

# FAITH *Before* ~~AND~~ WORK

By Dr. Rob McKenna



- The Meta of Belief Behind Your Actions
- What's Faith Got to Do With It
- Rules of Engagement
- Sunday to Monday
- The Theological Fundamental
- The Allure of Good Works
- Faith, Work and Leadership

 WILD LEADERS

# WHAT KINGDOM DO YOU LIVE IN?

What kingdom or universe do you exist within and what are the rules of that kingdom?

I have a confession. I still love video games. And while I love playing them, I am also intrigued by their design. I recently had a conversation with a leader - a lead game developer and he described something to me that blew my mind. One of the primary jobs of a game developer is to define the universe - to architect the fundamental rules behind the game, the resources available to a player, the way the players will be able to interact, and how all of it works together. As a game developer, you literally get to write the code that defines what the player gets to do, what a player gets to see, how the player is informed about their progress, how interactions with others work, and what matters. It is mind boggling the number of decisions the developer of a game's universe has to make.

*As if it isn't a big enough challenge for them to consider all of the things a player will need to experience in a game, they are also responsible for making sure all of those different rules make sense together. If those rules don't make sense, players will notice.*

## THE META OF BELIEF BEHIND YOUR ACTIONS.

If you are a parent or a teenager in the first quarter of the 21st century, you know about Fortnite. If not, let me fill you in. At the time of its launch, Fortnite was the most popular free video game in history and both of my sons were pretty good at it. On a normal drive to soccer practice, my son said to me,

*“Dad, in the last three months Fortnite has become a completely different game, with a completely different meta.”*

Trying to be relevant, while also clarifying what he meant, I asked him, **“So, how do you define a meta?”**

He said,

*“It’s like the fundamental rules of the game. The developers of the game changed some of the code that defined the rules so every player has had to adapt as quickly as possible.”*

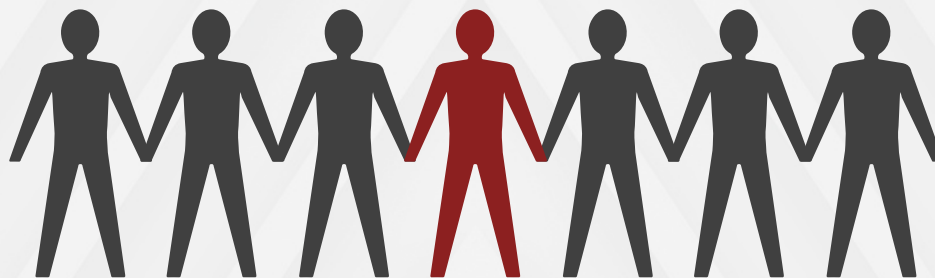
Then he went on to say that the developers had increased the power of a specific weapon in the game, making it OP - overpowered. That tiny shift had a huge impact on which weapons players used and how they used them. While life isn’t Fortnite, I think there’s something important in his statement. There’s not only a meta in a video game, there’s also a meta in our universe (or the culture surrounding us) that sometimes defines us, contradicts us, and informs us, that may change at any time. I’d suggest that the meta in our culture defining what it means to be a person or a leader is impacting everything we see, what we consider relevant, and how we perceive ourselves as ourselves, and in relationship to others.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CULTURAL META THAT ARE DEFINING OUR UNIVERSE TODAY?

*IN FULL AWARENESS THAT I MAY OR MAY NOT CAPTURE THESE RIGHT, HERE ARE SOME POSSIBILITIES:*



- **Approval of others is not only important, you can measure it.**
- **Be available to everyone all the time, which may lead to being available to no one.**
- **Call out the falls of those you disagree with.**
- **Be vulnerable, as long as that vulnerability is consistent with the meta going on in the universe.**
- **Be yourself. What other people think of you isn't relevant.**
- **Self-preservation, and security of those who matter to you.**



**THESE CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS, TO THE EXTENT YOU FEEL THEM, ARE POWERFUL. THEY TELL US WHAT'S IMPORTANT, HOW TO ACT, AND WHO IS IMPORTANT.**



