

## **Kirk Cameron**

*TV and film star Kirk Cameron began his career at the tender age of nine acting in commercials. He was fourteen when the popular sitcom Growing Pains took off, earning him two Golden Globe nominations, an adoring worldwide fan base and the reputation of teen heartthrob. But by the age of 17, the self-described atheist knew that something was missing. His 2008 autobiography Still Growing tells of his subsequent journey to faith. Kirk talked with Servant about success, passion, and his hit movie Fireproof.*

Servant: We're at a place called Prairie Bible College in Canada.

Kirk: Yes. My sister used to live in Calgary. Her husband played for the Calgary Flames.

S: Valerie Bure?

K: Yeah. They live in Florida now, he's retired. They're doing just great.

S: The Flames are out of the playoffs, so they're golfing.

K: Yeah.

S: I've been reading a little bit about your story and apparently you were once a confirmed atheist. What changed your mind? What brought you to faith?

K: We know it's only the Spirit of God that can draw an atheist out of his blind faith in atheism into faith in Jesus Christ but I didn't realize that was happening at the time. I was 17 years old, on top of the world, on a hit television show, making lots of money, famous, had everything I wanted. But questions were gnawing at me, questions like: have I really attained the most there is to achieve in life? Do I have anything else to look forward to? I've already arrived at the things that most people want in their lifetime. I also wondered if there was something that happens after you die. Could there be an afterlife? That led to questions like, is there a God? How do you know?

S: What did you do?

K: I dabbled a little in the New Age Movement and then I met someone who took me to church and I heard the gospel for the very first time. I heard about sin and about God's character, his holiness, his justice and his judgment. I also heard about God's grace toward sinners and Christ and the cross and repentance and faith. I had a lot of questions that some people did answer for me and that drove me to the point where I could believe it was intellectually possible that there might be a God and that I had been fooled by my blind faith in my science teachers who told me the opposite. And so I prayed for the first time while I was sitting in my sports car at the side of the road and asked God if he was real if he'd reveal himself to me and make me the man he wanted me to be. That simple little prayer opened my heart to the things of God. I began reading the Bible and was so captivated by the message of the Scriptures and by Jesus himself that I embraced the gospel. God began changing me from the inside into the person he created me

to be. I began to love God and wanted to turn from sin and live a life that honors him.

S: You were 17. Were you on *Growing Pains* at the time?

K: Yes, I was.

S: How did that affect your career?

K: Quite dramatically. I was not doing and saying the same things as before I was a follower of Christ so my friends thought it was a little strange that I wasn't diving into the same kinds of jokes and activities. They would accuse me of being part of some religious cult or having fallen off the cliff of religious lunacy. And that was difficult. It was also hard because in Hollywood you get labeled as some sort of 'born-again' nut. When that happens you're trying to defend yourself and stand for what's right and not compromise and at the same time you don't want to unnecessarily offend people. It was a struggle and it was a growth time. God was really developing my convictions and character for things that would be coming in the future.

S: Were you fairly vocal about your faith? Did people know that it was faith in Christ specifically as opposed to just some kind of religion?

K: They equated the two. If you were involved in Buddhism or Hinduism or something, oh, that's kind of cool, kind of different. But if you're a born-again Christian that means you're a fundamentalist, judgmental, David Koresh-fire and brimstone stone type. People weren't sure just what was going on. As much as I'd try to tell them, some would listen, but others would just be so concerned. They didn't understand. The carnal man does not understand the things of the Spirit because they're spiritually discerned and he can't know them. Their mind is at war with God because they love their sin and so they can't fully embrace what I had embraced without humbling themselves before God. That can be difficult and strain relationships. At 17 it's hard to process all that. You don't quite understand what's going on. You've found what you think is the greatest thing in the world and your friends think it's terrible.

S: Did you learn anything from those early years that has helped you in the way you deal with people in Hollywood now?

