

ABUNDANT LIFE

You Were Made for More



BY: SAMANTHA GALLO

Topics Addressed in **Abundant Life: You Were Made for More**

Engaging Teens Partnering with Parents Equipping Volunteers

<i>Module Name</i>	<i>Teaching Name & Message</i>
Rooted: Knowing and Believing Who You Are	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Identity - Only by knowing <i>whose</i> you are can you know who <i>you</i> are. 2) Love v. Infatuation - Culture taints how we understand love, but real love can only be understood by looking to God, our source of love. God, Guys, and Girls - Our relationship with God needs to be right before we can get our romantic relationships with each other right!
Let's Get Real	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Social Media: It's Not What You Think - Social media can be a dangerous place unless we filter it through a Biblical worldview. 2) Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Real Relationships - The root of pornography usage is a tragic misunderstanding of our identities and what relationships are meant to be. 3) Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection - Rejection should never define us. This lesson is for those struggling with suicidal thoughts, depression, & anxiety.
Purity: Rethinking, Reorienting, or Restarting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date - The term "dating" isn't used in the Bible, so how do we know what dating with honor and purity looks like? 2) A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story - God cares about our hearts, not the technicalities of our virginity, and calls us to a greater vision for our sexuality. 3) Marriage: Why It Matters - Marriage has a purpose that is far beyond our own happiness.
An Overflowing Cup	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Deeper Need - Is following Jesus worth our sacrifice? 2) Why Does God Give Us Rules? - The truths of the Gospel support the commands of the Gospel, which are for our good. 3) Love Does - What do you want your life & relationships to be known for?
We Were Made for the "Not Yet"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How Does Trauma Affect Relationships? - We all have traumas that have shaped our perspective of the world and what happens around us – which is why we don't live like we are fearfully and wonderfully made. 2) Attractions, Orientations, and Identity – The Biblical view of sexuality, which we'll cover in this teaching, does not call us to be straight - rather, it calls us to be holy. 3) Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It - God made us for community, for relationship, to be with each other, and it's about time we really understand why.

Abundant Life: You Were Made for More now has a complimentary podcast featuring author & host Sammie Gallo with a variety of guests, discussing relevant issues for teens, parents, and youth leaders, such as identity, relationships, sexuality, dating, & all the things in between. New episodes are posted every other week. Subscribe to the **You Were Made for More** podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, or BuzzSprout.

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ABUNDANT LIFE

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VISION

The vision for *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More* is based off three core tenants:

- 1) **Gospel-Centered:** Each student should receive the Good News, no matter what the theme of the module being taught. The character of Jesus should be evident and shine through the overarching message about healthy relationships, sex, identity, and life issues.
- 2) **Relevant Teaching:** Each module should be unpacking a cultural and relational topic that our teenagers are hearing about through their schools, friends, and the media. Our goal is to refocus their hearts on the Truth about life and who they are.
- 3) **Partnership with Communities:**
 - Why is this important? The goal is for youth leaders and parents to firmly believe and support the mission of why this material needs to be taught to their teenagers by the Church. *When I completed an informal survey, yielding 98 responses, only 9.3% of students said that they had had any conversations regarding sex/healthy relationships in their youth groups. Of the respondents, 68% said that churches should most definitely be talking about these topics MORE than they already are.*
 - Youth leaders are the ones engaging with their students on a weekly basis – diving into their messes and running the race with them, teaching them the Gospel. Our hope is that this curriculum will provide a solid base and support system for youth leaders, help them have difficult conversations with students, and equip them to educate and minister about healthy relationships and hot cultural topics.

Welcome to Abundant Life!

Dear Parents and Leaders,

I'm confident that the Lord is going to use the teachings in this curriculum to transform your teenager's perspective about everything ranging from identity, friendships, and relationships, to culturally relevant issues like social media, suicide, and pornography.

When writing this curriculum, I started thinking about what it would look like for the youth of the Anglican church to be fully living their lives for Christ... without doubt that what He says is really what is best for them. That's the vision. Our hope is that as parents and youth leaders, this curriculum will provide Gospel-centered, relevant teachings that will pave the way for better relationships all around.

The vision is as follows:

- A church communion in which every teenager knows who they are in Christ, so much so that they can live that out in their lives, creating healthy relationships and willingly committing to purifying sexual choices.
- That teenagers who regularly attend youth groups would feel comfortable having conversations about relationships and sex with trusted and equipped adults, who are actively involved in their spiritual development.
- Teens within our churches would come to understand and fully believe in the sanctity of human life – their lives, others' lives, and every life – so that they may be ignited to act justly for the weak and vulnerable in accordance with the Gospel.
- Every student would believe that they were made for far more than what the culture tells them they are.

On top of parents, youth leaders are the ones engaging with students on a weekly basis – diving into their messes, running the race with them, and teaching them what a life with Jesus looks like. The goal of this curriculum is to provide a solid base and support system for youth leaders, to help them have difficult conversations with students and develop a solid, biblical foundation on which they can build upon.

Anglicans for Life, the publisher of the curriculum *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*, is a Christ-centered ministry that provides educational and pastoral resources to churches in the Anglican Communion, to help them bear witness to the sanctity of life.

“The Talk”

Let's just get this out there: We all dread “the talk.” The talk that no parent looks forward to, but all parents know is critical. The sex talk reduces most of us to our middle-school-selves, all tongue-tied, darty-eyed, and fidgety. The talk is something parents desperately want to do well, but perhaps lack confidence in doing, while fearing failure on our part will deliver a debilitating blow to the healthy development of our children.

As your children age, it's my hope that you've had a basic conversation with them already, about relationships and how sexuality fits into God's design of relationships, setting the stage for them to have more mature talks as they grow (Check out Harvest USA's FREE resource online, “What To Say and When To Say It”). But, why start talking about relationships when they are

young? And, more importantly, why continue talking about them when it can be just plain awkward?

Did you know that in today's digital age the average kid has their first encounter with pornography at 11 years old? Eleven years old. That's not a typo, friends. In fact, some of the most recent studies are reporting that age is dropping to as low as eight years old. You don't need me to tell you how drastically different our world is now than it was 25 years ago. We could choose to lock away our students until they are thirty, or we can give them the knowledge that will hopefully shape their sexual integrity into something that reflects both well-informed decision making and unrelenting self-respect.

The harsh reality is that if you don't talk to your kids about their identity and how that identity shapes how they interact with the world, somebody else will. Churches, if we aren't partnering with parents in continuing these conversations in a way that is glorifying to God in a safe place where they can wrestle with questions and doubts, we are not being the voice of Truth that we are called to be in their lives.

Relationships are good, in fact, they are VERY good, because God made us for relationship with Him. But relationships are only good when they are done well, looking upward at Jesus and recognizing that true intimacy comes from a relationship with the Creator. Only then, are we able to go into the world and form life-giving relationships with other people.

I hope that you hear my heart in the mission of Abundant Life, and you'll take full advantage of the Scriptural outline that it provides. I encourage you to personalize the teachings with your own stories, your own style, and your own quirks. As you know, the more real you are, the better your students will connect with you. My stories are reflective of my experience leading youth ministry, and most are reflective of teachings I've seen to be necessary from my experience with students who are struggling with these issues in real time.

Attached to each module are also marketing materials for you to use. You'll see a graphic for each module, which you can use to advertise on social media. You'll also see a graphic for every teaching, so you can use those as the introduction slides of your teachings (if you're into technology) or for additional advertisement purposes. You'll also see an email template that you can create in MailChimp or Constant Contact to send to your parent contacts. Finally, there is a drop card template that you can print on postcards to hand out at youth group the week before, for students to take home and share with their parents. These promotional materials are also a great way to get the larger church congregation involved in what the youth of your church are learning about and to remind them to be in prayer, that these efforts would be used for God's glory.

To God be the Glory,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sammie". The script is cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'S'.

Sammie Gallo

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MISSION

*I have come that they may have life and have it to ABUNDANTLY.
John 10:10*

Anglicans for Life is a Christ-centered ministry that provides educational and pastoral resources to churches in the Anglican Communion, to help them bear witness to the sanctity of life. ABUNDANT LIFE is a youth-centered initiative of Anglicans for Life with the goal of educating teenagers about relational and culturally-relevant topics through Scriptural teaching and partnership with parents and youth leaders.

My heart yearns for teenagers to know that they are valued, loved, and created for purpose. Currently, middle school and high school students are being told who they are by society, their friends, social media, and all the voices that are telling them what they should or shouldn't do and who they should or shouldn't be. The Sanctity of Human Life, the core driving force of Anglicans for Life, begins with us teaching the next generation that their value is in Jesus Christ. There is so much glory in the abundant life that is freely offered to them, but they must first know where they can find it.

This curriculum is developed to educate students about healthy relationships, sex education, and decision-making, while also covering topics like pornography addiction, identity, social media usage, loneliness, depression, and suicide, and then ultimate redemption in Jesus. My experience in youth ministry shows that when teenagers know what they are worth and whose they are, they will be more inclined to live for Jesus – following His commandments and walking in His ways – and this is a comprehensive curriculum that helps to guide them in that commitment.

The worst thing our culture does for young people is to water down the issue of sexuality. We misunderstand teenagers when we assume that they are just immature, physically and emotionally, in how they think about relationships. Beneath the physiological realities resides a deep, human desire for connection. We were made for relationships. Relationships are good, in fact, they are GREAT! But, only when we recognize that ultimate intimacy comes in the relationship with God. We must get that relationship right. Teens, like everyone else, struggle with loneliness and isolation, and they desire intimate companionship. When we fail to help young people navigate how sex and relationships fit into the broader category of life, we are failing the God who created relationships to be deep, bountiful gifts for us.

The Sanctity of Life begins when we understand our own worth and what the purpose of life is. **Then, and only then, can abundant life begin.**

Hey, guys! I'm excited to share my story with y'all, the heart behind this project, and I hope one day I get the opportunity to do it in person. When you meet me, the first thing you probably notice is that I have some sort of accent that doesn't really match up with anyone you've ever met before. When you get to know me, you probably will learn that I'm more than willing to talk about why my voice is the way that it is, because it's crazy-unique and is a great testimony to God's anointing and calling on my life.

I have an identical twin sister; we developed Cytophasia very early on in our development. If you don't know what that is, it's a twin-language that sounds like jibberish in which the twins only communicate and understand one another. It occurs in 50% of twins, identical or fraternal, but normally fades away during the key linguistic developmental years, around 2-5 years of age. Of course, Meesh and I decided to be different, and we were in the rare group of twins (2%) that wanted nothing more to keep our secret language.

I didn't learn to speak English until I was five, making it my second language. I went through years of extensive speech therapy to learn what was supposed to be my native language, and my accent today is a result of how I first learned to speak.

Growing up, as I'm sure you can imagine, life was #rough. Meesh and I were different – not better or worse than anyone else, just different. That made me a target. Without going into too much detail, let's just say that words have power. You know that. The words of others deeply affected who I was growing up, who I came to see myself as, and what I thought I was worth. I never believed that I was good enough. And unfortunately, a lot of experiences, even today, as a grown woman, continually reiterate that belief. There are times when I still dread meeting new people, because I know what the first question they'll ask me is going to be. There are still times when I want to hide what it is that makes me different. BUT, the good news is, Jesus met me in that place when I was 18 years old, and He gave my story meaning, purpose, and value.

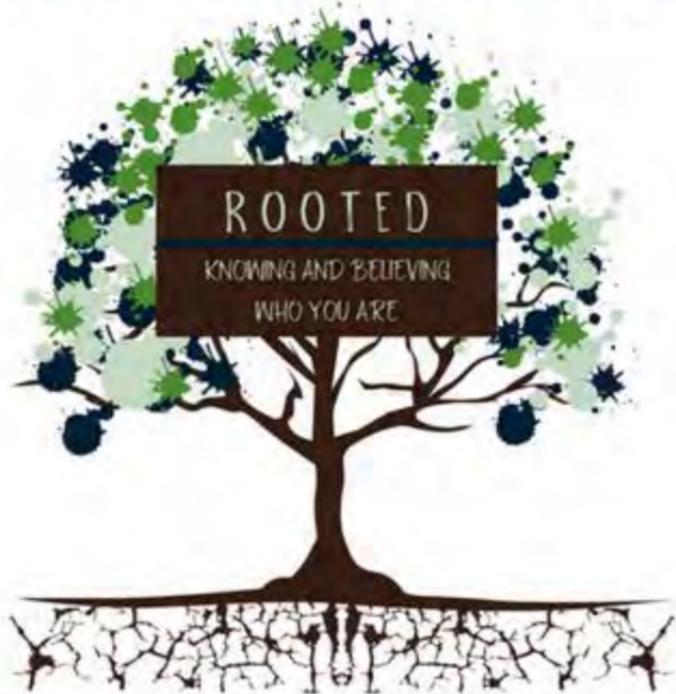
I've learned what it means to own my story. A large part of my career involves me speaking to large groups on a regular basis. If you would have told me I'd do that when I was in high school, I would have vomited on you. The idea of speaking up in a group of more than 5 people used to terrify me. I used to pray that I wouldn't be called on to answer a question in class. Now, speaking allows me to share my story, letting people know that they are indeed valued, seen, and loved. The Lord has written a beautiful narrative in my heart, showing me that who He created me to be is perfect.

My story makes me who I am. I can say with great certainty and absolute honesty that I did not fully know who I was before I met Jesus, but I often fall back to the place I was before knowing my true worth... desperately searching for affection & digging wells that I hope will fill me up, but never seem to do the trick. It's in those moments that I'm reminded why God has sown in my heart the topic of identity and a calling to youth ministry.

Every teenager needs to hear that they are worthy, that they are loved, and that they are more than enough, yet never too much. Every teenager deserves to know that they were made for more than the world tells them.



NEW MESSAGE SERIES!



WHEN WE FOCUS TOO MUCH ON WHO THE WORLD SAYS WE SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T BE, WE TEND TO LOSE SIGHT OF WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT US. IF WE'RE HONEST, MAYBE WE KNOW WHAT HE SAYS, BUT DON'T REALLY BELIEVE IT IN OUR HEARTS. MAYBE WE'VE BUILT OUR IDENTITY ON SAND, INSTEAD OF ON SOLID ROCK. JOIN US THIS MONTH AS WE TAKE A HARD LOOK AT HOW WE'VE ROOTED OUR SOULS AND HOW IT AFFECTS HOW WE LIVE.



ROOTED

KNOWING AND BELIEVING
WHO YOU ARE

Importance of Module 1

“Rooted: Knowing and Believing Who You Are” is the first module for a very distinct reason. The three teachings in this module are based around setting the scene for deeper conversations about issues that have the ability to penetrate our identity, so much so, that sometimes we allow them to define us. First, we talk about the importance of identity, then talk about the distinguishable difference between love and infatuation. Finally, we dive into “God, Guys, and Girls” and getting our relationship right with God before we get our relationships with others right. Who we think we are really affects how we live into other relationships.

Theme

When you know whose you are, you begin to truly believe who you are. The world will ALWAYS remind you of what you are not, and you must constantly remind yourself who you eternally and innately are in Christ. When you come to believe your identity in Jesus is ALL that defines you, it changes everything. It changes how you live, what you believe, and how you do relationships with others. God's spoken your identity over you before you've even realized it; let's talk about how to live into that identity and allow it to transform our lives.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTION: Who are you? Does what you do determine who you are? Does what other people think of you determine who you are? Does what you are good at or what you're not good at determine who you are? In a world full of opinions of what is right and what is wrong, how do we know who we are?

INTRO:

In seventh grade, I decided I wanted to play basketball. I was a chubby lil thing and I'd never played before in my life, but I was convinced that if I could practice my booty off for the next two years, I would be able to make the JV team in high school. So, I spent the next two years training and playing my best game. The problem was, my best wasn't good enough for the JV coach. I distinctly remember knowing that I was the worst person trying out for JV during team workouts – you see, I'm a distance runner, not a fast sprinter. I fell behind during our daily suicide circuits and I still wasn't up to par with making as many free shots as I should have been. When tryouts week was over, my coach called me into the gym and simply said: "I'm sorry, Sammie, you didn't make the team this year. You just aren't good enough." Ouch.

"You just aren't good enough." Those words would come to define the rest of my high school years.

TENSION:

You see, the tension that results from not knowing who we are isn't fun. The tension that comes when we feel like a failure, when we feel rejected, when we feel slightly less than someone else, is life-altering. The question we have to ask ourselves is: Who am I? Does what you do determine who you are? Does what other people think of you determine who you are? Does what you are good at or what you're not good at determine who you are? In a world full of opinions of what is right and what is wrong, how do we know who we are?

First, let's start with the basics. Everyone has asked that all important question of: who am I? And asking why you are here is the fundamental question that determines your worldview. The theory of evolution says that human beings "evolved" or matured from lower order animals, who matured from lower order organisms. In this worldview, everything comes from the same origin by naturalistic chance. The other worldview that the Bible argues is creation; creationists believe that God created the planets, the solar system, the earth, and everything that is in it, including humans. God created everything. My point in telling you this is that, if you believe in the Bible, you **MUST** believe what it says about creation. You must believe that God doesn't make mistakes, that He creates everything with a purpose, because that's what He says – especially when it comes to people. The key to creation is that God breathed His life into us, something that He didn't do with animals, plants, the land, or the sea.

Genesis 1:27 says: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." And then in Genesis 2:7 we see Him literally pouring His spirit into us...

Genesis 2:7 says: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

As marvelous as the rest of His creation is, He made a point to set us apart. He made a point to set humanity apart. That's important. It's important because if you believe in creation, you have to believe that what God says about you is true, even if sometimes you don't feel like it. The challenge is to believe that your life has purpose and is valuable, even when the world tells you it doesn't. Over the course of our lives, each person's identity is being formed and shaped through individual experiences, relationships, culture, media, and the world around us. We are constantly seeking to define who we are in any way we can. Often, we feel the pressure to define ourselves through our jobs, the friend group we're a part of, financial status, successes, grades, appearance, and what other people say about us. Sometimes we base our identity in something that isn't good. We find our identity in something that bullies at school say is different, weird, and wrong about us. And, slowly but surely, that thing starts to become who we are and what we see when we look at ourselves in the mirror.

I let that basketball coaches view of me decide who I was. I began to really believe that not only was I not good enough at basketball, but I also wasn't good enough at anything. I wasn't a good enough daughter. I wasn't a good enough friend. I wasn't a good enough student. And the list goes on. You can fill in the blanks with your "I'm just not _____ enough" statements. We all have them.

But what happens to our identity when we experience failure? Or lose a friend or boyfriend or girlfriend? Or fail a test and aren't able to bring that term grade back up to where our parents insist our grades need to be? The very foundation of our identity is shaken and altered, resulting in us hustling to define ourselves by something or someone else. How do we shift the cultural view of our identity to a biblical view of identity?

TRUTH:

If you need a reminder tonight of what the Bible is all about, or maybe this is your first time really hearing the message of the Bible, it often is broken down in four simple steps:

First, creation: Look at Psalm 139. *"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*

Second, the fall: In Galatians 5:19-20 we read about our tendency toward sin, breaking our relationship with our Heavenly Father, and leaving us in desperate need of saving... *“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, and selfish ambition.”*

Then comes, redemption: John 3:16 displays the beauty of God sending us a Savior... *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

And finally, restoration: Revelation 21:3-5 reminds us of the beauty of what is to come when we believe and place our lives in the Truth: *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* And he who was seated on the throne said, *“Behold, I am making all things new.”*

The bottom line of the Gospel is this: You aren't worthless, you are worth it.

A great example of this in the Bible is the woman at the well in the Gospel of John. I can guarantee you that the woman at the well felt many things that we feel today: Ashamed. Lonely. Mocked. Embarrassed. Hated even. I'd argue that she even got to the point where she believed all those things about herself. I wish I knew this woman's name, but we aren't told it in the Bible. I wish I could bring her up and interview her for y'all. In one conversation with Jesus, her life was changed. I want you to know a Jesus who in one encounter could change your life. Let's open up our Bibles to John chapter 4.

Although we don't know her name, we know that this woman was an outcast. The story begins at noon on a hot day. Ask yourself: why would someone choose to go to the well to gather water at the time when the sun is the hottest? Because she was an outcast. She didn't want to have to deal with the snickering or the mocking she would get if she went when all the other women did. See, back at the time when she lived, I imagine she went to collect water as part of her daily routine, but on this day, her trip to the well would be different.

Jesus, tired from traveling, chose a sensible rest stop – a well outside of town – while waiting for His disciples to go into town for food. In the Scripture, we see the woman appear at the well where Jesus was resting, and Jesus asks her: “Will you give me a drink?” Now, this is weird for two reasons. Listen to this... Jesus was a Jew – the woman was a Samaritan. In that culture, Jews weren't supposed to speak to Samaritans. They weren't cool with each other. Jesus was also a man – and she was a woman. It was strange for men to address women when their husbands weren't with them. Remember that.

The rest of their conversation goes like this: *The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* "Sir," the woman said, *"you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"* Jesus answered, *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* The woman said to him, *"Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

Then, Jesus says *"Go get your husband."* The first time I read this, I was like, yo Jesus, that's random... but it is actually SO SIGNIFICANT. He asks her the question because he wants to dive deeper. He wants to let her know that he sees her and knows her. Even though he already knows the answer to the question, he's just trying to connect with what's really in her heart. The woman replies that she has no husband. Then Jesus says *"You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."* I can only imagine the woman's emotions at that moment. She was probably raging inside - all of the shame that she had pushed down was just brought out into the light, pointed out by a random guy she met at the well. See, back in that day, women couldn't divorce their husbands - so the fact that she had five husbands, means that they either died, or they divorced her. Girlfriend has to have major rejection issues going on. She quickly changes the subject of the conversation, which I see a lot of us do. When someone starts to get too personal, we shift the conversation and divert the topic to anything but ourselves. There are some topics that make me so uncomfortable and vulnerable that I want to crawl out of my skin and get as far away from the conversation as I can. The woman goes as far as doing her best to shut Jesus down. She says: *"When the Messiah comes, He will explain everything to us."*

After more conversation, the disciples returning from lunch. The woman at the well finally comes to understand that this man was indeed Christ - the Son of the Living God.

To understand why this encounter is so significant, we have to dive deeper. She was filling her water jar, which represents her heart, with something that could never fill her or fully satisfy her. Jesus dove into the depths of her heart, met her in the middle of her daily life, at a place she often went, just to show her how deeply He had known her heart and where she had been looking for love – in her relationships with men. She was recycling one after another, and it wasn't working. It was not working! Not only does Jesus reveal what's going on in the depths of her heart, He reveals who He is, which is the core of who we are. We can only know our identity as deeply loved sons and daughters when we know the God that made us and chases after us.

This is the kicker... when she learned that Jesus was right in front of her, offering her eternal life, she left the water jar – the vessel that held the water that would never satisfy. She left it behind – moved from a life driven by fear that she would be alone, that she was not good enough, and was rejected, to a life rooted in faith, to a life rooted in Christ, because she had an encounter with the God that made her. She left the vessel and became a vessel – drawing people to Jesus. She runs back into the town, full of people who have condemned her for her sins, and says ... *“come and see this man who fully knows me and yet still loved me!”* She was amazed that God knew all of her deeds, good and bad, yet He didn’t label her by what she had done. He offered her eternal life anyway. That propelled her out of filling her vessel with worldly things to her vessel being filled with God’s love.

We dig wells in the world and seek to be filled with purpose and satisfaction, and then we are shocked when they don’t deliver on their promises. I dug a well in seventh grade that led to me believing making the basketball team would complete my life, and then I was utterly disappointed when I didn’t make it. Guys, His Word is a deeper well of truth. If we root ourselves in His truth and armor up with His strength, we live in freedom and live by faith, believing who He says he is and not what we see or feel in this world.

APPLICATION:

My prayer for you all is that you come to truly believe that Jesus wants to gently turn your gaze from your sins, shames, and not-enoughs to the hope of a future in Him. That He can satisfy your deepest thirst. That you matter. That you were made for a specific purpose. There will be times where you don’t feel like that is true; trust me, we all have them. Let me just tell you... all you have to say is: “NOT Today Satan. I know who I am. My strength comes from the Lord. My identity. My joy. My hope. My purpose. My worth is not in this world, and you can try to trick me. You can try to trick me. You can try to trick me, but it won’t work. The love that I need, the love that I was made for comes from the depths of the heart of a Father.”

AND... let me just tell you all, that GOD DOES NOT CUT HIS CHILDREN. Life is not like a basketball team where only some of us are judged to be good enough. You simply are. Here’s my challenge: stop cutting yourself. Stop living in the fear what you won’t be or that you aren’t good enough. That’s a lie – reject it!

LANDING:

In your small groups, I want you to process the two questions that we all want the answers to. 1) Who am I and 2) what am I doing here? Do you believe that you are who God says you are? I promise you that when you find who He is, you will find who you are.

Let’s stop cutting ourselves from life because we believe Satan’s lie that how we act and what we do is how we identify. The truth resides in Christ; we are not bound to our

actions and our sins; rather we are free to hold fast to His truth, knowing it's the only thing that sets us free. In that freedom, we can be who He created us to be.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

- **Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:7** (humanity)
- **Psalms 139** (creation)
- **Galatians 5:19-20** (acts of flesh, sin, and fallen humanity)
- **John 3:16** (for God so loved)

Small Group Questions

1. *Take some time and think about these questions in light of the Gospel:* Who am I and what am I doing here?
2. Who do you think that Jesus is? Do you believe He is who He says He is? Do you believe you are who He says you are?
3. What vessel have you been looking to for purpose and satisfaction?
4. What did Jesus mean when He said that He could offer her "living water?" Did He require anything from her before He offered it to her?
5. What would it look like if you lived your life as a vessel already full with Jesus?

WHAT'S FILLING YOUR WATER JAR?



Importance of Module 1

“Rooted: Knowing and Believing Who You Are” is the first module for a very distinct reason. The three teachings in this module are based around setting the scene for deeper conversations about issues that have the ability to penetrate our identity, so much so, that sometimes we allow them to define us. First, we talk about the importance of identity, then talk about the distinguishable difference between love and infatuation. Finally, we dive into “God, Guys, and Girls” and getting our relationship right with God before we get our relationships with others right. Who we think we are really affects how we live into other relationships.

Theme

There are a lot of ways to define love. So many in fact, that when it comes to loving people, we WILL get it wrong... unless we look to the Bible. Real love is often tainted by what we see to be normal in movies, books, and music; instead of investing in relationships, “hooking up” has become the new norm, and commitment is not something that many people either desire or know how to do well. Statistics show that about 60% of married people will eventually be divorced. That statistic is daunting, but there is a way to do relationships better. That way is made clear when we don’t see love as an emotion, but when we see it as a choice. This week, we’re going to tackle how we get to the bottom of what it really means to love.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they’re continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can’t control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We’re praying for your students, that they’d realize what they truly thirst for and that they’d take a drink. In the meantime, it’s our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students’ attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 2

MAIN QUESTIONS: What is a good model for a healthy relationship? What's the difference between love and infatuation? Have you been defining attraction incorrectly? What does Jesus teach us about love?

INTRO:

Love. What a word. When I was little, I loved scrambled eggs, Kraft mac n' cheese, and green beans and ketchup – yes, green beans and ketchup... together. Seriously, that's all I would eat; I was weird, clearly. Now, I'd say that I love peanut butter, iced coffee (even in the dead of winter when it is -10 degrees outside), and scary movies. I'm sure in twenty years when you ask me what I love, my answers will change. Do you ever think about what you love, or better yet, what you think you love? (Invite kids raising their hands to share their answers). We love a lot of things: pizza, friends, our families, our dogs, and the sports we play. I say "I love you" to my best girlfriends and send them all the heart-eyed emojis every time I end a conversation with them. But let's ask an important question. Is the way I love my iced coffee the same type of love that I give my momma? Well, I'd sure hope not... but if we say we love all of these things, how do we know what love really is?!

TENSION:

See, in the Greek language, they had four words for love; based on all the different things we just mentioned and all the different ways we can love them, this makes sense. We will be focusing on only one of those types today, but it's important to at least mention all of them:

- First, **Storge**: an empathy bond, liking someone through the fondness of being familiar with someone, natural or instinctual; an example of this is parental love or family love.
- **Philia**: a friend bond, sibling love, a strong bond existing between people who share common values, interests, and activities. It's freely chosen.
- **Eros**: sexual love or the physical intimacy that is a part of a relationship.
- And finally, **Agape**: unconditional, Godly love, and it's considered to be the highest form of love.

On the other hand, in English, we have one word to describe the intense feeling we have when we like something a lot.

Love has become one of our culture's most popular verbs. We use it so loosely and so freely to compliment superficial things (for example: I love your jacket! I love your hair! I'm loving this weather today!). Using love in these ways is not a negative thing. However, its frequency in our speech and thought can water down its meaning. The truth is, when we understand and define love in such trivial ways, we miss the depth and meaning about true love in our human relationships. Sometimes, we mistake

infatuation for love. Infatuation by definition is based on physical looks, lust, strong feelings that develop quickly, spontaneous feelings of excitement that quickly die off, possessiveness, and self-serving behavior. The difference between true love and infatuation is quite profound, yet we are truly missing the mark on what they mean. By mis-defining love, we've entered into an unhealthy cycle. We are a lovesick generation.

And a question that haunts me is, if we are all sick, do we realize truly how sick we are? Loneliness has become an epidemic. Pornography has gotten so out of control, it's been labeled a "public health crisis." Pamela Anderson, one of the most famous porn stars in history, called it a "public hazard." "Friends with benefits" and "no strings attached" seem to be the normative view of most relationships - and of Hollywood movie titles. Marriage is becoming so trivial, or failing at such a high rate, that some lawmakers have considered things like a "two-year marriage license" instead of a lifetime covenantal commitment. Maybe it has to do with our bad definition of love. Clearly something isn't working. Clearly we've got some wires crossed. Our culture at large is hurt. Sick. Unhealthy. Bruised. Broken.

The truth is, there isn't just one part to you. Culture likes to make us think that we are just physical bodies, who've evolved from monkeys and are surviving because we are the most superior organisms on this earth. That couldn't be further from the truth. You aren't just a physical body – you didn't just appear out of thin air – you were CREATED. You are a masterpiece. You were created with love. You were created with purpose. Do not believe the lie that you are only a physical body. You have five essential parts to who you are... physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual. All of those parts make a difference in who you are. Think of it as a gear... when one of your five gears are off kilter, you will be entirely off kilter. When you're physically sick, it's hard to function and think about anything at all. When you're emotionally struggling with a trauma, like parents getting divorced, being in an accident, or facing an unplanned pregnancy, many times you won't take care of yourself and your grades tend to drop. We can't say that we are just physical beings when every gear (physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual) needs to be working properly for us to function to our maximum capacity.

A greater truth is, we are all love-sick and love-diseased. Our views of romance, sexuality, dating, and marriage are killing us. We've been infected for years and haven't even realized it. There are few things in this world that can cause you more pain, grief, and hurt than relationships and the pursuit of love. In order to realize where we went so wrong, we first need to see where it was all so right.

TRUTH:

The most popular passage in the Bible that talks about love can be found in 1 Corinthians. It's read at most weddings, even by those who aren't Christians, and is on a lot of Hallmark cards. Scripture says: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not*

easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

This Scripture has three key take-aways that are often missed and important to know whether you're dating someone now or thinking about dating someone in the future:

- Love is not jealous. I remember I dated a guy in high school that always wanted to know where I was, what I was doing, and who I was with. At first, I was so naive and thought that it was cute that he cared. But then an older mentor said to me: “There is NO trust in jealousy.” Y'all, it ain't cute. It's low-key creepy and shows a lot about where the person's heart is that you're thinking about giving your heart to. To be in a healthy relationship, you have to be secure in who you are; that comes from understanding your worth is not dependent on what someone else thinks. If you're insecure, you'll be insecure in your relationships, always afraid that the other person will leave depending on what you do or don't do. The love the Bible talks about is secure by definition – that's why it says there is no fear in love.
- Love does not give up easily, and it isn't passive. Biblical love is always active; it's either doing something or not doing something for the other person's benefit. It's actively patient, not testy or anxious. It's actively kind and actively not rude.
- And finally, we can try our best to love people like this, but we will never measure up, because we aren't perfect. Nobody will be able to love you perfectly like this, except for Jesus. When you realize this, it takes so much pressure off of dating; you should not be someone's happiness and they should not be yours. The person you love will fall short in loving you, and you'll fall short in loving them. We are setting ourselves up for failure if our significant others are everything to us.

We say we love people all the time, without recognizing the weight of what we mean when we say those words. To love someone is a big responsibility. When we say, “I love you”, we're really saying something more like this:

“I will be patient with you. I will be kind to you. I won't be jealous or condescending or arrogant toward you. I won't dishonor you, and I'll put you before myself. I won't be quick to get irritated. I promise not to keep track of your failures. I promise to uphold purity of mind, body, and spirit, and saturate myself with God's truth, because I love you. I will protect your person and reputation. I will give you the benefit of the doubt. I will offer hope when no one hopes for you. I will press through difficulty beside you.”

Clearly, humanity has moved away from this biblical definition of love. Instead, we grasp desperately at anyone who will pay attention to us for one night or for a few minutes at a party. We seek comfort and assurance from people we meet online and convince ourselves that that's what real relationships look like. We “swipe right” based only on physical attraction. There's no commitment, no responsibility, and no accountability. The new way of dating, dating for fun and for pleasure, just arose in the last 50 years or so.

Since that time, we've been a culture that's more confused about love than we've ever been before.

Love is also now synonymous to sex. A hook-up is now considered to be more favorable than the hard work of a real relationship. Emotions are viewed as a bad thing because they can lead to attachment. The divorce rate is 60%. Clearly, we're doing something wrong, yet we are still looking to culture to tell us how we should love.

Romans 12:2 says *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will."*

Why do we look at people who suck at love to teach us how to love, when we could be looking at the Creator of love to teach us how to love?

The only way things can get better is if we acknowledge we are doing something wrong! **The 1 Corinthians 13 love is the type of love I want you to experience.** But to do that, we've got to rebrand love.

1 John 4:10, 16-17 says: *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus."*

Remember how I said that the Greek language had four words for love? The type of love that the Bible talks about is called **agape love, or Godly love**. It's not kindled by the merit or worth of its object. For most of us, the most practical example of this type of love is seen through our parents. Now, I say that recognizing that each of you in this room has a different story. We've already talked about the fact that human love will never measure up to what it was intended to be, and we see that being true in many homes, with many moms and dads. Even though our parents should give us unconditional, unflinching love, many times, they fall short of that. Sometimes it happens accidentally (I'm sure that when I'm a parent I'll fall short much more often than I'd like to), and in the worst cases, it's on purpose.

The good news is that God's love is not comparable to any type of love we've seen in this world, good or bad. The best kind of human love pales in comparison to God's love; the worst attempts at human love are redeemed in His perfection. God's love delights in giving. It keeps loving even when the loved one is unresponsive, unkind, unlovable, and unworthy. Agape love is how Jesus loves us. Agape love is talked about 320 times in the New Testament, and it's the kind of love that Jesus tells us to take into the world. It allows us to love others like Jesus loved us, because we aren't seeking to get something from our relationship with the person we are loving. Rather, we are seeking to give them the life-giving love of Jesus that has transformed us from the inside out. That's agape love, and that's the type of love you want to give and receive.

APPLICATION:

Have you ever popped a tire? When I first started driving, I popped a tire. I'm not gonna lie, I knew my dad would be furious because we'd literally just bought this 1999 fire-red Ford Mustang for my twin sister and I to share. Figures, I'd be the first one to mess something up on our first car. So, instead of telling him, I just drove on it for a while. I probably went about 50 miles before it completely flattened, until I was even further away from home and had to call my dad and admit my stupidity and stubbornness. Not only that, I had to own up to doing more damage to the rim of the tire by driving on it. I ended up doing more damage than I'd thought was possible.

For a lot of us, the way we see love, dating, sexuality, marriage, and romance is like a flat tire. There's a little something off at first. We know it, and we feel it. Sure, we can still get from point A to point B on a flat tire. Sure, it does the job. Sure, sex before marriage doesn't feel wrong. Sure, living together while you're dating helps you learn more about each other. But there are moments when it feels "off." There are moments when it feels more damaging than it should. There are moments where we just don't want to do it anymore. But we don't know any better, so we keep driving. And it gets worse. And worse. And worse. And eventually, it doesn't function like it should.

We were created for more.

We were never meant to drive on a flat tire. We were never meant to have sex with someone who wasn't our husband or our wife. We were never meant to be addicted to porn. We were never meant to be so wrapped up in a relationship that it makes us feel as if we are losing our god when we break up with that boyfriend or girlfriend.

Years later, when we finally pull over to look at the problem, many of us realize - for the first time - just how damaging the flat tire was. Our compounded decisions have made us view love as something we can take instead of something that we can receive. As something we feel instead of something to commit to.