# WHAT'S FAITH GOT TO DO WITH IT

**FAITH IS MY BELIEF IN SOMETHING THAT I CAN'T PROVE TO BE TRUE THAT IS SUPPORTED BY PIECES OF EVIDENCE OR PAST EXPERIENCES.**

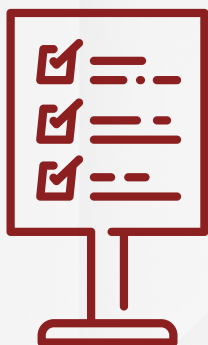
Faith is where it always begins. Imagine this. For over 50 years my family has driven to Eastern Washington to a place called Lake Chelan for a reunion together. While the act of driving my family across the mountains on that two lane road may seem like a simple trip from here to there, it takes a huge amount of faith for me to begin that drive. I have faith that other drivers on the road coming the other way won't cross the yellow line and collide head on into us. I have faith that there is gas in my gas tank, and even if my gas gauge says I have a full tank, that my gas gauge is working. I have faith that the town of Chelan is still there. And, I have faith that it will be worth the trip. I can't prove any of these things to be true, but I have had enough experience with them to believe, and therefore will do the work to get there.



MY POINT IS THIS.  
Faith - my belief in something I can't prove to be true that is supported by my experience - is always where my actions begin.

# RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Every single one of us in one way or another is a part of something that is larger than us, within which exists fundamental rules of engagement, ways to think about ourselves, what things are valued, and the nature of what it means to be in the world.



**THESE KINGDOMS OR UNIVERSES ARE NOT ONLY DEFINED BY WHAT OUR EXPERIENCE AND HUMANITY ARE LIKE, BUT THEY ALSO DEFINE THE NATURE OF EVERYTHING THAT WE DO AND HOW WE SEE OURSELVES RELATED TO THE WORKS OF OUR LIVES - OUR PRODUCTIVITY AND THE RESULTS THAT COME FROM WHAT WE DO.**

The universe or kingdom we live in isn't just a philosophical thing, but impacts really practical things both personally and organizationally. It defines everything about the nature of compensation, inclusion, trade, goal achievement, motivation, success, and even the literal and figurative marketplace of our lives. It even defines our understanding of deeper things like our own value and its source, love, the value we place on others, and even forgiveness and the place of grace in our lives.

While it's easy to dismiss the connective tissue between the nature of our humanity and the structures of the kingdom that surrounds us, and equally difficult to bring them together and see them for what they are in real time, our whole reality can be defined by either the productivity and outcomes of our lives, or by a deeper faith that tells the story of the nature of the kingdom we aspire to live in. Another fundamental paradox.

*Any whole conversation about faith and work, no matter what you have faith in, must begin with an intentional step toward an awareness of the universe we are living in and the universe our faith might lead us to.*

# WHAT ARE MY RULES?

To the extent that the assumptive rules defining the universe we live in is powerful, isn't it important for any person or leader to be able to describe that universe as best they can? Some may consider it risky to share, but my faith and my assumptions regarding what matters are continually informing what's important to me, and I believe the same is probably happening within you.

**SO, WHAT IS MY FAITH? WHAT HAVE I EXPERIENCED THAT HAS PROVIDED ENOUGH EVIDENCE FOR ME TO HAVE FAITH IN SOMEONE OR SOMETHING? WHAT DO I BELIEVE THAT I CAN'T PROVE THAT IS GUIDING MY BEHAVIOR, OR AT LEAST HOW I ASPIRE TO BEHAVE? HERE IT IS.**

