

No Strings Attached

Free To Be All There

Big Idea: To love others with No Strings Attached means we need to be all there, fully committed and fully engaged in our relationships.



Small Group Ice-Breaker:

What is one thing that requires some kind of technology you don't feel you can live without? (*Car, Facebook, texting, phone, email, etc*)

Introduction:

Jesus only spent 33 short years on this earth, but the majority of His life was spent with people. He did not just spend time in large groups or going places where people were; His time was spent developing relationships with people. The people He met all felt impacted by the time He spent with them, no matter how short the amount it was.

Discussion:

Turn in your Bibles and read out loud **Luke 10:38-41**: *As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

1. What was the reason behind Martha being so upset?
2. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her?" What do you think He could have been talking about?
3. What do you think would have been better? Making preparations or listening to Jesus? Does what Jesus says contradict what you would have predicted He would've said?
4. Who do you relate to most, Mary or Martha? Do you think you would be the one making all the preparations or the one that soaks up time with Jesus?

There are often things in our lives that are good, but that distract us from what is really important. In the story of Mary and Martha, it was good that Martha wanted to be a good host to the people in her home and work hard to make others feel welcome. However, her busyness came at the expense of true relationship. Jesus wasn't saying that Martha was doing something wrong, He was simply saying that Mary chose what was best.

5. Think of a time when you had to pick between two things that were both good? What was that time and was it difficult to choose?

Distractions aren't always bad. They can be good things like homework, sports, chores, music, or books. However, when they take priority over your *relationships*, they can lose their good-ness.

6. Talk about a time you when the person you were talking to was texting, checking their phone, or answering it, or was otherwise distracted. Maybe it was a teacher, a parent, or a friend. How did that make you feel?

No Strings Attached

Free To Be All There

7. Have you done that to others? How do you think it made them feel?



8. What about God? Do you think you ever treat God that way? Do you ever get distracted by so many other things going on in your life that you ignore God? How do you think God feels?

What's next?

Turn to in your Bibles to **Philippians 2:5-8**

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

9. According to this passage, how should we approach our relationships with others? (*as if they come first, humbling ourselves, serving others*) What are some of the images used to describe our approach to relationships? (*small, lowly, servant, humble man*)

10. What are some of the common things that distract you from having deep, life-giving relationships?

11. How do these verses change your attitude towards relationships from now on? (If at all)

12. What concrete steps can you take to minimize the distractions you mentioned in #10? (*silence phone when conversation begins; keep focused on the person's eyes when your phone buzzes to help you ignore it; turn it off, try not to have an argument via texting or FB, discuss it in person to minimize misunderstandings, etc.*)

12. What is one way you can keep yourself accountable to these changes? Do you need to tell someone that next time you text while you are talking with them, they should call you on it? Do you need to go out of your way to have a real conversation with someone you don't know very well? Do you need to put a stickie note on your phone to remind you?

No Strings Attached

Free from Manipulation

Big Idea God wants our relationships with Him and others to be based on authenticity and selflessness, free from manipulation.



Small Group Ice-Breaker

What's the best practical joke you ever saw or were part of?

Introduction

This series challenges us to look at our relationships and to re-think how we deal with others. It could be that we need to cut some strings to unhealthy relationships...or unhealthy ways of dealing with our friends and family. This week we'll be discussing something we all have done at one point or another: manipulate others...and we'll look at how attaching our strings to manipulation leads us away from what God intends for us.

Discussion

*Manipulation is when you "have devious influence over someone, especially for your own advantage."

*"If I get my little brother to clean my room by promising him things I am never going to follow through on, it is no big deal. If he threatens to tell, I'll promise him something else, or claim I never said it."

*"I don't really like the girl in the back of English class, but she's really smart. If I am nice to her so she lets me copy her homework, works for me! She's doing the work anyway, what is the big deal to share?"

*"Everyone gives that teacher a difficult time. If I pretend to be nice to him, I bet he'll give me good grades."

*"If my dad tells me I can't watch a movie I want to see, I'll just ask my mom and see what she says. Manipulation is great and nobody gets hurt!"

Another way to think about manipulation is taking advantage of others, and let's be honest, taking advantage of others can be useful.

1. What are some reasons that people take advantage of others?
2. What is the best thing you've gotten out of taking advantage of someone? Did you feel guilty about it?
3. What impact do you think it had on the person you manipulated?

Some of us might even take pride in our ability to take advantage of others. It comes so naturally to us at times we don't realize we're doing it. Well, if you think *you're* good at it, let's take a look at the Bible. There are some All-Star manipulators in there.

Jacob and Esau were brothers born just moments apart. Because Esau was born first, Jacob grew up jealous of Esau. In a way they were the modern day Prince William and Harry. Prince William is the future King of England, ahead of his younger brother, Harry. As the older brother, Esau was held in high regard and would receive a lot of money and responsibility in the future, while Jacob would always be the less important younger brother.

