

Katelyn Beaty: (00:03)

So I think of humility as a keen awareness that we are both wonderfully made and also that we are dust.

Speaker 2: (00:19)

You're listening to the Faith and Work podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor and society through our daily work.

Joanna Meyer: (00:30)

Hi, and welcome to the Faith and Work Podcast. I'm Joanna Meyer, director of public engagement, and I cannot wait to talk to today's guest, Katelyn Beaty, the author of Celebrities for Jesus, how Personas, Platforms and Profits are Hurting the Church.

Joanna Meyer: (00:45)

We're continuing with our series Virtue and Vice, which explores historic values of the Christian faith and their implications for our life and work today. This podcast series is in conjunction with a book we're publishing by the same name, which explores five vices that affect our work, themes as diverse as pride, lust and sloth, and in contrast, the pod class will explore five virtues, characteristics like love, justice, temperance and courage, as well as their implications for our calling.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>01:15</u>)

So today we'll be exploring the theme of humility, which is why I ask Katelyn to join us. The last few years have been tough ones in the American church, as we've seen some of the most high profile leaders fall. The podcast, The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, shot to the top of the charts as millions of listeners tuned in for an audio autopsy of Pastor Mark Driscoll's abusive leadership. We've wrestled with moral failings at Robbie Zacharia's Ministries and Willow Creek Church, and on a different note, we've wondered how to respond when celebrities like Justin Bieber and Kanye West came to faith.

Joanna Meyer: (01:55)

I can hear you saying, "Joanna, what in the world does this have to do with my work? Not all of us read People Magazine like you do." And I want you to hear me out, because whether we like it or not, managing a public presence has become part of modern working life. If you've ever updated your LinkedIn profile, if you've shared a work related post through social media, or haven't forbid, you've contemplated, in quotes, "your personal brand", and trust me, I have done all three of these things, you've managed your public presence. You and I may not be celebrities, but we're wrestling with questions of image, reputation, success, and yes, humility.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>02:33</u>)

So as we jump in a little bit about our guest, Katelyn Beaty. Katelyn Beaty lives in New York City, where she works as an acquisitions editor for Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Katelyn



previously served as managing editor of Christianity Today, and is written for the New Yorker, the Washington Post, the Atlantic and the New York Times on Topics as diverse as politics, gender and theology. She hosts the Saved by the City podcast through Religion News Services, and as I mentioned earlier, her book, Celebrities for Jesus, is in bookstores now, and was lauded by Publishers Weekly as a must read for anyone interested in the fate of evangelicalism. Welcome Katelyn, what a thrilled to have you on the podcast.

Katelyn Beaty: (03:16)

Thanks so much for having me.

Joanna Meyer: (03:18)

Friends of Denver Institute may remember when you joined us for two women's events in 2014 and 2015. You really were our first speaker at the Women Work and Calling event and you were deep in, up to your eyeballs in research for your book, A Women's Place. But a lot has changed since then, life has grown, your career has taken different directions. Can you give us a thumbnail sketch of what you're doing these days?

Katelyn Beaty: (03:40)

Sure. Well, first I want to say, I remember that speaking event very vividly, because it was one of the first times I ever spoke in a crowd like that, and I felt like such a newbie, and Kate Harris went after me, and she knocked the ball out of the park, and I thought, "Oh, she knows how to do this." So I hope that I have grown in my speaking abilities since then.

Katelyn Beaty: (04:08)

But at the time I was working at Christianity Today magazine, and as you said, writing the book, A Woman's Place, about women's work and vocation from a Christian perspective. That came out in 2016 and I also then left CT in 2016 and was in the freelance writing and editing space for a couple years, trying to figure out next steps. And then in 2018, it was a big year, I moved from the Chicago suburbs to New York City, that's where I currently live. I took a job with Brazos Press, which is a division of Baker Publishing Group, and I've been there for about four years.

Katelyn Beaty: (04:49)

And I also just wrote my second book on the problem of celebrity in the church. Very different topic from my first book, but it's a space that I have been able to observe formerly, both while working at CT and having more of a bird's eye view on American evangelicalism, as well as being in book publishing and seeing the ways that dynamics of celebrity so often crop up. So yeah, and also being someone who has a very small but nonetheless real public facing presence, and asking questions of, what does it look like to navigate that space with integrity and in a non-icky way? So there's a nexus of points in my life at which I'm coming to this topic of Celebrities for Jesus.



