



TIME OF GRACE®

Leave No One Behind: The Next Generation

Study Notes

Summary

Based on Matthew chapter 18, this message is meant to show us Jesus' heart for the next generation. Here Jesus warned against leading kids to sin or looking down on them. Even more important, he told a story about a desperate shepherd who was not willing that even a single lamb be lost. Application—While it's easy to stereotype and look down on other generations (in both directions!), our Father has a massive heart for those who are unlike you. This is good news, because it means that he has a massive heart for you!

- Generation Z (born 1995–2012)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

- **Matthew 18:12-14:** ¹² What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Points to Ponder

1. Describe what a church looks like that refuses to “leave the ninety-nine” to look for the wandering one. Why is the “stay and pray” strategy so tempting for Christians?

2. Read over Luke chapter 15, Jesus' famous teaching on the happiness God feels when lost things/people are found. Note two things you learn about the heart of God from these verses.

3. Take the first step in “leaving and looking” for someone you know who has wandered from the Christian faith. This might be a text, a coffee, an apology, or anything that expresses your genuine love for him or her as a person.

Homework for Next Week

Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9.

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

—Jesus (Luke 15:7)

Time of Grace Ministry
Leave No One Behind: The Next Generation
Matthew 18:10-14
February 2, 2020

Pastor Mike Novotny

If you got a 99 percent on your chemistry exam in college, would you be happy? If you retain 99 percent of your business from the last fiscal year, would you be a happy company owner? And if 99 of the 100 kids who grew up in the church came back as adults, would you be happy?

Last fall, my little eight-year-old dressed up as an 80-year-old woman. And she stepped out onto a stage with about 50 of her peers who were also dressed as elderly people; gray-haired, cardigan-wearing, walker-pushing people. And they raised up their fingers and they lifted up their voices in the chorus, which went, "Kids, tell me what is wrong with these kids today!" And the crowd loved it.

You ever heard that song before? It comes from a 1960 musical called Bye Bye Birdie, but it always gets a reaction from the crowd and I think it's because every generation thinks the same thing about the generations after it - like what's wrong with the kids? The things that confuse us about the next generation or the ones after it as we get older are the same things that confused our parents and grandparents and great grandparents when they looked at us. I bet no matter what generation you're from, what year you were born, there were older people that looked at you kind of baffled and confused with your beliefs and behavior and how you carried yourself.

Well today, and for the next few weeks, I want to talk about the latest version of the kids among us. Not the boomers or the gen x'ers or the millennials but what some people call generation z. And just to help you picture what this generation is, I need your help for just a second. If you were born between the years 1995 and 2012, '95 and 2012, would you stand up for me for just one second? Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to generation z. These are the grade schoolers, the teenagers, the collegiates, the young adults who are among us. Thanks guys; you can have a seat. Alright, these are our sons and our daughters, they're our nieces and nephews, they're our grandkids, they're the wrinkle-free faces that we see at church, they're our coworkers, our neighbors; the latest generation to get a name is generation z.

Today I want you to understand what generation z is like. There's a famous psychologist from San Diego State University named Jean Twenge and she spent her entire career kind of studying the surveys that were done at like key times in people's history in schooling and she's kind of spent her career comparing the differences between the boomers and the gen x'ers and the millennials and now what she calls iGen, or generation z. And just so you understand what this generation is like in general, there's six things I want to teach you about them today if you're taking notes in your program. These obviously aren't true for every young man and woman that just stood up, but as we compare one generation to another, this is what Dr. Twenge found in her research.

Here's the first thing; that generation z has a massive connection to the internet. You might use the internet, you might even love the internet, but gen z was raised with the internet. They can't remember a time because there literally was not a time in their existence when the internet did not exist. Do you know how many gen z'ers own an alarm clock? Almost zero. Why not? That's what a phone is for. You know how many gen z'ers love to hang out at the mall with their friends? Almost none of them because where do you hang out with your friends? On your phone. Do you know how many gen z'ers like to talk to someone when they're having coffee or going out to eat? Almost none of them because why would you talk to a person four feet away when you can text them and they can read your message on the phone? They live and die on the internet. Dating happens on the internet, school research happens on the internet, friendships happen on the internet, communication with family happens on the internet; they live and breathe online.

