

Iron Sharpening Iron

Dr. John Tolson on Discipleship, Godly Counsel, Accountability, and Leaders Who Invest in Others

Program Summary

In this Tuesday edition of Mark & Friends, Dr. John Tolson speaks from the Pinnacle Forum National Conference about the lifelong value of discipleship and godly counsel. Using Proverbs 27:17 as the program's foundation, John describes how trusted advisors, mentors, and fellow leaders have sharpened his thinking, strengthened his decisions, and helped him remain faithful through different seasons of life. He argues that Christian leadership is not meant to be practiced alone: leaders need people who will encourage them, assess them honestly, model mature faith, raise the standard, and then help them teach and disciple others. John organizes learning around four movements - observation, assessment, modeling, and teaching - and illustrates each through mentors, parents, Pinnacle Forum partners, and younger men he now discipled. The message then turns outward: discipleship is not only for personal growth but for faithful Christian influence in the surrounding culture. The program closes with two questions for every listener: Who is pouring into my life, and whose life am I pouring into?

Key Takeaways

Christian discipleship is relational; God often shapes people through other faithful believers who encourage, challenge, pray, and speak truth.

Major decisions become wiser when trusted, godly advisors are invited to speak honestly into them.

Trying to lead entirely from my own counsel can isolate me and increase the risk of serious mistakes.

Iron sharpening iron includes encouragement and accountability; sometimes love means telling someone what they do not especially want to hear.

Learning often follows four movements: observe, assess, see a model, and then teach someone else.

Good models matter because they show what courage, consistency, humility, faithfulness, and perseverance look like in real life.

Accountability becomes practical when people ask what I will do differently and then follow up on the commitment.

Discipleship should reproduce itself: if I have been taught, encouraged, and led, I should intentionally invest in others.

Leadership is forged through heat, pressure, time, correction, and faithful perseverance rather than instant success.

Christian influence should flow from being rooted in Jesus rather than simply absorbing the assumptions of the surrounding culture.

God uses committed and obedient people, not merely impressive people, to accomplish His purposes.

Every believer can ask two discipleship questions: Who is pouring into my life, and whose life am I pouring into?

Scripture References

Proverbs 27:17, Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Timothy 2:2, Proverbs 11:14, Proverbs 15:22, Romans 12:2, John 15:4-5, Hebrews 10:24-25, Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, Philippians 3:17

Quote of the Day

"Who is pouring into your life, and whose life are you pouring into?"

Broadcast Notes

Mark introduces Dr. John Tolson from the Pinnacle Forum National Conference held in Arizona in April and connects the message personally to his own roughly twenty years of involvement with Pinnacle Forum. John describes Pinnacle Forum as more than leadership development or Bible study: its distinctive value is the ongoing gathering of leaders who pour into and disciple one another. He says his father encouraged him to form a board of advisors at age sixteen, and that trusted counsel has shaped major decisions throughout his life. John warns against the 'do-it-alone' approach and says regular interaction with godly men has centered him on higher values, tested new ideas, strengthened marriage and leadership decisions, and increased confidence. He then uses the conference theme, Forged for Influence, to picture leadership as metal shaped through heat, pressure, and time. John identifies four movements in

learning and discipleship: observation, assessment, modeling, and teaching others. His parents are offered as models of consistent Christian living, while older and younger leaders illustrate lifelong discipleship and accountability. He describes a Forum confronting him about physical health, leading to a five-year journey in which he lost significant weight and began challenging younger men to do difficult things. The message then turns toward cultural influence. John argues that Christians are called to be transformed rather than conformed and to carry kingdom values into the places where they live and lead. Several political and cultural examples in this portion are the speaker's own commentary from the conference; the Ministry Package preserves them in the transcript without adopting them as independent conclusions. The program closes with John's emphasis on committed obedience and Mark's application of Proverbs 27:17: believers need people who pray, encourage, challenge, and help them remain faithful, and they should intentionally offer the same investment to someone else.

Practical Applications

Identify two or three mature believers whose counsel I trust and intentionally invite them to speak into an important decision.

Ask a trusted friend to tell me one thing I may not want to hear but need to consider.

Review one area where I have been trying to lead or solve problems alone and invite wise Christian counsel.

Use John's four-step pattern on one skill or area of growth: observe, assess, model, and teach.

Thank someone whose consistent example has helped me see what faithful Christian living looks like.

Make one measurable commitment in an area where I need accountability and tell someone who will follow up.

