



A 4-WEEK STUDY
FROM THE OLD & NEW
TESTAMENTS ON

FRIENDSHIP

FROM OUR ANNUAL *TEACHING STRATEGY*



WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED WITH . . .

ERICA RODRIGUEZ & ARNALDO SANTIAGO

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- ▶ [Teaching Guide](#)
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SERIES OVERVIEW

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

WEEK 1

This week, we'll examine wisdom from the Psalms and Gospels about healthy relationships and positive influences.

- **BIG IDEA:** Real friends choose each other wisely.
- **BIBLE:** Psalm 1; Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 9:10-13; Proverbs 13:20

WEEK 2

This week, we'll explore Paul's conversion story, followed by his advice to Timothy about giving and receiving grace.

- **BIG IDEA:** Real friends show each other grace.
- **BIBLE:** Acts 9:1-19; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Proverbs 17:9

WEEK 3

This week, we'll explore the story of Jesus weeping over the death of his friend Lazarus and what Jeremiah (the "weeping prophet") said about God's comfort.

- **BIG IDEA:** Real friends comfort each other.
- **BIBLE:** John 11:1-45; Jeremiah 8:18; Proverbs 17:17

WEEK 4

This week, we'll examine a moment in Jesus' ministry when he corrected his friends and a letter from Paul to Timothy giving advice and encouragement.

- **BIG IDEA:** Real friends help each other grow.
- **BIBLE:** Mark 9:33-37; 1 Timothy 6:11-18; Proverbs 27:17

MEMORY VERSE: "Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'" – Mark 9:35 (NIV)

HOW TO DISCIPLE DURING THIS SERIES

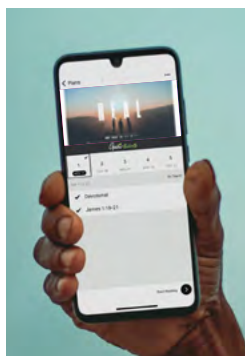
We all know teenagers don't get disciplined just by sitting through a message every week. So here's what else we've provided to **help your students develop more consistent spiritual habits.**

THE 4 SPIRITUAL HABITS

We feature one of Grow's 4 Spiritual Habits every month with a unique activity or experience. But the 4 Spiritual Habits show up year-round! **Here are a few of the places you can spot them in this series:**

- **SPEND TIME WITH GOD:** While this entire series is focused on a student's personal relationship with God, in Week 3, they'll specifically be challenged to evaluate their relationship with God, make a decision to follow Jesus, or recommit to following Jesus.
- **SPEND TIME WITH OTHERS:** Week 2 is all about how others can help us grow, so students will be encouraged to learn from others' faith and maybe even invite someone to mentor them.
- **USE YOUR GIFTS:** Weeks 1 and 4 are all about turning our faith into action, and those actions include using our gifts to give back to God and serve others.
- **SHARE YOUR STORY:** Throughout this series, students will be encouraged to have conversations about how their faith stories are developing so far. In Week 4, they'll be challenged to share their faith by loving others well.

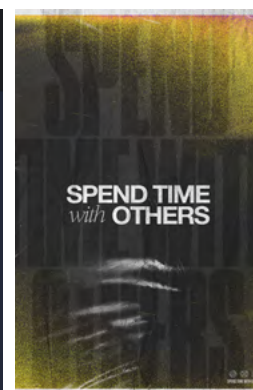
DEVOTIONALS



To help students regularly **spend time with God**, every series comes with daily readings and devotionals through The Bible App. You can access them on your browser or app [right here](#). And don't forget about your [Volunteer Devotional!](#)

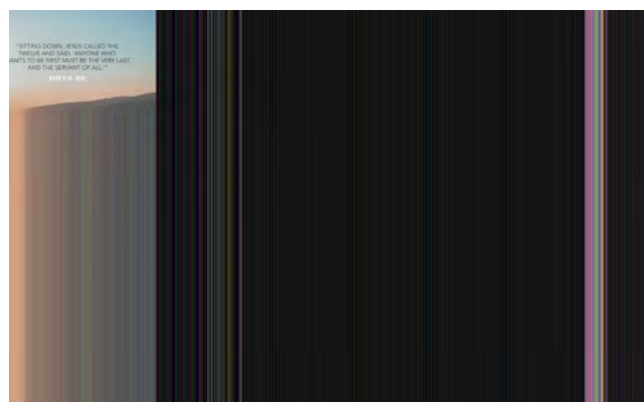
DISCIPLESHIP ACTIVITY

If you're following along with our scope and sequence, our discipleship activity this quarter is **Spiritual Habit Tracker App**, an activity to help students **spend time with others**. We also made you some [posters and graphics](#) for this quarter's habit you can print, display, or share online.



MEMORY VERSE

Try challenging students to memorize a verse that corresponds with the Big Ideas or themes of this series. Here's the verse we chose — and [we made graphics](#) you can post, print, or show on screen too!



HOW TO PROGRAM FOR THIS SERIES

Outside of your teaching time, we have a few programming ideas to help this series really come to life — everything from how to **design your room**, to which **games to play**, to what **music to play and sing**.



ROOM DESIGN

For this series, we recommend creating a clean and modern room design inspired by the series graphics.

First, you'll need a backdrop. There are tons of ways to create a backdrop that you can re-use multiple times each year. Check out [this post](#) for a list of ideas. For this series, **we recommend using free-standing foam insulation boards** because they're affordable, lightweight, and easy to move around. For this design, you'll need one, two, or five foam insulation boards, which typically measure 4' x 8'. Paint the boards white or gray and let the paint dry completely.

Meanwhile, head to your local print shop and get at least one large format banner printed, using the vertical series graphic provided in your Graphics and Video folder. Attach this banner to the center foam insulation board with glue or spray adhesive.

If you're only using one board for the series graphic, you're done with this step! But if you'd like to incorporate more boards in your room design, here's our suggestion: either create one more board (where each week you'll display only the Big Idea for the current week) or create four more boards (where you'll display one Big Idea per board). Either way, use the vertical background slide for this series as your backdrop, have it printed at your local print shop, and attach it to your boards just like you did the first one.

We always suggest adding your Big Ideas to your room design only after you've revealed the Big Ideas each week. There are plenty of ways to do this, but here's a simple one: **print or paint the Big Ideas on large sheets of transparent plastic**. When you're ready to add the Big Idea each week, attach it to the board using push pins.

Finally, create an environment where two friends might like to hang out by adding **a modern table, chairs, and table decor**. Try decorating it with a succulent or two!



GAMES

If you have a designated time for games before your worship and teaching time, we have a few suggestions for games you can play! Since this series talks a lot about friendship, the games for this series are all based on friendships and relationships.. To get the instructions and graphics for each game, click the images to the

right or visit the Games section of your Grow Students dashboard.

- [Real Fake Friends](#)
- [Real or No Real](#)
- [Real Good Contacts](#)
- [What is Real?](#)

MUSIC

Here are a few on-theme worship songs you may want to feature throughout this series . . .

- **"Goodness of God"** (Bethel Music)
- **"Run To The Father"** (Cody Carnes)
- **"Dear God"** (Cory Asbury)
- **"Shall Not Want"** (Elevation Worship & Maverick City Music)
- **"Names"** (Elevation Worship & Maverick City Music)
- **"I Will Carry You"** (Ellie Holcomb)
- **"What a Friend + The Blessing"** (ATG Worship)
- **"Forgiveness Rushes In"** (KXC)
- **"Better Than Good"** (Todd Galberth)
- **"Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus"** (Darla Baltazar)

And if you want to sing or sample a non-worship song or two (maybe as an opener, a closer, a bonus song during your program), try some of these . . .

- **"Love Your Neighbor"** (Phil J.)
- **"Best Friends"** (Hillsong Young & Free)
- **"Count On Me"** (Bruno Mars)
- **"You're My Best Friend"** (Queen)
- **"Real Friends"** (Camila Cabello)

We've added these songs to our [Grow Students \(Volume 6\) Spotify playlist](#) for your personal use only, according to Spotify's [terms and conditions](#). For more information on how to use copyrighted music in your services legally, [read this!](#)


GRAPHIC DESIGN


We give you editable graphics so you can make everything your own! If you're going to **edit our graphics** or **create something brand new** . . .


Use this font! Download it [here](#).

DHARMA GOTHIC

And use these colors!

 HEX: #293538
CMYK: 78-62-60-56

 HEX: #B3C6CA
CMYK: 29-13-17-00

 HEX: #D19D7D
CMYK: 19-38-54-00

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THIS SERIES

SHOPPING LIST

If you want to try all of our suggestions for this series, here's what you'll need to buy, borrow, Google, or dig for in your storage closet . . .

WEEK 1:

- This video clip from [The Big Bang Theory – Sheldon's Friend Flow Chart](#)
- This video clip from [Toy Story 4 – Friendships That Last](#)
- The rip current image found in your Week 1 folder

WEEK 2:

- This video clip from [Moesha – Friends Encouraging Each Other](#)
- [Painter's tape](#)
- [Sticky notes](#)
- This video clip from [Raya and the Last Dragon – Raya takes the first step](#)

WEEK 3:

- This video clip from [Stranger Things – Dustin and Steve Handshake](#)
- This clip from [Inside Out – Sadness Comforts Bing Bong](#)

WEEK 4:

- This clip from [The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air – Will Dances With Carlton](#)
- This clip from [Luca – Alberto Helps Luca](#)

PREP LIST

WEEK 1:

- Set up a space to play **Musical Speed Friending**. See your Week 1 Teaching Guide for details!
- Print one copy of the **handout** provided for every two students. Cut each handout into halves.

