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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.

Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.

I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.

I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life, because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

Today we're talking about meditation and how we should view it as Christians.

To explore the topic, I have Dr. Rick Marrs in the studio.

He is a professor of practical theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, and he brings together two areas of study that puts him in a unique position of expertise.

He has a Master's of Divinity and has served as a pastor, but he also has a Ph.D. in psychology and spent years working as a counselor and licensed psychologist.

He's been a professor at two colleges.

He authored the book Making Christian Counseling More Christ-Centered, along with numerous other Bible studies and training programs.

I've gotten to work with Dr. Marrs on a couple projects, which I've thoroughly enjoyed.

We developed an online course called Stress and Worry in the Life of a Christian.

You can find it at Lutheran Hour Ministries.

Dr. Marrs, it's great to have you on the show.

Rick: It's very good to be with you, Jessica.

I'm looking forward to this, and yeah, I've been wanting to talk about this for Concordia Seminary for some time.

Jessica: It's a topic that needs to be talked about.

So we're talking about meditation.

It's often recommended by mental health professionals, but is it appropriate for Christians?

Rick: Yeah, that's the big question that a lot of faithful Christians want to ask, and I think they should ask.

There's a whole body of scientific research evidence out there that shows that meditation, often called mindfulness in the culture now, is beneficial psychologically for people in a whole variety of different sort of psychological treatments and psychological disorders.

But a lot of Christians go, but isn't that got some Buddhism in it?

And I don't want to be practicing any Buddhism.

And I fully agree with that kind of, when I say reservation about doing meditation.

And I've talked to any number of Christians that have said, yeah, our kids are in a school system that their school is teaching them mindfulness, and it seems kind of Buddhist to me.

What can we do?

They say, well, there are Christian forms of meditation.

Christians have been doing meditation for thousands of years.

I've been studying this for decades now, and it was chapter 15 of my book to try to help people to be less afraid of it and know that there are Christian options.

I'm looking forward to talking with you more in detail about it.

Jessica: Well, let's clarify that term.  
What is meditation?

Rick:

A lot of what does pass from meditation did come to the United States through Asia, through Buddhism.

Back even in the 1940s, 50s, they were starting to practice some of this.

In the 1970s, 80s, 90s, mindfulness became very, very popular, extremely popular, sort of a secular version of transcendental meditation was what it was first called.

Mindfulness has kind of replaced that because the transcendental aspect was more heavily Buddhist Eastern religions.

The main problem with the Eastern religions is that they encourage people to look inside themselves for their answers.

It's not that important.

We go into a lot of details on it, but just know that it is a focus on how can I look deeply within myself, looking for answers that are somehow bubbling up within myself.

We Christians kind of go, wait a minute, I know that there are things bubbling up within me, but it's based in my sinful nature and so forth.

And so, yeah, getting people to focus on their inner self, while not always bad, can be overly focused upon.

And so having people actually practice similar sort of mindfulness techniques on breathing and other things, which we'll get to later actually with an experience of it, which I'm looking forward to for the listeners.

It is important to focus on our bodies, being aware of our muscles and how they are tense and things like that.

I think that's just a standard first article sort of issue to be aware of and then to focus on breathing, but then to bring God's Word into it in some very legitimate ways.

We don't want to be too afraid of meditation.

If Christians are reticent to do it, we need to teach them some ways that they can faithfully practice meditation as a Christian.

Christians have been meditating on scripture for thousands of years because they know that scripture helps to point them outside to their need for a Savior, to the salvation that they have in Jesus, to his prayers, to the Psalms.

In fact, I like to point out to Christians that there are a number of Hebrew scriptures and New Testament scriptures that point towards meditation.

Even I think that that word meditation was more commonly used in the King James Version Bible than it has been in some of our later editions because in the King James Version Bible time they weren't worried about transcendental meditation.

They probably hadn't even heard of it at that time.

But since then, we've become more, I say, our culture of Christians have become more reticent to practice meditation, so the word itself shows up in English translation somewhat less frequently.

