



Season 4 | Episode 12

Meet “The Autism Pastor,” Dr. Lamar Hardwick

Dr. Lamar Hardwick

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Lamar Hardwick is a husband, father, and advocate, and also the lead pastor at Tri-Cities church in East Point, Georgia. He writes and speaks frequently on the topic of disability, especially autism, from the unique perspective of someone who was diagnosed with autism later in life. Pastor Lamar wrote the best-selling book, *I Am Strong: The Life and Journey of an Autistic Pastor* as well as *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* and he joins us today to talk about his life and faith and how his autism diagnosis gave him some understanding of why he felt different. And on the outside, most of his life. Welcome to the podcast, pastor Lamar.

Lamar Hardwick:

Thanks for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I'd love to begin this conversation by asking about your younger years. Pastor Lamar, what was it like for you growing up as a young man with autism who felt like he just didn't belong?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah. A good question. As you said I was not diagnosed till later in life.

I was thirty-six, but I would honestly say that probably around the age of seven or eight, I started to realize there were significant differences between me and my peers. And so, I mimicked a lot of behavior. I pretended to understand things I really didn't. And so, I like to say that I didn't know what I should do to fit in, but I started to learn very quickly what not to do to stand out. Growing up, it felt like the world was in on an inside joke that I didn't understand.

I now know it's things like body language, social cues, facial expressions, the way people say things, voice intonation, all things that are communicated through body language and social cues that I didn't understand. And so, I now realize that most of what people say, and we've all heard this saying that ninety percent of all communication is non-verbal, right? Well, for someone like me, I like to say I don't have the translator in my head to translate body language, voice intonation, facial expressions. And so, you can understand that if the whole world is speaking in a language that you don't understand how difficult it is socially. So, for me as a kid,



um, I, I had some friends. I didn't have a lot. I read a lot because that was my only way of really understanding the world around me.

Crystal Keating:

That's really helpful to put ourselves in your shoes and thinking, what would we do in a world where we didn't understand the language and we didn't have a translator? How do you become connected? And I really appreciated your transparency in one of the blogs you wrote. You shared that you turned to drugs and alcohol, actually as a way to cope with a lot of things when you were younger, including your undiagnosed autism. You didn't know what was happening and I've read this is actually quite common for teens and people in their twenties who struggle with a developmental disorder or other undiagnosed challenges.

Even mental health challenges that have not been identified. So why do you think this is the case that some turn to drugs and alcohol and, and as you did, and how do you move forward from dependency on substances to a relationship with Jesus? What changed in your life spiritually?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, so I started around eighth grade. So, I think one of the things that is important and I share this with parents that I'm mentoring, teenagers and young adults on the spectrum is that you know, right around the age, getting to middle school, you start to become really aware of your social settings and the types of things that are described as the type of person that society is beginning to influence you into thinking that you should be. And so, you know, someone on the spectrum, I have social anxiety, so I'm not always a great initiator in conversations. It's kind of hard to figure out what to say and when to fit in. I'm not very good at small talk.

And so, what you get labeled is as someone who's either stuck up or sometimes people think that you're standoffish. Basically, you get labeled as someone who's not a quote-unquote people person. And I think what happens is, is that drugs and alcohol alter your natural state. And so, it made me more outgoing even though that's not necessarily my personality.

And so, what I found out very quickly is drugs and alcohol made me quote-unquote, a people person, all the things that people said I should be: more outgoing, more fun, things that are not really a natural part of my personality being introverted and being autistic. But it was something that helped alter that personality.

And so, the payoff was, is that it made me feel more accepted, more cool; not because I was doing drugs with people, but because of the ways in which it changed my personality when I was under the influence and the reward was, it made people think that I was more of a quote-unquote people person. And so, I always caution parents... I think one of the things that studies show that it's a generalization. But most people on the spectrum tend to have addictive personalities because we tend to get laser-focused on one thing at a time. Or, you know, we tend to like patterns and sometimes the behavior is that I need to be more in control of the situation. And that kind of put me in a situation where I felt like I was more in control of my social life because I was more accepted. Now, granted, that is not a long-term strategy. So, the second part of the question is when I actually got to college and the short version of the story is I call it my Jonah story. Because you know how Jonah got on the ship and because of his running away



from God, everybody on the ship was impacted by the storm that he sort of brought on. And that was at a place where I was in my life, in my freshman year of college.

So, from eighth grade, all the way to my freshman year in college, I was doing drugs and alcohol, trying to be somebody that I was not. And in my freshman year, long story short, we got in a very serious car accident. Thankfully, everybody went home. I wasn't driving and the person who was driving wasn't under the influence, but the entire time, what I kind of felt impressed upon me was everyone in this car is subject to the fact that you're running away from God, sort of like Jonah.

