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S1E6 - Mentoring Experience

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Mike says he wouldn't be where he is in his studies and public speaking without the help of mentors. Listen to Mike as he details his experience and explains the importance of mentoring.

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor in theology at Houston Baptist University and he's a frequent speaker on college campuses, churches, retreats and has appeared on dozens of radio and television interviews. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode we are talking about mentoring experience. Now Mike, you are someone who's really taken heart to the concept of mentoring and you yourself have been mentored by some big names in the apologetics world.

Of course for you it was even before you became a Christian. Tell me about your history in being mentored. Okay well I wouldn't say it was before I became a Christian but it was before I got into Christian apologetics and things like that.

The first person I'd say I was mentored by would have been, I mean of course my parents had a great influence on me but later on mentoring in terms of what I do right now, the first and primary person would be Gary Habermas. And the way that happened I was just beginning to experience some doubts about the truth of the Christian faith. I had a couple roommates who were in the MA and Christian apologetics program at Liberty University at the time.

I was in the MA and New Testament studies program there but they suggested that I talk to Gary Habermas and so I went to his office. I knocked on the door and he said yes and I introduced myself and I said I've never had you for a class. I'm in a different program but these are my roommates.

You know gave them their names and I said they suggested I come see you. I'm experiencing some doubts about the truth of the Christian faith. He says well come on in and he closed the door and he says look I just want you to know you don't have to feel bad about this.

I get plenty of guys here in the seminary program and they come to me and they say they're experiencing doubts and he told me how he had experienced doubts at a time in his life. And so we talked about it for a while. We talked about the resurrection.

That's when he started to bring up the historical evidence for the resurrection and he entertained my questions and I walked out of the office feeling really really good and my doubts were gone at that point. But then after I left, finished my coursework and went back to Baltimore where I lived. I started you know I was talking to some people there and engaging in conversations with non-believers and they were bringing up things that I just didn't know how to answer.

And so I'd get back in touch with Gary Habermas. They didn't have email back then so I called him. And we spent a lot of time talking on the phone.

And you know he would answer my questions and he would point me to books to read and resources to consult and so I would do that and just continue to engage in discussions with others and then I'd come back to him. Over the years we just became really good friends. It's kind of unusual for a professor and their student to become really good friends but next to my wife I'd say he's my best friend and has been for years.

I trust him. I trust my life with him. I'd do anything for him.

He's helped me tremendously. So he's been a primary mentor. Someone close behind that would be William Lane Craig.

He took me under his wing when I moved down to the Atlanta area back in 2005 and we met on a weekly basis one day a week and we get together for I think two hours and discuss debate and he I'm told I'm the only person that he's ever one on one mentored in debate and he really believed in my abilities after watching my first debate with Richard Carrier at UCLA. So we became friends and he's been a tremendous influence and mentor for me. So I mean I consider him a very close friend and I consult him when it comes to asking for advice for important matters pertaining to our ministry and what we do.

I consult him a lot. So he's been a mentor. Then there have been people that I've consulted often on.

Maybe there were periods when I was asking them a lot of questions like Craig Evans who now is a colleague at Houston Baptist University. Craig Keener has become a dear friend and he's ahead of me in New Testament scholarship of course. He's just a scholar

of the first rank when it comes to this stuff.

He's just amazing. But we've discussed a lot about New Testament issues, historical Jesus, ancient biography, historiography, things like that and in a big sense he has mentored me. Craig Blomberg and Darrell Bock have also been great influences in my life and I've gone to them for advice at different times and you know they've guided me and helped me and defended me at times through various controversies.

So these have just been great people, great friends. Oh and of course Dan Wallace and there have been others. So there are certain ones, people like Dan Wallace has been one that's like Mike you got to pursue truth and follow it no matter where it leads and has really encouraged me in that way.

So and I'm probably leaving out some people and I'm really sorry that I am but those are some people that just come to my mind immediately that have just had a great impact on my life. We could just call them the who's who of Christian apologists. Yeah Christian apologists, the New Testament scholarship.

Yep. Yeah that's great. What a blessing it's been I'm sure to learn from folks like that.

Yeah John Ramsey too, he's a class assistant he retired from the University of Illinois up where you're at in Chicago and he really has helped me guide me through when I was doing my work with Plutarch for my recent book on gospel differences and man I would have just stepped on many landmines had it not been for his guidance. You first mentioned your parents as those that provided guidance for you. Of course the scripture says in Proverbs 22, "Train up a child in the way he should go even when he is old he will not depart from it." Sometimes with regard to either being a parent and having a child or a more general mentorship sometimes the mentorship doesn't turn out the way one wants it to.

Has there ever been a situation like that in your life where maybe you've mentored someone or you've gone a different direction than what the advice of a mentor? No I wouldn't say so. Of course there have been times when I disagreed with the advice of a mentor for example back in 2011 when I was being criticized for my view of the saints raised the Jesus death in Matthew chapter 27 and man I was getting attacked and a lot of catching a lot of flack. People were criticizing me a lot.

