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Week 8: WFL

Chonda Pierce & Dr. Mike Courtney

James: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm James Robison; Betty and I are thrilled to have you. We're still smiling. Chonda Pierce is our guest. If you haven't watched her, you just owe it to yourself to go online, LifeToday.org and back up a day -- not right now while we're doing this show!

[Laughter]

But just listen to her, she is absolutely crazy. And her brother is a psychiatrist. She had to have someone travel with her so he became a psychiatrist.

[Laughter]

Really, this is an incredible story. They've written a book called *Laugh Lines: Lessons about holding on and letting go*. It's an incredible ministry that God actually gave them together and we here at *LIFE* have tried to encourage them. It is a counseling ministry for church people and many church leaders, pastors and their families who have been defeated. It's been remarkable.

I want you to welcome Dr. Mike Courtney and Chonda Pierce to *LIFE Today*.

Mike: Thank you!

James: Mike, I want to talk to you and we'll see if Chonda will behave long enough.

Mike: I'll be surprised.

Chonda: They're not going to let me say one stinking word!

James: Well, just...

Chonda: Just sit there!

[Laughter]

James: I want you, really, because your story, your own personal journey is what led you to want to help people through their journey. So just tell our viewing audience about what you'd like to share in your own journey but also what you're doing now and what Chonda has excitedly participated in doing and what we at *LIFE Outreach* have tried to help you.

Mike: Yeah, you've been a great part of it. I pastored for almost 25 years, James. God gave us a wonderful ministry, my wife and I. During most of that time, probably because of family of origin issues and lots of other things I struggled with some personal addictions, succumbed to that and was unfaithful in my marriage, lost my church, lost my ministry, lost my family; my wife left and she should have left 15 years before that but God began to work.

I found a counseling center in Phoenix, Arizona and went there for an extended period of time. Two things happened. I tell people all the time, first, I was healed. I think God absolutely came and miraculously did something in my life.

The second thing is I really became aware of the process of being healed and what it takes to stay clean and sober for the rest of your life. God restored our marriage; Doris and I were separated for almost a year. We, about two months into it, we knew we were going to be okay but we knew I had a lot of work to do. So we were separated for almost a year, and then God brought us back together. We've been married 37 years now and he's just done a wonderful thing in our lives.

James: Thank God because that is a miracle. It so seldom happens.

[Applause]

Mike: Well, and then you became a part of the story. I don't know if you even knew that you were a part of the story but I remember getting a phone call about three years into our recovery.

One of your staff members said, "James wants you to write a book."

I said, "Sure!"

Hung up the phone and wondered who I was talking to. And a couple months later I got a phone call and she said, "James wants to know how that book is coming along."

That happened two or three times until finally I said, "I think I'm going to have to write a book. I think he is really serious about this." Wrote a book called *Failure and How I Achieved It* and it was...

James: *Failure and How I Achieved It.*

Mike: It was received well; I think it resonated with a lot of people who felt like their ministry was over, that their reputation was ruined. And out of that we began to get phone calls from people all across the country, but especially from clergy families who asked how they could find help, who they could talk to. They began to come to us and talk to us.

And finally, the time came that God was leading us to develop a counseling center. Chonda and I found a place and rented a building, put up a shingle and thought that was about it and it probably would have been about it except a few months later *LIFE Today* and James and Betty made a miraculous investment in that little fledgling ministry and we would not be here today if it were not for that.

You all, absolutely, and the people that support *LIFE Today*, changed the lives not only of us and our staff but I think of hundreds and maybe thousands of people down through the years. Today we have five counseling centers; we see about 800 people a month. We deal with depression, anxiety, marital unfaithfulness, addiction recovery,

grief recovery. We have one wing dedicated just to Chonda. We spend a lot of time just with her.

[Laughter]

Chonda: I have my own cell; I let myself in just like Otis on Mayberry. I just go in and let myself in.