WEEK 2:

- Collect your sticky notes, pen, and board for your **discussion** time.

WEEK 3:

- Collect your sticky notes, pen, and board for your **discussion** time.

WEEK 4:

- Set up a space and your supplies for **On-the-Spot Skill Share**. See your Week 4 Teaching Guide for details!
- Prepare your flowers for the **Give Them Their Flowers** object lesson.
- Print one copy of the **handout** provided for every four students. Cut each handout into quarters.

WHAT TO CUSTOMIZE

You know your students better than we do, so there are probably some things you'd like to change about this series before you start teaching. Here's what you'll need to update if you make changes . . .

- **TEACHING:** Add your own stories, jokes, and any pop culture references that make sense for your group. You can edit each message using the Word documents provided or the [Grow Message Builder](#).
- **DISCUSSIONS:** If you make any changes to your teaching, make sure your discussion questions reflect those changes. You can edit these using the Word documents provided.
- **GRAPHICS:** We've provided graphics in your [Graphics & Video](#) folder already, but we've also provided blank slides in case you need to make your own.
- **PRESENTATION:** Customize your weekly presentations in [SLIDR](#) and use it to show images and videos during your weekly program. Each week of Grow Curriculum comes pre-loaded with content to get you started.
- **EMAILS & HUBS:** Customize and send the [volunteer and parent emails](#) as well as the [Volunteer and Parent Hubs](#) content we've provided for this series to keep everyone's grown-ups in the loop.

WHAT TO COMMUNICATE

To make sure your students, volunteers, and parents are in the loop, follow along with the Marketing Checklist we've provided for this series to make sure you've got everything covered, like . . .

- **STUDENTS:** Throughout the month, post the [Graphics & Video](#) we've provided on social media, like the Big Idea images and Bumper Video. Post the [One-Minute Sermon Videos](#) we've provided or use the **One-Minute Sermon Scripts [JUMP]** to film a recap video each week and post it on social media.
- **FAMILIES:** Before you begin teaching this series, send parents the [Parent Email](#) we've provided (after you've customized it for your ministry, of course). After each week of the series, post the Big Idea images wherever you talk to parents online. And don't forget to update your [Parent Hub](#) with the information they need for this series!
- **VOLUNTEERS:** Before you teach each week of this series, send volunteers the weekly [Volunteer Emails](#) we've provided (after you've customized it for your ministry, of course). Before each week of the series, post the Big Idea images wherever you talk to volunteers online and make sure they have their Discussion Guides in advance! And don't forget to update your [Volunteer Hub](#) with the information they need for this series!

And hey! When you post on social media, **don't forget to use the #growcurriculum hashtag and tag us @stuffyoucanuse** to share your ideas and stories with our team and with other churches who are using Grow!

HOW TO HACK THIS SERIES

Every ministry is different. Whether you're teaching middle schoolers, high schoolers, teenagers with special needs, or all three, here's how to hack this series to fit your unique and diverse audience.

HACKS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

REVISE

To make this series more accessible for middle schoolers, here's what to adjust . . .

In Week 2, revise what you say after you tell a story about a time when you were comforted.

Middle school students may feel like they don't have or haven't actually thought about someone who can comfort them. A good starting place could be with family but even that could not be the case. Instead, mention that the youth group or small group could be a starting point to find comfort from people.

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

In Week 2, you could replace the activity Learn by Listening with the Never-Ending Portrait.

One student draws the name of a famous person at random. The rest of the group will each take turns adding on to a silhouette until they've drawn the face of the famous person selected.

REMEMBER

Remember, this series is so important for middle school students because they are going through the stage developmentally where they are learning how to pick friends and how to navigate friendship conflicts. Really dive deep into how you can listen and understand where your students are at when it comes to friendships.

HACKS FOR HIGH SCHOOLERS

REVISE

To make this series more accessible for high schoolers, here's what to adjust . . .

In Week 2, revise the activity Step Forward If . . . by adding a trigger warning. Depending on how deep you want to start this lesson, give students a heads up that they can opt-out of answering a question if they feel uncomfortable or not ready to share about a certain situation. High school students are typically more open to sharing about themselves, but a warning would be helpful for those who aren't comfortable sharing.

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

Each week has an opening video that shows an example of friendship. Most are connected to the Big Idea, but feel free to replace any of the videos with more relevant pop culture references based on your ministry context and high school students.

REMEMBER

As you teach Week 2, be prepared to unpack what it means to forgive and show grace in certain scenarios. High school students will have most likely gone through conflicts in their friendships. Depending on how deep conversations go, you might want to have resources for students experiencing abuse, have mental health professionals present, and definitely give a heads up to parents and volunteers before teaching this sermon.

HACKS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

REVISE

To make this series more accessible for students with special needs, here's what to adjust . . .

In Week 2, revise the application steps when talking about Showing Grace. Adding concrete examples and calls to action can help students with mental disabilities. This could be through pictures, physical handouts of the action steps, or pair a volunteer with a student to help unpack the application steps a little further.

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

In Week 1, replace Speed Friendship with the activity "VIP." For this activity, students are in small groups of three, and one person is the "VIP" while other people ask three questions about this person. Rotate the person who is the "VIP." Smaller groups might be less intimidating for students with special needs or social anxiety. Have those most comfortable go first, and have a volunteer present to monitor the questions being asked.

REMEMBER

Remember, a student with special needs who is high functioning may feel that they don't have friends because of their neurodivergent behaviors and habits. Each week could bring up painful memories for these students. If while teaching, a student brings something like this up, follow up with your students and walk alongside them to help them process and feel supported.

Remember to include closed captions or auditory illustrations to videos for each week to assist those who are hearing or visually impaired.



WRITTEN & DEVELOPED WITH . . .

Erica Rodriguez is Donor Development Lead at Rescue A Generation, a non-profit organization in San Bernardino, CA. She has been serving in the non-profit sector and local church for seven years. If you'd like to chat with Erica about the best coffee shops in the Los Angeles area, developing relationships with ministry partners, or engaging culture, reach out! She would love to connect with you!

Arnaldo Santiago, Jr is a pastor in Sydney, Australia. Originally from Brooklyn, Arnaldo has made Sydney home where he planted Anchor South West in 2021. He has been in ministry for 18 years in various contexts, places, and roles. When Arnaldo isn't spending time with his awesome kids, he's making sure his dog doesn't eat his bunny Donnie Nacho.

. . . AND THE REST OF THE TEAM!



SERIES DEVELOPMENT & REVIEW: Elle Campbell, Brooklyn Lindsey, David Magallanes, Crystal Quintero, Stephen Switzer, Linda Moon, Arnaldo Santiago, Bianca Quezada, Alex Moss, Amber Gaddis, Matty McCage

MENTAL HEALTH REVIEW: Robert Vore

HACKS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL, AND SPECIAL NEEDS: Mia Harrington, Eddie Witkowski, Liliana Reza, Caleb Maple, Alyssa Roberts, Addison Roberts

GAMES: Jeremiah Herring, Tyler Grant

ONE-MINUTE SERMONS: Elle Campbell, Jose Rodriguez, Erica Rodriguez, Vanessa Serrano Cruz, Damean Easter, The Rescue a Generation Team, Jules Gray, Jeremiah Herring

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VOLUNTEER DEVOTIONAL

REAL

STUDY

If there's one thing that's true about friendship it's this – no one wants to be or have a fake friend. But the fast connections of a social media driven world are tempting. They can lead us to people and places where it's not always easy to see the difference between a courtesy connection and a real friendship. What makes a friendship real?

What causes us to trust others with the most honest parts of ourselves? What makes a friendship fake or disingenuous? You're in a different season of life than the students you lead, but friendship is always a big part of everyone's story. Look at the relationships in the stories you'll be teaching this month and wonder what they might be teaching you.

To get ready for this series, **spend a few minutes reading the stories we'll be teaching students this month.** As you do, think about what God has taught you (and is still teaching you) about friendship through these passages, and how these Big Ideas have been true in your life.

WEEK 1: Real friends choose each other wisely. Psalm 1; Matthew 9:10-13

WEEK 2: Real friends show each other grace. Timothy 1:12-17; Acts 9:1-19

WEEK 3: Real friends comfort each other. Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; John 11:1-45

WEEK 4: Real friends help each other grow. Timothy 6:1-18; Matthew 5:3-12

PRAY

Fake is something none of us want to be. Maybe you've said and done something that didn't communicate your sincerity. And you've felt it from the other direction too, when a "friend" wasn't sincere with you. Like most people, you probably have experienced relationships where it seemed like genuine love and support was lacking. So what do you do? Hide? Quit?

Keep doing the same things hoping for different results? We actually all do a little bit of all of these things . . . because we feel like we've failed or we think someone failed us. What's interesting (and helpful) to know is that God's essence in relationship to us never changes. We can learn from God's relationship with us and others. We can talk to God about showing us our blind spots and ask for help when navigating the path to real friendship.

Which passage of Scripture or Big Idea from this month is most relevant to you right now? Spend a few minutes asking God to show you how you've already grown in this area, plus the next step you need to take in order to keep growing.

GROW

So what's your next step? Do you need to reconsider a relationship that isn't helping you be your most authentic self? Is there someone you need to comfort or offer grace to? What's something you can do to help one of your friends grow? **Whatever your next step is right now, take it. Then help students do the same.**

WEEK 1 TEACHING GUIDE

REAL

BIG IDEA

Real friends choose each other wisely.