Well I should say there were a few of them that were really doing it online and a couple of them were saying people whom I highly respect were saying Mike why don't you just kind of back down for this and at least admit it could be 50-50 and I'd say I'm not going to do that if I really don't believe it and I don't want to feel pressured in to that because this is my integrity on the line here and I want to do authentic research. I want to be authentic here in terms of who I am. I don't want to just toe the party line to toe the party line.

I didn't like breaking from the pack. I love the group of believers with whom I affiliate. I love being an evangelical.

I'm proud to be an evangelical. I didn't like it that some of them were coming after me and it hurt but I wanted to be true to what I believed the word of God was saying and you know I admitted I could be wrong but I had to be convinced of that so yeah I parted from their advice from a couple of them in that sense but then it was the advice of people like Dan Wallace that said Mike you got to stand strong for what you really believe even if it cost you so and I did and it cost me you know but I think it was worth it and you know I've had some atheists say to me that I'm the only Christian scholar they trust because they know I'm being honest they know I'm because I've been willing to suffer for that honesty I paid a price for it they trust that I really believe what I'm saying rather than I'm just saying it to defend the Christian faith so that kind of stuff is worth it to me it means a lot to hear that. Tell me more about your experience in relationship with Gary Habermas.

I know that was an integral to your confirming of your faith I guess that's maybe what I meant earlier with my opening question he played a very large role for you in helping to be able to answer your questions. For someone who's maybe in a similar life situation what is something they should be looking for in trying to seek out a mentor like that? Well I think first that they have to realize that you know professors people who would be mentoring whether it's a professor or a Christian apologist full-time like a Frank Turic and Alex McFarland a least robo someone like that our time is limited so you just can't go and ask someone hey would you mentor me I mean you can but you can't really expect that they're going to say yes I was blessed that Gary was willing to take that time with me and I don't know why he did I'm glad he did but and he has a real heart a shepherding heart for people so that's probably why he did that well a lot of us we just don't have the time and it's the very reason that they have sought out for us to mentor that it's because of the research we've done because of the work that we do and mentoring can take some time so they should probably find someone that they really jive with them in terms of their approach to things like if they're philosophically minded they really like getting into metaphysics well then they don't want to come to someone like me or you know Gary Habermas or something like that you know we're more historically minded and things like that also not or for me when I mentor someone I don't even consider myself a mentor in a strict sense of the word what I can do is I can advise people I can provide some advice and say hey you know if you want to get started here's what you want to here's some things if you're asking me here's some things that you can do to get started you know and they may contact me occasionally to to say hey I'm facing this what do you recommend I might recommend some sources to them to read to consult I might help them some and with some of those people you're going to click so like for example a guy who's become a good friend his name's Tim Stratton you know everybody knows of him now free thinking ministries I don't consider myself to be his mentor I don't

consider myself to be anyone's mentor to be honest with you but they'll come to me like Tim came to me and he I guess he just resonated with some of the things I said in a class that I taught years ago at Biola and he was one of the students and you know we just he would ask some questions and he was getting launched in his ministry and and he was asking how to get going with it and kind of things to do and I helped him there and pointed him into some different directions and we had some common interests and our personalities kind of jived and we became friends and so that's kind of what happened with Gary Habermas and I and so with Tim and I that's kind of happened and we've become friends and so I can provide some guidance for him and I can ask for his advice on some things and get his feedback on some things so it's kind of a mutual friendship here I really believed in Tim and the kind of work that he does in fact he doesn't even so much do the historical stuff he does more of the philosophical stuff but there was just some things about us that just clicked with our personalities and some common interests and it just made for those kinds of things so if you're looking for someone sometimes the mentoring thing the process just kind of clicks in it just kind of fits um another guy that I kind of work with and we've become friends is a guy named Mike DeVito he contacted me while he was an active player in the NFL with the Kansas City Chiefs a few years ago and he just said he really appreciated the work that I was doing it was a contact he made he reached out to me on Twitter I really even read the Twitter messages that come to me but this one I caught one day and I thought man this guy's with the Chiefs what's he doing contacting me and so we ended up going back and forth and then having a phone call and then he ended up coming to Houston Baptist University to do his master's degree in Christian apologetics and we've become pretty good friends over the time and so you know I've given him some guidance in terms of here's some things that you can do in your academic career and and your apologetics and your speaking and how to put together things for an opening statement and but you know we become friends there's some common interest we have several common interests and our personality is just jive together so um that's kind of the I don't know what to say other than sometimes these things just happen you can't force them and if a person's trying to find a mentor pray and ask the Lord to guide you to one um yeah and don't expect that you're going to be just hanging out all the time like maybe you know the disciples in Jesus or Socrates and his disciples it's just not the way our society works today you might have to carve out that time to spend together yeah whether it's say your time with William Lane Craig you know one time a week where you'd get yeah that was just for a little bit now we just I mean we may talk on the phone once every month once every two months it's not a long phone conversation you know that that's that's it with Bill and then Debbie and I will get with Bill and Jan for a meal maybe at least once around Christmas and and maybe another time throughout the year and we just have a good time together um but when your friends like that and you're all busy doing your own thing you don't expect to be spending a whole lot of time together it's not like you're even looking to do that because you've got your own stuff that you're doing you're just slammed with research and writing and teaching and speaking and you know you're up to your neck and things that