Look for a younger or less experienced believer I can encourage, mentor, pray for, or walk alongside.

Refuse to confuse influence with independence; strong leaders still need correction, friendship, and accountability.

Ask whether the surrounding culture is shaping my convictions more than Scripture and my relationship with Jesus.

Choose one difficult but worthwhile discipline that will strengthen my ability to serve others faithfully.

Pray for humility to learn from both good examples and examples of what not to do.

Write down names in answer to both questions: Who is pouring into my life? Whose life am I pouring into?

Today's Challenge

Make a simple two-column discipleship list this week. On the left write, 'Who is pouring into me?' and name at least two people whose wisdom, prayer, accountability, or example helps you follow Jesus. On the right write, 'Who am I pouring into?' and name at least one person you can intentionally encourage, pray for, mentor, or walk alongside. Then schedule one concrete conversation in each direction.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for the people You have used to sharpen, encourage, correct, and strengthen me. Keep me from trying to follow Jesus or lead others in isolation. Give me humility to invite wise counsel, courage to hear truth I may not want to hear, and discernment to recognize godly voices. Help me learn by observing carefully, assessing honestly, following faithful examples, and then teaching what You have entrusted to me. Show me where I need accountability and give me grace to keep the commitments I make. Thank You for mentors, friends, parents, pastors, leaders, and ordinary believers whose lives have shown me something of Jesus. Do not let their investment stop with me. Show me whose life I can encourage, pray for, mentor, and strengthen. Keep me rooted in Jesus so that I am transformed by Your truth rather than simply conformed to the world around me. Forge my character through every season and make me committed, obedient, humble, and faithful. Use my life to help someone else become more like Jesus. In His name, Amen.

About Today's Speaker

Dr. John Tolson is the founder of The Gathering Dallas and has spent more than four decades as a disciple-maker, speaker, author, and mentor. His ministry has focused especially on helping men follow Jesus intentionally and then invest what they have learned into the lives of others. In this Pinnacle Forum conference message, John draws from decades of mentoring relationships, leadership experience, and personal accountability to encourage believers to reject isolated Christianity, seek godly counsel, learn from faithful models, and make disciples who make disciples.

About Today's Host

Mark Burns is General Manager of the WLUJ Family of Stations and Great News Radio Network and host of Mark & Friends. For decades, Mark has been involved in Christian radio and ministry, with a heart for helping listeners know Jesus and grow deeper in God's Word. Through Mark & Friends, he brings pastors, ministry leaders, teachers, missionaries, authors, and everyday believers around the microphone for biblical teaching, testimony, conversation, and encouragement. His desire is that each program help listeners learn, grow, and faithfully live out their relationship with Jesus.

Proofread Broadcast Transcript

Reading from Proverbs chapter 27, verse 17.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. That was Proverbs chapter 27, verse 17. O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt His name together.

It's Tuesday, September 22, 2026, and welcome to Mark & Friends. Today we're returning to the Pinnacle Forum National Conference held in Arizona this past April, where high-impact leaders who follow Christ are encouraged and equipped to influence culture for him. Our speaker is Dr. John Tolson, founder of The Gathering Dallas.

For more than four decades, John has been a passionate disciple-maker, speaker, and author, equipping thousands of men to follow Jesus, and then intentionally invest what they've learned into the lives of others. And that's really the heart of his message today, making disciples who make disciples. This one is also personal for me.

I've been involved with Pinnacle Forum for about 20 years, and I've experienced firsthand the value of having other followers of Jesus around you, people who will encourage you, pray with you, challenge your thinking, help you discern God's direction, and sometimes lovingly tell you something you may not particularly want to hear. That's Proverbs 27, 17 lived out. Iron sharpening iron.

So as you listen today, perhaps consider two questions. Who is pouring into your life, and whose life am I pouring into? Learn more about Pinnacle Forum at PinnacleForum.com. Here's Dr. John Tolson with Making Disciples Who Make Disciples on today's edition of Mark & Friends. We're here to learn some good stuff, amen? And we just heard some good stuff about discipling other people.

The only thing we can take to heaven with us are other people. That's it. Can't take the house, can't take the boat, can't take anything else, but we can take other people.

I want to thank you for that great introduction. To be asked to close our time on Saturday is an honor. There are so many people in this room who have impacted me for God and for good.

I first heard about Pinnacle Forum 10 years ago after I'd sold a software company. So many partners in this room, Connor Hilliard, Merrill Oster, Bruce Everett, Tom Okarma, Terry Lynn Miller, Sue Masetic, just good and godly people that have impacted me. I flew in late last night from a funeral.

