

## Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

**Hosts:** Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

**Episode 12 — Guest: Rachel Joy Welcher**

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**Elyse Fitzpatrick 00:00**

Hi there. This is Elyse Fitzpatrick, and thanks for tuning in to this episode of Worthy with Rachel Welcher. We're happy to have you here. But we wanted to give you a heads up that this is not going to be an episode you'll want to listen to with any little ears around. We're going to be talking about abuse. And we're going to get pretty specific. So let us just encourage you to make sure you're going to listen to this with adult ears only. And thanks for joining us. Welcome to Worthy, a Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week we'll bring you conversations with women and men, and the value of women in the church, home and society. We won't always agree on everything, but we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, and women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day. Hi, and welcome back to Worthy. My name is Elyse Fitzpatrick, and I'm here today with my co-author Eric Schumacher. And Eric and I have the great privilege of having a guest on with us today. Rachel Joy Welcher is someone we'd like to introduce you to. She's a columnist and editor at Fathom magazine. She earned her Master of Letters in Theology from the University of St. Andrews, which means of course that she's a certified smart person. And she is the author of two books of poetry, which also means that she's a certified artistic person. Her primary books are "Blue Tarp" and "Two Funerals, then Easter". She lives in Glenwood, Iowa with her husband, Evan, who, if you listen to our last podcast was our guest and their dog, Frank. She's, I need to find out what kind of dog it is. So, Rachel, what kind of dog is Frank?

**Rachel Joy Welcher 02:58**

Oh, he's an American mutt.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 03:00**

Oh, he's a mutt. Oh, how wonderful.

**Rachel Joy Welcher 03:03**

He looks like a black lab.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 03:04**

Oh, and that makes him even more [inaudible]

**Eric Schumacher 03:06**

And he has a goatee doesn't he? Does he have a gray goatee?

**Rachel Joy Welcher 03:09**

I don't think so.

**Eric Schumacher 03:11**

Oh, nevermind.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 03:12

He's got a white belly.

**Eric Schumacher** 03:13

Okay. That's what I was [inaudible]

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 03:16

So we're so happy to have her on. She has a book that has been that it. Try again. Her most recent release is a book entitled, "Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality". I am so happy to have you on. I want very much to talk about your book as someone who raised her children, sadly in the purity culture. But before we get to that, I'd like you to just talk a little bit with our audience about who you are, how you ended up doing what you're doing in your marriage, in your writing. Tell us a little bit about yourself. Please, Rachel.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 04:08

Well, hi. I'm so glad to be here. I grew up as a pastor's kid, and had the honor of learning about Jesus from a young age and had just a very privileged blessed growing up. And if you listen to the episode with Evan, he talked about my story. I went to Bible college I met my first husband. And we were married almost five years. But into that fifth year, or that fourth year Rather, he started to question his faith and eventually decided that we were no longer compatible because I was a Christian and he no longer claimed the faith. So he divorced me, and that really, I had been a high school English teacher. In all I've taught high school English for 10 years. And so that's what I was doing at the time. But after he left me, I moved home to live with my parents, I was almost 30 at that point and just very crushed and trying to figure out what to do, how to move forward. So what I ended up doing is applying to graduate programs, something I'd never considered doing before, I'd always just figured I would teach, I've wanted to write since I was a kid, and saw the film Harriet the Spy, but but I didn't think I'd ever do that. So I started to look into graduate programs. And I got accepted to the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. And I just, it felt like a gift from God to take some time to figure out my gifts and sort of reevaluate where I was at and what to do next. Now as a as a single divorced woman in the church. So that's how I ended up studying purity culture is I decided to dig into that topic for my dissertation. Or rather, we'd call it a thesis here. And one of the reasons is because I work with high schoolers for 10 years, and I grew up in the church myself, but also, I'd heard countless stories from women who had been sexually abused. And were dealing with guilt, false guilt, over it. And so I wanted to dig into the books of my youth and see how they what they had to say about those who've been sexually abused. I wanted to read those books through the lens of someone who had been abused and see how we treated them. And if that message, if the purity culture messages should stay the same moving forward. And so that's how I started my research. My thesis was specifically about how the messages of purity culture impacted the sexually abused.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 06:52

That's, I am. Okay. I just am going to stop and say right now, I am so so glad for this book. I'm so glad for this book. So why don't you for perhaps there is a listener who doesn't really understand when we say purity culture, can you define that for us so that people will know what we're talking about?