The reason love, romance, and sexuality feels so right, even when they are wrong, is because we were created for them. Even the distortions hold an element of truth; that's what a distortion is - an alteration of the original. But there's more. So much more. God doesn't want to take away our joy; He wants to give us more of it. He doesn't want to take away our sexual desire; He wants to give it to us in the context in which it works the best. God doesn't want us to hate romance; He wants to introduce us to and include us in the greatest love story of all time.

LANDING:

Our fragile human loves are bound to change. I no longer love green beans and ketchup and I've discovered that eating Kraft mac n' cheese for every meal will ultimately lead to me being the unhealthiest version of myself. My human love is dependent on what I'm feeling. God's love is adamant... it never changes, it never stumbles, and if you come back here in 20 years, I guarantee you'll hear the same message of His love that you heard today. His love knows the future you, knows the

people you will love in the future, and knows everything about how you'll get there. God is love; that's the kind of love that we should want and try to emulate in our lives – the kind of love that came, died, and called us by name. That love never changes and, for that, we should be eternally changed and forever grateful.

To end, I just want to remind you all that if there ever comes a day when you think you're loving perfectly, there's probably something wrong with your logic; we will never love perfectly. We can, however, try our best and ask God to help us do so. Great love takes effort, commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, and lots of time. It's in those things that the depth, beauty, and mystery of true love will show that it is superior to the false realities, the lesser reflections we cheapen it with.

Let's pray. *"God, sometimes I don't know what commitment looks like. Sometimes, I want to quit and give up. Help me to stay in the fight and not to act on my emotions. Help me to come to you first when I'm feeling discouraged and unloved, so that you can remind me of who I am. Grow endurance in me and make me dependent on you. Let me look to you and realize how loved and cherished I truly am. Shape me into an expression of your agape love. I know that I can do none of this without you, and I thank you that you will never change and you'll never leave me. I want to love people like you love me. Help me to do that, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

Main Scriptures

- **1 John 4:10, 16-17** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins... And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.
- **1 Corinthians 13** If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even

as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

- **Romans 12:12** (*World v. Word*) Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Small Group Questions

1. What's the difference between love and infatuation?
2. Have you ever thought you've loved someone when you've just been infatuated with them? (Leaders: share a funny story when you've experienced this).
3. What does Paul mean in the book of Romans when he says "do not conform to the pattern of this world?" What are some practical ways we can live different in our relationships?
4. What is agape love?
5. Have you ever been in a tough situation where you didn't know how to love someone because you didn't agree with them? What can God teach us about loving those we don't agree with or those who have hurt us?



WE WERE NEVER MEANT TO DRIVE
ON A FLAT TIRE.

We were made for more.

Importance of Module 1

“Rooted: Knowing and Believing Who You Are” is the first module for a very distinct reason. The three teachings in this module are based around setting the scene for deeper conversations about issues that have the ability to penetrate our identity, so much so, that sometimes we allow them to define us. First, we talk about the importance of identity, then talk about the distinguishable difference between love and infatuation. Finally, we dive into “God, Guys, and Girls” and getting our relationship right with God before we get our relationships with others right. Who we think we are really affects how we live into other relationships.

Theme

So often, we place too much emphasis on who we are attracted to in a romantic way. While feeling romantic love can be a beautiful gift we're given by God, should we actually be placing as much emphasis on these relationships as we are? Culturally, the pressure to date and pair off starts at a very young age, and it only grows greater as we mature and grow up. If we want to do relationships better than we have been, we must realize that they aren't all about us. Relationships are about the other person; we know this because that's what Jesus teaches us. In order to be a source of life and not a sucker of life, we need to make sure we're connected to the original source of life Himself. We must get our relationship with God right before we can get relationships with each other right. Once we're on the journey with Him, He will bring a companion alongside of us who is on the journey with Him, too!

Sex is first and foremost a reference to our maleness or femaleness. We are either a son of God or a daughter of God. Therein lies all of our identity. We are His and uniquely designed to reflect Him as men and women. Male and female, we bear the image of God distinctively. In this teaching, we'll take a look at creation and how God speaks into our sexual identities from the very beginning.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't

control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 3

MAIN QUESTIONS: What does creation have to do with relationships? Before I pair off with an individual, am I getting my relationship with God right? What happens if I'm attracted to the same-sex? How does that change how I navigate dating and relationships?

INTRO:

When I bring up the word "dating," I normally get a myriad of different responses. For some people, it will elicit a stress response. You think... "I don't even know what to do..." or "Do I ask her to hang out or actually go on a date?!" "Wait don't those technically mean the same thing?" or "Will she think I'm a stalker if I actually call her... should I just send a snapchat?" and the list goes on. For other people, dating brings about a source of joy. You think of the time that you got that text back from that guy or girl that you liked, saying that they'd love to hang out more with you. And for a lot of others, dating brings up an unimaginable amount of pain. There is desperate hurt and heartbreak from dating. I'll start this message by saying that there are few things that make people cry like the intentional loss of a relationship; very few people cry like those who have been broken up with.

I'm sure you can also think of the list of dating advice that you've heard from other Christians:

- Date exclusively in groups v. make sure you get plenty of one-on-one time.
- Don't kiss before you're married v. how can you know you have chemistry without kissing?
- Put clear boundaries into place v. just go with the flow and handle conflicts as they come up.
- Make sure you date a bunch of people before you get serious v. don't date anyone until you're ready to marry them.

And the list of opinions goes on and on and on. In a world full of opinions on dating, how do we know where the Truth lies? I for one stand here knowing that the absolute truth about dating is found right in the Bible. I believe that everything in the Bible is true, including what it has to say about who and how we date. We aren't told exactly what decisions to make, but we are given parameters and boundaries that are going to lead us to flourish and thrive in relationships. Because of God's Holy Spirit, we are able to

call on His power, that lives inside of us. The Holy Spirit can help us discern what God's will is for our relationships as we grow deeper in our relationship with Jesus. The Holy Spirit comforts us, instructs us, gives peace, and convicts us. All we have to do is ask for wisdom, and we will receive it, if we're willing to listen and obey out of love for the Father.

TENSION:

The tension with dating begins when we examine why and how we are dating people. The truth is, the impulse in us to pair off is a good thing; it's the way we are doing it that is the problem. For example...

- Dating websites are often based on physical attraction alone. In fact, dating apps largely now are used to find a late-night booty call. We're judging each other based solely on charm and beauty, giving ourselves away to anyone who will make us feel loved in the moment. That is so dangerous. (*Proverbs 31:30*)
- We aren't sure how to relate to each other anymore. There's a loss of connectivity that is fueled by our ability to get whatever we want and talk to whoever we want through the screen of our electronic devices. Actual, real relationships are no longer coming natural to us, and instead we're investing in cheaper, exploitative versions.

Dating isn't bad, it's just how we are doing it that is. The truth is: It's really hard to find a companion on the journey of life when we don't even know why we're here or what we are doing here. Before we get into how to create and sustain a relationship with another person, we have to deal with us!

TRUTH:

Now, if you add up all the passages in the Bible about dating, it equals – well, not a lot. There's a small portion of passages that talk about marriage and the relationships we all so deeply long for. The rest of the Bible doesn't talk about dating. You may be asking... well then, what does it talk about?! I'm concerned about my relationship with that girl or guy I think is cute... does the fact that it's not in the Bible that much mean God doesn't care about it?!

That's not what it means at all. The majority of the Bible talks about the love story between God and His Church, between God and His people... in other words, it talks about the relationship that God wants with you. That's the relationship the Bible cares about. It took me a long time to realize this, but the truth is before I even think about seeking a guy or a girl, I need to seek God. I have to understand the One who made me. I have to get connected to the source of life before I can even attempt to encourage, love, and be with another person.

The golden rule for dating is this, and it's found in Mark 12:30... *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

Why is this the Golden Dating Rule? Let's take a look at creation in Genesis 1 – if you're under the perception that this creation story is about what was created, you're wrong; Genesis 1 is all about the God of Creation. As it begins, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless – without structure – and void – without fullness. It had no structure and no life. God saw this problem, clearly, because we see now that He wasn't finished yet. Scripture says that the spirit of God hovered over the waters and God moved toward the chaos of the world. In days one, two, and three, He started to form the heavens, the sky, and the seas – the static life support systems that can fulfill life. He was creating the world with the purpose of filling it. He makes good on that intention, and He fills it with birds, sea creatures, and animals. On day six, we finally get a glimpse of why he is doing it all; all along, He was waiting for the earth to be substantial enough so that He could say, "*Let us [the Trinity] make man in our image.*" All along, He was creating a home FOR US to live in and to enjoy His love in.

God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. He created man and woman to flourish and use the gifts God gave them to thrive. That is what love is. God wanted the best for us, and He intentionally showed that throughout the entirety of the Creation story. He's a giving God. He did everything for us. He's always made it about us, and He's never made it about Him.

When I really focus on the creation story, I see a marvelous picture of beauty. But then, I'm hit with the reminder that not everyone sees it this way. Some women see it as ostracizing that we were created out of a man. They see it as saying that we have less worth than those around us, because that's exactly how Satan works; he takes what God intended to be used for good and uses it for evil. The God that created me and you, He isn't one for discrimination and He isn't one for belittling. He isn't one for picking favorites.

I'm also hit with the reminder that so many people, and statistically, a number of you in this room, are dealing with same sex attraction. You're probably dreading this message because you think I'm preaching from a point of judgement, or frankly, just hate talking about marriage and relationships because it brings up the fear of telling those you love what's going on in your heart.

Let me start by saying this: Culture will scream at you that being straight or gay is your identity. It isn't, and I'm sorry for the times that you've been made to feel like it is. Who you are is not defined by who you are attracted to; who you are has been set in stone by the Savior of the world. I don't think it's a stretch to say that everyone in this room is either in this very dilemma, or you're confused about what the Bible says about homosexuality, or you've been a part of judging those who are struggling with it.

God tells us that homosexuality is sinful, abominable, and unnatural (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 – Romans 1:18-32 – 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:8—10). Even though that's what we read in Scripture, maybe your heart disagrees. You see what God has to say about homosexuality, but your heart doesn't utter the same sentiments. God's word

says it is sinful; your heart says it feels right. God's word says it's abominable; your heart says it's delightful. God's word says it's unnatural; your heart says it's totally normal. Do you see the clear divide? What voice should you believe?

Let's start here: sex is first and foremost a reference to our maleness or femaleness. We are either a son of God or a daughter of God. Therein lies all of our identity. We are His and uniquely designed to reflect Him as men and women. Male and female, we bear the image of God distinctively—not by stereotypes of pink and blue, footballs and tutus, but through accepting how He made us and using our gifts and energy to serve Him, trusting that this makes a proclamation to the world that God is good.

I look at many adults my age, and I continually ask them if they've forgotten how rough junior high was. If someone would have asked me to self-identify in junior high, I would have said I was a unicorn. Like, seriously, I was just trying to figure out what was going on with my own body and why I was developing slower or faster than the girls around me. I didn't feel I had a safe place where I could ask questions, I didn't know who I could trust, and I didn't know what my feelings were telling me.

Sexual preference is no different than any other struggle; if you're struggling with something, you are told to bring it into the light. Either we choose to trust in His word or we trust our own feelings. Either I look to Him for the pleasure of what my soul craves, or I search for it in lesser things. Either I walk in obedience to what He says, or I reject His truth as if it were a lie. I'd argue that the struggle with homosexuality is not an identity battle, but rather a faith battle. Is God your joy? Is He good enough? Or are you still looking to broken vessels to quench a thirst only He can satisfy? That is the battle.

The choice is yours, but my prayer is that you put your faith in Christ and flee from the lies of our society that coincide with the voices of your heart – run to Jesus instead. You were made for Him. You were made for more than anything this world could ever offer you. He is good, and He is wise. He is the source of all comfort. He is kind and patient. He is righteous and faithful. He is holy and just. He is your true King. He is your Savior. And He is inviting you to be His follower, but also His friend. If lasting love is what you're looking for anywhere else, you are chasing the wind, seeking what you will never find, slowly being destroyed by your pursuit. But in Jesus, there is fullness of joy. In Jesus, there is a relationship worth everything, because He is everything. Run to Him.

Now, remember the golden rule... love God, love others. It's only when we love God that we are able to love others; if you don't believe me yet, let me tell you a story about scuba diving.

A friend of a friend of mine was in the Caribbean and was learning to scuba dive; when they teach you, they pair you up with a partner. She was paired up with a nice, middle-aged guy who was learning for the first time as well. They were plopped into the middle of the ocean after reviewing all the policies and procedures for what happens if anything goes wrong, and she was having so much fun. Soon, though, something shifted.

She noticed her partner was thrashing around, swimming toward her, and motioning toward her mouth. She eventually came to the conclusion that his breathing mask wasn't working, and he wasn't getting enough air. She realized too late that he was swimming over to her to rip her mask off, so that he could use it. At first, this seemed logical, and she was more than willing to share. When one person doesn't have enough air, let's share the air. You have some, I have some... you have some, I have some, passing the mask back and forth. Soon enough, she realized that the man did not plan on giving her the mask back. He was taking all of the air for himself. The air for him to breathe became scarce when his mask stopped working, desperation set in, and he sacrificed this girl's safety for his own comfort. **Where there is desperation, there will always be exploitation.**

APPLICATION:

After the fall, when Adam and Eve were separated from God, we see a trend within humanity. Cain and Abel, two brothers, are the next men named in the Bible... and if you know the story, you know that Cain ends up killing Abel. There was enough room for each of them (seriously, there were like... very few people on the Earth at this point), but Cain still felt the need to defend his honor, to be the best. Again, where there is scarcity there is desperation and where there is desperation there is exploitation. Cain wanted so badly to be better than his brother, that he was willing to exploit him to boost himself higher. In the same way, when we feel threatened, we become desperate, and we exploit others. Exploitation by definition is the action of treating someone unfairly in order to reap the benefits for yourself; in other words, exploitation means sacrificing someone else's well being or happiness to ensure your own.

In the same way, after the fall, the next two women who were named in the Bible by name were both appropriated by one man. We see the sexual misuse of women enter the world.

What does this tell us? Selfishness came into play after the fall. When we break away from God, we break away from each other. Every person of the opposite sex becomes someone to fill the vacancy in us. Every person of the same sex becomes competition. Every person becomes someone to fill some sort of emptiness in us. We look at what we can get from someone and what they have to offer us. But we tell ourselves it's fine, as long as it builds our personal kingdoms. We see pornography – the objectification of women – running rampant in our culture. We see men just wanting to use their bodies and not putting in the effort it takes to care for their souls. Love has become cheap and it's become easy. We're missing out on the love we were created for and trading it for a cheaper, superficial version. If we look close enough at our culture, we see that too often we use each other as a means of filling the God-sized vacancy in our souls.

LANDING:

When you're struggling, it's all about where you are seeking answers. Finding answers to tough relational questions isn't difficult. The scary reality is that we can find an

answer anywhere to justify what we want to do – right or wrong, safe or unsafe, wise or unwise. The advice might be from a book by a doctor, a random conversation with someone at church, a blog post that popped up on your Instagram feed, or a quote you found on Pinterest. For many of us, if we're honest, it really doesn't matter who's offering the advice, as long as it confirms what we thought or wanted in the first place.

In 1 John 4:7 we read: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

This verse is pivotal. John tells the people to love one another. He doesn't give them a threat on the other side. He doesn't say love one another or else God will be mad or you'll get in trouble. NO... he simply says, everyone who knows God loves. He says that those who are beloved... love. When you know your beloved by God, you can give that love other people. If I have a source of love, I can be a source of love. If I have an eternal source of life, I can be a source of life. That's how it was always meant to be.

The question you need to answer is: Before I want to pair off with an individual, am I getting my relationship with God right? Do I know where to go for answers, or am I looking everywhere else BUT the Bible?

If you stay connected to the source, you can be a source. If your relationship with God is aligned, your other relationships are much more likely to thrive. So many of us are trying to suck life from other places to try and fill our kingdoms, and I'm here to tell you that there is a source of life. We may have broken away from it in the fall, but 1 John tells us that the Son of God came for us that we may live through Him. He gave himself up for us – He let all the guilt, shame, condemnation fall on Him – and He buried it in the dirt. From Him, new life will spring. God is the ultimate partner for our souls; the first marriage we need to be concerned about is with God – we need to link up with Him, the lover of our souls.

When you link up with the source of life, the lover of your soul, and One who created you, IT WILL TAKE THE DESPERATION OUT OF DATING. I now don't have to look to a partner to fill my deepest vacancies, because I have a river of God's truth filling my heart.

Ladies, you want a guy that's not looking for you to complete him. That's low-key scary when people talk like that! Guys, what happens when she lets you down? How can anyone live up to that? Girls, if you're looking for a guy to fill every vacant part of your soul, think about that for a moment... how can he do that?!? Have you EVER met a guy? Just watch one for a while. I promise you, you'll be like... "I don't know why I was thinking that could solve this." Because he can't.

But, girls, you get a guy who turns everything over to Jesus, that guy will love and honor you at your best and at your worst because it honors his King to do so.

Guys, you want a girl like that – she's chasing your King – so when she comes alongside of you – she will join you in mission and honor you, when you meet her needs

and when you fall desperately short. That's the kind of person you want. The person that's pursuing Him, and then you. When we journey with the true King, we can trust that He will link us up with someone doing the same.

The most important thing is to remember that God is your source of life, love, stability. He is the partner that came for you, fought for you, died for you, and rose for you. If you trust Him, He will make you the kind of person you were meant to be.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

- **Proverbs 31:30** Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
- **1 John 4:7** Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Small Group Questions

1. What type of feelings does dating bring up for you?
2. Culturally, what does dating look like? What are some ways we talked about the Bible being countercultural when it comes to dating?
3. What does the Bible say about Jesus being a source of life? Do you believe that to be true?
4. How does it change the dating-game when you're connected to the source of life? How does the Holy Spirit come into play with our relationship with Jesus?
5. Where do you normally take your tough relationship questions? What do you think about taking them to God from now on? (Youth Leaders: Lean into and discuss what this practically looks like)
6. Take some time to reflect on your past relationships or your hopeful future relationships. What do you need to ask God to redeem in you, and what do you need to be more faithful in praying about for your future partner?



CONNECTIONS

NEW MESSAGE SERIES!



LET'S GET REAL FOR A SECOND. THE CULTURE THAT OUR STUDENTS IS IMMERSSED IN IS SCARY. WHEN WE LOOK AT IT CLOSELY, WE CAN SEE A CLEAR PICTURE OF COUNTERFEIT INTIMACY, DISTRACTION, AND COMPARISON THAT IS FUELED BY SOCIAL MEDIA. TEENAGERS YEARN TO HAVE TOUGH QUESTIONS ANSWERED ABOUT SOME OF THEIR DEEPEST STRUGGLES, LIKE PORNOGRAPHY, LONELINESS, AND REJECTION. WE'RE GOING TO TRY AND ANSWER THOSE. THE GOOD NEWS IS... THERE IS FREEDOM FOUND IN THE ABUNDANT LIFE THAT JESUS CAME TO GIVE US.

LET'S GET



REAL



Importance of Module 2

“Let’s Get Real” is the second module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. The three teachings in this module are focused around the reality of the culture that our students are immersed in. When we look at the reality of what their days are filled with, we can see a clear picture of counterfeit intimacy, distraction, and comparison that is fueled by social media. Online dependency has had some great effects on society, as it has increased our ability to communicate efficiently, but it has also created a dangerous place for unintended loneliness and corruption. As the Church, creating conversations around these cultural topics is so important; I know with certainty that teenagers yearn to have their questions answered about some of their deepest struggles. We must shine the light on struggles like pornography, loneliness, and rejection, and declare that there is hope because Jesus has already overcome them. After taking a few weeks to study identity in module one, the second module will begin to look at how understanding our identity in Jesus is guaranteed to lead us to freedom. Before we fully live into the abundant life Jesus Christ has provided for us, we have to get real and deal with our relational and sexual brokenness.

Theme

Instagram. Snapchat. Twitter. Facebook. VSCO. Pinterest. Social media is great because it lets us stay connected to friends who live far away from us. Social media is awesome when it gives us the opportunity to encourage friends and stay in touch with them. But these platforms can quickly become dangerous and destructive. We are quick to comment our thoughts even when they’re offensive and discouraging, quick to judge, quick to compare, quick to make assumptions, and quick to react spontaneously, largely because we can’t see the other person’s face through the screen. While we may think that social media is allowing us to be connected to everything always, it’s actually making us less present in everyday life and damaging our relationships. The dangers of social media are real, and until we filter them through a Biblical worldview, the internet can become a place of darkness that enslaves us to perpetual brokenness.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they’re continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can’t

control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTIONS: Why should social media be used to complement our sense of community, but not replace it? How has social media changed our relationships? What does it mean to bring struggles into the light? Why is community an essential part of the Christian lifestyle?

INTRO:

I remember when I was in seventh grade all I wanted was a Myspace profile. If you don't know what Myspace is, be thankful that you don't. But for real, Myspace was like the hippest social media platform of my middle school years. Everybody had one and for some reason, when I asked my dad if I could get one, he acted like I had just asked him to swim across the Atlantic Ocean. He was so dramatic, and I remember being confused as to why he was so against something that everyone else seemed to be fine with. Like a logical 12-year-old, I of course went against my dad's wishes, blocked the history on my account from our family computer, and created a profile anyway. I firmly believed that there was no way my dad would catch on; I'd taken all the precautions to eliminate any traces of my profile.

A few days later, I logged onto my profile and saw that I had a friend request. I loved that I could come home from school and connect with friends and see what music they were listening to, post pictures and status updates, and never miss anything or be out of the loop. I clicked the friend request tab excitedly, but my stomach dropped. There it was. My dad's name popped up. My dad had found my Myspace profile, the one that he'd forbidden me from getting, and I knew I was going to be D-E-A-D.

I think I was grounded for a good three months, and since we didn't have smartphones, all of my online access was taken away. I was back to being eternally out of the loop and was extremely bitter that my dad just didn't quite seem to get the importance of being connected.

Today, though, as I look back at how naïve I truly was about social media. I see that my dad was trying to shield me from the unintended consequences that social media has. Within that three months that I wasn't allowed to have social media, I began hanging out at a neighbor's house a lot. We were the same age, it was summer, and we had a bunch of free time. Because her mom was a single mom and wasn't home a lot, I watched my friend interact with strangers online in hopes of finding companionship. I

watched her give pieces of herself away to men through the screen, that could or could not have been the people they claimed to be. I watched her obtain all of her happiness through interactions she had through technology. As her online life thrived, her real-life relationships deteriorated.

That's when I started to get it.

TENSION:

Y'all, have you ever watched *Catfish* on MTV? I'm not condoning it because it's crazy-sauce, but it is one of my guilty pleasures; it puts the cultural shift that has taken place within the last few years into perspective. It's a reality-based documentary television series about the truths and lies of online dating. On the internet, a catfish is a person who creates fake personal profiles on social media sites using someone else's pictures and false biographical information to pretend to be themselves. The show's hosts help people who are emotionally entangled with someone they have never met in real life. Some couples have been communicating for a few months – others, for years. Most without even hearing the other person's voice on the phone. Like I said, crazy-sauce.

In the early 2000's, this show wouldn't have existed. Today, it's the norm. You are the first generation to grow up with smartphones in your hands. "Catfishing" is a thing because we don't know how to engage in real relationships anymore. They've been replaced with cheap, convenient, online ones that may or may not even be true. Nev Shulman, the director and one of the hosts, says this:

"Whether or not two people are totally lying to each other and it turns out to be a huge disaster, that's only the first part of the story. We then want to know why they are doing it, who they are, what they are feeling, what led them to this place, and why the show resonates with thousands of other young people who have the same situations."

In other words, he wants to get the bottom of why this phenomenon is even happening in the first place. I think if we need to get on board with that. If we want to really focus on doing relationships better, we also have to recognize that social media has changed the game.

Social media can make us feel like we are gaining connections because we have the power to get anything at our fingertips. The truth is, research has found we are actually losing connection. Researchers believe that the constant use of social networking affects brain development. They say that young users of online communities become more self-absorbed and may lose key parts of the socialization process that only direct human contact can provide. They point out that meeting people face to face and building personal relationships in real life is crucial for enabling young people to learn what acceptable behavior is in a social group. They also question whether or not it is possible to learn empathy through these social networking sites. Think about your virtual conversations. How do you assess the mood of the other person and communicate your own? Is it by texting in capitals and virtually shouting? Is it by

Module 2, Teaching 1: Social Media: It's Not What You Think

sending a GIF? Or is it by sending an emoji? The answer is simple: you can never feel a person's real reaction through a screen. You'll miss the beauty of their nonverbal communication, the awkwardness of trying to express something through the nerves, the rise and fall of their voice when they get excited about something, and the joy when you really click with someone.

In addition, mental-health deficit is clearly correlated with screen time: teens who spend more time on screens are more likely to be depressed than teens who spend significantly less time on screens. This, in turn, leads to a higher risk of suicide. One reason for the connection between smartphone/internet use and depression is the predominance of cyberbullying. Another is the negative impact that excessive smartphone use has on sleep. And surely yet another reason is the simple disconnectedness from real things and real people that is experienced by those whose primary forms of personal interaction are mediated by a screen.

Because of social media, we are becoming master manipulators and constant performers. Although we have so much connectivity through technology, we have suffered a loss of community. We've begun to believe the lie that we can be fully known and fully loved online, when we were only created to be fully loved and fully known by God. It's kind of like drinking salt water and expecting your thirst to be quenched. It'll just make you thirstier. All of our online relationships will never fulfill us, and we end up thirsting more for real connections. We become hopeless when they don't seem to exist and disconnect entirely. According to a report released by USA Today, your generation is the most connected and engaged online, but you're also the loneliest.

Our digital reactions with one another, which are often necessarily brief and superficial, begin to pattern all our relationships. When you begin to become shallow in your interactions with people, you can become habituated to that. All of our personal interactions take the same shape. The barista at the coffee counter gets a DM-like response. When we hang out with friends, we offer a series of tweet-like responses in a superficial conversation with little spiritual meaning. We sit across the table having meals together but barely say a word to one another. Never more connected, we seem to be growing more distant. Never more efficient, we have never been more distracted.

TRUTH:

So, where SHOULD social media fit into our lives? I'm not going to stand up here and tell you to delete every app and go back to the 18th century. Just like you, I too see the benefits of social media. Technology can be a very useful extension of our embodied relationships, but here's the key: it should never serve as a replacement for them.

The bottom line is that community is what saves us. Not just any community, but a life-giving, Gospel-centric community. Since the beginning of creation, God knew that we needed human companionship. From the beginning, Adam NEEDED Eve, and vice versa. God instructed Adam to name all of the creatures in the world and after he was

done, God decided none of the animals would do. Adam needed another person. We need a person. We need people. We need community. This theme is echoed throughout the entire Bible. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says: *“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.”* In Galatians 6:2 it says... *“carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”* We're commanded to lift each other up, encourage one another, and help each other bring our sins into the light.

You see, too much privacy keeps all of our sins in the dark. Darkness is dangerous. Anything in your life that you are trying to keep a secret, hidden in the dark, is holding you back and will harm you eventually. Think about it. Nothing healthy grows in the dark. Flowers, trees, fruits, and vegetables—the kind of things that you want to grow—they all require sunshine. Mold spores, fungi, moss, these are the kinds of things that thrive in dark environments. The kind of growth you don't want is what you will find in secret, shady places. If there is any part of your day, any activity, habits, media you consume, websites you visit, or relationships you foster that you wouldn't want your parents, mentors, grandparents, or friends to know about; it's a fungus. It might be small and containable now, but it won't stay that way. It will eventually spread and grow more and more toxic until it poisons you and harms people you love. Plus, you need to remember these two things: 1. it's not going to stay a secret forever—your sin will find you out. and 2. It's not a secret now. God knows. He sees what happens in every shady place. The only thing to do is to kill it with bleach and expose it to the light of day. Forgiveness comes from confessing our sins to God, healing comes from confessing our sins to other believers who will hold us accountable. We can only be fruitful when we walk in the light, and every day Jesus invites us again to walk with Him in the light.

Romans 13:12 says, *“The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light.”*

APPLICATION:

The apostle John closes one of his ancient handwritten letters with a line of enduring relevance for those of us who now write with our thumbs: *“Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink [which was considered to be modern technology for John]. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete”* (2 John 12).

Why does John insist on talking to the people face-to-face? I think it has a lot to do with what we already talked about. While technology has evolved and changed, the premise of what John is talking about hasn't. Sure, our personality will come through to some extent in a text message or a tweet. But we are holistic beings. We have feelings. We have thoughts. We have imagination. We have bodies. We look different. We express ourselves differently for example, in our tone of voice. How many times have we miscommunicated with someone online because there is no tone of voice? You were

Module 2, Teaching 1: Social Media: It's Not What You Think

joking and someone took it seriously and got offended. Or maybe you say something serious and people think you were joking. So, I think the fullness of joy comes with one personality interacting with other personalities in terms of voice, touch, appearance, and timing. Sometimes it is time just to be quiet with people, or to cry with people, or to laugh with people.

Community is important, because this life will be hard. We're told in the Gospel of John that in this world we will have trouble. That's a fact. You will have trouble, with or without Jesus. I can tell you from personal experience that your hard times will be better with Him than without Him, though it doesn't change the initial weight of the pain we feel. When the hard times come, you will feel them so deeply. And we wonder if others have these hard moments as well. It's so easy to feel alone in our struggle, because we don't outwardly see people struggling through social media if that's the only sense of community that we have. After all, I know I sure as heck don't snap pictures of the crushing times and post them on Instagram. That girl you think is perfect that sits next to you in history class and has perfect friends and perfect hair and the perfect boyfriend? Or the guy that's on your football team who the coach loves and seems to get everything he wants so easily, when you have to work hard for seemingly everything? They have struggles, too.

One of the biggest reasons we struggle with insecurity is because of social media. We compare our behind the scenes with everyone else's highlight reel. Y'all. Nobody shares things that hurt them or make them look weak and vulnerable on their feeds. Like for real, nobody talks about anxiety, depression, parents getting divorced, friends talking behind their backs, getting cut from a team, or getting caught doing something they shouldn't be. Everybody shares when they make the team, when they get an award, when they do something nice for someone, or when they go on a cool vacation. WE ONLY SEE THE GOOD PARTS. I'm telling you – another person's Instagram feed is most definitely not their reality.

Overall, there are some basic do's and don'ts to social media that I hope you can take-away from today's message.

First don't: do not, under any circumstance, interact with someone you don't know. Like it or not, there are predators on Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and any other new website or app that comes along. I know it's easy to think, "This would never happen to me." But for your own safety, don't interact with anyone who you don't know in real life. I bet if you talked to anyone that was on the show *Catfish*, they'd tell you they never thought it would happen to them, either.

Second don't: It's important, especially with Snapchat, to remember that anything you send out into the web-o-sphere never, ever really goes away. Even if you're snapping a close friend of the same gender, be careful what you're putting onto that world wide web. You can show your bestie your new swimsuit when she comes over. You don't

Module 2, Teaching 1: Social Media: It's Not What You Think

need to snap it to her. It's too easy to screenshot anything you receive, and you don't want something like that showing up somewhere you weren't planning for it to go.

Do use your social media interactions to show people the love of Christ. Like it or not, social media is a huge part of all of our lives and relationships, and the way you represent yourself on those platforms can be a direct representation of Jesus. Wouldn't it be incredible to find out that you encouraged a friend with a status or comment? How would it feel if you were able to pray for someone because you saw on Twitter that they were really having a hard time? What if you were able to help a friend who was getting sucked into inappropriate conversations? It's a weird world, and it's important for you to look out for each other. God has placed you in this time, with all of these social media platforms, for a reason. Be a witness for Him. And use it—to connect and to love people well. But be wise, and most importantly, be who you were created to be.

Most importantly, please do not believe the lie that your social media determines your worth. The amount of likes you get does not determine how much you're loved. If you find yourself obsessively checking how many likes you've gotten on a recent post, turn your notifications off, or maybe take a second and think about why you were posting the picture in the first place. If you can get to the place where social media is a tool you use to empower and encourage others, instead of empowering and encouraging yourself, you will be much better off. Jesus is the only thing that can empower and encourage you. He's the only One that can give you worth. If you truly believe that, you have the power to change the digital culture around you.

LANDING:

Don't default to isolation when we were creatively designed to be part of a community. Social media has as much power as you give it. What you post has the ability to reveal the depths of your heart and what you value. If you value Jesus, use your platform to be a light. If you value Jesus, dive into real relationships and embrace the beauty that they have, even when it gets hard. When you don't know how to handle a relational conflict, run to Jesus. Don't run to the internet. Run to the source of life, the source of Truth, and the One who made you.

Let's pray before we head into small groups.

Main Scriptures

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who fall and has no one to help them up.

Galatians 6:2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

2 John 12 I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

Small Group Questions

1. How much time do you think you spend on your phone? What are the apps you think you spend most of your time on?
2. How has social media changed relationships?
3. Discuss some healthy ways to utilize social media & why it should not replace our sense of community.
4. What is the danger of having everything at our fingertips? What does Jesus say about bringing our sins out of the dark and into the light?
5. Why is face-to-face intimacy needed to develop a relationship?



IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

Importance of Module 2

“Let’s Get Real” is the second module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. The three teachings in this module are focused around the reality of the culture that our students are immersed in. When we look at the reality of what their days are filled with, we can see a clear picture of counterfeit intimacy, distraction, and comparison that is fueled by social media. Online dependency has had some great effects on society, as it has increased our ability to communicate efficiently, but it has also created a dangerous place for unintended loneliness and corruption. As the Church, creating conversations around these cultural topics is so important; I know with certainty that teenagers yearn to have their questions answered about some of their deepest struggles. We must shine the light on struggles like pornography, loneliness, and rejection, and declare that there is hope because Jesus has already overcome them. After taking a few weeks to study identity in module one, the second module will begin to look at how understanding our identity in Jesus is guaranteed to lead us to freedom. Before we fully live into the abundant life Jesus Christ has provided for us, we have to get real and deal with our relational and sexual brokenness.

Theme

Pornography is a phenomenon that not many youth groups aren’t talking about, despite the epidemic running wild within the lives of our young men and women. The statistics are shocking, and if we take time to let them soak in, it becomes more and more clear that relationships are in desperate need of saving. Pornography is easy, it’s accessible, requires zero relational effort, and it’s safe because there is no vulnerability, no love, and no fear of getting hurt. Pornography is responsible for diminishing real romantic relationships. The saddest part is that if we decided not to give pornography the power it would have none. Pornography is so supplied because we demand it so much. A heart change is needed to tackle this epidemic; at the root of the pornography problem lies a tragic misunderstanding of who we were created to be and what relationships are supposed to be about.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they’re continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can’t control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 2

MAIN QUESTIONS: Why is pornography a problem? What does the Bible say about it? Is there hope for people who struggle with pornography addictions? How is pornography impacting relationships?

INTRO:

The internet is a crazy jungle of temptation. All we have to do is hit "search" and whatever we are looking for just appears right on our screens. BAM, instant gratification. We're going to jump right into this message because, honestly, there's no great way to get into a teaching about pornography. I'm pretty smooth, but as I was researching and writing, I concluded that there's no smooth way to ease into this talk.

Pornography is defined as: *"printed or visual material containing the explicit description to display sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate erotic feelings."* You may be sitting here thinking... "This problem doesn't apply to me" or "this lady is wack, there's nothing wrong with looking at porn... everyone does it!" or "Crap. Here we go, talking about one of my deepest struggles that nobody knows about." If you're sitting in one of those camps, I know that God has a word of hope for you tonight. Stick with me. He cares way too much about you to let you stay where you are. Despite what you've heard or what you think, God cares about sexuality. He cares about your relationships, and He's got something to say about this pornography thing.

Now, the first step to changing the game is awareness; that's what we need to be doing with the issue of pornography. Right now, the porn industry is simply supplying what people are demanding. The only way this changes is if people pause, re-examine reality, get educated about the harmful effects of porn, and make adjustments. By stopping the demand for porn, we would be putting an end to something that addicts people, destroys relationships, and affects our society as a whole. It's time to change the statistics. Stopping the demand starts here, with us speaking the Truth. Once we become educated about the risks and consequences, it suddenly looks a lot less appealing. Once we realize that Jesus is the only One that can satisfy what we are looking for, porn suddenly becomes a lot less satisfying.

TENSION:

I'm going to start by telling you that pornography is way more common than you may think it is. It's everywhere, and many times it pops up when you least expect it. Most TV shows have at least some type of pornographic content, and many have scenes that full-on classify as pornography. The average age that a person encounters a pornographic image is age 11 – basically as a child.