I had to participate in Dallas. And while on the flight, there was a young man seated beside of me. He had graduated from the University of Illinois.

Do I have any Illinois people here tonight? Okay. The young man had never been on a plane before, first time, and so obviously we take off, and a few minutes into the flight, for whatever reason, the first of four engines just goes up in flames. And the pilot, trying to calm everybody down, ladies and gentlemen, do not be alarmed.

We still have three good engines left. It just means that we'll be 30 minutes late getting into Phoenix. Well, a few minutes later, the second of four engines goes up in flames.

Ladies and gentlemen, do not be alarmed. We still have two good engines left. It just means we'll be an hour and a half late getting into Phoenix.

Well, a few minutes later, you betcha, the third of four engines goes up in flames. Ladies and gentlemen, please do not be alarmed. We still have one good engine left.

It just means we'll be three hours late getting into Phoenix. The fellow sitting next to me, University of Illinois grad, he said, man, if that last engine goes out, we're liable to be up here all day long. So I'm just kidding.

Here's my commitment to you. We're not going to be up here all day long. All right.

Starting a forum and being part of Pinnacle Forum has made me a better leader and a better listener. And so I want to share some things with you that I've learned and observed in leading forums and also being part of Pinnacle Forum. We need leadership development.

But Pinnacle Forum is more than just leadership development. We need Bible studies. But Pinnacle Forum is more than just a Bible study.

The magic of Pinnacle Forum is the ongoing gathering of leaders who pour into each other, who disciple each other in their season of life. When I was 16 years old, my dad encouraged me to form my first board of advisors. And at 16, since that day, I have not made any major decisions, but what I did is have that group of advisors in my life, engaged in my life, and me allow it to run those decisions by them.

It's been one of the secrets of my life, having godly men speak into my life. And that's what Pinnacle Forum has meant to me. It's what Pinnacle Forum stands for.

And it's what Pinnacle Forum can do for you. So tonight, in just a few moments, I'm going to share with you what Pinnacle Forum does. I'm going to share with you what it's done for me.

And I'm going to share for you how it changes a culture. It can change those things around us. And then at the end, I'm going to try to give you some encouragement about not quitting.

Do you ever get tired? Do you ever get fatigued in trying to do right? Well, I'm going to give you some encouragement hopefully at the end. And then by the end of this conversation, hopefully you'll look at me and think, man, if that guy can do it, surely I can. Hopefully I'll give you some hope.

My life journey has been a constant feedback and engagement of godly men who disciplined me, who poured their life into me. Today at 63, I run a discipleship organization housed in a jazz venue. And you're going to be like, how in the world? If you're running a concrete company, you should be running a discipleship organization housed in a concrete company.

If you're running a software company, you should be involved in a discipleship ministry housed in a software company. A lot of people will try to do it individualistically. They'll try to do it like Frank Sinatra, I did it my way.

Well, good luck with that. There are too many organizations and ministries that have been destroyed and fallen apart because of the do-it-alone attitude. You want to wreck lives? Then do it with your own counsel.

Do it by yourself. If our brain is the only thing we consult for advice, we're going to end up in shipwreck. A forum of other leaders is not only safer, it is infinitely smarter than my own thinking.

And interacting with other godly men on a regular basis has centered me on the highest values. It has vetted every beginning idea. It has served as an effective marriage counseling session.

It's helped me think through coaching other young leaders. It's given me confidence. Forums have changed my life.

The promise of Pinnacle Forum is just that. Recently, Mike Burns, a Pinnacle Forum partner I met 10 years ago, and a Marine Corps captain during Vietnam, passed away. Right up until the very end, Mike Burns was leading and discipling others.

You and I should be like Mike Burns. The theme of this conference, Forged for Influence, reflects the very heart of Pinnacle Forum. The reality of iron sharpening iron is a fitting effect of what Pinnacle Forum stands for.

And just as metal is shaped in the fire, leaders and our forums are being refined by Christ, awakened to their divine purpose, and sent out to transform culture with courage. As a young non-commissioned officer in the Marine Corps, I received my NCO sword. The first model was crafted in 1859 with Bethlehem steel.

Now, I was not around in 1859, but I think Tom O'Karma was. Tom is an old Marine. Do we have any other Marines in here? Let me see your hand.

You're not going to admit it. You know what Marine stands for, right? It stands for Muscles Are Required, Intelligence Not Essential. But a sword like this is designed and it's made this way through heat and pressure and time.