I come to this conversation regarding faith and work from what I would describe as a Christ aspired and inspired worldview. I describe it as Christ inspired because the guiding worldview of my life isn't very accurately captured in the word Christian because my faith is about a person - the person of Jesus as I understand Jesus to be. I'm fully aware that anyone who reads these words or hears me speak may not fully understand my perspective, nor agree with it and may come at their world from a very different perspective, but I believe a conversation around the things deepest in our faith and the good, neutral or negative works of our lives is important. I also hope that you won't dismiss your capacity to understand what I'm trying to describe because of your lack of experience in "church." If that happens, the failure to describe my faith is on me, not you. More specifically than faith, the rules that guide my own meta are that I believe in a kingdom that is defined by God's love for me and love for you. I believe that I have value in the eyes of God, and your life is just as important as mine - maybe more important. I believe there are things about me that need to change - brokenness in me that needs healing, and I believe the same is true for you. The honest truth is that I'm 80% sure God loves me, but I am 100% sure that God loves you - which in a way increases my own certainty of God's love for me. This meta changes my perspective immensely.

*I BELIEVE THAT EVERY PERSON HAS INCREDIBLE REDEMPTIVE POTENTIAL AND THE INVITATION TO MOVE TOWARD WHOLENESS,*

but that we all live our reality in a state of awareness of the brokenness and fragmentation that still exists in us and around us.

I believe in God's forgiveness and love that runs so deep for each of us. And, I believe that God sees us whole - our whole and unveiled selves, which honestly is overwhelming to imagine. This meta means that courage, efficacy, confidence and a strong sense of who we are and our capacity to do great things is important. Equally important is our consideration and sacrifice for others - even the most unlikely others in our lives - is something we are called to consider. I believe in these things more than ever because of the seat I have been honored to occupy that has put me in the front row of the experience of hundreds and maybe thousands of leaders and people who have shared their whole and real story with me. When a person trusts me enough, over and over again I have seen that the most powerful thing we share in common is that every one of us has a story of brokenness and beauty, of success and failure, of heartbreak and joy, and of forgiveness and redemption.

## **What does all that have to do with faith and work?**

There is something powerful in becoming aware of the space between the universe we live in and the universe we aspire to live in. Without that awareness we will default to the one we live in and risk becoming servants to a kingdom we never really wanted. The kingdom I want to live in and feel called to live in is a kingdom where I matter, and you matter. That is the kingdom the God I have faith in has described to me and is closest to my experience of my world. My faith is there, but the things I do - the works, are powerful. While faith is where it all begins, the works and work we do is powerful because its evidence is salient, immediate, and really tempting.



# SUNDAY TO MONDAY

I have had so many conversations with people about that crazy intersection between their faith and their work. Many of them are those who built a career, a business, or even a church, and now looking back are attempting to make sense out of the progress or decline they experienced in the context of their relationship to God. So often as we look back, we want to make sense out of it all as something that was meaningful alongside our faith.

We ask ourselves questions like, What was it all about? How did my faith in God inform my work? Did it make a difference? What mattered? Was God in it? These questions are so normal to ask. Even if your work was more explicitly faith-based, many of us have asked these questions.



**But, what if our approach to all these questions was just slightly off? What if our attempts to integrate our faith and our work wasn't a task of sense-making, but more simply a job of prioritization?**

## THE FAITH AND WORK MOVEMENT IN OUR WORLD IS NOT NEW.

**Our attempts to make sense out of our efforts is likely as old as the human capacity to do anything, anything at all.**

My faith in God, as the root of everything in my identity, is something that I know should be at the center of everything I do. But, at the same time, my work is so central to my life that it must also play a primary role in everything that defines me, possibly the only exception being my family and God Himself.

Many of us have attempted to make sense out of our faith in the rearview mirror or windshield of our lives and work - either as an attempt to understand what our work was all about in the first place, or how our faith makes sense in our current pursuits and efforts. And, therein lies our problem.

