

Jesus the Teenager

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Date: 04 January 2026

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[0 : 00] Over the last several years, many news and research organizations have reported that teenagers today are struggling to flourish more than previous generations. Compared to millennials, Gen X, and boomers, overall as a whole population, Gen Z is more depressed, more anxious, and more lonely. On average, they spend less face-to-face time with people and more and more time on the internet and social media. One professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh puts it like this. Teenagers today are more connected than ever, and yet at the same time, they are more lonely than ever. A couple years ago, the previous Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released a report some of you might have seen on the impact of social media on youth and adolescents. And he recommended a Surgeon General's warning label, similar to what you would see on alcohol and tobacco products. Because youth who use social media more often have predictably worse health outcomes than those who don't.

[1 : 39] And I think all of this raises an important question for us in the midst of the culture in which we live. How can we as a church, how can our church community be a community that bucks this trend? How can our church community be a community where teenagers can flourish and thrive? Our gospel passage here in Luke 2 is actually incredibly well-suited to answer this question. Because in this story, we meet Jesus as a teenager. He's almost a teenager. He's 12, so he's on the precipice of being a teenager. He's almost 13. And this is an incredibly unique passage. Not only is it a passage about Jesus as a teenager, but it is the only story in all of Scripture and in all the four Gospels that we have of Jesus between his birth and between his adulthood. And because of that, it's a really unique passage and it's a really important passage to pay attention to as we consider the implications of the fact that Jesus was, in fact, one day a teenager. The editorial summary that Luke gives us at the end of the story is that Jesus was a flourishing teenager.

[2 : 56] Verse 52 says, at the end, that Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. If Luke was writing this to teenagers today, he would say, bro, Jesus was cooking. He was slaying. He was living his best life. For all the older people in the room, the translation of that is that as a teenager, Jesus excelled in every aspect of his life. He excelled physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. And so we're going to focus today, this morning, on Jesus as a teenager. And you might be here this morning. You might say, well, why just focus on teenagers?

Why not just focus on all kids? And the answer is, first and foremost, that's what our text focuses on. But the second reason is the fact that the fact that Jesus was a teenager introduces some unique drama into the story that we're going to see as the story goes on.

And the challenge it creates in this story is the fact that he had started to make some decisions on his own, apart from his parents. And this is something that younger kids can't do.

[4 : 08] And so the fact that Jesus is a teenager is really significant. So this morning, we're going to be focusing on that. We're going to look at this. We're going to look at how did teenage Jesus flourish, and how can teenagers flourish today in our community?

That's what we're going to look at this morning. First of all, teenage Jesus flourished by pursuing godly relationships. He flourished by pursuing godly relationships.

In verses 41 and 42, we read that Jesus and his parents went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. And verse 44 says that it wasn't just the three of them, but that they traveled with a large caravan of relatives and friends.

And this is why, on the way back home to Nazareth, after celebrating the Passover, it actually took them, Mary and Joseph, a day to realize that Jesus wasn't in their company.

They actually assumed that he was just hanging out with some of his cousins or some of his friends or aunts and uncles. They're actually a day's journey back to Nazareth when they realize they don't know where their son is.

[5 : 18] And so they start asking aunts and uncles and cousins and friends, have you seen Jesus? No, haven't seen him. Is he with you? Is he in your tent? No, he's not with us.

We haven't seen him. And they look everywhere and they can't find him. And you can imagine, whether you're a parent or not, you can imagine the anxiety that starts to creep in for Mary and Joseph.

Where is he? What's happened to him? I mean, is he lost? Has he been attacked by robbers or wild animals? Is he injured or worse, is he dead?

This is a moment that every parent in the room can appreciate. It's the moment at the grocery store or at the mall or at school or even at church when you realize all of a sudden, I don't know where my kid is.

It's a moment every parent can appreciate. And let me just say, next time, if you're a parent, next time you feel like you're failing as a parent, just remember this story.