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

Statistically and scientifically, pornography is very different than what you've been told that it is. I say that because it not too long ago I was in middle school and high school. I heard what you guys hear. In fact, part of what I spend my time doing is going into high schools and teaching in health classes about sexual education. It's in that space where I get a clear look at what the majority of teenagers believe about their sexuality and their relationships. When it comes to pornography, here's a snapshot of what we are up against:

- 12% of websites on the internet are pornographic – that's 24,644,172 sites.
- 1 in 3 porn viewers are women. It's not just a "guy problem."
- Porn sites receive more regular traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined each month.
- Watching porn diminishes relationship commitment. Porn increased marital infidelity, or cheating, by 300%. A few studies reported in *Psychology Today* show that people who watched porn were more likely to engage in flirting (or more) outside their relationships and were more likely to cheat and hook-up with someone other than their partner.
- 50% of all adults do not think that porn is wrong – and most teenagers are encouraging, neutral, or indifferent about opinions of pornography. They say it's "not a big deal."
- Porn is a \$57 billion-dollar industry worldwide - \$14 billion-dollar industry in the US. That's larger than all the combined revenues of all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises AND more than CBS, NBC, and ABC combined.
- A pastor in Cincinnati, Ohio polled all the 7th graders in his church and 100% of those 11-year-olds admitted to having exposure to pornography.
- 50% of Christian men are addicted to pornography.

In summary: porn is running rampant in our society. If you wanted to get it, you could get it whenever you wanted, and its presence in the Church is heartbreaking yet so very real.

Pornography addiction is just that. It's an addiction that seeps into every other part of your life. At first, it doesn't seem like a big deal to just pull up something on your phone with a group of friends because you're curious. Then, though, you probably will find yourself lying in bed at night when nobody knows what you are doing, and you convince yourself that one time won't hurt. Before you know it, it's an everyday thing. You plan your life around when you can disappear for 20 minutes and have a sexual release. It's a slippery slope into addiction, but that's exactly what pornography is.

I've talked to so many men and women who are convinced that pornography will go away once they get married. That's not how it works. Your pornography addiction will not just disappear just because you get married and you're having sex with your husband or wife. Think about it... we've already talked about the fact that no human will ever be able to love you perfectly. No matter how great they are, there will be times when they fail. When that happens, when you don't feel loved or treated well by your husband or wife, you will run to pornography out of habit.

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

Why? Because through research scientists have proven that pornography affects the brain in the same way drugs do. Watching porn literally will neurologically rewire your brain. Pornography has a profound impact on you from the first time you view it, and eventually you'll build up a tolerance to the graphic material you're watching and begin to crave a different type of it. You'll also become desensitized to real sex. After a while, all sex is interpreted as porn and for a man, all women as porn stars, not as people created by God in His image. The more someone uses this pathway, the more intense their longing for it will be. After a while, they'll long for more frequent and higher levels of stimulation. Consistent and reliable evidence that shows exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women.

Women who view porn have similar pathways that form in their brain; they'll begin to accept that they are just objects to be used for sexual objectification and devalue themselves to fit the image of female porn stars.

Another important point for me to mention to all the ladies out there... not all porn is visual; for many women, reading books with explicit sexual descriptions can be destructive to our view of sexuality and the expectations of relationships. At the unfortunate end of the spectrum, you have some books glorifying sexual violence, brokenness, and victimhood instead of integrity and any kind of selfless, disciplined love. On the other end, even though our minds automatically turn to visual pornography such as videos and images, the problem doesn't stop there. Writing can be steamy, too. Women tend to turn to fictional love stories to fulfill our craving for romance because we are discouraged in our own love life and feel like "real love stories" don't exist.

There is a danger in this, though. Romance novels portray perfect guys. You know, the man that is sensitive, but also masculine. The guy who is just the right amount of protective over you, but also doesn't cling to you like dog fur. The guy that never checks out other girls and gets jealous when another guy flirts with you. Oh, and on top of that killer personality, he looks like a Greek god. A lot of these books have similar plots. It goes like this: Girl meets hot guy. He's rebellious, free-spirited, and falls madly in love with her. They get into a serious relationship and suddenly he changes his ways; he becomes a sweet, sensitive guy who never glances at other women. Newsflash ladies: that isn't how real-life works. The habits that a person has before you start dating them, will carry into your dating relationship, and eventually your marriage.

So, how does the innocent glance at an image or writing or video turn into a destructive addiction? Pornography addiction results from the attempt to receive intimacy without risking rejection. There is zero vulnerability, and to many, porn offers them the safest form of a relationship. Many of us deeply fear the rejection that could come with being known by another person. If someone sees all our flaws, we fear that we won't be loved. This is where pornography becomes so tempting. It offers us a way to satisfy our desire for intimacy without any of the risk.

In reality though, the shame that comes from porn fuels isolation and drives us further away from the true intimacy we are searching for. Porn teaches a lifestyle of selfishness – it gives nothing and takes everything. The best way to describe it is as a "counterfeit intimacy." Our culture is under this weird impression that we can be fully known and fully loved by social media. That is crazy talk! We can only be fully known and fully loved by

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

God... that's how we were created and that's how it was always supposed to be. He created us, He knows us, and He wants a relationship with us.

TRUTH:

If we talk about getting to the root of the problem, we have to recognize that pornography addiction is just a symptom of another sin. Pornography isn't just an addiction, it's a heart issue. Pornography is a sin that demonstrates how desperate we are for intimacy, yet we simply don't know how to get there. We don't know where to get the real thing.

The Bible tells us where to get true intimacy. If you're looking for that answer, I know where you can find it.

Philippians 4:8 says "*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*" PORN IS THE OPPOSITE OF ALL OF THESE THINGS.

There is nothing true, nothing noble, nothing right, nothing pure, nothing lovely, and absolutely nothing admirable about sexual objectification. The world will tell you that lust is okay; that sex is something that will make you happy and fulfill you. The world will push and push you to view yourself and others as less than you are. God wants you to view others and yourself as deeply loved and of great worth. He wants us to love one another, not lust after one another.

But... as always, God doesn't leave us there. If you're trapped in a cycle of counterfeit intimacy and you don't know where to go, He wants to meet you there. He offers you an abundance of hope, and grace, and mercy, and forgiveness. I hope you realize that God still has a plan for your life, no matter where you are or where you feel trapped. God can redeem the worst things in our lives and use them to equip us for whatever He has for us. If you whole-heartedly seek after God, He will use you in amazing ways. Once you learn the truth and believe what the Bible says about the lies that are weighing you down, they lose their power over you. Once you realize that pornography and lust are enslaving you, you have the power to get out of it. John 8:32 says... "*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

APPLICATION:

If you're sitting here and your chain is pornography, I know a name that will break that chain. If you're sitting in here and you're in a dating relationship where pornography is an active part of it, I know a name that will break that chain for you and your significant other. If you're sitting here and your chain is anxiety, depression, self-harm, shame, or guilt, I know a name that will break that chain. I know a name that will break every chain. And that name is Jesus.

More than ever, there is a deep need for sexual restoration, healing, and change in our world. My prayer for you all is that you will play a part in shifting the culture. I pray that you start to see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and not just as people to use for your own self-gratification or happiness. I pray that you actually begin to love one another in relationships and not just lust after them.

The statistics are alarming, and I could stand up here spitting them at you all day, but the bottom line is that pornography is a distortion of sex is destroying us. There seems

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

to be little difference between Christians and non-Christians in their sexual behavior. We pick and choose what we want to believe in the Bible, and many times, we skip right over God's design for sex inside of marriage and why He gave us that gift. We want God to bless us but make up our own rules when it comes to sex and relationships. The only possible difference is that the Christian suffers some type of guilt, shame, and brokenness, because they know better.

Maybe you're in a true Romans 7 battle of the flesh and the spirit, which are warring against each other. Maybe you are struggling with questions such as, "If I'm a Christian why do I still struggle? Why does it seem I have no power to conquer this? Am I saved? Does God love me?" Maybe you come to church and youth group every week, and it seems like everything is perfect. Maybe you're close to throwing in the towel because you feel alone. Maybe you just think it's too difficult and depressing.

This is my encouragement to you: Be real. Share your struggles, your hurts, and the hard spots in your life you just can't seem to overcome. Be vulnerable. Start being transparent, raw, and real, showing the true meaning of boasting in the cross of Christ alone. You're not alone.

The battle with pornography is not one that you have to fight alone. The battle of relationships is not one that you have to fight alone. It's not one that we have to figure out. We have a Book that shows us the way to abundance and freedom by lovingly guiding our lives.

LANDING:

The beauty in Jesus's victory is that we have the freedom to struggle. Truth is, the fact that we wrestle is one of the biggest signs that we are saved to begin with. Do dead people wrestle? Do corpses struggle? NO; it's only because we have been made alive that we are a new creation. It's only because we have been made alive that we are able to struggle.

Jesus is the One who has done that for you. Let Him crush your idols by bringing them into the light. He's so much bigger than anything you are struggling with. He's so much stronger. He's so much better. He is worth it. He foresaw all our sin, all our shortcomings, all the times we'd run back to lust instead of Him, all the times we'd fail, and He still joyfully came and got us (*Hebrews 12:2*).

So, rest in that fact. Rest knowing that Jesus wants you, not your stuff or your behavior. He just wants you. Don't be the one that goes to Him when the starvation kicks in. Open your Bible. Rely on Him daily, and He will give you what you need. Don't try to do it by yourself. Your identity is found in Him. Rest in Him and your soul won't constantly be searching or competing for worth.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

Philippians 4:8 Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

John 8:32 You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Module 2, Teaching 2: Pornography: The Culprit of Diminishing Relationships

Mark 7:15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.

Hebrews 12:2 And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Small Group Questions

1. What do you know about pornography and what have you heard about it?
2. How does the Bible change what you think about pornography?
3. How does pornography affect the real relationships that we were made for?
4. What is the hope that Jesus offers to those struggling with pornography addiction?
5. Leaders, take this time to review the importance of sharing struggles in a Christian community and how bringing them into the light no longer gives them power.

FIGHT FOR

REAL LOVE

PORN

SELFISH
DEMEANING
FAKE
CHEAP



LOVE

SELFLESS
GENUINE
LOYAL
FULFILLING

Importance of Module 2

“Let’s Get Real” is the second module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. The three teachings in this module are focused around the reality of the culture that our students are immersed in. When we look at the reality of what their days are filled with, we can see a clear picture of counterfeit intimacy, distraction, and comparison that is fueled by social media. Online dependency has had some great effects on society, as it has increased our ability to communicate efficiently, but it has also created a dangerous place for unintended loneliness and corruption. As the Church, creating conversations around these cultural topics is so important; I know with certainty that teenagers yearn to have their questions answered about some of their deepest struggles. We must shine the light on struggles like pornography, loneliness, and rejection, and declare that there is hope because Jesus has already overcome them. After taking a few weeks to study identity in module one, the second module will begin to look at how understanding our identity in Jesus is guaranteed to lead us to freedom. Before we fully live into the abundant life Jesus Christ has provided for us, we have to get real and deal with our relational and sexual brokenness.

Theme

We’ve all been there. And if you haven’t yet, you undoubtedly will be. Our hearts feel pain so very deeply. Interestingly enough, tests have shown that the parts of our brain that light up in response to rejection also light up when we experience physical pain. Rejection can cause intense feelings of loneliness, despair, and cause us to question the goodness of God. Sometimes, we look for affirmation and acceptance in all the wrong places, and other times, even when we have good intentions, we miss the mark. How do we deal with the negative emotions that we are all bound to face and not let them take root in our souls and start to distort who we are? The truth is, rejection can always grow us and shape us, but it was never meant to define us. Jesus wants to do something more with it, if we will let Him.

They say hindsight is 20/20. It can be hard to look past our circumstances and look up at God. When we’re in the middle of hard circumstances, our outlooks can be a little blurry. While we are waiting for God to come through on His promises, it can be hard to adopt a hopeful perspective. But so many times we can look back on God’s past faithfulness and see clearly that He had a plan. He came through for you then. And He will come through for you again.

This message is an invitation of hope from the God of the Universe – specifically for those students struggling with suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety. We’ll take a look at the lies. And we’ll invite them back to the Truth.

Goal of Small Group

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 3

MAIN QUESTIONS: Why is loneliness such an epidemic in our society? What does the Bible say about suicide? How do we deal with loneliness and rejection? What does the Bible teach us about these emotions, and how can knowing more about Jesus help us to navigate these?

INTRO:

When I was very little, my grandma tells me that I'd do some extraordinary feat then turn toward her and my grandpa, pause with expectation, and finally say what I obviously thought they should have known: "You can clap now!" Which of course they both did with gusto. My heart breaks when I see children who seem to have no one to clap for them. You all have probably heard that a child's future emotional well-being is greatly affected by the presence or absence of healthy, parental affirmation. When lacking, children can spend decades unconsciously searching for a "well done." But even when affirmation is given to us growing up, many of us still feel like children wandering about, waiting for someone, somewhere, to start clapping. What have you done that you wish others would clap about? What could they affirm in you that would lead you to take a deep breath, sigh, and say, "Finally - I have been waiting to hear that for a long, long time"? Perhaps it has something to do with your academic or athletic accomplishments,

your inner character, your physical beauty, or how much stuff you have acquired because you worked hard to have the money to get it.

Well, wait no more! Someone is clapping - wildly in fact. Father God never misses even a moment of our lives. His enthusiasm for us would make the most exuberant soccer mom look like a still-life painting.

TENSION:

The problem is that we can neither see Him nor hear Him. Thankfully, God's existence is not dependent upon a confirmation from our senses. His actions are not on pause awaiting our OK. Believe it or not, feel it or not, through Jesus, Father God accepts, affirms, and delights in His children. That's you. He accepts, affirms, and delights in you (*Ephesians 3:18-19*).

Sometimes that Truth simply does not feel like it is enough, so we keep looking for "something more." That search has led more than a few followers of God to distraction, despair, or even self-destruction. More than ever, the popularity of suicide is raging. Our culture has romanticized suicide for your generation, through TV shows like *13 Reasons Why*, which brings to light issues like abuse, addiction, bullying, depression, hardship at home, image, self-harm, and suicide. All of these experiences are very, very real, and I see that most of you react to the show similarly; you relate to the characters and you can empathize with how they're feeling in certain situations. What shows like this lack, though, is the Truth that combats the deep emotions that come from those hurts.

13 Reasons Why reminds us that the battle is real. Death and destruction are actively seeking to destroy lives. Yet, I take great comfort to know that my God not only sees this and knows the state of the battle—but He promises to provide me strength in it. Grace – that crazy, powerful, table-turning undeserved favor from God – wins the battle against guilt and shame. Grace is greater than all our sin, even suicide. Grace wins. Because of grace, there is always hope. Do you believe that, even in a world of doubt, despair, and hatred?

Even if we know what Jesus says about us, it's still more than likely we will feel things like rejection and loneliness. We still feel the weight of what other people think about us and what they say about us, or the lack thereof. We still yearn to be loved, and when we aren't, at times, it can feel like we are being crushed to a point that we can never come back from.

Interestingly enough, MRI studies show that the same areas of the brain become activated when we experience rejection as when we experience physical pain. Deep

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

hurt can make us question who we are, what we were made for, and why we are here. One of my favorite authors, Lysa Turkeurst, puts it this way: *“Rejection steals the best of who I am by reinforcing the worst of what’s been said about me.”*

Think about why it hurts so much when other people say or do things that make you feel unwanted. Isn’t it in part due to the fact they just voiced some vulnerability or insecurity that you’ve already berated yourself for? It hurts exponentially more when you’re kicked in an already bruised shin. When someone else affirms the lies you believe about yourself, it starts a dangerous, downward spiral of believing those lies, emotions, and feelings are the truth. If you’re honest, maybe that’s the camp that you’re living in today.

TRUTH:

Satan wants to convince you that any and all failure defines you. That’s exactly the opposite of the Gospel. Jesus says, *“You are worth so much. I will die so that you may live.”* If you’re stuck in the cycle of believing lies about yourself, I invite you to come back to the Truth found in John 10:10: *“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly.”*

If you’re in a spot where you’re feeling like nothing good can ever come from a situation, nothing good can ever be made from the brokenness you’re facing, let me just remind you that God can take what Satan meant for shame and use it for His glory. Just when we think we’ve messed up so badly that our lives are nothing but heaps of ashes, God pours His living water over us and mixes the ashes into clay. He then takes this clay and molds it into a vessel of beauty. After He fills us with His overflowing love, He can use us to pour His love into the hurting lives of others.

When you’re lonely and you see your ex-girlfriend or boyfriend post a picture with someone new, laughing, holding hands, and looking like the happiest they’ve ever been, you’ll want to grab at something to fill the void. It’s hard not to comfort yourself by texting another guy or girl to grab a little attention and make yourself feel better. All these things we are tempted to grab at? They won’t fill us the way we think they will. In the end, they only make us feel emptier and more rejected. Yes, the concept of telling our flesh “no” can sound good on paper, but in the midst of rejection’s painful pricks, we often feel so very powerless. That’s where we have to know we aren’t expected to just put on a brave face and hope for the best. We have the power through Christ, who is over every power, including the pull of flesh and the sting of rejection. When we have Christ, we are full - fully loved and accepted and empowered to say “no” to letting our feelings rule our lives.

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

Many times, feeling lonely, rejected, or abandoned comes from the sting of betrayal or deception or the hurt of someone deliberately choosing to end a friendship or relationship with us. I once heard a story about a woman getting her purse stolen while she was shopping for shoes. She bent over to put a box back on the shelf, and in that instant a thief grabbed her purse and started running like a bolt of lightning through the store. Naturally, she started chasing him, and as many of us would do, she chased him out of the store, flailing her arms in the air and screaming at the top of her lungs, desperate for someone to help her get her belongings back. Interestingly enough, she chased the thief about two blocks, still screaming and flailing, when he decided that it wasn't worth it. People were staring, and he knew this woman wasn't going to give up; so, he threw the purse behind him. The woman picked up her mangled purse off the ground, panting from the chase, and walked back to the shoe store in shock. Despite her belongings being jumbled, nothing really was ruined or destroyed.

Sometimes, I wish that life was like this purse snatching incident. We are used to our "normal," and then suddenly, something alters that normal, rips away from us something that we hold dear, and it leaves us in shock. When my normal has been taken from me, I wish I could run down the street, flailing and crying, and get the same result as that woman. I wish life would change its mind, tossing back what I lost. That's not always the way that things work out. Unfortunately, life doesn't just throw back our "normal" at us; instead, we are left in the aftermath of our normal being snatched and figuring out how to live in a new normal. Parents getting divorced. A significant other dumping you. A friend group deliberately excluding you and leaving you out. Feelings of depression or anxiety that seem to come out of nowhere.

I remember a specific time period that my "normal" was turned upside down. I was devastated, confused, and clinging to God by a thread. My friend group deteriorated, my boyfriend dropped me like it was hot, and soon after started dating another one of my friends. On top of that, I no longer trusted my own judgement when it came to my dating life. Plus, I was transitioning into my senior year of college, looking for a job after deciding I no longer wanted to be a doctor, even though I'd spent the last three years preparing to do so and had no back-up plan, and was dealing with disapproval from my family. That's like a quadruple-whammy. Needless to say, I wasn't thriving.

My normal was snatched right from underneath me, just like that woman's purse. I wished I could also run down the sidewalk screaming, and that life would've changed its mind. I craved that, and I even prayed for it. But that's not the way things always work out, and I see now that God's plan was to snatch my "normal" right up from underneath me and give me something even better. Even though everything felt strange and hard

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

and different and impossibly irreversible, I now see that no amount of screaming and running down a sidewalk would've gotten it back.

Let me stop here and say: No one, and I mean no one is immune to feelings of depression, anxiety, rejection, loneliness, or suicidal thoughts. No one. Take out your phone, lay down your pride, and before we go any further, type these numbers into your contacts. Some of you will need it personally, and some of you will need it to help a friend. None of us are above or beyond the reach of lies taking root in our souls. That's Satan's primary goal. To make you believe that you are in fact alone and worthless.

- **National Suicide Prevention Line:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Student Counseling Helpline:** 979-845-2700
- **Youth Pastor Email or Phone** (whichever one you are comfortable giving out – but, take this opportunity to speak to kids that you are there for them... that you're a safe place).

APPLICATION:

Looking back at that hard season of life, I'm so thankful that God is good at being God. It frees me. I don't have to figure out my present circumstances. I don't have to fill the silence left behind in another person's absence. I don't have to know all the whys and what-ifs. All I have to do is trust. So, in quiet humility and without a personal agenda, I made the decision to let God sort it all out. I sat quietly in His presence and simply said, "God, I want Your truth to be the loudest voice in my life. Correct me. Comfort me. Come closer still. And I will trust. God, You are good at being God."

When we live from the abundant place, knowing that we are loved, we don't find ourselves begging others for scraps of love. I used to think that Jesus was my number one. I was doing and doing and doing so many things with God in mind but not really spending time getting refilled by His abundant love. I was saying I was connecting with Him, but in all honesty, I was letting the world stir my deep affections. I would say I was putting God first in my life, but then I'd give my first moments of each day checking my text messages rather than checking in with His message. I'd believe I had prayed about things, but in reality, I'd only worried about them, talked to friends about them, and tried to figure out how to solve them myself. I lived secretly for the applause of the world, while publicly proclaiming that I lived for Jesus.

The truth is, Jesus waits every day with every answer we need, every comfort we crave, every affection we're desperate for, while we look everywhere else but at Him. We run at a breakneck pace to try and achieve what God simply wants us to slow down enough to receive.

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

You guys are living in a world where there's no kind of empty quite like the empty we are experiencing: your hands are full but inside you may be nothing but an exhausted shell. You're busy. You're wrapped up in everyone else's seemingly perfect lives that you see through social media. Maybe you're not sure why you're here or what the point to all of it is. Life is hard, so what's the point? I can tell you that running from the pain won't fix it. Pretending to be fine when you're not won't fix it. Avoiding future relationships won't fix it. Staying busy enough or becoming successful enough won't fix it. What will fix it?! In 1 Peter 5:7 we are told, "*Cast all your anxieties on Him because He cares for you.*" You aren't alone; there is a God who wants to listen, take the pain from you, and replace it with Truth.

This is what you need to know. There is hope – but in order to move toward that hope, you must move away from the lies. There are so many lies that Satan is working to try and get you to believe. The first lie? That nobody cares. Maybe you've had thoughts that the world would be better off without you, or that nobody would care if you were gone, or that taking your own life would make everything better. That's a flat out lie. How do I know? Because I care about you. That's why we are taking tonight to do this. Because I want you to live. But more importantly, God wants you to live. God cares about you. He's trying to speak to you in this message – He's trying to say, "I see you, I love you, and I care about you." Listen up! He's trying to get your attention! The whole point of Jesus coming to earth was so that you could live – not just physically but spiritually! He cares. I care.

Lie #2: Suicide will end the pain. That's a lie – and maybe you're having similar thoughts to the main character of *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker. She had convinced herself that nobody really cared, so her death would end her pain. We clearly see through viewing the show that that wasn't the case; the people in Hannah's life suffer greatly from her death. The pain she is feeling is only magnified and spread to the people that loved her. If you die, your pain transfers from you, to the people that love you.

And the last lie: Things won't change. Once again, what a trap this is. Emotions and feelings will always change. They are meant to. They won't last forever! Suicide is often an impulsive yet permanent and irreversible attempt to deal with unbearable, yet temporary, pain. You don't have to end your life to end your pain. Do you realize that? Your pain can end by simply letting someone know you, and I mean really know you. Let them into your pain, let them walk through it with you, and let them speak Truth over the lies you're believing about yourself.

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

If you've bought into this lie, you need to know that Jesus changes everything. So much so that there will be a day with no pain – the Bible talks about it. There will be a new day, and the pain we now know, will be gone forever. That is hope, my friends.

To one who thinks there is no way out, there is. To one who thinks that no one cares, we do. To the one who thinks there is no hope, see the hope in Jesus. To the one who is scared to get help, to let someone in, to let someone know you, run toward them anyway. The darkness of night never lasts forever. Wait for the light that always comes. I promise that the God who has been faithful to me will also be faithful to you.

LANDING:

Rejection might be a delay. It may be a distraction. It may even be a devastation. But it is not your final destination. You are destined for a love that can never be diminished, tarnished, shaken, or taken. You have a story. My prayer is that your story becomes intertwined with His; that everything you do, you do for the glory of God. The truth is, the more fully we invite God in, the less we will feel uninvited by others.

Sometimes though this truth simply does not feel like it is enough, so we keep looking for “something more.” Within our souls, we all possess an innate need to be soundly valued and wanted. Mankind's affirmation cannot probe the depths of that need in our lives. It can't even touch it. Like a short spoon in a tall glass, people's attention simply cannot reach the bottom of our profound longing to be valued. Only God can reach that place, because he is the One who created that place. So, when God's affirmation from above feels insufficient, and we are tempted to live for the awe and applause of man, we must remind ourselves that honoring God's ways but living for man's are mutually incompatible goals. Then, we can adjust our posture, anchoring ourselves in God's Word, and repositioning our it-is-not-enough feelings behind God's it-is-enough truth. We are the recipients of God's enthusiastic attention and acceptance. What could all the attention and acceptance of the world actually add to that?

We've been talking tonight about the heaviness of taking your own life, but what you need to leave here with is that Jesus wants to give you life. Consider tonight a phone call from a friend. Jesus is calling you and saying: “I see you, I care about you, and I want you to live.” This is an invitation to take a step toward hope.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

Module 2, Teaching 3: Uninvited: Loneliness and Rejection

Ephesians 3:18-19 So that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand and grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses the knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of fullness of God.

John 10:10 I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly.

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

Isaiah 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Small Group Questions

1. Discuss feelings and truth – what is the difference between them, and how can we combat feelings with Truth?
2. How does being vulnerable open us up for disappointment?
3. What does the Bible say about us casting our fears and anxieties on Jesus?
4. How do you tend to react when you feel betrayed, lonely, rejected, or taken advantage of? How do you react when your normal is stolen?
5. How do we go about taking up a posture of freedom and identity in Christ?

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LINE:

1-800-273-8255

STUDENT COUNSELING HELPLINE:

979-845-2700

YOUTH PASTOR EMAIL OR PHONE:

[Redacted area]

“

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your
God. I will strengthen you and
help you; I will uphold you with my
righteous right hand.

ISAIAH 41:10

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

NEW MESSAGE SERIES!

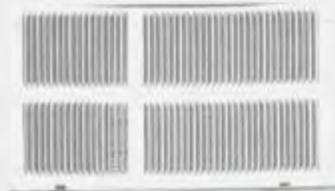


PURITY

Rethinking, Reorienting, Restarting



CONFUSION - TEARS - PAIN - JOY - EXHILARATION - THESE ARE ALL THINGS THAT DESCRIBE LOVE FOR TEENS. FOR SOME, THE SUBJECT OF DATING BRINGS UP FEELINGS OF INTENSE PAIN, AND FOR OTHERS, IT BRINGS UP IMMENSE JOY. EITHER WAY, TEENAGERS CARE DEEPLY ABOUT DATING, AND THERE IS A VERY REAL CRAVING TO PAIR OFF AT AN EARLY AGE. CULTURALLY, WE HAVEN'T HAD THE BEST EXAMPLE OF WHAT A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP LOOKS LIKE, SO IT'S NO WONDER THAT THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF FEELINGS THAT GO ALONG WITH DATING. THESE TEACHINGS FIRST COVER HOW TO DATE AND WHO TO DATE, THEN WE'LL DIVE INTO FORGIVENESS & HEALING FROM RELATIONAL BROKENNESS OR SEXUAL SIN, AND THEN TALK ABOUT REDEFINING THE MISSION OF MARRIAGE.



PURITY

Rethinking, Reorienting, Restarting



Importance of Module 3

“Purity: Rethinking, Reorienting, Restarting” is the third module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. Confusion – tears – pain – joy – exhilaration – these are all words that describe love for teens. For some, the subject of dating brings up feelings of intense pain, and for others it brings up immense joy & fullness. Either way, teenagers care deeply about dating, and there is a very real craving to pair off at an early age. Unfortunately, many teens haven’t had great examples of what healthy relationships looks like whether due to family conflict or negative cultural influences. So, it’s no wonder that there are a multitude of good and bad feelings that go along with dating. Statistically, the vast majority of youth want to get married* and if statistics hold like they have for hundreds of years, the vast majority of them will. The rumors of the death of marriage have been greatly exaggerated. The goal of this module is to take the teachings in the first two modules about identity and cultural issues and apply them. These teachings first cover how to date and who to date. Then we’ll dive into forgiveness & healing from relational brokenness or sexual sin, and then talk about redefining the mission of marriage.

*Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Theme

Let’s be honest – we haven’t had the best example of what relationships were created to look like. Coupling and decoupling (pairing and pairing off) is dangerous – especially when we treat a relationship with another person like something we go to the store and pick up. Dating is not like selecting your perfect first day of school outfit – you don’t get to do that with a human. You can’t make a list of characteristics that you “need” in a person, and BAM, expect them to come out of thin air, flawless. Dating occurs between two very flawed people, both of whom are immensely loved by God. No matter how hard we try, we still manage to get this so wrong. In order to get it right, we have to look to the One who made us, who created us to be in relationship.

The term “dating” isn’t really in the Bible, so how do we know what the parameters are? Just because, culturally speaking, times were different back when Jesus lived, doesn’t mean that what He taught is now ancient history. God addresses sex, purity, relationships, and marriage all throughout the Bible. We’re going to talk about how to date, who to date, and how to pursue God’s guidance in this process. We’ll also talk about purity and how the larger idea is not just about abstaining from sex, but rather engaging in a lifestyle, investing in abundant life. Dating with honor is doable, even amidst all of the confusion, especially when we see it is possible and desire it, because we know it’s what is best for us.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTIONS: How do we know who to date and how to date? What should we be looking for in another person who we are romantically attracted to? What does the Bible say about negotiables and non-negotiables when it comes to dating? What's the difference between abstinence and purity?

INTRO:

Dating. Whether you've been on a ton of dates or you've never been on one, chances are, you have an opinion about dating. Maybe you've been on some really awkward dates. Maybe you've been on some really stellar ones. Maybe you don't really get the point of dating. Let me just say this: dating is confusing, it can be awkward, and whatever you feel about the topic of dating, that's okay. That's what we're here to talk about today. In a culture that saturates your brains with everything from who you should date to how you should date, have you ever stopped and asked the question: What does God say about dating?

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

This is the craziest time for dating that has ever existed; 47% of young people have been in dating relationships that have been initiated over social media. 2/3 of college students have been in a “friends with benefits” relationship, saying the lack of commitment is what makes these relationships fun and appealing.

You’re in the middle of the hook-up culture. We like not having any commitments, not being tied down, and just using people to get what we want, when we want it. I’ve witnessed the self-esteem of my friends’ plummet as they’ve slept with people who have quickly moved on to the next relationship, seemingly unfazed.

70% of students will have their first sexual experience by 19. I think that it’s because we really have come to believe that God’s way, the way we were created, doesn’t quite measure up to the world’s way.

When I was your age, I needed a higher understanding. I needed to know the cause at the core of my temptation. I know that navigating dating is hard, and I needed to hear more than “do this, don’t do that.” I didn’t need a rule list; I needed to know why it mattered to listen and obey in the first place. Because the truth is, most of our relational struggles come out of our lack of deep-rooted understanding about what sex is, how God sees us, why God calls us to a greater vision, and why obedience to that calling is worth the sacrifice.

Every good invention comes with an instruction manual – what to do and what not to do – but I fear that a lot of us only know what God says not to do. And that’s preventing us from having a higher view of sex and that’s preventing us from wanting God’s best, because we don’t even know what His best is. Too often, we automatically default to what the world is telling us is “normal.”

I believe that the Bible is true, it is good, and it is living, written from a God who wants the best for us. That’s the truth that this entire message is going to be based on, and I promise you that what it has to say about dating is so much better than what you’ve been hearing.

If you look around, dating is more marked with destruction than it is marked with delight. If you’ve ever been broken up with or seen someone close to you go through a tough break-up, you know that nothing quite destroys someone like the intentional end to a relationship that meant the world to them. Nothing quite destroys someone like an unexpected break-up, feeling like their emotions were insignificant or being toyed with. Even though we tend to treat dating like a game, it isn’t one. So, you may be asking... well then, what is it?

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

What's the real goal of dating? If we look in the Bible, the answer is marriage. Now, I'm not suggesting we go back to some 17th century way of dating, where your parents set you up with someone and you literally meet them when you are marrying them - that's crazy sauce, too! No, what I'm saying is that we need to think more about why, how, and who we are dating, instead of just doing what everyone else is doing. Although we live in a society that is afraid of commitment, recent studies have actually revealed that the majority of you want to get married. If that's the case, we have to look at how to get there because CLEARLY with a 60% divorce rate we are doing something entirely wrong. Casual dating and the hook-up culture aren't working. If we want to do it better, we have to set different parameters. We have to have a different game plan. We have to have a different perspective about dating.

Someone once said to me: "To date with no intention of getting married is like going to the grocery store with no money." You're either going to leave unhappy or you're going to take something that isn't yours. What are your intentions? Guys, if you can't get clarity on that question from a girl you're interested in, don't ask her out – keep walking. Ladies, if the guy you're going out with can't answer that question, there's an issue – keep walking.

TENSION:

A *New York Times* Magazine article reported how teenagers found members of the opposite sex to be annoying and difficult, and dating involved give-and-take, communication, and learning to deal with someone who was different. In other words, they rightly perceived that dating involved work. To avoid all this, a new form of meeting partners was developed, one that went straight to sex. A hook-up is a simple sexual encounter without the condition of conducting a relationship. After a hook-up, you may want to start a dating relationship, but that is no condition for a hook-up. The advent of hook-up culture has meant to some that we have one of the first societies with no clear culturally supported pathways for single adults to meet and marry.

If we're honest, fear, pride, and lust are leading us in relationships. That's what the hook-up culture is based on – relationships have become all about us. The problem isn't with *how to get a date* (really, anyone can get a date – you lower your standards enough, you could get a date in two minutes – probably less). That isn't the issue - the issue is *how we date*.

If dating is purely a selfish endeavor, it gets dangerous. When we view the other person as a someone who can satisfy us or save us from our loneliness, we are using people instead of caring for them. We must also recognize how hypersexualized our culture is –

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

everywhere around us, we see sex. Sex sells, and that's why the hook-up culture is working. Relationships we see in movies and on tv shows scream, "Do what feels good. Do whatever you're drawn to. If you want it, you can have it." Instant gratification is the ultimate goal. Now, I'm sure that nothing I say will come as a shock to any of you. You're immersed in it, and if society is telling you you're at an age where you can have sex, then there certainly shouldn't be a problem with having a real conversation about it.

When we combine the selfishness and hypersexualized culture we live in, it becomes very clear that sex and dating are indeed a big deal. This is one of the clearest expressions of your identity to those around you. Your actions in your relationships announce to the world who you think you are. You are acting on some sort of subconscious belief that says what you are living for and what you believe you are worth.

If you're surprised we are talking about sex in youth group, you shouldn't be. The Bible has a lot to say about it. Let's think about sex as a fire. The gift of fire can be amazing, or it can be destructive, depending on what boundaries surround it. If it's in a fireplace, fire is good – it's comforting, warming, and creates an atmosphere of love. The same is true for sex. When inside of marriage (the boundaries God outlines in the Bible), sex is a gift that God has given us, and we shouldn't ever feel ashamed about that. Sex inside of marriage is safe and secure. When fire is outside of a fireplace though, it can be volatile. If sex is like a fire, then when it is outside of marriage or through a computer screen, it has the ability to destroy us. Virtual sex, or pornography, is like a fake fire. Casual sex, which is what the hook-up culture pushes, is like igniting a pool of lighter fluid. It ignites with a big flash and then disintegrates to nothing.

Don't believe the lies that sex won't make your relationship different – if you've experienced this before, I bet you can pinpoint the exact moment things changed. Physical intimacy is a oneness, biblically and scientifically- there is an adhesive. Have you ever seen someone dating someone and you're like – why the heck are you dating them?! Think about a great friend you have, and they're dating someone with zero redeeming qualities. There is probably sex involved. Just sayin'. It's important to realize that our desire to find love is sometimes so intense that it makes us impatient to find love, so impatient that we may even be blind to a person's downfalls. This is why it is important to listen to the people around you, seek guidance from your parents about dating, and ask their input about the people you are spending your time with, especially if there is romantic interest involved. Out of everyone, your parents are the ones that should want the best for you because they love you deeply. If they're willing to give you their input, don't take it as an intrusion or lack of trust; I wish I would

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

have recognized sooner that the wisdom they offer is unparalleled from any other source.

The reality is that some of you will walk out of here today being okay with settling for less than the best - for a cheap fire or a fake fire – some of you will continue to believe the lie that pornography and hook-ups are as good as it gets. Some of you will buy into the lie that sex is the best – and you'll fall into a pattern of idolizing it, believing it's the greatest source of pleasure in the world. Though God created sex with a place and purpose, yet we've made sex its own god and worship it at the throne of our wants.

I'm going to tell you where so many young people get confused. We make dating a status rather than a process. Our thought process goes something like this: if I can just enter this status and get outta the friendzone, I get certain responsibilities and certain privileges. I can hang in this zone for a while, enjoying as many of the perks as I can while avoiding the harsher responsibilities of marriage. Dating should **not** be a way of maximizing benefits and minimizing obligations, but that's what it has turned into. Dating should be a way of evaluating if you want to partner with that person for the rest of your life.