And what it showed me was the power of the influence that my decisions had on other people's life because I really don't think at that stage, I was really concerned about my own life, which is why I was trying to be someone else. But when I saw the impact that it was having on other people's lives, one of those people in the car was my then girlfriend, my now wife.

And so, it took for God to show me, your choices actually impact. I know you don't really care about yourself, but they're impacting the people around you that you do care about. But that was also the beginning stages of me understanding my call in the ministry. Because if something as simple as me being disobedient, impacting people in a negative way, what would happen if I actually stopped running from God and actually started obeying God? How much of an impact can I have in a positive way on people's lives? So, I'm, I'm thankful for that story, because I think what God does is, God speaks to each one of us, according to our personality. And so, because I was so laid back, I needed like a huge awakening. Whereas some people, God can speak to them and is still a small voice like he did with Elijah.

I'm not one of those people. I need God has to really grab me by the shoulders and shake me and say wake up because that's how he gets my attention. And so that's what happened for me.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, at that time, were you and your then girlfriend now wife, were you part of a church? Like how did you recognize God's voice? And I mean, was it later that you're like, this is a Jonah moment, or did you realize I am being disobedient to you, lord? My conscience is bothering me. What was that process like?

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah, so we were in college and so like most young adults and they go off, they kind of do their own thing, but I was raised in a church.

My father is a pastor. Okay. So, this is not new to me. I was raised in a church. I was baptized when I was a teenager. So, I had a relationship. It's just the pressures of trying to fit into the social world. And then I was out in college and so I was not under my parents' supervision where I was made to go to church.

And you know, I would periodically go, and we could catch a ride cause I didn't have a car in college. But, but I knew. And so that's why I called the Jonah story. It wasn't that Jonah didn't



have a relationship with God. He heard very clearly from God. He just chose to go the other direction.

Right. And so, I don't, I don't know there was a time where I was not able to know what God was nudging me toward. It was just a matter of actually being obedient to it. And that's why I say, you know, when you know God's voice, then you actually know when you're actually rejecting that.

And so, it wasn't a mysterious thing for me. I knew exactly as a matter of fact after the car, and it was a very bad car accident. They couldn't find anywhere to tow the car away because it was so damaged. Wow. And it was a miracle that we all walked away without a scratch. Wow. And it actually landed about twenty, thirty feet in front of someone's house.

Oh. Cause the car spun around multiple times, crossed oncoming traffic, got hit a second time. The whole time the car was spinning, I could hear God talking to me. Wow. And so, when the car finally stopped, I got out and the paramedics thought I was in shock because I was on my knees weeping.

And it wasn't because of the accident so much, as I finally said, okay, I hear you, God. I have to, I have to do better. I have to turn my life around because it's impacting people around me that I love.

Crystal Keating:

God's grace. You heard his voice. He is worthy of following. Mm-hmm. I love that. Wow. Well, pastor Lamar, you talked a little bit at the beginning of our conversation, just maybe what you were experiencing as a younger person living with autism about the social cues and not being in on the conversation. But maybe you could talk about living with autism as an adult. What are some of the barriers you experience today and what are some of the strengths that come with having autism?

Lamar Hardwick:

Mm-hmm. Good question. Yes. So, some of the barriers are the same and particularly because, um you know, church in the Western world is highly social.

So as a pastor, there are lots of things that go on in the church. It's very social and it should be, but, but all the same challenges are still there that I had as a kid. The difference though, it's a degree of difficulty has been raised because the older you get, the less grace people have for you.

Hmm. When you're younger and you're on the spectrum and you don't understand the social cues, people think that you're shy or maybe aloof. But then the older you get, it changes from being shy to arrogant, to standoffish, to he's not a people person to even prior to my first role as a lead pastor to being told that I can't be a good pastor because I don't relate well to people.

And so, that's one of the things that I mentor young people and parents is that the older you get, the less grace people give you because you're quote-unquote, supposed to know better. And the



thing about it is these are things that after I was diagnosed, I spent two years with a therapist that diagnosed me, both my wife and I to help me untangle some complicated parts of my life, but also to give me some tools.

And so, I'm fully self-aware that these things happen. I'm just not aware when they're happening. Hmm. And so, it constantly put me on the edge because I was afraid that I might offend someone with my own body language or facial expressions that often don't mirror the environment. So that's why I had to, you know, disclose because a church I was passionate at the time was growing.