But there's a number of places.

Psalm 19, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

That's one Hebrew word, hibion.

Psalm 104, Let my meditation be pleasing to Him. As for me I shall be glad in the Lord.

That's another Hebrew word, sikak.

Psalm 119, verse 97, because that's a long psalm.

How I love your law. It is my meditation.

My sikak, all the day.

So again, numerous different Hebrew words that get translated as meditation still in our English versions today.

Why can't we look at that and say, okay, what can we, what should we meditate on?

Jessica: Why would psychologists or counselors want to use meditation with their patients?

Rick: Well, it's just a whole, again, a lot of research evidence.

A lot of people are very anxious, and when they're anxious, their bodies change.

They start breathing more shallowly, more frequently, with a more frequent pace to their breathing and they don't realize that that actually then changes their blood and their

level of oxygen and carbon dioxide and things like that, which then can exacerbate the anxiety that they're feeling.

People can hyperventilate and it does, if you just breathe shallowly and frequently for 10, 15 minutes, it will actually change the dark carbon dioxide level in your bloodstream and start to make you feel more and more anxious.

When we are not breathing deeply, when we are breathing quickly, not slowly, it changes the way that our bodies just feel in general.

People with anxiety disorders just often aren't aware that they're doing that.

When they slow down their breathing, breathe more deeply, concentrate on more, and I'm kind of doing this with my hands right now, concentrate on more peaceful sorts of images, then it can slow down their heart rate and just make them feel less anxious.

Jessica: Yeah, there's definitely a connection with your emotions and your mind and your body.

And it's kind of surprising that you could do that, that you could calm down your anxiety by just the way you breathe.

Rick: Yeah, as the psalmist said, we are fearfully and wonderfully made and it's wild how that

can then change just how our neurons are interacting with each other in our brains, in the rest of our bodies.

As people do practice some meditation, then they can feel less anxious and even be more focused on God in their prayer life, I think.

Jessica: It seems very relevant with the percentage of anxiety and stress that are being reported right now among Americans and amongst teens and children.

It seems like we are more in need of some way to calm ourselves down, but one that is God-pleasing and that includes our spirit as well as our mind and our emotions.

Rick: And I know you're probably not going to bring this up, but you wrote a little booklet for CTA, Christ Who All, called Just Breathe, Devotions for Overwhelmed Youth.

And so yeah, I remember doing a podcast sort of thing with you a year or two ago about your little booklet.

So I was really glad to have that come out.

Jessica: And you were my advisor for that book.

That was fun and thank you.

I remember, oh, it was probably five or six years ago now, but I was working with a group of college-age students and they were coming in, flying into town and we were going to do some leadership training.

And I had all my curriculum set and the leadership things that we're going to work on and the

Bible studies, and they came in so stressed from their different schools and their work and their classes and their friends and their parents.

And so even though we were trying to use this curriculum, like they were somewhere else. So I stopped actually, I stopped what we were doing and I got out a recording that you and I had made of one of the meditations that you led and I played that for them and we did that.

You should have seen the looks on their faces when they were done.

They had been calmed down, refocused, and then we opened up our curriculum and we kept going and it was completely different.

It's pretty significant.

So I know that you've been researching Luther's view of soul care, right?

Tell me about that.

Rick:

Soul care, yeah, care of souls.

So yeah, that's kind of what the first half of my book is about is Luther and soul care.

I've been involved in the Christian counseling sort of movement for going on four decades now, but a lot of Christian counselors, very few of them are Lutheran or have ever talked to or heard about Luther or at least studied him in much detail.

I usually have studied Calvin or other sorts of theologians that they're more attuned with. And so the first half of my book is just here's what Luther's soul care theology was about and he was such a wonderful soul caregiver that we know from history because he sent out thousands and thousands, actually over 2,600 letters to thousands of different people all across Europe because back at that time they didn't have psychologists and psychiatrists.