Here's the next thing you should know - generation z tends to be independent. There are fewer and fewer diehard democrats and deep red republicans and Christians who will make a commitment to one specific denomination in the Christian family for the rest of their life. They love the freedom, the individuality; in fact, I wonder if some of the gen z'ers who stood up are bothered that we even have a title for the group of them, that we lump you into one generation, because you want to be unique and independent and yourself.

And perhaps one of the reasons they're so independent is number three; because they love to be inclusive. They look at the older generations and they see many of the mistakes that we made. I mean, I'm right on the border of gen x and millennial and I think when I was in grade school, the things we said about people of other races, the things we said about females, the things we said about people from the LGBTQ community; they saw so much of the bigotry and the bullying and the hate and the judgment and the exclusion and so they swung to a very, very different place. What matters almost more than anything else is tolerance and acceptance and letting people be who they are, what they feel they should be.

The fourth thing I want you to know is that they are in no hurry. If you can rewind about a hundred years, do you know what you'd find? Most of our great grandparents were engaged and married by about age nineteen. Do you know a lot of gen z'ers these days married by nineteen? They'd have one kid, two kids, maybe five kids by their 25th birthday but the average gen z'er starting grad school, not getting married until their late twenties, not having kids until about the age of 30; they are in no hurry to grow up. In fact, Dr. Twenge found some really interesting stuff that what used to be so common in early years is now getting pushed back about four to six years with this latest generation. I was shocked to find out that a massive number of high school seniors today still don't have their driver's license. Because why would you need a license to drive to the mall and hang out with your friends when you hang out with your friends on your phone? High school drinking is down, teenage pregnancy is down; they're in no hurry to grow up and explore and be rebellious like generations before. They play it safe and they are in no hurry to grow up.

And the number five thing you really need to know is this; that many people from generation z are insecure for a whole bunch of reasons. Dr. Twenge's theory is it's because of the phone. Because 24/7, we can compare ourselves to one another; we're always afraid about what we see

and what people will say. Back in my day, if you wanted to get bullied by your classmates, it happened from Monday to Friday between the hours of eight and three, but those days are dead and gone, right? Anyone can bully 24/7, 365, as long as the phone is in our hand. So, there's a lot of anxiety, there's a lot of fear. The internet has taught the members of generation z that you have to make your mark in the world and make a difference and do something you're passionate about except that's going to take a college degree, maybe at the graduate level, and college is insanely expensive and so there's a lot of fear about getting by and doing the things that they long and that they dream to do.

Now before I fill in that final blank, I'm wondering what you older Christians think of gen z? If you're impressed? Or frustrated? Or interested? Or afraid? I'm not sure how you feel about them but I do know there's one very, very tempting reaction that God would hate it if you felt. And that reaction would be condescension. You know, my eight-year-old got on the stage, she repeated those classic lyrics from the song Kids. Have you ever heard the line, "Why can't they be like we were - perfect in every way? What's the matter with kids today?" Which is just the gut reaction, right? Like our music was the good music. What kind of music are these kids listening to? Our movies were the classic movies. I don't even know why they find this funny at all? Our generation was the one that got it right and look at all these things that this generation is doing wrong and Jesus just won't have it. Number one, because it's insanely proud and pride is nothing like the Jesus who humbly gave his life on the cross. And number two, because condescension robs us of the kind of love that it's going to take to work to serve and to connect the next generation to Jesus. In his longest sermon ever on the next generation and the little ones among us, Jesus said, don't look down on one of these little ones. He even had to scold his disciples 2,000 years ago. Let the little children come to me and stop hindering them because it's so easy to think about this next generation as the ones that don't matter; the ones that need to change.