BIBLE

Psalm 1; Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 9:10-13;
Proverbs 13:20

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

VIDEO | A Clip from The Big Bang Theory – Sheldon's Friend Flow Chart

- Today we're starting a new series called *Real*, where we're going to be talking about *real* friendships. For some of us, making friends is easy, while for others, it's more of a challenge.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (6:35-9:01) from The Big Bang Theory, where Sheldon creates a flow chart for making friends. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*

ACTIVITY | Musical Speed Friending

- Sometimes it feels like a technical feat to make a new friend, so let's see if we can simplify (and speed up) the process just a little.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this activity, all you'll need is some music! To play, have students stand in two concentric circles, with the same number of students in each circle, facing each other. Once students are standing in their circles, play a song. While the music plays, have the inner circle of students spin clockwise while the outer circle of students spins counterclockwise. When the music stops, have everyone stop spinning, give them an icebreaker question to answer, and give them one minute to have a quick conversation with the person they're facing. When one minute is up, turn the music back on and play again! Keep going until you run out of time or questions. If you need some fun icebreaker questions, check out the free [Grow Games & Icebreakers app](#) or try one of these:*
 - What's one thing you're really into right now?
 - What's the best animal and why?
 - What's something you've done that you're really proud of?
 - If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?
 - What's a food you could eat every day for the rest of your life and never get sick of it?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - What's your favorite fictional friendship and why?
 - What percentage of your friends would you call your "real" friends?

QUESTION | "What is a real friend?"

- Okay, maybe that little exercise helped you strike up a conversation with someone new, but it probably didn't result in a real friendship yet. But **what is a real friend? What do you think?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.
- You might say a real friend is someone who has . . .
 - Been your friend for a long time.
 - Stuck with you through a difficult time.
 - Treated you the way you want to be treated.
 - Helped or challenged you even when it was uncomfortable.
- Maybe some of you can name someone who has been a real friend to you. But I'm guessing there are some of us here today who are still unsure if any of our current friends are "real" friends.
- For the next few weeks, we're going to see if we can discover what a "real" friend really is. As we do, we'll not only discover how we can find more real friends, but how we can be them too.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about a friend who wasn't a good influence on you.

- There are a lot of reasons you might want to be a person's friend. Maybe it's because . . .
 - You think they're cool.
 - They make you laugh.
 - You have similar interests.
 - Or because it's convenient. Maybe you happen to have classes together, live near each other, or have lockers next to each other.
- But these things alone don't necessarily make someone good friend material, right? Some of those things can actually be pretty superficial reasons to be someone's friends.
- A person can be cool, funny, have a lot in common with you, and always be available to hang out, but still:
 - Be unkind, either to you or others.
 - Distract you from what really matters.
 - Pressure you to be something you're not.
 - Influence you to do things you once said you'd never do.
 - Not be a "real" friend.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time you realized one of your friends wasn't a great influence on you (or vice versa). Begin the story by focusing on what you liked about your friendship, or why you wanted to be friends with them in the first place, but then reveal why the friend was harmful.
- So what happens when we realize our friendships are more shallow than we realized? What do we do when we start to suspect the people we call our "friends" aren't exactly the best influences?
- Maybe when you hear my story, it seems like an easy solution. If my friend was a bad influence on me . . .
 - They weren't really a great friend to begin with, right?
 - I should have just dropped them, right?
 - I should have done a better job picking my friends, right?
- Yeah, maybe. Or maybe not.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*

½ **What are some ways a friend might influence you in a negative way?**

½ **When you realize a friend isn't a great influence, what do you think your options are? Which of those options do you think is best?**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 1:1-3

- There's a passage in Scripture that seems to give pretty clear instructions on what to do about a friend who's a bad influence or who isn't making great choices.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 1:1-3.*
- The picture painted by this psalm (which is a song of worship to God) is pretty beautiful. It says we (the "tree") grow healthy and strong when we follow and stay close to God (our source of life and nourishment).
- But before that, this psalm seems to say this growth only happens when we refuse to hang out with the wrong people. The song tells us not to:
 - Walk with the wicked.
 - Stand with sinners.
 - Sit with mockers.
- This is good advice. It's not a great idea to surround yourself with people who aren't good influences or put yourself in situations that are going to lead you down destructive paths.
 - But who, exactly, qualifies as "wicked," or a "sinner," or a "mocker"?
 - Does this mean all our friends have to be basically perfect?
 - Do we have to drop our friends when they screw up?
 - Should we only be friends with people who follow Jesus?

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 9:9-13

- To help us answer those questions, let's see how Jesus approached his own friendships. At first glance, it might seem like Jesus didn't always follow the advice in this psalm very closely.
- When Jesus officially began his ministry, he rounded up a bunch of people and invited them to follow him. One of them was a guy named Matthew, a tax collector.
 - At that time and in that culture, tax collectors weren't known for being great people. Many of them collected more taxes than they were supposed to and kept the extra money. Tax collectors were hated by pretty much everyone. I'm guessing a lot of people called them "wicked" or "sinners."
 - But instead of avoiding all tax collectors, Jesus asked Matthew to join his crew. Then he had dinner with Matthew and a bunch of his "sinner" friends.
 - The religious leaders at the time (who knew Scripture incredibly well, including Psalm 1) were outraged by Jesus' choice of company.
- So why is it that Jesus decided to sit, eat, and spend time with the same kinds of people Psalm 1 said not to go anywhere near?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 9:9-13.*
- Jesus knew spending time with Matthew and his friends wasn't going to turn him into a tax collector who stole money from people. Instead of being negatively influenced by the people he spent time with, Jesus knew he could actually influence others and make a difference.
 - When Jesus asked Matthew to follow him, he knew Matthew was ready to leave his tax collecting ways and start a new life with Jesus.

- When Jesus chose to eat with Matthew's friends, Jesus knew he'd have an opportunity to influence a lot of people at once for the better, like:
 - **THE "SINNERS":** The people Jesus ate with got the chance to experience the real friendship, love, and compassion of Jesus. No, those people weren't perfect, but that's exactly why they needed to spend time with him. Jesus didn't ask them to change who they were or get their lives together before hanging out with him. He made space for them to be real with him. Then Jesus invited them to follow him — not the other way around.
 - **THE DISCIPLES:** Remember, Jesus' disciples were still pretty new to following Jesus. It seems like Matthew had just been recruited that day! By having dinner all together, Jesus was letting his friends know they were going to do things differently. They weren't just going to hang out with perfect people — they were going love God by loving everyone.
 - **THE PHARISEES:** With this dinner, Jesus challenged the religious leaders who were watching everything unfold too. Would they continue treating the people they called "sinners" like outsiders, unworthy of God's love? Or would they start to see people (including themselves) for who they really were — imperfect, but loved by God?
- Jesus wasn't just thoughtlessly hanging out with whoever he happened to meet or whoever was easiest to plan hangouts with. Jesus chose his relationships wisely and, through his example, invites us to do the same.
 - He sought out specific people, like Matthew.
 - He left himself open to befriending new people, like Matthew's friends, and the friends of those friends.
 - He didn't force anyone to be perfect to hang out with him. Instead, he created space for others to be real when they were with him.
 - He didn't let the "sinners" or the religious leaders around him distract him from his mission. Instead, he influenced everyone around him for the better.
- Just like Jesus picked his friends from a place of wisdom and love, we can learn to do the same. Real friends don't have to be perfect, but **real friends choose each other wisely.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ½ **When you're trying to influence a friend in a positive way, how do you think you can avoid being influenced by them in a negative way?**
 - ½ **Have you ever felt like you don't have a lot of control over who you're friends with? When our friendship options seem limited, what could it look like to choose our friends wisely?**

IMAGE | Rip Currents

- If you've ever been to the ocean, you may have seen warning signs about rip currents. These powerful currents pull you quickly away from the shore and out to sea.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** As you teach, show an image of a rip current warning like [this one](#) on screen. This image is provided in your Week 1 folder.
- When you're stuck in a rip current, you have a few options:
 - Let it carry you all the way out to sea — and when it stops, hope someone will be able to help or you'll have the strength to swim back.
 - Try to fight it by trying to swim in the opposite direction — but that's not going to work and will only exhaust you.
 - Or you can exit the current by swimming to the left or right.
- When we find ourselves in a friendship we know isn't influencing us or others for the better, it can feel like we are in a rip current. Maybe the friendship was fun at the beginning, but now we realize it's quickly taking us somewhere we don't want to go and we're not sure what to do. When that happens:
 - You can go with the flow, but where you'll end up might be pretty far from where you were hoping you'd be — and you might need someone to help you get back to a safe place.
 - You can try to fight against the influences that are moving you in the wrong direction. Maybe you're strong enough to counteract those negative influences with a positive influence, but that fight can be pretty exhausting.
 - Or you can take a breath, change direction, and simply swim away from the current.
- When we rethink, adjust, or sometimes even remove ourselves from relationships that are influencing us in a negative way, it doesn't mean we give up on people or turn friends into enemies.
 - Jesus wasn't worried about anyone influencing him negatively because he was God, but you and I are just human. That's why we need wisdom to know when a friendship is taking us somewhere we don't want to go.
 - Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for ourselves and others is to know when a friendship isn't healthy and then do something about it.

