

Student Ministry Sunday // 2024

In the book of Acts we're introduced to a guy named Paul who did a lot of incredible things to establish the early church. When we first meet Paul, he's known as Saul of Tarsus - a religious radical and prominent Jewish leader who is killing Christians in Jerusalem for refusing to be quiet about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While on the road to Damascus from Jerusalem to go capture and imprison Christians, Paul's life is completely turned around when he encounters Jesus Christ for the first time. He goes from being a torturer of Christians to a humble, loving man of God who devotes his life to preaching the very Gospel he had once tried to silence.

Over the course of about 30 years, Paul dedicates his life to traveling all over the world to fulfill Jesus' command to "go into all the world and make disciples of every nation". And during that timeframe, Paul took a young man named Timothy under his wing. After years of training and investing in Timothy, Paul sends Timothy to pastor the church he helped plant in a town called Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the largest trade ports in the first century world. And this was a strategic planting location for the gospel to spread around the globe. Paul believed in Timothy and entrusted Timothy with an enormous challenge and responsibility. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he tells him how he should fulfill his responsibilities as one of the leaders in the church, and then says:

1 Timothy 4:12, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

There's a lot of things we can take just from this one verse, but something I can't help but wonder is why Paul felt like he needed to say this? Did Paul really think that the church would disrespect Timothy just because he was young? The Greek culture that Paul and Timothy were living in placed a high value on age and experience. Since Timothy was probably in his thirties, still young by the standards of that culture, he would have had to earn respect by being a godly example. And Paul understood this. He understood that Timothy, because of his lack of experience and maturity, was more susceptible to making mistakes. But Paul also understood that our human nature is to look down on those younger and less experienced than us.

Every generation has done this. In our society, we tend to see a mentality today that says these younger generations are hopeless and we fear for the future of our nation,

or for our grandchildren. Or maybe on the other end of the spectrum, we think, *"The older generations just don't get it, they don't understand the world we're living in..."*

Any former hippies? What did the adults say to you when you were a teenager and young adult? According to the older generations of your day, y'all were a disaster! But your generation started the Jesus Movement. And without that movement of God in your generation, our church wouldn't be here! This church would not exist today without the Jesus Movement.

Any high school students? If you're honest, what do you tend think of the middle schoolers who are just a few years behind you? Middle schoolers, what do you think of the 4th and 5th grade kids? No matter what stage of life we're in, we all face the temptation to look down on those who are less experienced in life than we are. We've all experienced this happening to us - we've all been despised for our youth, and we've all done this to others to some degree.

For the older generation, the common sentiment is, "Kids these days"...and it makes sense

The Problems of Gen Z

Depending on the studies you read, Gen Z is classified as anyone who was born between 1997 and 2012. If you're between the ages of 12-26 years old, give or take a year in either direction, this is you. The narrative that is being pushed about Gen Z right now is that they just don't have what it takes.

From an education standpoint, [one study](#) found that:

- 1 in 3 educators who have taught for 11+ years say Gen Z is more difficult to work with than any other generation.
- 50% of educators say their Gen Z students have complained that their class is too hard.
- 1 in 3 educators say their Gen Z students are unprepared for the workforce, their work ethic being the main reason why.

In the workforce, [one study](#) found that:

- 74% of managers find Gen Z to be the most difficult generation to work with.
- 49% say it is difficult "most or all of the time."
- And 39% said Gen Z lacked the necessary workplace skills.

From an emotional standpoint, Gen Z has been labeled “The Most Anxious Generation” with some referring to them as Gen Ztressed. [Another study](#) found that:

- Only 26% of Gen Z adults would describe the state of their mental health as good or very good...meaning 3 out of 4 would say it's not good.
- And nearly half of that same study group said they feel stressed either all or most of the time.