**Rachel Joy Welcher 07:19**

It's a bit hard to define. But when I refer to purity culture, I'm talking about the period of time from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Specifically, a time that was defined by Well, there was fear, starting in the 80s, over teen pregnancy, a rise in teen pregnancy and HIV. And so the reaction to those fears impacted how the church handled the message of premarital sex. And so what we saw was a huge number of Christian books being written and curriculum and conferences, True Love Waits rallies, purity rings, purity balls, Father daughter balls. We saw just a huge emphasis for teenagers on staying abstinent, staying sexually abstinent. And what it ended up doing was, it really infiltrated everything we did in youth group. It became the main message. I would argue that that message was larger and more looming than the gospel itself.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 08:30**

And so, you know, as someone who I homeschooled my kids, during that time, I didn't homeschool them the whole time. They were in and out of Christian school and public school and whatever. But I can remember how important the purity culture was certain authors made it as you said, it was the primary message. And one of the things that I think I really saw there, and I'd like you to talk about this a bit, if you'd like, is how the purity of the relationship the purity culture really rested on the women, rested on girls. It was on the girls to dress in such a way that they were protecting their brothers. And you know, I'm gonna let you I'll let you vamp on that, because I'm sure you'd love to. But you know, I don't want to start out by saying, yeah, we don't care how people dress. Of course we do. But modesty is not primarily how much skin you're showing. It's, really an issue of not showing off how well you can dress or it's an issue of pride. And I mean, I've had to push back so much against so much of what people say about modesty, and how women are really blamed for men having lust in their hearts. And one of the ways that I've done that is just said, Hey, do you suppose that in the entire Middle East, there are no men who struggle with lust? Because women are covered from head to toe. So you know, I'm sorry, that's, that's my little vamp here. You know, I'd like you to talk about that. And, you know, just about how much the purity culture really rested on the women.

**Rachel Joy Welcher 10:41**

Or you're spot on, I think you're exactly right. What I saw when I went back, and re read these books for my youth, was that women were tasked with, they were tasked with the responsibility of keeping both genders sexually pure. And this was this was promoted almost as a nod of respect to women. But essentially, women were portrayed as sexually and morally superior to men and and part of this idea came from the idea that women don't have as strong of a sex drive as men or that women aren't sexual at all. So when you assume that women don't have sexual feelings, and you portray men as lust machines, then it makes sense that women would be in charge of controlling both genders. So this, this teaching was built on wrong assumptions about men and women, as though sexuality is only for men. And so that was one problem. But there are numerous problems with tasking women with the responsibility of keeping both genders pure. I think one of the main ones we can see right off the bat is that if a woman is sexually abused, for instance, the culpability then returns to her and it is assumed that she didn't do enough to stop it, that she should have been wearing something different, that there's something that she failed to do. In fact, the books have advice about to women about how not to get raped. But then the books for men don't have advice about how to treat women as human beings and

image bearers of God. And so we have some major problems here with what you're talking about, Elyse, this idea that it's on women. And so the modesty issue is one of many where this culpability gets very complicated.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 12:37

And you know what you're talking about there is really a Victorian idea, the Victorian idea is that women are the civilizers, if you will, of the culture, women are the ones who are to keep men somehow from falling into their baser nature, and that women are not really interested in, in sexuality, if they are, of course, they're looked at askance, and, and that the strength, the vitality, if you will, of the home, rests on the woman, so the man goes out into the culture, and is exposed to all this stuff. But then the woman is supposed to stay home, and she's going to be the one that's going to hold everything together. That's a really, that's really a Victorian idea. It is not a biblical idea at all. And so yeah, this is something you know, of course, I strongly resonate with at this time. But boy, I'll tell you what, when I was involved in homeschooling, and the purity culture, I bought into it just hook, line, and sinker. And basically, you know, I was part of a church that made that made the purity culture, the most important things. Listen, a woman would say, on her wedding day that that was the first time she'd ever even been kissed. As if, then, and I know you, this is something you fought, as if then what that meant was she was going to have a beautiful marriage, and a wonderful sex life.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 14:29

Right? In fact, yeah, that was a promise. That was the purity culture promise we were fed.

**Eric Schumacher** 14:36

And of course, the bride who doesn't say that on her wedding day, then everybody knows what that means.

Rachel, talk to us about you know, so we're gonna have some listeners going well, what's wrong with purity? And a couple things I want to explore is first of all, I think you mentioned how purity culture idolizes virginity. Obviously being a virgin isn't wrong. You know, our culture, the worldly culture mocks virginity. And we're familiar with that. Jesus, of course, was a virgin, his entire life. What does it mean to idolize virginity?