RESPONSE | 3 Wise Questions

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Before your teaching time, print and cut the handouts provided in your Week 1 folder. Place one under each seat, along with a pen.
- So how can we choose our friends more wisely? How can we be positive influences in the world without being negatively influenced by others? What do we do if a friendship no longer seems healthy or wise? And what do we do if we feel like this whole conversation is irrelevant because we don't even have very many friends to begin with?
- This week, I want to challenge you to ask three questions.
 - Reflect on these questions by yourself.
 - Talk about them with each other.
 - And then ask someone wise to talk about them with you. Who is someone whose opinion you trust, like an adult, older sibling, or mentor? Do you have a name in mind? Text or reach out to them today and ask if you can ask them a few questions about wise friendships.
- Here are those questions:
 - **HOW ARE MY FRIENDSHIPS INFLUENCING ME?** In which direction are your friendships taking you? Are they pushing you to grow and to know Jesus more? Or are they pulling you away from him and toward things that are destructive or harmful?
 - **HOW AM I INFLUENCING MY FRIENDS?** What impact would your friends say you have on them? Are you just going with the flow in your friendships or are you looking for ways to influence your friends for the better? How are you sharing the *real* love of Jesus with the people around you?

- **HOW CAN I BE MORE WISE WITH MY FRIENDSHIPS?** What new friendships can you make? What current friendships do you need to adjust? What harmful friendships do you need to walk away from? And how can you do each of those things while modeling the love of Jesus?
- Real friendship isn't about being perfect or surrounding ourselves with perfect people. But real friendship should keep you moving in the right direction and help others do the same – toward Jesus. That's why it's so important to remember that **real friends choose each other wisely.**

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **Read Proverbs 13:20. Do you think most people could be considered wise, foolish, or a little bit of both? Why?**
 - **How do you think your friends are influencing you right now?**
 - **How do you think you're influencing your friends?**
 - **This week, what's one way you're going to be wiser with your friendships?**

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends choose each other wisely.

BIBLE

Psalm 1; Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 9:10-13;
Proverbs 13:20

QUESTIONS

- What's your favorite fictional friendship and why?
- What percentage of your friends would you call your "real" friends?
- What are some ways a friend might influence you in a negative way?
- When you realize a friend isn't a great influence, what do you think your options are? Which of those options do you think is best?
- When you're trying to influence a friend in a positive way, how do you think you can avoid being influenced by them in a negative way?
- Have you ever felt like you don't have a lot of control over who you're friends with? When our friendship options seem limited, what could it look like to choose our friends wisely?
- Read Proverbs 13:20. Do you think most people could be considered wise, foolish, or a little bit of both? Why?
- How do you think your friends are influencing you right now?
- How do you think you're influencing your friends?
- This week, what's one way you're going to be wiser with your friendships?

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE *for middle schoolers*

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends choose each other wisely.

BIBLE

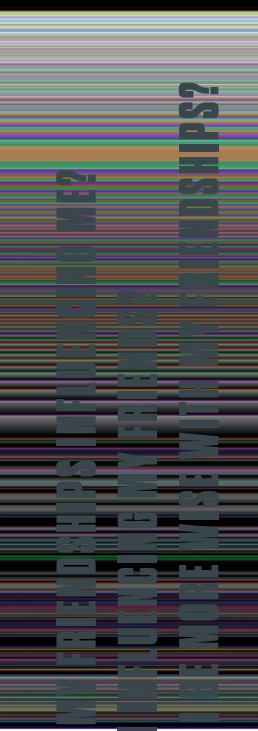
Psalm 1; Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 9:10-13;
Proverbs 13:20

QUESTIONS

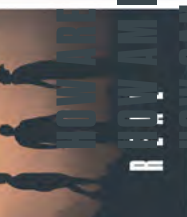
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- What percentage of your friends would you call your "real" friends?
- Read Proverbs 13:20. Do you think most people could be considered wise, foolish, or a little bit of both? Why?
- How do you think your friends are influencing you right now?
- How do you think you're influencing your friends?
- This week, what's one way you're going to be wiser with your friendships?



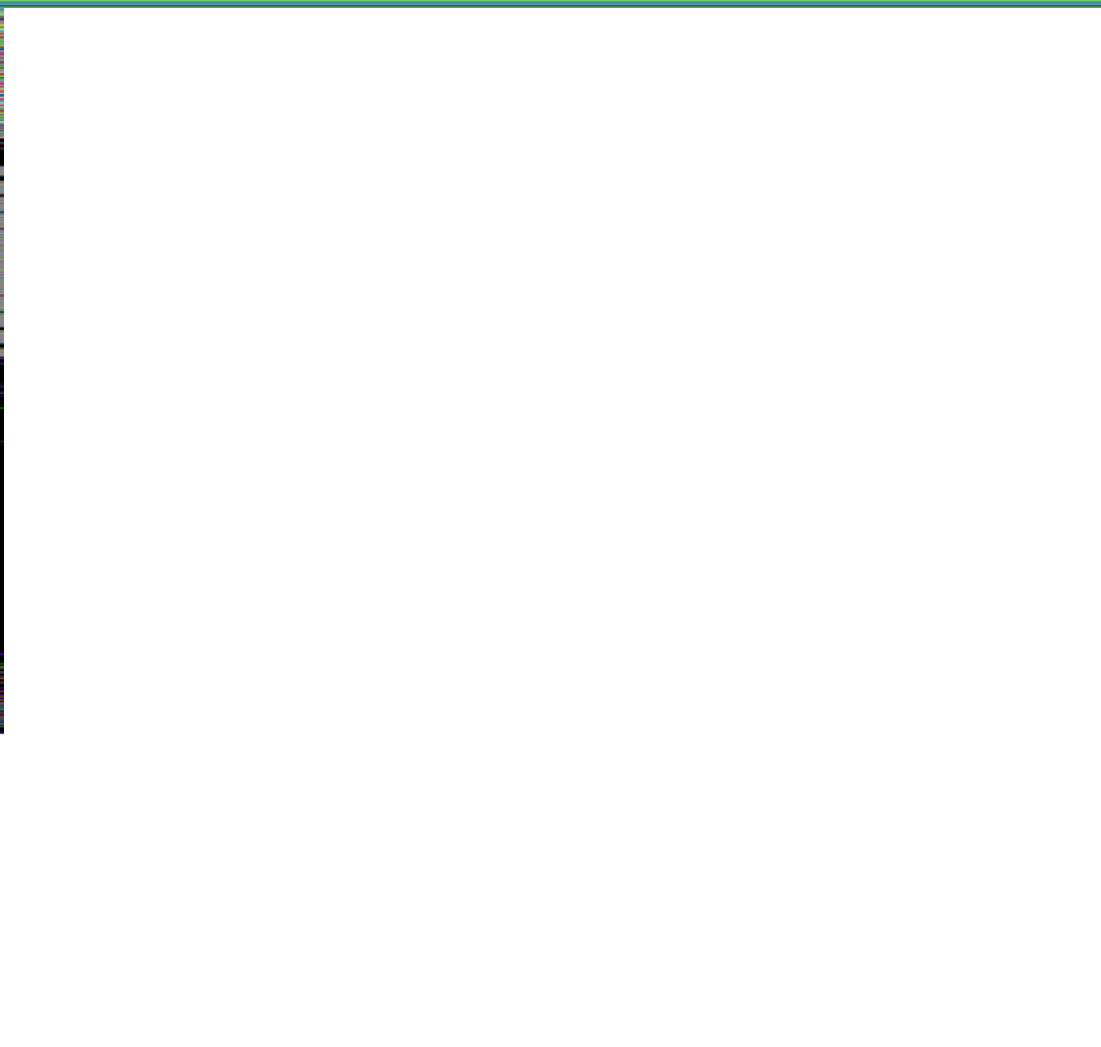
**HOW AM MY FRIENDSHIPS INFLUENCING ME?
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RELY AM I BEING MORE WISE WITH MY FRIENDSHIPS?
HOW CAN I**



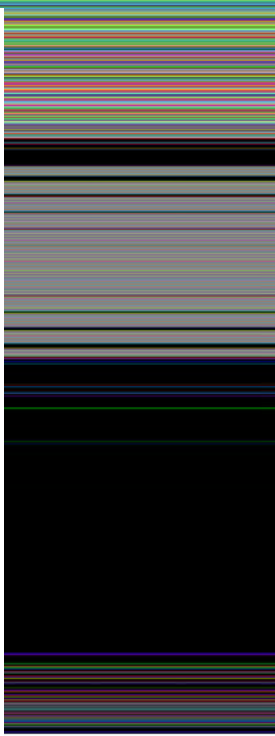
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**HOW AM MY FRIENDSHIPS INFLUENCING ME?
HOW AM I INFLUENCING MY FRIENDS?
RELY AM I BEING MORE WISE WITH MY FRIENDSHIPS?
HOW CAN I**



WEEK 2 TEACHING GUIDE

REAL

BIG IDEA

Real friends show each other grace.

BIBLE

Acts 9:1-19; 1 Timothy 1:12-17;
Proverbs 17:9

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | "Who was a real friend to you this week?"

- Welcome back to *Real*, where we're talking about "real" friendships! To get us started this week, I thought we could take a second to give some shout outs to the people who were real friends to us this past week.
- **So how about you? Who was a real friend to you this week and how?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Give a few students a chance to respond by sharing their stories.*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **What's your favorite quality in a "real" friend?**
 - **What do you think some of the differences are between a real friend and a fake friend?**

VIDEO | A Clip from *Moesha* – A Friendly Pep Talk

- There are a lot of ways to be a "real" friend, but some of the realest friends in my life are the ones who I can always trust to give me a pep talk when I really need it.
- There's this one episode from *Moesha* (a classic 90s-era show), where Moesha and her friends start doing everything they can to try and get the attention of some guys – until Moesha decides it's time for a pep talk.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (7:57-9:06) from *Moesha* where a group of friends give each other a pep talk. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*
- At some point, we all wander a little bit off course and need a friend to help us get back on track. A real friend is someone who isn't afraid to step in and say something that might be hard for us to hear – but to say it with love, compassion, and encouragement.

