don't know how he had escaped my awareness for so long, but I turned to the first page of the first chapter and the first line is this "Clearly there are four kinds of monks," and I just thought that was the most interesting opening line. I didn't know there were four kinds of monks, you know what I mean?

[00:04:03]: So I start reading his definition of these four kinds of monks and ultimately, Darryl, at the end of that maybe 15 minutes, I felt like this man had diagnosed the problem with the North American church so succinctly. I was literally turning the book around trying to find out who is this man, and when did he write this book? And I was shocked to find out he's an Italian from the sixth century and he's talking about the collapse of Rome and the church during the collapse of Rome. But I felt like he just absolutely nailed specifically the consumerism that in my view and in his view, was just wrecking the Christian community.

And so I thought Darryl, if he understands the problem, maybe he's got a good solution, and that solution ultimately is the vow of stability. And so since that day, I have read more on Saint Benedict and Benedictine spirituality than any other topic. I've continued to be totally fascinated by it.

[00:05:05] Darryl Dash: So I'm surprised to hear you talk about consumerism in Benedict's Day because I often think of it as being a modern thing. You know, something that maybe was invented with the industrial revolution and has accelerated recently. So what does it look like back then? How did it differ, and how was it the same as what we face today?

[00:05:23] Nathan Oates: It's a great question. He goes to college at 19 in Rome and he drops out almost immediately because of just the brokenness, the moral decay that he encounters in Rome. And it's not just the culture, it's also the church, there's corruption in the church that really causes him to experience some deep disillusionment. I think that has to do with what's related to consumerism, the bishops of the church had been given political power by this time. And so there's a possibility that there was a real advantage financially and in terms of power to be in places of religious authority. I love to pursue that question more in terms of the roots of consumerism in and of itself. But what he explicitly says that relates to this, is the fourth kind of monk that he describes, which he detests and says is worse in any way than the other bad kind of monk that he identifies. He calls this kind of monk the Gyrovague, which is a word he makes up to mean they just circle around, they swirl around in circles and they never stop. He's essentially describing this trend among so-called monks, 'Church shopping' is what they would do, except they were going from monastery to monastery.

And in the Benedictine tradition, guests are welcomed as Christ. So if you show up at a monastery as a guest, you're given a great place to stay, you're given a beautiful welcome, a graceful response, good food, a place of honor, you sit by the abbot. And then the trend apparently was that after three or four days of this kind of hospitality, when they finally said hey, would you guys help with the dishes, these Gyrovagues would say actually we're moving on.

[00:07:13]: So he just feels like these guys are ashamed of the whole idea of monasticism and he's got some really strong words for them. So that's the form of consumerism that was almost immediately in the context of Benedict in the 6th century. And so to counter that Darryl, he says if you're even going to come to my monastery requirement of entrance is a vow of stability. You're not going anywhere. You're going to commit to spend the rest of your life literally within the confines of this community, with these people, serving this rule and serving me or whoever I place in charge as your abbot.

[00:07:52] Darryl Dash: So talk about what that stability looks like. Especially translating that out of his day in a monastery to living in North America in the 21st century. What do you actually mean when you're talking about stability?

[00:08:07] Nathan Oates: Okay, first, that question was my essential question with this book project. Is there a way for us to take what monks have done for generations, for decades, centuries, and translate it into a different Christian tradition? Or a Protestant context, a non-cloistered context where there is a dispersed community? I don't live in a community with the people in my church, we all have our own homes in different parts of the town. Is there a way we can take something of the stability that is supporting and enabling such profound holiness and effectiveness and impacting the culture there and translated to our context here? And that question which I asked in several ways and I explained this in the book, when I asked the monks during this three-week stay in a monastery in Italy, their response was pretty negative. Like we don't think you can, we don't think you can translate this. You can't just import this into a different context because the context is so fundamental to what we're experiencing.

[00:09:16]: So I've had to do a lot of work, and I can say more about that if you're interested. But I've had to do a lot of translation in order to glean something of the essence of Benedictine stability and then try to put it into practice here. It is the fundamental challenge I think that I'm facing. So I put it like this, as you said in the intro, we (you and I) in our context, we can still make a vow to, "I'm going to be committed to this place to these people and to this shared purpose." I think even if we move in that direction, we've gone miles beyond the typical consumer-driven, treat the church as a commodity, not as a community approach. That frankly in my view, is characterizing especially the larger North American evangelical churches.

