

Faith for Life: Teens  
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It was about a year ago I was sitting in the audience at the CGL annual meeting listening to the guest speaker who I knew from my seminary days. He was teaching us that for Christ to make an impact throughout our entire lives we needed to understand the questions we struggle with during the different life-stages we go through. We change over the years, don't we? Each decade, each life-stage presents new challenges. He was encouraging us to make sure our churches were addressing these challenges in our lives. And then he started listing these questions, these issues that we go through as we grow older. As I sat there listening, I could hear my heart say, "Yes!" Teens, 20s, 30s, and now 40s - the more he shared the more I was blessed. I caught myself thinking, "I remember struggling through that; I remember feeling that way." The more listened the more I felt known by God and hopeful walking through life his way. And even though I just started my 40s and don't know what it's like to be in my 50s, 60s, or 70s, I trusted what he was saying about these coming decades I pray the Lord gives me.

After he was done, I thought, "That will preach!" So, that's why we are beginning a new series today called *Faith for Life*. The goal, the hope, for this sermon series is to apply the truth and teaching of Jesus to the big questions of each decade of our lives believing that God will supply us with the necessary help we need to remainful to Christ all the days that he gives us.

Now, you need to know a few things. First, I didn't come up with the big questions for each decade that we are going talk about. I'm not going to pretend I'm smart enough or experienced enough to know that, especially for the decades I haven't lived through. So, I'm relying a lot on two sources. The first source was Gordon MacDonald, the man I mentioned to you earlier. Gordon is a man now in his 80s and I find him profoundly insightful and helpful. I first met him in seminary when he taught a week long intensive with his wife. He's authored dozens of books and has gone through the highs and lows. I find him very wise. But I'm not simply taking his word on everything; I'm comparing his insights with social science research about the existential concerns of each generation or decade (that's my 2nd resource)

It's quite possible that the question we go through for each decade (your decade) doesn't quite resonate with you. You may think, "That's not the question I'm struggling with!" Well, I'm not trying to disappoint you. As I surveyed the questions for each decade I couldn't help but think we will all face these questions sooner or later whether it matches the particular decade or not. I bet if you're willing to be patient, someday you will wonder and maybe even struggle through these questions. So, if I could ask you to have an open mind about that, I think you will be served well.

One more thing before we start with our first decade - the teens: you might be tempted to check out when we're not discussing your generation; as if the content will be irrelevant to you. If you're 55, don't check out today when we examine the teen years. I can promise you that we

all need a reminder of what I'm going to preach on today. In fact, I find that the big questions in our early years (like our teens and 20s) serve as a foundation for the rest of our lives and that we actually need to revisit them over and over again so we keep our bearing set our Christ throughout all of our life. It might just be that you are struggling in the second half of your life because you've drifted away from the foundation that was laid or should have been laid in your early years. That would be a good reason to listen. And if you're 25, learn now what might be some of your challenges when you're 30, 40, or 50 and start preparing early.

Or how about this: what if you listened to the sermons for the other decades with an ear of learning about (or being reminded of) the particular challenges, concerns, and fears your brothers and sisters are going through in their decade. When we hit the 70s and beyond in our last sermon in this series, what if the rest of us listened and learned to better understand and support our big brothers and sisters in the Lord as they search for Christ with their struggles and questions? Or today when we talk about the teen years, let's listen to learn how we can better encourage of our young people. We have a great opportunity with this series to better learn how we can serve and care for one another; why not do that?

So, we're beginning with the teen years. I have teenagers; 3 of them in fact. And I've been a teenager. You might think that makes me a resident expert on the teen years. Well, you'd be wrong as my sons would tell you. I know it to be true as well; I learned this many years ago. The year after Korby and I got married in our very early 20s we led a small group of high schoolers for our church youth group. We thought we were so cool; here we were this young couple in our 20s; just a few years older than them. If anybody could relate, if anyone could connect, it would be us. But we discovered you don't need to be in your 40s to be lame. I couldn't believe it. We'd try to talk about music, fashion, and high school and those HS looked at us like we were from another planet. They were giving us brochures for retirement homes at the Del Boca Vista in Florida.