QUESTION | "When might friends need to have hard conversations?"

- Right now, maybe you're thinking about a time when . . .
 - You had to speak up to a friend.
 - A friend had to speak up to you.
 - You wish someone had spoken up when someone was going off-track.

- Without sharing any personal stories or details, **what are some examples of times when friends need to have hard conversations like these?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.
- Whether it's because someone makes an unwise or dangerous decision, or someone hurts someone else, there are a lot of reasons why friends might sometimes need to have hard conversations with each other.
 - This is who we are as humans, isn't it? We tend to think selfishly, forget our actions and words have consequences, and end up hurting ourselves and others.
 - So what do we do when a friend is messing up? How should we react when a friend tells us we're the ones messing up? And what would it look like for us to show real friendship during moments like this?

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about a time a friend had a hard conversation with you.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time a friend graciously confronted you about something you had done or were doing. Maybe you did something to hurt someone else or maybe you were making a choice that was hurting you. Either way, share how the friend confronted you, why their approach was helpful to you, and what changed as a result.
- When we're the one being confronted, we sometimes try to minimize our problem. But in friendships, when we're making unwise choices or behaving in ways that are hurtful, it has a ripple effect.
 - If you think your choices are only hurting you, they're not — they're hurting the people you love too.
 - If you've hurt a friend, you might think the problem is only between the two of you. But it's not — that hurt impacts the other people in your group of friends too.
- And on the other hand, when we think we might need to confront a friend for their behavior or choices, it can be pretty intimidating and confusing. Depending on the size of the issue, we might wonder . . .
 - "What if they don't listen?" If they don't agree with you or want to change, how might your friendship change?
 - "Is this big enough to end our friendship?" Letting go can feel like a major loss, especially if this friend held a special place in your life.
 - "How can we make things right?" Letting go of a friendship isn't always the only route! But figuring out how to move forward can be a challenge.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - **When there's a problem in your friendships, are you more likely to confront someone, get confronted, or neither? Why?**
 - **½ Have you ever confronted a friend or been confronted by a friend? What happened and how did it end?**

DISCUSSION | Defining "Grace"

- In my friendships, I've been on both sides of this situation from time to time. Sometimes I was the friend who was really in need of grace. Sometimes I was the friend struggling to have grace for a friend who messed up.
- We're going to be talking about this word "grace" a lot today, so let's explore that word a little bit together.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Spend a few moments discussing the idea of "grace" together by letting students share and debate their thoughts. As they discuss, write key words, ideas, and examples on [sticky notes](#) or note cards and display them on a board. Be sure students know there are no wrong answers for these questions!
 - **What do you think "grace" means?**
 - **When should you have grace for a friend?**
 - **Do you think it's ever okay for your grace for a friend to run out? Why or why not?**
 - **Do you think it's possible to end a friendship in a "gracious" way?**
- I think the simplest definition of "grace" is "giving someone a gift they don't deserve." That gift could be:
 - A second chance.
 - Kindness.
 - Patience.
 - Forgiveness.
 - Love.
 - Or all sorts of things!

SCRIPTURE | Acts 9:1-19

- You'll see the word "grace" a lot in the Bible. Sometimes it's an invitation for us to show grace to each other, but even more importantly, the Bible tells us the story of how God has shown grace to you and me.
- Let's take a look at a story in which a man named Saul was shown some pretty incredible grace — both by God and by a man named Ananias.
 - We can find Saul's story in the book of Acts, which is shorthand for *The Acts of the Apostles*. The stories found in this book are all about the actions the earliest followers of Jesus took to help spread Jesus' message after he left earth.
 - Saul, however, did not start off as someone committed to spreading the good news of Jesus. In fact, Saul was actively fighting the spreading of the gospel by imprisoning and even killing Jesus-followers.
 - Ananias, on the other hand, was a dedicated follower of Jesus. He knew Saul's reputation and probably saw Saul as one of his biggest enemies. But let's take a look at what grace can do.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Read Acts 9:1-19.
- There are a lot of things God could have done with Saul in this scenario. Saul could have been blinded forever, or killed, or imprisoned, or punished in some way. Instead, God gave Saul a mission, healed him, and made him a leader in the early church.
 - If you said Saul was unworthy of the grace and forgiveness God gave him in this moment, I wouldn't blame you. But that's the point of grace, isn't it? If we deserved it, it wouldn't be grace!
 - With each and every one of us (Saul included) God went first by showing us grace even when we didn't deserve it. But that's not the end of the story. Like we see with Ananias, God then challenges us to show each other grace in the same way.
- After this moment, Saul went from murdering Christians to following Jesus with his whole life. The grace Saul was shown impacted his life so much that he actually became one of God's greatest messengers. He eventually wrote much of what we now call the New Testament of the Bible. That's how powerful grace can be.

SCRIPTURE | 1 Timothy 1:12-17

- Many years later, Saul (who is also called Paul in other places of the Bible) wrote a letter to a man he was mentoring named Timothy. In that letter, he recounted some of the things he learned from his big encounter with grace.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17.
- When Paul experienced grace from God and Ananias, he didn't take it as a free pass to go and continue doing all the horrible things he had been doing. Instead, he was filled with gratitude. It changed his life.
 - Paul understood that as a recipient of God's grace, he had a responsibility to share that grace with others.
 - In the same way, when we recognize the grace that's been given to us, it becomes so much easier to offer grace to others when they mess up — especially when those people are our friends.
- No friend is perfect (and neither are you). But when someone has messed up or caused someone pain, **real friends show each other grace.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

VIDEO | A Clip from *Raya and the Last Dragon* — Raya Takes the First Step

- In friendships, when someone messes up, either on purpose or by accident, trust is broken. And if you've ever seen the movie *Raya and the Last Dragon*, you might know that broken trust can be difficult to repair.
 - In this story, the character of Namaari messed up in a big way, breaking the trust of the rest of her friends.
 - Toward the end of the movie, Raya has the opportunity to kill Namaari for what she did. But instead, she remembers a story from her past — a story about trust, forgiveness, and grace.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-0:47) from *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the first two minutes of the clip is the end scene where all the characters show each other grace. The last part of the clip is a trailer explaining the storyline. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)
- Instead of killing Namaari, Raya gives Namaari her gem and her trust. As a result, Namaari is given a second chance, and through that second chance, she is able to save their world.
- To some, Namaari seemed hopeless and unforgivable — kind of like Saul did. But when Raya chose to take the first step and extend grace to her friend, it changed everything.

RESPONSE | Take the Next Step

- This week, I'm going to challenge all of us to do something difficult but so worth it: take a step toward grace. Whether you need to give grace, receive grace, or a little bit of both, take that next step today.
 - Send that text message.
 - Have that conversation.
 - Give an apology.
 - Offer some forgiveness.
- What your next step toward grace is depends on you, but here are a few ideas to get you started. Maybe you need to . . .
 - **ACCEPT GOD'S GRACE.** Have you ever had a moment like the one Saul had? Has God's grace ever transformed you from the inside out? If not, today is a great day to begin. Take a step toward Jesus for the first time and find out just how big his love and grace for you really is.
 - **EXTEND GOD'S GRACE.** Have you been holding a grudge against a friend because of something they did? Have you been avoiding or talking about someone because you don't agree with their choices? If so, what would it look like for you to give that person grace — a gift you're not sure they deserve?

- You may not know how to forgive yet, but you can choose to be kind in the meantime.
- You may not know how to forget what happened, but you can tell them how much you would like to keep moving forward.
- You may not be sure what to do about your disagreements yet, but you can ask them to help you understand their perspective.
- **COMBINE GRACE AND TRUTH.** Do you have a friend who is making choices right now that hurt them or others? A real friend is someone willing to do what's uncomfortable by telling the truth — but with lots of love, humility, and (of course) grace. If there is a conversation you've been avoiding or putting off, maybe it's time to have it.
- **ASK FOR GRACE.** If you know you're the friend who's been messing up or causing hurt, maybe it's time for you to reach out and begin to make things right. It's scary to admit you were wrong or to ask for forgiveness, but it's what a real friend would do — and remember, no friend is perfect. Including you.
- **GIVE YOURSELF GRACE.** Friendship is hard work. Owning up to our mistakes is hard work. Calling out someone we love when they're making a mistake is hard work. So as you learn to show each other grace, I hope you'll give yourself some too.
 - You're going to make mistakes.
 - You're going to say things you regret.
 - You're going to hurt or frustrate your friends.
 - You're going to fall short of what God wants for you.
 - And still, there is so much grace — more than you can imagine!
- **So what's your next step?** And what are you going to do about it?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Invite students to take out their phones and add a new one-hour event to their calendar (or set an alarm) called "Take the Next Step." If they already know what step they need to take, tell them to jot some notes in the note section so they don't forget what they want to do when they get that reminder. If they're not sure, they can use that time to reflect and then take a step.*
- We said it last week and we'll say it again this week. Friendship isn't about being perfect — that's never going to happen. But when there is hurt, or mistakes, or unwise choices, real friends choose to do for each other what God has already done for all of us. **Real friends show each other grace.**

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Read Proverbs 17:9.** **When you're in a disagreement with a friend, do you think it's possible to talk about it with others without gossiping? Why or why not?**
 - ½ **Are you struggling to show grace in any of your friendships right now? What would help you extend more grace to them?**
 - **This week, what's one step you're going to take toward more grace in your friendships?**

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends show each other grace.