Joanna Meyer: (05:46)

Yeah. What motivated you to write Celebrities for Jesus? Why this topic, and why now?

Katelyn Beaty: (05:54)

So the seeds for Celebrities for Jesus were really planted when I was still an editor at Christianity Today, and CT is a journalistic publication, and as journalists, and maybe especially Christian journalists, we really felt this responsibility to report the full truth about things happening in the church, believing that the truth ought to come out. We ought to be truth speakers and truth tellers even when the truth is hard to hear and navigate. And over the course of several years, we received tips about major Christian leaders, I would say, household names, leaders who had started important ministries or started churches, and the churches grew exponentially, they had their own conferences and book deals, and there were at least two instances where we received tips, and within a matter of years these allegations of misconduct and abuse were proven to be true.

Katelyn Beaty: (07:06)

And in the wake of those stories and seeing those headlines, both as a journalist, but also as a Christian, just before asking, just really acknowledging this is grievous, there's grief here in just acknowledging that people were hurt by this person's abuse of power. There's grief in recognizing that there's a watching world that sees these headlines, and how is this hampering the church as witness in a watching world?

Katelyn Beaty: (07:42)

But then also asking, what is it about celebrity power, in particular, that so often allows people to believe that they can act without accountability, that leads people to start believing their own hype, and yet that we, in our consumption habits, in our discipleship habits, we so often feed... You don't have celebrities without fans propping them up and making them celebrities, so just asking, is there something in the American evangelical mindset and history that has put an undue emphasis on celebrity? We are seeing the worst effects of it, we're seeing the worst effects of celebrity power gone wrong and these stories. How do we come to a healthier church?

Katelyn Beaty: (08:39)

And I write this book primarily as a journalist. There's analysis, there's putting together pieces, but I do also have some exhortation at the end of the book about ordinary faithfulness and humility, and I know that we're going to get to that soon, but that's why I wrote the book. Your heart breaks for the church and for other Christians, and you want to see it be healthier, so that was the impetus.



Joanna Meyer: (09:10)

Yeah, definitely. And our conversational will touch on both ends of the spectrum, of great fame and the cost of that, as well as the challenge of ordinary faithfulness, of humility. How would you describe what it means to be a celebrity, and is there a unique nuance that comes with being a Christian celebrity?

Katelyn Beaty: (09:28)

So I define celebrity in the book as social power without proximity. And I'll back up a little bit. I do distinguish celebrity from fame. I think in every time and place there have always been people whose accomplishments, or family name, or military power, whatever it is, takes their name far beyond a time and place, and gets worked into the stories of history. And fame isn't necessarily bad. People can find themselves with a measure of fame for doing really good things in the world. I think fame is probably best and healthiest when it is not something that is being sought or cultivated, but when it comes, as the result, ultimately, of living a good life, of living a virtuous life, for Christians, living a life grounded in the person of Christ and Christ-likeness.

Katelyn Beaty: (10:29)

Celebrity is a much more recent phenomenon in human history. It is a modern phenomenon where the appearance of well-knowness can be cultivated using the tools of mass media. So there is a heavy reliance on, initially, newspapers, radio, television, now of course, social media, which has just amplified, added jet fuel to the dynamics of celebrity in our world. But using those tools to project an image, and a persona, and a personal brand without necessarily having had to have done anything, and done anything good in the world, just having to know how to game the system to project a particular appearance.

Katelyn Beaty: (11:22)

Christian celebrity, it's a really interesting question. I do think what makes one unique dynamic of Christian celebrity is oftentimes someone's persona, and a sense of providence and God's calling and anointing are mixed up together. So we start to see, or just assume if somebody has a big platform and, they're an amazing communicator, and they can gather crowds, and that they can grow an organization, and they're dynamic and they're passionate, clearly God is using all of this for God's purposes in the world.