I have had some say, "Well, Sammie, we've been dating forever. It's like we are married." No, it's not. When you consider the gravity of the covenant of marriage, which we will talk about later – the fact that you are committing to someone to unite your finances, family and future forever – you realize that it is a very different level of weight. A dating relationship, no matter how long it may have gone on, can be dissolved in an hour. Marriage opens up a completely new world of privileges because it also requires shouldering a completely new world of responsibilities. So, if someone is saying to you, "I want the privilege of access to your body, but I don't want the responsibility of loving and caring for you forever," that is not love. True love does not request access to your body while simultaneously avoiding any responsibility to care for you emotionally and financially. Try to make it sound as romantic as you want, but it is a selfish endeavor and God does not acknowledge it as honorable. If your partner gives you a hard time about your decision to remain pure, then you have all the proof you need to show that he or she is just trying to get something from you versus loving you as you deserve to be loved.

Our desires for intimacy are powerful. This power can be constructive or destructive. Our satisfaction and our safety will be ensured if we can aim these powerful desires toward divine purposes.

TRUTH:

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

Like a sailor on turbulent seas, we need to look up and see the North Star: the fixed points in the sky that we can count on to help us navigate all the opinions of the world. That is why God gives us the Bible – if it wasn't for the Bible, I don't know where I would go for my relationship advice. God's original design was for us to be in relationship with each other and in relationship with Him! He is the King of relationships, so why wouldn't I look to His Word – a Word that never changes, never falters, and is a source of life – for help with my relationships?!

A big question I get often with relationships is about the physical aspect of them. Like I said, sex is a big deal. Have you ever wondered – how far is too far? How far can I go physically with someone I am dating? Most of us have grown up hearing from the Church “don't have sex until you get married.” You may not even know why, you just know that's the cliché response that Christians give. While I'm in agreement with the virtue of purity, I don't think that answer is good enough. I don't think that that's how God would respond to the question. I don't think that's a fair response based on what His word says. If you've been told that before and you're not really sure why you shouldn't have sex until you get married, let me try to iron it out for you.

If you really want to know “how far is too far?” realize that you're asking the wrong question. What we should be asking is, “God, how do You want me to live and love so I can find the happiness I really long for?” If we approach God with this type of sincere faith and trust, He will bless us beyond our hopes. Instead of asking how far we can push the boundaries, we should acknowledge God's love for us, ask Him how we apply the love we've received from Him into our relationships, and realize that, most likely, what the Lord calls us to is going to seem crazy to those around us who don't know Him. Living a life that Jesus calls us to is going to be countercultural, but I for one know that it's going to be worth it, in Heaven and here on earth.

The best way we can honor Jesus is to choose to honor our bodies – and the first step to doing that is realizing how complex of a person you were created to be. You have so many parts to you, so many traits that make you who you are, and you're so much more than just the sum of biological responses. Maybe you've heard the word “chastity.” If you're not sure what that means, it is a virtue that values saving sex for marriage, because you value it as the beautiful and wonderful gift that God created it to be. It fights the selfish desires of lust and the lie that sex equals love. It's true, at least for many, that sex equates an emotional tie of some sort – one that might seem like love. But here's a newsflash: many treat sex as more of a physical thing than an emotional one. The Bible says sex is meant to be the ultimate expression of the ultimate commitment, marriage. Love comes first, marriage second, sex third. Not only that, but you trust that saving sex for marriage will allow you to learn skills that will help make

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

marriage last: skills like patience, self-sacrifice, restraint, and self-discipline. Living a life of purity means that you recognize sexual desires are much more than other biological responses, like being hungry or thirsty. It means honoring your body, soul, heart, and mind, because you believe that God created you to be set apart, to be honored, and to be worthy of true love, not some type of artificial love that our culture makes to look so appealing. Sex is sacred, and if you believe that chastity is good, it's important to know why you believe it, so that you can live it, no matter what your relationship status is.

If you believe that Jesus designed relationships, doesn't it make sense that He's the one that should be informing us on what they should look like? **2 Timothy 2:22** says: "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Instead of letting your emotions control you, the Lord reminds us that we all have the ability and the choice to honor Him in dating, even when it is difficult!

Remember: the ultimate purpose of dating is to find a spouse. If you date for recreation, you're just training yourself in the habit of failed relationships. In the Bible, there is no mention of "boyfriends or girlfriends." You are either a brother or sister in Christ, or you are husband and wife. That's it. What does this tell us? You must first learn to see each other as a sister or brother in Christ instead of allowing attraction and infatuation to cloud your decision-making. You must value the person you are dating as who they are – a precious son or daughter of God.

This is where it gets tricky. You find someone you like. They're cute. They think you're cute. They love Jesus, you love Jesus - which by the way, is a non-negotiable. The Bible has a lot to say about being unequally yoked, but the bottom line is this - the person you are dating ideally should love Jesus more than you do, and they should love Him more than they love you. If they don't love Jesus, they won't be able to properly love you, because the definition of real love is in the cross. That is a non-negotiable. If that requirement is fulfilled, move ahead. If it isn't, please hear me when I say that that relationship will never offer you the abundance because Jesus will not be at the center of it.

When that box is checked, you start hanging out, you learn more about each other, you admire that person's character, you have chemistry with them, and all of a sudden, things get complicated. No matter what you've said you believe, I can guarantee you'll be tempted to go further physically with them than the Bible commands us to go. It's natural to have a perspective change when you're dating someone, but that doesn't change the Truth that is in the Bible.

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

When you're looking for a partner to date, physical attraction should be on the list of things that are important to you – it's not a bad thing to list at all! But it shouldn't be the sole reason you are interested in someone. Our attraction to beauty is a very good thing. God made us this way! In a sense, this attraction is rooted in our innate attraction to the beauty of God, which we will experience in Heaven. But, we must also be aware of how our culture has warped our understanding of beauty. When you're married, even when you're "allowed" to have sex according to the Bible, 98% of your time as a married couple will be spent doing things that are not having sex.

You may have heard this before: "You've got to test drive the car before you buy it." In other words, people think it is absurd to wait until marriage to have sex because, well, you can't commit to loving a person forever until you know the sex is good. First of all, people are not cars, but I'll try my best to share my views on this theory. *James 1:17* tells us that every good and perfect gift comes from God. *Psalms 84:11* says that God will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly. *Psalms 145:16* says that God opens His hand and satisfied the desires of every living thing. Nowhere in those verses does it say, "Except when it comes to sex." If God is providing someone who satisfies every other thing you value in a partner, the Truth says that you can rest assured and you don't need to "test drive" the person before you marry them.

I think deep down the real issue is that we all want to do whatever we want (now) and to have what God wants (later). That's not how it works. You can't just flip a switch and undo what you have done, who you have become. This is a hard reality, but it's true. Like all sin, sexual sin is forgivable. But unlike some other sins, it's also a sin against yourself. It's intentionally making a choice that you know will hurt you. There will be scars. It changes who you are – and you can't take that back. Your experiences shape everything about your future. The challenge I have for you today and why I'm up here talking about dating is because I want you to fight for your future. There is no condom that can go over your soul. A boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, as close as it may feel, can only declare, "I might want all of you." Please don't give all of yourself away to someone whose best is a solid "maybe."

APPLICATION:

Let's put all of this into practice. Guys & girls, I want you to picture your sister, if you have one. If you don't, picture your best friend. Personally, I have a twin sister, so that's who I am picturing. My sister is amazing, and I pray for her future husband (although I have no idea who he is) often – that he would be following Jesus and honoring Him by living His life in accordance with the Word. What would I want a guy to do if he had a chance to date her? What would you want someone to do if they had the chance to date that person in your mind? I would want him to treat her in a way that, regardless of

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

whether or not their dating ended in marriage, she would be a better person and more like Christ as a result of his influence. I would want him to do or not do whatever he had to in order to play a role in helping her be all she is meant to be under God. Girls, if you're dating a guy, I'd want you to honor him, support him, respect him, both when he meets your needs AND when he falls desperately short. I'd want you to do your part in making him more like Jesus, simply because of who you are and how much you love the God that made him.

I think this is what God wants from us. If we ever date someone, regardless of whether or not we marry them, I want them to be able to say... "I am a better person for having spent time in proximity to that person." I believe that is a great aim in dating, and I think God would agree. You want the net effect of your presence in any relationship to be that the other person is better – that they trust and love God more because of your presence in his or her life. If you leave a trail of broken hearts and confused people, then you need to evaluate what you're doing.

Here's the key take-away:

If you have chosen to trust God with your eternal destiny, you can also trust Him with your dating life.

What destination do you want to get to? Do you desire to have great relationships and a great marriage? If you do, invite other people with you on the journey. We weren't meant to figure this out by ourselves. Ask hard questions. Instead of asking... is it okay for me to do this? Ask... is it wise for me to do this?

Hold out for honor! If you're negotiating the non-negotiables in dating, you are settling. If the "love" of your life does not exhibit God, if they don't pursue the heart of God AND the heart of you, working to make you the best version of yourself before the King's throne, YOU ARE SETTLING.

The Lord wants more for you than that!

If you're going to bring someone into your walk with God, they need to keep up if you plan to keep running. If you're single, hear me when I say this: that person doesn't have to be perfect or without sin. Don't be so obsessed with not settling that you pick apart every little thing about someone. But don't let a guy or girl that trips you up or drags you down stick around. You've got a race to run. And if someone can keep up with you, introduce yourself and get to know what they're all about. Hebrews 12:1 reminds us that this life is a race, and that we have a responsibility to run it well. When we run the race

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

with Jesus, for Jesus, with the goal of being more like Him, our lives will be fuller than we could ever imagine – both here on earth and in Heaven.

LANDING:

When I'm struggling in my relationships, I pray over Psalm 51:10 - *God, create a clean heart in me, and renew a right Spirit within me, as I figure out what the pure and holy thing to do in this situation looks like. I know I can't do it by myself, and I need you to help me.*

This is a tangible prayer that you can revert to, again and again, because prayer is how we're told to battle temptation. Is it going to be easy to hold out for honor and wait for the person you are going to marry? Heck, no. You might even question a couple of times if it's worth it. I know I have. But Jesus is standing at the edge of eternity calling your name and He wants more for you than you could ever want for yourself. That's what makes it worth it.

We can careen into the treacherous seas of relationships on our own, or we can surrender to the One who can guide us through dating's stormy seas. So, let's end this where we began. I do not know what God has in store for you in dating or marriage. But let me plead with you: before you get a relationship with a guy or girl right, it is essential that you get your relationship with God right. He is your source of life. He is your source of love. He is the hero who came for you, fought for you, died for you, and rose for you, so that you could have life. He is the reason we know what it really looks like to love like Jesus. If you learn to trust Him and His guidance in relationships, he will make you flourish, and the world and everyone in proximity to you will be better for it.

Remember that your salvation is a gift; you can't lose through bad behavior what you didn't deserve in the first place. However, it is possible to have a saved soul but a wasted life – to have been given everything and to have done nothing with it.

God doesn't want us to struggle through our relationships and our dating lives – He wants more for us. You were made by a King – and your body, heart, and dignity are worth valuing accordingly. Let's pray that we not only would understand that, but we'd desire to live into it.

Main Scriptures

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change the shifting shadows.

Psalm 145:16 You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

Module 3, Teaching 1: The Pursuit: Who to Date and How to Date

Psalm 84:11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

2 Timothy 2:22 So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Small Group Questions

1. What are nonnegotiables v. negotiables in dating? Have you ever thought about choosing a partner in this way, or have you often jumped into relationships without any period of evaluating the friendship?
2. What does culture tell us is “normal” when it comes to relationships?
2. Why does God value purity and why does He instruct us to keep it within the context of marriage?
3. What is the goal of dating? How do you make sure that goal stays at the center, even as a teenager?
4. Do you want to get married? What are your conceptions of marriage, what does your family history of marriage look like?
5. Does this picture of a relationship scare you, intrigue you, excite you, etc.? Do you truly believe that this is God’s best for you?

DATING
ISN'T
A
GAME.



So, then... what is it?

Importance of Module 3

“Purity: Rethinking, Reorienting, Restarting” is the third module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. Confusion – tears – pain – joy – exhilaration – these are all words that describe love for teens. For some, the subject of dating brings up feelings of intense pain, and for others it brings up immense joy & fullness. Either way, teenagers care deeply about dating, and there is a very real craving to pair off at an early age. Unfortunately, many teens haven’t had great examples of what healthy relationships looks like whether due to family conflict or negative cultural influences. So, it’s no wonder that there are a multitude of good and bad feelings that go along with dating. Statistically, the vast majority of youth want to get married* and if statistics hold like they have for hundreds of years, the vast majority of them will. The rumors of the death of marriage have been greatly exaggerated. The goal of this module is to take the teachings in the first two modules about identity and cultural issues and apply them. These teachings first cover how to date and who to date. Then we’ll dive into forgiveness & healing from relational brokenness or sexual sin, and then talk about redefining the mission of marriage.

*Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Theme

Sex. In a world overwhelmingly obsessed with it, why is the church so silent about it? While our secular culture twists, perverts, cheapens, and idolizes sex, there are gaping holes in the Church's guidance of young people. The result has been generations of sexually illiterate people, who are drowning in the repercussions of overwhelming sexual struggles. It may look like touting virginity and misunderstanding purity; we have sexual brokenness in our hearts from the things we've watched or seen or pieces of ourselves we've given away without going "all the way." We're dealing with all sorts of sexual sins that don't have to be the final act of sexual intercourse. The reality is that God cares about the condition of the heart, not the technicalities of our virginity, and He calls us to a greater vision of sexual understanding because of who we are. We all have a sexual past, and it's about time someone starts talking about what God thinks about those pasts.

God was safe. God is safe. God never changes. God is for us, not against us. Shame does not come from God. Shame is produced by our sin. Guilt says, "I've made a mistake." Shame says, "I am a mistake." In Genesis 3:10, Adam hid from God because he was naked and afraid. The very One that Adam should have felt safe with was God; but the opposite happened. He felt shame and he hid. When sin entered the equation, it was Adam's projection of his sin that caused him to see God as unsafe. We're not punished for our sin, but by our sin. Adam and Eve were the ones who changed, not

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

God. Our ability to see ourselves, God, and others for who they really are becomes distorted because of sin and shame. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Jesus came to save us from our brokenness, and, even today, no person is too far gone to be out of His reach. That's the message. That's the promise.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 2

MAIN QUESTIONS: What happens if I've gone too far? What happens if I've already had sex? What are the results of being sexually active before marriage? How does shame play a part in our relationship with God? What does God say about shame, and can we be set free from our shame?

INTRO:

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

When I was in 11th grade, I took an honors physics class. That was my first mistake – physics is one of those subjects that you either understand naturally, or you just don't get at all. After hours upon hours of studying and tutoring, plus several breakdowns and lots of frustration-tears, I've come to accept that the Good Lord just did not make me to understand physics. Like, ever. I never will. It's just a fact.

Anyway, one of our major assignments was to create a rubber band powered car that would go 20 meters by the end of the semester. Like I said, the Good Lord just did not give me the gift of being good at physics, so I struggled big time with this assignment. Luckily, my dad is one of the best “fixers” and handymen I know, and he spent hours guiding, helping, and partnering with me on how to build this dang rubber band car. Looking back, my favorite part of the assignment was the quality time I got to spend with him because he was willing to spend his spare time teaching me a thing or two about creating something with my hands. Again, not something that comes naturally to me.

We finally created, recreated, adjusted, and readjusted the car, and it just made it to 20 meters! Seeing a project I had put so much effort into was awesome, and I was so proud of it.

The night before the final test day, my finished car was sitting on the laundry room counter, above a cabinet where we kept a bunch of random things. In a series of unfortunate events, my mom was doing laundry, opened the cabinet, a paint can that wasn't quite stable on the shelf came flying out of the cabinet, and before she could catch it, it landed right on my rubber band car. Right on it. Splat. Cue the tears, people.

I think my mind has blacked out most of that night because the only other memory I have is stumbling into the classroom the next morning after an all-nighter filled with tears, delirious laughs, and tons of caffeine. My dad and I had stayed up for the majority of the night remaking the car, but we did it! AND you know what?! I aced that project. I came out with an A for the semester, all because that rubber band car made it even further than the 20 meters. During the remaking process, my dad had spray painted the car matte black and added some super swag detailing. Seriously, if I could have replicated that thing into a real car, I would still be driving that thing. PRAISE JESUS.

That project took hard work, tears, perseverance through the frustration, but I recreated that thing, and it came out just as beautiful as it was before it had been smashed. I think Jesus does the same for us – especially when it comes to our sexual pasts. My favorite thing about Jesus used to be that He created us – with care, with purpose, inviting us into living an abundant life. Somewhere along the line though the weight of the world, the expectations of those around us, and the temptation of living only for ourselves comes crashing down on us like a paint can. My favorite part about Jesus now? Even

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

after I've been crushed, sometimes willingly by my own choices, He doesn't leave me there. God doesn't just create – He recreates. He doesn't just forgive – He abundantly pardons.

TENSION:

Sex. In a world overwhelmingly obsessed with it, why is the Church so silent about it? While our secular culture twists, perverts, cheapens, and idolizes sex, there are gaping holes in the Church's guidance of young people. The result has been generations of sexually illiterate people, who are drowning in the repercussions of overwhelming sexual struggles.

Sexual struggle looks different for everyone. It may look like flaunting virginity and misunderstanding purity; we have sexual brokenness in our hearts from the things we've watched or seen or pieces of ourselves we've given away without going "all the way." We're dealing with all sorts of sexual sins that don't have to be the final act of sexual intercourse.

We've normalized sex outside of marriage, seemingly forgetting the deep impact that it not only has on our souls, but also on our lives. Sex has simply become recreational play between two consenting adults. It's just for fun. It isn't a big deal. You can have it anywhere you want it, when you want it, with who you want, with no repercussions. Our sexual brokenness has even led us to using sex as a weapon, objectifying the human body, and taking what was never ours to take. Sexual assault, abuse, and rape are not rare. On top of that, sexual brokenness has even eliminated the original design of two people, man and woman, created to be perfect compliments, and has reformed sex into an individual act. Pornography takes men and women who were made in the image of God and turns them into objects to be lusted after. We've been heavily desensitized when it comes to anything about sex. We've become a people who would rather submit to our lust than to God.

Sex in the Bible is holy – the Hebrew word used in Genesis for sex is "*echad*." It's describing being fused together at the deepest level, becoming one, the bonding of two people into one entity. It's a much higher view of sex than the culture has been feeding us.

When we read God's commandments about sex in the Bible, I think of a little girl I know, named Noah. Noah's favorite word is "no." Literally. She says it more than any other word, anytime she doesn't agree with something that I'm saying. Noah can't see the big picture. She is so unaware that my counsel really is what is best for her, simply because she doesn't know. Unfortunately, I'm much more like Noah than I'd like to think. We are

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

so unaware that God's best really is what is best for us, that what He commands us to do really is what is best for us. We say no to God's commandments about sex because all we can see is what is right in front of us, what we want in the moment, and what feels right. The truth is, we can't see the effect that sex and impurity have on our lives until the damage is already done.

The first tactic Satan used in the garden was to get Eve to say no to God's best, by convincing her that God wasn't who He said He was, that He didn't really have her best interest in mind, and that she'd be more powerful by herself. The first lie that Eve believed was that she wouldn't have any consequence for her sin, that even in her disobedience she could live. Isn't that interesting...

Today, Satan is still using the same tactics. Sin has consequences, and when we look at the consequences of the sexual revolution on the people of the Church, I don't know how we can be desensitized any longer. People are hurting. God's people are hurting, because we've bought into the lies that Satan has been sowing into the human heart since the beginning. Ever since sin has gotten a hold of our hearts, it's been making us slaves. And to our own downfall, we've been letting it.

Each year, there have been 20 million new sexually transmitted diseases reported. 50% of all new STD's are transmitted by people ages 15 to 24. In other words, 25% of teenagers will contract an STD each year. STD's are not rare, and they aren't "no big deal." They're not part of the original creation design. They're a consequence of our sin.

1 in 3 women get pregnant before the age of 20, and about 1 in 3 of those teens will seek abortions. Over 200,000 teens get an abortion every year. Abortion is such a controversial topic in our society, because choice is choice, and my body is my body, right? Well, I'd argue that that's not the point. By our choices, literally, we are demeaning human life. Every life was created, every life has purpose, and every life is sacred. That's what the Bible says, and even when I don't feel that way, it is true. You may think abortion has nothing to do with you or that you'll never come into contact with it, but statistically, it will impact you or someone you know – 1 in 4 of women in the Church have had an abortion. If it isn't abortion, maybe it's unplanned pregnancy.

Sex has consequences, and even though it's so easy to settle on the belief that those consequences can never touch us, I'd challenge you to dig a little bit deeper, and be a little bit wiser. The impact abortions have on women and men is astounding. Humanity is being demeaned, because we've distorted life into being all about us, when it never was meant to be that way.

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

The odds of divorce increasingly go up with more and more baggage, such as more sexual partners, children from other marriages, or other factors that play into sexual history. Because sex was created to be a bonding of the flesh and a unification in marriage, the after-effects of sex are not just “no big deal.” Even other acts of physical intimacy that are not sexual intercourse affect our souls – sexual intimacy technically is any physical act of intimacy outside of marriage. It’s giving ourselves away physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It will affect your other relationships; when we give ourselves away to someone outside the commitment and protection of marriage, it breaks down an important part of us, making our future relationships unhealthier and more difficult to sustain.

Proverbs 14:21 says: *“There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death.”* So, where do we go from there? Where do we go when the damage is already done, and we’re left feeling so ashamed that we can’t talk to anyone?

TRUTH:

Sexual brokenness is a result of the constant struggle between autonomy and obedience. Despite that struggle, this is what the Lord says: you have to believe My Word is true, even when it contradicts your feelings. There’s that still, small lie again that’s been the same from the beginning – is God really good?

Sexual brokenness can first be traced back to a basic mistrust in the character of God. When we forget who God is, it’s easy to believe who the world says He is. When we forget who He really is intrinsically, we forget how He created us first and foremost out of love, for love, to love. When we forget whose we are, we forget what we are worth. When we forget what we are worth, we are much more likely to fall into the temptation of the world. When we fall into that temptation, we are much more likely to make it a lifestyle, because that’s what Satan does. While God is in the business of creating and recreating, Satan is in the business of destroying us by small, seemingly unnoticeable grievances that lead to our ultimate defeat. He makes the world look appealing, and He disguises sin as the most beautiful comfort in the world.

Negative sexual history can be one of our greatest sources of shame; whether it’s from abuse, an affair, betrayal, or addiction. Shame is the most powerful, tarnished emotion. It’s the fear that because of what we’ve done we aren’t good enough. Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change. This is what you need to hear, if you’re struggling with sexual brokenness: nothing is in vain when Jesus is in control. No sin disqualifies you from the life that Jesus died for. You’re never too far gone, too far out of His reach, or too far into your sin. We may not ever be capable of

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

change, but He is. Remember, he doesn't just create, he recreates. He doesn't just forgive, He abundantly pardons.

Imagine yourself as the woman in this story. The story of the woman caught in adultery is found in John 8. You've been caught in the act of adultery, which means you're having sex with someone who isn't your husband. Not only are you caught red-handed, but you're also caught by the religious elite. They drag you out in the town square, not allowing you to get dressed, and you're very aware of what the consequence should be for what you've just done. You're alone, because they didn't drag that man out with you, you're afraid, and you're probably ashamed. You end up amid a group of people listening to a man named Jesus, and your embarrassment increases as you see the group's treatment of you. You listen intently, laying on the ground, naked, as the religious leaders inform Jesus that the punishment for adultery deserves death – and not just any old death, but death by stoning. As this is happening, you're looking back on the act that has gotten you to this point. Slightly confused, you can't quite reconcile why these people think that what you did was wrong. At the time, it didn't seem evil, and even now, in your heart it seems more like love than evil. You reckon that you have the right to do with your body as you please, and even think that this act would have finally brought you the immense happiness you've been looking for – but now, you're face to face with the condemnation of your behavior, which is death, and it has you questioning if what you were feeling was true.

Jesus, after listening to the religious leaders says: *“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”* You brace yourself, wondering how the religious elite will respond and one by one, you're shocked as they walk away. Eventually, it's just you and Jesus. You're now wondering... why hasn't He walked away? Why is He the only one who can stay? Is He going to be the one who throws the stones at me?

He looks you in the eye and says, *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Has no one given you what they deserve?”* You respond by saying: *“No one, Lord.”* And He says, *“Neither do I condemn you, go from now on and sin no more”* – how is it that this woman who is guilty of sexual sin can stand before the same God she sinned against, the God of the Heavens and the Earth, even after she used her body not for His glory but for her own gain? If God is just, somebody has to pay the price for that sin. And this is where the beauty happens. Jesus looked her in the face because He was going to pay that penalty. He made a way of escape for all of us who are just like her. All of us who have lost our identities, all of us who have made sex and lust an idol, and all of us who are bruised and broken by sin.

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

The reality is that God cares about condition of the heart, not the technicalities of our virginity, and He calls us to a greater vision of sexual understanding because of who we are.

God is safe. God never changes. God is for us, not against us. Shame does not come from God. Shame is produced by our sin. Guilt says, "I've made a mistake." Shame says, "I am a mistake." In Genesis 3:10, Adam hid from God because he was naked and afraid. The very One that Adam should have felt safe with was God; but the opposite happened. He felt shame and he hid. When sin entered the equation, it was Adam's projection of his sin that caused him to see God as unsafe. We're not punished for our sin, but by our sin. Adam and Eve were the ones who changed, not God. Our ability to see ourselves, God, and others for who they really are becomes distorted because of sin and shame. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Jesus came to save us from our brokenness, and even today, no person is too far gone to be out of His reach. That's the message. That's the promise.

APPLICATION:

If you're sitting here with a sexual past that you've been living in shame about, you need to know that God sees all that you have done, and He says the same thing to you that He said to the adulterous woman. Please don't sit in your shame, hoping that one day it will magically disappear. That may seem safe, but it surely isn't honoring the God who sees you worthy enough to die for. If you trade your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief. When the shame is brought into the light, when you talk about it with parents and trusted adults, you release most of its power.

When you share the most wounded and broken parts of you and receive empathy and mercy, it can be a powerfully healing moment. Confessing and repenting opens the doors for restoration. It has the potential to take much of the sting out of old wounds in your life. Once we've experienced that life-changing love that looks past our faults and sees us to the core of who we are, it's much more likely that we want to give that kind of love to someone we love. You want a husband who is like Jesus, who grabbed us at our dirtiest and loved us. You want a wife like Jesus, who will see you in all your brokenness and extend grace and love toward you anyway.

LANDING:

Shame says you're alone and excluded. The Spirit is sent to remind us of all the Father teaches us; to remind us we're not alone like orphans, but are sons and daughters, who

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

have been set free from condemnation. The Spirit frees us to speak up when shame wants to silence us.

The Spirit insists we belong to the community of the redeemed when shame whispers we're too bad to be accepted or loved. The Spirit gives us courage to welcome others whom our culture or churches might deem "unclean."

John 3:17 says - *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it."* If you've got issues with sex, know this: I've been there, and every day is not a cakewalk. If I could say one thing, it would be this: Grace and mercy has taught me that God thinks so much of you that He wants you to see yourself as more than abstinent ... or even a virgin. He wants you to be esteemed as pure.

Paul says we are no longer known by our sins but by our Savior. The same God who came for us, made himself one of us, and died for us, has not changed His standards. He is still the God of good and the judge of what is good, especially when it comes to sex and relationships; the question is... do we believe Him?

I promise you, God has made you for something good.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: [a] that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body[b] in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;

Proverbs 14:21 There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death.

John 8:1-11 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus

Module 3, Teaching 2: A Blank Slate: How the Gospel Changes Your Story

was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Small Group Questions

1. What does it mean when the Bible says that we are new creations?
2. Talk a little bit about sexual brokenness; what are some ways of sexual brokenness that do not include having sex? How is virginity different than purity?
3. Have you ever thought: “Is God really good?”
4. Why is how Jesus treats the Samaritan woman significant?
5. Have you ever judged someone’s sexual history, while neglecting the impurities that reside in your heart? Why is it important to realize that we are all sexually broken?
6. What does it mean to be defined by your Savior and not your sin? How does that make you feel?

THE TRUTH
ABOUT
SHAME...



THE GOSPEL
CHANGES
EVERYTHING.

Importance of Module 3

“Purity: Rethinking, Reorienting, Restarting” is the third module of *Abundant Life: You Were Made for More*. Confusion – tears – pain – joy – exhilaration – these are all words that describe love for teens. For some, the subject of dating brings up feelings of intense pain, and for others it brings up immense joy & fullness. Either way, teenagers care deeply about dating, and there is a very real craving to pair off at an early age. Unfortunately, many teens haven’t had great examples of what healthy relationships looks like whether due to family conflict or negative cultural influences. So, it’s no wonder that there are a multitude of good and bad feelings that go along with dating. Statistically, the vast majority of youth want to get married* and if statistics hold like they have for hundreds of years, the vast majority of them will. The rumors of the death of marriage have been greatly exaggerated. The goal of this module is to take the teachings in the first two modules about identity and cultural issues and apply them. These teachings first cover how to date and who to date. Then we’ll dive into forgiveness & healing from relational brokenness or sexual sin, and then talk about redefining the mission of marriage.

**Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).*

Theme

Most young people today do not bring to their dating relationship and marriage a great vision of God - who He is, what He is like, how He acts. They don’t bring an all-consuming admiration for Him, reverence for Him, absolute surrender to Him, and deep satisfaction in Him. Instead, they bring a deep desire to be fully known and deeply loved by their spouse. The truth about marriage has been distorted by our culture. Marriage has a purpose that is far beyond our own happiness. Marriage was created by God, as a gift to us, with the specific purpose of being the closest thing to His love for the Church that we can experience here on Earth; the goal of this teaching is to once again reiterate that humankind is desperate for deep companionship, and that has been rooted in us since creation. Then, I want to talk about how we should think about and define marriage in a way that will help us navigate the highs and lows of living with another person who is sinful, just like us. We’ll talk about what marriage is, what it isn’t, and what the goal of a healthy marriage is. Lastly, we will hit on the point that if marriage was meant to glorify God’s love for us, then we must realize that marriage is not the ultimate thing, and we must find more satisfaction in God than in our marriages. By doing this, when we are loving Jesus the most, we will love our spouse way better than we ever could on our own.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 3

MAIN QUESTIONS: What does creation tell us about marriage? What was marriage actually created for, and why has marriage developed into something that does not at all look like what the Bible says it should be? What's the meaning of marriage? Will our marriages ever fully satisfy us if we make them all about us?

INTRO:

The text we are going to be looking at is from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 6:33 says: *Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well* (Matthew 6:33).

I don't know what your family history is when it comes to marriage. I don't know what brokenness exists in your home. But I know enough statistics and have seen enough situations to know that each of you has a different experience. Some have seen the good, some have seen the bad, and some have seen both. When I was a little girl, I dreamed of getting married (okay, you caught me - I really dreamed about the wedding and less about the marriage). I dreamed of what the man would be like that would one day capture my heart and make me a wife.

As I've gotten older, that dream has slowly been drained and distorted by the brokenness I've seen around me. I've watched couples that I thought had perfect marriages decide that divorce was what was best for them. I've seen men and women in shackles due to pornography addictions that have transformed who they are, making it harder and harder for them to love their spouse. I've seen marriages end abruptly with no warning, and it's made me think twice about whether or not it's worth it to even consider marriage. Is that dream that I had as a little girl even a reality? Is committing to loving someone forever even really possible?

It's so easy to think that only "other people" get divorced, that your own marriage is somehow immune to heartache, infidelity and fights over who gets the house, the car, the dog. After all, how many of us would walk down the aisle if we believed our relationships would end up in divorce court? I know that I wouldn't.

As a single person, life is not filled with happiness every moment... there are so many challenges that we're going to face whether we do it alone or with another person. So why are we under the impression that marriage will be perfect? That being married makes me immune to tough things, when it involves another person who is just as sinful, prideful, and selfish as I am? That's why on your wedding day, you will say vows that declare: "for better or for worse." We have to stop asking of marriage what God never designed it to give - perfect happiness, conflict-free living, and idolatrous obsession. If we can rid ourselves of those unrealistic expectations, we can appreciate what God designed marriage to be: a partnership of two committed people sharing in spiritual intimacy and the ability to pursue God – together. That's what it's all about, and it can be a beautiful gift, when we have the right perspective and expectations.

Let me shift your perspective even more: maybe being in love with someone isn't a good enough reason to get married to them. You can be in love with a lot of people; but being in love easily can take a selfish twist, and selfishness is at the root of what our culture says marriage is all about. We have to want something deeper. The reason so many relationships end is because honestly, we get bored with each other - think about it. None of us are enchanting enough to keep someone entertained and interested for five to six decades. That just isn't gonna cut it. Eventually, your spouse is going to have heard all of your jokes, all of your stories, and if you aren't growing and constantly pursuing one another, you aren't going to be interested for more than a few years let alone a few decades. We have to go deeper than that. Infatuation is not a good enough reason to get married; you may think you're in love with someone, but after that initial period of 12-18 months (the average length of infatuation) and the neurochemical reaction fades away, what is your relationship going to be left with? Why would we

commit to a lifelong decision based off of a ‘feeling’ that lasts for a shorter amount of time than it takes to potty train the average child?

The institution of marriage, as God created it, has a much deeper intention than simply finding someone you are “in love” with and getting married, because that’s what you’re supposed to do. Marriage has an intention that is beyond us; really, marriage isn’t even about us. What I mean by that is clear when we look at the first marriage in the Bible; Adam and Eve’s marriage must be a prototype of how all marriages are supposed to be, because it was the original one! Instead of taking that viewpoint, we’ve viewed God’s design for marriage simply as a suggestion, and not an ultimate answer, so marriage has become something it was never meant to be.

Colossians 1:16 says “*He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.*” The first marriage looks a little bit like this: one woman, one man, holding fast to each other with loyalty, commitment, and love. They become one flesh; and when Scripture mentions that, it’s the first mention of sex. That tells us that the context in which sex is meant is in marriage; sex isn’t even brought up until Adam has Eve with him. It’s not mentioned when Adam was alone. It’s mentioned when he has a compliment, a partner, and a wife. That context is also speaking to the fact that sex, in its best and purest form, requires two beings - both who are present and engaged - not just one person, or two people, with one that’s over the computer screen.

Jesus makes the point most clearly through the creation story that marriage is the doing of God.

- Mark 10:6–9 says: *From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.*
- Genesis 1:27 says: *Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*
- Genesis 2:24 says: *So they are no longer two but one flesh. **What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.***

This is the clearest statement in the Bible that marriage is not a merely human doing. The words “God has joined together” means it is God’s doing. God created it - and that means He sets the design for it. He knows how marriage works best, and He modeled the first marriage to reflect that for us, yet for some reason we think we can do it better.

If we don’t know the why of marriage, if we don’t take the time to understand why it was created, we can’t even begin to evaluate if someone fits the mold for a lifetime partner or if marriage is a viable option for us. Just like anything else, the type of job determines who we choose to go through the project with. If my plumbing is breaking in my house,

I'm not going to willingly choose a software tech to help me - if I'm training to run a half marathon, I'm not going to choose a wrestling coach to teach me the in's and out's and tricks of running long-distance. I'm going to pick someone who is fit for the project, who compliments me, who I want to partner with for that project. In order to do marriage well, we have to understand the purpose of it. Every single day of your life will be influenced by this one decision. And because of that, we have to know the mission in order to make a wise choice.

Marriage is beautiful, when you think about it; really, it is. You get to choose who you go through all the hard things in life with. Either way, stuff happens. None of us will ever know what we will be up against; medical diagnoses, addictions, unemployment, the pain of losing children. We can't possibly know. The beautiful part is... God lets you choose who you face those things with. You also get the option of doing them single or doing them married. There's a lot of freedom that God entrusts us with when it comes to marriage.

Paul makes it very clear it is your choice, to stay single or to get married - with one condition. Whether you are single or married, you must be following the Lord and your partner must be following the Lord. It blows my mind that Christians even consider dating non-Christians. Why? Because in 1 John 4:19 it says: *We love because He first loved us*. It simply isn't possible to love someone on your own as well as you can when you have the Holy Spirit. And if you're a follower of Jesus and you're creating a loophole in that for yourself because you're "in love," what you are actually saying is that you don't take God seriously enough to consider what He says. If you don't think it's vital to marry someone who has the Holy Spirit inside of them, guiding them, you are indirectly saying that you don't believe the Holy Spirit changes and transforms us into new creations. You're saying it doesn't matter, and that God's way isn't quite as good as yours. I'd challenge you on that, because it breaks God's heart when we make decisions that ultimately will bring us more pain and heartache than good.

So if marriage isn't all about us, what's it about?

Marriage is a solid foundation. It sets the structure for flourishing, love, and discipleship, IF it is done the right way. That can't be argued. The family unit is the seed by which humanity and society grows into something beautiful. If you destroy the family, you destroy the beauty of humanity very quickly. We see a call toward community, a call toward companionship. We have been hardwired to know others in a deep and intimate way.