BIBLE

Acts 9:1-19; 1 Timothy 1:12-17;
Proverbs 17:9

QUESTIONS

- What's your favorite quality in a "real" friend?
- What do you think some of the differences are between a real friend and a fake friend?
- When there's a problem in your friendships, are you more likely to confront someone, get confronted, or neither? Why?
- Have you ever confronted a friend or been confronted by a friend? What happened and how did it end?
- Has a friend ever shown you grace when you messed up? What happened?
- Do you think it's ever okay for your grace for a friend to run out? Why or why not?
- Do you think it's possible to end a friendship in a "gracious" way?
- Read Proverbs 17:9. When you're in a disagreement with a friend, do you think it's possible to talk about it with others without gossiping? Why or why not?
- Are you struggling to show grace in any of your friendships right now? What would help you extend more grace to them?
- This week, what's one step you're going to take toward more grace in your friendships?

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE *for middle schoolers*

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends show each other grace.

BIBLE

Acts 9:1-19; 1 Timothy 1:12-17;
Proverbs 17:9

QUESTIONS

- What's your favorite quality in a "real" friend?
- What do you think some of the differences are between a real friend and a fake friend?
- When there's a problem in your friendships, are you more likely to confront someone, get confronted, or neither? Why?
- Has a friend ever shown you grace when you messed up? What happened?
- Read Proverbs 17:9. When you're in a disagreement with a friend, do you think it's possible to talk about it with others without gossiping? Why or why not?
- This week, what's one step you're going to take toward more grace in your friendships?

WEEK 3 TEACHING GUIDE

REAL

BIG IDEA

Real friends
comfort each other.

BIBLE

John 11:1-45; Jeremiah 8:18
Proverbs 17:17

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | "What's your favorite fictional friendship?"

- Welcome back to *Real*, where we're talking about what it means to have *real* friendships. But since it's not always easy to know what "real-life" friendship looks like, **what's your favorite fictional friendship?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Give a few students a chance to respond.*

VIDEO | A Clip from *Stranger Things* — Dustin and Steve's Handshake

- One of my favorite fictional friendships is the friendship between Dustin and Steve from *Stranger Things*.
 - If you've seen the show, you probably know Steve and Dustin weren't the best of friends in the beginning. But thanks to a series of unlikely (and terrifying) circumstances, a pretty tight friendship developed.
 - Take a look at what happened when they finally saw each other again after some time apart.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-0:37) from *Stranger Things*, where Dustin and Steve see each other for the first time in a long time. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*
- You've probably never battled inter-dimensional monsters with your best friends, but maybe you've seen how shared experiences (both the fun ones and the difficult ones) can bring you closer together.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **What's one of the most fun experiences you've ever shared with a friend?**
 - ½ **Which do you think is better at bringing friends closer together: fun experiences or difficult experiences? Why?**

POLL | Friend Preferences

- When it comes to both fun moments and difficult moments, we all want different things from our friendships. Let's find out some of the ways we're all similar (or not-so-similar) in our friend preferences.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Poll your students by asking the following multiple choice questions. Invite them to respond by either raising their hands, applauding, or moving to different areas of the room that you designate for each option.*
 - **When you're excited about some big news, you want friends who will . . .**
 - Blow up your group text with 300 messages.
 - Go wild on a trampoline with you.
 - Listen intently over coffee.
 - Show up at your house with balloons and confetti.
 - **When you're feeling down, you want friends who will . . .**
 - Make you laugh with their dumbest jokes or memes.
 - Feel every feeling with you.
 - Tell you it's going to be okay.
 - Bring you ice cream or presents or a puppy to snuggle.
 - **When you're stressed out, you want friends who will . . .**
 - Tell you all the reasons you're awesome.
 - Distract you with funny TikToks.
 - Pray with or for you.
 - Check in with you every day.
 - **Yes or no – have you ever needed a friend when . . .**
 - You lost a loved one?
 - You got disappointing news?
 - You were sick or in pain?
 - You were embarrassed about something?
 - You felt like a failure?
- If you've ever experienced any of the situations, you know how powerful friendship can be during the moments when we need comfort.
 - The truth is, life is hard sometimes. As a teenager, you might be juggling the demands of school, sports, clubs, music programs, church, jobs, family, and so much more. It's not easy.
 - When life gets overwhelming, it's okay to want someone to tell you it's going to be okay. Sometimes we all need a *real* friend who makes us feel safe enough to cry, vent, or ask for help.
- But how do we find real friends like that? And how we can be real friends like that?

SO WHAT? *Why does it matter to God and to us?*

STORY | Talk about a time a friend comforted you.

- **INSTRUCTION:** *Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time a friend comforted you when you were weren't okay. What did they specifically do to comfort you? How did that make you feel and help you make it through? What did you learn from their example?*
- When I've been in difficult situations like these, I've sometimes had friends who stuck by my side and went through it with me. When they did, I'm sure I said something like, "I don't know what I would do without you."
- But the truth is, there have also been moments in my life when my friends weren't around or didn't come through. In those moments:

- "I don't know what I would do without you" wasn't hypothetical. I actually had to figure out how to survive those tough times without supportive friends.
- I learned the importance of being the kind of friend who shows up when other people need comfort.
- And I learned how to find comfort from God — the only one who will always come through for me, no matter what.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **What are some of the top reasons people your age might need to be comforted?**
 - **Can you think of a time someone comforted you? What happened and what did they do?**

SCRIPTURE | John 11:1-45

- Maybe it's easy for you to grasp the idea of God comforting you when you're hurting or grieving. But have you ever thought about God hurting or grieving too? Is that even possible?
 - To answer that question, I want to show you a story about an interaction Jesus had with a few of his friends. Maybe you've never really thought about Jesus having friends, but he did! The friends in this story were some of his closest.
 - When the story begins, Jesus is traveling, teaching, and healing people in different cities. But then he gets word his good friend, Lazarus, is deathly sick.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read or summarize John 11:1-45.*
- Clearly, Jesus is no stranger to grief. Not only did he experience it, but he also comforted others while they were grieving too. Jesus comforted his friends . . .
 - **WITH HIS WORDS.** We don't know all the words Jesus spoke to his friends, but we know a few. With his words, he:
 - Reminded his friends to trust God.
 - Prayed with and in front of them.
 - Spoke life-giving words to Lazarus (literally) and to those who were mourning his loss. With his words alone, Lazarus returned to life.
 - **WITH HIS PRESENCE.** Jesus had really important work to do, but he didn't let that stop him from being with his friends while they mourned. Even though returning to Judea was extremely dangerous, Jesus went, because real friends show up for each other.
 - **WITH HIS ACTIONS.** Jesus, of course, knew he was capable of bringing Lazarus back to life. But this didn't stop him from mourning Lazarus' death and the pain his death caused others. Jesus didn't shame anyone for crying. He joined in and mourned along with them — because that's what real friendship does.
- When your friend is in need of comfort, it might feel like a challenge to find ways to comfort them.
 - But with his example, Jesus shows us comforting each other isn't as complicated as we might fear it is.
 - It's not always easy to put yourself in a situation to feel someone else's pain, but Jesus gives us clues.
- And when you could really use some help or comfort but can't seem to find a friend who can give you the support you need, Jesus is the friend who understands and will never let you down.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ½ ● **Can you think of a time you wanted comfort from a friend, but didn't get it? What happened?**
 - **What are some of the ways God can comfort us? Have you ever experienced any of them?**

SCRIPTURE | Jeremiah 8:18-19

- In the Old Testament of the Bible (that's the part that was written before Jesus arrived), there was a prophet named Jeremiah who is sometimes called "the weeping prophet." You see, Jeremiah saw and experienced a lot of heartbreak during his time as a prophet.
 - But the grief Jeremiah experienced was different from the grief we just saw in the story of Jesus and Lazarus. While the death of a loved one is terrible, it's often unavoidable. Death is just part of life.
 - Instead, Jeremiah wept because of the terrible things he saw people do to each other, to God, and to themselves. He wept over the sins of God's people and the consequences they faced because of that sin.
 - One of the consequences God's people faced for their sin was the destruction of their whole city.
- Being a prophet like Jeremiah would have been a lonely job. As a prophet, it was Jeremiah's job to deliver messages from God to God's people — and those messages were often not what people wanted to hear. As a result, Jeremiah would have had to carry much of this burden without the support of a large group of friends. But let's see what Jeremiah says in the midst of all of this hurt.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Jeremiah 8:18-19a.*
- "You who are my Comforter in sorrow." This is how Jeremiah saw God. When Jeremiah was grieving, afraid, and helpless, he cried out to God and trusted God would hear him.
- I don't know what you and your friends are dealing with right now, but I'm guessing someone in your friend group is in need of some comfort — and maybe it's you.
 - If you need comfort, encouragement, kindness, or care, I hope you're getting it from your friends. But if you're not, I hope you know that God is your ultimate source of comfort. When we struggle to find real friendships here on earth, Jesus is always the truest friend we could ever have.
 - If you know someone who needs comfort, encouragement, kindness, or care, I hope you'll learn from Jesus' example and show that person what a real friend could look like.
- Sometimes, you'll be the friend in need of comfort. Sometimes, you'll be the friend who can comfort someone who's struggling. Either way, real friendships are an opportunity for us to love and care for each other the way God loves and cares for us. Because **real friends comfort each other.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

VIDEO | A Clip from *Inside Out* — Sadness Comforts Bing Bong

- When a friend is struggling, maybe because they're grieving, disappointed, overwhelmed, or afraid, it's not always easy to figure out how to comfort them.
 - Sometimes their need for comfort makes us uncomfortable. Because we don't know what to do, we either ignore their pain or try to distract them from it.
 - Maybe sometimes that approach is helpful. But most of the time, our friends don't need us to ignore their pain. They need us to feel it with them.