People like the way I preach, but off the stage, they felt like I was a totally different person. You know, cause on the stage it's just me talking and I can communicate very well when I want to get across. But I really struggle with social interactions off the stage. And so, all the same things are there.

But as an adult, you get far less grace and it's not children saying mean things about you anymore. It's adults saying mean things about you. But as far as strengths, what I learned in spending time with my therapist and with others is that there are a lot of strengths that come along with it.

One is a lot of the things that are considered deficits when it comes to autism, if the environment is right, those things can be leveraged in the strengths. For example, it's often seen as, repetitive behavior seen as being rigid. I see it oftentimes that the environment right as being focused. I think it's one in forty-four now that are diagnosed with autism.

I always say that if I'm in the room with forty-three other people, there's at least one thing that I can do that they can't. Hmm. And so what it has led to is, part of the routine is I am good at creating systems because systems are just routine that is repeated. So, I was very good at creating systems within our church for helping people assimilate for discipleship.

But you also are able to see patterns very well. A lot of people on the spectrum can see patterns very well. That's why they're good at math. But that translated into me being able to see what are the ebbs and flows and the patterns of our church and our community and was able to leverage that and see trends coming around the corner.

Uh, it helped with church growth because you knew the patterns of the church. You knew when you were hitting a growth season - when it was not gonna be a growth season. All those things are strengths if they're allowed to be placed in the right environment. There are many strengths, but the last thing I'll say is most children that you see that you know, that on the spectrum have a special interest.

And so that's the kid that knows everything about dinosaurs or knows everything about trains or knows everything about rocks. Right. And sometimes for people who watch them, it can become a bit overwhelming because that's all the child wants to talk about. Well, what I've learned is when I was a child, my special interest was always history.



And so, I, I was a nerdy kid who literally read the encyclopedia. Like, you know, we don't do that anymore, but my parents would order the whole set. Yes. And I would literally, literally read the whole set. Like I was always interested in history. I was always interested in how things are made, where things come from.

And so, no one thinks it's strange that I know as much as I know about first-century church history. Because that's what I do for a living. Yeah. But you know, when, when you're seven or eight, it's super weird. Right? Why does this kid know all this stuff? So, I say that.

Crystal Keating:

It's not being used practically in the moment. Right?

Lamar Hardwick:

Exactly. So, what I tell parents is, you know, the special interest, even though it appears to be rigidity like they don't want to learn or know anything else, leverage that to the good to where you can build around it. Pique their interest by using their special interest to introduce them to other things. Because for me and I don't assume that, you know, everyone on the spectrum is different, but what it ended up turning out for me is, is that that actually became my strength. And I'm allowed to in my church, to spend hours reading and researching because that's one of the things I do best, and it comes across in my sermons.

And so, I think I even tweeted this the other day. The reason why I'm, I've been able to be successful as a pastor once the church understood what my strengths are, they don't expect me to veer too much out of how God wired me. And so, we get other people to, to do things that I'm not good at.

That's great. And just give me hours a week to, by myself to read and research. And then I get to share what I learned in an uninterrupted form called sermons. And if you think about it, that's all a child with their special interest does is they know everything about particular topics and they want you to listen to them for hours to teach you about what they know about it. And that's what I do for a living.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, and God is using that for his glory, absolutely, and their good. Oh, what a gift! What a gift. Even the other staff members who can use their gifts and stay in their areas of expertise to come alongside of you. That's the picture of the body. I love that.

So, okay. Well, I'm kind of curious about something you said. Well, two things, one about working with a therapist for two years. What was that like for you? What are some of the tools and tips that your therapist shared? And then my other question is about just how we as a church can be better at supporting someone who maybe isn't a people person and maybe does have undiagnosed autism spectrum disorder. So that's two questions. But first, what was it like to be in therapy for two years?



Lamar Hardwick:

For me it was good, and I encourage. I get lots and lots of adults and a lot of pastors actually, who message me and say, you know, I heard your story and I actually think that I'm on the spectrum too, some of which go get diagnosed as well.

Yeah. That's happened a lot over the last seven years or so since I disclosed. Some of them are not ready to disclose publicly, but I work with them behind the scenes cause a lot of them are pastoring churches. But one of the things I tell them is that don't just go get the diagnosis. I went, but then I stayed with a therapist to help me.

So, two things quickly that she helped me with is we used to do something that a lot of churches do where they allow those who are new to the church to attend some kind of lunch or gathering where they get to know the staff, the pastors. We used to call it newcomer's lunch. Well, you know, I already said that initiation and I have as a part of autism, oftentimes people on the spectrum have social anxiety. So, it's difficult to initiate conversation, to know having the conversations a lot, like Double-Dutch that we used to play when we were a kid. Mm-hmm. Like, you kind of size up the ropes and you don't know when to jump in.