K: I would say I learned through the years that you can really only change one person. God doesn't give us jurisdiction over other people's hearts so I can't force my beliefs onto someone. I can't change them no matter how articulately I explain the Gospel or my own belief. The most powerful and authentic thing I can do is to be who God has made me, to have a sense of personal conviction that I don't compromise and live those things out in every area of my life. That's another way of saying you don't need to be obnoxious and offensive in the way you share your faith. Scripture tells us that the Gospel is an offense all on its own and so all we need to do is live authentic lives as followers of Jesus Christ and leave the changing of other people up to God.

S: Do you think there's a place in Hollywood for Christians who are more quiet and reserved about their faith than perhaps you were or are?

K: Sure, I think there's a place for Christians anywhere, regardless of their personality type, and definitely in Hollywood. It's not the loud-mouth Christians who get everything done for the kingdom; it's the ones who are not just hearers of the Word but doers of the Word. Some people are going to be quiet, shy, but their roots have gone down deep into the Word of God and they're building up the kingdom in different ways, living out their faith, sharing with people more in a one-one, private setting rather than in a public one. People who are lifting up marriage and family through movies and television or directing or writing or whatever. They have a quiet witness but their works speak loudly.

S: Do you ever view Hollywood as a mission field, a 'lost people group' that we like to watch and criticize but would never think to pray for?

K: Definitely. We see this unreached people group who live in great darkness, they practice great wickedness and most people won't dare try to reach them. And if you do, they will either try to convert you to their kingdom or just cut you down completely. We do need to reach them. And there are Christians here. But the great tension is that if you want to make a living, there's a fair amount of 'kissing up' that you have to do. It's all about who you know—and you don't want to burn those bridges. But speaking openly and candidly about Jesus Christ will separate and divide. Jesus told us that. So that becomes the great tension for Christians in Hollywood: can I be honest about who I am and what I believe even if it means that I blow an opportunity?

S: You've said that you put God first, then family, then career. What has that cost you?

K: A lot of heartache and headache. When your priorities are in place it makes life a lot simpler. When you know who you are and what you believe you can say, Look, this is my number one priority; does it honor the Lord and advance his kingdom in some way? Two, is this going to be beneficial for my family and build up my marriage and my home, and if the answers to either of those questions are no, then it's not even an option for my career. So that may have cost me a few movie roles, but I don't care because God has promised to bless and protect those who honor him. The results of the convictions God has given me have been a marriage that has lasted 18 years and is just getting better every day, six beautiful children, a ministry called The Way of the Master where we're able to teach Christians how to share the gospel, and a wonderful television and radio program. We just finished *Fireproof*, a movie on marriage that was the number one grossing independent movie of 2008 and my wife and I are about to launch a new marriage and family ministry this year. So the Lord has abundantly blessed me and my family.

S: How did you meet Chelsea? Was she on the set of *Growing Pains*?

K: She was. I actually met her for the first time as an actress on the set of *Full House*. My sister was on the program. We met up again on *Growing Pains* when she was cast to play Mike Siever's girlfriend.

S: How long did you date?

K: I was weak in the knees the first time I saw her. It was probably about a year that we were dating before I asked Chelsea to marry me.

S: Why did you and Chelsea choose adoption?

K: Chelsea herself is an adopted child and I think it's always been a dream of hers to adopt children and give them the same gift of a home that she was given as an orphan. We decided that we would adopt some kids if the Lord allowed and make our whole family come together through adoption only. We weren't planning to have natural children. After we adopted four kids we discovered that Chelsea was going to have a baby and that was such a wonderful experience that we decided to do that again.

S: What's the standard response when people hear you have six children?

K: They freak out. They say, "I've got 2 and I can barely handle it!" Do you have children?

S: I have three. They're 19, 20 and 22 and I am so blessed. They love the Lord and I don't think it gets better than that.

K: Praise the Lord.

