

CIRCLE 1/3: IDENTITY CRISIS

What were some things you believed as a kid that you've realized were total nonsense?

As a child, I wasn't crazy about Sunday School lessons. However, I loved goldfish crackers. Thus, I loved going to Sunday School. They gave us unlimited Goldfish at 10 a.m. How cool is that? I vividly remember being a little kid in a cramped classroom one Sunday morning while Mrs. Clark was teaching the Ten Commandments. I did not pay too much attention, but one commandment really stuck out to me. "Thou shall not commit adultery," she explained. I instantly freaked out knowing that I had broken this commandment.

Keep in mind, I was just a small child. I had no idea what adultery actually meant. I thought she said "adult tree," as in a large, grown-up tree. This was problematic as my favorite activity was climbing onto the limb of a huge pine tree in my back yard and riding it like a bucking bronco. My whole world crumbled when I discovered that this activity was in direct opposition to the Bible. This moment instilled a far-fetched fear of forests in my heart.

Can you imagine how silly I felt when I learned what that word actually meant? However odd this example is, we do this all the time. There are concepts that we honestly thought we understood that get turned on their heads as we get older. One that I constantly see students wrestling with is the difference between religion and relationship. We often think of our faith as something that we get by learning rules and sitting in classrooms, but that's not the case. Jesus wants an authentic, interactive, life-giving relationship with you, one that goes far beyond Sunday School classes and youth gatherings.

TEXT: Mark 5:25-34

"A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

I wish I could call this woman by her real name. Maybe it was Megan, Bethany, or Kylie. We do not know. Mark simply calls her “the woman with the issue of blood.” Let’s think about that for a second. Sometimes your problems can be so big that they swallow up your identity. Have you ever had something consume you so much that you could only see yourself through the lens of your problem? You define yourself and shape your entire identity around a single struggle.

You just see yourself as the lonely kid who plays video games.

You just see yourself as the heartbroken ex who can't stop thinking about why he doesn't like you anymore.

You see yourself as less-than, not-good-enough, or even unworthy. Any time your mind wanders, it goes through a negative thought pattern.

Just like the woman in this passage, an experience from Jesus will shift your entire identity. Even a small touch from Jesus can cause big change. Imagine being in this woman’s situation. Culture had shut her out due to her sickness. The religious leaders of the day labeled her as “unclean.” All the “holy” people wanted absolutely nothing to do with her, but she knew there was something different about Jesus. Imagine what was going through her mind when she reached out to Jesus. All of that pain was in her mind, but she still crawled through the crowd just to touch Him. She had to crawl past her history to reach her destiny. When we authentically experience Jesus, everything changes. Your whole identity shifts.

Look at the language Jesus uses to speak to her! He calls her daughter— and this reveals a relationship. This shows connection. This shows compassion. All of the religious ideas of the day rejected her, but Jesus accepted her. Religious practices, rituals, and regulations didn’t help her, but a relationship with Jesus healed her.

It’s crucial that you move from religion to relationship.

“Religion” is any attempt to look good enough for God through your own strength or fortitude. “Religion” is when you only walk through the motions on Sunday, but Jesus hardly crosses your mind outside of church. “Religion” is when you make following Jesus exclusively about keeping a list of rules and regulations, like He is an all-seeing referee. A relationship is a constant connection with Him. It is when you choose to obey His Word because you care about Him and know that He cares about you. It is understanding that Jesus is lavishly in love with you like a perfect parent working all things together for your ultimate good.



THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY JACKSON GARRELL. FOR ALL THE LATEST CIRCLES DEVOTIONALS, FOLLOW @STUDENT_CIRCLES.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: What's one thing you believed as a little kid that you've learned was total nonsense?

Q2: How do people spiral to the point of letting one struggle define their entire identity?

Q3: Has one hardship ever consumed your thoughts so much that you started thinking less of yourself? How did you overcome it?

Q4: What is the difference between being religious and having a relationship with Jesus?

Q5: How can you reach out to Jesus this week and pursue a more personal relationship with Him?