When I'm using the word intimate there, I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about knowing and being fully known. We crave that. We want that. The issue of our day is we live in a society that is very thin. You have a thousand Instagram followers, but how many do you really know? In a way, you know everybody without knowing anyone. It's a paradox that has never really occurred before. It's a scary day in which you and I live. We're hungry for more. We're lonely when we don't have intimacy. Marriage is all about being fully known and deeply loved - and I'd argue that all of us want that, no matter what our preconceived notions are.

TENSION:

Here is what I want to do. I want to talk about the way I think marriage tends to be viewed in our culture versus how God has designed marriage to work. I think that our consumerism society has turned relationships in consumer endeavors. In other words, marriage is more about what's in it for us than anything else.

I keep saying this because I want you to be so aware of it; I think the rest of the world, when you're not in here, at Church, in a place where we can have real conversations that center around the Truth found in the Gospel, is trying to disciple you down its path. We live in a day and age where the rights of the individual are ultimate. What you want is what you must have, and ultimate freedom and happiness can only be found in your individual desires being fulfilled.

That's never what life and marriage were meant to be about. Marriage was created to be a partnership, for a man and a woman to come together and form a legacy. But instead, it's the complete opposite. It's not about partnering for something bigger than ourselves. It's not about coming together to make something beautiful. It's just about romantic fulfillment. Self is at the heart of marriage through the cultural lens. It sees the individual as supreme. Now, think about the breakdown that we already have going into the marriage. If the husband sees himself supreme, and the wife sees herself supreme, and you put two supreme rulers in the same house, historically, that starts wars. When you see marriage through the lens of, "what I want is most important," and your spouse sees marriage through the lens of, "wait, hold up, no... what I want is most important!" you're already headed down a dangerous path. The mantra of marriage is, "You adjust to me, or I'm out." It's driven by each person's feelings and passion and has left no room for duty or promises.

TRUTH:

I started to try to work on a definition of marriage, but then I realized Tim Keller has one, so obviously I'm going to use his. He's just smarter and better and older and wiser. He's like Yoda, for you Star Wars nerds. Here is what Keller says: "*Marriage is a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman.*" Then he begins to unpack the

purpose. "According to the Bible, God devised marriage to reflect the saving love for us in Christ."

God designed marriage with a great end goal in mind. Marriage is not just designed by God; it's meant to display something about Him. Unity by marriage tells a bigger story - marriage is not just for our joy but it is also a metaphor, a parable, a symbol of something great and universal and eternal - the union of Christ with His bride, which is His Church. It is a visual representation of Christ loving His Church.

Marriage is where we get to learn what it means to love more like Jesus does. We get to learn what it means to love unconditionally. What it means to pursue no matter what. What it means to serve without condition. And if we aren't willing to do that, we must question why yearn to get married one day. Is it to make ourselves comfortable, fill a void, or achieve happiness? Or is it to be more like Jesus? If it's anything other than becoming more like Jesus, the expectations you set on your marriage are bound to disappoint you.

Here's the truth:

- Sex outside of marriage cannot exhibit the Gospel, because it enjoys the benefits of the covenant without the commitment to the covenant.
- Same sex marriage cannot exhibit the Gospel because Christ is not married to another Christ. Christ married and bought His bride, who was distinctly different yet like Him due to her oneness with Him.
- Adultery cannot exhibit the Gospel, because it distorts the true beauty of covenantal commitment that God has placed on His Church - He promises never to leave us or forsake us.
- All forms of sexuality expressed outside of the marriage covenant are a sin before God Himself - and some of us don't like that.

We've talked about the first marriage being a prototype for all of them. In Genesis 2, we get our first glimpse of God's design for marriage. God fashioned from the side of Adam what Genesis calls "a helper suitable for him." One that was a good fit - and that person was called woman. In 1 Peter we see the woman, or the wife, called a "fellow heir of the grace of life." Different from each other yet made to fit together. Physically (obviously), but also spiritually and emotionally. God designs husbands and wives to complement each other - to fit together in a way that brings joy to both of them.

APPLICATION:

Ephesians 5:22-33 *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives*

should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

The passage from Ephesians is Paul talking to the Church about roles within marriage, or rather how husbands and wives should function in a marital relationship, and it has caused much controversy.

The problem with marriage is the same problem that affects every relationship and all of creation: sin. From the moment that Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their relationship changed. They became ashamed and estranged, and the pattern of brokenness began to emerge. They hid from God and from each other. Instead of union and common purpose, they entered into a competition for control and a distorted, selfish type of love. Scripture says that the woman's "desire" will be for her husband. And the husband will "rule" over his wife. This core brokenness and rebellion leads to the undoing of the relationship the Lord had in mind when he created them male and female.

Because the Gospel frees us from our sin, our own personal brokenness, it frees us from our relational brokenness; therefore, this is the good news! The marriage relationship is based in redemption. In Ephesians 5, Paul offers the remedy to Genesis 3; a remedy that relies on the cross of Christ and the filling of the Holy Spirit! Wives are to submit (instead of seeking to dominate). Husbands are to love their wives (instead of ruling them). The Cross makes a way back to God's original intent for marriage: union, fruitfulness, and common purpose.

There is this moment in every wedding where you have the exchanging of vows, or lifelong promises. What happens in that moment is the bride and groom turn and face one another. Before God and their community, they begin to exchange vows. They begin to make promises to one another. The language is always covenantal. “For better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, till death do us part.” That is covenantal language. A covenant says, “I’m not going anywhere, even though I have no idea what is going to happen. I’m telling you now that I’m not going anywhere.”

Let's be clear here... I'm not teaching on covenant because I'm naive about the problems that plague our relationships; in no way am I justifying or minimizing the pain in so many relationships where emotional, physical, or sexual abuse is prevalent. Under no circumstance are those things okay, and if you're ever in a relationship where this is happening, you must seek wisdom from God, who loves you. God is a just God, and He doesn't want you to stay in a relationship that is abusive to you. I'd encourage you to bring the problem to the attention of a parent, church leader, or youth pastor, a trusted adult that can walk with you through how to get out of that situation.

I'm teaching on covenant, because there are seasons of difficulty where our impulse is to see only ourselves, and we might, in a moment, say something foolish or freak out, and be tempted to leave when the connection seems broken... thinking that the "grass is greener on the other side," instead of staying and persevering through the difficulties for the sake of the covenant.

I'm leaning into covenant because every marriage will go through some dry seasons or just ordinary seasons. I have a responsibility to lay before you that the Bible commands you to stay and push through those seasons. We don't bail on those seasons. We don't fall out of love because our feelings aren't the same as they were on the day we made the vow to our spouse. Love isn't a feeling, it's a decision, and in the mundane moments where you see nothing but the ordinary, you lean in and trust that God is doing something extraordinary that you can't see. That's why love has so much to do with duty and promise, not just feelings and passion.

Going back to the language in Ephesians 5 that has stirred controversy – it's really one word that is the problem... *submit* or *submission*. Culturally, submission has a negative connotation because of sinful behavior. Submission for a wife is an inclination to receive and affirm her husband's leadership, and it speaks to a general disposition or posture. The woman's general disposition should be to respond positively to his efforts to lead her and to encourage him when he roots their relationship in Jesus. It clarifies that submission does not mean that a woman never initiates. It doesn't mean that you never speak up. Some people think that if a woman submits, she must sit quietly and never voice her opinions, share her thoughts, or contribute ideas. She must simply wait for the man to come up with every thought. And even if she has a good idea, that's obvious to everyone but her husband, she must sit there and wait for him to figure it out. That's a cultural lie, and that's really because of men abusing their authority. Good leadership does not feel like forced control - it feels like freedom and genuine care.

Module 3, Teaching 3: Marriage: Why It Matters

Ladies, when the Bible talks about submission, it's speaking about a decision you make to willingly submit. It's a simple way to say that you recognize and respond to your husband's leadership. The official definition means to order yourself under one another - thus submission is not a statement of worth, value, or equality, but rather about organizational structure. The type of submission the Bible is talking about is not this sort of forced-submission, it's a willing one out of respect for who your husband was created to be and his love for you that is rooted in Christ's love.

Think of a time you've been asked on a date. One time, I went on a date with a super indecisive guy who literally picked me up and as I got in the car, threw me a bunch of questions about what I felt like doing. I was not impressed - seriously, you ask me on a date, and then you don't put the effort into planning something I will like? I don't want to make all the decisions in my relationship; truthfully, I make enough leadership decisions in my everyday life in work and ministry and all the things I have going on. When I come home at night, I want to rest assured that my husband has the leadership skills to manage our family so that all of the weight doesn't fall on my shoulders. Now, when I go on a date with a guy who picks me up, surprises me with a date that knocks my socks off, and leads intentional conversation to be worthy of my time? That's attractive. That's something I'm willing to follow. That's good leadership - listening to who I am, what I enjoy, and then planning a date around that because he cares for me.

Being a biblical wife does not mean that you don't or can't provide financially for your family. That certainly is not the case in the Bible... look at the honorable wife in Proverbs 31. That woman is running a small business, buying and selling real estate. She is getting stuff done! Women can initiate and do many different things. However, the man bears the weight of responsibility to care for her. If he fails, God will take issue with the husband. God is just, and He will hold us, both husbands and wives, responsible for the love we give OR don't give to our spouses.

I promise you want to marry a man who feels the responsibility to initiate on behalf of his wife and children. What is the grievance against men in our country? I'd say that the answer is that men do not feel the weight of responsibility to initiate on behalf of their family. The selfishness and passivity of men has given rise to an incalculable amount of human suffering in our world. You want a man who feels a sense of responsibility under God to care for his family. And when you see him doing his best to guide you and your kids in a good way, you want to let him know every way you can that you affirm that!

What I have discovered is that when single women express their concerns about submission to their husband's leadership, they speak about the fear of being micromanaged or of having their dreams crushed. But I would suggest to you that is not

a fear of submission to leadership; **that is a fear of submission to bad leadership.** In marriage, you are not signing up for submission to all men. You are vowing to respond to one man. This is why it is so important to pick the right man. Ladies, be discerning in dating. Don't settle for a selfish man and hope he will change. Get the right guy. Good leadership is a gift, not a burden.

Men, it's so important that you learn about the biblical type of love that a husband is meant to give; the type of "agape love," that says, "I'm not going anywhere." The verb agape is also in present tense in that passage in Ephesians. That suggests continuous action. That means a husband is meant to love his wife at all times and never stop. A husband's job is to initiate and sacrifice so that his wife might flourish under God. How does a man love his wife? He is willing to sacrifice anything for her, even on the worst days when he gets nothing back. That is how a man should love his wife. He will initiate to move toward her and sacrifice whatever he needs to sacrifice. And read in verses 26-27 why Christ did this for us: *That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

Jesus initiated. He moved toward us. He sacrificed, gave everything, and moved sin out of the way. That is what sanctify means. All the broken things and sad things, He is pushing them out of the way. A godly husband takes the hit for sin for her so that she might be clean and pure. He protects. He also provides. He stays, he sacrifices, and he moves towards the mess, no matter what.

LANDING:

We've covered the fact that marriage is not our invention, and it's not about us. We did not invent marriage – and we've got to get over the temptation to change it up and make it about meeting our needs. God said *"I'm going to uniquely choose one thing to show every person on the earth how deeply I love them – and I'm choosing marriage."* He gave us that covenant to show us that in the covenant, in the promise, in the love, even when we rebel, He gets closer and pursues us even more. Marriage is a shadow of God's love for us - that's why we celebrate and party at weddings - to celebrate how good God is for giving us the institution of marriage, the ability to love freely and the way He weaves lives together to create beautiful glimpses of His redemption. The goal of marriage is that we should be better together than we are apart; that we should better complete the mission of both of our lives as a result of doing it together, rather than individually.

Our partnership allows us to be a picture of the God we love so much. As a husband initiates and sacrifices and a wife receives and responds to his leadership, the world gets to see a portrait of how Christ loves His bride, the Church. We all want to be happy; but marriage was never meant to give that to us. Happiness was meant to be a by-product of a marriage modeled after Christ, not a reason to pursue it.

So I say this again, if we want marriage to glorify the truth, beauty, and worth of God, we must model, teach, and preach the Truth that God is infinitely more important than marriage - or anything else. When we lay down our autonomy in order to enter a relationship with Him, we find that the great paradox is true: in losing our lives, we actually find them.

Seek first the Kingdom of God, and your marriage will be better for it.

Main Scriptures

Matthew 6:33 Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Mark 10:9 Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Ephesians 5:25-33 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Small Group Questions

1. Why is the first marriage in the Bible what all marriages should be based on? Do you believe that because God created marriage, that He sets the boundaries for marriage?

Module 3, Teaching 3: Marriage: Why It Matters

2. What are some ways that you see marriage being broken? Do you believe that the institution of marriage is still good, despite the broken pictures that we see around us?
3. What do you want your future marriage to look like?
4. What are the benefits of marriage?
5. Why should sex be kept inside of marriage?
6. What is the mission of marriage, and why is it all about God, and not about us?

SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS
RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND ALL THESE THINGS
WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU AS WELL.



Matthew 6:33

NEW MESSAGE SERIES!

AN OVERFLOWING CUP



HOW MANY OF US HAVE TAKEN THE TIME TO THINK ABOUT WHAT AN ABUNDANT LIFE LOOKS LIKE AND HOW WE GET ONE? TRUTH IS, ABUNDANT LIFE IS AN UNDESERVED, GRACE-FILLED GIFT, AND WE HAVE FREE ACCESS TO IT AT ANY POINT. IN THIS SERIES, WE'RE GOING TO TALK ABOUT WHY FOLLOWING JESUS IS WORTH IT, WHY GOD FINDS IT NECESSARY TO GIVE US RULES, AND WHAT LOVE "IN ACTION" LOOKS LIKE. WHEN WE ARE FILLED UP BY THE GIVER OF LIFE, WE ARE FREE TO OVERFLOW HIS LOVE INTO OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

AN OVERFLOWING CUP



Importance of Module 4

This module is entitled, “An Overflowing Cup,” and it’s all about the true meaning of an abundant life. We hear that phrase all the time when talking about faith, including in the name of this curriculum. But how many of us have actually taken the time to think about what an abundant life looks like, what’s necessary for it to exist, and where does it come from? Truth is, abundant life is a grace-filled, undeserved gift, and we have free access to it at any point. Through the teachings in this module, we are going to talk about why following Jesus is worth it, why God finds it necessary to give us rules, and what love “in action” looks like. When we receive the love of Jesus and His transforming grace, we really need to dive into what it looks like to access and desire it above anything else. He pursues us unflinchingly and without end. Jesus is better than anything else, because He is the source of love and the model of a perfect relationship, which our human relationships shadow. When we are filled up by the Giver, His love in us can overflow into our earthly relationships.

Theme

The Deeper Need is referring to the desire in our hearts to look for happiness and fulfillment anywhere other than Jesus. It’s referring to our natural tendency to veer off God’s path and into the path of the world. Sometimes, it starts happening before we consciously realize it. Sometimes, the world’s path looks better. Sometimes, following Jesus is costly. Sometimes, we may even question if it is worth it. All throughout the Bible, we see men and women who struggle believing in the Gospel, who give everything, even their lives, to follow Jesus. Often, we expect a life free of suffering when we become Christians. Truth is, there will be suffering, pain, and rejection, no matter how we live this life. And we get the choice – we can either do the hard things with Jesus or without Him. A Christian life doesn’t promise us an easy walk, but it does promise us one that is worth it. Following Jesus is worth it, and through this message, we are going to talk about why that’s the case.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they’re continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can’t

control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTIONS: Is following God worth it? In the midst of suffering, is believing in Jesus really worth the fight for our hearts?

INTRO:

Can you guys think about those friends you have that are like professional moochers? Those people who will do anything to avoid paying actual money for things, no matter if it's a need or a want? I have a friend who refuses to go to the grocery store and buy food to pack his lunches because he swears it's a waste of money and he just ends up wasting the food – so he takes a bag of almonds for lunch, every dang day.

I have a Hulu account, and I swear it's like the community account. At least eight people have my password to it and use it to watch their television show, yet I'm the one that foots the bill for it every month.

I'm one of those people who is all about the free trial life – it's easy to sign up for a free trial, but once that comes to an end, you have to evaluate your decision about actually wanting to invest money in that product. Same with samples (let me just bless you with some life advice right now... if you ever go to Costco, always go during lunch time because the FREE SAMPLES are legit - and you can go around the store enough times, get your exercise in, get multiple free samples, so that it's like an entire meal). But there comes a moment when the salesman says, "Do you want to purchase this?" Instead of just taking the hand out, there comes a moment where you have to think about how much you like the product and if it's worth the cost. Will you use it enough? Do you really need it? Does it really taste that good? Is it worth your money, your time, and your energy?

Ladies, you may be dating a guy and begin to realize that dating him is a lot of effort. Putting effort into your relationship costs you time at the gym or time with your gal pals, and you have to recognize the weight of how much you actually like him. Dudes, you might be dating a girl and all of a sudden, you realize that she expects more out of you than you are willing to give. You can't play football whenever you want to, you can't go hang out with the bros whenever you want to or play FortNite whenever you want to. You have to talk about your feelings, which you HATE, and then Christmas time rolls around, and you realize a gift card just ain't gonna cut it – you have to put emotional energy into the gift! Is a relationship worth your investment?

Making decisions is costly. The previously mentioned things are costly. The higher the cost, the deeper the commitment. Relationships are free, but intimacy is costly. Relationships are not all sunshine and rainbows. Just with all things that are costly, we start to analyze whether or not it's worth it. Do we value the intimacy enough to pay the cost?

I see this a lot with teenagers at camps. When they find out about this Jesus guy, they get super pumped up. They may be fired up about the person of Jesus, about who He is and what He is all about. Others may be fired up about Jesus' people – they feel loved and accepted and like they can be themselves. But then they go home, and the contemplating begins. They start to think: "If I really do commit to Him, I'm gonna face ridicule and maybe even rejection from my friends who don't get why I've changed." Or maybe they realize they really have to check how they're living and make some big lifestyle changes. They know they're gonna have to shut some things down that might be "fun" in order to honor Jesus and they think... man, this better be worth it, because that is hard. It's gonna be hard, and it might even cause some waves. It might be sly comments for some, and it might mean straight up rejection for others. When students begin to contemplate a commitment to Jesus and realize that that decision may cost them something they're not sure they want to give up, they begin to ask... is it really worth the sacrifice?

TENSION:

If you've been following Jesus for more than twenty minutes, you have probably experienced moments of doubt, uncertainty, and even anger at God. In those moments, you've probably questioned – is it worth it to keep this up, or would it be better if I just did it by myself?

I'm gonna give you a quick summary of Luke Chapter 9. Jesus takes the disciples on a retreat, and the purpose is for Him to really let them know what is going on. He takes them away from all distractions and responsibilities and starts by simply asking them who they think He is. After they respond, He begins to tell them what is in store for the rest of His time on the earth. He is honest, explaining to them that they're going to go to Jerusalem, and He is going to face rejection, pain, and difficulty. AND because they are with Him, they are going to face it too. He's up front with them and then just says, "So, let's go – who's in?"

Their response is like... oh, man. We see Peter respond by saying: "No, Jesus. I don't want that. I want a story of the Christ that is fun and life-enhancing and life-giving. I don't want suffering and rejection and pain. That's not what I want. What are you talking about?"

Peter begins to weigh his options. They all begin to weigh their options.

They're at the top of the mountain after a long day of travelling to the retreat and instead of getting up there and relaxing, they're now at the top, and they're discouraged and

exhausted. Maybe that's where you're at. Maybe you're suffering, exhausted from all of it, and just tired.

Next in Scripture, we see that the disciples fall asleep, and Jesus begins to pray. Eventually, the disciples wake up to an epic scene. He is shining brightly, even when they are asleep. Catch that – He doesn't start shining brightly when they notice Him. He does it regardless of their acknowledgement. When they wake up, He is shining, and He gives them a look at what He really looks like.

“Oh God, is it worth it?” I've asked myself that many times. In those moments, when we are questioning if following Him is worth it, God wants to show us Himself. Even when we are unaware of it, Jesus is shining. Even when we miss it because we are so focused on our suffering, He's always shining. Even when we miss it because we think we have it all together and can do it ourselves, He's still shining. And my prayer tonight is that our eyes would be fully opened, to see that His glory is worth the fight for our hearts.

I remember in college, seeing my non-Christian friends live for themselves and for their own entertainment, I was constantly wrestling with the idea of saying “no” to things that looked tempting, solely because I was a follower of Jesus. Their lives, or at least what I could see of them, didn't look overwhelmingly miserable. I honestly wondered... “If my non-Christian friends seem to be getting along just fine without obeying God, is it that important to remain faithful?” From a 21st century perspective, following Jesus sucks. You're told to give up having sex with that guy or girl, you have to control going out on the weekend and missing social events and parties, and you're called to do a lot of things that the rest of the world thinks or considers to be very odd. If you have ever honestly wrestled with your faith in God (which I'm guessing is everyone in this room!), then this message is for you.

For some people, believing and trusting in God appears to be quite simple. For others, faith does not come so easy. In a world that emphasizes the present rather than the eternal, the powerful over the meek, and the visible rather than the invisible, you may find it a struggle to live daily for God. It may not be natural to die to yourself and to live for Him. For the longest time, I really thought I was alone in this struggle. But when I began to read the Bible more carefully, I realized that almost every character in the Bible struggled with trusting God at some point in his or her life.

Joseph wondered why he was sold into slavery. The disciples wondered why Jesus was betrayed, beaten, and ultimately crucified. Job wondered why as a righteous man he was experiencing such acute suffering.

We aren't alone in the wondering if it's worth it, or if we could do it better without God. Especially when it comes to relationships, we tend to think that we can figure it out without Him and it might even be easier to do it by ourselves.

TRUTH:

Imagine putting a chocolate-chip cookie in front of a 3-year old and asking her not to eat it. Do you think she could resist? Honestly, most adults would have trouble with that. Recently, some researchers did exactly this to study what the Bible calls “free will” – humans have the ability to make any choice they want, and it’s interesting to look at what the majority of humans will choose to do statistically in certain situations. Children were given a single cookie with the promise that if they didn’t eat it for five minutes, they would be given a second. While some of the children resisted the temptation, others simply could not. The researchers found that the children who resisted the cookie at 3-years old were far more likely to succeed in school, relationships, finances, and in their future careers. *Why? The simple answer is that success requires delaying present desires for later gratification.*

Ask yourself an honest question: How are you giving up a present thrill for your long-term good? Are you choosing your long term good by sacrificing something that would be fun or feel good in the moment? Think about your decisions with money, school, and even sexual purity. Are you sacrificing God’s great plan for you for a temporary pleasure? Are you honoring the people you are in relationship with because you trust the One who made them?

Luke 14:26-27 says:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Here is the hard truth: being a Christian requires commitment and discipline. We are to put our own desires aside and to take up God’s desires. Our lives can no longer be about pleasing ourselves but rather must be about living to please God, no matter the cost. It takes commitment to get to know Jesus; instead of binging Netflix, you actually have to open your Bible and read about history. It takes work to understand it, and it takes prayer to let it soak into your life. Being a Christian is hard work, and if you’ve been under the impression that it isn’t, I hope you see that that’s not the Truth.

We see in Luke 9 that Jesus is unashamed and unafraid of telling us what it may cost to follow Him. He never sugarcoats it, never shies away from the truth, and is honest with us from the beginning. The Bible tells us that the world will hate us. There is a painful cost associated with being a Christian: choosing His will over my own, carrying a cross, and renouncing possessions. There is no small print when it comes to what it will cost us. Jesus is big and bold, offering us abundant grace, but also loving us enough to be real with us. There is no cheap grace – it’s costly. But yet, He still invites us – come and be my disciple.

The interesting thing is, God is up front with us, but Satan isn’t. Satan hides his worst and shows only his best. You only find out how much damage the devil can do when you’re in the middle of the mess, and it seems like it’s too hard to climb back out. All that

really matters in the deal with Satan is in small print on the back page. On the front page in big, bold letters are the words, “You will not surely die” (*Genesis 3:4*), and “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (*Matthew 4:9*). But on the back page in small print — so small you can only read it with the magnifying glass of the Bible and the Holy Spirit — they say, “And after the fleeting pleasures, you will suffer with me forever, and you’ll be separated forever from the One your soul was made for.”

APPLICATION:

The bottom line is that you can choose the fleeting pleasures of this world that Satan endorses, or you can trust God. If you want to know God, is there going to be suffering? Yeah, there will be. Following Him is difficult, trying, and at times full of challenges, but it’s the only path worthwhile that will bring you abundant and eternal life. Nothing else will measure up.

This is the key point: the call of Jesus is not just a call to suffering and self-denial. There’s so much more, and that’s what we are called to put our hope in. Jesus promises a glorious resurrection where all the losses of this life will be repaid (*Luke 14:14*). He also tells us that He will help us endure the hardships (*Luke 22:32*). He tells us our Father will give us the Holy Spirit (*Luke 11:13*). He promises that even if we are killed for the Kingdom, “not a hair of your head will perish” (*Luke 21:18*). He talks about and focuses on eternity – which is so, so much different than the here and now, the immediate and the instant gratification that is bound to fade away.

Which means that when we sit down to calculate the cost of following Jesus — when we weigh the “worst” and the “best” — He is worth it. Abundantly worth it (*Romans 8:18*; *2 Corinthians 4:17*). The here and now will always be less than eternity.

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself this question: What if Christianity isn’t what you think? What if the Bible is less about going to Heaven when we die and more about bringing Heaven to earth? That would mean that your story matters. The story you believe in matters. That how you live and why you live that way matters. When we live in Jesus’ story, we may not know what path lies ahead of us, but we do know the outcome. The outcome is eternity with Him, the deepest fulfillment of what our souls long for.

The Lord really has been impressing on me that the main reason we aren’t receiving His best is because we are willing to settle for less. Very few of us are committed to God’s best. We have been influenced more by the world than by God’s Word, and we have “dumbed down” to accept far less than what God has promised.

As long as you can live with less than God’s best, you will. As long as you are comfortable living for yourself and by yourself, instead of for Him and with Him, you will.

You have to get sick and tired of being sick and tired before you will aggressively pursue God’s best. You have to have a holy dissatisfaction with mediocrity before you can experience all that God has for you. It doesn’t happen accidentally or automatically.

If you don't pursue it, you won't get it. As long as you CAN live without God's best comfortably, you will. You won't be inspired to live into a higher calling, because what you're doing and how you're living seems to be working just fine. That's a powerful truth.

Yet another truth is that everything in our fallen world naturally goes from good to bad. Things don't get better without effort. We have to seek to find, knock to get the door opened, and ask before we receive (*Matt. 7:7*). We must raise our sights and aim higher. Most people are shooting at nothing and hitting it every time.

One of the greatest promises in the Bible is Jeremiah 29:11 – *I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, plans to give you hope and a future.*

When the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, Israel was devastated. The city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, and many people had been taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Thoughts of peace were probably the last thing on their minds, and they surely were in the middle of evil.

But Jeremiah went on to say in verses 12-13, *“Then you will call on Me, Your God, and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.”*

I've had people tell me they prayed and believed God but later resented Him and retracted that belief, because nothing happened. They couldn't see Him moving, so they didn't believe He was. These Scriptures promise otherwise. The story in Luke 9 of Jesus shining His glory when the disciples were asleep says otherwise. So, who's right? I choose to believe God is true, because I've seen His faithfulness, and I know that I'll see it again. The key is, we have to seek with ALL our hearts. We have to get rid of the fear that if our prayers aren't answered then God isn't real. That's not what His Word says. That's the element that so many of us are missing. We have to reach a point where we won't live with anything less than God's best, and we aren't willing to settle for less just to avoid the possible disappointment.

It's a process, but we need to begin moving in that direction. I haven't arrived there either, but I have left and am on my way. God has far more for all of us than we are currently experiencing.

One of these days, we are all going to stand before God. And when we do, we will know all things even as we are known (*1 Cor. 13:12*). In an instant, we are going to know what we could have had while on this earth. We will FULLY understand that the same power that raised Christ from the dead was resident within us all along (*Eph. 1:18-20*). We will discover that we didn't have to be sick, that we didn't have to live with broken spirits, and that we didn't have to be depressed and discouraged. We will realize that love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance were living inside us the whole time (*Gal. 5:22-23*). We can live a life of victory now. Jesus died to deliver us from this present evil world (*Gal. 1:4*), not just the

one to come. Sometimes, even if we are being called to suffer for God's glory like Joseph and Job, the challenge is for us to choose a posture of joy in the midst of that.

Unless you're willing to stand and fight the fight of faith, you will be overcome by this world. If you don't stir yourself up, you will settle to the bottom. The world isn't going to encourage you toward God's best, and most Christians aren't either.

Sadly, religion is one of the strongest weapons Satan has to discourage people from believing in something more. Satan loves to use our disappointments to cause us to doubt the goodness of God... but God wants us to know that while the enemy may be vicious, he will not be victorious.

We also have to recognize that it's all about receiving what God has already done and not about getting God to do something He has yet to do. We don't need God to heal us; by His stripes, we were healed (*1 Pet. 2:24*). That miraculous healing power is already IN us. We don't need God to move; we need to believe what He has already done it and learn how to receive that power.

LANDING:

Let's wrap up by going back to the Jesus and His disciples in Luke 9 – so many people left Jesus when they realized it wasn't going to be easy, and Jesus knew that our free will allows us to make that choice. So He asks His disciples the question that turned so many others away – “So, what are you going to do? Are you in or are you out? Do you believe following me is worth it?”

The disciples respond by saying: “Where would we go, You have the words of Life.” But where would we go? Have you ever thought about that? If you were to walk away from Jesus right now, where could you go that would offer you something better than He offers you? There's nowhere else to go where life can be found.

Jesus came to earth for the sole purpose of being with us in our suffering. That's unlike anything this world has to offer you. He doesn't just say He's going to leave us to deal with the hardships or sit by and watch as we walk through them. He walks through them with us, He has gone before us and He already has seen the outcome.

Jesus is the hero of my story. He wants to be the hero of your story. He's the hero of the world. He's the hero of history, the Son of the almighty. You're following the Son of God, not just some great teacher... and that to me is worth it. That's why the solution to the math problem is always the same.

The text in the Gospel is Luke lays out for us that as a disciple of Jesus, we are either all in or we are out. We can't have one foot across the line, wavering about what we are living for. We can't pick certain things out of the Bible that we want to believe in and throw others out, because we don't like them, so we are convinced they don't apply to us. We can't say that we are all in and then doubt God, just because our small brains can't understand or see what He is doing. That's what the text is saying. We have to

believe whole-heartedly that whatever we go through in this world is worth it because He is worth everything, and our suffering is not in vain.

There is no cost that you can pay in following Jesus that won't be made up to you a thousand-fold in the resurrection. And we need to remember Matthew 13:44, which says, "*The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*" A man sees and sells everything he has — everything he has! — to get that treasure. In other words, all the so-called costs and all the so-called losses — everything — are nothing compared to the gains of having Jesus, the greatest treasure.

So yes, we must count the cost in order to be a disciple. But we must not lose sight of the end of the story we are living. In the end, having Jesus means gain, just like Paul says: "*I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (Philippians 3:8).

Jesus is worth following.

You're going to be so glad in the glorious end that you stayed in it. You're going to get to say: *I didn't give up and live my story, I stayed in Jesus' story and was a part of the Hero's story. I stayed in it.*

You may suffer in the name of Jesus – it may cost you socially and relationally – it may bring you rejection and suffering, but I promise you, He is the Son of God and He is worth it.

Jesus asks us the same question that He asked the disciples in the Gospel of Luke. He's asking you, today, do you believe that I'm worth it?

So, let's go. Who's in?

Let's pray before we head into our small groups.

Main Scriptures

Luke 9

Luke 14:26-27 If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:14 And you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in His holy body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Matthew 13:44 The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, He hid it again, and then in His joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Philippians 3:8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

Small Group Questions

1. Have you ever questioned if following God was worth it?
2. Do you think that you avoid following Jesus whole-heartedly to avoid disappointment if He doesn't answer your prayers? Do you avoid praying boldly?
3. Have you ever suffered or went through hardship because you were a Christian?
4. What's the difference between what God tells us and what Satan tells us?
5. How can we better live into the Truth that following Jesus is the only way to real fulfillment and that He is worth it?

DO WE BELIEVE THE REWARD FOUND
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THE RISK OF FOLLOWING HIM?



Importance of Module 4

This module is entitled, “An Overflowing Cup,” and it’s all about the true meaning of an abundant life. We hear that phrase all the time when talking about faith, including in the name of this curriculum. But how many of us have actually taken the time to think about what an abundant life looks like, what’s necessary for it to exist, and where does it come from? Truth is, abundant life is a grace-filled, undeserved gift, and we have free access to it at any point. Through the teachings in this module, we are going to talk about why following Jesus is worth it, why God finds it necessary to give us rules, and what love “in action” looks like. When we receive the love of Jesus and His transforming grace, we really need to dive into what it looks like to access and desire it above anything else. He pursues us unflinchingly and without end. Jesus is better than anything else, because He is the source of love and the model of a perfect relationship, which our human relationships shadow. When we are filled up by the Giver, His love in us can overflow into our earthly relationships.

Theme

Whether we are children, teens, or adults, it seems like our natural tendency is to veer away from rules and do the exact opposite of what we are told to do, even if the person telling us is doing so for our own benefit. Some of us think that they threaten our freedom, or maybe we are convinced that God won’t love us or save us unless we keep His commandments perfectly. We think our salvation is dependent on our ability to perform and totally neglect the gift of grace. Or maybe the opposite, we take advantage of grace and do whatever we want, living however we see fit, because we know God will save us despite our sins. Neither is true. God gives us rules for our own good, and they actually aren’t a restriction but rather a ticket to freedom. In this teaching, we will take a look at what it means to make some “half-time” adjustments in our lives to live a life worthy of the calling we’ve received as children of God.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they’re continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can’t

control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 3

MAIN QUESTIONS: What is the point of rules? Why do we tend to do the exact opposite of what rules tell us to do, stretching the boundaries and testing the limits? Why does God give us rules and how do we know they are for our good?

INTRO:

If you've ever played a soccer game before, you know that when you exit the field before half-time and when you come back on the field after half-time, it's like an entirely different game. Coaches use half-time to speak to their team about getting back out on the field, ignoring whatever happened in the first half, and playing a new game. For some teams, this changes the trajectory of the entire game. They're able to make epic comebacks and win the game, even though they were being destroyed in the first half. Good half-time adjustments change the game.

If you do make the right adjustments, you'll give yourself a better chance of success in the second half. If you fail to make the right changes, then whatever was going wrong in the first half will just keep getting worse. Plus you'll keep getting more and more frustrated. To be a star player, though, I'd argue you need something else, too: you need to have a good coach. To be a star player, I have to have a coach that convicts me that I need to make changes, equips me to know how to make them, and encourages me to keep going, even though I've messed up. Behind every star player is a coach who believes in them and pushes them to make the necessary adjustments to play their best game.

Some of the best comeback stories in sports' history came after a solid half-time speech. One of my favorites personally is from "Mighty Ducks" – let's watch the clip, and while you're watching pay attention to the coach's strategy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyVF1gIhAfk> – link (3:13 second clip)

This speech is one of my favorites, because it's very similar to what we see in the Bible. What does the coach do? He doesn't talk about strategy, really, but rather, he takes the opportunity to remind the players who they are. That's what it is all about.

TENSION:

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

I would say that many of us have comeback stories like this one. Maybe they aren't as drastic or dramatic, but we all have them. Maybe yours looks like that time you were a freshman and got to play on a varsity team, and you helped win a critically important game. Maybe it's that your family doesn't believe in Jesus, but you are following Him despite the pressure you feel from them not to. Maybe it looks like bringing your grades up tremendously after switching up some study habits. Mine looks a little different than yours I'm sure, but one thing is consistent through all of them.

When I look at a comeback story, I see two very distinct "halves." The first half is full of defeats, depressions, and chaos. There really is no presence of a "coach," so we are just trying to figure it all out ourselves, which leads to us guessing and doing what everyone else is doing. I know that in my story, I surely didn't have a coach, and if I did, I was letting things like fear, pride, and lust drive me. Those insecurities were driving everything I did and were acting like my coach. The second half is when the game can change. When I look at my second half, I see that I found my coach. I found some guidance. It just so happens, the coach that I found was Jesus - and the good news? He wants to be your coach, too.

When I met Jesus, I was an eighteen-year-old girl who had been doing things her own way for a long time. Like any good coach, Jesus came along side of me and asked me to make some adjustments, so that I could play my best game. In other words, He asked me to reevaluate how I was living and make choices that would benefit me, while simultaneously glorifying Him, so that I could have the abundant life that He promises. In 2 Timothy 1:7 it says: *For God has not given us a Spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind.* Those emotions that drove me for so long were not of God, but rather of the world, and once I recognized that, it changed the game for me.