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 17:34

Yeah, that's a great question. I think what I saw in the books as I reread them, is that virginity was the thing that determined a woman's worth. So certainly sexual purity, there were books for men on sexual purity, but they did not emphasize virginity at all. Virginity was emphasized for women. And just going back to something you were saying earlier Elyse, about this Victorian idea. It's not biblical. It's more from the Victorian era. Well, Dr. James Dobson started talking about this idea, from Victorian culture that women have this job to civilize men. And when you look into it, Sarah Mosler who wrote "Virgin Nation", she said that James Dobson actually was drawing from the work of George Gilder, who as far as I know, isn't a Christian writer at all. He's an anti-feminist, and he was talking about how men are barbarians that must be tamed by women. And so James Dobson bought into this idea, and then, you know, in his radio shows and in his books and promoted the idea that women really had this responsibility and weight on them. As far as virginity goes, Dobson, there's some quote, I can't

remember exactly what it was, but he said that the women reached the height of their value on their wedding night.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 18:57

Okay wait, wait, wait, wait, what?

**Eric Schumacher** 19:01

Oh my goodness.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 19:01

That, uh, that is maybe not be a direct quote. I will look at my book and see. I'm pretty sure I'm summarizing what Sarah Mosliner said about James Dobson's teaching.

**Eric Schumacher** 19:11

No, it's totally believable. I remember reading a book by him in college where he said, if at all possible, seek to marry a virgin.

19:19

And I don't want to bash James Dobson. Again, all the people promoting these messages were speaking out in large part they were speaking out of fear, a hysteria over HIV and teen pregnancy. And so my goal is, of course, not to say that they were all that they had impure motives or anything, but this idea that women's worth is based on their virginity. There are a few problems with that.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 19:43

Uh, yeah.

**Eric Schumacher** 19:46

A few.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 19:46

Just a few. But I think, one of the first things I thought of during my research was how that speaks to the sexually abused.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 19:57

Yeah,

**Eric Schumacher** 19:58

Yeah, unpack that.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 19:59

Right. And The books said that basically the best gift, this is something all the women my age knew in the church was the best gift you could give your spouse is not a relationship with Christ, or, you know, a beautiful spirit or any of those things. The best gift you can give your spouse is your virginity on your wedding night. And this was this was not even something I ever questioned. That was just what I read

in all the books. And so then someone who has had their virginity stolen from them, what are they left to assume, but that they have less worth. One writer Sarah Mally said that when you give away parts of your heart, it's like a big chocolate cake with a slice out of it. And that's what that's who you are. So actually removing pieces from the whole. Just a very striking metaphor. And that's, as you guys know, that's not the worst metaphor. There are many, you know, chewed up gum, someone spitting in water, etc, etc. The rose, the infamous rose passed down the room and being crushed, and its petals all wilted and that is your worth as a woman, not only if you have had sex before marriage, but if you've kissed as you said, Elyse, the kiss first kiss was a big deal. Sara Mally even goes so far as to say that having deep conversations with men, before you're married to them is a problem. Rachel, one of the things that I know you're going to want to do is talk about how the purity culture has affected women who have been sexually abused. And I remember reading a testimony of a woman who had been sexually abused. In fact, she had been raped anally, and someone a pastor or someone in spiritual authority over her when she was reporting this incident said to her, Well, that's really not so bad, because you're still going to be a virgin on your wedding night.

**Eric Schumacher** 22:10

Tragic

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 22:10

And that that is what happens when women are viewed as their entire worth being bound up in whether or not they're a virgin.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 22:30

Well, and I think that's, that's why you, you two, wrote the book "Worthy", because we have to know where our worth comes from. And it's not from our sexuality. What this does, goodness, rhetoric like that dehumanizes women in so many ways and women, if you look at books written for men during purity culture, or something I noticed is that the rhetoric continually dehumanizes women because it treats women as well, they're about three things, three objects that it talks about, either as obstacles to purity, so, for single men obstacles to the pursuit of purity, as stumbling blocks, vixens or as sexual outlets and marriage. So in the book, every man's battle, it there's only a few categories for women, and there's not any category that would include sisters in Christ, co-heirs of the kingdom, partners in gospel ministry, or even fellow image bearers of God, women are either a temptation or they're your wife. And I think what's so sad is that you read these books and you start to understand why we have the the arguments and controversies we have in the church about things like the Billy Graham rule or the way women are treated. If men have been taught for years, that women are just walking temptations until you marry them, and then they they are your sexual outlet, rather than a partner. And someone to serve and love, then, in some ways, is it not a self fulfilling prophecy? When when we tell them that they are lust machines, that they are barely controllable. I don't believe that that's true, and I don't believe that that's biblical, but after a while, I think men start to believe that about themselves.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 24:19