James: Tell us the name of not only the web site but the centers, but I want people to know how to find it, how to go. You have five. One of them is in Florida, others I think are in Tennessee?

Mike: In Tennessee, scattered across Tennessee -- Branches Counseling Centers.

James: Branches?

Mike: Our web site is BranchesCounselingCenter.com. You can find a location close to you. The main office is in Murfreesboro and we have 12 staff members there. But the vision was that we would be accessible, that no one would ever be turned away. And so for eight years now people call and they're not turned away because of financial reasons, and God has just blessed us with the opportunity to help more and more people.

James: I want to say -- let me just say a sort of thank you, not only to people here in the audience but all of you at home. When someone thanks us, it means a lot to us. I hope it means a lot to you when we thank you because you really are the ones that make possible the hopes and dreams of so many in ministry and so many missionaries. The missionaries I compliment as being the greatest witnesses.

They say, "No, no, no! -- The people that enable us to be here. They've never even known us but they see what God wants to do through us for people he loves. They're the greatest because they make it possible." So thank you because you've made this possible.

Chonda, you've got to be kind of thrilled about what is going on with your brother.

Chonda: It is amazing to watch. I went through a deep bout of depression about five or six years ago that I thought was just the end-all of my ministry. I know that there are people that watch or listen or even in this studio audience tonight that think, wow, I didn't know people in ministry would have struggles of this, that or the other. But I always tell them, who you do you think the devil is going to attack the most? And we have a wonderful farm that pastors come and stay.

What I love is I just get to meet people a little bit. I'm not at all a professional anything except to make them laugh. The sweet thing I watch is they come into these things, what's it called? Intensives -- they come and they get a little break from their church and they check in and you watch the change in them in a two-week period of how the Lord takes hold of one, allowing them a safe place to unload and some of these things aren't major crisis. Sometimes it's missionaries' kids that grew up in Ecuador and a parent says, "Now it is time to go home."

They're going, "Wait a minute, this is my home." And they just struggle integrating back into America or integrating back into a culture or a different lifestyle. Sometimes you just need another body part of Christ that's going to help you through those processes. I watch that happen.

I watch addiction that has taken over a family who kind of gets kicked -- we are terrible about beating up our wounded and they don't have a safe place to unload, and I've seen their lives changed. It's a miraculous thing. When I went to rehab for my depression it -- I had to take out a second mortgage, and I'm not kidding, a second mortgage on my home to pay for a 10-day period in a very wonderful counseling center. But I know of the thousands of people in the pastorate or just ordinary folks that could not afford to do something like that. So in order for us -- so to have a place that they can manage economically and financially, and yet find hope and healing, I'm crazy about it.

Betty: I think it is so wonderful what you're doing for ministers and those that have had God's call on their life. And yet, they feel like they come to a point where they're

just broken. It is very hard for them to find someone that they can confide in, they can feel safe with, to just unload. So many times we put expectations on someone like that that they've got it altogether all the time.

Chonda: That's a good point.

Betty: They're battled just as much as the layperson is. Things come at them just like we live in the same world. So I think it is beautiful what you're doing.

Mike: I thank you, Betty. One of the things that we have found that is important is that we are part of the church but we're not the church, so that they can come and feel safe, be anonymous. Murfreesboro is a wonderful little community but it is a little community and so they kind of slip in and slip out.

I have a plaque on my wall that someone spoke over our ministry in those very early days and he said, "You are to be a carpenter. Put a hammer and a nail on your wall because people will come to you and you'll fix them and send them back out into ministry and no one will ever know they were there."

That has been an important part of this. We've had a chance to work with some of the most wonderful people in the world that God is not finished with. He still has a great plan for their lives.

James: When a preacher fails, which we all do, I think you have a tendency to think, I'm finished, or I ought to be, when really they ought to be just fixed. What are some of the challenges that say ministers and church people have that really seem to be big to them today that maybe they don't want to deal with or they're reluctant to deal with but they need to know somebody loves them and will help them?