[00:10:12] Darryl Dash: So Nathan, I think in the book you talk about the state of our North American society, we're always in a rush. It seems like we are in this frantic search for more satisfaction and meaning. And usually that means we need either a new experience or a new place or something to give us the excitement. We're always hoping that will lead to contentment and it's just not working, right? It leads to this sense of restlessness and no matter how much we get, it's simply not enough. So how is stability pointing us in the right direction to finding what we're actually looking for?

[00:10:55] Nathan Oates: Yeah, it's inviting us to a contentedness here and that is a fundamental shift in the way we think. We think we're trained, we are wired, not by God but by the culture, to expect the next phone to be better than this phone and the next house to be bigger and the next job, etcetera. And so I think simply the idea that you could be content, there could be this residential contentedness in remaining is a big leap, is a big step and shift in values and expectations. So it challenges our very world view, I think, at a really fundamental level.

But I think that, as you mentioned Darryl, there's enough dissatisfaction with the status quo, which is a constant movement that there actually might be an audience or a willingness is probably a better way to say it to hear a different approach to life. You know, I don't get it anymore, I think people are just finally like "I think he's just going to stay at that church for the rest of his life." But for the first six, seven, eight years that we were here at our church that we planted and things were going well, some of the optics were good. I was getting invitations to go to other places and I'm like no, I'm hardly even getting started here kind of perspective was met with "Oh, okay, so you're not really ambitious enough to succeed in ministry? You don't really want to take the platform to the next level." Almost like I was a failure in not desiring to kind of climb the ladder. Even within the context of pastoral ministry, which is really too bad, don't you think? I can imagine that in a certain professional context, but it even exists in the church.

[00:12:53]: So first of all, I think there's this contentedness that it invites us into. And then the second thing that comes to mind when you asked that question, Darryl, is that we don't develop when we're constantly moving. Like a tree can't produce fruit if you transplant it three or four times, it somehow loses the ability to produce fruit. And I think there's a parallel there that's really important to pay attention to. The place, remaining in a place, which is the most basic primal, fundamental expression of stability. Don't go anywhere, and even that is so challenging because it's so instructive.

The place teaches me what is real. I fashion myself a leader. You should ask my staff if I really am a leader because they're the ones that will tell you that most accurately. My home is what's going to reveal the truth most clearly about who I am and what I value. The place is such a powerful instructor, and then there are just circles that go out from there. There's the place, there are the people, there's the purpose and ultimately there's the heart of God.

But I don't think most that we come into contact with have allowed stability to do its work long enough to really see the value of it, which is too bad because we love the fruit of stability or at least we admire the fruit of stability. We admire the 40-year marriage, we admire the long-tenured and successful business career. You know, the man or the woman who takes the business through scorified iterations and remains in the lead and just seems to have the staying power, but we seem to repudiate the practice itself of stability.

[00:14:38] Darryl Dash: Why is that? What is there that makes us want to be on the run all the time, even though we like the fruit? It's like we just don't stick around long enough to get that fruit. What's behind that?

[00:14:51] Nathan Oates: Oh, man, I want to hear your thoughts on that. I think it's hard to stay fundamentally. It's just really hard. It's hard to stay in a marriage for your whole life. It's hard to stick with a friend that is taxing. It's hard to pastor the same community. It's just difficult. And then maybe a more of anthropological level, we are restless, we're restless beings. We have a fundamental lack of trust in our creator and it has caused us since the first record of humanity to run away from conflict instead of facing it. So I think the combination of our desire to not take responsibility and to run and the simple challenge of the daily work of remaining is what probably causes most of us to just bail as soon as things get a little bit sideways. What do you think in terms of your writing and research? What do you think the answer to the question is?

[00:15:53] Darryl Dash: I was telling you before we started recording that I live in a hyper transient community where people, 70%, move every two years and I think you nailed it. I think it's a sense of this is a temporary stop on the way to something better. You know, in Toronto where I am, it seems like the model is you stay in a career for two years, but if you're there year three, you're starting to get stale and you're not gonna be able to move up. I think I have this image of life that life is continually trading up, almost like a game of bigger and better. And you take that to the extreme of even upgrading relationships, right? This person is not Mr right, but they're Mr right now, and maybe somebody better is gonna come along. And Nathan, you're the expert on this more than I am, but in the same way that you go on Amazon and shop for the ideal product, it's like that with everything now. You go on a job search site and there's an infinite number of jobs to aspire, or you go on a dating site with an infinite number of potential partners. So I think we've just spotted this vision of we can continually trade up.