S: You've had much of what culture views as success. Have you ever thought much about what defines 'success'?

K: I would consider myself a success when I am fully devoted to the Lord with my whole heart. I was just reading in Psalm 119 today where David talks about the man who walks in the ways of the Lord and seeks him with his whole heart. As long as we're in this human body, a repository of the sinful nature, and that stuff still clings to us we'll forever be longing to be more wholly devoted to the Lord. So I think success certainly is not measured by how many dollars you have in the bank or how many interviews and TV shows or how many awards you get. When you're in heaven it's measured by are you going to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant" and how many people you helped move along in their journey toward the Lord Jesus. That's what success is all about. I just had a meeting yesterday with Columbia Pictures with the Vice President of Production. He told me, "*Fireproof* did great, we want to make some more of these faith kind of movies." I get home and I think to myself, it's great to do movies, it's exciting but when I really sit down and read God's Word, he's not really calling me to be an actor. I don't think God calls you to be a beautician or an actress or a dancer or a plumber or a carpenter. I think he calls you to his Son Jesus Christ to live a life that honors and glorifies him. He's given you gifts and talents and if you want to be a dancer or a plumber, great, as long as you can do that and use those platforms to glorify the Lord with your whole heart. So making movies is not my deal. That's not where I'm going to find success. I'll find it by walking with the Lord, serving him with my whole heart. And that means being the kind of husband that loves his wife the way Christ loves his Bride, and loving and leading my children like a good father and spreading the gospel to every creature that I can, helping others along that journey. Maybe that will be through a movie like *Fireproof*—that was great. But maybe it's not. Maybe all that's done. The Lord knows.

S: Why did the story line of the movie capture your attention?

K: Because this firefighter and his wife represent millions of marriages—starts out great, hot and sizzling, romantic and wonderful and within ten years they're like two disconnected people living in a boarding house with no relationship. And if there is a relationship it's antagonistic. They can't even stand to be around each other. Getting on each other's nerves, never looking out for the other one and fighting more than they are talking. Never laughing, never enjoying being around each other and that's the state of so many marriages. You put kids in that situation and the stakes are even higher. So I knew people would relate to it and it gave the one and only answer—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The guy can't fix his marriage even with a father who loves him giving great advice. The thing that changes the firefighter is the gospel. God changes the heart of the man and brings him to the cross. Then, when his heart has been humbled and changed and he's living to honor the Lord, now marriage takes on meaning and significance and it's an opportunity for him to demonstrate love to someone who does not deserve to be treated so well. But that's the message of the cross. Christ laid down his life and died for us while we were undeserving sinners and I think that's the hope that everyone needs to have—it begins at the cross. The heart of the problem in any area of life is the problem of the heart. It's wicked and deceitful, sinful by nature and we cannot get anything right until we center onto the path of life and blessing that starts at the cross. That's what the movie was about and that's what I loved about it.

S: My wife and I watched it last night. Is it true that no-one took a salary for the movie?

K: It is. Everyone except me was a member of the church there in Georgia. There were no other professional actors. Even the crew was constantly changing and revolving because they were community people who would take time off work. It was a complete volunteer effort except for a handful of expert technicians to operate the equipment.

S: It's a good story, but you can tell it was made for God, not for Oscar. Do you ever dream of making movies with this kind of message but a higher budget?

K: I've never really dreamed of doing it myself but it would be great—we'd all love to.

S: What would that take?

K: Well, a few donors who would come up with the money or somebody in Hollywood who would just step up to the plate. To make a movie for 10, 20 million dollars is no big deal. They do it all the time for far more than that. It's just a question of can they get the money back. Because this is a new type of film everyone is very cautious. But because it did very well, I'm sure next time instead of a \$500,000 budget it will probably be 2 or 3 million.

S: Did your conversation with Columbia kind of give you hope that this might be an option?