READING PLAN FOR “**IDENTITY CRISIS**”

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 1:12

Hebrews 4:16

Romans 5:1-11

2 Corinthians 5:20

Colossians 1:1-14

Jeremiah 31:3

1 Peter 2:9

1 Corinthians 3:16

2 Corinthians 2:1-15

Matthew 5:3-10

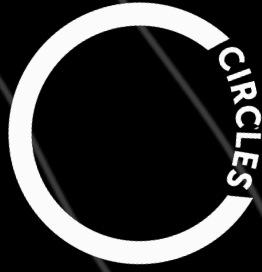
Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.



CIRCLE 02/03: INSTAGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Have you ever noticed how people only post the good parts of their lives on social media? They portray their best selves by broadcasting successes, adventures, and good hair days while hiding the bad and ugly moments from the world.

I was in high school when Instagram took over and always did my best to share a beautiful highlight reel of my life. Instagram made it really easy to see who was having the best time with the nicest stuff and coolest friends. I tried to follow suit. One Friday night in a misguided effort to look cool to a new group of friends, I decided to post a picture getting ready for a party. In reality, there was no party. At least not one that I was invited to. But no one had to know that! I straightened my hair, put on makeup, dressed up, and took several mirror selfies until I had it just right. I posted my photo with a caption that went something like, "Ready for tonight's party!" It wasn't long before my plan started to work. Likes and comments from my new acquaintances, who I hoped to turn into friends, started rolling in.

Unfortunately, they wanted more information on my party that really didn't exist. I lied and told them I was going with my cousin and her friends from another school. Little did I know the girls I was hoping to befriend also knew people from that school. They found out there was no party. And worse, they found out that I made the whole thing up just to try to look cool, which is really lame. While trying to manufacture a new image for myself, I ended up as a liar all dressed up with no where to go.

READ Matthew 6:19-20

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."

Our identities were never meant to be tied to the stuff we have on Earth. Think of all the things we chase— popularity, Instagram fame, trendy clothes, travel goals. Those could be destroyed or stolen in an instant. If you get caught posting about fake parties on Instagram, your chances of popularity are gone. If your family faces money issues, your chances of new clothes and selfie-worthy vacations are gone. Instagram encourages us to focus on what we have and what we do, which makes it easy to obsess over these things. Never let your happiness hinge on something that can be taken away.

Our identities are meant to be tied to something that no one could ever destroy or steal: faith in Jesus. Whether you have a lot or a little, you have incredible purpose when you are following Jesus. What you do today has the potential to matter forever, and it doesn't require anything but a heart willing to follow God. 2 Corinthians 4:18 says, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Popularity in high school is temporary. Showing others the love of God is eternal.
Gossiping to fit in is temporary. Speaking words that honor God is eternal.
Tearing others down to elevate yourself is temporary. Building others up in faith is eternal.
Wealth is temporary. Generosity is eternal.

God has given every believer incredible purpose in life, and it's an eternal purpose that no one could ever destroy or take from you. Tying your identity to temporary things will lead to loss and pain, but tying your identity to your purpose in Christ will lead to eternal fulfillment and joy.



THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY CHELSEA NYSCHOT. FOR ALL THE LATEST CIRCLES DEVOTIONALS, FOLLOW @STUDENT_CIRCLES.

TALK IT OUT

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Q1: How do you think social media impacts the way teens see themselves?

Q2: What are some earthly or temporary treasures that are commonly promoted as #goals on Instagram?

Q3: What are some heavenly treasures that bring eternal meaning to life?

Q4: How can you remind yourself to pursue treasures with eternal benefits while you're on social media or in school?

Q5: What can you commit to doing this week that has eternal value and purpose?

READING PLAN FOR “INSTAGRAM HIGHLIGHTS”

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John 15: 5-6

1 Corinthians 6:17

Ephesians 1:1-12

Colossians 3:1-17

1 Thessalonians 5:5

Hebrews 3:1-11

1 Peter 2:9-10

Colossians 2:6-7

Philippians 1:6

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

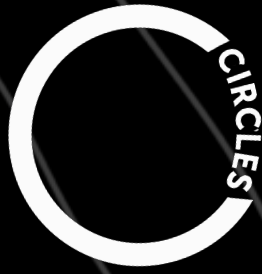
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REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what’s on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you’ve uncovered.