[6 : 28] The parents of the parents of the perfect, sinless son of God lost their son on a family trip. And if that could happen to them, it probably means you're not a failure.

It probably just means that like Mary and Joseph, you're doing your best. So give yourself some grace. And so Mary and Joseph, after they feel that initial panic and anxiety, they do what any parent would do.

They start to retrace their steps back to Jerusalem. And verse 46 says that after three days, they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

They eventually find Jesus sitting in the temple at a Bible study. Now, before we move on and continue in the drama of this story, let's just stop and pause to notice something.

Let's stop and pause to notice that as a teenager, so far in this story, we see that Jesus' life was full of godly relationships.

[7 : 33] It was full of godly relationships, both with peers and friends and with older adult mentors. He's hanging out with a whole caravan of family and friends on the way to celebrate the Passover.

And he's hanging out with older adults. He's hanging out with rabbis and teachers who are studying the Bible and discussing it with him.

And this is a really important thing to reflect on as a church, whether you're a parent or not, whether you have kids or not. That at first, Mary and Joseph actually don't go looking for Jesus because they just assume that he's hanging out with others.

Imagine a church culture where if on a Sunday or on a weeknight, if a parent doesn't know where their kid is, their first assumption is just they're probably just hanging out with their friends in the youth room.

They're probably just hanging out with one of their youth leaders or one of their teachers. They're probably just hanging out with another adult who's being a mentor to them. That would be, if that was the first assumption, that would be a church culture where teenagers are flourishing because their lives are full of relationships with others.

[8 : 47] Many research studies have concluded something that we see a dynamic here going on in Luke 2, which is that one of the most essential things that adolescents and teenagers need in order to flourish is multiple overlapping relationships with adults who are not their parents, whom they can talk to about their faith.

And some studies have even put a number on it. And that number is five. It's five. If a teenager has at least five relationships with adults who are not their parents, with whom that they can talk about their faith, the odds of their flourishing spiritually, physically, emotionally go way up.

And so I think the question we have to ask is how can we cultivate those kind of relationships in our community between adults and teenagers? And I think that there's a lot of ways that you could answer that question.

But I want you to notice a very specific detail in verse 46. Look at verse 46. We see Jesus sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions.

And this was part of the Jewish rabbinic style of learning. Rabbis taught students by asking questions. And students learned by asking questions as well.

[10 : 18] And there's a lot of wisdom in this ancient rabbinic practice of asking good questions. A good question is like a key. A good question is like a key that unlocks wisdom and insight and truth.

Ask a good question. You can really learn a lot. A good question is also like a bucket. A good question is like a bucket that draws water from the deep well that's inside each and every person.

Ask a good question. And you can open up someone's heart. You can open up someone's mind. When you ask questions that unlock something in somebody else.

When you ask questions that send the bucket down into someone's heart. That's when the real stuff happens. That's when the real connection and relationships happen.

Questions like what makes you interested in that? What was that experience like for you? How did it change you?

[11 : 24] How did it form you? What's your story? How did you become a Christian? What's God doing in your life? Adults in the room, teenagers need you to ask them these questions.

They need you to ask them these questions. If you're a teenager in the room, if you're a middle schooler, if you're a high schooler, learning to ask good questions is one of the things that is going to help you flourish and grow in wisdom in life.

It's going to help you flourish in school. It's going to help you flourish in school. It's going to help you in friendships, in your career, in dating, and it will help you flourish in your faith. Asking good questions is going to be one of the things that's going to help you find people who can become mentors to you.

People who can mentor you and disciple you in your faith. How do you find a good mentor? How do you find a good spiritual mentor or disciple? Well, you look around at people that you respect, look around at people whose lives you want to imitate, and you say, hey, can we get coffee sometime?

I've got some questions about my faith. I've got questions about the Bible. I'd love to just ask a few questions I've been thinking about. Hey, can we get lunch? I want to ask you how you got to where you are in life.