Yeah, and that would probably be also, really would play into the blight of pornography. That we have in the church. If you know, and we were talking with Lisa Elred who works with Covenant Eyes, and she said that fully 50% of the men in church, view pornography fairly frequently. Listen, if a man has been

told if a young boy has been told, from the time that he's little, that women are obstacles to purity, they are vixens of temptation, and that in their marriage they are simply to be seen as their sexual outlets, that they're lust machines, then of course, they're going to look at women and view them as people to be commodified, objectified, and pornography of course fits into that.

25:27

And pornography will feel justified, if a man is told you cannot, how can a young man keep his way pure by finding a wife and having lots of sex with her? If that's the gospel,

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 25:39**

Wait, stop. Say that again. Do that, again.

**Eric Schumacher 25:43**

If the gospel that's preached is, how can a young man keep his way pure, by finding a young woman and having lots of sex with her, you know, by getting a wife, that's the way that he subdues the flesh and is sanctified. And he believes if you keep yourself a virgin, and get married, then you'll have the best sex there ever is, then, and that's what a wife is there for to be a sexual outlet. Then he gets married, and his wife can't have sex. There's painful sex. There's all sorts of things that can happen. And suddenly, she's not, sometimes pastors call it sexually available for her husband. And he's thinking, I deserve this? I earned it through waiting? This is God's plan for my purity. So since my wife isn't available to me, I'll find pictures of women online, or someone at the office.

**Rachel Joy Welcher 26:50**

I think that is such an important point you're making. When we treat sex as a right, something that you earn by good works, the good work of abstinence, it really messes up marriage, because then both spouses, even women. You enter marriage, viewing that person as a prize that you've earned. And I can't tell you how many people I interviewed who talked about the disappointment of married sex. And I don't say that to bother listeners. What what they meant was that their expectations were on the level of idolatry. So what I'm not saying is that married sex is bad. I think it's an incredible gift. But we know that we're embodied. And just as Eric said, a lot of couples deal with painful sex. Seasons where sex is not an option due to illness, due to depression, so many different factors. And if we, if we view our spouse as just a sexual outlet, or if we view sex or orgasm as a right, we will treat sex selfishly. And I think that's something that, you know, purity culture, the goal was to get teenagers to not have sex before marriage. But in doing, in trying to accomplish that one goal, we ended up preaching so many unbiblical messages about sex. And I think that so many people in my generation, are trying to disentangle themselves from the selfish views of sex. It's a huge problem. There's even a there's a condition called vaginismus that some women suffer from and specifically women who grew up in purity culture, it's been documented where they aren't able, they're physically unable to have intercourse in marriage. Their body doesn't allow them to, it's a muscle issue. And they have to go through extreme counseling to get to a place and a lot of that has to do with this whole light switch analogy that you can go from saying no, no, no to yes, all the sudden. And that your honeymoon has to be the night that you lose your virginity if you are a virgin. You know, there are just so many issues with this. And I think that we set Christian kids up to be disappointed when they got married, not because sex isn't good, but because it's not God.

**Eric Schumacher 29:11**

Yeah. And I think I think what Christians did, so you know, I graduated high school in 95. And I got into campus ministry and started being exposed to evangelical culture. Mid 90s, you know, through the early 2000s. And one of the things I noticed was as they emphasized abstinence, which is good and right before marriage, as they are often using these, so on the one hand, they use the stick like here's all the bad things that can happen and then they held up the carrot. And I think because they were scared, we were scared of coming across as sex is bad. We really emphasized it is good. It is so good. I remember speakers getting up before for college conferences, you know, in bragging about their sex life.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 30:05**

Their smokin' hot wife.

**Eric Schumacher 30:07**

And how it's so good once you get married,

**Rachel Joy Welcher 30:10**

right? Yeah, there's a whole book. So here's a book recommendation for you based on that, by Christine Gardner. It's called "Making Chastity Sexy". And she basically wrote an entire book, analyzing the different purity movements, True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, Passport to Purity, all those and discovered exactly what you're saying that we created these sexy carrots and dangled them in front of teenagers hoping to convince them one way or another, either through fear, or prosperity promises to get them to commit to abstinence. And you know what happens, and this is a whole other conversation. But one of the ways we did this in America was through government funding of abstinence programs. And this is a bit controversial, because a Christian might say, well, why wouldn't we want the government to give money to the promotion of abstinence. But what happened was that the government said, we can take this message to public schools, but you have to take Jesus out of it. So what happens for Christian kids, when you remove Jesus from the message of sexual purity, then what is the motivation to stay pure, it's for, for the personal gain, you will get. So again, sex becomes a very selfish pursuit. Purity becomes a selfish pursuit. And it gets all twisted up. The worldly messages, and the Christian messages get entangled, and we don't know how which is which.