And you know God makes leaders the same way. This conference has been about being forged for service. Our themes this conference tell us the path.

Rooted in Christ, tempered for purpose, standing firm in the heat. To be forged means that a process has taken place to convert raw metal into an instrument of tremendous value. And that process is how God makes leaders.

The teachers and the coaches in my life impacted me, making me want to emulate them. If you've been disciplined, you want to disciple others. If you've been led, you want to lead others.

The process of me being disciplined and being taught has involved learning and teaching from the best and the worst examples. Sometimes God will give you an Exhibit A of what not to do. And there's a pattern of observance,

assessment, modeling, and then teaching others that's woven into every area of life.

That's the model of learning. We can learn anything by doing those four things. I can teach you how to hit a target at five football fields away without a scope by observing, by being assessed, by modeling, and then by teaching others.

First, we must observe and gain knowledge. That observation could come from books. It could come from conferences like this one in which we find ourselves.

After we observe, then we enter into a time of assessment. What did we really learn from our observations? If we go out and repeat those same mistakes, then we really didn't learn anything, did we? Thirdly, we must see a model of how it is supposed to look. One of the great blessings of our World War II generation is that we had models for how men do tough things and keep moving forward.

We saw courage exhibited on a daily basis. My parents are the greatest models of Christian living I've ever seen modeled. My dad's 85.

My mother's 83. My dad still preaches one Sunday a month somewhere around the South. They are the most consistent Christians I've ever been around in my life.

I was able to see Jesus modeled in their lives every day. And then lastly, you've got to be able to teach it to someone else. You don't really know something if you can't teach it to someone else.

This is what makes the Forum experience so powerful. Weekly, we observe other leaders and we learn from them and the way they approach life. One of the men I learned through Pinnacle Forum is a man by the name of Dave Adelson.

He's what I want to be like when I grow up. Dave's 89 years old. Two years ago, he went skydiving.

He is a discipler of men. Every day in his ninth decade of life, he dresses himself and puts a gospel track in his pocket thinking, I'm going to talk to somebody about Jesus today. Now, what you don't know about Dave is that Dave was a guy that built the Mall of America.

But you'd never know that because he's so humble. He loves people. We can learn a lot by observation.

The Forum gives us that privilege of rubbing shoulders with other leaders. The Forum also gives us assessments. If we have a good and solid Forum, they will check up on us.

One week in my Forum, I confessed that I had not stuck to my physical health regimen in the most consistent manner. And the men in that group called me out. They asked me what was I going to do about it.

And that week, in front of other Forum members, I committed to a journey of health. That was five years ago. I've lost 85 pounds.

I've hiked the Grand Canyon twice. I've bench-pressed my weight seven times. My goal this year is I'm taking a group of men that I disciple.

Young men today are really not pushed to do tough things in a lot of ways. I'm taking a group of men who I'm discipling, and we're hiking the Grand Canyon for the third time. And I'm hitting the gym with them, and I'm teaching them how to do hard things.

And I look at these young men, and I tell them, Young men, if you cannot lift your body weight, then your children really have two mamas. I get in their grill, and I lovingly tell them, and I raise the standard. It's not personal.

Here's the standard. Live up to a standard. In a Forum, we get to see leadership modeled.

We get to see how leaders break down problems and solve them. We get to see how they build coalitions and they press forward. And we dream a little bigger because we're in a Forum of other leaders.

I joked about Tom Okarma a while ago. I've watched Tom teach board recruitment and development just by the way he engages in a Forum. He asks for ideas, he presses people for commitments, and he keeps the train moving.

The last thing is, I've seen in the Forum, we teach people how to teach others. Bruce Everett is here. Bruce is one of the most humble men in this room.

He started out as a bag boy at Safeway Grocery Stores and over 45 years became the president of Safeway. You never know that, but in a Forum, he pushes you to lead, he pushes you to teach, he pushes you to teach others. I learned all of that by participating in a Forum.

A Forum will change us. A Forum can also change the people and the things around us. This brings us to our cultural moment.

What does a Forum have to say about culture outside that room? When you leave your Forum, now what? If you haven't noticed, the world outside our Forum is a lot different than the world inside that Forum. Not everyone outside our Forum wants us to succeed. Not everyone in our community, our neighborhood, or maybe even our home have the same values.