[12:44] I want to ask you how you think about your work and your career and how you think about your work and relationships. It's important to realize that teenage Jesus did something here that younger kids mostly can't do, which is that he didn't wait.

He didn't wait for godly relationships to come to him, but he went out and pursued them. Jesus made an independent decision to go out and pursue people who could mentor him and disciple him.

He pursued them by listening and asking questions. So that's the first thing that we see. Teenage Jesus flourished by pursuing godly relationships.

The second thing we see in the story is that teenage Jesus flourished by exercising godly freedom. Exercising godly freedom.

We said at the beginning of the story the fact that Jesus as a teenager makes the drama of this story happen because in this story he makes an independent decision apart from his parents' permission.

[13:49] This is not something that a five-year-old can do, but it is something that a teenager can do. In Jewish culture, around the ages of 12 or 13 marked a significant transition from childhood to adulthood.

It's when someone started to become responsible to God, responsible before God, and responsible before the community for taking ownership of their faith.

And this is true even today. You probably know that around 13 is when Jewish boys and girls still today celebrate their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. It's this celebration, this ceremony that celebrates the beginning of the moral and spiritual responsibilities of adulthood.

And this is key. Teenage Jesus here is making an independent decision. And this decision makes his parents really anxious.

Verse 48. When his parents saw him in the temple, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us like this?

[14:54] Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. Now, I'm sure no parent in the room has ever felt anxious about their teenager's decisions.

But you can imagine what it would be like, right? You can imagine what it would be like. He makes this decision. They end up anxious. And how does Jesus respond?

He responds in verse 49. Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house? But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Now, if Jesus was a normal teenager affected by the fall, you can imagine the exasperation in his tone in saying this.

This is something that I said when I was a teenager. Something that all teenagers say, You guys obviously don't understand anything. You're so out of touch. Right?

[15:52] But this wasn't Jesus' tone because he wasn't a normal teenager. He was the perfect sinless Messiah. And so we have to conclude that both Jesus' response and his tone is not an exasperated one.

It's a holy one. It's a sanctified one. Jesus is saying, My relationship with my heavenly father is the number one thing in my life.

And I have to prioritize that above everything else. Including my own family. But even though Jesus' response is a sanctified holy one, I think we can all admit, This is still a classic moment between a teenager and a parent.

A teenager makes an independent choice That creates friction and conflict and anxiety with his parents. And I just want to say a couple things.

I want to say something to parents and I want to say something to teenagers. Parents, I think there's something really important here for you to learn from Mary and Joseph, which is this.

[16 : 56] That for your teenagers to flourish in every area of their life, They need to have increasing amounts of freedom to make their own choices as they get older.

And you need to have less and less control over their decisions. Not all at once, but gradually over time.

Yes, they will make mistakes. But learning from their mistakes is one of the ways that they will grow in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man.

Now, I'm not going to get more specific than that. Because I think that's as far as the text allows me to go. I realize that within that, there is a lot of discernment. There's a lot of prayer.

And probably a lot of hand-wringing that goes with that. But parents need to understand that if you want your kids to flourish, you have to learn to give up control. And you have to trust.

[18 : 05] You have to learn to trust that their heavenly father cares more about their flourishing than you do. Teenagers. Not letting you off the hook.

Teenagers, as you get older, you will have more and more freedom to exercise. It's a privilege getting older. Freedom is a great privilege.

It's also a great responsibility. One of the most important decisions that you can, or one of the most important questions that you can ask as a teenager who's moving into adulthood is what am I going to do with my freedom?

Am I going to exercise my freedom just to check out, to watch YouTube, play video games, scroll on Instagram?

Or am I going to exercise my freedom to prioritize the thing in life that is going to make me most flourish in every other aspect of my life?

[19 : 06] What teenage Jesus models for you in this story is how to exercise your freedom. The most important choice you will ever make now and throughout your life is how you prioritize your relationship with your heavenly father above everything else.