The truth is, for this series to work, I need you to love and humbly be ready to listen and serve and save the members of the next generation. Because if you don't truly love them, you're not going to be ready for the last blank I want you to fill in. In research, Dr. Twenge learned this; that generation z is irreligious. She says they are the least religious generation in almost 250 years of American history. And it's not like we were 25 or 50 years ago; it's not that you get into the teenage years or you go off to college and you miss a week or two of church and you go when you're back home with mom and dad. She says that one in three current college students never pray, never go to church, and don't even believe there is a God. This is not just spiritual but not religious; this is not spiritual at all. Through the stories they've heard on the internet, for their diverse community that comes from all different kinds of background of religion or no religion at all, many, many, many people from generation z don't think there was a Jesus and, if there was, he is not what many Christians claim.

So now what do you think? If you're like many older Christians, this is what you pray about - you're worried about your grandkids and your niece and your nephew. You're worried about the little ones who are being raised in this culture that they might fall away; that you might not see them forever and ever and ever in heaven. This is why we're often so concerned for the kids who go off to college and we pray passionately for them. It's why we have programs and events and pastors and all these kinds of prayers to help mothers and fathers help raise up a strong

generation in the faith because we know it's not guaranteed. Just because you start religious doesn't mean you end up that way. Just because you believe in Jesus now doesn't mean you always will and so we pray.

But here's my big question for today: Is that all we should do? Should we just stay here and pray passionately for the next generation? Or is there something more God is calling us to do? So look at what our heavenly Father feels about the next generation in Matthew 18. Jesus said, "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?" And he's asking you a question so what's your answer? What do you think? If you've got a 99 percent on your chemistry exam, would you be happy? If you retain 99 percent of your business from the last fiscal year, would you be a happy company owner? And if 99 of the 100 kids who grew up in the church came back as adults, would you be happy? Jesus says, "Because God is not." If 99 percent of our grandchildren stayed Christian until they were older, would God be happy? If 99 out of 100 of those graduates of a local Christian high school, they actually went to church during their college years, would that be enough for God? And Jesus' question is, well, what do you think?

Maybe we should think of it like the Behm family. You know the Behms? Brian and Amanda from our church and their five sons - Logan, Parker, Miles, Lincoln, and Sawyer - took me a long time to memorize all those boys' names in order. Let's imagine the Behms packed up their five boys in their massive white van that you often see in the church parking lot. They went on a road trip for a vacation and 10 days later, they pull back into Appleton, 1:00 in the morning, and they look in the back - one, two, three, four. Where's Logan? Do you think Amanda would look over at Brian and say, "You know what? We've still got four." That's better than average. I mean, there's families in church that have no kids, or one kid, or two kids - we're still beating like 99 percent of the families at church. That's pretty good, isn't it? Well, what do you think? Because when you see it like this, you know it's not just a number, right? It's a name and a face; it's someone that God cares intensely about.

And that's how God feels about his flock. Ninety-nine percent might seem like an incredible average for the church of God but what about the one? What about the one that God cares about? Because whoever's name you wrote down in your program, that's how God feels about the one. When you go out to a restaurant and you see all the kids and you're so frustrated because they're not even looking at each other, they're all just staring at their phones sitting right next to, you can be frustrated that they're different or you could say, "That's the one; the one Jesus was talking about." And you see the kids and they just look different and their music is different and they act so different than you would have growing up than you do now, you can be frustrated and gnash your teeth or you could think, "That's the one;" that's the one that God made in his mother's womb. That's the girl that Jesus was thinking about when he stretched out his arms on a cross. That's the one that the Holy Spirit is desperately reaching out to, teaching, trying to connect, trying to love, trying to show the glory of God. That's the one that is on the heart of God.

See, Jesus really, really wants you to love that one because odds are that one is going to wander. Remember those words that Jesus spoke in verse twelve? He said if a man owns 100 sheep and

one of them wanders away, which is a really curious verb. Listen, if you're a member of generation z, I want to be honest with you. One of the biggest temptations you're going to face is to wander. I don't know that I've ever met anyone who loves Jesus and wakes up the next morning and doesn't. What happens, sometimes without us even knowing it, is that we wander. And I really sympathize; I have incredible compassion for you younger brothers and sisters in the faith because you are going to face some temptation that most of us did not. All of us are tempted in a thousand ways when we're young but there are things that this next generation faces that are so hard, it will take a miracle of God to prevent them from wandering.