*Any attempt to integrate our faith into our work will miss the fundamental point - that our faith in God was never designed to be integrated, but only to be primary, and everything pivots on that reality.*

# THE THEOLOGICAL FUNDAMENTAL

My first real adult job was as a professor in a school of business at a Christian university. I will never forget the dozens of conversations we would have as a faculty in our attempts to define our unique contribution to business and to the world of business education. Over and over again some of the faculty in our school would define our uniqueness (that which made us different as Christian educators) as a set of Biblical ethics. I always struggled with that because I was fully aware that the university I was attending down the road that did not claim to be a Christian university was doing the same thing - educating its students in good ethical decision-making. While I would never claim that business ethics - telling the truth, paying bills on time, being kind to customers and to employees, paying well for good work, and seeing profit as service was and is not important, I would suggest that there is nothing uniquely "Christian" about doing business differently and better and more as a service. Those are important things, but are they what sets us apart as Christians in the marketplace? Probably not. And, theologically speaking, absolutely not.



**ETHICAL DECISION MAKING IS SO IMPORTANT, BUT IT'S NOT A CHRISTIAN THING. IT'S A GOOD HUMAN THING TO DO. THE CHRIST-CENTERED PART OF OUR IDENTITY AND APPROACH TO THE WORLD IS SO MUCH MORE.**

## LET ME GET STRAIGHT TO THE POINT.

At the risk of alienating many of my dear friends in the faith and work movement, or of sounding like I believe I have all the answers regarding faith, which I do not - let me get straight to the point.

**OUR FAITH AND WORK MOVEMENT IS  
PLAGUED BY A TITLING PROBLEM BECAUSE IT  
LEADS WITH THE TITLED STATEMENT THAT FAITH  
AND WORK ARE EQUAL PARTNERS.**

- *Our faith in God comes before the work, and always did.*
- *The work is critically important and our efforts matter, but they will only matter in the context of a larger surrender to the God who owns it all.*
- *Our faith in God is the root of everything - not something to be integrated, but something to be the start from which all the work begins to make sense.*



## THE BIBLE IS NO ETHICAL GUIDEBOOK, BUT IS SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT.

I believe it is the living and breathing word of God. I'm not suggesting it has nothing to offer us in terms of decision-making and good organizational work, but that it doesn't start there. The Apostle Paul says some really interesting things regarding faith and the work of our lives - his primary statement being that any time we seek to fit Jesus alongside something else, we may completely lose touch with the most important reality of our lives. There is nothing we can do to make it all right, but at the same time, we must seek to do things right. Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8-10 is so important.

*“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

Our works always followed our faith, and only came first through God's providential presence in our lives. That's what I believe. And, by the way, I would suggest that works and work are the same thing - they are the fastest way to describe what we do and accomplish in the world.

WE WERE DESIGNED FOR GOOD WORKS, BUT IT ALL  
BEGINS IN THAT LIVING AND BREATHING MOMENT  
WHERE WE FULLY PUT OUR FAITH IN GOD.

*THE SURRENDER IS THE START, AND NOW THE WORK BEGINS. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORK IS DEFINED BY THE SURRENDER, NOT ALONGSIDE IT OR IN LIGHT OF IT.*

**HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD A TALK ABOUT FAITH THAT WAS INSPIRING IN THE MOMENT, BUT LOST ITS POWER AS SOON AS IT HIT YOUR REAL WORLD?**

**WHY IS IT THAT THE DEEPLY INSPIRING SERMONS ON SUNDAY SO RARELY BRIDGE THE GAP TO OUR MONDAY REALITY?**

In defense of all the pastors out there, bridging that gap is hard. Only those really good at making things practical and giving us working examples bridge that gap very well, and even then sometimes leave us wanting more than an oversimplified metaphor or analogy.



**The gap between Sunday and Monday, or between our faith and the daily “works” of our lives, is a big one. But, minding that gap may be one of the most important pathways to living more deeply into the faith that changed our lives forever.**

# THE ALLURE OF GOOD WORKS

One of my heroes is John Wesley. John Wesley was a pastor, theologian, and leader and he had a lot to say about the relationship between faith and our work.