No Strings Attached

Free from Manipulation

Genesis 27 and 28 give examples of Jacob manipulating his brother. First Jacob allows a weakened Esau to trade his birthright (half his inheritance) for a bowl of stew. Then, Jacob puts animal fur on his arms to trick his blind father into thinking he was his hairy brother so that Jacob would receive the family blessing (transferring authority over the household from father to son)!



4. How do you think Esau felt when he found out about losing the family blessing to his brother due to his trickery?
5. Earlier we talked about taking advantage of others, when is a time someone took advantage of you? Did you know it at the time?
6. How did you feel when you learned you had been manipulated...or how did you feel knowing you were being manipulated, but you did it anyway?

We like to think that manipulation is a victimless crime. As you can see, that isn't always the case. Being attached to the string of manipulation isn't great and people do get hurt.

Manipulation robs us of the authentic relationships God longs for us to have. We end up with a lot of superficial relationships. Manipulation is built on lies and deceit. Are those the building blocks of intentional, authentic relationships? Is the person you weaseled snack money out of going to be there when you need someone to talk to about what's really going on in your life?

Later in Jacob's life, he was manipulated by his father-in-law into marrying the wrong girl! Jacob, who had manipulated Esau, was now manipulated himself! A back and forth between Jacob and his father-in-law went on for years. Jacob also spent many years hiding from Esau, fearing revenge. The never ending circle of manipulation in Jacob's life prevented him from fully enjoying a relationship with his family.

7. A word we can use to characterize a relationship based on manipulation is 'selfish'. What's an opposite word that can be used to characterize a relationship based on authenticity? (*selfless*)
8. Take an example of manipulation that you've described above and talk about how it would be different if it were based on an authentic, selfless relationship. (*Leader, ideas like: offering to help without expecting repayment, developing integrity & character by getting a worse grade because they didn't copy, delaying gratification by saving money for purchase instead of wheedling it out of someone now, more meaningful relationships can develop when they don't think you're trying to get something out of them, etc.*).

Take turns looking up the following verses, have students read each twice when it's their turn:

Philippians 2:3-4

Luke 6:31

Luke 6:35

Psalms 119:36

James 3:16

James 3:17

It's hard to be selfless. It's hard to break the cycle of manipulation when we're so used to doing it.

No Strings Attached

Free from Manipulation

9. Which one of the above verses encourages you most to have more authentic, God-honoring relationship, free from manipulation? Why? (read again if necessary)



What's Next

What about manipulating God? If you've ever tried to bargain with God, then you've tried to manipulate Him. God cares about His relationship with you, not about what He can get you to do or what you can get Him to do. He just wants you to be *real* with Him and to hang out with Him.

10. What are ways to be real with God? (*talk to him like you talk with your best friend, ask Him to help you remember to talk to Him, read His word so you get to know Him and how he feels about things*)

God also wants you to be real and hang out with others (not just your friends)...in authentic, unselfish, non-manipulating ways. You can't help others find their way back to God when they are suspicious of you or you're always thinking of what's in it for you. Having authentic relationships with others, relationships free from manipulation doesn't mean your relationships are free from arguments or disagreements, but when they are based on authenticity, those disagreements are more easily and lovingly resolved...they don't turn into drama!

11. Discuss what actions you can take this week to change manipulative relationships (or leave them if necessary), think of two things you can do that will put you on a path to more authentic, less "me"-focused, relationships.
12. What ways you can keep each other be accountable for the actions in your relationships?

No Strings Attached

Free to Be Awkward

Leader, the activity at the end is very important. Please monitor the time and adjust accordingly so you have time to get to it.

Big Idea: To love with No Strings Attached means being willing to risk awkwardness in a relationship. Sometimes it means having tough conversations and others times it means swallowing our pride.



Small Group Ice-Breaker

What is one of the most awkward moments you have experienced at school?

Introduction

We all have those embarrassing moments when we say something that we shouldn't have, or at the wrong time. We also tend to avoid awkwardness at all cost by sticking to surface conversations. There are times, however, when we have an awkward conversation with a friend or family member that sometimes ends up turning out great. No one wants to be awkward, but sometimes being uncomfortable by saying something tough or something nice to someone is a risk God asks us to take. Today we will talk about our need to cut the string of awkwardness to deepen our relationships with others and help people find their way back to God.