Katelyn Beaty: (12:07)

And hey, if our pastor is spending, I don't know, 10 hours a week cultivating his Instagram following, well, that's just a pragmatic tool that he can use to reach more people with the Gospel. Evangelicals are, at the end of the day, pragmatists about mass media, about the tools of media, and there's a sense that if celebrity is what it takes to get people to listen to us and take us seriously, and for us to have cultural credibility, and ultimately for more people to hear the Gospel, then let's go all in. This is just what it takes, so let's use this tool to bring more people to Jesus without maybe asking, but what kind of Gospel



are we presenting, and what kind of Christian witness are we offering, and are we being changed in unhealthy ways in the process of using this tool?

Katelyn Beaty: (<u>13:04</u>)

But I think, to be charitable, not toward all Christian celebrities, but a lot of them, I think it really starts with a good earnest desire to minister and serve, and to use one's gift for God's glory. It's just, those tools, you can't use them without them changing you. There's no neutral tool. So if you're seeking celebrity, it's going to change you in the process of you seeking it.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>13:38</u>)

So give us a brief history of how this concept of Christian celebrity came to be. Who are some of the names that we should know about?

Katelyn Beaty: (13:45)

So I really focus the second chapter of my book on three, again, household names who I think really, in the American evangelical landscape, came to kind of crystallize our contemporary sense of Christian celebrity, and that would be Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham.

Katelyn Beaty: (14:08)

Now, I'm most familiar with Billy Graham, in part because he's the youngest. He was the youngest of the three, so my grandparents, my parents grew up watching Billy Grahams crusades on television, it's very possible my grandparents listened to him on the radio, and later on I would work at the magazine that he helped to found, in Christianity Today, and so I became very well acquainted with the story of Graham. And actually, I really like Graham. It's often said, evangelicals are people who like Billy Graham. Well, if that's the case, if that's what we're going on, then I'm an evangelical.

Katelyn Beaty: (14:50)

All of these men, in their own time and historical context, were proactively embracing the tools of mass media to project an image of themselves that would draw crowds. There was a embrace of spectacle, of size, of all three men. Moody, Sunday and Graham were excellent communicators, passionate for sharing the Gospel with as many people as possible. I'd say they also had a pretty... It's not that they were against institutions. All of those men, to some extent, were involved in churches, in organizations. Graham was very intimately connected with specific Christian organizations after World War II and helped to found some of the most important ministries of 20th century evangelicalism. But at the end of the day, all three men to some extent spent a lot of their time on the road, away from an embodied, embedded local expression of Christian faith.



Katelyn Beaty: (16:08)

The way that all of these men were presenting the Gospel was from either a stage, very far away, or through disembodied media, like hearing Graham's voice on the radio, or seeing his image on the television screen, or eventually he even dabbled in social media, but there was something disembodied about the Gospel that they were presenting.

Katelyn Beaty: (16:42)

There was also a, not shying away from thinking of presenting the Gospel in an entertaining way. There was a confluence or combining of preaching with great music and Gospel choirs, and the lights and the sound, and just again, the spectacle, seeing spectacle as something that could be wielded to draw crowds with the preacher at the center of the activity.

Katelyn Beaty: (17:18)

And I can't speak to any of these men's motivation. I have every reason to believe they, at the end of the day, wanted to reach as many people as possible with the Gospel, but the Gospel that they presented tended to center on the individual preacher inviting people into an individualistic relationship with Jesus, and without always having the necessary call and grounding in the life of the local church and embedded embodied Christian community.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>17:55</u>)

So in the book you identify three temptations that any Christian who's seeking to build their public presence might face, and I wondered if you could tell us more about them, and to let our readers know. They were a lust for power, the pressure to build a platform and the need to adopt a persona.

Katelyn Beaty: (18:12)

We had to get the alliteration in there, power, platform and persona. So yeah, of course I'll start just by reflecting on, and I already alluded to this, but in so many stories of famous Christian leaders who have had a falling or a failing of some sort, there was... I would say, actually there was maybe a naive or weakly developed understanding of what power is and how it operates, and not taking the temptation to power seriously. We have a really good theology in the church of Temptations around sex and money, but I can count on one hand the number of sermons that I've heard about what a properly Christian or rightly Christian understanding of power looks like. So, I think in that absence, we think we can handle, and I think this is true for all of us to some extent, we think we can handle more power than we actually can.