*"I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, a religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this – this continual decay of pure religion (of faith)? We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich." - John Wesley (SOURCE)*

**When you consider the contribution of the Christian communities around our world to those in the deepest need, it's astonishing. Homeless missions in our urban communities, hospitals, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) responding to human crises around the globe - including all of the ways that individuals sacrificially and invisibly serve those in their local communities without credit - wow.**

## CHRISTIANS ARE NOT THE ONLY ONES MAKING THESE SACRIFICES,

**but it's hard to argue against the reality that a transformation of faith in a person toward a universe defined by the value of each person and a call to consider sacrificing for that person.**

---

A chosen faith planted in that universe serves and produces - not perfectly, but so often sacrificially. I don't have the data to support it, nor do I believe a clear number exists, but it is hard to fathom the crisis we would face if these sacrificial, faith-based people were removed from our world. Even at the time of Nero in the first century A.D., local government officials feared killing all the Christians because of the services they provided in their communities. Faith changes us, and it changes our world.

---

Wesley also said, "We are not indebted to him for all we have, but although a debtor is obliged to return what he has received, yet until the time payment comes he is at liberty as he pleases. It is not so with a steward; he is not at liberty at what is lodged in his hands as he pleases, but as his MASTER pleases. He has no right to dispose of anything in his hands, but according to the will of his Lord for he is not the proprietor of any of these things, but barely entrusted with them in another; and entrusted on this expressed condition - that he shall dispose of all as his master orders. Now, this is exactly the case with every man in relationship to God. We are not at liberty to use what he has lodged in our hands as we please, but as he pleases who alone is the possessor of heaven and earth, and the Lord of every creature."



*THE IDEA THAT IT WAS ALL GOD'S IN THE FIRST PLACE WOULD BE EASY IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE POWER OF THE POTENTIAL PRODUCTIVITY AND SUCCESSES THAT COME FROM OUR WORK IN THE WORLD.*

As Max Weber suggests, we live in a paradoxical reality of things of faith and our astonishing capacity to get things done - to define our universe by how important we are, how productive we are, and how powerful we are in getting the results we want.

**I DON'T BELIEVE YOU HAVE TO COME FROM A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW TO UNDERSTAND THE TEMPTATION TO MAKE EVERYTHING ABOUT US AND TO BECOME OBSESSED WITH PRODUCTIVITY AND OUTCOMES.**

I want to be clear that I believe outcomes matter and our capacity to do great things is really important. It is when the allure of our progress becomes primary or even shares a space with the reason we did it all in the first place that it gets challenging.

There's also another way to look at it: if our value is defined by our successes, accomplishments, good works, and being nice to people, what do we do with the reality and moments where we fall short?

That is probably why our failures and mistakes play such a pivotal role in moving us continually towards wholeness. While our work matters, it can never be given the role of defining our value and our purpose in the world. The purpose begins and ends with our faith and our works follow that leap of belief that is supported by our real experience, and yet, we cannot prove.

## WHEN I TALK TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AGAIN, I WILL SAY THIS.

*YOUR NEW LIFE EVERY DAY BEGINS WITH AN AWARENESS THAT WHATEVER HAPPENS NEXT IS BECAUSE OF AND FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU.*

Your journey doesn't begin with faith just because the Bible told you so, but also because that is the truth we aspire to believe. And, your actions and what you will do, will always begin with faith anyway. But, here is what is going to happen. Your faith in the God who owns it all is likely to make you tremendously industrious and productive. That is a very good thing. Your belief in a God who has called you to love him, to love your neighbors, and to love your enemies is going to plant a purpose in you that is massive. And a purpose is going to make you productive. There is no more compelling purpose than that, and a purposeful person creates, innovates, multiplies, inspires, and produces.