K: It's a possibility. But I think it's a good idea to know who the other believers are in this business. This guy claimed to be a Christian himself so it was a positive and encouraging meeting.

S: It seems to me when you see the success of a film like this and even Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, it must soak in at some point where they realize that there's an audience out there and it's worth catering to them. I hope a lot more of it will happen. I wanted to ask you about the topic of the movie. The average Hollywood marriage seems to last about 16 seconds these days if you read the tabloids. You've been married 18 years. On a practical level, what has kept you together?

K: Without God's hand of restraining grace, all of us act so selfishly. Ultimately God's hand of blessing and favor has been on our marriage. That's not to say that God has blessed our marriage more than others because God hates divorce and wants all marriages to succeed. I think the thing that Chelsea and I have done that has kept our marriage together is our individual love for Christ that causes us to want to honor him and do those things that are important to him and not do those things that he hates.

S: Life Skills International claims that 50% of non-believers experience divorce, among believers it's 53%, and in cultures where marriages are arranged it's almost non-existent. Have you given any thought to why that could be?

K: I think we've got it all wrong. Couples sit in some of our churches and listen to a shallow gospel where there's no sin and no sacrifice. There are some well-known preachers who probably love the Lord but they preach this easy gospel, "You've got a champion in you and you can have God on your side too." They need to preach the gospel of Christ crucified and alive in you. Instead, it's "Say this little prayer and you'll go to heaven and be a child of God." That is an adulteration of the gospel message because what happens is people are buying into a Christianity that promises them the world—"Hey, I've said this prayer and asked Jesus into my heart and now God is going to bless me and everything's supposed to work out great." But they know nothing of repenting of sin. You can ask Jesus into your heart as much as you want—though the Bible never tells us to do that—but if you're not making war against your sin and loving Jesus with an obedient love, desiring to do what he says, going to church all your life and asking Jesus into your heart fifteen times is not going to save you from hell or save your marriage from falling apart. We need the gospel of Christ crucified and alive. I think what's happening is that we have a weak, anemic message being preached in the church today where there's no sin and no sacrifice. Because of that, people don't know anything about what Jesus said.

S: How does that relate to marriage?

K: Jesus said if you want to walk with me you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Those are the things that are inextricably linked to being a Christian: self-denial, cross-bearing and submission to Christ as king. Today's Christianity doesn't want to touch those things with a ten-foot pole. It's 'do

whatever you want and Jesus will be your buddy'. He's kind of your co-pilot to make sure you don't crash and burn at the end. Then you have trouble in your marriage and people bail just like the world. And it's even worse because they were promised too much from God and when they don't get it they think either God is not real or he's let them down and they chuck the whole thing out as a big fraud. Whereas if you have people in religious communities where there's a real message of the holiness of God, the judgment and the grace of God and that faith produces obedience and real devotion and serving God and loving him with all your heart, then the stakes are high and you and the community have invested in helping one another. In arranged marriages families actually come together with all of their history and heritage and there's so much going into it that it has a much better potential for success. I think we could learn a lot from those kinds of cultures.

S: It seems to me that the theme of *Fireproof* is that of sacrifice. Jesus went to the cross, am I willing to go that far?

K: That's what Jesus said, deny yourself and take up your cross. When Jesus took up his cross there was only one place he was going—he was going up the hill to die. He wasn't coming back. He's as good as dead. That's what we're to be as Christians. I am crucified with Christ, paying the price of dying to self.

S: How do you want to be remembered, Kirk?

K: I'd like to be remembered as a wholly devoted follower of Jesus, a good husband, a good father. That takes a lifetime of hard work. For the last 20 years I've worked hard at developing a level of trust with the family audience and it wasn't easy to do. It cost me lots of money and career opportunities. But I feel like it's paying off now in other ways and with different opportunities...and to top it off, my name's written in heaven. The high cost of following Jesus on the narrow road may look totally backward to some, but the infinite value and adventure has been thrilling beyond my wildest dreams.