- If you've seen the movie *Inside Out*, you might remember a scene where this happens.
 - The character Bing Bong was simultaneously mourning the loss of his wagon rocket and coming to terms with the reality that he had been forgotten by a little girl named Riley who he loved.
 - The character Joy unsuccessfully tries to snap Bing Bong out of his pain, while the character Sadness tries a different approach.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-2:15) from *Inside Out*, where Sadness comforts Bing Bong. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)
- Joy tried to quickly move past her friend's pain, but Sadness was ready to feel it with him.
- Like Sadness, we don't need to have the perfect words or a well-planned strategy for comforting someone. When we're willing to show up, be with them, and simply listen, it's often enough.

DISCUSSION | When We Need Comfort

- But can we be honest for a second? When our lives are good, it can be hard to notice when our friends' lives aren't so good. Maybe if there's a big crisis, like a death or illness in their family, we'll know about it.
 - But how many of your friends might be struggling and in need of comfort right now, but you're unaware of it?
 - How many of *you* are struggling and in need of comfort right now, but you haven't figured out how to tell your friends you need help?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Spend a few moments listing situations when teenagers might need comfort from their friends. Encourage both broad answers (grief, stress, anxiety) and specific answers (a breakup, getting cut from a team, scary events in the world). As they discuss, write key words, ideas, and examples on [sticky notes](#) or note cards and display them on a board. Be sure students know there are no wrong answers for these questions!
 - **What are some specific reasons a friend might need comfort?**
 - **How can you know when a friend needs comfort?**
 - **If you are the friend who needs comfort, how can you let your friends know how to support you?**
- So how can we be "real" friends for each other when we need comfort? Let's take a hint from Jesus.
 - **COMFORT WITH YOUR WORDS.** Your words are powerful, but you don't have to prepare a whole speech or write an essay to comfort someone. Simple words like "I'm so sorry," "I'm here," "I love you," and "I'm listening" are often all you need. Simple questions like, "How are you feeling?" or "Do you want to talk about it?" are often even better.
 - **COMFORT WITH YOUR PRESENCE.** Sometimes just your quiet presence can be even more powerful than your words. Your friend may not need advice. They might just need someone to reach out, listen, and remind them they care.
 - **COMFORT WITH YOUR ACTIONS.** When a friend is crying, cry with them. When they're having a hard time, text them, send them a gift, make them a meal, give them a hug, or simply ask them what they need.
 - **POINT THEM TOWARD GOD, OUR COMFORTER.** Like the prophet Jeremiah said, God is our Comforter in sorrow. If you know this to be true about God, then a real friend wouldn't keep that to themselves. When your friends need comfort, remember you're not the only comforter they need. Point them toward Jesus, who understands what they're experiencing better than any other friend ever could.
- And, hey. If you need some extra comfort or support right now, don't be afraid or ashamed to say so. This is the perfect opportunity to let someone in this room know you could use a real friend right now. Don't go home today without saying something.

- I wish I could tell you life with Jesus means a life without grief, loss, disappointment, or stress, but I can't. Even Jesus himself experienced it. But I can tell you this:
 - With God, we have a source of Comfort always available to us.
 - And with Jesus, we have a model for what real friendship can look like here on earth. Like Jesus demonstrated, **real friends comfort each other.**

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ½ **Read Proverbs 17:17. Who's a friend who has your back the way a good sibling would? How do you know they do?**
 - ½ **When a friend needs comfort, what sometimes keeps you from reaching out to them? What could you do differently next time?**
 - ½ **When you need comfort, what sometimes keeps you from letting your friends know you need support? What could you do differently next time?**
 - **This week, what's one way you and your friends can comfort each other like God comforts us?**

WEEK 3

DISCUSSION GUIDE

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends
comfort each other.

BIBLE

John 11:1-45; Jeremiah 8:18
Proverbs 17:17

QUESTIONS

- What's one of the most fun experiences you've ever shared with a friend?
- Which do you think is better at bringing friends closer together: fun experiences or difficult experiences? Why?
- What are some of the top reasons people your age might need to be comforted?
- Can you think of a time someone comforted you? What happened and what did they do?
- Can you think of a time you wanted comfort from a friend, but didn't get it? What happened?
- What are some of the ways God can comfort us? Have you ever experienced any of them?
- Read Proverbs 17:17. Who's a friend who has your back the way a good sibling would? How do you know they do?
- When a friend needs comfort, what sometimes keeps you from reaching out to them? What could you do differently next time?
- When you need comfort, what sometimes keeps you from letting your friends know you need support? What could you do differently next time?
- This week, what's one way you and your friends can comfort each other like God comforts us?

WEEK 3

DISCUSSION GUIDE *for middle schoolers*

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends
comfort each other.

BIBLE

John 11:1-45; Jeremiah 8:18
Proverbs 17:17

QUESTIONS

- What's one of the most fun experiences you've ever shared with a friend?
- What are some of the top reasons people your age might need to be comforted?
- Can you think of a time someone comforted you? What happened and what did they do?
- What are some of the ways God can comfort us? Have you ever experienced any of them?
- Read Proverbs 17:17. Who's a friend who has your back the way a good sibling would? How do you know they do?
- This week, what's one way you and your friends can comfort each other like God comforts us?

WEEK 4 TEACHING GUIDE

REAL

BIG IDEA

Real friends help each other grow.

BIBLE

Mark 9:33-37; 1 Timothy 6:11-18;
Proverbs 27:17

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

VIDEO | A Clip from *Luca* – Alberto Helps Luca

- Welcome to our final week of *Real*, where we've been talking about "real" friendships. In the last few weeks, we've seen a lot of clips from some of our favorite fictional friendships, and today's no different.
 - If you've seen the movie *Luca*, you know this movie is the story of a boy named Luca who is . . . well, he's a sea monster. But when he leaves the ocean for land, his fins turn into legs!
 - Unfortunately for Luca, he doesn't actually know how to use those legs when he finds himself out of the water for the first time.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-1:52) from the movie [Luca](#), where Alberto helps Luca learn to walk. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*
- Okay, maybe you've never needed a friend to teach you how to seem less like a sea monster, but I'm guessing a friend has taught you *something* before, right?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **Which do you like more: learning something new or teaching other people something you know? Give an example!**
 - **What's a fun fact, skill, or habit you've learned from a friend? What's something a friend has learned from you?**

QUESTION | "What's something a friend has taught you?"

- Sometimes our friends teach us by:
 - Helping us learn a new skill.
 - Giving us information we didn't have before.
 - Introducing us to new ideas.
 - Helping us see things in new ways.
- **So what about you? What's something a friend has taught you?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Give a few students a chance to respond.*

ACTIVITY | On-the-Spot Skill Share

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Before your teaching time, find a volunteer or student in your ministry who wants to try to teach you a new skill on the spot (or vice versa). Choose a fairly simple skill that would be fun for students to watch, like juggling, playing a harmonica, solving a Rubik's Cube, or doing a trick with a jump rope. You can either do this live or film a video in advance that you edit down for time. At the end, the people involved should share thoughts like:
 - What was fun about the process.
 - What was challenging about the process.
 - What would have made the skill share more successful.

POLL | "How do you like to learn new things?"

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Poll your students by asking the following multiple choice questions. Invite them to respond by either raising their hands, applauding, or moving to different areas of the room that you designate for each option. And yes, they can answer more than once!
 - **So how do you like to learn about new ideas? Do you like to:**
 - Listen to someone explain it?
 - Have a conversation with someone about it so you can ask questions or debate with them?
 - Research it on your own?
 - **How do you like to learn new skills? Do you like to:**
 - Watch someone's example and then try it on your own later?
 - Try it out with a friend's help?
 - Get professional training?
 - **And although these next few things can definitely teach us things, does anyone actually like to learn by:**
 - Making mistakes?
 - Getting injured?
 - Being yelled at or corrected?
- The idea of learning from our friends might sound fun when we're talking about learning to play pickle ball or ride a hoverboard, or learning everything there is to know about a really niche band only the two of you are into. But learning from our friends gets a little more uncomfortable when you're talking about:
 - The mistakes you've made.
 - The ways you've hurt them.
 - The places in your life you still have room to grow.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about a time a friend helped you grow in a way that was difficult.