## SO WHY IS THIS SO HARD?

The temptation is that our universe, defined by the acceptance of our value and the call to put the interest of others before our own, slowly and secretly becomes sabotaged by a different universe that causes us to see ourselves as the owner of it all, the producers of it all, and the source of what is important. It is not something to feel guilty about, but something to be aware of. Our deepening faith infuses us over the long haul with a tremendous capacity to do unbelievable things. Maybe our only job is the intentional refusal to be defined by the allure of that new universe and the metas it is made of. This is likely why John Wesley went on to say,

*"Make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."*

It is also probably why John Wesley was driven himself to understand how to help each of us maintain an awareness of our faith and reason for being here as we become more accomplished along the way. It is also probably why he spent so much time trying to ensure that each of the leaders within his sphere of influence were surrounded by people who could hold them accountable to be reminded of the faith at the center of their lives.

# FAITH, WORK AND LEADERSHIP

If faith is that leap to believe something we can't prove and trust in something beyond ourselves, what are the implications for developing leaders? Our faith is the start and then the work begins.

Once we understand where our faith is grounded, all of the working parts of our lives look so different. Our awareness of the specifics of our development as people and as leaders is completely transformed.

If our faith calls us to accept our belovedness and at the same time value and love those around us, how does that change our perspective on the purpose driving our work? Now, everything, including our paychecks, our systems, our profits and losses, our wealth, our leaders and employees, our volunteers, our marketing, parenting, marriages, and health all exist in service of our faith. That daily chosen faith and release to the God who owns it all changes every meeting on our calendar into a moment to see and serve another. Even our awareness and development of ourselves as leaders is transformed because it's no longer only about us, but about us in relationship to them.

*And, here's the catch, we must avoid the temptation to see the outcomes as the purpose, but instead to hold the outcomes and the measures of our progress that are so important as lightly as possible. We still hold them, but we hold them loosely.*

As soon as we begin to work for the sake of those outcomes and not more simply toward them, faith is either integrated or put in the back seat. It was never supposed to be there. It changes everything, and even how you think about your own learning. In that universe, how does your understanding of your competence look different? What does it now mean to understand your own motivations and the motivations of others? How does goal achievement look different? We are still asking the same basic questions about why we are here, what we are good at, how to motivate others, set goals, grow our organizations and businesses, identify our blindspots and what we need to learn, but now the purpose behind our development in those areas has a whole new look. Our leap of faith not only renews our lives in a providential way, it literally has the capacity to completely revolutionize how we see and do everything.



**FAITH IS NEVER INTEGRATED WITH OUR WORK. INTENTIONAL AND CHOSEN FAITH OVERRIDES OUR DEFAULT TO PUT OUR WORKS AND OURSELVES FIRST, AND CHANGES EVERYTHING.**

# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1** What is the default universe you live in and what are the rules defining the meta of that universe, and does it differ from the universe you aspire to live in?
- 2** What ways are you defining yourself by the outcomes of your life as opposed to faith?
- 3** What can you do to maintain an awareness of your faith in the midst of the successes and failures you will experience?

---

**Learn more about WiLD Leaders at [www.wildleaders.org](http://www.wildleaders.org)**



# DR. ROB MCKENNA

**Architect of whole + intentional leader development**

CEO + FOUNDER, WILD LEADERS

CREATOR OF THE WILD TOOLKIT, + PRESIDENT OF THE WILD FOUNDATION

AUTHOR, TEDX SPEAKER, FEATURED IN FORBES, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, +

NAMED ONE OF THE TOP 30 I-O PSYCHOLOGISTS

Named one of the top 30 I-O Psychologists alive today, Dr. McKenna is passionate about developing leaders and about transforming the way we see the people in our organizations. As he will tell you, we have the tools at our fingertips to invest in our people in ways that are meaningful to them and will get the results we need. Thirty years of research has taught us much how people learn and grow on the job. We have what it takes to create rich learning environments for the people we lead, and all we have to do is begin to act on what we know.

Dr. McKenna brings a combination of approachability, authenticity, expert knowledge, and humor to his talks. Whether you are interested in character development, dealing with conflict, creating engaging learning cultures, or developing the next generation of leaders, his approach of getting real about what's going on in your life and work brings people alongside him in a way that inspires change. The models he uses in his talks are based on decades of research on leadership, team functioning, organizational health, and individual development.