And so, it just makes for an awkward social interaction sometimes that people interpret different ways. But one of the things that she told me to do was just ask a lot of questions. Mm-hmm. And she said, this is funny, but it's true. She said most people love to talk about themselves anyway. Yep. So, she said, in order for them to feel like they've had a great interaction with you as a pastor, just ask a lot of questions and then they'll do ninety percent of the talking.

And all you did is ask three questions. But they'll walk away feeling like that was a great conversation.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true. They felt loved and cared for and seen and heard.

Lamar Hardwick:

And meanwhile, I'm nervous cuz I don't know what to say. But she said you don't really have to say a lot, just ask questions. And so, I would have a script, which most autistic people do of things that I would ask.

And over the years I learned through practicing that. And that's another thing. I have to practice a lot of things that some people just take for granted. But through the years of practicing that, I started to journal, what are some of the common things that people ask me and what they want to know? And I've essentially boiled it down to a couple of main things that I always get asked.

And so, then I began to be able to talk about those things. Once I realized this is what people generally asked. So, I asked a lot of questions. And then another tip that she gave was in the very beginning because I was so nervous about it. She said, assign yourself a task. And so, what I would do for maybe like the first two years of these newcomers' lunches, and we were getting lots and lots of new people who were coming. The church was growing rapidly.



And so, there'd be a room like full of thirty people and I'd be nervous. Yeah. But she said, assign yourself a task. And so, what I would do is I would serve drinks and what it would do is it made people feel close to me. I got to interact with them and do small talk, which I didn't do very well. But it also gave me a chance to serve, and it got a chance for people to see me serving others.

And so, I practiced that for two years and worked my way into being able to have more conversations with people up until the point where I started to be able to sit down with people, have a conversation with them because I journaled every interaction. Afterwards, I would journal. These are the things that people tend to ask me. These are the things that people tend to wanna know.

And so, it just prepared me for being able to get better at it. So, I tell people Lamar in 2022 is much different than Lamar in 2014, because I'm more polished. I'm more practiced. Yeah. But I'm also more prayed up. Amen. Because I know how to navigate, that doesn't mean the autism is not a factor. But I've done on my end, but that leads into answering the other part of the question is what can people do? I think start with just understanding that people oftentimes, especially those who have what's considered invisible disabilities. Right. They are navigating through some things that oftentimes are challenges that people can't see and can't often appreciate the extent of it.

And so, you know, we're, we are called to be people of grace, but I think that we don't often practice that very well. It's true. And so, one of the things that I had to do when I disclose is just to tell people, look, we talk about authenticity, and I would say authenticity is like the big foot of Christianity.

Like we, we kind of feel like he's out there somewhere, but we can't really nail it down. Mm-hmm. But I said, you know if my facial expressions look like I'm upset or I'm angry because I also don't know what I look like to people, then just ask me. Let's just, let's be authentic as we claim to be.

If you think I'm upset, I give you the freedom to ask me, instead of making up a story in your head about how I didn't want to be there or how I was being standoffish or how I was aloof. Just ask, are you upset. And if I'm upset, I'll tell you, yes, I'm upset. If I'm not, I'll tell you no, well, thank you for pointing that out, but I'm not upset. Maybe my facial expressions are not communicating the right thing. So, I think grace, but also create an environment where it's okay to actually really be what we say we want to be, which is authentic and be transparent and just say how we feel, what we are experiencing. And I talk about that in my most recent book in the introduction, I say the thing that led me to the diagnosis, even though I knew around seven or eight is I had to ask myself the question, what do people experience when they experience me? Because it wasn't what I thought it was. And so, I challenged the church to ask itself the same question.

What do people with autism or other disability experience when they experience the church? And I think their absence is telling us what their experience is, that we're not as graceful. We're not as inclusive of them. We haven't created a space where they can be authentic and talk about the things that they're really challenged with.



So that would be what I would say to the church is let's really practice more grace and create a space where people can tell us what their real experience with us is. And if it's not good, then we use that as a way to sharpen ourselves and to adapt.

Crystal Keating:

That is a humble question. And we have to be ready for the answer. And then ask God, how do we move forward in your grace, in your likeness, spirit led to be the loving and grace-filled and truth-filled church that we really wanna be.

Mm-hmm. That is good. Well, I appreciate the practicality of your therapist. And I think that's so important just giving you tips where you've seen progress. So, because you weren't diagnosed with autism until later in life, what was it like when you actually had an explanation for your struggles after maybe compensating as a pastor?