Mike: Well, we obviously deal in a sexually-driven culture. And so by far, especially when we're dealing with clergy families is pornography addictions, marital infidelity, sexual identity crises; so by far that is it. We deal with a lot of chemical addictions. A lot of shame-based issues: Depression, anxiety, panic that comes in a marriage and in a ministry because the minister feels like I should know more than this, I should be

doing better than this, I should have a better understanding of this. We deal with that a lot.

James: Don't you think they don't want to talk about it because they think they're done in if they talk about it?

Chonda: Many times they have been done in trying to find answers.

James: Is one of the steps that you find necessary for them is to come feeling that they have a safe place and they go ahead and talk to you about it? Or do they normally get pushed to the wall, over the cliff, so to speak or they get caught in some misdeed or they get accused or somebody wants to throw them out, and then they end up there; is that how a lot of them get there? Or are they coming because they finally think, I know I want help so I need to go ahead and risk getting it?

Mike: The wonderful thing that happens in ministry is that God begins to multiply it. In the early days, quite honestly, it was mainly because they were caught and there was no place else to go. But they have begun to go home and tell that story to their friends and to their peers.

James: Somebody found love, is what they tell. I bet they tell they found love even as they're saying, "Help!" This is what I would think they would say.

Mike: Absolutely! And now more and more, we're seeing people who come long before that. In fact, long before the major crisis happens, when they just feel this beginning to move in the wrong direction. So we are able to see people come and have ministry restored much more quickly and much more efficiently and to go back. I think, not only to go back into ministry but go back in ministry in a whole different level to minister to people in a way that they never could have had they not been broken.

Chonda: I think people accumulate or they get the tools to one, survive their life and to go through this crisis but then they also get this encouragement of going, your story

of the way the Lord freed you is what is going to change your congregation. And they go back and share that.

Then what happens in the telling of our story is that resonates with someone in the congregation or with another pastor and they say, "Man, I'm headed down that path if I'm not careful. I better go get some help. I better go talk to somebody about this now before it is too late."

So it's begun this big snowball effect which is wonderful. It's the best snowball you can find is in telling your story. And isn't that just the way that Jesus did it? He would heal someone or find someone in their brokenness and then people would hear that story and it made multitudes want to come and hang out with him because they heard what happened to that person or what good happened to that person and people wanted to be a part of that and wanted to see that.

I think, I pray so anyway, that my heart is that when the church world begins to see that recovery is a beautiful thing that the Lord can use instead of shoving it away or hiding it away, that it becomes a part of the church process, that oh, if you want to go to a Sunday school class, if you want to go to the church library or if you want to go down here to the recovery group for alcoholism or drug addiction, wouldn't it be wonderful if that's the safe place they can find these kind of helps, is in a church. And that only begins when one person in that church is set free to go, "Here's what the Lord delivered me from. Here's where I found help."

James: I think it is really important and you've got the psychological training and you know, and the counseling, I think that it's real important that we recognize reality. There is a vast difference in weakness and defeat and wickedness.

There are many people who are defeated by evil or by a habit or a tendency or an addiction that are weak but they're not committed to it to the defense of it. The evil that is in the world is committed to evil destroys. If you want to discern spirits, and we live in a spirit world, good and evil, evil spirits, righteous, Holy Spirit influence; if you want to discern the spirit driving something, there is really a simple key. The Spirit of

God is redemptive. The spirit of the enemy is not only deceptive it is bent on destruction.

What you're seeing all over the world that you can't even imagine cutting children's heads off, slitting women's throats and watching them bleed to death, having children kill people while people watch, sending families the body parts of their family, this is evil. This horrible -- and it can be in the name of religion to that you are committed to evil.