Gen Z is also labeled [the loneliest](#) generation. [Studies show](#):

- 57% say they lack companionship.
- Only 38% feel confident in their ability to make friends and establish connections...meaning 62% of an entire generation believes they cannot build meaningful friendships and connections with others!
- And only 36% feel they currently belong in their community.

From a spiritual standpoint:

- [In terms of identity](#), Gen Z is the least religious generation yet. It's estimated that more than one-third of Gen Z is religiously unaffiliated.
- And it is estimated that [only 4% of Gen Z](#) maintains a biblical worldview.

The World's Narrative:

The world's narrative about the future of our society and the future of the church is dim at best, and utterly dark at worst.

- From the world's perspective, our future lies in the hands of
 - the most incompetent generation
 - the most anxious generation
 - the loneliest generation
 - and the least religious generation
 - According to the world's narrative, the future of the church is not very bright, but if we're only listening to the world's narrative, then we might be missing something.

The Counter-Narrative:

The narrative of the world says the future of the church is dim. But I believe there's a different story being written. While it's easy to see all of those horrible statistics that are being spouted off about Gen Z as obstacles, I have so much hope for this generation. While they may not have a strong biblical worldview, they're also being labeled as the most spiritually open generation. They are curious! They're open! They

long for deeper connections with God and others. They want to belong to something bigger than themselves. And we, as the church, have the only thing that can truly satisfy and meet those needs – and His name is Jesus

Do we see the issues of Gen Z as obstacles, or opportunities? 50 years ago, the Jesus Movement spread like wildfire because of its profound hospitality, its self-sacrificial willingness to serve anyone, and its love that stood against the grain of the culture it was surrounded by. And it's those same qualities that are winning over the most sold-out students of this generation today. We see students every week who are on fire for Jesus and want to make a difference in their community. We see students every year at our camps and retreats confessing, repenting, and walking away with transformed lives. We have young adults serving in our kids, middle, and high school ministries who want to help make a difference in their own generation because of the love of God they've encountered in Christ Jesus. This generation is ripe with all the ingredients of an awakening and a revival

In [an article from Axis.org on understanding Gen Z](#), the author writes:

“Gen Zers have some real strengths. They are pragmatic, they value relationships, and they love people no matter how different they are or how “shocking” their lifestyles might be. They’re interested in being self-starters and in finding creative ways to educate themselves and better their lives. They strongly dislike hypocrisy and are unwilling to go along with institutions merely because of their perceived authority ... Gen Zers also want to see evidence before accepting something as true...They need to know where their hope truly comes from and that there is good reason for believing in Christianity.”

Our Part:

We, as the family of God, have a responsibility to nurture the opportunity before us with this incredible group of young people! What if instead of joining in with the same ways we were despised by the generations before us, we tried a different approach?

I'm about to become a father, and it's been said to me that as a parent, you get what you are, not what you say. Jon Courson tells a great story of this reality

“It's easy to exhort others. Being an example ourselves, however, is much more difficult...’Son,’ said the concerned father, ‘you're not studying the way you could.”

When Abraham Lincoln was your age, he didn't have computers or electric lights. He walked fifteen miles through the snow to check out books at the library—and then walked fifteen miles home so that he could read them by the light of the fireplace. When he was your age, that's what he did.' 'Well,' replied the son, 'when Abraham Lincoln was your age, he was President of the United States!' It's easy to want to exhort someone else! But Mom and Dad, if you want to see your kids be more spiritual, you be more spiritual...The key lies in being an example.

- Jon Courson

God has been commanding this to His people since the beginning.

Deuteronomy 6:4-7, *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."*

Making disciples of the next generation isn't going to happen through preaching better sermons or having more game nights at youth group. It comes through living out the reality of our faith, through living like what we say we believe is actually true! We, as the church, all have the responsibility of nurturing the faith of the next generation! And we have to understand that discipleship starts in our homes. Take Paul and Timothy for example. The foundation of Timothy's discipleship didn't begin when Timothy met Paul as a teenager. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes,

2 Timothy 3:14-15, *"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."*

Timothy's foundation for discipleship didn't start when he met Paul as a young man, it began when he was a child! In the beginning of Paul's second letter to Timothy, he writes,

2 Timothy 1:5, *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also."*

Timothy, from the early stages of his childhood, was deeply influenced by the genuine faith of his mother and grandmother. Discipleship began in the home! But the reality is that while it wasn't *just* Paul who disciplined him, it also wasn't *just* the work of his parents. Paul had no biological relation to Timothy, yet he called him his son.