[00:17:09] Nathan Oates: Yeah, it's such a great comment. We date like we shop, isn't that crazy? I mean, I have dated for 25 years, but you literally are flipping through images of products. That's incredible. It can't help but wire us, it can't help but shape us. One of the best questions I was asked Darryl, early in the project by one of my best friends. In fact, I've known this guy since we went to high school together, we played football together and he said stability, went right on stability, he said that sounds like stagnation. And it was really helpful because it was good to hear a perspective that wasn't shaped at all by the writings of Benedict as I had been already for too long to kind of get outside of it. And so it helped me to clarify things in the book.

[00:17:58] I talk about the posture of stability, not doing nothing, even though it can look like you're doing nothing. We live by the American river, we go there a lot on our days off. It's not a huge river, but it's big enough to be dangerous, and

occasionally we'll try to cross the river. And when our kids were younger, I would go out in the middle of the river, they would kind of come to me and I would help them get across. It looks like I'm doing nothing but under the water, like say I'm about like chest-deep in the water, I am bracing. I am leaning against the current, my toes are dug into the river rock. It's very active. It looks like I'm doing nothing, but in fact, doing nothing would be floating down the river like a dead piece of wood. And people would go, "Oh look, he's moving, but no he's not, he's just going with the current." The true picture of stability is this posture of remaining. That is very active, requiring a lot of intentionality and focus and it's enabling helpful movement to happen, in this case, the crossing of the river of my kids.

[00:19:05] So I think the posture of stability is something that's really hard for us to get our heads wrapped around. It's not complicated, but we just don't ever see it like that. And then the purpose of stability needs to be held up as well because stability for the sake of stability itself is sort of silly. Stability is instrumental, stability value is held in what it enables. You know, the Jesus of the soils, the value of the soil that enables the seeds to take root is that it's undisturbed. The stability enables not just a safe place to be, but it enables fruit, so it's instrumental. People have talked to me a lot in the last couple of weeks since the books came out, stability is the ideal, it's the ultimate. It's not really the ultimate, it's simply a necessary ingredient to the ultimate, which is work that lasts, fruit that matters, a marriage that is fulfilling those kinds of things. The ironic thing and the sad thing is it's just been so ignored in North American culture, maybe Western culture at large, that it sounds like a brand new idea. It's really not, it's just a rarely demonstrated value I think.

[00:20:23] Darryl Dash: Are you a big fan of Zack Eswine. Have you read some of his books?

[00:20:27] Nathan Oates: I know the name, but I've never read his books

[00:20:31] Daryl Dash: In his book, *The Imperfect Pastor*, he talks about the desire to transcend our limits and to be everywhere at once and to know everything that's going on and to be able to fix everything, and to do things quickly and famously. He talks about pastoral ministry really being something about doing small things, mostly unseen and unknown by everybody else over a long period of time. And it's really a model of stability. I think what he's describing there is a model of pastoring that is about doing that slow, patient, unseen work of being in a community and loving certain people for a long period of time. And that's a very un-American, un-Canadian way of pastoring. So how has that shaped your pastoral ministry? You planted a church, I'm sure that you

wrestled through how to shape, how you pastor. What has the church become as a result of this?

[00:21:27] Nathan Oates: Yeah, I feel like we're beginning to see the fruit of having been here for a long time. There's such an advantage to plant, and you did, you planted your church. So it's such an advantage rather than coming in on the heels of somebody else and dealing with the challenges that just aren't your issues anymore. But you've now adopted them, they're now yours, you bought the farm kind of thing. So I think we were able to start with a vision that cast this as a value from the beginning. And now we've been able to live into that vision so consistently that the three values of our church are still the values of our church that we started with. There are still the values, I still believe in them with my whole heart. Our whole community is wrapped around these values. And now in regard to the fruit, people that I got to lead to Christ, now I got to marry, do their weddings, now I'm baptizing kids, you know, it's just so good. It's just so beautiful.

[00:22:26]: I think that the change has been remarkable in terms of the perspective of our church on the part of the city. We came here, we're like "Hey, we want to help, we're here to serve the city, we'll do whatever you want." Nothing, they didn't need us, want us, no interest in us at all. And that has shifted in just the last couple of years and I believe it's because now we have something to offer. What do we have to offer? Stability. We have been here. We've been here longer than most of the city councilmen have lived in the town. Now we're a community that has roots here, knowledge, the capacity to meet practical needs. We stepped in during the pandemic when the schools shut down and we're able to do really meaningful work here. That's the kind of thing that is valued. What people don't see, is that took 17 years to erect. There's no shortcut to that. There's no shortcut to 25 years of marriage, you got to go through 365 days of marriage 25 times to get to that. And I had just been totally thrilled by that revelation that now I'm beginning to experience finally just turning 49 last week. I feel like it's now starting to get good. I wish I could tell the 23-year-old church planter to hold on for 20 years.

