

HOPE AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

AN ADDITIONAL MODULE RELATED TO TEENS AND SUICIDE

SCRIPTURE IN THE SESSION

EPHESIANS 3:20-21

ISAIAH 40:31

TOPICS CONSIDERED

- ▶ Preciousness of life
- ▶ Doubt as necessary for faith as necessary for hope
- ▶ Being strong in the Lord
- ▶ Being God's masterpiece: God cares for you as a master craftsman cares for his creation, knowing there could never be another you
- ▶ Acceptance and hopefulness
- ▶ Rejection and despair/hopelessness

NOTE TO FACILITATOR

It is important for all leaders to be aware that there may be young people in the group who are wrestling with their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression and their identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, or who may be struggling with thoughts of suicide. Be aware of the inclusiveness of your language; avoid using "us" and "them" language. (e.g., "WE should care for LGBTQ persons because THEY are God's children too" is exclusionary while "LGBTQ persons are God's children, as are all people" does not create a false us and them attitude.)

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

In Ephesians 2:10 we find that we are God's "workmanship." The Bible is clear that each of us is God's masterpiece, personally handcrafted by God. It's a wonderful metaphor to illustrate our uniqueness. Think about it. The human genome, our DNA, is made up of about three billion pairs of nucleotides (a nucleotide is one of the basic components of our DNA). Of those three billion pairs, on average, three million vary from person to person. That means that between you and the person sitting next to you there are around six million biological reasons why you are uniquely you. God intentionally created each of us so there would be no chance for another person just like us to ever be created. God cares for you as a master craftsman cares for each masterpiece. No matter how hard anyone tried, there could never be another you.

Many things about us make us different, including but not limited to our biological structure. For example, our eye color, hair color, sexual orientation, height, weight, and earlobe shape all contribute to our uniqueness. Even abstract characteristics that may be invisible to others contribute to our uniqueness, such as our fears, anxieties, gender expression, hopes, dreams, beliefs, doubts, sexual and gender identity, hobbies and interests. In a world where we are constantly berated with false stereotypes and perceived expectations, it can be hard to fully appreciate how unique we are. We are quick to judge others and ourselves for not measuring up, for being different from an arbitrary standard of normal. We reject each other for our God-given uniqueness.

SEX:

A Christian perspective on our bodies,
decisions, and relationships

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THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND (CONT.)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word "rejection" as the act of refusing to accept, consider, submit to, take for some purpose, or use. When we are rejected or feel as though we are not included in a group of friends, or on a sports team, or in church, it can be a difficult experience to overcome. We wonder, "What's wrong with us that they don't want us here?" Unfortunately, many teens feel there is something wrong with them that cannot be fixed, and this leads to hopelessness. Statistically, feelings of hopelessness are strong predictors of suicidal thoughts and behavior, even stronger than depression. Young people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) can easily find themselves feeling hopeless. Studies show that LGBTQ youth are three to four times more likely to complete suicide than their straight counterparts. LGBTQ youth who are highly rejected by their families are eight to nine times more likely to attempt suicide than youth who experience little or no family rejection. Some youth who do not know what their parents or pastor think will hear messages of condemnation from other Christians and assume their church or family will reject them as well.

The key to overcoming the hopelessness that can set in and turn us away from God's purpose is an ability to accept ourselves even when others reject us (Isaiah 40:31).

In the New International Version, Isaiah 43:4 begins by saying, "Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you . . ." When in the eyes of some people we are considered unworthy of anything but rejection, we are still ever so precious in the eyes of God. Our lives are precious and a gift to be treasured. At times it can feel as though life is nothing more than a burden, a struggle. That feeling does not make you any less precious or any less loved.

As the Church, a community of Christians, we are called to be representatives of Christ's love for all of God's children. For Christians to even attempt to justify or promote rejection or exclusion of any group or individual directly contradicts our call to share God's love. The Church hasn't always gotten this acceptance thing right. In Matthew 15 a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus and asks that he heal her daughter. At first Jesus refuses because she is not an Israelite. However, when she responds with "even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from under the Master's table," Jesus is deeply moved by her faith and heals her daughter. This story illustrates Jesus' welcoming of all people into his ministry, even those who aren't Israelites. It is an example of how we can welcome all as well.

The Church's relationship with LGBTQ people is a prominent example of this in society today. Even when we don't think that we know or have LGBTQ persons in our midst, it's likely that someone in our church, school or family identifies as LGBTQ. Unfortunately they often hide it because so many LGBTQ people experience rejection, violence, or fear because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. We can change this, just as Jesus changed his response. We can start by being equally aware of other's identities as unique masterpieces of God. Owning our identity as Christ-followers and accepting our uniqueness as "God's masterpiece." This means being careful about the words we use, the assumptions we make, and the way we treat LGBTQ people. When we do this, whether someone identifies openly as LGBTQ or not, they will know they are welcomed and loved among us.

The most certain way to help people escape hopelessness or rejection is to foster congregations, friendships, and families where everyone knows they will be welcomed and loved.

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