But weakness, here's the thing, that prodigal son, would he have ever come home and would any other prodigal want to come home if all that quote "righteous good father" who blessed that boy, who gave him those things he could enjoy, if all he did is scold him and beat him for being so wasteful and "You hypocrite! You had a good family and just..." Who would ever want to come home to the father?

But when all that father wants to do is cover you, cleanse you and free you and help you, if we have the father's heart as a church, we'll have the heart God gave you that you needed that father because you were a prodigal.

And Mike, I feel like you and Chonda with what you're doing with Branches, you're trying to help that. I think God's blessing you in it. Do you appreciate this couple? Do you appreciate what Mike's doing?

[Applause]

Well, I want to say to you that I love both of you. I think you're a beautiful, beautiful brother and sister. Is she not the craziest person you've ever met?

Mike: She is the craziest person I've ever known!

Chonda: And he's known some crazy people!

[Laughter]

Mike: I say that in the clinical sense.

[Laughter]

James: We so love sharing this time. We feel honored that you would give us this time in your day with all you've got to do and all there is to watch. Thanks for watching *LIFE Today*! One thing you'll know. We want, as a result of you watching, you to experience life more fully, more meaningfully but we want something else to happen. We want to release that river of God, his life, his love, his truth, his compassion. We want you to let it flow because that's why we're here on this earth.

Betty and I, we've been blessed. We've had challenges, we've had losses, we've had pain; we have joy unspeakable full of glory, and we're part of that family, and you are. We just challenge you to trust God, to love him with all your heart, totally say, "Jesus, I want you to have everything in my life. I give you me. You gave your life for me; I give my life to you." And really mean that in commitment. And then on *LIFE Today* we ask you to be a part of a miracle. We ask you to give life.

Let me show you something here. This is a little doodle bug made by little children, school children in a challenged state where they've got some challenges, in Colorado. They really do! These little children, they know the answer. You're going to see -- if you want to see what Jesus looks like and you want to hear what he sounds like, oh, you'll hear him from one little girl and you're going to know it right off. I'm hearing Jesus! You'll see it in a whole bunch of kids. Then you're going to get to literally be the hands of Jesus. Watch closely.

Begin video clip

>> Got the kids in here, said this is what we're going to do. We're making doodle bugs. This is what they look like. This is the reason why. Because there is children out there that don't have fresh clean drinking water. If you made two doodle bugs you will have saved one person. So if you sacrifice your lunchtime and make two doodle bugs, you'll save one person.

>> Yeah, and you can make them different colors! That's the funnest thing. It's not all the same. See these ones... this one is all like pink, yellow, and green. And I don't even know how much colors this one is!

>> It made me happy that it's not just us involved in this project, other people in our school want to help people in need of fresh water.

>> I made this Broncos doodle bug; pretty well done. And I made this one pretty fast!

>> Knowing that I helped people and that it's fun for me to do. At recess I usually don't do anything, just walk around and talk to people. I thought why not use my time for a good meaning?

>> Every five minutes a kid dies and I thought, saving a kid's life was a lot better than playing on the swing.

>> We're making doodle bugs for Water for Life. It makes me feel happy because I'm actually saving people's lives. They have nasty dirty water like mud water that can make you very sick to where you can go to a hospital.

>> I learned that we're sacrificing; and nice and kind and generous, all that kind of stuff. And the second I heard about this, I wanted to do it right off the bat. I just didn't want it to go every Friday I wanted it to be every day. People need clean water and it's not good to not have clean water!

End of clip

In the studio

James: Wow! Did you not get blessed by what you just saw?

[Applause]

Betty: Can't say it any better!

Chonda: That is adorable!

James: Wow! If you want to know what Jesus sounds like -- like those children! I can't add anything to it, Betty.

Betty: They said it all!

James: They absolutely did.

Betty: And so profound, so clear and so truthful. Kids are very truthful.

Chonda: Completely unjaded. They're so not jaded and they totally get the basic -- the basic need going, "Wow! It's terrible to not have clean water."