Katelyn Beaty: (19:25)

And a lot of times leaders with amazing skill sets and gifting, and maybe even calling, has stepped into the spotlight and think that they can handle it, think that their spirits and their souls can handle what it's like for everybody to see you as the most important person in the room, or everybody to hang on every



word that you speak, or everybody to turn to you when it's time to make a big decision about your organization or church. Having that level of adoration and ability to influence and shape other people is not for the faint of heart, it's not for the spiritually immature, even if you have amazing gifting, and actually, I think one sign might be if you're seeking that kind of power, you're probably not ready for it.

Katelyn Beaty: (20:27)

Maybe in the same way that fame operates, if fame comes to you because of good things that you're doing, great. If power is given to you because people see how you're faithfully stewarding your gifts in a particular context, great. But as soon as you're trying to reach for it or grab for it, it's ultimately the temptation to have power over other people, to get your way, to have that kind of control. And that's not even touching on more specific abuses of power that we see in some of these stories of fallen Christian leaders. So that would just be one temptation, is the misuse of power resulting from an inability to really grapple with its effects on our souls.

Katelyn Beaty: (21:20)

The second temptation is the search for platform. And I see this a lot, and I grapple with this a lot because I am in Christian book publishing, and of course, many of your listeners will know that anybody who wants to write a book is mostly told, "Well, you have to have a platform in order to do that." And that can be really dispiriting for a lot of people. But what can happen is, in Christian book publishing, but also in the conference circuit, we see this on social media and the cultivation of a platform using those tools, there's often this... The work of cultivating a platform can be so time consuming and all encompassing that you start to forget why you're building the platform. You start to forget this isn't about me and my image and ego, and projecting an image of myself. Hopefully I'm supposed to be building a platform because I want to step on top of it and share something from the platform to reach a wider group of people.

Katelyn Beaty: (22:33)

The third temptation that I write about in the book is really, it's this cultivation of a persona. And what that's really about is a division between the true self and the false self, and the public self in the private itself, where you perform your own importance in front of other people, and there's some kind of masking that is required to be a well liked charismatic leader, and then behind closed doors, you just hear in so many stories, for example, of celebrity pastors or other ministry leaders, there is real pain behind closed doors, there is real sense that I'm not actually deeply known by many people. These people adore me, but I don't even know that they like me, and would they like me if they really knew that I wasn't as shiny and glamorous as they think that I am, or that I'm struggling with something in my personal life, or that I'm human and mortal and limited, just like they are? And that has such a cost, spiritually, relationally, emotionally.



Katelyn Beaty: (23:53)

And I think that's... What we ask Christian leaders to be in our understandings of success are too much for anybody to bear. And I think especially the loneliness and isolation factor, if that is what our notions of ministry success require of our leaders, we have gotten something wrong. We need to abandon or change those notions of success because our leaders are people and they desire to be known and cared for just all of us. And so, I think that gets into maybe how we contribute to these temptations, which it sounds like we're going to get into.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: (24:46)

Hi, I'm Jeff Hoffmeyer, vice president of advancement here at Denver Institute for Faith and Work, and I'd like to invite you to become a part of our new monthly partner community. Whether it's a monthly commitment of \$25, \$50, or any amount, your generosity will support Denver Institute's ongoing efforts to help men and women love God, their neighbors and society through their daily work, including this podcast. To say thank you, as a monthly partner, you'll receive a welcome box, you'll have exclusive access to private digital content, personalized vocational coaching and discounts for Denver Institute content and experiences. To become a monthly partner, simply visit denverinstitute.org/give, or see the show notes in today's episode. Thank you in advance for your generosity.

Joanna Meyer: (25:39)

Well, as I was thinking about this particular episode and talking about virtue, not just celebrity, the virtue of humility, one thing I realized is that even though our listeners may not be public Christian, in the sense of being a Justin Bieber or a Mark Driscoll, if they were listening to that Mars Hill Podcast, all of us, to some greater or lesser degree are engaged in public life, and often the media is part of that. Anyone who has a LinkedIn profile is carefully cultivating relationships and managing their image in that context with the goal of professional advancement, and while that may not be celebrity, it still is managing yourself and is putting the best version of yourself out there. And so, questions of the pressures that go into cultivating the image, as well as the true virtue of humility, are present in all of our lives. So in contrast to pursuing fame and influence, I'm wondering, how would you define Biblical humility? How would you put it in your own words?