CIRCLE 03/03: FINGERPRINTS OF THE ARTIST

One Spring Break, I took a highly-anticipated trip to a famous museum in Paris. It's called the Louve. I am convinced that is just French for "the line." It seemed like the whole winding walk through the facility was basically a mile-long line. However, that was one impressive wait! While moving through, I saw some of the most beautiful art in the world. Masterful works by Monnet, Delacroix, Rembrandt, and Da Vinci decorated the winding hallways and galleries. All the motion in this museum leads to one final room— the home to the most famous painting in all the world.

With a thousand people crammed around me, I was standing in front of the most underwhelming sight I had ever seen. There it was, surrounded by bullet-proof glass and armed guards: the Mona Lisa. I do not want to offend any art connoisseurs, but it wasn't all that impressive. It was an ordinary portrait of an ordinary person with nothing else going for it. Plus, it was small. This whole painting is about 8x11, which is the size of a normal piece of notebook paper. It was no bigger than your math homework.

Here is the wild thing about that painting. It is insured at over \$100 million. That can buy dozens of mansions, thirty Rolls-Royce cars, or 300 million chicken nuggets. That is an insane amount of money. Here is the kicker, though! I can go on Amazon and buy the exact same painting as a poster for 12 bucks.

Why are the prices so different? They both look the same, right? Neither of them are prettier than the other, nor do they really serve different functions. The value lies in the fingerprints of the artist. That original painting has Da Vinci's handiwork all over it. You can see the character of his strokes, fingerprints, blemishes, and his signature. The famous artist's authentic creation is what gives it great value.

READ: EPHESIANS 2:10

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Let's dig into one word in this verse— handiwork. The Greek word here is actually "poeme." This is directly related to our word for poem. This word basically means "work of art" or "masterpiece." God is saying that you are His masterpiece. Just like the Mona Lisa, you have the fingerprints of an artist all over you. Every personality trait, every distinction, every freckle, and every characteristic is a distinct brush stroke of our Savior.

Where does your worth come from? It's in the artist that created you. God made you and then broke the mold. Jesus loves you more than you could comprehend. You are His masterpiece. You are treasured. Your value does not come from who you are. Rather, it comes from whose you are. You belong to Jesus.

Have you ever worked hard on something just for someone to criticize it? It's tough. It hurts the creator to have their creation criticized. Think about that next time you tear yourself down. It's so easy to struggle with your identity, but God made you with a purpose in mind.

Next time you are being hard on yourself, search the Bible to learn the truth that God says about you. When you are insecure about your appearance, God says you are beautifully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). When you feel like the world is against you, God says He is working all things together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). When you feel like you have messed up beyond repair, God says He will forgive you and give you a clean slate as soon as you confess (1 John 1:9). If you're wrestling with negative thoughts that diminish the person God created you to be, search Scripture to learn the true identity that God has given to you. A basic Google search for "Bible verses on..." or looking through the topics in the back of your Bible's index will point you towards life-giving truth.

We live in the era of Youtube stars, Instagram follows, and overnight celebrities. In a recent survey by UCLA, nearly one-third of teenagers said that "becoming famous" was important to them. This is a dramatic increase from years before. We live in a culture that is obsessed with fame and popularity. Think about this, though: The God of the whole universe knows you, loves you, and is fighting for you. He created the stars, but He wants to write your story. He is King over the whole planet, but He has a plan for your life. That is way better than fame— the God of all creation knows your name.

It's crucial to redirect your perspective and see yourself as the wonderful creation God made you to be.

Even when you feel unlovable, Jesus loves you.
Even when you feel like you don't fit in, Jesus calls you family.
Even when you feel unworthy, Jesus says you're worth dying for.
These life-changing truths should shift your identity.



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Q1: Who is your favorite artist?

Q2: How does knowing that God intentionally made you the way you are change the way you see yourself?

Q3: What is one trait that God has given you that you like about yourself?

Q4: How can we stop tearing ourselves down over the things we don't like about ourselves?

Q5: What can you do this week to replace self-critical thoughts with the truth about who God made you to be?

READING PLAN FOR “FINGERPRINTS OF THE ARTIST”

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Psalm 25:1-15

Ephesians 2:1-10

Ephesians 5:11-21

Proverbs 16:1-9

Genesis 1:27

John 1:12

Colossians 4:2-6

1 Timothy 6:11-21

Romans 6:6

1 John 3:1-2

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