As with a lot of things, when we are given boundaries, we like to push them and see how far we can go. When we're told to not drive over the speed limit, eventually we convince ourselves that going 8-10 mph over the speed limit isn't actually that harmful, and as we drive more often and become more comfortable, we push the boundaries more. We do the same with physical relationships – we start out innocent, and then it moves into heavier sexual intimacy that is clearly outlined in the Bible as not good for us outside of marriage. Eventually, we think it is okay to cross that boundary completely because "who really cares." Soon, we aren't even sure what the boundaries were in the first place. We know the rules, yet we still push the boundaries, and we break them, even if we know they were put in place for our own good.

Often, we refer to the point where sin came into the picture as "the fall," I'd argue that we should refer to it as "rebellion." We are the ones that make choices on purpose, not by accident. Falling is an accident, while rebellion is a conscious choice. Our rebellion

causes us a deep amount of hurt that we may not even notice until we take a closer look at our hearts.

TRUTH:

We may be tempted to push the boundaries and break the rules because of our sinful nature, but that doesn't mean we have to.

In 1 John 4:4 we read:

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them (evil spirits), because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

The One who is in us, because of the Holy Spirit, is greater than the world we are in. Have you ever thought about what that means? What it's saying is that you, as a believer, have the spiritual power in you to not be overcome by the atmosphere of the world. That spiritual power residing in you will help you change any part of your character that has become ungodly. Because of Jesus, you can turn your rebellion into restoration. You have ALL the power to change the trajectory of the second half of your life! All you have to do is seek God's help, make up your mind, be honest with yourself after you check how you're living, and stop making excuses. Saying, "it's not that bad," or "nobody actually cares how I live my life," or "God isn't concerned with my day-to-day decisions" will not help you or I to become more like Christ. God **does** care about every decision you make, every day, big or small. The Word of God gives us specific directions about the kind of behaviors that are, and are not, appropriate, because He cares! For example, consider the following excerpts from Ephesians 5:

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Do not get drunk."

God not only tells us what not to do, He tells us the kind of behavior we should be exhibiting in our lives... if all He cared about were rules, He wouldn't even bother telling us what we could be doing to win this game! He doesn't just care about rules – He cares about our hearts, the condition of them, and how we are loving others and being loved in return. For example, we find the following excerpts in Galatians 5:

"Serve one another in love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Live by the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Keep in step with the Spirit. If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Carry each other's burdens. Let us not become weary in doing good...as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

Many of us have struggled hard to obey Scripture and not follow our sinful nature. It is not easy to obey God and become like Christ. But, although we will never arrive at perfection, we can have a killer second half of our game because the God who created us also lives inside of us and empowers us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received!

Interestingly enough, studies done on people who have learned to control their anger show that the brain actually responds differently to the same stimulus before and after the person made a concerted effort for several months to be less angry. Thus, the transformation that a person goes through on his journey to become more like Christ is not just a disciplining of the flesh but a rewiring of the brain. That is why, though old habits and tendencies still pop up in each of us, the more we work to become like Christ, the easier it becomes. We will never totally rid ourselves of the desires of our flesh, because they are part of us. But as we are transformed more and more into the image of Christ, some of the battles we have had to fight will end in victory, while other battles will be easier to win each time we armor up with His righteousness and Truth.

I think we can learn something from “Mighty Ducks” – there is a better way than trying to use your willpower to submit to external rules. Now, this wasn’t invented by the coach you saw on the screen a few minutes ago. This method was invented by God. This better way is actually emphasized throughout the whole New Testament, and Paul was particularly clear about it in the third chapter of Colossians. Check out the first ten verses:

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

What was Paul getting at? If trying to rule ourselves with “don’t do this and don’t do that” doesn’t work to make us holier, what does?

Becoming who we are.

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

Look again at the ten verses above. Jesus did the same thing that Paul is doing, when He told His followers that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He didn't tell them they COULD be the salt and light if they kept certain rules - rather that they were already salt and light because of their connection to Him.

Christ is your new identity. Christ is your life. But let me ask you a question: is Christ your life? Do you want Jesus more than you want anything else? I think most of us, if we were being honest would say something like, "No, Christ isn't my life... but I want Him to be." And what if I went even further and asked you to explain: *why isn't Christ your life?*

Then you might go into more detail about your life and your choices. You might admit that you still do what you want to do sometimes, or that you don't pray enough, or that you haven't forgiven a certain person even though you know you should. With your sin and failure so apparent, so ever present, you might wonder how you could ever claim that Christ is truly your life. The critical point is this: that you want Him to be... you want Him.

However, Paul proclaimed in Colossians 3 that Christ is your life. **He is. Fact. Done deal.** He did not say that Christ is your life if you accomplish this, give that away, and forgive those. No. None of that. Paul stated, qualification free, that Christ is your life. This kind of statement in Scripture is called an *indicative* - something that has already been declared about you as a fact, a Truth.

Indicatives aren't the only kind of statement in Scripture, however. There are also imperatives. An imperative is something we are supposed to do, phrased as a command or a direction. It might sound dry to talk about types of speech, but it is hugely important for this reason: when we confuse indicatives with imperatives, we sabotage our ability to live in our new identities.

Colossians 3 is full of indicatives. Solid Truths. You have been raised with Christ. You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ. Christ is your life. All of these things are declared about you as facts that are already true. They indicate your identity.

On the other hand, some people see imperatives, the commands, as a threat to our freedom. Others love imperatives but for selfish reasons. See, we fall into the trap of thinking if we keep all the commands and rules, we can chart of progress toward holiness and present ourselves as righteous people. But the problem is, both of these approaches are wrong.

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

Here's why. Every imperative in Scripture is based on an indicative. In other words, we're never asked to do something until we're told something true about who we are.

The truths of the Gospel support and sustain the commands of the Gospel. If we don't first understand the truth about who we are - the truest thing about us - we will be crushed by the weight of the commands. If we don't understand who we are, we can't even begin to make wise half-time adjustments.

Jesus always tells us who we are before He ever tells us what to do, because Jesus knows two things about those who will choose to follow Him. First, He knows He is asking the impossible. And second, He specializes in making the impossible possible.

Let's take this for a test drive. Think about some of the heaviest commands we're given in Scripture. And remember, the imperatives are always based on an indicative that is already true about us. You will flee from sexual immorality - true, but not before you are reminded that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in you. That's who you are, so because of that, you are told to flee from sexual immorality. Do nothing out of selfish ambition - true, but not before you are reminded that the mind of Christ, the ultimate humble servant, is in you. That's who you are, so because of that, act in humility. You will always forgive your enemies - true, but not before you are reminded that you have been forgiven. The death of Jesus has washed away every sin. That's who you are, so because of that, forgive your enemies.

This model isn't found only in the New Testament. Think of the greatest list of rules in all of human history, the Ten Commandments. How does it begin? *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt."* That's identity, ladies and gentlemen. You were slaves, but now you're free, and because of that, live like this.

We simply cannot become who we should be. It's impossible. The only thing we can become is who we are. It's the high and beautiful gospel indicatives that sustain the gospel imperatives. In Christ, we can become who we are **AND** who we were created to be.

Identity statements are everywhere. Find a command, and you'll find somewhere near it a truth about who you are. No one ever told me that. No one had ever told me when I was your age that my actions flow from my identity, not the other way around. No one had ever shown me how Scripture builds every command on the foundation of the truth of our identity in Christ.

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

Transformation doesn't begin with cleaning up and getting our acts together. It begins with meeting Jesus. When we do that, we are identified with Jesus and given new identities - identities based on His righteousness and standing with God. And that is how we become who we are. Not by our own effort or achievement, but by virtue of Christ being in us.

We don't need to impress God sufficiently to warrant His love and approval. If we did, we would live our lives in a constant state of trembling anxiety, wondering if this gift or that gift is the right one to earn us a fatherly smile. However, God is waiting to pull us close, to bless us, no matter what gift we bring. And any gift we bring, our time, our love, our scholarship, our art, our relationships, our job - was given to us by God in the first place.

The call to become who we are is the only claim on our lives that matters.

We cannot change who we are, and that is the worst and the best news imaginable. Worst because there is nothing we can do - not one single thing - that will make us better people. And it is also the best, because despite that God calls us beloved. God delights in us. God saved us while we were still a long way off.

God does not want us to have sorrow, emotional trauma, loneliness, or anxiety, living as unwary victims of the ungodly spiritual atmosphere we breathe every day. He wants us to be blessed – to have abundant life here on earth – that is why Jesus came to Earth and put on flesh in the first place!

He knows for us to have an abundant life, we need to be aware of the spiritual atmosphere of our time and not live by its standards. Further, He knows that our flesh produces desires and thoughts that are unhealthy for us, and which lead to distress and dismay. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and once we get that, we can see why He lovingly provides parameters for us to flourish and thrive within. He commands us to be transformed by constantly bringing our thoughts in line with His (*Romans 12*).

But, here's the kicker: He can't make us do anything. We have the ability to make a choice. It's up to us whether or not we believe that He is faithful and loving enough to have our best interests at heart. It's up to us to obey Him. Once again, He loves us enough to give us the ability to think, control, and make decisions. We can have all the knowledge in the world, but until we are willing to lay down our lives and walk away from the temptations that harm us, in order to follow Him, we're doing something wrong. We can be so intelligent, knowing the Bible in and out – but then have no idea what to do with it. If you lack wisdom, you lack the ability to make the right decisions. And the way you gain wisdom is through studying God's word, getting to know His heart for you, and

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

growing in your understanding of why He says what He says. Wisdom flows from your love for Jesus, and the healthy decisions flow from the wisdom you acquire in your relationship with Him.

Think of it this way. The ten commandments are often mocked, referred to as being old fashioned and irrelevant, and often, the Church doesn't even teach them. I'd argue that's a poor decision – not because I think you would be able to adhere to all of the things on that list – heck, I know you'll never be able to. That's not the point. The point is that once you understand the weight of those, that you'll never be able to uphold them, and that you can never measure up, one day, you will desperately realize that you need a Savior. There will come a point that you realize you no longer want to do this by yourself, and you'll know that Jesus is there waiting for you to turn to Him. That's the point of commandments.

Jesus knows we will never measure up, yet He loves us and wants the best for us anyway.

APPLICATION:

So, let me ask you a question: What half-time adjustments do you need to make in your life? In 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 we are told: "I have the right to do anything, you said – but not everything is beneficial. *"I have the right to do anything" – but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. I have the right to do anything, you say, but not everything.*" You may have the right and the ability to do anything you want, but that doesn't mean that you should do it.

The best way to know Jesus and His intentions is through the study of His word. Notice I said "study," not just "read." Christ's followers should cultivate a deep hunger and love to know the Scriptures. For in knowing the Scriptures, we know Christ Himself. Reading the Bible for rules to live by is fine, but I'd bet it will make you bitter, resentful, and have a distorted view of Jesus. We read the Bible not so much to know the rules but to know Christ.

Christ has given us His Spirit to walk beside us and guide us into all truth. As we encounter His Word, it shapes us more and more into His likeness – the same way His Word formed the universe of creation. His heart becomes our heart. His thoughts become our thoughts. His desires are ours. We have been crucified with Christ and are now dead to our sins.

LANDING:

God outlines "rules" for us in the Bible, guidelines, recommendations, or imperatives to give us the option of having an abundant life. So often we read Scripture like it's a rulebook or a disjointed encyclopedia of stories, but that's not what the Bible is. The

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

Bible is a relational book. Are there rules? Yes, of course, because it is written to showcase the redemption that Jesus offers us through a simple belief in Him. The rules serve as a tool to tell us about the God who creates and redeems a people for himself—a people who know Him personally. The God of the Bible wants us to know Him. He isn't silent. He has revealed Himself. He will speak to us if we will take our Bibles off the shelf and learn of His goodness through His word. It's through regularly hearing God speak that we know and enjoy relationship with Him. The more we come to love Him, the less His commandments are like rules and the more they are like loving advice from our best friend that we WANT to obey.

Taste and see that the Lord is good, and He will offer Himself to you. He offers you saving grace from your deepest temptations and sins and guilt and shame. He offers you redemption. And He does it through loving guidance and a relationship.

God may give us rules, but they aren't to restrict us – they are for our benefit, and when we get to know His heart for us and the fact that everything He has ever done has always been because of His love for us, our attitude toward his rules will change. We're never told what to do before we are told who we are – and who we are is defined by Him alone – because the God of the Universe loves you and cherishes you. That's what I call freedom.

Now what half-time adjustments can you make to win this game? This is your turning point, and it's a choice you get the privilege of making. Jesus invites you to live an abundant life – and my prayer is that you'd choose it with all of your heart.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

2 Timothy 1:7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

1 John 4:4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who in the world.

Ephesians 5:3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling, and slander, along with every form of malice.

Galatians 5:22 Serve one another in love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Live by the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Keep in step with the Spirit. If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Carry each other's

burdens. Let us not become weary in doing good...as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Colossians 3:1-10 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. I have the right to do anything, you say, but not everything.

Romans 12

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love in Action

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful

Module 4, Teaching 2: Why Does God Give Us Rules?

in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Small Group Questions

1. Have you ever felt like God is restricting your freedom with all of the commandments found in the Bible?
2. What do you think about God telling you who you are before He tells you what to do? Have you ever been told that before?
3. Do you believe the commandments in the Bible are for your good? Do you realize you realistically can never measure up to them? What's the good news found in that?
4. Have you made any decisions that you wish you would have done differently, unknowingly or knowingly?
5. What are some "half-time" adjustments you can make in your life to acquire and start living the abundant life that Jesus offers you?

WE ARE NEVER TOLD

WHAT TO DO

BEFORE

WE ARE TOLD

WHO WE ARE.

Importance of Module 4

This module is entitled, “An Overflowing Cup,” and it’s all about the true meaning of an abundant life. We hear that phrase all the time when talking about faith, including in the name of this curriculum. But how many of us have actually taken the time to think about what an abundant life looks like, what’s necessary for it to exist, and where does it come from? Truth is, abundant life is a grace-filled, undeserved gift, and we have free access to it at any point. Through the teachings in this module, we are going to talk about why following Jesus is worth it, why God finds it necessary to give us rules, and what love “in action” looks like. When we receive the love of Jesus and His transforming grace, we really need to dive into what it looks like to access and desire it above anything else. He pursues us unflinchingly and without end. Jesus is better than anything else, because He is the source of love and the model of a perfect relationship, which our human relationships shadow. When we are filled up by the Giver, His love in us can overflow into our earthly relationships.

Theme

This is all about love. Dating, sexuality, relationships, and marriage, everything we’ve been talking about - it all rests on love, or rather, what we think love looks like. In the words of Bob Goff, “Love is never stationary.” It’s always moving, always acting, and always pursuing the best interest of the other person. If we have the wrong definition of love, we will be utterly helpless when we are trying to live it out in our day-to-day lives. Sometimes we are so inspired by sermon illustrations, and we connect with teachings about Jesus that inspire us to live into His greater story. But instead of going out there and creating our own epic stories of love, we marvel at someone else’s, or we wait for extraordinary acts of love to be done to us. Truth is, if we love people greatly and deeply on a daily basis, God will teach us something through that. He will reveal Himself not only to the person we are loving, but also to us, as we seek to love more like Him. Here’s what it comes down to: love is what defines our lives. We will be known for how we love others, and the definition of love is found in the Gospel of Jesus alone. The love of God is reckless - going after us and chasing us no matter what the cost.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I’m so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him,

so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 3

MAIN QUESTIONS: What do you want your life to be known for? How do you love people – is it based on the reckless love of God or is it based on the “norm” of love that we see around us? What does it mean to REALLY love?

INTRO:

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.” -C.S. Lewis

“We love because He first loved us.” “Let all that you do be done in love.” “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” “Our sin was great, His love was greater.” “What good is it if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions?”

Those phrases I just said are all ones that we hear in the Bible. Love is all over Scripture. In fact, love is the point of the Bible. The Bible is a love story between the God of Creation and the creation itself. We've talked about the difference between biblical love and the example of love we see modeled around us. We see people committing to love each other forever, but not taking that vow seriously enough to actually keep it “forever.” We see distortions of real love: pornography, dating with no intentions, using one another to fulfill lustful desires, and exploiting others to lift ourselves higher. The “normal” of our love doesn't always match up with what our hearts wish it to be.

But there are times when it does... and those times, the times that echo the type of love that we were created to give AND receive, tend to stop all of humanity in its tracks. Think about it – we celebrate heroic acts of sacrifice, and we honor those that are willing to risk their own well-being in order to ensure another person's safety, maybe even a stranger's. Moments like those go down in history. I think we celebrate those heroic acts of love, because deep down, no matter who we are or what we believe, we know that

that's what we were made for and our hearts yearn to see more of it. These instances remind us that our state of brokenness is indeed not our home. It is in those moments that we realize our hearts not only yearn for Heaven – but that they also yearn for Jesus.

Chuck Colson, a former politician who went to prison for illegal activity, met Jesus while he was there, and eventually became a great Christian theologian and author, told a story that demonstrates this type of love very well. The story involved a group of American prisoners of war during the Second World War, who were made to do hard labor in a prison camp. Each had a shovel and would dig all day, then come in and give an account of his work in the evening. One evening 20 prisoners were lined up by the guard and the shovels were counted. The guard counted nineteen shovels and turned in rage on the 20 prisoners, demanding to know which one did not bring his shovel back. No one responded. The guard took out his gun and said that he would shoot five men if the guilty prisoner did not step forward. After a moment of tense silence, a 19-year-old soldier—who was not that much older than many of you—stepped forward with his head bowed down. The guard grabbed him, took him to the side, shot him in the head, and turned to warn the others that they better be more careful than he was. When he left, the men counted the shovels, and it turned out that there were 20. The guard had miscounted. And the boy had given his life for his friends.

Can you imagine the emotions that must have filled their hearts as they knelt down over his body? In the five or ten seconds of silence, the boy had weighed his whole future in the balance—a future wife, an education, a new truck, children, a career, all the things on his bucket list—and he chose death so that others might live. Jesus said in John 15:13, "*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*" This is what great love looks like. To love is to choose suffering for the sake of another.

TENSION:

There's nothing we love more than a story of sacrificial love. Think about it. We are so inspired by heroic acts, sermon illustrations, and we connect with teachings about Jesus that inspire us to live into His greater story. Selfless acts that put another's well-being before our own in dangerous situations, stories where a stranger steps in and protects someone in danger, and stories where we sacrifice time or money for the greater good. Those stories inspire us. But instead of going out there and creating our own epic stories of love, we marvel at someone else's, or we wait for extraordinary acts of love to be done to us. We wish we would have the courage of that young man in the concentration camp, but very few of us actually would. Because that type of love takes something that is entirely not of us - it takes the type of love that only is found in God.

I think of things I see in this world that remind me that love is necessary and able to move mountains, and I think of situations in this world where I see love being so

desperately needed. I think of real people doing real things that demonstrate the type of love in John 15:13.

Adoption is one of those things. If you know someone who has been impacted by adoption, you know why it is considered to be one of the most sacrificial acts of love, ever. A family that I know in New Jersey, the Youngs, adopted a young boy from the country of Ukraine. Not only did they sacrifice their finances (they were both in ministry, fundraising their salaries) to move forward with this, but they also felt the Lord telling them to adopt a child with special needs. They had been fruitful in the ministry that they'd been leading, and they sensed God calling them to give that up, for a little boy they didn't know, in a way that would alter their lives and the lives of their family forever. Their ministry focus would shift from outreach to their own family. They did it, after years of paperwork and setbacks, trusting God through it all. Today, they have a little boy named Alec, who was diagnosed with Down Syndrome and autism earlier this year. Their lives are most certainly not easy, but if you would talk to Aaron or Deanna, I think you'd hear of that John 15:13 type of love. They've sacrificed things that the world says are important for one of God's children. That's love in action.

I think when I first was learning about Jesus, I had a misconception of His love and therefore a misconception of who He was and how I was to love other people. I really thought about Him being just up in the sky – observing my life and checking out all the decisions I was making, in order to see if they matched up with how He wanted me to live. I imagined Him sitting on His throne, higher than me, criticizing my decisions, checking all the boxes where I didn't quite measure up, and marking me by my sin. When I did "good," He was pleased with me, but when I did "bad," He wasn't too happy. I imagined Him giving me a slap on the wrist for less serious offenses, but when I really messed up, I imagined Him orchestrating events in my life and causing bad things to happen that would teach me a lesson. I knew that He loved me, but I wasn't quite sure how that love measured with His justice and discipline. I wasn't completely convinced that His love is what defines who He is. But now I am.

TRUTH:

The truth is, Jesus was known for how He loved people. When we look at His life, we see clearly four things that outline who He is. The funny thing is that they are all about love:

1. First, Paul shows the depth of Christ's love for us. *Christ loved you and gave Himself to you* (Ephesians 5:2). The giving of Himself is the demonstration of His love. It's deep, it's not based on our performance, and it's totally free.
2. Second, notice that the cost of His love was *himself*—His life. It was not just money or time or energy or inconvenience or even suffering; it was the full extent of sacrifice. It's as sacrificial as you get. He gave everything. He gave himself.
3. Third, notice that this love and this self-giving was for *you*: Christ loved *you* and gave Himself (Ephesians 2:8). He gave Himself for *you*. That's speaking directly

to the core of who you are - to the core of your identity. Christ gave Himself for you because of who you are to Him.

4. Finally, notice that God the Father was pleased with this act of self-sacrificing love. Verse 2: "Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, *an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.*" When God bowed down over the love that His Son poured out for us on the cross, it was like a fragrant aroma to him. God loves the Son's love for us.

Romans 5:8, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This verse tells us that love saves. Love rescues. Love helps. And it does so, if necessary, at great cost to the lover.

Truth is, God is not an overarching figure like a traffic cop. He's a good, good Father. He is God with us. He doesn't just care about our discipline, He cares about our hearts. He gave everything for us, so that we would not only experience this love, but so that we would be able to give it away. He has set you apart by dying for you. He didn't die for anything else- you are not the same as any other part of creation! You are set apart. That action shows that you are worth everything to Him. **This means that your identity is sacred. Your humanity is sacred. And here is the truth: God has never made a person that He does not love.**

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God loves even the messiest, most sinful person, immensely, so much so that He would die all over again for them? If you want to believe that, it all comes down to if you're willing to love in the middle of the mess like He does. A lot of us desire to make our names known, but we don't want to sacrifice anything in order to do so. A lot of us honestly want to make our names known above Jesus' name. Instead of wanting to be great, and wanting fame, we should want to be known in our inner circles for loving people ferociously - we should want everyone we love to question how we are loving them so counter-culturally. We shouldn't desire to solely be known by strangers for our platforms; we should desire to be known by our people for our love.

APPLICATION:

Bottom Line: Your life is not defined by what you believe in, it's about what you actively and deliberately participate in. What do you want your life and relationships to be known for?

When we live from a place of knowing who we are because of who God says we are, we freely give away love and change the world around us. Love is unselfishly choosing for another's highest good. Extraordinary things can happen from that simple belief. My trust in God flows out of the experience of His loving me, day in and day out, whether the day is stormy or fair, whether I'm sick or in good health, whether I'm in a state of grace or disgrace. He comes to me where I live and loves me as I am.

My challenge to you is this: don't keep the love you've found in Jesus to yourself. I truly believe that once you've been changed by Jesus, it will be hard for you not to want to

shout that from the rooftops. When your soul finds what it has been looking for, you should want everyone else to find that, too.

Every morning when we wake up, we have a choice. What are we living for and how are we choosing to love? Acts of love don't have to be these great, grandiose gestures - instead, they can simply be small, thoughtful, intentional acts of service. Taking the trash out for your parents without them asking you to do it, because you see that it's overflowing. Driving a little sibling to a friend's house to take another thing off your parent's to-do list. Baking a friend cookies when you know that they are stressed, angry, anxious, or depressed. Spending quality time with a person you normally wouldn't spend time with. Volunteering at your church in an area that desperately needs people. Treating your Starbucks barista like an actual human and not like a robot. Praying for people is one of that most intentional ways that you can love them, and they might not even know it. Praying for an enemy - praying for somebody that has hurt you is an act of love that the Bible holds in high esteem.

Big or small, acts of love are what show what place we are living in. Loving because you want to look good, keep up your Christian image, check a box, or gain fame? That's what our human flesh tells us is important. Loving from a place of wanting to give of yourself? Now that's what Jesus did - and that type of love is beautiful.

LANDING:

If you've ever heard the song "Reckless Love," it's a dynamic song, one that rises and falls with intensity and really speaks to the heart of God's love for us. The bridge goes like this:

There's no shadow you won't light up, mountain you won't climb up, coming after me

No wall you won't kick down, lie you won't tear down, coming after me

One night when I was talking with a friend about the song, he said that the Lord had given him a very specific picture of what those words were talking about. My friend, Brad, has three little children, all under the age of four. Brad described his vision like this:

"One night, I was at home with my children, and suddenly, I had lost sight of my son. All of a sudden, I couldn't find him anymore. He wasn't in the house and he wasn't on the porch and he wasn't in the yard - no matter where I looked, I couldn't find him. Finally, I spotted him, down in front of the house, across the sidewalk on the road. He was right in the middle. Looking again, I could see this car racing toward my son, my sweet boy, innocent and unaware of the danger coming at him. He stood there so lost and vulnerable and alone, completely unaware of the threat to his life. My heart sank - and in that moment, I understood reckless love. Why? Because I knew in that moment that there would be nothing that would keep me from getting to my son, holding him close, providing for him safety and protection. I would have died for him in that exact moment. If that's the reckless love that I would show my son, how much greater is the love of our

Heavenly Father? You see, our God sees the danger swirling all around us while we are helpless and unaware and lost, and He still comes after us, every single time, with a fierce, raging, and unstoppable love. It doesn't make sense. It's not based on our merit. It's not timid, or slow to act, and it's definitely not safe. It's reckless, but it's perfect. Because it comes from a perfect God. A God worthy of our worship"

That's what love does. It pursues blindly, unflinchingly, and without end. When you go after something you love, you'll do anything it takes to get it, even if it costs everything.

I don't know about you, but if there is one thing I want to be known for, it's how I love other people. I want to be known for recklessly loving people, even when I try and fall desperately short. Romans 12:1 tells us to outdo one another in brotherly love. Because of Jesus, you're freed up to live, serve, encourage, and celebrate one another without the fear that you're not good enough. Micah 6:8 tells us to *love mercy, act justly, and walk humbly*.

I love real love. Love through the weaknesses and the victories. Love that you fight for and work at. Love that you wait patiently for. Love that you honor and treasure. Love that is messy yet pure. Love that conquers all. All this is given to us and is only possible through our King Jesus, the One who first loved us.

What if we added a lot more kindness, generosity, gratefulness, and encouragement to the world? What if we aimed to not be known for who we are, but for who God is in us? What if we aimed to love like Him and be known for that love? We could start to leave people better than we found them. Every person would come to truly believe their value. Every person would believe that they were created uniquely and perfectly, even before they were born. Every person would be transformed by the freedom that that offers. That's the reckless kind of love I'm aiming for.

Romans 12:9-13 says: *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourself. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need.*

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

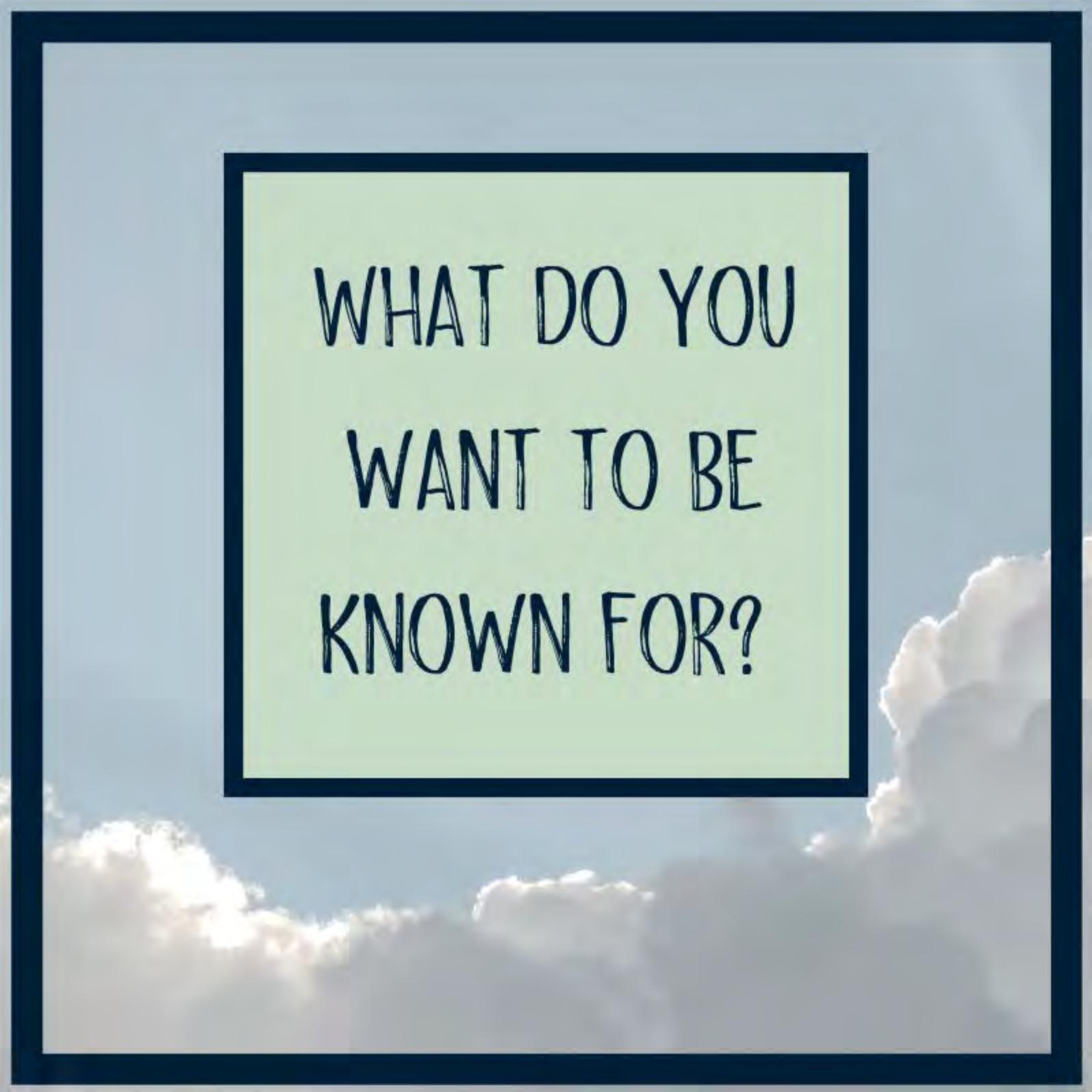
Matthew 5:13-16 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Micah 6:8 To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Romans 12:9-13 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourself. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need.

Small Group Questions

1. How would you define love?
2. Have you ever fallen into the trap of loving people to make yourself look good and not for their benefit?
3. Do you believe you are loved simply because of who you are?
4. What are some practical ways this week that you can show others that they are loved for who they are?
5. Do you think that God's love is reckless? What does that mean?



WHAT DO YOU
WANT TO BE
KNOWN FOR?

NEW MESSAGE SERIES!



THE IDEA OF BEING MADE FOR THE "NOT YET" IS ESSENTIAL TO HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES HERE ON EARTH. WE WERE CREATED BY GOD, PERFECTLY AND UNIQUELY - YET, BECAUSE OF SIN, WE ARE LIVING IN THE HERE AND NOW, WHICH IS MUCH MORE BROKEN THAN THE ORIGINAL AND FAR FROM PERFECT. THIS GAP CAUSES AN ETERNAL STRUGGLE ON EARTH- EVEN WHEN WHEN WE KNOW AND LOVE JESUS IN THE HERE AND NOW.



WE WERE MADE
for the
"NOT YET"

Importance of Module 5

“We Were Made for the ‘Not Yet’” is the fifth module of Abundant Life: You Were Made for More. The three teachings in this module are based on topics that we’ll admit that we don’t have all the answers to – rather, we want to ignite conversations about them. The idea of being made for the “not yet” is essential to how we live our lives here on earth. We were created by God, perfectly and uniquely – yet, because of sin, we are living in the here and now, which is much more broken than the original and far from perfect. The key is to recognize this that gap exists because of sin... to recognize that our souls will always yearn for the “not yet”, even when we know and love Jesus in the here and now. We will always struggle. Not everybody’s struggle will look the same, of course. But until we’re fully restored, the struggle will continue.

The first teaching will hit on the impact of trauma and how trauma’s effects can gravely impact our relationships. The second teaching will cover dysphorias of gender, attractions, and identity, in order to open up conversations about how to love those around us, while also promoting a biblical view of sexuality to our students. Finally, the third teaching will speak into why friendship and community are so essential to all of us, especially in light of struggling.

**Note: Although we use both the terms “same-sex attracted” and “gay” in these teachings, we encourage you to pray, discern, and seek wisdom from God about what best suits you and your group. The issue of language and labels surrounding the gender identity argument is not what we are looking to reconcile in this teaching. Instead, we want to focus on our core identity. Our identity in Christ is first and foremost, so the labels that come after that, the ones that we often pin to our identity in an effort to “belong”, are interchangeable and don’t hold as much weight as many think they do. The labels that God pins to our identity are SO different than the ones we want people to know us by. We’ll take a look at why humans find labels necessary (for belonging, community, connection, acceptance, etc.) and provide an opportunity for some insightful discussion within your group.*

Many times, when a student is insistent on using a label, and questions why you won’t use that label (such as the term “gay”), they are really asking you to affirm their desire for acceptance or love. They want to know that, if they associate with that label, will your treatment of them change? Will you still welcome them? Keep that in mind as you’re tackling these topics.

The more important question we need to be working through is this: Would students who are questioning their sexual orientation or struggling with their gender identity feel comfortable raising this issue with our clergy or youth leaders

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

at our church? If not, how can we reframe the narrative and reset the structure so that they do have a safe space to wrestle with hard things in light of the Gospel?

While some argue that using the word “gay” as an identifier will perpetuate the issues we’re facing and reinforce that particular label into the student’s identity, others argue that using terms like “same sex attracted” is refusing to use the common, cultural language involved in this argument and will only further isolate students and distract from the Gospel message that they desperately need to hear. Again, we don’t have all the right answers – but we know that God does. When I’ve asked Him to help me discern how to write this teaching, He’s helped me see that engaging people is far more important than winning the argument. It’s all about people, and that’s what we need to focus on. It’s about winning back hearts for His Kingdom, and we believe we do that by meeting people where they’re at.

We have created a resource page that discusses the different arguments about labeling students struggling with their attractions and orientation, and we encourage you to dive into those before you make a decision. Please visit www.youweremadeformore.org or contact Abundant Life at abundantlifeym@gmail.com to get your copy today!

Theme

You were fearfully and wonderfully made – I bet you’ve heard that one before, right? But how many of us actually live with the perspective that we were made for more and allow it to permeate into our souls? Today, we’re going to be talking about trauma. Even if you don’t think you have any personally, I encourage you to lean in – because you most likely will have a friend that experiences trauma. In the words of Dana Henry, LPC: “Trauma is something that takes a person and pulls everything they know that is safe and secure out from underneath them.” The goal of this teaching is to destigmatize pain, hurt, and hard things through having discussions about trauma. So many students are struggling, and we believe that having conversations is vital in providing healing for students who don’t even know that they’re suffering from trauma. Many times, we think trauma must be this huge, for lack of a better word, “traumatic” experience. However, the truth is that we all have traumas that have shaped our perspective of the world and what happens around us – which is why we don’t live like we are fearfully and wonderfully made, made for more than we believe. The good news is that there is healing found in Jesus – for every trauma, big or small. Unfortunately, the reality of what happened to you, or what you experienced, will likely not change during this conversation, no matter how badly we wish or pray that it would. However, your perspective will change. Recovering from any sort of trauma is exactly that – a process,

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

a journey through pain, a regaining of what was taken. Most of all, it requires self-awareness and a desire to wrestle with the truths of pain that are found in the Gospel.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTION: What is trauma? Who experiences trauma? What steps can we take to heal in our own trauma and the places we've been hurt? What role does Jesus play in the healing process? How can unresolved trauma hurt our relationships?

LEADER'S REMINDER:

During small group time, a student may reveal a trauma that they are currently in the midst of, and there probably will be deep emotion involved in that. Instead of feeling the need to speak immediately, get comfortable with sitting with people in their deep pain. Take a moment before this teaching and remind yourself that it is okay for students to question or be angry at God in the middle of their grief and pain. God is big enough to handle their anger and catch every tear that they probably have been holding in for a while. And sometimes the best thing you can do as a leader for a student dealing with trauma is to create an environment that is safe for them to speak and process without fear of judgment.

*We have the power to positively influence the lives of those around us. Being informed and remembering we are not alone will allow us to have a huge impact in the lives of students struggling with trauma. **We are better together**, and we serve a God who will wipe every tear and bind every broken heart (and that's a promise we can rejoice in!).*

INTRO:

No matter what you've heard about trauma, I want us to challenge us to think a little differently about trauma today. We're going to first define trauma, talk about some scenarios, and then take a look at what Jesus has to say about trauma in the Scriptures and what that means for us.