you got to do uh but it's nice to know that you got friends there that you can just reach out to for a quick phone call or a quick email and you know get some help on some things or just to say hi or to hang out and keep that friendship going with the mentoring experience a lot of people think that there's a benefit to being mentored but there there's value in mentoring others isn't there yeah I mean it's uh you know you commonly hear it said that the best way to learn something is to teach it and so when you're mentoring someone you know you like for example I did not consider myself to be a mentor of Nabil Khureshi I think he considered me to be a mentor to a large extent but when he became a Christian you know he faced a number of questions and he would call me quite often and we'd have conversations over the phone and he asked very very thoughtful questions like about gospel differences authorship of the gospels um you know you know he had had a rigid view growing up in a Muslim family about verbatim um uh the way things appeared verbatim in the Quran this was verbatim what about when things in the gospels something Jesus said is different in one gospel than the other the the meanings is the same but the wording is different and that troubled him and so we would we would talk through these things and of course it helped me to I'm wrestling with some of these things at the time and um it helps clarify your own thoughts and it helps you as you think through these things learn how to communicate them a little better you work through these things together with the person in some cases you know and and maybe some things I might have an answer for it and maybe the the person I'm working with brings it up the the the problem up the challenge up in a manner that I haven't thought before and maybe reveals a weakness in my own thinking and then I have to be rethink that and say well maybe I'm wrong or maybe I need to tweak this a little to make it correct so yeah there's there's always help in there um for the person who's mentoring what would be your advice to someone who's say studied apologetics a little bit or you know theology or Old Testament New Testament criticism you know some fields related to Christian worldview stuff who studied this material but who nevertheless is say insecure about trying to help others well if they're if they are the more you study this in your field the more you become an expert on these matters the more confidence you get and I have found the more that I focused on things like resurrection and the gospels the less confident I feel in other areas so like I used to lecture on things like evidence for a creator the universe in life arguments for God's existence and I suppose I still could to an extent but I'd really don't want to because I feel insecure in those areas the more I've grown in my knowledge with New Testament related issues the less secure I feel with these others so the more knowledge you get I mean I realize now I don't know everything related to the New Testament not even close only a little fraction um and resurrection I'll never know as much as Gary Habermas on the resurrection but I feel like my knowledge of these things is superior to most of the people that with whom I'm going to dialogue especially on the resurrection so that that gives you a confidence going into things and then my experience and debate I'm not nervous like I used to be and it's like someone playing in post-season baseball or football you if you've got experience in the post-season your nerves are going to be a little more calm and you're going to perform

better so in a debate I've got a little more experience I'm a little more relaxed I've got knowledge that has accumulated over the years and so that gives you a confidence and so but you start somewhere and when I got started I was you know out there speaking to small groups and then when I saw how much this encouraged some believers man that gave me all the more desire to continue to do it so I don't know if that answers your question but that's how it worked for me I think so so what you're saying is for people that might have some of that insecurity as you mentor people and as you experience and do more of this work you're going to gain some confidence and a greater willingness to share what you know with others yeah it just takes time it takes time and experience it doesn't come overnight and there's a guy right now who sends me messages all the time on Facebook I don't even answer a lot of them because they're just these same kinds of questions and it's you know I keep telling them look this doesn't happen overnight he's a young Christian I said this doesn't happen overnight this is going to take years of work when you're part you just can't get out and start lecturing on this stuff and think that you're going to be able to debate and answer all these questions with after just being a Christian for three months or six months it's just going to take years of work it's a lot of fun but it's a lot of hard work and it takes time Psalm 71 18 so even to old age and gray hairs oh god do not forsake me until I proclaim your might to another generation your power to all those to come so here the psalmist is saying he's got he's got work to do before old age and gray hairs come mike how's the gray hair coming along for you the gray hair is coming along it's uh I get more and more every year and you know more and more tinsel in my hair every year so but that's uh that's irreversible at least by I guess I could die it but I have no desire to do that but yeah yeah even this fleeting even my wife I'm 31 and my wife has begun to notice the start to the changing of color it happens to us all yep great mike thank you for sharing your your reflections here and your experience on mentoring and the value that it played for you as you grew up along your your faith journey and the importance and relevance that mentoring has for others so thanks for that okay thank you thank you Kurt if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of dr mike lacona please visit risenjesus.com where you can find authentic answers to questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels you can also check out free resources like ebooks watch videos such as the baits or lectures or simply read some articles if this program has been a blessing to you would you consider becoming one of our partners you can learn more and start your partnership by going to risenjesus.com/donate please be sure to subscribe to this podcast and follow us on facebook and twitter this has been the risenjesus podcast a ministry of dr mike lacona oh my god my god my god my god my god my god
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