Katelyn Beaty: (26:43)

I think about the etymology of the word humility, which is, of course, connected to the word human, which is connected to the word hummus, which is essentially ground, or dust, or dirt. And we believe, as Christians, that we... To dust we came and to dust we shall return. And we are wonderfully made and loved, and also we are often frail, and we have such deep limitations, and we are people of need. We are not all self-sufficient. We need each other. Any success that any of us have had has not come just from our own grit or determination. Even in our glory, even in our successes, we are deeply dependent on other people. So I think of humility as the keen awareness that we are both wonderfully made and also



that we are dust, and ultimately, that God is the sustainer of everything that we do, and to really keep front and center our reliance on God as His image bearers.

Katelyn Beaty: (28:23)

Tim Keller, who I'm sure you're your listeners know and love says... And he might have been taking this from CS Lewis. It's one of the two, it's either Keller or Lewis, both good sources. "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." I love that quote just because we might falsely think that humility means a kind of self-flagellation, or like, "Oh, I'm a worm, I'm terrible." It's not that. It is in our daily work, our daily life, how can we resist the temptation to make it all about ourselves, and how do we resist the temptation to get caught up in our own pursuits, our own desires, our own goals, and think about our neighbors as ourselves, and even think about any platform or influence that we may have as ultimately being about serving other people, rather than serving our own egos.

Joanna Meyer: (29:39)

Yeah. This struggle with reputation and pride is nothing new. One of the things that's been so fascinating about this research project is going back to text from the fourth and the fifth century, from the early days of Christiandom, and realizing that some of these challenges, while they are shaped by our modern dynamic, really at the heart level, are very much the same. And John Chrysostom, who was a fifth century archbishop of Constantinople said this, he said that humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation and bond of all virtue. And I loved that he places it at the center of our heart's attitude and our posture towards life, that shapes how we approach our lives and our work. And I'm wondering, from your own just personal experience and watching other people, if you have a unique bird's eye view of a lot of people's lives and ministries, how do you think we cult cultivate humility?

Katelyn Beaty: (30:39)

So when I think about Christians I know, even those with large public presences and platforms, and the ones who stand out to me as being humble, a couple things come to mind.

Katelyn Beaty: (30:58)

One, they are primarily interested and focused on knowing and being known in the context of embodied community. Yes, they may have a ton of followers online, or have people coming to their speaking engagements, but they're primarily focused on and concerned about loving and serving the people off screen and off stage, and are known by those people, and are willing to let themselves be known in all of their flaws and limitations, as well as their gifting and calling. So I think about the people who do have those platforms, they are very intentional about taking breaks from the spotlight, that there is a cultivated practice of going quiet, of going dark, and by going dark, I mean turning off your laptop, turning off your cell phone, being intentional about unplugging, so to speak, letting the noise of media die down to be attuned to the Spirit speaking, and taking the time to be grounded again, be re-grounded in the knowledge of one's belovedness, apart from praise, apart from performance, apart from success.



The healthiest leaders, I think, lead from that place of belovedness. They're not trying to seek to fill that void to be loved and liked, because they are so deeply confident and secure in God's love for them in Christ.

Katelyn Beaty: (32:56)

And then, I also just think, and this is the practice of humility that is not really fun for any of us, but just acknowledging when you're totally wrong, and recognizing that you are going to get it wrong, that you often don't know what you don't know, that you have a posture of learning and growing, and learning from people who you wouldn't expect to learn from. And then, when you do get it wrong and you recognize that, being quick to own it and confess it, and recommit yourself to learning.

Katelyn Beaty: (33:37)

I think, in these stories of toxic celebrity in the church, there can be a real reticence to say, "Yeah, I made a mistake, I made the wrong decision." There's all sorts of deflection and a kind of, "If this person is our leader, he's always right and we always defer to him". And I just don't think that's healthy for any of us. So yeah, an acknowledgement of when you mess up and a real commitment to doing better, I think is another sign of humility.