**Eric Schumacher 31:46**

You know, that's, that's so interesting that we ended up both in the church in the world making sex, the end and the God. And, and as I think about even just the storyline of the Bible, and the gospel, and the New Testament epistles, you know, Paul, and Peter, as they encourage us to keep ourselves pure, it is, as we look forward to a resurrection from the dead in which we will reign and live with Jesus in a new heavens and a new earth. It is an overflow of love, for the relationship that we have with Christ. It's not husband's love your wives as Christ loved the church so that she will return sexual favors to you. It is a display of Christ glory, and the end towards which we're looking is a blessed marriage with our bridegroom. And that's not depicted in sexual terms that's depicted in a union relationship. I think sex can point towards that union with Christ, but sex isn't the end. It's, a shadow that is passing away as we wait for the true and better thing. And yeah, if our, if our aim is to merely keep our kids from sex, for

whatever reason, we'll probably keep them from Jesus. I wonder, then, what do you recommend we say to our kids?

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 33:23

That is that's the question, isn't it? What do we do instead, I have a chapter in my forthcoming book called, What Will We Tell Our Children? And I don't have all the answers. I'm not even a parent. But I've worked with high schoolers. And I think that we have to start by talking to them about sexuality as a God created good, where we remove the fear and shame of just being sexual beings. You know, it starts in Genesis and you two make this point in your book "Worthy", that sex existed before the fall. So sex is not you know, this idea that Eve was the first temptation, that sex is the first temptation is not accurate. And so we start by telling our kids that we prepare them for their sexuality, so that they know it's coming, and that they aren't going to be surprised by it or ashamed by it. We we do this so that they know that the questions that they have can be asked out loud. Too often our kids try to figure out the answers to embarrassing questions on their own. And this is often where they discover pornography. To be honest. Some of my students shared there was there's a huge problem with women and pornography now. And some of my students shared that they discovered pornography on through Pinterest and through Instagram. And so what happens is that if our children are ashamed of just having sexual feelings, sin breeds in the darkness and so what we do is we end up pushing them into the darkness with their fears and struggle. And then they don't feel as though these are things that can be said out loud. And so I think we have to start there by preparing them for their sexuality.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 35:11

That's, that's so good. And then and then to tell, to tell our daughters and our granddaughters, that their value does not come from anything that they do or don't do. That their value comes from the fact that they have been created in the image of God. And belong to Him.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 35:42

Exactly.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 35:43

And our value doesn't come from, you know, abstaining or, you know, because, you know, if you look through the women in the Bible, who you know, when we talk about so many of them in the book, nobody says, aren't they wonderful? They are virgins. So, yeah, I, yes, we need to do a better job. I think all of us moving this conversation forward. I also want to just put a little plug in. My daughter, Jessica Thompson and her brother, Joel Fitzpatrick, have a book called "Mom, Dad, What's Sex". And it really is trying to offer a way for parents to talk to their kids about sex in a in a gospel centered way.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 36:36

That's excellent. That's so so needed.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 36:39

So, Rachel, thank you.

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 36:43

Thank you so much for having me.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 36:46

This was so so wonderful. on so many levels, I know that we're going to have a lot of conversations that are going to start out of this. And I'm very glad for that. How can people how can people reach you or find out about you? And then tell us again, the title of your book, that will be out in the fall?

**Rachel Joy Welcher** 37:12

Yeah, so my book isn't out quite yet. But you can find me on Twitter at Racheljwelcher. And my book is coming out from Intervarsity Press. It's called "Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality. And I will be sure to tweet about it and post about it. I'm so excited. My goal with this book is to start the conversation not end it.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 37:36

Great.

**Eric Schumacher** 37:37

It's going to be good. Well, we hope you've enjoyed this conversation with Rachel. I know Elyse and I certainly have, and we hope that you'll share it with others, particularly with parents, we hope as Rachel indicated that this is a conversation starter. And so if you know of parents or pastors, or others who might benefit from this, please share the podcast and we hope that you will tune in next time as we welcome another guest to have respectful conversations about the value of women.