Trauma is defined as any sort of disturbing experience that produces an overwhelming and unmanageable emotional response. First, trauma is a certain kind of suffering – the kind that overwhelms one's ability to cope. Trauma can be a whole list of wounds that cripple us. Often, any one of those things can bury themselves deep in our consciousness because they're too heavy for us to bear at once. Trauma is something that happens in the past but asserts itself over and over again in our present lives and day-to-day activities.

The statistics about trauma are staggering. Two thirds of children report experiencing at least one traumatic event by the time they are 16 years old. Divorce, domestic violence, the death or illness of a loved one, and neglect are just a few examples of more serious traumas that may impact you, your family, or your friends. Studies show the brain is negatively impacted by trauma, and because of that students that have had traumatic experiences may at times act, think, and feel differently than their peers. Students who have experienced trauma may do things like:

- Engage in risky behaviors.
- Have struggles eating, sleeping, and completing everyday tasks.
- Be overly aggressive or passive (increased fight or flight response).
- Display attention-seeking behaviors.

And that doesn't even scratch the surface of what effects trauma can have on any one of us. If an adult has unaddressed trauma from when they were growing up, it can manifest itself in any one of those ways throughout adulthood. Trauma shows up everywhere and anywhere – it affects all people differently, even if they are a part of the same experience, due to other past traumas and triggers. Trauma is not rare, and it's not uncommon.

Here's the other important thing to recognize: trauma will most certainly affect every single relationship you are in – whether it's friendship, dating, or family. Trauma has an ability to seep into every part of your life – and can drastically affect your behavior, as we've talked about. That's why we're talking about this today, because it's so important to get a hold on what traumas have taken root in your heart, what lies you're believing because of them, and how to get healing from them.

TENSION:

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

I'll be honest with you for a quick second - so many times I would hear the word trauma and automatically think: *"That has nothing to do with me. I don't have any trauma."* Trauma seemed like this huge deal, a word with a lot of stigma and judgement behind it. I thought that if I admitted to having trauma, I'd probably have to go to counseling, and everybody would know, and I did not want that. I was more comfortable trying to work through the pain and the hurt I experienced by myself.

First of all, all of those assumptions I made were incorrect. In actuality, trauma doesn't have to be a huge life event. Some people never go to counseling for trauma (although I love, support, and have went to counseling myself, it's really just a tool to move through past hurts - it's not the way, the Truth, and the life – Jesus is). Remember what Isaiah 53:5 says: *But he (Jesus) was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

Terry Wardle, a leading psychologist on trauma and Christianity, actually says there are five different types of traumas that we can suffer from.

1. First, **Wounds of Aggression:** things that happen to us as children that shouldn't happen, things that are said to us that impact how we view ourselves.
2. **Wounds of Withholding:** every child should view who they are as safe, loved, and cared for – these wounds happen when something that they need was withheld. Our first idea of who we are comes from the way others express facial expressions to us (how they react to us and what we do), which is a huge contributor to these types of wounds.
3. **Event Trauma:** this can be direct or second-hand trauma- anything that profoundly impacts or shifts our perspectives.
4. **Betrayal Trauma:** someone who had power in your life that abused that power.
5. **Trauma of Long-Term Duress:** humiliating nicknames or consistent verbal put downs.

Take a minute to review those five types of wounds in your own mind – wounds of aggression, wounds of withholding, event trauma, betrayal trauma, and trauma of long-term duress. Is anything popping into your head – maybe a memory that brings a stinging sensation to your heart? Maybe a relationship that you know wasn't healthy and has left some serious effects on how you've proceeded in other relationships? I really encourage you as we go throughout this teaching to ask God to show you where you need healing, because the truth is, we all need it, or at least no someone else who needs it. No matter what type of wound you've experienced, they all cause us to perceive the world in an altered way, which affects how we behave and respond in ways that seem strange to everyone else.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

The truth is, a single negative statement can have a huge impact on someone's life. Memories become encoded into our lives and actually affect much of who we are – much more than we think they ever will. Many times, we shrug things off, in an effort to pretend like they don't bother us, but they actually end up affecting us more than ever.

By having this conversation, I want to encourage you today to go deeper – are there still wounds in your life that you've written off and ignored? Today's the day to look at it – I promise you, when you do, there is healing and freedom on the other side.

Trauma is linked to so many things we experience on a daily basis and equate to other sources: irritability, anxiety, insomnia, impatience, nightmares or flashbacks, changes in appetite, emotional shutdown and inability to accomplish goals, difficulty trusting, or avoidance of friends, loved ones, or activities you used to enjoy.

Or, maybe, you feel apathetic toward God – your faith is at a roadblock and you're not really sure why. Sometimes, other people's hurt of us and their harm of us can cause us to view our relationship with God in a certain way, too. We equate human characteristics to God and think that He's going to respond to us in the same way that humans do. That is a result of trauma – a result of brokenness – a result of the Fall. Remember, we were made for the "not yet," but we're living in the here and now, and that's bound to include confusion, doubt, hurt, pain, and for some, intense suffering and struggle.

Here's an example of trauma in my own life: right before I got married, I was reflecting on my dating relationship with my now-husband. I thought I was really great at handling my emotions, being vulnerable, sharing my heart and my feelings, and letting him in on what I was processing in my mind. Now, as I look back, I see so clearly how closed off I was. I see so clearly how he gently nudged me into tough conversations, broke down defensive barriers I didn't even know that I had. I now realize how fearful I was of marriage when I met him. I was terrified because of what I've seen happen to couples who were once "in love" around me, relationships in my past that hadn't quite worked out like I'd hoped and left me broken, and surprises about the infidelity of faithful men supposedly walking with the Lord, who I once admired; because of my past, my traumas, and my everyday adaptation to them, I was terrified. Not one big trauma, but many smaller ones.

Here's another example. A friend of mine was going back and telling me a story from her childhood, as we were discussing her struggle with same sex attraction, which carried into her young adult life. I was curious, so I asked – did she feel like she was born with it, or could she remember a time where the feelings arose? In remembering and going back to her childhood memories, she told me that she remembered a specific instance where her perspective shifted.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

When she was eight years old, she was so excited to go to the father-daughter dance with her dad, she could barely stand the anticipation of him getting home from work. She stood patiently in the kitchen, waiting for him to walk in and see her new dress. I saw the smile on her face fade as she was telling me story, recounting what she had dreamed about happening and then what actually happened – her mind still held the disappointment that she experienced in that moment - in a very real and raw manner. Suddenly the door swung open, her dad stormed in, frantically finishing up a phone call, disengaged and disconnected. She noticed her mom whispering something to him in a hushed tone – probably that she had been waiting all day for him to get home and see her new dress, but he quickly dismissed her, rushing into the next room to find his notepad.

Now to us, that may seem insignificant and unlikely to have any major repercussions. But for her, it changed everything. From that moment on, she would tell you that a subconscious belief took root and began to flourish in her heart: that no man would ever find her worthy or beautiful enough. So she turned to women instead.

Another huge source of trauma is dating violence and abuse – once again, something we think will never happen to us, until it does. Nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year. One in three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner. And only 33% of teens who were in a violent dating relationship ever told anyone about the abuse. Many times this form of trauma presents itself in a cycle, endlessly repeating itself between the following cycle:

- An initial abusive incident occurs.
- **Tension builds** – the abuser tries to quell their violent tendency and the abused tries to “keep the peace” until, finally, another incident happens.
- **Make-up** – the abuser apologizes, often promising to never do it again, or conversely, trying to be shed blame by saying that the victim “asked for it” or is “making a big deal out of nothing.”
- **Calm** – both parties act as if nothing is wrong and do their best to ignore the mounting problem.

Often, many victims of long-term, habitual dating violence suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a serious psychological disorder that can be challenging to diagnose and conquer. Others will experience depression, anxiety, abnormally low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and drug/alcohol abuse. Violent relationships in adolescence can have serious ramifications, such as putting the victims at higher risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and further dating violence. In many cases, you become desensitized to dating violence – and it’s more likely that you’ll be a victim in another relationship and settle for unhealthy habits.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

If you are a previous victim of dating violence, and you suspect that you are suffering from the delayed symptoms of PTSD, I encourage you to contact a professional who specializes in this type of violence. If you are in a situation where you are currently experiencing dating violence—or even if you are unsure and want to learn more—a great place to start is by talking to your youth leader, who is in this room because they want you to experience abundance, and your parents, who care for you more than anyone else in the world. If you want more information, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) where there is access to anonymous and confidential help, 24/7.

Here's a few warning signs to look out for that could signal a relationship with dating violence:

- Becoming isolated from friends and family members
- Losing interest in activities that used to be enjoyed
- Apologizing and making excuses for the abusive behavior of the dating partner
- Being called names and put down by dating partner in front of other people
- Having a dating partner who is extremely jealous of attention from other guys or girls
- Having a dating partner who breaks objects, hurts animals, or threatens people or things the victim cares about
- Having bruises or injuries that can't be satisfactorily explained
- Being constantly monitored by a dating partner through phone calls, texts, or other people

This is a perfect example of trauma resulting from things that are seen as “normal” in our culture but are actually very, very toxic and damaging to who we were created to be. A lot of behavior in dating that's seen as normal is actually the furthest thing from normal! Drinking, partying, and using drugs can lead to negative life choices, being put into situations that otherwise you would have chosen to stay out of, and unknowingly putting yourself in dangerous environments that have the potential to lead to even more trauma.

The important thing that I want to hit on is that even if we all have trauma in our lives that can act as barriers in preventing us from being in relationship with God and relationship with one another, there is hope in the middle of that.

TRUTH:

Let's pause for a second... If you're overwhelmed by all that we've talked about so far, trust me, it's overwhelming for me, too! There is so much brokenness, pain, and hurt in the here and now. But here's the one thing that we need to remember: God remembers the evil that has caused our traumas. He will not forget the life of our lost loved one, the wrongdoing of our abuser, the brutal pain of violence, the shock and awe of loss, and the aching regret over wounds that we're responsible for because of our own decisions.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

One day, He will bring all of it (the big and the small) into the light with crystal clarity and perfect justice. I believe that.

I also believe that the only One who has the power to heal that pain, that trauma, that brokenness, was the One who created me... Jesus. When I laid it all down at His feet, when I said I can't go on and asked Him to come into my mess and save me from the pain that surrounded me, the healing began. Instantaneously. That doesn't mean it was easy... just like a physical injury, I had to do the hard work in order to heal. I had to listen to my doctor (God) and follow His instructions. The healing process took time, and that's something I want you to hear. Your brokenness, your compounded trauma, didn't come overnight... many times, it's from years of built up rejection, hurt, actions, and words that need to be replaced by the Holy Spirit in order to be made new. That sort of hard but holy work takes time.

If you think back to a situation where you probably shouldn't have reacted the way you did (because it was over the top or emotional, and involved you jumping to conclusions and assumptions), you'll probably be able to pinpoint something called a "trigger." Have you ever responded weirdly to a situation that shouldn't have been "that big of a deal"? Again, this is where you can really pinpoint how much trauma has affected you and where the healing needs to take place.

Another reason we're talking about trauma is because it's really important to identify safe people in your life – safe people who love Jesus and can help you move toward healing in Him, safe people who you consider to be friends, and safe people who you trust to keep everything confidential. One of the key factors of a healthy relationship is trust. It's our goal here, as the Church and in youth group, to create relationships where you feel like you can be fully known and fully loved. In the words of Bessel A. van der Kolk author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*: "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives."

It's important to realize that you need safe people in the here and now to walk through trauma with you – but you also need the definition of safety Himself... the one who has experienced everything that you've experienced: Jesus. The wounds of Christ are healing. If you don't believe me, let me explain. There are hidden places that we don't want anyone else to touch – but when he touches those places, they are transformed and able to be used for the good of others' healing. I'll tell you that the most impactful places that I've been able to serve and be a part of orchestrated healing have been in the places where I've experienced significant pain. The Lord has brought beauty from the ashes in many spaces of my life that I never saw how He could redeem.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

Out of that same place where there's hurt flowing from you, there can flow a new river, not of hurt, but of healing.

APPLICATION:

Now, here's the tricky part - some people believe that if you hand your trauma over to Jesus, you will never experience triggers or pain after He brings healing to the core lies that underlie the trauma. In all honesty, I don't think that outlook is necessarily true – what I do know to be true is that when we invite Jesus in, we no longer have to wonder “why,” because He will give us an answer. He will show us the next right step to take, even if it is scary and terrifying, and we don't know what we're doing. We no longer have to wonder if Jesus knows what our pain is like or if He's with us in it, because He will speak directly to the exact questions with which we are wrestling.

Have you ever thought about what the Bible says about suffering specifically? It's talked about a lot – which leads me to believe it's really important. Suffering is something we're told to expect. We're told that it will happen, but we're also reminded time and time again that we won't be alone in it. God says a lot about suffering and trauma in Scripture, so that you know when the pain comes where you can look. So, in the hard moments, when you're asking God, “Why is this happening to me?”, I want you to remember these truths:

1. **Suffering was not what was intended.** It's a result of the Fall.
2. **The silence of God does not always mean His indifference.** Although at times we may feel like God isn't speaking to us or doing anything to change our situation, Scripture is full of people who felt the same way... who then claimed the Truth that God is always with us, no matter what we feel. Isaiah 41:10 says: *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*
3. **God uses suffering for good** – don't mishear me and think I'm being all cliché. Remember, suffering is a part of the Fall. It's not what He intended, and He doesn't rejoice in it. God never tells us our pain is good. He never wanted it to affect us in the first place. But - He does say that He'll take our pain and work for our good in His miraculous and mysterious ways.
 - **1 Peter 2:21 says** *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps.”*
4. **Suffering can AND should propel you into community.** My suffering has caused me to depend on the believing community for help, service, encouragement, and prayer. Though seeking help is humbling, it has an added bonus of friendship. Looking back at some of the darkest points in my own life, I

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

don't think I would have moved through them if I didn't have people pointing my thoughts back to eternity.

5. **You will go through trauma and suffering no matter what you believe in.**

Christianity, or following Jesus, provides true hope for the hurting. Suffering and death are inevitable for us, but we can have hope, because one has gone before us in death. Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, lived a sinless life in our place. He faced various temptations and trials – betrayal by those closest to him, mockery, emotional anguish, physical agony, and most of all, judgement by God the Father.

Believing in Jesus means that His resurrection signifies our pain and our trials and even our deaths are not the end of the story. Three days later, He walked out of His tomb, and I believe that gives us the power to rise up, even in the midst of things that are supposed to crush us.

Remember: trauma is not rare. Trauma is not a scary word that labels you as “damaged goods” or “broken beyond repair.” When we believe in Jesus, our perspective shifts to eternity – instead of the here and now, and we have an everlasting hope that we can't find anywhere else.

God is with us – through all of it. Our traumas are not too big for Him, and He wants to remind you of something today. Those traumas in your life that you haven't named, or somebody has told you are insignificant, or have kept you terrified of something you desperately want... He was there with you, and He already knows about them, He doesn't think they are insignificant, and He cares deeply about how they're keeping you from an abundant life. The truth is, Jesus was with you in the trauma you experienced. And if you look close enough, if you really dive deep enough, you'll see exactly where He was. The truth in the Bible, which says He will never leave you or forsake you, is not specific to just some people. It includes you, too. God never says to us that we won't experience physical or emotional pain in this life, but He does promise that He will be with us in all of it. And that's what we must hold onto.

Unfortunately, the reality of what happened to you, what was done to you, or whatever trauma you experienced will not change. However, your perspective will. Recovering from any sort of trauma is exactly that – a process, a journey through pain, a regaining of what was taken. Most of all, it requires self-awareness and a desire to wrestle with the truths that are found in the Gospel.

If you're in the place today where you feel yourself not running into glory but limping, desperately seeking refuge from the pain and hardship going on in your heart, I want to remind you that Christ Himself refuses to forget the scars of His earthly pain, even in glory. Christ is the one who bought our freedom and signifies the breakability of the chains of death. We may not feel the full weight of that hope today, but one day, we will.

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

In John 1:5 we read: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Some versions of that verse say “...and the darkness did not comprehend it.” Meaning, try as he might, the enemy can’t ever get on God’s level: he can’t even grasp the majesty of God, let alone overpower it. So, no matter what the outcome is, no matter what traumas and sufferings seek to destroy our lives, God is STILL good and STILL in control, and the victory is yours. Ask yourself this question: Do you believe that?

LANDING:

Healing is ours for the taking – because of Jesus! Again, trauma, pain, hurt, and immense suffering are not God’s desire for our lives... they exist because of the Fall. BUT... He will not waste those experiences if you hand them over to Him. And here’s another thing that I’ve learned from my own healing process: genuine trauma is done a disservice when the wound is hidden. Satan wants you to hide and deceive everyone around you into thinking that you are “just fine.” God wants you to come to Him with every honest, painful detail. He can handle it. Your trauma, your anger, your questions as to “why” – those aren’t too big for God. He wants us to hand them over.

My prayer is that you would let these words soak into your being today: it doesn’t matter your situation, what trauma you’ve experienced, or if you’ve ever even opened up about them. It doesn’t matter the status or presence of your parents. It doesn’t matter the words that have been spoken over you about your life or the words you’ve assumed people have thought.

You were fearfully and wonderfully made FIRST. You were made for more.

Main Scriptures

- **Isaiah 53:5** *“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”*
- **Philippians 1:29** *“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”*
- **1 Peter 2:21** *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”*
- **Isaiah 41:10** *“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*
- **John 1:5** *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

Small Group Questions

Module 5, Teaching 1: How Does Trauma Affect Relationships?

1. Did how you define trauma change by having this conversation? Is your definition is different than it was before? If so, can you share how they differ and what you learned?
2. Now that we've talked about what trauma is, do you think you have been looking at situations and circumstances through a lens of trauma or through the Gospel?
3. In looking at your own life, how has trauma affected your own relationships?
4. What is dating violence, and what are some signs of it?
5. Discuss with your group why facing trauma, although it's hard, can be what's necessary to live a "you were made for more" life.
6. Do you believe that God cares about the trauma in your life? Take the opportunity to dig into some Scripture passages about what God has to say about trauma.

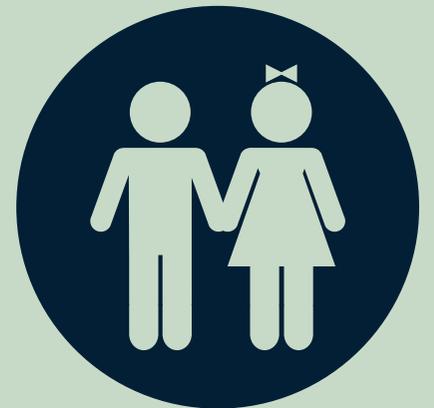
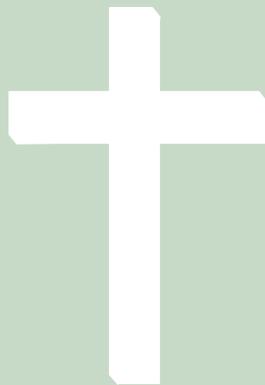
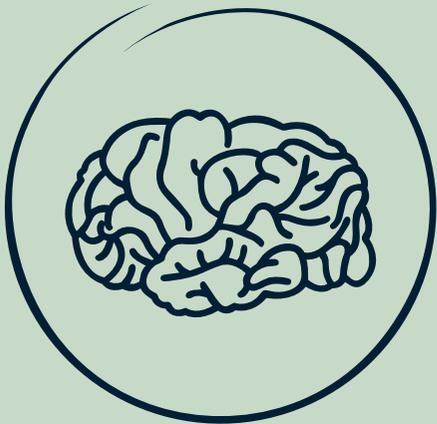
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Importance of Module 5

“We Were Made for the ‘Not Yet’” is the fifth module of Abundant Life: You Were Made for More. The three teachings in this module are based on topics that we’ll admit that we don’t have all the answers to – rather, we want to ignite conversations about them. The idea of being made for the “not yet” is essential to how we live our lives here on earth. We were created by God, perfectly and uniquely – yet, because of sin, we are living in the here and now, which is much more broken than the original and far from perfect. The key is to recognize this that gap exists because of sin... to recognize that our souls will always yearn for the “not yet”, even when we know and love Jesus in the here and now. We will always struggle. Not everybody’s struggle will look the same, of course. But until we’re fully restored, the struggle will continue.

The first teaching will hit on the impact of trauma and how trauma’s effects can gravely impact our relationships. The second teaching will cover dysphorias of gender, attractions, and identity, in order to open up conversations about how to love those around us, while also promoting a biblical view of sexuality to our students. Finally, the third teaching will speak into why friendship and community are so essential to all of us, especially in light of struggling.

**Note: Although we use both the terms “same-sex attracted” and “gay” in these teachings, we encourage you to pray, discern, and seek wisdom from God about what best suits you and your group. The issue of language and labels surrounding the gender identity argument is not what we are looking to reconcile in this teaching. Instead, we want to focus on our core identity. Our identity in Christ is first and foremost, so the labels that come after that, the ones that we often pin to our identity in an effort to “belong”, are interchangeable and don’t hold as much weight as many think they do. The labels that God pins to our identity are SO different than the ones we want people to know us by. We’ll take a look at why humans find labels necessary (for belonging, community, connection, acceptance, etc.) and provide an opportunity for some insightful discussion within your group.*

Many times, when a student is insistent on using a label, and questions why you won’t use that label (such as the term “gay”), they are really asking you to affirm their desire for acceptance or love. They want to know that, if they associate with that label, will your treatment of them change? Will you still welcome them? Keep that in mind as you’re tackling these topics.

The more important question we need to be working through is this: Would students who are questioning their sexual orientation or struggling with their gender identity feel comfortable raising this issue with our clergy or youth leaders

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

at our church? If not, how can we reframe the narrative and reset the structure so that they do have a safe space to wrestle with hard things in light of the Gospel?

While some argue that using the word “gay” as an identifier will perpetuate the issues we’re facing and reinforce that particular label into the student’s identity, others argue that using terms like “same sex attracted” is refusing to use the common, cultural language involved in this argument and will only further isolate students and distract from the Gospel message that they desperately need to hear. Again, we don’t have all the right answers – but we know that God does. When I’ve asked Him to help me discern how to write this teaching, He’s helped me see that engaging people is far more important than winning the argument. It’s all about people, and that’s what we need to focus on. It’s about winning back hearts for His Kingdom, and we believe we do that by meeting people where they’re at.

We have created a resource page that discusses the different arguments about labeling students struggling with their attractions and orientation, and we encourage you to dive into those before you make a decision. Please visit www.youweremadeformore.org or contact Abundant Life at abundantlifeym@gmail.com to get your copy today!

Theme

In the fog of navigating relationships and sexuality - especially in this life, when we’re living between “two gardens”- there is one topic that is still very much controversial inside and outside of the Church. Attractions, orientations, and identity are words that generate a well of emotions inside each of us, and most likely we ourselves or someone else has been deeply impacted by the wide variety of opinions and voices out there. It’s time that we not only stop avoiding the conversations, but, when we do have them, we approach them with hearts yearning for our friends to really and truly believe that Jesus is better than anything else they could ever experience.

In the fog of the culture war, a complex issue like gender dysphoria is reduced to slogans, social media rants, and political wars. If we really want to know the “right” answer when it comes to what God thinks about homosexuality (and all types of gender confusion), I think we need to approach this issue differently. The Biblical view of sexuality, which we’ll cover in this teaching, does not call us to be straight - rather, it calls us to be holy. If you’re listening to this teaching and you yourself are experiencing same sex attraction, are confused about your identity, already identify as gay, or trying to navigate how to love a loved one who is struggling with their attractions and orientation, our prayer is that this message would ignite a conversation, offer hope, and be a catalyst for this generation to lean into God.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTION: What does the Bible say about homosexuality and same sex attraction, and how do we respond to our brothers and sisters who identify as being gay? What is the Biblical view of sexuality and what are the options that God lays out for us? Are homosexuality and premarital sex the same "sin" or is one worse than the other? What does the Bible say about gender dysphoria and transgenderism?

***NOTE: "GOING DEEPER"**

In this teaching, you'll notice a few sections that we've entitled, "Going Deeper." Since there is so much information just on this topic alone, but we wanted to keep the model of a 25-35 minute large group teaching. So, we have also provided you with the information you need if you want to go deeper on some of these topics, specifically within a small group environment. As always, everything in this teaching is able to be edited and formatted to a style that fits your group. Feel free to pick and choose what you teach and use this as a template for where to start!

INTRO:

"Our sexuality is not our soul, marriage is not heaven, and singleness is not hell."

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

-Jackie Hill Perry

Last year, I was hanging out with a group of high schoolers that help each week with our middle school ministry. Suddenly, the mood switched from fun-loving, carefree, and full of laughter to tense and full of whispered negativities. The girls in the circle around me were talking about another leader that had recently shared her struggle with gender identity on social media, creating havoc around their school with her peers and a constant buzz of gossip when her name came up. As I listened more, asked more questions, and really tried to understand why they were so invested in this girl's life, I came to realize that *they didn't think she should be a leader in our ministry*. One girl, who has been in a serious relationship for a few years, even said to me: "I don't think she should be leading if she labels herself as gay and is so vocal about her sexuality."

And that's when I realized... we have a serious problem. Not "we" as in my group of high school students. No, "we" as in my church. I'm talking about "we" as Christians. I'm talking about "we" as a culture. We have a serious problem.

We have a serious problem because we've come to see one type of sexual sin as "worse" or more shameful than the other. Here's the thing: the girl that made that comment to me had been in a long-term relationship, and I knew that she was having sex – something the Bible also has a lot to say about. Despite knowing and hearing over and over again what God says in the Bible about sex being created for marriage, she was ignoring her own sin, and at the same time, so blatantly pointing out someone else's.

I think a lot of us in this room could have that same perspective, whether we realize it or not. So, I want to start by saying... "none of us has stewarded our sexuality – our maleness or femaleness – perfectly (Ferguson, *Transgender and Transformation*)."

Which means... we are all in desperate need of grace and forgiveness to bring us back to what we were made for.

I'm sure you've heard as often as I have some well-meaning person saying, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." If you don't agree with that statement, you're more than likely going to be labeled as "intolerant," "narrow-minded," and even "hateful." That's the world we live in, in its broken condition. It's more important to agree with everyone than to sincerely and genuinely want the best for their well-being. I think if we are Christians, if we're trying to imitate Jesus, if we want to live like Him in order to experience His fullness of life, we have to realize that simply isn't true, because it's not what He did. Sometimes, simply agreeing with people and letting them do whatever they want is not loving them at all - it's the most unloving thing we could do.

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

When we fix our eyes on Jesus, He becomes the author and finisher of our stories. We are able to see that maybe, just maybe, He has a different idea of what love is. At least, that's what He has done for me. Today, I want us to keep Hebrews 12:1-2 in our minds... "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

I want to preface this teaching about attraction, orientation, and identity by saying that I don't know everything, and I don't have all of the right answers. But I have prayed, searched God's Word, and asked Him what He thinks, and I believe that He knows what He's doing. God has shown me that we all have strong opinions about dating and sexuality - whether you agree with what I'm about to say or you don't - because we care deeply about them. We know we were made for relationships - and that's exactly why we care so much. So, as we go through this today, I want you to remember that. No matter what your preconceived thoughts are about this, I want you to remember that it involves people. Real people, who have real confusion, real hurt, and real questions. I believe that God does talk to us about this stuff. And I also believe that His Word is very contradictory to what the majority of people may think - Christian or not.

Like I said, I don't have all the answers, and my point in talking about this stuff is not to tell you what to do or tell you that my sins are any less grievous than yours. Please don't hear that - I am broken, too, and I have not stewarded my own sexuality perfectly. None of us have. My point in bringing up this conversation is to first say... I'm sorry if you have been hurt by the Church when it comes to your sexuality. And two, I think God wants us to lean in and learn how to love people in this, no matter where we are with it. If you're sitting in this room, and you are struggling with same sex attraction, I want you to hear that you are able to be loved if you admit it to someone in this room. Jesus doesn't love you less because you're confused, and neither should anyone that follows Him (**Leaders Note: make sure your leadership team has prayerfully discussed this precedent beforehand*).

As we do with every question regarding relationships, we have to start with identity. If you've never thought about these questions before, I encourage you to do so.

- Who am I?
- What am I and what's the point of my body?
- Where do I go for fulfillment, and where do I search for hope in the midst of pain?

All of these are heart issues that play into what your gender, attractions, orientation, and sexuality look like, so it's important to really think and be honest with yourself about where you're at. These are the questions that I encourage you to explore with your

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

small group leader during discussion time. It's by answering these questions that we're able to really understand what is going on in our hearts.

The next step is to define all of these words we're going to be using:

- The first word is attraction. *Attractions* are the action or power of evoking interest, pleasure, or liking for someone or something
- The second word is orientation. *Orientation* (when we're talking about sexuality) is the emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that a person feels toward another person. The important point to hit on here is that we're talking about consistent attractions – the same type of attractions over a lengthy period of time.
- And finally, *identity* is defined as the fact of being; the Biblical view of identity is “an identity grounded in God would mean that when we think of who we are, the first thing that would come to mind is our status as someone who is deeply loved by God.”

Sam Ferguson is one of the leading theologians in the gender debate, and he makes it clear that we need to distinguish between the three words we just talked about, attractions, orientations, and identity, because they are all very different things.

Gender, Ferguson argues, is an “embodied reality” – it is more than just about reproductive organs, but it is never less. Gender in the Bible is never divorced from biology, like we're taught that it can be today. It's actually an embodied, holistic reality:

- *Humans are created; identity issues from the creator.*
- *Humans are a dynamic whole; identity cannot be reduced to parts.*
- *Gender is embodied; when God designed our body, He gave us our gender.*

In Genesis, we read that God made two bodies, male or female; therefore there are two genders, man or woman.

We were created to live out the biblical view of sexuality, but instead, we're living in a world full of brokenness, sin, exploitation, and hurt, very different from what God intended it to be. We're living, and we're waiting - waiting for the “not yet” to finally be here - for Jesus to come back and rescue us from all of the confusion and pain. Until that day comes, we're going to be struggling. That's inevitable - we can't avoid the struggle, because we're living in it. The reason it's important for me to bring this up is because we have to recognize the difference.

Our current reality is not what we were made and created for. Yet, here we are, and we're left trying to learn how to honor God and love Him with all our hearts and souls and strength above all else, even in this broken state. We've come to believe that we

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

are stewards of our own identity and that we can change God's original design, when it's really just moving us further from who we were made to be.

Here's what I mean: we've come to believe that we can separate our bodies from our minds - but at creation, we see that Adam was created both body and spirit (dust and breath). That's how God intended it to be, and therefore they cannot be separated. We can try, and obviously, we have... but that's why we're still broken, confused, and searching.

There has been research done by the American College of Pediatricians. It shows up to 88% of those ages 0-18 who experience gender dysphoria actually will come to accept their biological sex if interventions are not taken to change that person's gender. Yet, because we don't want to be seen as hateful or unloving, we keep our mouths shut, and let people follow their feelings, instead of sharing the truth with them.

Instead of looking at who God says we were created to be, we make up our own narrative and depend on our feelings to be our Truth. We ask questions like, "Do you feel like a woman?" or "Do you feel like a man?" But in reality we can't base the answers to those questions on our feelings. Our relative experience is not the ultimate Truth - whether it's about gender identity or not.

So, the question remains - what do we do if we're experiencing same sex attractions? What do we do if we feel male as a female, or vice versa? What do we do if we identify as being gay? What do we do if we're a friend or a parent having difficulty loving someone else who identifies in one of these ways?

These are all big questions that we're going to try and dive into today.

TENSION:

Now, there's a clear divide between what the world says and what God says. A surprisingly high number of teenagers involved in religious communities identify as being in the LGBTQ+ community - the highest reports say up to 14% (*Religious InSTITUTE*). But the reality is, even though there are students in our Church who are struggling with who they are, only a fraction of them discuss their sexuality with their pastors or adult leaders.

LGBTQ+ youth are almost five times as likely to attempt suicide compared to students who are comfortable in their bodies and have a heteronormative sexuality. Those rates go up, too, if there is family pressure and rejection involved - teens that experience this are 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide as LGBTQ+ peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection. When I hear these statistics, my heart sinks - it makes

me angry - and it encourages me to fight for the identity of students, so that they know they are valuable and that they were made for more, whether they identify as a sexual minority or not.

On top of that, I've read blog posts from friends of mine, as well as people I've met on the street, who have been deeply hurt by the Church in the midst of their struggle with sexuality. If I had to take a guess, I'd say that's because Churches declare their position without taking the people struggling with the issue into account. So, I want to say I'm sorry. If you're sitting in this room tonight and you've been made to feel at some point like you weren't welcome in Church because of who you are, I'm sorry.

I've wrestled with this idea -- of whether or not what I believe is actually hurting people more than helping them. I've wrestled with if what I believe about sexuality, dating, and identity is not really my place to impose on people in the first place. But I really and truly believe that creating conversations around how our faith and realities can go together, even when they don't seem to match up, is what God calls us to do. To enter into uncomfortable spaces, asking Him to show us what He wants us to see what He wants from us. If we are His people, then He calls us to do this and He promises to show up when we do. I don't believe God's heart is to change people's orientation... and here's why. God doesn't call us to be straight – He calls us to be holy. You can be straight, yet be in a relationship where sex before marriage, or any type of physical intimacy that's dishonoring to God, is the norm - in that scenario, that individual is straight. You can be completely straight but addicted to pornography. Do you see the issue? Our sins look different, but the root of what God desires for us doesn't change. He calls us to be holy.

So, let me make it clear - my intent for starting this conversation is not to give you a list of hard-and-fast do's and don'ts. Rather, it's to open up this conversation for several groups of people.

1. First, let me speak to those in the room that might be experiencing this for themselves. If you're asking the question in your head... if I admit to this struggle, will I still be loved and accepted here? Yes, yes you will be.
2. Then, there's those of us in the room that have a friend who is gay and might not believe in Jesus. I hope this conversation helps you start to think about and discern what it means to love your neighbor, as we're told to do in the Bible.
3. There may be parents in the room who are struggling with accepting gender dysphoria or same sex attractions in their child. Maybe there is a relationship there that desperately needs to be repaired or you regret reacting a certain way when you discovered your child's orientation wasn't what you imagined it would be.

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

4. And finally, maybe you've been a part of judging or hating someone who identifies differently than you, because it's hard for you to understand them.

No matter what group you're in, creation should always be our starting point, because we have to know what our original design was if we're ever going to know how to live in there here and now.

In Romans, Paul gives us a key insight into the world in which we live. This is what he says:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20–21)

He's saying that the physical world has been "subjected to futility," to frustration. It doesn't work properly. It's out of joint. It has been subjected to this frustration by God. The Bible's wider narrative dives deeper into this, as we see that God cursed the ground as a judgment on human sin (Gen. 3:17). In other words, the world isn't right as both a consequence and a demonstration of the fact that we're not right with God. By "not right," I mean that we aren't in perfect relationship with Him... as we were created to be.

What's true of creation in general is true of our bodies, too, since they're part of the physical order that's been subjected to this frustration. We see this frustration in a variety of ways. Some face unremitting health issues; others contend with a whole range of body image struggles; still more experience body dysphoria—feeling as though they're trapped in the wrong kind of body. The fact is, virtually no one has an entirely straightforward relationship with their own body. It's the way of life in this world. Some people suffer with gender dysphoria, some people suffer with body dysmorphic disorder, a mental illness involving obsessive focus on a perceived flaw in appearance. Dysphoria is a common occurrence, and its definition is simple. It's a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life. And while this is true that anyone can see this problem, Christians can uniquely account for it because of what the Bible says.

The Bible shows us that sin causes profound alienation—first and foremost from God, but also with those we're in relationship with. We're alienated from one another. And we're alienated from ourselves. What was meant to be whole and integrated—our mind, body, and spirit—is now deeply fractured. We don't feel aligned in ourselves.

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

For me, that looked like struggling with an eating disorder and obsessively working out during my college years. I wanted so badly to feel good about my body, but everything around me was telling me that I had to succumb to these unhealthy desires in order to achieve what I hoped to look like. At the root of my dysphoria was an immense desire to be accepted and loved by people - specifically men. Now on the other side of my dysphoria, still working out 4-5 days a week, eating healthy, and learning to love my body, I've learned that at the root of my struggle there was a deep-rooted unbelief in who God made me to be. This unbelief was planted and perpetuated through words spoken to me as a child. I didn't think I was beautiful, and I surely didn't think I was worthy of love. As soon as I leaned into that, the struggle became a little bit lighter. I saw that my dysphoria was not a result of my true human condition - but rather a result of my broken human condition. And that changed everything for me. Knowing this has made me compassionate – compassionate because I'm very well acquainted with wanting to change my body desperately and not having anyone I felt like I could trust to talk about it with. I, too, know what it feels like to believe in Jesus and yet not grab hold of His promises.