I didn't come up with the big question for the teen years (I'm not smart enough). Social science is pretty universal about this: one of the big challenges for teenagers is identity - "Who am I?" This question of identity is fundamental for those in their teen years even though they may not ask the question so simply. Teenagers are trying to figure out who they are. When our children are young in their elementary school age years, they naturally and gladly take on the family identity. Dad loves the Packers so I love the Packers. Mom plays music so I play music. They love to go camping or to the cabin. But when kids become teenagers, it's developmentally normal for kids to start saying, "Who am I in contrast to my parents? What am I good at? Where am I accepted? What do I like to do?"

I remember when I was a teenager I cared about what I looked liked even though I didn't want people to know I cared what I looked like. I wore my hair a certain way; I had favorite pants and shirts and shoes. I was trying to figure out who I was. When our kids experiment with their clothes, with green hair, with different music, with new interests, they're trying to figure out who they are. Can I talk to you adults in the room right now; especially those of you who scratch your

head when you see your kids coloring their hair or wearing what you consider as funny shoes or jewelry? Don't be harsh or cynical about the way they explore their identity. Our teens are trying to figure some stuff out. Don't make fun of them; don't scoff. Don't be critical. It's not easy trying to figure some of these things out. They could use your encouragement. They could use their church family to be a community, a place, that's safe to be honest with their struggles and questions. They get enough grief out in the world; let's not add to that.

I think the scriptures teach us that there are two fundamental realities we all need to know and understand about our identity to walk with Christ well. One passage jumped to my mind in relationship to identity so let's turn there now (READ 1 Tim. 1:15-17). First, notice how Paul puts some confidence behind these verses; he says, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance." He's sure of what he's about to say; he knows that it's true and wants you to make sure you know it, too. And what is that? What does he know for sure? That Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

In 1912 a man by the name of RA Torrey moved to Los Angeles with one purpose: to see the city saved by Jesus. In 1915 he became the first pastor of new church called The Church of the Open Door. Many years later, in an attempt to let people know the most important thing about their church and about their message, (PIC) they installed the famous "Jesus Saves" sign that has lit up downtown LA for years. What is now a cultural landmark was first the most important message the Church of the Open Door communicated to their city - Jesus saves.

And who does Jesus save? Look at vs. 15 - sinners. That's who. People who fall short of God's glory. People who break God's law. People who rebel against God's will. People who set their heart and purposes against the God of the Universe. Sinners. That's who Jesus saves. But notice how Paul identifies as a sinner. He says, "of whom I am the foremost." Another way of saying that would be, "of whom I am the worst;" some of your translations might read, "I am the chief of sinners." He doesn't say, "I used to be a sinner, but I'm not anymore." He says, "I am, today, a sinner." He recognizes this reality as part of his identity.

Young people, never, ever forget that you are a sinner. Never forget that you have a deep spiritual need to be saved from your sins. Never believe the message that there's nothing wrong with you. There is something wrong with you; you are a sinner. You're guilty of breaking God's law. You miss the mark of God's standards. You are unable and even unwilling to obey God without his grace in your life.

One of the most important things to know, understand, and appropriate into our identity is our profound need before God as sinners. It's all lost if you fail to see and realize this fundamental reality of your identity. You will never relate to God as his child if you forget or refuse to admit that you are a sinner of the worst kind (the worst kind being a sinner like me, your pastor... unable to please God at all on our own. Unable to any good without God's help).