And so if somebody was struggling with depression or some other sort of whatever we would call it now, anxiety disorder, and it was debilitating their lives, they would all say, well, let's ask Luther if he'll send them something.

And so Luther would write letters to these people, princes and nobles and other just friends of friends, people that he knew, and we have those.

And one of my other colleagues, Steven Pietsch, has actually studied these letters much more than I have.

He wrote a book called *Of Good Comfort* and he actually used some of Luther's letters of spiritual counsel to give to people that he was counseling who were struggling with depression.

And at least one of the people he was counseling came back and said, you're right, Luther is very empathetic towards my struggle with depression.

In fact, reading Luther's letters has been more helpful than the counseling we've been doing together.

And Steven was willing to put that into a book, so I've been repeating that ever since.

I didn't know Steven when he first wrote the book, but since 2016 he's become a colleague here at Concordia Seminary this past year.

Jessica:

That's not usually the writings that I think of when I think of Luther, but he's known for empathetic writings of soul care.

That's amazing.

Rick:

Yeah, yeah.

He just wrote tons and tons of things about that.

I mean, again, these letters, not all of them are translated into English, but several hundred

of them have been and so we can use those with people, share them with people.

And again, I just am a big believer that proper distinction of law and gospel is very important, so that's one chapter of my book.

Theology of the cross is very important, so that's another chapter of the book.

Our created bodies is another chapter in what Lutheran theology has to say about that.

And then the word of God and how Luther and Lutherans tend to treat the word of God somewhat

differently than other denominations do.

I spent a chapter talking about those things.

And that all kind of comes together.

Well, the second half of my book is here are some counseling techniques that pastors and Christian counselors can use that flow out of Luther's soul care theology.

Whether the counselor is a Lutheran or not, they can still use some of Luther's guided techniques.

And then one of those is Christian meditation.

So it's the next to last chapter in my book is kind of teaching people, here's what Luther said.

And again, we've been focused a lot on Luther, focused on oratio, meditatio, and tentatio.

Jessica: You'll have to translate those for me.

Rick: Those Latin terms, reading, meditation, and testing, or struggle that people have.

When Luther was taught how to pray in the monastery, he was taught to read, meditate, pray, and then contemplate the higher things.

Contemplatio was what he was taught.

But after he rediscovered the gospel, he started teaching his own students, no, don't contemplate the heavenly things.

Contemplate, think about the struggles that you're having, and pray to God about those temptations, those tentatio.

And so oratio, meditatio, tentatio is just something that we've been teaching students.

Lutheran pastors teaching the next generation of Lutheran pastors for 500 years since Luther said it.

And so, yeah, how can we bring tentatio into our prayer life and then look to scripture for answers or at least support through those various struggles as well?

Jessica: You said prayer life?

What does prayer have to do with meditation?

Rick: Well, it's our time to pray back to God.

We receive him in His word and His sacraments, and we don't consider prayer a sacrament back to Him, but it is our Christian living response.

Just like parents start taking care of little babies before they can talk, then parents start to teach those little babies to talk, and we're all excited when they say their first words and when they say their first sentences and when they can use their words.

We often tell them God is wanting us to use His words, our words, to speak back to Him, to ask Him for what we need.

Again, a lot of people say, well, I don't need to pray because God already knows what I need.

Well, God taught us to pray.

Jesus taught us to pray the Lord's Prayer.

And we have all these Psalms and all these other places where faithful believers have prayed back to God, and we can use those same words.

So, yeah, Luther was very much focused on oratio, meditatio, tentatio, reading, meditation, and then contemplating our own testing, our own struggles in this life during our prayer.

We want to be attending to God's word, realizing His grace is receptive to us.

We don't create His grace for us.

It's outside of us, and we want to hear that grace even in our prayers.

But then speaking back to Him, our struggles while we are here in this lifetime until Jesus returns.

Jessica: If Luther was so supportive and involved in counseling people, where do you think the stigma with mental health professionals has come?

It's almost like it is not a very Christian thing to do to go see a counselor.