We hear these advertisements or we watch these clips and we see all this and as adults we've become so jaded that we go, "Well, it's really my dollar is not going to matter." Or "I wonder how much that's really going out there." We've become so skeptic. And here's kids that haven't gotten that way yet and they totally get it. If our hearts could go back to live just like those.

That's why Jesus said, "Suffer the little children. Come as a child." All those things he related to; he wanted us to relate to him as little children and they're the ones teaching us now. That was awesome!

James: I think that you've heard it and I think all you need to know is James, what do we do? Those little children are anxious to do it. And we want to participate. This whole studio audience was just electrified, captivated by the love in those little children.

We're committed and this is why we always try to tell you what we do because we set the goal. We want to drill another 500 water wells where the missionaries have said, "The need is great here and we know there is water here. Bring the rigs." Be at different

levels but the average cost, some are shallower, some are much deeper, the average is still \$4800 to drill a well.

Bear in mind, people like you have already paid for all the drilling equipment and now then we just need to go and take care of the cost to drill it there. So we have to move it around, drill, case it, get the pump. We're asking you to make a gift, \$48; that gift will give basically 10 people water the rest of their life. My goodness! And \$144 will give 30! The cost of the well is \$4800. You could give a well perhaps; those children, that's what they targeted to do. They're successful. We can do it as couples, as individuals, as church groups, sometimes businesses and companies do it. But individuals do it.

Father, I pray everyone who can will; in Jesus' name.

You may say, "James, I can't give an entire well, I can give \$1200 or \$2400," pray three people join with you giving \$1200 or pray another person joins giving \$2400. Whatever you can do.

We have some gifts to give you. We've got the beautiful painting by Thomas Kinkade "Forest Chapel" for those of you who give a well or \$1200 or more toward the well, other gifts to inspire and to bless you.

Would you go online right now, LifeToday.org? Use your bankcard like a check. It is immediately there. We know we're able to tell the missionaries, I'm telling you the people are going to do it and it really enables us to get ahead of the game. If you want to call use the phone, dial the number there on the screen, take your bankcard, make the gift God puts on your heart. If you want to write a check and mail it, make the check to *LIFE*. Thank you so much for doing it.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Every day millions of children are forced to make a dreadful choice: drink filthy, polluted water filled with deadly disease or die from thirst. No child should ever be faced with this decision.

The good news is there is a solution! *Mission Water for Life* is one of the most exciting and viable demonstrations of God's love in the world today. Suffering can end because clean water changes everything.

With your gift today we can establish and drill 500 water wells for remote villages in over 12 different nations. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for 5 people. A gift of \$48 will help provide for 10 people; \$72 will impact 15 people. And \$144 will help provide fresh, clean, disease-free water for 30 people for a lifetime!

With your gift you'll receive the brand-new *Free to Be Me* 40-day devotional where Betty shares the challenges, victories, and insights God gave her while struggling through fear and insecurity. You'll also receive Betty's book, *Free to Be Me*. With your gift of \$100 or more you may request *LIFE's* inspirational coffee mug set featuring encouraging quotes and scripture to brighten your mornings for years to come!

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4,800 to help sponsor a complete well. And request this beautifully framed canvas print of "The Forest Chapel" by the Painter of Light TM, Thomas Kinkade.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today!

End of clip

In the studio

James: I know -- I know you're still thinking about those little kids. You have to be! And these little doodle bugs! You're going to make a lot of kids happy when you give them water. We want to send you Betty's devotional book, 40 days in the word, what Betty has journaled and journeyed. If you'd like to have Dr. Courtney and Chonda Pierce, *Laugh Lines*: Lessons about holding on and letting go. I think you'll really be blessed by it.

Join Betty and me in saying thanks to Dr. Courtney and also to Chonda. We love you too! Y'all are great!

Chonda: Love you very much!

James: Great family here! Thank all of you for being family and putting God's arms around a lot of people. Thank you!