Bodily brokenness of any kind, if we have eyes to see, can point us to the broken body of Christ—and through that brokenness to the eventual restoration and healing that comes through Him. Embracing Christ doesn't guarantee resolution in this life to the bodily brokenness we experience. But it does give us a sure and confident hope that we will have a perfect relationship with our body in the world to come. It gives us the hope that we were made for more - we were made for eternity, for Heaven, for a perfect relationship with Jesus where there is no struggle - and that we will get there if we place all of our hope in Him.

GO DEEPER WITH TRANSGENDERISM + THE GOSPEL

So, I think this is a good time to talk about what God thinks about transgenderism. Transgender teens are defined as those whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex at birth - that now represents almost 2 percent of U.S. high school students, according to a new report from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. That conclusions stems from the agency's analysis of data collected nationally from a sample of 131,901 public school students in grades nine through 12, who were asked a variety of questions about gender identity and personal health and safety issues. Then comes the bombshell: around 35 percent of teens who identify as transgender report having tried to commit suicide in the past 12 months, the CDC reports.

Again, I'm not claiming to have all the answers, but I want to point out a few things for you to think about and discuss with your groups:

1. *Does anybody know when your brain fully stops developing?* Your brain stops developing when you're 25. That means that until that point, your brain is not fully capable of comprehending what impact decisions will have on your overall quality of life. That's why suicide rates skyrocket in individuals who have transitioned prior to their brains being fully developed - they mature and eventually they realize that they feel even more dysphoria than they did before in their "new and improved bodies."

The most thorough follow-up of sex-reassigned people—extending over 30 years and conducted in Sweden, where the culture is strongly supportive of the transgendered—documents their lifelong mental unrest. Ten to 15 years after surgical reassignment, the suicide rate of those who had undergone sex-reassignment surgery rose to 20 times that of comparable peers (Heritage Foundation). They're confused because they thought there were supposed to be changed and fulfilled completely by "fixing" their gender.

2. *Transitioning is not a quick fix - it is a permanent life decision... one that may cause regret, shame, and confusion deep enough to result in suicide.* Sure, for some, a physical transition or hormone therapy may alleviate an immediate dysphoria, but there are plenty of reports of people who did not benefit from this (see Claire's Story: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/when-a-child-says-shes-trans/561749/>). It's important to seek professional counseling, pastoral guidance, and counsel from the Lord about a decision that shouldn't be taken lightly.

It's estimated that reassignment procedures can cost between \$5,000 and \$50,000, some reaching up to the \$100,000 mark.

Many times, boys and girls experience gender dysphoria simply because of cultural gender roles that are placed on them. Maybe you don't fit in with what a "woman" typically likes or acts like - that doesn't mean your gender is wrong. The concerns that many Christians have with transitioning are echoed by many psychologists and psychiatrists who work in this field, who support affirming care (in other words, dealing with children's dysphoria in a compassionate and kind manner), but worry that many "experts" are ignoring the complexity and fluidity in young people naturally and biologically. Some doctors are approving teens for hormone therapy without even thinking to acknowledge their mental health or social/family influences that could be shaping their emerging sense of gender identity. Some of these interventions are irreversible; people respond differently to cross-sex hormones, but changes in vocal pitch, body hair, and other physical characteristics, such as the development of breast tissue, can become

permanent. Kids who go on puberty blockers and then on cross- sex hormones may not be able to have biological children.

3. *It used to be a requirement that you would go through a mental health evaluation before going through a transition... now that boundary for a person's emotional protection is no longer in place.*
4. *There are real health risks to transitioning. Here are just a few:*
 - Men undertaking female hormone treatments double the risk of stroke in both men and women.
 - Men undertaking female hormone treatments doubled their heart attack risk.
 - These same men also increased their blood clot risk by 4.5 times.
 - Women taking hormones to transition to men were perhaps worse off, in that they triple their risk for heart attack.

TRUTH:

In the middle of all types of dysphoria - especially gender and relational/attractional dysphoria, we have to stop and look at what God says about relationships and what our real options are if we want to honor Him.

Realistically, there are *two biblical options for pairing up*: heterosexual marriage (marriage between a man and a woman) OR celibacy. Now, one is not better than the other. I encourage you to refer back to Module 3's teaching on marriage, which talks specifically about the mission of marriage. Marriage is not the ultimate goal of life and, going off of that, happiness is not the ultimate goal of marriage (the byproduct of an intentional, Christ-centered marriage is happiness... not the other way around!). As a teenager and even during my young adult years, my deepest desire used to be the life that courtship promised me, but then a different desire took hold: I wanted to be the woman God called me to be, nothing more and nothing less. In college, after a list of dumb decisions, failed relationships, and little, lingering hope, I faced the fact that my calling might not include marriage. But my calling would always include loving and living among God's people. Now, as a wife myself, I hope and pray that my daughters know and truly believe that their calling is not marriage - rather, their calling is to love the Lord with all of their hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and to love their neighbors in return. I now truly believe that my marriage will never satisfy me in and of itself... only Jesus can do that, and the most beneficial thing about my marriage is that I have learned more about Jesus and who He is.

That being said, marriage is still good. In fact, it's one of my favorite gifts from God. But only when we grasp the biblical vision of marriage do we actually have the ability to keep it in a healthy perspective. Grasping what it points to means we won't demean or

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

trivialize it, and it also means we won't idolize it. Marriage itself is not meant to fulfill us, but to point to the thing that does.

Celibacy or the state of abstaining from marriage and sexual relations, is the other biblical approach to sexuality. And, despite what you may think as you hear this, it's a real option that I encourage each of you to prayerfully seek and consider. This means that singleness, like marriage, has a unique way of testifying to the Gospel of grace. Jesus said there will be no marriage in the new creation. I think that's because we'll have the reality of the Gospel, so we'll no longer need the earthly picture of it. Sam Alberry, a gay, celibate Christian man, puts it this way: "Celibacy isn't a waste of our sexuality but rather a wonderful fulfilling of it. If marriage shows us the shape of the Gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency." In fact, the Bible couldn't be more positive about choosing to be celibate. Jesus did it. Paul did it. To deny someone a sexual, romantic relationship is not to condemn him or her to a life of empty intimacy and full of loneliness. Loneliness will never be entirely absent (whether you are married or not - loneliness isn't absent in the most successful marriages and picture-perfect families), but intimacy can be present in close friendships and church families.

Ed Shaw (pastor and author of *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life*) puts it this way...

"As a single man, I might not enjoy sexual intimacy with anyone, but I suspect I often enjoy greater appropriate intimacy with more people than most of my married friends - they sometimes have the great intimacy deficit. Lying in bed at night next to someone you once promised to love and knowing there is no way to bridge the gulf between you... that is the most crushing loneliness of all."

So, where does that leave those of us who are attracted to the same sex and don't necessarily fit into either of those categories? The truth is, Jesus gives no third alternative, whether cohabitation or some alternative explanation of marriage... alter marriage, and you end up distorting a picture of the Gospel itself.

APPLICATION:

Ignoring the confusion that you have in the here and now about your sexual desires is not the path to redemption - which is another reason why we're having this conversation.

Here's what the Bible says about homosexuality (some people argue that it doesn't say anything, but I'd have to disagree). God does not honor any type of same sex attraction, as hard as that may be to believe because of what you feel... He just doesn't. But - if you refer to somebody else (or yourself) as being gay, you have to remember that that's not your, or their, primary identity. It may very well be a big part of who you are, and it

may at times feel like the most important part... but it isn't the core part. Humans are more than who we're sexually attracted to.

In Romans 1, we read about Gentile society facing God's wrath, because it has suppressed the truth that God has revealed about Himself in creation (verses 18-20). In the verses that follow, Paul illustrates how this has happened, giving three examples of how what has been known about God has been exchanged for something else: they exchange the glory of God for images of creatures (verse 23), the truth of God for a lie, leading to full-blown idolatry, worshipping created things (verse 25), and reject the knowledge of God (verse 28), exchanging "natural" relations for "unnatural" ones. Here's the text that follows:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

I love this passage because it points back to the idea we've been talking about: brokenness in the here and now, but living with the hope that restoration is coming. Again, dishonorable passions are not what we were made for, and more so, dishonorable passions often lead to hurt and more brokenness.

And another verse in 1 Corinthians that validates this:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Again, we see here that all forms of sexual immorality are seen as leading us away from our identity, along with greed and stealing. Another testament to the Truth that God does not call us to be straight, He calls us to be holy.

GO DEEPER WITH HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE SCRIPTURES

Two important and sobering truths are apparent from these verses:

1. Homosexual desire is not what God originally intended. This is not to say that homosexual desire is the only thing that God did not originally intend. Remember, our desires have been distorted by sin. Paul does describe both lesbian and male homosexual behavior as "unnatural." The words for "natural" and "against nature" refer not to our subjective experience of what feels natural

to us, but to the fixed way of things in creation. The nature that Paul says homosexual behavior contradicts is God's purpose for us, revealed in creation and reiterated throughout Scripture.

Paul's reference to lesbianism as well as male homosexual conduct also supports the idea that he is condemning all homosexual activity and not just the man-boy relationships that occurred in Roman culture during that time period. He's talking about all of it. Here and now included.

The strength of Paul's language here should not make us think that homosexual conduct is the worst or only form of sinful behavior. Paul may be highlighting it, because it is a particularly vivid example and may have been especially pertinent for his readers in Rome, given their cultural context. Either way it is illustrative of something that is the case for all of us: as we reject God, we find ourselves craving what we are not naturally designed to do. This is as true of a heterosexual person as of a homosexual person. There are no grounds in this passage for singling out homosexual people for any kind of special condemnation. The same passage indicts all of us.

2. Homosexual sin is not unique. Paul's list includes other forms of sexual sin, and it includes non-sexual forms of sin. Homosexual sin is incredibly serious, but it is not alone in being so. It is wicked, but so is, say, greed. We must not imply that homosexual sex is *the* sin of our age. If we are to be faithful to Scripture, we must also preach against theft, greed, drunkenness, reviling, and defrauding others, many of which are also trivialized in our society, and all of which also characterize the unrighteous.

Homosexual sin is another type of sexual sin, but so is sex outside of marriage – otherwise known as fornication; fornication is any kind of sexual activity outside marriage or between unmarried persons. ... The Bible explains in Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

So, that's what God says about homosexuality and sexual sin - what He doesn't talk about is how to fix the desires, even if we feel like we were born with them. That's what we have to figure out - do we succumb to something we know that God sees as harmful, or do we fight the temptation in hopes of honoring Him?

In my heart, I hope each of you chooses the latter. There is no formula to fix same sex attraction, no combination of prayer or counseling that is promised to fix certain desires.

But there is a starting point. The primary question you have to ask yourself is this – *where am I trying to find love, and where am I trying to get love?*

My encouragement is to genuinely take the time to think through these questions and pray through the answers. Once you genuinely answer these questions, you'll be able to move forward in healing or work through a struggle. My second encouragement is to have what I like to call "pastoral patience," because I can almost promise you that this journey will not be quick. The journey to sanctification is not quick, so we cannot expect the journey of figuring out attractions to be quick either. We all struggle and struggling to reconcile our feelings with the Bible will not be quick.

LANDING:

Remember how I said that there is no formula to walk someone through this struggle? I want to talk about, too, the fact that hard work does not necessarily guarantee that you're going to remove the desires that you have. Jackie Hill Perry talks about that in her book, *Gay Girl, Good God*. She talks about the fact that although she is in a heterosexual marriage now and has chosen to live a biblical view of sexuality, her same sex attractions and desires will still probably be something that she wrestles with "until she goes to glory." She still struggles – even though she is doing the hard work of choosing to be holy and honor God. This is what Jesus was talking about when He mentioned "taking up our crosses daily."

Although for some of us this looks like same sex attractions and denying ourselves of a romantic relationship because of what we believe Jesus to hold dear, for others of us, it looks like denying ourselves of other temptations, because we believe Jesus is better than what we will get from whatever is tempting us. For some of us, it will look like choosing to wait until we find a spouse to have sex. For others, it will look like fighting the addiction we acquired to pornography, because we know it isn't real love, and it isn't the kind of love that Jesus died for. And for many more, it will look like laying aside our own wants and caring for our neighbors, despite the pride inside of us that says "you deserve to do what you want." Regardless of what "it" is, for all of us, we are required to take up our crosses daily (Luke 9:23 says "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*").

Unfortunately, putting the hard work in does not necessarily guarantee that you're going to remove the desires or hardships that you have. Sometimes, God requires us to walk with Him in the midst of trying to be faithful and figuring out what it practically looks like to take up our crosses daily. Think about an issue not related to sexuality. Somebody who suffers from a physical disease that results in chronic pain. They put the work in every week at physical therapy, do their at-home exercises, eat the right foods, don't overexert themselves. Yet they still have chronic pain. They still struggle. Somebody

who has an alcohol addiction may attend AA meetings every week, never missing one opportunity to be in community with others who struggle from the same things that they do. They still can't walk in a bar and not be tempted by a drink, and they still have to set up preventative boundaries in order to be sure that they don't give in to the temptation to have a drink. As Wesley Hill says, instead of expecting instantaneous healing, I think we just need more "faithfulness in the midst of brokenness." In my own struggle with my body image, I've come to understand that I have to fight to be faithful in the midst of my own brokenness. Every day, I wake up and I fight the lies that so often want to control my mind. For me, that looks like putting limits on my social media use. For me, it looks like actively talking with one or two older, wiser women about where my heart is when it comes to my body. For me, it looks like being okay with admitting to God that I'm not okay and that I don't like where I'm at. For me, it looks like learning to share with my husband every week when I've been triggered by words or actions or thoughts that send me into a downward spiral of unproductive thinking. For me, it looks like always looking "up" to the One who made me. Depending on your struggle, it will look differently for you... but you are called to fight.

The important thing to remember is that you are not your sexuality. Marriage is not heaven, singleness is not hell, and the only thing that can satisfy any sort of longing in your heart for experiencing ultimate love is not a thing but rather a person, named Jesus.

If we could turn to the last page of our story, we'd be amazed by the dazzling beauty of its ending. Today, our faith is in what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1), and yet our salvation is so glorious that even "angels long to look" into the grace we have received (1 Peter 1:12). One day, our hope will be fully realized when we see Jesus face-to-face. Our hope has a name, and His name is Jesus. He brings the truth of His promises to every page of our difficult stories. For those who have living hope, every story ends in glory, too, as we figure out together what it means to take up our crosses.

May we always remember that we were made for the "not yet" - and we're just in the waiting. Revelation 21:4 says this... "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." I don't know about you, but I can't wait for that day, and I hope wherever you're at, that's what you put your hope in.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

- **Hebrews 12:1-2** "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

- **Romans 8:20-21** “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”
- **Romans 1:26-27** *“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”*
- **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** *“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”*
- **Luke 9:23** *“Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”*
- **Revelation 21:4** *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

Small Group Questions

1. **Take some time to discuss these questions about identity.**
 - *Who am I?*
 - *What am I and what’s the point of my body?*
 - *Where do I go for fulfillment and where do I search for hope in the midst of pain?*
2. Have any of us stewarded our sexuality properly? Talk about what Paul means when He refers to sexual immorality.
3. Why does the Bible and the story of creation say that gender and biology cannot be separate? Do you agree or disagree?
4. What types of dysphoria do we experience in the world?
5. Do you believe that your identity in God is more important than any other identity you assign to yourself?
6. What have you heard about celibacy, and what do you think of it?
7. What’s a practical way, right now, in the here and now, that you can honor God in your relationships and with your sexuality (no matter what your relationship status is at the current moment)?

Module 5, Teaching 2: Attraction, Orientations, and Identity

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ATTRACTIONS, ORIENTATION, AND
IDENTITY

Who Am I?

What am I and what's the point of my
body?

Where
do I go for fulfillment and where do I search
for hope in the midst of pain?

Importance of Module 5

“We Were Made for the ‘Not Yet’” is the fifth module of Abundant Life: You Were Made for More. The three teachings in this module are based on topics that we’ll admit that we don’t have all the answers to – rather, we want to ignite conversations about them. The idea of being made for the “not yet” is essential to how we live our lives here on earth. We were created by God, perfectly and uniquely – yet, because of sin, we are living in the here and now, which is much more broken than the original and far from perfect. The key is to recognize this that gap exists because of sin... to recognize that our souls will always yearn for the “not yet”, even when we know and love Jesus in the here and now. We will always struggle. Not everybody’s struggle will look the same, of course. But until we’re fully restored, the struggle will continue.

The first teaching will hit on the impact of trauma and how trauma’s effects can gravely impact our relationships. The second teaching will cover dysphorias of gender, attractions, and identity, in order to open up conversations about how to love those around us, while also promoting a biblical view of sexuality to our students. Finally, the third teaching will speak into why friendship and community are so essential to all of us, especially in light of struggling.

**Note: Although we use both the terms “same-sex attracted” and “gay” in these teachings, we encourage you to pray, discern, and seek wisdom from God about what best suits you and your group. The issue of language and labels surrounding the gender identity argument is not what we are looking to reconcile in this teaching. Instead, we want to focus on our core identity. Our identity in Christ is first and foremost, so the labels that come after that, the ones that we often pin to our identity in an effort to “belong”, are interchangeable and don’t hold as much weight as many think they do. The labels that God pins to our identity are SO different than the ones we want people to know us by. We’ll take a look at why humans find labels necessary (for belonging, community, connection, acceptance, etc.) and provide an opportunity for some insightful discussion within your group.*

Many times, when a student is insistent on using a label, and questions why you won’t use that label (such as the term “gay”), they are really asking you to affirm their desire for acceptance or love. They want to know that, if they associate with that label, will your treatment of them change? Will you still welcome them? Keep that in mind as you’re tackling these topics.

The more important question we need to be working through is this: Would students who are questioning their sexual orientation or struggling with their gender identity feel comfortable raising this issue with our clergy or youth leaders at our church? If not, how can we reframe the narrative and reset the structure so that they do have a safe space to wrestle with hard things in light of the Gospel?

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

While some argue that using the word “gay” as an identifier will perpetuate the issues we’re facing and reinforce that particular label into the student’s identity, others argue that using terms like “same sex attracted” is refusing to use the common, cultural language involved in this argument and will only further isolate students and distract from the Gospel message that they desperately need to hear. Again, we don’t have all the right answers – but we know that God does. When I’ve asked Him to help me discern how to write this teaching, He’s helped me see that engaging people is far more important than winning the argument. It’s all about people, and that’s what we need to focus on. It’s about winning back hearts for His Kingdom, and we believe we do that by meeting people where they’re at.

We have created a resource page that discusses the different arguments about labeling students struggling with their attractions and orientation, and we encourage you to dive into those before you make a decision. Please visit www.youweremadeformore.org or contact Abundant Life at abundantlifeym@gmail.com to get your copy today!

Theme

The Bible says so much about friendship – so much more than we’ll ever be able to cover in this teaching. Without people to love and be loved by (and we’re not just talking about romantic and dating relationships, we’re talking about real, life-giving friendships), I don’t imagine faith is very sustainable. The essence of Christian friendship is companionship forged in the fire of two convictions: 1) Jesus alone can satisfy the soul and 2) His kingdom alone is worth living for. True friendship should do many things, including gently correcting sin in your life – it should love you **for** the glory of God and push you **toward** the glory of God. Friendship is a vital piece of community that keeps Satan from using depression, anxiety, and loneliness from discouraging our hearts. Friendship plays a huge part in bringing Heaven to earth, especially if it’s done with Him and through Him. Through this teaching, we’ll look at redefining how friendship is lived out, what its purpose is, and why it’s so important to invest relationally in the people around you. God made us for community, for relationship, to be with each other, and it’s about time we really understand why.

Goal of Small Group

The goal of small group time is to make connections with students that create flourishing, Christ-centered relationships. These teachings will mean nothing unless students can personally identify with the Scripture. You should listen, encourage when you feel called to, and facilitate discussions among your students; relationships are what will keep students coming back. They were made for relationship and they crave

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

relationship where they are fully known and deeply loved; so, utilize the small group time to show them that. First and foremost, our goal should be for our students to meet Jesus. I'm so thankful for the youth ministers I know that have been called to shepherd the next generation. The goal in their ministries is clear. They yearn for students to discover who Jesus is, learn about Him, embrace their personal relationship with Him, so that, as they mature, that relationship will transform the world outwardly, just as they're continually shaped and pruned inwardly to look more like Him. While we can't control their spiritual journeys, we can intentionally provide a nurturing context for growth to take place. We may not be able to force them to take a drink of the spiritual water they thirst for, but we can lead them to the foundation of eternal life that is freely offered to them. We're praying for your students, that they'd realize what they truly thirst for and that they'd take a drink. In the meantime, it's our job to at least lead them to the fountain. The trust and credibility of youth leaders plays a large role in students' attempts to live within biblical parameters.

Teaching 1

MAIN QUESTION: What's the point of friendship? Why are friendships so important for human life to flourish? What are the benefits of friendship? How does our current culture feed us expectations for our friendships that aren't necessarily true?

INTRO:

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one

part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

I love this passage that Paul writes in Corinthians, because it really hits on just how important the body of Christ is – or rather, how important it is that we as the body of Christ recognize that we need one another.

Have you ever thought about how boring life would be if everyone in the entire world was exactly like you? Not just boring, though – if everyone in the world was like me, I'm pretty sure the world would be a hot mess express all of the time!

Early on in my relationship with my husband, when we would disagree and our differences would be made clear, I would sometimes wish for a split second that he could just be a little more like me. If that were to happen, I was convinced, everything would be fine.

Here's a confession: I can be a brat. Sometimes, I'm in some type of mood where I want my way when I want it, and my husband is much more likely to respond in a way that is providing for me and protecting me, even though I am being a brat. But there are also times when he isn't perfect, and that makes conflict very apparent in our relationship. Sometimes, our expectations of each other don't match up, and we get frustrated. At the beginning of our dating relationship, I didn't want to appear like I "needed" anyone, so I put on a mask and pretended like I didn't need anything, because I'm a strong, independent woman, and I could take care of myself (or at least that's what culture taught me). Sometimes, he wants to talk, and I'm hurt, so I retreat. The walls he spent a lot of time lovingly breaking down, I willingly put back up because I don't feel safe anymore.

Not only does this happen in my marriage, but it also happens in my friendships, too. Sometimes, I wish they could just be like me, because then they would get it. Right?

... WRONG.

If you are living life with other people, you know that we all have our "sometimes." Sometimes, I think it would be easier if he just thought like I did or communicated like I did.

It took me a while, but I finally realized... I don't want him to be like me. Because sometimes, the way that I handle my relationships, isn't very good, even though I try really hard. So, no, I don't want him to be like me; I want him to be more like Jesus - He's the only perfect One in our relationship and that's what I want my husband to model.

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

My point in telling you that story is first to encourage you -- relationships are worth it, even though they are hard and disappointing at times. Some of you may be in a place where you think that relationships are pointless, and you've given up on them completely -- some of you may not be that far gone yet, but maybe you make cynical comments like "I'm going to be single forever," because you're afraid of being hurt again. And some of you may be in relationships currently that actually aren't God's best for your life, but they're fun, and you get a lot of Instagram likes so, hey, what do you have to lose?

Remember -- God created relationships for friendship and companionship, so that we would be able to experience the fullness of life through them. I'm even more convinced of this when we look at what the Bible has a lot to say about friendship -- just look at the life of Jesus and his disciples.

Think about this: when you hear the Church talk about relationships, what's the first thing that comes to mind? If you're like me, you probably would say something like: "You should wait until you're married to have sex." That message is called abstinence -- and it's been the message of the purity culture for a long time. However, I really believe that the outlook fostered within purity culture (as well as the hook up culture, which oversexualizes everything and makes sex seem like the best thing in the world), make romantic relationships look like they're the ultimate and best thing.

The truth is, abundance is not found in romantic relationships. Abundance is found in God -- and if it just so happens that you're following God and a romantic relationship is in His plan for you, than yes, abundance can definitely be a part of that relationship but only because Jesus is a part of it. My marriage would be nothing without Jesus. My husband, who is a youth pastor, and I have frequent conversations about how difficult it would be to stay married and enjoy being married if we both weren't following Jesus. Heck, some days it's still hard to stay married and be married WITH Jesus. My marriage is the best gift that God has given me on this side of Heaven, but it is by no means the ultimate key to my happiness. My marriage is hard, and it's full of brokenness, but because God has called me to it, it's where I have experienced more abundance than I could. If somebody tells you that their marriage has made them complete and has saved them, I caution you to really look at what they're saying to you. No earthly relationship can do that -- not even marriage in its best form. As Wesley Hill, an author and professor, often says, "The New Testament views **the Church** as the place where human love is best expressed and experienced, not marriage."

Because of that, we're going to talk about the importance of friendship, or in other words, companionship. If you've heard the words, "You were made for relationship" -- this is the type of relationship that we're talking about! We were not made to do this life alone, and that's clearly modeled throughout the New Testament. Again, we see the

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

Church as the place where human love is best expressed and experienced, not marriage. The Church is a place of community, friendship, true accountability, and therefore true companionship – or at least it should be. This is so important. The Gospel demands that we foster friendships. Here's why.

TENSION:

I'm sure you've seen the headlines about loneliness. Western individualism has produced unprecedented social isolation unique to 21st century youth. Even though opportunities for social connection have exponentially increased, suicide rates have reached all-time highs, and sexual exploitation is running rampant. It seems as though Satan is preparing for his grand finale – working overtime to convince people that they are alone and worthless.

But why is Satan using loneliness as a weapon? So much of our sin, such as sexual immorality, pornography usage, and suicide, can be traced back to loneliness. Loneliness hurts, and the pain morphs into a physical sickness, which can't be corrected with anything but real, deep connections. It's interesting that science and faith agree on the fact that we are relational beings. We were created to connect with one another.

Jesus models what it looks like to live in genuine relationship. He entered this world not by splitting the heavens but by gently growing in His mother's womb. He spent His early years in anonymity, and then launched His ministry by inviting others to follow Him. Even on the eve of His crucifixion, He gathered for a meal with His disciples and then led them to pray with Him at Gethsemane. With His final breath, He instructed His disciples to care for His mother. His life reminds us that even He did not live life in isolation.

Like Jesus, we exist for relationships. Created in the image of a triune – and therefore eternally relational – God, to be fully alive means to live in relationships. We weren't made to connect through the screen on a phone. We weren't made to base our worth on how many followers we have on social media. Simply put, we were made for more.

A recent study also revealed that 22 percent of millennials said they had zero friends. ZERO. Twenty-seven percent said they had "no close friends," 30 percent said they have "no best friends," and 25 percent said they have no acquaintances. The poll, which looked at 1,254 adults 18 and up, did not report results for the up-and-coming Gen Z (who report high levels of loneliness on other surveys), or for the oldest adults in the country.

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

Other studies have also shown that friendship is important in adolescence—it predicts everything from stronger psychological health and better stress responses to improved academic motivation and success during teen years. Other studies have shown that teens with a few close friends thrive more so than “popular” teens with a large peer group but less depth in their friendships – showing us that friendship has benefits when we are intentional and purposeful about building them.

It’s about the skills a teen develops in forming friendships, rather than the friends themselves. Most of you won’t have the same best friend at 25 that you had at 15, but making close friends develops muscles that can become self-defining characteristics. These help to build self-worth and give teenagers confidence trusting relationships, which is something the researchers say actually will help with navigating romantic relationships, too!

Once again, science is confirming that we were made for relationship. The studies prove exactly how God designed us, which I think is amazing!

Here’s the problem though... sin has wrapped its sticky little fingers around our culture. When we look around, we see friendships rattled with sarcasm, competition, and insecurity because of the false beliefs we’ve come to accept as truths. We’ve actually come to believe that if you’re a woman, it’s empowering to see yourself as both equal and at the same time “better” than a man – modern feminism is enticing to many young women on the grounds of offering choice and freedom, but it’s anything but freeing. We’re destroying who God has created us to be, and we automatically believe the lie that we have to have the same roles as men. It leaves us fighting to create an identity for ourselves instead of embracing who we were made to be and living into our God-given identities.

I really believe that fostering friendships between males and females is a key factor in limiting the divide that the current feministic culture has created. Men and women, while created differently with different gifts, were created by God to do the same thing: love God and love people. If we are living into who God made us to be, our friendships and our relationships will be better because of it, that I am sure of. When we recognize the gifts that we’ve been given and focus on how they complement one another as we seek to serve each other and the Lord, this mantra that we have to be stronger and better than one another will disappear. Both men and women are vital to the Church’s mission, and I’d love to see your generation grab hold of that Truth... embracing biblical sexuality because you have the confidence that it’s where abundance actually is accessible.

Another way sin has entangled itself in our relational narrative is by making us think that human intimacy is the same as sex - in other words, we can only experience intimacy through sex. Our culture has warped them into being one, and that simply isn’t true.

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

Intimacy is not just physical, and that's clear when we look at its definition. Intimacy is simply letting somebody see all of you – every part, not just the physical. That includes emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual, and even the financial part of you! Physical intimacy refers to sex, but there are different types of intimacy that can be experienced and are necessary for flourishing friendships. Every friendship should have some sort of emotional and spiritual intimacy, too, not just social intimacy! You want to be able to connect with friends and share vulnerable parts of your life with them, while also sharing experiences with them and creating memories. Both of those things are good and life-giving, but it's important that we recognize that they're different.

Marriage – of course – would be the culmination of true intimacy, because ALL parts of you are exposed to your husband or wife - that's why marriage is set apart from other relationships. That's the way God purposefully designs it. But it's so important to know that, if you don't feel like marriage is what you're called to, that in no way means you can never experience intimacy in friendship and companionship. That is a lie that Satan is speaking to you, in an effort to make you settle for cheap, counterfeit intimacy, which isn't really intimacy at all.

TRUTH:

The truth is, friendship offers us a deep hope that helps us experience God's abundance here on earth, because *companionship always heightens joy*. Any one of us can and should experience God-glorifying friendships, because it's within those places, both the good things and the hard things that come along with it, where we experience freedom.

Remember: sin deceives us. It darkens our understanding and makes us fools, so much so that we may be walking in sin and convinced that we are obeying God (*think of the Pharisees*). This is why we desperately need friends.

Not only are friends vital to our need for relationship, but God has also designed friendships to serve as a place of sanctification for us! We need friends to lovingly show us our sin. We need friends to help us see our blind spots. We need friends to speak with brutal honesty (Matthew 18:15) and tender compassion (Galatians 6:1), telling us the truth about ourselves even when we don't want to hear it (Ephesians 4:15).

- **Matthew 18:15 says** “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.
- **Galatians 6:1 says** “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

- **Ephesians 4:15** says “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

This is what the Bible says about friendship. But even though we read that and we might even think it is all good and wonderful, it's a vital function of community that few people want. We'd much rather have friends who always tell us what we want to hear, who show us the false grace of excusing sin and give us false hope that we can grow closer to God without repentance. Because sin is a poison to our souls and a thief of our joy that comes from God. We cannot afford to forsake this kind of friendship.

Think about some of the most challenging things that you have struggled with or walked through – what role has community played in them? If you're still struggling with that thing that first came to mind, what impact do you think that community could have on that struggle? I can tell you that friendships have played a great role in my own sanctification – they've helped me in my journey of becoming more like Jesus. Friendship is so important in helping us walk and talk through biblically what it means to heal from trauma. It can be the key to navigating extremely confusing situations, like same sex attraction or gender confusion. Navigating these issues or unknown life changes like the divorce of our parents, illnesses of those we love, or our futures not going the way we planned are all tough. The importance of community really is irreplaceable and offers something that no other thing can provide in the midst of heartache and confusion.

Friendship has played a huge role in sharpening me, personally. I remember a specific time my freshman year of college, when I was drinking and partying and doing things I clearly said that I didn't believe in. My twin sister looked at me and questioned the “why” behind the choices I was making. WHY did I feel like I had to do these things to gain people's approval? Why was I even hanging out with people that wouldn't let me into their group unless I did those things? Even though, at the time, it really required me laying aside my pride and admitting that I still was grasping to define myself based on what other people thought of me, and it was really, really hard to hear (so hard that my pride kept me from speaking to my sister for six months), I've since come to believe that people that love you genuinely have the ability to sharpen you the most. I'm thankful for the times my friends have chosen to do the hard things, to confront me in my own sin, and to remind me that God's abundance is found when we follow His teaching - because that's what we were made to do.

APPLICATION:

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

Clearly, as you've seen, I don't do friendships perfectly, either, but I'm always trying to be better, and I do that by reading what God's Word says. For a better understanding of friendship, I turn first to John 15:9–15, where Jesus said to his disciples:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you.

In these verses Jesus taught what He went on to model: true friendship requires sacrifice. Sometimes, like the story I just told you, it requires sacrificing pride in order to hear and understand where your friend is coming from. Sometimes it requires sacrifice in another way - maybe your friend is going through a hard time, and you need to sacrifice your time, your plans, or your energy to love on them and encourage them. Sometimes it will require doing things that you don't find enjoyable, because you know they do, and that it's important to them. Sometimes, it will look like speaking up for the glory of God and tough-loving them into remembering who God made them to be.

Jesus also tells us that we love our friends best by remaining and abiding in HIS love. Do not miss that, either - you are able to best love the people surrounding you when you're connected to the constant source of love... Jesus. I love that He throws in that little reminder before He tells us that love at times can look like laying down our lives - it puts my heart in a posture of gratefulness and thankfulness for what's been done for me before I even try to go ahead and start to love someone else.

I believe that the Church will proclaim the Gospel as we bear the full image of God through the incarnate work of His people – male + female – together, all of us bringing our own gifts to the table. All loving Jesus first. When we all have a posture of gratefulness for what's already been finished for us. When we're willing to sacrifice to love our brothers and sisters in the name of our Savior, and when we're able to accept criticism, listen, and maybe, just maybe, trust that our friends have our best interests in my mind and are trying to make us more like Jesus.

Our main purpose in the waiting – in this time between the here and now and the not yet – is to love both God and our neighbor. That's what we're here to do, and that starts with loving Jesus first, then loving the people closest to us, who are in our inner circle. Then, through our friendships, we take steps to love our communities and change them for the better by and for the glory of God.

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

True friendship will not be easy. That's not what Jesus says in the Gospel of John. It will not come naturally, be effortless, and be all fun at every moment of the day. But it will be worth it. Friendship is worth the hard work that you put into it - not only are you going to learn more about God in the process, but you're also going to learn more about how you are. His love in action has the power to change lives... I don't know about you, but that's not really something I want to miss out on, because I'm staring at social media on my phone wishing I had that person's life or that girl's body or that couple's love story.

LANDING:

And finally, in the midst of all of this, we can't miss the fact that Christ has called us to be His friend and, truthfully, while human friendships keep us steady and stable in the waiting for Heaven to come, ultimately Jesus is all we need. Though He intends some to marry and many more to have rich friendships, He alone satisfies us. We can search for friends all day long, but we will never find anyone who loves us and helps us more than God has and continues to do in Jesus Christ. Our quest for friendships should never outstrip, outshine, or outwork our quest for God. He alone will never, ever let us down. Remember - you will find fullness and abundance in your friendships when you are abiding and moving toward Him. He will make your motives pure and your heart more tender and compassionate.

The Bible says much more about friendship than has been mentioned here, and we still could take it a step further. There are so many more questions to be answered. For example, is there a difference between befriending someone and disciplining someone? For now, though, it is sufficient to note that Christians really ought to be the best friends to others because we have been befriended by the Savior. What has been done for us, we should want to provide for someone else in this world, even though it will require time, energy, sacrifice, and not-so-fun conversations.

Friendship is a vital piece of community that keeps Satan from using depression, anxiety, and loneliness from discouraging our hearts. Friendship plays a huge part in bringing Heaven to earth, especially if it's done with Him and through Him.

Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians about the body of Christ - *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.* During your small group time and as you go through your week, think about how you can move toward a person who is in the body of Christ, that you naturally and maybe even intentionally have been avoiding, because it's uncomfortable, you don't know what to say, or you don't want to ruin your own reputation. When one person who loves Jesus suffers, we all suffer - when one person rejoices, knowing what His goodness looks like because of how we love one another, the whole body rejoices - and that's something with eternal impact

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

that is felt all the way up in Heaven. True friendship should give us hope and point us back to our ultimate source of relationship - Jesus.

Let's pray.

Main Scriptures

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*

John 15:9–15 *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you.”*

Small Group Questions

1. Think about your friend group. What talents do you bring to the table, and what talents do you really appreciate in your group that you see someone else bringing?

Module 5, Teaching 3: Fostering Friendship and Why the Gospel Demands It

(Leaders: this could be a great opportunity to call out gifts in your students if you know them well enough, and a place to encourage them).

2. Have you ever wanted to change someone to be like you? Where do you see the flaw in that now?
3. How often are you on your phone/social media? Do you believe that that plays into what you are thinking about and what you're feeling? Does it have a negative or positive impact on you?
4. Have you ever been in a situation where a friendship has sharpened you, or you've had to sharpen a friendship?
5. How does friendship that's done well point you back to Jesus?



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