You should maybe just pray it away.

Rick: Yeah, yeah.

In fact, I found out as I was doing the book, a lot of people had told me before that Melanchthon coined the term psychology.

I found out in my research that he didn't actually coin the term.

There was another guy 10 years or so ahead of him that coined the term psychology, but Melanchthon put it into his books, and since his books were so well read across Europe, he made the term psychology actually well known.

And so we've been studying psychology mostly since the 1800s ever since.

Now there are reasons why Christians should be somewhat reticent about some counseling that they might receive because again, the secular field of counseling is often anti-Christian.

There were pastors who, when I was considering going into this field in the 1970s and 80s, were trying to tell me not to do it, that they didn't trust it as well.

But my focus has always been how can Christians use first article gifts that we receive from the field of psychology, but then make sure that they are amenable to the Christian faith that we have and use God's word in appropriate ways.

I think we can and should do that.

I think Luther would applaud that as well.

Jessica: So our listeners hear what you're saying about meditation and how it can be positive and helpful.

How would you start to incorporate that into your self-care or into your spiritual life?

Rick: When I first became a pastor, I was a second career pastor so I didn't become a pastor until I was about 42 years old, I got to my congregation and one of the things I started teaching church leaders and others was to say, let's just pray the Lord's Prayer with pauses.

To not pray it in the 45 seconds that we normally do in our liturgical ways, but just to take two to five minutes to pray the Lord's Prayer just slowly.

Say the first, our Father who art in heaven, pause then for 20 or 30 seconds and contemplate what does that mean both in the catechism that wow, we are His children and we can go to him as children go to their dear Father as he says in the catechism.

Contemplate what that first article or what that first petition actually means and then just go to the second petition, actually that's the opening to the Lord's Prayer, then the first petition, hallow would be thy name.

Contemplate what that means both in how I'm trying to hallow God's name in my life, but

how can we hallow God's name in our church.

And again, just go through the Lord's Prayer slowly, meditatively.

I thought I was coming up with something kind of new.

After I'd been a pastor for three or four years, somebody said, have you ever read Luther on meditation?

I said, no, what are you talking about?

Well, he actually wrote a little book, Letters to Master Peter the Barber, in which he encouraged this man to pray the catechism, to pray the Lord's Prayer slowly and meditatively, to pray the Apostles Creed slowly and meditatively, to pray the Ten Commandments slowly and meditatively.

And so here I was thinking in my 40s I was creating something new and realized, oh, Luther was already teaching people how to do this 500 years earlier, so I should have known Luther was ahead of me.

Jessica: What about more widespread in the world of Christianity?

Are there other denominations that are recognizing the importance of meditation?

I think of Catholicism and the time spent doing the rosary, but what about other Christians?

Rick:

Yeah, I think that's a good example that some other denominations do sort of practice somewhat. The meditative going on the rosary is probably one of those.

Some of my Catholic friends just go through that slowly or repetitively.

Again, we don't want to have our people praying to Mary or anything like that, but the slowing down of the meditative process.

There's actually been a number of articles written, there are journals of Christian psychology and Christianity.

One of them did a special issue back about four years ago on meditation and mindfulness as being practiced by Christians, and they actually found out that there were two different types of some Christians that are meditating directly upon specific scripture and some Christians that were practicing on just characteristics of God rather than specific scripture. I like to think that we can practice both, and so I like to include that in when I do a 20-minute experience with people, I like to use both direct scripture but also on various aspects of God and His grace towards us.

This special issue came out in 2020 that actually did have four different articles on how Roman Catholics kind of practice meditation, how Puritans have done it in the past, how Eastern Orthodox have done it, how Pentecostals have done it, but I noticed then they didn't ask any Lutheran authors to put in another chapter or essay into that particular one.

And so we Lutherans have been kind of left out of the Christian counseling realm, partly because we just haven't been speaking about it.

My book is one of the first in 50-plus years to really kind of try to engage the Christian counseling field with Luther's theology.