Joanna Meyer: (34:16)

Yeah, I was part of a spiritual formation program for leaders this year that was based on some of the principles of St. Ignatian, or Ignatian spirituality, which is just based on ancient monastic traditions coming out of the Catholic Church. And two things stood out to me, one, just watching our lives with how many people in the program could believe the Gospel for other people, but not live and understand it for themselves. And so, that sense of deep-rootedness of a healthy sense of inadequacy and a wonder at God's grace, that goes a long way in cultivating humility. And that's so important, because I think a lot of our ministry leaders offer the Gospel to other people, and that's maybe what they're most known for, is the way they extend it to others, but if they can't understand it themselves, like you said, if they can't understand their need for and the belovedness they have in Christ, that's a difficult thing.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>35:04</u>)

And then, I think two practices related to it, one is cultivating an attitude of active indifference. And I have not even come close to mastering this yet, but it's the ability to be deeply passionate about for something and yet hold it very open handedly, that your identity, your value, your sense of satisfaction is not tied to whether your idea moves forward, would be an example. And so, that's a practice I'm working on.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>35:32</u>)

The other is just the practice of examine. We will put it in our show notes, some links to the prayer of exam, which comes out of Ignatian tradition. And it's just a simple five step form of prayer, that where



you are examining or reflecting on your day. It could be done in the morning and before you go to bed, but it's a simple check in that will allow you to evaluate how you sense the Lord, how you yourself were throughout the course of the day. And I think if you were practicing those, it's not a secret to humility, but there's simple grounding practices that can begin to turn the attitude of your heart and the way you approach your life and your work.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>36:08</u>)

To wrap us up, I want to share a quote that you included in the book. It is from one of my favorite authors. Let me quick pull up the page. George Elliot, in her book, Middlemarch, had this beautiful quote. She says, "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been if half owning to the number who live faithfully a hidden life and rest unvisited tombs." And I love that vision of the unheralded but faithful life. I'd love to give you the final word, Katelyn. I wonder if you'd give a bit of a charge to our listeners. I'm going to put you on the spot. An invitation, that we call it, to a life of greater humility.

Katelyn Beaty: (36:59)

Well, I will just say, I usually can't read or hear that passage of Middlemarch without tearing up. I just think it's one of the most... It's at the very end of the novel. And by the way, the novel is very long. 900 pages.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>37:14</u>)

But very good.

Katelyn Beaty: (37:15)

Very, very good. It's a classic for a reason. This gorgeous vision that she offers at the very end, the notion of a hidden life. What would it mean for all of us to accept the possibility that God is calling us to obscurity, to a life lived off the screen, off the stage, known really only by the people whose lives are most deeply linked with ours, and resting in the belief that how we love and serve those people has infinite worth and value, and we may just not know it until we get to stand before the Lord, and are we okay with that?

Katelyn Beaty: (<u>38:19</u>)

And in saying that, I am not saying... I do think that there are people in every time and age who are called to public service and ministry, but is it possible that we are in a time in the American church when more of us can recapture the beauty of the call of ordinary, obscure, hidden faithfulness? That's the vision that I want to live more into. That's the vision that I hope readers of this book will be captured by.



Joanna Meyer: (39:02)

Katelyn Beaty, thanks for your insight, and for your leadership, and for the wisdom that you've shared

with us today.

Katelyn Beaty: (39:08)

Thanks for having me, Joanna.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>39:15</u>)

What a fascinating conversation with Katelyn Beaty. In our show notes today, we will link to her book, Celebrities for Jesus, as well as the Denver Institute produced book Virtue and Vice, How the Gospel Redeems Our Souls, Reshapes Our Work and Restores Our Relationships. Really intriguing conversation about how some of the most historic traditions of the Christian faith are relevant to our lives and work today.

Joanna Meyer: (<u>39:37</u>)

And finally, don't forget that Women Work and Calling is in-person and here in Denver and online anywhere in the world on Saturday October 8th. You can go to womenworkandcalling.com to find out more information about that event. Thanks for joining us today.

Joanna Meyer: (39:56)

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