[00:24:05] Darryl Dash: It's so true though. The normal church marketing model is come to our church because we offer something; it's really the marketing, the consumerist pitch, right? You're going to get something here that you don't get elsewhere. So how do you shift that and really begin to cast a different set of values and a different way of living?

[00:24:29] Nathan Oates: Oh man, that's a good question. I had it easy Daryl because we were called to this place to plant. I was given an internship at the big model, big church and told to do this with our network. And the bottom line

is they might even be right, I might be wrong, and I've said this to several people. The big church might be right and I might be wrong. The bottom line is I can't get passionate about that, so I can't give my life to that model, I just can't do it. If you wanted me to do the big flashy something for everyone kind of church, I'll just die. My soul will just shrivel. So in that sense, I say that I had it easy because God wired me in such a way that I recognized within the first couple weeks of this request to plant a church like that. I just can't do it, and it's not about right or wrong, it's about my vision. I just can't get passionate about that. I felt like I was given the freedom to pursue what I am passionate about and that is this contemplative spirituality that ultimately affects holistic transformation in a person and in a community.

[00:25:38]: So I credit the people who were in leadership over me, giving me the freedom to do this, which was very weird. I'm in the Church of the Nazarene, which is the holiness denomination that started in LA and then in Texas. And we're not very typical Nazarene in the way we look and the liturgy that we use, we look more Anglican and more contemplative, and we're always being asked are you catholic? But it's because I am so grateful for the freedom that I was given to just pursue what I was ultimately passionate about, which I think ultimately speaks to this idea of stability.

It's really hard to remain if you're not convinced, if you're not passionate, if you don't love it. So I would want to be careful to say to somebody who's like oh man, I got into this and it's not a good fit. I would not be asking them to remain, I would be trying to give them permission to try something different. So it's not a one-size-fits-all in every situation, don't ever leave anything. However, if the reason that you want to leave is because now it's gotten hard or now this conflict or those kinds of consumerist kind of reasons, that's the person to whom I would say oh, it's just going to get good on the other side of this. You got to go through this challenge and you're going to start to see the fruit on the other side.

[00:27:00] Darryl Dash: So Nathan, I'm tempted to ask you a stupid question, which is how can I become a stable person right away because I need it. Obviously, it's going to be a long pursuit, it's not going to be an instant thing with three steps. And it's probably also a community endeavor, not just an individual endeavor. What are some radical steps though that we can take to begin to at least move in that direction in our lives?

[00:27:26] Nathan Oates: Okay, good. One of the steps that have been meaningful to me is I put it in a rhyme in order to make it memorable in the book. And the way I put it in the book is to celebrate the root that leads to the fruit. We're surrounded by the happy endings and testimonies that are and then

happily ever after and now everybody is wonderful and everything's fixed. I don't often hear stories about the sacrifice with no resolution. I don't often hear stories about the challenges just disconnected from the victories, and so much of life is that, so much of life. And I'm trying to lead myself and our community into a corporate experience that celebrates the root, not just the fruit. So we begin to see there is value in being on this street for a decade. Let's not even talk about the transformation of the shop owner who we walk past every day yet. That hasn't happened yet, but let's celebrate. We've been here for 10 years, or whatever it is. And with that, the sacrifices, the things that we've given up, the promotions that we said no to, the nicer house that was actually 30 minutes away. It's going to kind of drag us out of this community, so we said no to that. I want to celebrate those things as worthy of celebrating. We've endured, we've survived, like that's the beginning.

[00:29:05]: So that's one of the things that I've been trying to lead our community into, and before I did that I had to leave myself into it. I had to celebrate that myself, like celebrating three years of real difficulty in a specific situation where it seemed like everything else around me fell apart. Because there was an illness that was so consuming that it's all I could do, so everything just fell apart. Well, that's either just a terrible story, a waste of time, something you want to erase from your history. Or it's this place where the seed died and then something else started and happening that maybe I couldn't even recognize. I want to celebrate that. Why? Because I mean even yesterday Darryl, you probably go through this too, I'm preaching on joy out of Philippians and I'm looking out in a congregation and I was like, there's a cancer diagnosis and there's someone who's recently blind and there's someone who's going through a divorce. And so I'm trying, I need to say what you're going through right now. It matters, even though it's horrible and hard. I want to be able to believe that that's true, and I do believe that that's true. But I don't want to just be talking about health and wealth and prosperity all the time, so they're like what's the matter with me? I want to say no, that pain, that darkness, that dark night of the soul, that valley of the shadow of death, that's where God is, and that's the part of the story that matters. That was a really long answer to your question, sorry.