So, here's my question for the rest of you: What will you do when the one wanders? When your nephew starts posting something online that he's not sure about the church anymore or Christianity anymore, what will you do? When she's accepting different lifestyles and beliefs and behaviors, what will you do? Will we just stay and pray that things will be different? And Jesus' answer is no, no. Because this is his answer: "Won't he leave the 99?" Jesus says. "Won't he look? Won't a good shepherd love?" I mean, just picture that scene for a second. It's the end of an exhausting day of being a shepherd and you just want to put down the staff and take off the sandals and crash and sleep but you have one last thing to do, right? You have to count - there's 95, 96, 97, 98, ninety - no, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 97, 98, ninety-nine. And the shepherd squints out into the dusk just looking for a little white sheep, the wandering one, he doesn't see it. Which means he has to make a choice, right? Is 99 enough? Or will he go and look? And remember, 2000 years ago there's not an F150 parked next to the pen with the heated seats, right? This was going to be walking after an exhausting day down into the dark valley to climb another mountain; to go face to face with the wolf that might have dragged off the one that wandered. It was going to be work.

And Christians, I want to be absolutely real with you. If we are going to reach the next generation, it will be more work than it was. You know, 50 years ago when you talked about the church and you talked about Christians, there was a cultural push to think that was a good thing. Alright, if I told someone that I was a pastor, the natural reaction probably would have been, "Oh yeah, I should get back to church," because that's what we all kind of believed; like church was good for us and Christianity was the right religion. But those days, listen, they're dead and they're gone. When I go out in public and people ask me what I do, do you know what I'm very tempted to do? To lie to them because people don't respect a Christian pastor; they feel awkward. And why wouldn't they? Every pastor that they've seen on the internet is a hypocrite who is money hungry, is homophobic, is incredibly judgmental and intolerant. Why would they warm up to the Christian faith? Ask the average member of gen z what they think about church and Christianity; see if you get a positive reaction. Which means this: We're going to have to work. Like we can't squeeze searching for the next generation into the little slots in our busy, adult lives; like a shepherd who's going after the wandering one, we'll have to work at it. You will have to spend months, years, loving people. They will think you're like all the other stories that they've heard online; that you probably protest at funerals to judge "those" people. That you think hurricanes and natural disasters are God's judgment on America because of "those" people. You'll have to prove them wrong. You will have to show them kindness and patience and compassion. You'll have to show them generosity, even when they don't respect your faith. You'll have to love and be there for them. We cannot just hide in the church and pray that

somehow they would change and that's why Jesus asked the question. Won't he leave? Won't he look? Doesn't love call him to work?

He said, "And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off." I love that line: He's happier. It's not like the exhausted shepherd throws that little lamb over his shoulders and he grumbles the whole way home, "Stupid sheep." No, he's so happy. He loved that one so much, he is so happy, he practically skips the whole way home. In another version of this parable that Jesus told in the gospel of Luke, the shepherd actually calls his friends and family members, they pop bottles and they celebrate because the one that he loved so much that had wandered is back safe, sound, and saved.

And that's how God would feel, too. For that one that wandered, that family member that you're wondering if they will ever come back, for that friend that you are so, so concerned about, God would be so, so happy. Like he is for this young woman. That's Lacey and her fiancé, John. Have you met them yet? If not, they're sitting right here so you can talk to them after church. Lacey gave me permission to tell a little bit of her story because she wandered. She grew up with a little bit of Jesus and a little bit of church but as life got crazy and education and friends, she admitted that she really wandered from a place like this and a book like this and a God like this. But then she met John. And John was baptized in college himself, had a confidence and a peace and a passion that she noticed. And curious enough, about 18 months ago, she came and she listened and I hope you have a chance to meet Lacey today because she makes us so happy. She makes God so happy. This young woman has Jesus roots. Like she's not just here because I told her she'd be in the sermon; she's here because this is where she is on Sundays. And it's not just a Sunday faith, either; she does life with a group of people and she reads the Bible at home and she prays and she worships and she gives generously and she has a passion to go and share her faith with others. She has these roots in Jesus and the Holy Spirit has produced incredible fruit, like her peace and her joy and the passion that she has for God. She's far from perfect, she would tell you that, but she is not the same and I'm so happy for her. Like, I love the 99 of you that were here every Sunday since this church started but when I think about the last year, do you know who makes me the happiest? Stories like that. People that didn't have the peace, that did not know the joy, but now they're here and we celebrate.