Jessica: And again, the name of that book is Making Christian Counseling More Christ-Centered.

There'll be a link to it on our [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org) site.

Rick:

And actually one of my predecessors, not here at Concordia Seminary, but William Hulme was a professor at Luther Seminary up in St. Paul, Minnesota.

He was an ALC professor at the time, back in the 50s to the 80s when he was teaching there. He wrote a little book that I came across early in my career called Let the Spirit In. And so he was saying some of these same things, although he wasn't going on quite so much of a Luther focus as what I would have liked to have him done. But it was an influential little book, just like 75 pages or so, that helped introduce me because I trusted him.

He was a fairly conservative writer back in the 70s and 80s.

I met him once before he died in the 1990s.

And so yeah, he just, at the end of his book, takes people through a meditative experience. And so I've modified, I think, about a third or a half of what he's used in that book and then expand on it in some other ways and improve upon it, I think, in the meditations that I help lead people in.

But that little book was called Let the Spirit In, Practicing Christian Devotional Meditation.

I kind of just came across it by accident.

I thought it was like a portals of prayer type devotional and found out, no, he was actually doing something very different.

So I'm not the first Lutheran pastor, counselor who's gone this direction.

We haven't heard a lot about it since William Hume.

Jessica: Well the name of this show is Tangible.

We talk about putting theology into practice.

I would love to put that into practice right now.

If you would lead us through a short Christian meditation that our listeners could have as a sample to see what it's like and ways that they could use it.

Rick: I would be happy to.

I've been doing workshops all around, well literally the world, in the last several years on this.

So I usually wait toward the end of the workshop and people are very open to it and they really appreciate it.

Then they often say, have you recorded that somewhere?

I say, I'm going to get to that.

Jessica: So that I can use it again, right?

Rick: Yes, so I can use it again.

Jessica: That's what my college student said as well.

Rick: Pastors conferences.

I even have done this now in Argentina and Brazil, in Spanish and Portuguese.

So we may try to get even some translations of this later on for those people because I've told them I would try to record this and make it available to them.

Especially the pastors in Argentina, I remember, it was a group of about 60 of them.

They actually had told me before we started, yeah when we saw you were going to do meditation we weren't very trusting of you but now we've grown to trust you.

Once we finished the meditation they were all like, thank you.

That just helped me settle in, feel more at peace with God because God wants us to feel peace. Shalom is a big aspect of the Old Testament message and New Testament message as well from Jesus.

How can we meditate and use meditation as a First Article gift while receiving God's



word through hearing specific verses and contemplating His care for us, His grace for us, His mercy to us.

We can combine all those things into Christian meditation.

So thank you.

I look forward to doing this.

Jessica: Sounds good.

Sign me up.

Listeners, I'd like to invite you to join me in this scripture based meditation.

I've participated in this meditation that Dr. Marrs has led in the past and it is wonderful.

I didn't include it within the episode because it's around 20 minutes long.

I have a link to it on [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org).

It's available to you as a resource.

All of our digital resources are free.

Just click on the link.

We will also be making a recording in Spanish and Portuguese available in two separate links.

I've used this meditation with groups to rave reviews with college age adults when I've spoken at women's conferences and at home with my family.

So check it out at [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org) and click on Tangible.

It's 20 minutes that will make your day better.

Now back to the show.

I have a final question for you, Dr. Marrs.

What do you want our listeners to remember?

Rick:

That meditation can actually be Christian and that Christians can get the benefits psychologically and spiritually from meditation.

They don't have to be afraid of mindfulness being too Buddhist or somehow controversial or upsetting to their faith.

That Christians have been practicing devotional meditation and we can use these same sorts of words and processes and God's word to actually guide our meditative practices.

So don't avoid meditation.

Just practice it in Christian ways.

Jessica: Well, that's it for today.

Dr. Marrs, thanks for being here.

Rick: Thank you very much, Jessica, for having me.

I'd like to thank our listeners for being here as well.

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We've got a lot more resources there.

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