We all know that the world would look a lot better if that Forum of leaders who learn and teach others and encourage them to greater work and fulfillment was better represented in our community. So how do we impact our culture? How do we transfer those values and see the ripples of change become more of a reality? As Christians, we know of our biblical mandate to make disciples of all nations. We also know we're in this world, but we're not of the world.

And yet, there is a very real tension in being not conformed to this world, but being transformed. We need to be transformers, not conformers. We are citizens of heaven, and we march to a different order and drum than the rest of humanity.

The embassy we represent is in hostile territory. A lot of Christian organizations want to talk about changing culture, and yet most of the time, culture changes us. Instead of instituting a new way of thinking and living for a watching world, often we adopt and adapt such that it can be indistinguishable between the kingdom of this world and that of our ancient and biblical mission.

Instead of Babylon becoming more like heaven, we oftentimes become fluent Babylonians. We assimilate rather than create and dominate. We're reminded by Revelation 11, 15 and echoed in Handel's Messiah that the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.

The model prayer implores us to appeal, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done at the Arizona grand as it is in heaven. God shapes culture. Our God is sovereign over everything and everybody.

He cannot be legislated out. He cannot be outvoted. He's not going to resign, and He's not going to retire.

And He shall reign forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and He turns it whithersoever He will. Somebody in this room ought to say amen.

Even the Presbyterians in this room ought to give a little positive grunt. Amen. I prepared two sermons tonight.

If you laugh at my jokes and you say an occasional amen, you get the real short version. Amen. I love it.

Most of us grew up in an American system and time whereby Judeo-Christian beliefs formed the foundation of our culture. There were certain perceptions and realities that were as obvious and accepted as the oxygen in the room. In my own lifetime, we went from sending boys into combat with moral clarity and them coming back to create the most prosperous nation on the earth to a time when a Supreme Court justice cannot tell you what is the definition of a woman.

In my own lifetime, we put a man on the moon, and now we want to put a man in the women's bathroom. In my own lifetime, we've gone from wicked people taking their hats off when entering a church building to where people now have no fear or respect to barge into a church service with their protest disrupting the service or to shoot Jewish congregants outside a synagogue. It feels like we're losing our culture.

So what do we do? On November the 2nd, 1979, less than five miles from where you're seated tonight, Francis Schaeffer spoke at Gammage Auditorium on the campus of Arizona State University. His speech that day became the book, How Should We Then Live? One of the local Christian leaders in the room that day, a Pinnacle Forum partner, Dave Everett. He walked out of Gammage that day inspired to do something.

With his wife, Joanne, they started Choices Pregnancy Centers with multiple locations, and they have saved hundreds of thousands of babies for 47 years. As my guests, they are here tonight. Dave and Joanne Everett, would you please raise your hands so people can see? Let's give them a hand.

God is looking for committed and obedient people. He's not looking for big people. Gideon was a little on the shy side. David was a teenager. Moses had a murder rap sheet. Paul was a terrorist.

One of Jesus' disciples was Simon the Zealot, which was a precursor to the hell's angels. Peter was a liar and a braggart. God's looking for the committed, and He's looking for the obedient.

Frankly, I have not always been obedient or fully committed. But at 63, I have burned the boats. There is no possible retreat.

I am all in for King Jesus. Listening friend, you and I were never intended to follow Jesus all by ourselves. Dr. John Tolson has spent more than four decades emphasizing something Jesus Himself commanded us to do, make disciples

who make disciples.

I love that picture of iron sharpening iron. Sometimes God uses encouragement, sometimes accountability, sometimes He places someone in our lives whose example raises the standard and causes us to say, I want to become more like Jesus because I've seen something of Him lived out in that person. And after being involved with Pinnacle Forum for about 20 years myself, I can tell you that's one reason I value those relationships.

We need people who will pray for us, encourage us, challenge us, and help us remain faithful to what God has called us to do. But it doesn't stop with, who is discipling me? Listening friend, ask the second question, who am I discipling? Who could you encourage, mentor, pray for, or simply walk alongside as together you become more like Jesus? And we're not finished. Tomorrow on Mark & Friends, we'll continue Dr. John Tolson's message from the Pinnacle Forum National Conference and hear more about faithfully influencing the culture around us and not quitting when doing what's right becomes difficult.

Learn more about Pinnacle Forum at PinnacleForum.com and find today's program and additional resources under the Mark & Friends tab at GreatNewsRadio.org or WLUJ.org. Thanks for listening. Thanks for being a part of our radio listening family. This is Mark Burns with the Ministry of Great News Media.

God bless you and have a great day and night.