Our identities make an impact on how we live our lives. And remembering you are a sinner will produce humility in you, my dear young brothers and sisters. When you know you are a sinner, when you know you fall short, when you know you need God's help, there's not a lot to be proud of. Teenagers, I would love if you read the Proverbs some. If you want to know God and be like him, read the Proverbs... it was written for you. And when you read the Proverbs don't think, "yeah, yeah, I've already heard that before," say to yourself, "I need this. I may have heard this wisdom before, but I need it more deeply in me than it is now." The reason why I bring this up is that Proverbs will remind you of your need for God and will keep you humble. And when you are humble you will be able to relate to God and be helpful and kind to others.

So, that's the first thing you need to know about yourself as you search and explore your identity - you are a sinner. But that's not the only thing you need to know: you also need to know that if you are in Christ you are a child of mercy. Let's read vs. 16 again (READ).

Paul didn't stop with his identity as a sinner. If he did, he might have gotten depressed and discouraged. He might have made the conclusion that God only wanted his harm for falling short of His standards. That's the danger of only appropriating the reality that you are a sinner into your identity; the weight of that bad news will crush you. That's why in the very next breath Paul remembers that he's a child of mercy.

You are a child of mercy if you trust in Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. You are a child of mercy if you treasure Jesus. We're not all born as children of mercy; we must become children of mercy through God's grace. That's why Jesus says in John 3:3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." According to Jesus, being born again is a spiritual birth done by God that opens our eyes to the reality of our sin and to the beauty of his forgiveness and grace for us.

You need to know you are a sinner; but you especially need to know that because of Jesus you are a child of mercy. You are a son or daughter of the king. You are loved by God. You belong to him. You have a home. And as all of us search for a home, search for acceptance, look for a name, and long to be known, God towers over our questions and says, "You are mine! You are my son; you are my daughter."

Remembering you are a child of mercy will help you in many ways, but I can suggest this: it will give you joy and happiness. I'm guessing some of you young people out there are sad. Maybe stuff at school is tough. Or maybe you're struggling at home with your parents. When I was a teen, I had more pimples than I wanted and not enough muscles. I didn't like that about me. I know some of you have much bigger problems than that. But here's what you do have: you have the love of God. In Christ, you are one of his sons, you are one of his daughters. Let's read our verses, but before we do, ask yourself this, "Is Paul happy as he writes these verses or is he sad?" (READ).

Now, I think there is a clue in this verse to know if Paul's happy or sad; we don't have to guess. The clue is vs. 17. Vs. 17 is a verse of praise; *To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.* Paul closes this section by celebrating God. And you're happy when you are celebrating! He's glad in God! Why? Because Jesus saves sinners, even sinners like him. Because even though he misses God's mark, he's a child of mercy.

These are not the only two things you need to know about your identity (you're a sinner and you're a child of mercy), but it's probably the most important. If you're a teenager, can I tell you a secret: even us adults keep striving to understand our identity. Like I mentioned before, our identity isn't something we figure out and then move on from. It's something we have to revisit throughout the rest of our lives. It's like a chair we sit on; it supports us when we are weary and tired and fatigued. Even after walking and doing life, you need to sit down again. And I bet a lot of my 30, 40, 50 year old friends out there would admit to you today that this is still something they are trying to better understand and know about themselves; they are trying to understand their identity as a sinner, and more importantly, their identity as a child of mercy to experience the full blessing of the riches of Christ.. So as you search and explore your identity remember what we talked about today. You need to figure out who you are; and it's a really important step in your life. Getting your identity wrong will lead you down destructive path so you want to get this right. You're not a Christian because you're parents are; they can't make you anything (maybe embarrassed). If you want to begin your own faith journey with God you need to know who you are. You are a sinner, and, in Christ, you are a child of mercy.

Key vs. 1 Timothy 1:15

#### Questions for the week

- However old you might be, recount times and moments in your life where your faith in Jesus has changed. What has caused some of those changes?
- What has changed about your faith and what has stayed the same?
- Do you have a clear sense of who you are? Do you know your identity? Why do you think knowing this identity is so important for your future?