Lamar Hardwick:

Mm-hmm yeah, it was dual-fold. There was a sense of relief and I've written about this in the past. I think for the first time in my life after I was diagnosed, I felt human. Mm. Because I was characterized all the way up until the time of my diagnosis as weird, as weak, just all sorts of labels and, and sometimes parents will struggle with, should I get my child diagnosed because I don't want them to be labeled.

And when I tell them this, people are already labeling. I think that we need to get control of what that label is so that we can give them the language and you, the language to explain to people how their brain is wired and how, you know, they interact with the world differently. But people are already labeling me, weird, weak, arrogant, standoffish, all the negative characteristics that you can think of.

So, I think that part of the process was relief because I didn't feel like I was all those things anymore. There was an explanation for why I saw the world the way that I did. But then if I were to be honest, there was also a little bit of grief because I felt like, okay, now I have to meet me for the first time and I'm losing a sense of who I thought I was presenting to the world. That person doesn't exist. And so, I had to grieve that.

And then, you know, honestly, there was also a time period, and this is why I saved my therapist for two years, because there was an extended period of time where I replayed multiple relationships in my head that ended, and I never knew why. And I had carried the guilt and the burden of something that I did to make that person not talk to me anymore, not love me anymore. And I carried that from a child all the way into my mid-thirties. And so, part of the process of why I stayed with her is that I had to get some healing for that, because I carried that burden of saying, this is why that person didn't talk anymore.

It was something I did and not being able to know what it was is a huge burden to place on the child and you never really get over that. And so, she helped my wife and I to really untangle all that. It was a sense of wow; I feel human now. But then on the other side, there was a sense of,



wow, I feel a little bit of grief and I had to unburden myself from relationships that ended that weren't my fault, because I didn't know at the time.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and God is so good to gently uncover those things and, in our grief, and with the right person, slowly minister, and mm-hmm you build us and, you know, I'm glad you shared those things, cuz I know you are not the only one.

And I know our listeners need to hear your experience. You know, you talked a little bit about your wife, and I'd love to hear more about her. And I was reading that you battled cancerous tumors last year and wrote that your wife, Isabella is your rock. And so, I'd love for you to share a bit about your marriage and how being diagnosed with autism impacted your relationship with her.

Lamar Hardwick:

Yeah. So, in January, we'll be married twenty-two years. Praise the Lord. So we were, you know, well into our marriage, by the time I got a diagnosis. Now the interesting thing, and I told people is my wife is from Malawi in Africa. We started dating in college at eighteen, so we've been together literally half of our lives, more than half of our lives.

But one of the things I think was the benefit for us, even though I was not diagnosed is that we just assumed that because we were from different continents and different cultures, that's where the differences lie. Huh. And so, some of the social awkwardness, some of the, because my wife is an extreme extrovert like she can become friends with anybody within five minutes. Um, and I'm not like I am not like her at all, and we are totally opposite. But we worked well together, and we just assumed that she grew up on a different continent and different culture. I grew up in a different continent, different culture.

So, our assumptions going into it was we're just gonna have to work really hard at understanding each other and make this work because we really like each other. And then eventually, obviously fell in love with each other. But we went at it from the beginning, knowing that we had to work because we just saw life differently.

And I think that was to our benefit because even though we didn't know, and I would later be diagnosed and a lot of things started to make sense, then. We had already predetermined that we were going to put in the work because of our cultural differences and different upbringing. Yeah, that's good. So yeah, so when I was diagnosed, it helped to explain a lot of things. But it was not like it was something that was a deterrent to the work and the foundation that we had already put in. We just determined that we were gonna be devoted to trying to understand each other and as difficult as it was, and probably as challenging as it was for my wife to understand some of my quirky behavior, we already had you know, over a decade of working on that. We just assumed that it was something different than what it actually ended up being.

So, it actually ended up being good for both of us, because then we developed an additional set of tools to help us to work on our marriage that we didn't have. So, our first set of tools was just,

oh, we're from different cultures. You know, she speaks multiple languages. She grew up in a different culture.

So, we brought, brought out the tool belt to work with that. But then the diagnosis says, okay, here's some additional tools that our therapist gave us. So, it only made things actually get better.

Crystal Keating:

That is good. You already had the commitment there and the love and I'm sure it just deepened your relationship even more.

Well, pastor Lamar, it's evident God has been working in and through you. And I would love if you would come back for another episode, just to talk more about your heart for diversity and finding your identity in the body of Christ through the Lord. This has been so good.

Lamar Hardwick:

Thanks for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

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