Above everything else. And now is the perfect time in your life to do that if you're in middle or high school. I remember when I first started to read the Bible for myself on my own.

I was about this age. I was about 12 or 13, eighth or ninth grade. And I had grown up in church. I'd been to Sunday school. I learned a lot from my Bible teachers who had taught me the Bible.

And all of that was really essential for my formation. But something happened when I got alone in my room by myself and opened up the Bible and read it for myself for the first time.

And I remember that these words that I heard in church and in Sunday school, these words came alive for the first time. It was like the words were leaping off the page and they were penetrating my mind and my heart.

[20 : 23] If as a middle schooler or as a high schooler, if you choose to exercise your freedom by prioritizing your time with your heavenly father, by immersing yourself in scripture, by learning how to pray, then like Jesus, you will grow in wisdom and you will grow in stature and you will grow in favor with God and man.

And I promise you that you will have experiences with the Holy Spirit that you will never forget for the rest of your life.

There will be moments when you look back when you're older and you say that as a middle schooler or as a high schooler, God met me, he spoke to me, he changed me, and he transformed me.

By the way, one last point, teenagers, teenagers, middle schoolers, high schoolers, this story should really teach you to have lots of compassion and patience for your parents.

If your parents seem overly anxious and exasperated and frustrated with you, it's because they love you and it's because they want to see you flourish and like Mary and Joseph, just like Jesus' parents, they're worried that the worst might happen to you.

[21 : 52] And so, if you're a middle schooler or a high schooler here this morning, give your parents some grace. Give your parents some grace. That leads to our third point. Teenage Jesus flourished and he flourished by pursuing godly relationships.

He flourished by exercising godly freedom. And thirdly, finally, he flourished by submitting to godly authority. By submitting to godly authority.

The story concludes verse 51. Then he went down to Nazareth, he went down to Nazareth with them, his parents, and was obedient to them. Now, admittedly, if you're a teenager, this is probably not how you hoped the story would end.

Okay, now go home and obey your parents. It's kind of a letdown. But, it raises an important point. If Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless, son of God, couldn't flourish without submitting to godly authority, I've got news for you.

Then neither can you. Neither can you. God has placed parents and teachers, coaches, youth leaders, pastors, in your life in order to help you flourish.

[23 : 12] To help you grow in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. Now, but let's be honest, as a teenager, it doesn't always feel like this, does it? Sometimes it's difficult to submit to the authorities in your life.

Sometimes it can feel like there's all these people that are telling you what to do and they're giving you rules and expectations and it feels like they're restricting your freedom. But here's what you need to know.

That submitting to godly authority isn't just part of how you flourish as a teenager, it's how you flourish for the rest of your life. It's also how you flourish as an adult.

Growing up in your parents' home is only the beginning of learning how to live under authority. When you leave home in 18, you may be no longer living under your parents' roof, but there will be new authorities in your life.

There will be college professors, there will be managers, supervisors, there's something called the Internal Revenue Service, which is an authority that all of us love to submit to.

[24 : 23] We all have authorities in our life to submit to and that is not a bug in God's plan for our lives, it's a feature. It's a feature. Living under God, living under authority is how God designed creation to work from the very beginning.

Kids need parents, students need teachers, athletes need coaches, writers need editors, and citizens need political leaders.

and yes, yes, I know what you're thinking. Sometimes those in authority have major flaws. Sometimes those in authority do things that are unjust.

Sometimes those in authority do things that are even harmful and abusive. And that is a tragic reality of living in a fallen world and there are times and places to hold such authorities accountable.

But, the path to flourishing when you're under bad authority isn't to avoid authority altogether. It's to come under godly authority. It's to come under godly authority.

[25 : 34] How do we know that? How do we know that? And how do we know, how can we submit to authority when it's difficult? How can we submit to authority when our parents are just so exhausting?