Discussion

1. When you are with a group of friends, are there certain things you definitely don't talk about? Like what? (*Family problems, relationship problems, faith, church, grades, etc.*)

There are even awkward moments in the bible. Last week we talked about how Jacob manipulated his brother Esau. That sounds like it could lead to some pretty awkward moments. Jacob and Esau are twin brothers from a family that has a long history of being dysfunctional and always messing up, some of us can relate to this. Jacob is the younger twin, and has always been the sneaky one. He has cheated Esau out of money, land, and power. As you can imagine, Esau does not take this very well

2. Has a friend or sibling ever made you feel "cheated out"? (*Such as taking advantage of you, or tricking you into doing something you did not want to do, or getting a better reward for the same amount of work.*)
3. If so how did this make you feel?

Later in the story we learn that Jacob moves away and becomes rich. Jacob owns lots of goats and camels and has many people working for him. (*Owning lots of animals back then was like owning fancy cars today.*) Later in Genesis 32 Jacob has moved on and become successful, but knows he has wronged his brother and desires to reconnect with him for the right reasons. Jacob knows he is about to have a very awkward moment.

Turn to **Genesis 32:3-5** ³*Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.* ⁴*He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my master Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now.* ⁵*I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes."*

4. What do you think Jacob wanted to say to Esau? (*He wanted to apologize and try to get their relationship to where it should be*)

No Strings Attached

Free to Be Awkward



5. In verse four, how does Jacob want his messenger to describe him to Esau? (as his servant, “Your servant Jacob...”)
6. What attitude does this suggest Jacob is taking toward his brother: a humble one or a proud, superior one? Do you think it would be awkward for Jacob to humble himself in order to apologize, after always being in control and having the upper hand in their relationship?
7. Would it be awkward for *you* to humble *yourself* before saying you’re sorry?

Jacob is so nervous and scared about this upcoming awkward situation. But he has to cut the string of awkwardness in order to reconcile. And he does. God is always in favor of reconciliation. He will help us and He wants us to ask for His help. Now look at **Gen. 32:9**. What are the first three words? “*Then Jacob prayed...*”

8. So what is one thing we should do to help us risk awkwardness? (*PRAY*)

God rewarded Jacob’s willingness to be awkward by reconciling Jacob’s relationship with Esau. In the end, Esau did forgive him.

Apologizing is just one example of how risking awkwardness can restore and deepen relationships. It’s also uncomfortable to tell others when they are hurting you (or others) or ask for help or tell someone what’s really bugging you instead of squelching it inside. But all these “awkward conversations” can lead to a better, more solid relationship. And more solid relationships put us in a better position to help bring people back to God!

What about the awkwardness of giving someone props? Sometimes it’s embarrassing to tell someone they’re good at something or that you admire them. And sometimes we *don’t* say those things because we think it’ll sound stupid or, well, awkward. Wonder how God feels about *that*!?

9. Has a friend or teacher or parent or friend or coach ever said you were good at something, or they liked the way you did something that really made you feel good about yourself? Something that you’ll never forget? Explain. (*Leader, be prepared to share your own story*).
10. Have you ever wanted to tell someone what they meant to you, but you were afraid of the awkward conversation? (*Telling a friend that they make a difference in your life. Letting your leader know that they are helping you to become a better person.*)
11. Or maybe you have wanted to tell a friend, family member, or leader that you feel lost or alone. But you are afraid of that awkward moment. Have you ever felt this?

What’s Next?

Awkward moments may even be found in our small groups. You get scared to share what is going on.

It’s important to always make sure that your friend knows you care about them. Even just letting someone know they make a difference and what you see in them can help them to feel better about themselves. It can be awkward to tell a friend the good qualities that you see in them, however, if you are able to get over the awkward moment then it can help to build a stronger and longer lasting relationship. So let’s now take a few minutes to “get awkward” with each other.

No Strings Attached

Free to Be Awkward



1 Thessalonians 5:11 tell us ¹¹ *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Have you ever heard of ICNU? I-See-In-You. It's First Thessalonians in actions. ICNU is when you tell someone what good qualities you see in them. We're going to try this right now! Leaders have students turn to each other in the group and finish this statement " I see _____ in you! Examples: good athlete, smart, funny, good organizer, good friend, creativity, singer, wisdom, etc. (*Leaders: Help the student to fill in the blank with each other or pair them up for this. **MAKE SURE NO STUDENT IS LEFT OUT.***)

Throughout this week, let a friend, leader, or family member know how you feel. Yes, is can and will be awkward, however, pray first and know that many times these awkward conversations make things better.

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Free to Let Go



Big Idea When I let go of control in a relationship it helps me build relationships that last. When we go to God as the one who supplies our needs emotionally and spiritually, we are freed to love others with No Strings Attached. That means we don't cling to relationships so tightly that we end up choking the life out of them. Our relationship with God defines us, nothing or no one else does.

Small Group Ice-Breaker

Everyone has their own personal style, and that style tends to change often over the years. Tomboys can become girly-girls...nerds can become jocks. What is the most memorable style or "look" you (or someone you know) have had? (Leader-share one of your own crazy or embarrassing styles from your teen years, if you dare!)