[00:30:40] Darryl Dash: Nathan, in talking to you, there's something inviting about what you're talking about. And what I'm noticing is even in the way that you describe it, this is obviously a message that you're living into. It's not just a message that you discovered last year, but it's one that you've been building into your life. So yeah, I just appreciate how attractive it is, and not just the ideas, but even seeing you practice that in your life and ministry. I really appreciate that. I want to ask you a couple of personal questions as we close here. What are you learning lately? It doesn't have to be related to stability, it can be related to anything, but what have you been learning lately in your life?

[00:31:18] Nathan Oates: That's a great question. The first thing that comes to mind, I'll segue with your last question, another really practical way to grow in stability is to have someone coach you in it. To have someone who values it more than you do help you to make the choices for stability. My growth in the last 21 years has been significantly shaped by my spiritual director who was a priest in an Episcopal Anglican tradition. So a little different than me, brought different questions to my situations, offered different resources than I would typically go to. And as you can imagine if you meet with somebody consistently for 21 years and you confess your sins and you share your burdens and your hopes, they become massively significant to you. And he passed away last week and so what am I learning is I'm recognizing the void that now exists in my life and in my ministry. This man's words are all over my ministry and my sermons were shaped by him and my personal growth was deeply shaped by him.

[00:32:37]: So I haven't learned the lesson necessarily, but I'm seeing something Darryl that I haven't seen clearly in 20 years, which is the significant role that a few others can play in your life when you stay with them for so long. I feel like he's part of me, I'm part of him and in the absence of his physical presence now, I'm recognizing just how significant that relationship was. Which is making me lean into my wife more intentionally, making me spend better time with my kids. You and I probably live in a world with hundreds of people that we know probably just a few that really know us well and there's so much value there. So that value should shape my decisions, I should be leaning in and prioritizing those few relationships. Sadly, sometimes it's the absence that reveals the beauty of something that you have become accustomed to for a couple of decades. Yeah, so that's the raw there Dr. Dash.

[00:33:51] Darryl Dash: Yeah, that's very profound. You know, you've been honest about they're looking at people yesterday and seeing how tough life can be, right? People struggling with illnesses, you've talked about the death of a spiritual director and mentor. These are really hard times for a lot of people. It's been a difficult season for a lot of us with the pandemic and polarization and everything else going on. What's encouraging you in the middle of that?

[00:34:23] Nathan Oates: One of the things that's encouraging me is despite the polarization and we've experienced some relational conflict and political conflict, and there are things that people wanted me to say that I wasn't ready to say on about seven different issues as you know. But we have more people in our church community in home groups. We launched a new home-group season in the fall, hundreds of people and home groups more than we've ever had. And that's so encouraging that people are longing for relational connection. It was

that the isolation that I think was the most destructive. I don't know if you have little kids still, but the situation at grammar schools are horrendous right now and at high schools are horrendous, and I think it's because of all the isolation. Even with adults, the isolation was super destructive, and so to see people with the capacity to recognize I need to be with others, so encouraging. The rule of Saint Benedict is written for personal spiritual formation, but it's addressed to an individual. "Listen my son," that's how it begins, but the assumed context is community and we can't assume that context anymore in North America because people are so isolated. So to see people recognize that the context for my own health is community, it's so encouraging.

[00:35:50] Darryl Dash: Yeah, that is very good. Nathan, where can people find your book and where can they learn more about you?

[00:35:57] Nathan Oates: Thanks for asking. I have a website, nathanoates.com, and the book is available there. It's also available at Amazon and Barnes and Noble in those kinds of places. I also pastor a church here in Northern California called Emmaus community and that's emmauscommunity.org.

[00:36:17] Darryl Dash: I really appreciate talking to you today. And even talking to you as I said, there's just an invitation almost in what you're talking about and how you say it to that kind of life. So I hope that the listeners can pick that up as well and I'm really grateful for your writing on this and for your ministry. Thank you for joining us today.

[00:36:36] Nathan Oates: Thank you brother, it's really been a joy talking to you. Thanks for the time.