How can we submit to authority when our boss at work is being incredibly difficult? How can we find the resources? How can we find the power to do it? By seeing that this is exactly how Jesus Christ himself flourished.

Think about this for a second. The perfect, sinless son of God was obedient to his sinful, flawed parents. The one with all authority.

The one with all authority in heaven and on earth submitted to finite human authority. And as a result, he grew.

He grew in wisdom, he grew in stature, and he grew in favor with God and man. And we see this not just with teenage Jesus. We see this with adult Jesus.

[26 : 46] If you flip over 20 chapters later in the Gospel of Luke, you see Jesus coming up against the will and the authority of his heavenly father. The night before he was arrested and betrayed before his death, Jesus was praying on the Mount of Olives if his disciples were asleep, and he said, Father, if you are willing, if you are willing, take this cup from me.

Father, is there any other way that this can happen according to your will and plan? And the answer was no. There was no other way.

Not if you and I had any hope of truly flourishing. Not if you and I were to be rescued from sin and death. Not if you and I were to know the same love with the father that Jesus himself experienced.

There was no other way, and so he bent his will to his father's and he said, yet, father, not my will. Not my will, but yours be done.

And by submitting to the will of his father, facing the cross, Jesus brought ultimate flourishing and salvation into the world, into your life, and mine. Friends, this is the power of the gospel.

[28 : 06] This is the power of the gospel, and it's through the power of the gospel that we can not only submit to godly authority, but that we can be a church community where teenagers and adults and little children can flourish together as a church family.

I started earlier by noticing some discouraging trends among Gen Z and teenagers today. Let me end with some encouragement.

This is from Ryan Penley, who's the campus ministry director with CREW at the University of Maryland. He was my campus minister. He's still doing ministry there, and he sent this in a recent fall update.

Meet Will. Will spent the first two years of college pursuing a number of things, but the Lord was not one of them. things changed after God was at work and some recent events in his life.

Will shared his story with me last Friday. God is working. I was chasing all of the wrong things, but now I see clearly. I thought I was a Christian, but now I can say definitely that I was not. Not until this semester, and now everything is changing.

[29 : 20] I'm in. I'm done with the old living. I'm with Jesus, and I'm locked in. Now meet Jacob. Jacob is one of Will's roommates and a leading scorer on the club lacrosse team.

Jacob has watched this transformation, and Will has been intrigued. He came with Will recently to our large group meeting a couple weeks ago, and he filled out a newcomer card, and Will and I met with Jacob the following week in the bagel shop on campus.

And 45 minutes later, Will's roommate and longtime friend, Jacob, placed his faith in Christ in the bagel shop on campus. Now meet Jay.

Jay is also on the club lacrosse team and living in the house with both Will and Jacob and has noticed some significant things happening in the lives of the roommates. And he recently came to our large group meeting, and then our intern, John, met with him to share the gospel.

And one week after Jacob came to faith, Jay placed his faith in Christ. And I keep in touch with campus ministry friends all over the country, and I can tell you this kind of thing is happening everywhere.

[30 : 35] It's happening everywhere. Despite what you might read in the news, God is moving among Gen Z and among teenagers and college students and middle schoolers and high schoolers through the power of the gospel.

I've seen it firsthand among the middle schoolers and high schoolers at our church. It's been amazing to see God at work in our youth. Friends, if you want to be part of what God is doing in the world, if you want to be excited about what God is doing in the world, invest your life.

Invest your life in teenagers. Let's pray. Father in heaven, would you help us to be a church family where teenagers can flourish and thrive as we together follow the example of Jesus, as we pursue godly relationships, as we exercise godly freedom, and as we submit to godly authority.

And I pray that like this story here in Luke 2, that we would be a community where teenagers would not just have lots of great relationships and examples to follow, but that many of them would be examples to us of what it looks like to seek our heavenly father above all else.

We pray this in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.