Introduction

Life is full of struggles. Just when you get through one challenge, it seems another comes your way. But what Jesus came to offer us is freedom. As we grow closer to Him and conform our lives more to His, we receive His grace and strength to tackle any challenges that come our way. When we surrender control over our lives to God, we cut the strings to the things that are holding us back from experiencing the life He has dreamed for us.

The one thing you can count on in life is that everything can and will change. This can be a bad thing, and it can be a good thing...or sometimes a little of both. Life has probably been changing pretty consistently for you.

1. What are some changes you've had just in the last six months or year?

Each year brings new experiences, new things to learn, new people to get to know and new challenges to overcome. As we've been talking about in this series, these new things, combined with all the other stuff you already have to deal with, can be like "strings" that hold you back from becoming all you could be. On the flip side, you can use these experiences as opportunities to grow and become more and more like the person that God designed you to be.

2. Can you think of a way you have "grown up" or matured through a challenging experience in your life? (Leader-some examples might be: a move, the end of a friendship, a divorce, etc.)
3. What do you think is the biggest lesson you learned from this experience?

Discussion

A lot of students struggle with their identity. Who am I...really?! This is normal. So what's the big deal about our identity? How do we figure out what it is? It's natural to let what you do...or who you hang out with...or where you're from define your identity. But is that your TRUE identity? Hollywood has used this idea of missing or mistaken identity in many popular movies. The main character usually has some episode of amnesia and finds his identity a mystery. The plot thickens as the character's identity is often mistaken. People think he's someone he's not, but he doesn't know any better. He soon realizes, though, that what appears on the outside is not matching up with what is in his heart. When the movie ends well, the character discovers that he has the choice to become who he believes he should be, despite the obstacles he faces. So, maybe this is the stuff for movies, and life isn't really that dramatic, or maybe not...

No Strings Attached

Free to Let Go



4. In what ways might you or people you know have a “mistaken identity” based on something you do, or some relationship in your life? *(Leader-help students process the possible ways they are identifying themselves by what they are good at, where they are from, or who they hang out with.)*
5. If you could be everything you want to be, what would your true identity be? Why?

Let’s take a look at what God says about our identity in relation to the world we live in. In this passage from John 17, Jesus is praying to God the Father, on behalf of us, his followers. *(Leader, read this to the students, perhaps twice, as this is a different translation than the bibles we provide)*

John 17:15-19 *“I’m not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth. (NLT)*

6. What do you think Jesus is trying to convey in this prayer? *(Leader-allow discussion, but land on the fact that Jesus set the example of how to live “in and not of” the world and that we only need to look to Him to find our way.)*
7. How can we ensure our identity is in Christ and not in these other things? *(the more we spend time with Jesus, the more we become like Him: remembering to pray, be thankful to Him, spend lots of time reading His word, connecting with other Christ-followers, being generous with our time, talent, money, serving others, etc.)*

Let’s look at our relationships.

8. Do you know people who are going down the wrong path because of who they hang out with? Do you know people who are kept on the right path because of people they hang out with?

Think about some of the people who are closest to you: your parents or siblings, your friends or classmates, your teachers, leaders or coaches. The first step in *letting go* of the things that hold us back relationally is *identifying* those very things. Think about three people that you would say are your closest relationships at this time. These are probably the people who you talk to the most and spend the most time with. *(Leader, give them a few moments).* Now think about what kind of impact those relationships have on your life right now. Maybe they provide fun and stress relief for you...or maybe the relationship is strained and weighs you down...maybe it is leading you down a path you didn’t really mean to go on.

9. Is there a relationship that you think might be one of these ‘strings’ that is holding you back? Explain. *(Leader-remind students to respect confidentiality-and that it’s ok to pass on this or any question they are not comfortable sharing.)*
 - a. Which part of this relationship is in your control to change? *(ie: relationships with parents or family members can’t always be eliminated, but we can change how we act or respond with those people. On the other hand, we can choose which friends we hang out with.)*

No Strings Attached

Free to Let Go

10. Think about the people in your life again. Who is more of a positive influence to you, someone who encourages you to move forward in the right direction?



What's Next

So, what am I supposed to do now? Read the following direction Paul gives us from Romans 12: **Romans 12:2** *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* (NIV)

The Message says it like this: *Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

- IDENTIFY one step you can take today to *let go* what is holding you back.
 - Eliminate a relationship that is unhealthy for me.
 - Spend more time with someone who helps lead me in the right direction.
 - Focus on learning from God’s word, and praying, about my identity in Jesus.
 - Changing an unhealthy behavior or pattern in my life.
 - Something else?

- SHARE your decision with another Christ follower who will encourage you. Ask to be held accountable to the change you are working on.

- PRAY each day and be open to God’s direction as you grow!