1st Timothy 1:2, "To Timothy, my true child in the faith:"

Paul took the work of discipleship seriously, and for him, Timothy wasn't just a student...he was his son! The reality is that if we want to see Gen Z be transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it's going to take all of us, and we've got to be willing to know and love these young people as our own. These kids aren't just the future of the church...they are the church! And it takes the whole church for us to be the church!

1 Cor. 12:24-27, "But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

An important question that every single one of us needs to ask ourselves this morning is: Who's the Paul in my life? Who is my Timothy? There's a statistic out there that claims that 70% of young adults will walk away from the church after their freshman year of college. A lot of experts have tried to explain why so many people are walking away from church. But what if we've been asking the wrong question?

Instead of asking the question "Why do 70% of young adults walk away from the church," what if we started asking, "Why do 30% stay?" Dr. Jeff Meyers and his team at Summit Ministries have done studies and have found three of the primary reasons why young adults choose Jesus and choose to stay in the faith.

Why Young Adults Choose Jesus and Stay in the Faith:

1. They're equipped with a biblical worldview that makes sense of the actual things going on in their world. (In other words, they're shown how what we talk about at church connects with what happens throughout the rest of the week.)
2. They make connections with older mentors in the church – with people who have lived experience of what it means to follow Jesus over a lifetime.
3. They become part of a vibrant community of people who are trying to live as if their beliefs are actually true.

- Dr. Jeff Myers, Summit Ministries

What would it take to see our students and young adults stay in the faith past high school? What would it take to move the needle from 30, to 32, to 35%? It's going to take all of us. Over the last several weeks we've been in a series called Faith that Works. Last week, Pastor Rob talked about how God has prepared good works for every single one of us, and nurturing the faith of our students is part of that work! But how do we do this?

Now what?

- Retired/Empty Nester.... You have life experience, wisdom, guidance to offer that the younger generations desperately need.
 - You have powerful prayers and encouragement you can offer!
- Maybe you still have kids at home... God's challenge to you today is to really model what following Jesus looks like for your kids.
 - Talk about Jesus with your kids. Ask them questions. Pray with them about problems or issues they're facing. Know them and love them. That's where discipleship begins.
- Maybe that's not you, but you're in a season of life where you could spend some time really investing in the generation coming up behind you. They need you to help them navigate their next steps and stages of life!
 - Maybe you don't have time to invest, but you have finances you can give.
- Young Adults - our students are looking to you. 21-24 year olds determine what students wear, how they act, what they consume...what if you could make an impact on their life on a weekly basis?
- Students - you aren't just the future of the church, you are the church. You have a part to play in this. Seek mentorship, seek discipleship, take following Jesus seriously, be humble, be curious, ask questions, get advice.
 - Wherever you're at, we have a table in the lobby if any of you are genuinely interested in connecting with our student ministry or discovering what your part is in nurturing the faith of the next generation

Conclusion

Growth in Christ isn't for us, it's for the world, and the world is in desperate need of a savior. What would it look like for us as an entire church, people from every generation, to walk in unity and say "God, use us"? How could that change what God

might do in Gen Z? Jesus was one man filled with all the fullness of God. He imparted His life and example to 12 people, and through them, everything in all of human history changed. If he could do that with 12 guys who were fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, and nobodies, what could He do with us? Ephesians 3 says He's able to do more than we could ever even ask for or think of. If we're willing to partner with Him, He will be glorified in this generation too.