So, what if you're one was the next Lacey? Do you believe that could happen? That the name you wrote down, maybe the person that seems like they're never going to come, there's no interest there, what if they came? In fact, humor me for just a second - would you close your eyes and would you just imagine that that person was here today? And when you blasted your voice in that first song, you weren't the only voice singing because you could hear theirs in your ear to your side. And imagine if you went home and you opened up that Bible app and there they were, reading the Scriptures, highlighting a favorite verse. And imagine if they're standing up front in church right next to me with a bowl of water and baptism in Jesus' name. What if they were here at your side worshipping the same God, the same shepherd, the same flock, the same faith? Alright, open your eyes. Do you believe that could happen? Because it does. And it is. And it has. And it will. Our God is the God of the impossible. And I know he can do that for your wandering one because guess what? He did it for you.

Here's Jesus' last words from his short story. He says, "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish." God was not okay with the ninety-nine. When you were conceived in sin and born into this world without faith, he didn't say, "Well, my church is pretty big already. I've got a couple billion." No, what'd he say, "I want that one." I want him to know, I want her to be saved, and so what did he do? Jesus didn't stay and pray in the comforts of heaven. The Good Shepherd left and he looked and he looked for you. Jesus Christ gave up his safety and as a Good Shepherd, he faced the wolf and he got bit and he laid down his life for you. That he lived an incredible life and he gave up that life on a cross and he left the tomb empty to look for you. He was God, he didn't need anything, but that God had to go and he had to get. In fact, he loved you so much he sent someone to look for you when you wandered. He sent a mom, a dad, a grandma, a grandpa, a roommate, a boyfriend, a teammate, a coworker you thought you just met at a bar. No, that was God looking for you. You thought you just happened to fall in love with him, with her? No, that was Jesus looking for you. You thought you just happened to see the thing on social media that led you to the church where you heard about grace? No, no, no, no. That was God showing his incredible compassion, mercy and love to look for you.

Brothers and sisters in the faith, you boomers, gen x'ers, millennials, and gen z - this is our story: That God did anything because 99 percent wasn't good enough. And it's the passion we bring to the next generation; that we cannot let just one wander. God cares too much and we do, too. So let's leave and let's look. Let's love deeply and let's work so that the next time we lift up our voices about the never-ending, crazy, reckless love of God, it's not just us singing; it's the next generation with us.

Let's pray.

Dear God, thank you so much that you saved us. You didn't owe us anything and we gave you a thousand reasons to run away but it wasn't enough for you. I thank you, God, for your heart. I thank you, despite all of our sin, even times we didn't wander but we flat out ran away, yet still, you were a God full of compassion. I pray, God, for humility for our church. It's going to be so easy to see the differences and to take a step back and just grumble about the direction of our country but you want so much more. Jesus, when you look at the culture of your day, you felt compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And so, we pray for that same compassion today. God, fill our hearts with a deep love for the next generation - not just our own children, but the children that we see in our culture and in our church. God, we want your faithfulness to be known and proclaimed from generation to generation to generation. We want the kids that haven't even been born yet to know how amazing you are and that you are the only thing that can satisfy our hearts. So, help us to be faithful with the time that we have. Help us to be passionate with the minutes that we're given and help us to be unashamed of the gospel that you've entrusted to our care.

We pray this, God, for the sake of your church, your flock, for your people, and for your glory, and we ask it all in Jesus' name, Amen.