- I know tons of people who are funny, easy to get along with, and fun to hang out with. But those aren't the qualities that make someone a "real" friend. For me, real friends are the ones who:
 - Have something to teach me through their example.
 - Are willing to teach me even when it's uncomfortable for us both.
 - And are willing to learn things from me too.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time a friend helped you learn an important lesson, even though it was difficult. Maybe your friend called you out for

something you did, gave you feedback that was hard to hear, or asked you to make a change in the way you were treating them. You might even tell a story about a lesson you learned from a friend's example, rather than their words. Share what they taught you and how they helped you grow.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*

- ½ **What's a lesson you learned recently that was difficult or uncomfortable? How did you learn it?**
- ½ **When someone corrects or challenges you, how do you usually react? Give some examples.**

SCRIPTURE | Mark 9:33-37

- For the last few weeks, we've been talking about some of the ways Jesus modeled real friendship.
 - When he chose to befriend people not everyone would have befriended, Jesus showed us **real friends choose each other wisely.**
 - When he showed to forgive Saul and change his life, he showed us **real friends show each other grace.**
 - When he mourned with his friends over the death of Lazarus, he showed us **real friends comfort each other.**
 - But there's one more story we're going to look at today to see what Jesus can teach us with his example.
- We've talked already about how Jesus recruited twelve people to be his "disciples" — or "students." Jesus had disciples and friends in lots of different cities, but these twelve were the ones Scripture says Jesus specifically chose to be part of his crew. For three years, they did everything together. They were more than just his disciples — they were his friends.
- In those three years, the disciples learned a lot from Jesus.
 - **They learned from Jesus' example.** They watched the way he interacted with them, with others, and with God.
 - **They learned from Jesus' words.** They listened when he spoke to big crowds, to small groups of people, to his family members, and to them — his closest friends.
 - **And they learned from Jesus' correction.** Let's listen in on one of those conversations.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Mark 9:30-37.*
- This story is a little funny, right? I mean, the disciples have been following Jesus for a while now, so they should understand what he's all about — but sometimes, they don't.
 - First, Jesus tries to tell them he's going to die and rise from the dead. This is pretty big news, but they have no idea what he's talking about.
 - Instead of asking Jesus for clarification, they change the subject and start arguing about which of them is the best.
 - Jesus knows exactly what's going on, but gives them a chance to come clean by asking, "So . . . what are you guys talking about?"
- Clearly, the disciples still had some things to learn, so Jesus uses this moment to help them grow by giving them some gentle (but direct) correction.
 - The message Jesus taught his friends here is really important: that God values childlike humility over arrogance and pride.

- But what I want to point out today is less about *what* Jesus taught his disciples and more about *how* he taught his disciples.
- In this conversation, Jesus' friends needed to be corrected. But Jesus didn't make fun of them, embarrass them, or make them feel inferior to him. Because Jesus loved his friends, he wanted to help them grow.
- If we had more time to look at some other examples of moments when Jesus helped his friends grow, we'd start to see some patterns.
 - **Jesus invited them to grow by living what they were learning.** Jesus didn't spend all his time teaching his disciples facts or theories about God that didn't have anything to do with their daily lives. Instead, Jesus showed them how to grow by challenging them to love God and others with their everyday choices.
 - **Jesus invited them to grow in community.** While I'm sure Jesus had plenty of one-on-one conversations with his disciples, most of the interactions we see in the Bible are as a group. That's because we grow best when we have others growing alongside us.
 - **Jesus invites us to be patient while we grow.** It would be great if our spiritual growth had a finish line so we knew when we were all done, but it doesn't. Our growth is never really complete because learning to live out our faith is a life-long process — and that's okay with Jesus. He's patient with us, just like he was patient with his disciples.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ½ **When friends try to correct or challenge each other, what are some of the ways things could go wrong?**
 - ½ **When Jesus corrected his friends, how did he do it so lovingly? What can we learn from his example?**

SCRIPTURE | 1 Timothy 6:11-18

- When Jesus was on earth, he never sat down and wrote a letter to his disciples. But we do have some letters from the leaders of the church who came after Jesus and continued spreading his message all over the world.
 - One of those letters is 1 Timothy, written by Paul (also known as Saul, who we talked about recently) to a young man named Timothy.
 - Kind of like Jesus modeled with his disciples, leaders like Paul often found young leaders to train and mentor, both in the ways of Jesus and in how to be a leader.
- At the end of his letter, Paul leaves Timothy with all sorts of reminders, encouragements, and challenges to help Timothy grow.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read or summarize 1 Timothy 6:11-18.*
- In this letter, Paul helps Timothy grow by encouraging him to:
 - Run away from evil things.
 - Live a life of integrity.
 - Keep growing in his faith.
 - And help others grow too.
- This might be advice given specifically to Timothy, but it's also advice for all of us today. Like Jesus did for his disciples, like Paul did for Timothy, and like Paul encouraged Timothy to do for others, we all have room to grow — and to help each other grow too.

- So when we talk about "real" friendship, we can't forget this part. Even when it's uncomfortable, difficult, or a little bit awkward, **real friends help each other grow.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Read Proverbs 27:17. What are some specific things you and your friends can do to help each other grow?**
 - **If you and your friends are ever not helping each other grow, what do you think you could do to change that?**

6 WAYS TO HELP EACH OTHER GROW

- But how exactly are we supposed to help each other grow? Especially as a teenager, when you feel like you're still figuring out your own life, how can you help your friends grow too?
 - **BE CURIOUS.** You can't help each other grow if you're not sure what's going on in each other's lives. It might feel awkward to ask personal questions. You might worry it's none of your business. But the truth is, your friend is probably waiting for someone to ask them how they're really doing or what they're really going through.
 - **BE A HELPER.** When a friend comes to you looking for advice, you don't have to pretend to have answers or solutions you don't have. Instead, you can use the tools you have to help them find the answers they need.
 - **BE BRAVE.** If you're serious about wanting to help your friends grow, sometimes it's going to take an uncomfortable conversation when a friend needs someone to ask a hard question or give difficult advice. It takes courage to be that kind of friend. But at the same time . . .
 - **BE HUMBLE.** You don't know everything. Even if you're convinced your friend needs someone to call them out, don't forget to entertain the possibility that you don't have the full story.
 - **BE OPEN.** If you want to help your friends grow, be open with them about how you're growing. Share regularly about what you're learning, wondering about, struggling with, or working on. The more you share, the more comfortable your friends will be sharing too.
 - **BE AN ENCOURAGEMENT.** When someone tells us what they love or appreciate about us, it makes us want to work harder on the good things they see in us or encourage us to keep going when we were ready to give up. If there's something you like or appreciate about a friend, tell them! It will make them want to keep growing.
- There are so many ways we can grow alongside our friends! Don't think of this as a complete list. Think of it as a starting point with so many more ideas you and your friends can discover together.

OBJECT LESSON | Give Them Their Flowers

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, prepare a bouquet of flowers. You can either use a single bouquet as a prop, or you can purchase a larger quantity of flowers for students to take and give to each other during your response time.*
- Have you ever heard this phrase, "Give people their flowers"? It's a reminder to tell people why they matter to us while they're still alive, rather than waiting until they're gone to talk about the impact they've made.

- What do you think might happen to your friendships if you decided to acknowledge the ways your friends have already helped you grow? What if you gave your friends their flowers by thanking them for what you've learned:
 - From their example?
 - What you've learned from the words they've spoken?
 - From their willingness to correct or challenge you?

RESPONSE | Thank You for Helping Me Grow

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, print and cut the handouts provided in your Week 4 folder. Place one under each seat, along with a pen. Give students a few moments to write. If you'd like (and you have time) encourage a few students to read their note out loud before giving it to someone in the room.*
- It's not always easy to make real friends, and it's certainly not always easy to be a real friend to others. But with God's words and Jesus' example to follow, I think we have a pretty good head start, don't you?
- This week, I hope you'll take the love Jesus has shown to you and reflect it back on each other. I hope:
 - You'll pay attention to who's influencing you and who you're influencing in return, because **real friends choose each other wisely.**
 - You'll be gracious with each other's mistakes and flaws, because **real friends show each other grace.**
 - You'll reach out and support someone who needs it, because **real friends comfort each other.**
 - And you'll look for ways to help make each other better, because **real friends help each other grow.**

WEEK 4

DISCUSSION GUIDE

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends help each other grow.

BIBLE

Mark 9:33-37; 1 Timothy 6:11-18;
Proverbs 27:17

QUESTIONS

- Which do you like more: learning something new or teaching other people something you know? Give an example!
- What's a fun fact, skill, or habit you've learned from a friend? What's something a friend has learned from you?
- What's a lesson you learned recently that was difficult or uncomfortable? How did you learn it?
- When someone corrects or challenges you, how do you usually react? Give some examples.
- When friends try to correct or challenge each other, what are some of the ways things could go wrong?
- When Jesus corrected his friends, how did he do it so lovingly? What can we learn from his example?
- Read Proverbs 27:17. What are some specific things you and your friends can do to help each other grow?
- If you and your friends are ever not helping each other grow, what do you think you could do to change that?
- What is your biggest challenge when it comes to having friendships that help you grow? How can we help?
- This week, what's one step you're going to take to grow and help others grow in your friendships?

WEEK 4

DISCUSSION GUIDE *for middle schoolers*

REAL

It's easy to spot a fake friend (and even easier to be a fake friend at times), but what's not-so-easy is figuring out how to make and keep friendships that are real. Maybe it's just easier to keep our friendships on the surface. Or maybe we've never seen real friendship in real life before. Or maybe we don't actually know anyone we trust enough to be real with. These days, when "friends" are just a click or a follow away, it's more important than ever to figure out what true friendship really looks like. In this 4-week series, we'll explore the words and stories of Jesus, the disciples, Paul, Timothy, David, and Jeremiah to help us understand what authentic friendship can look like. Together, we'll discover that real friends **choose each other wisely, show each other grace, comfort each other, and help each other grow.**

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

Real friends help each other grow.

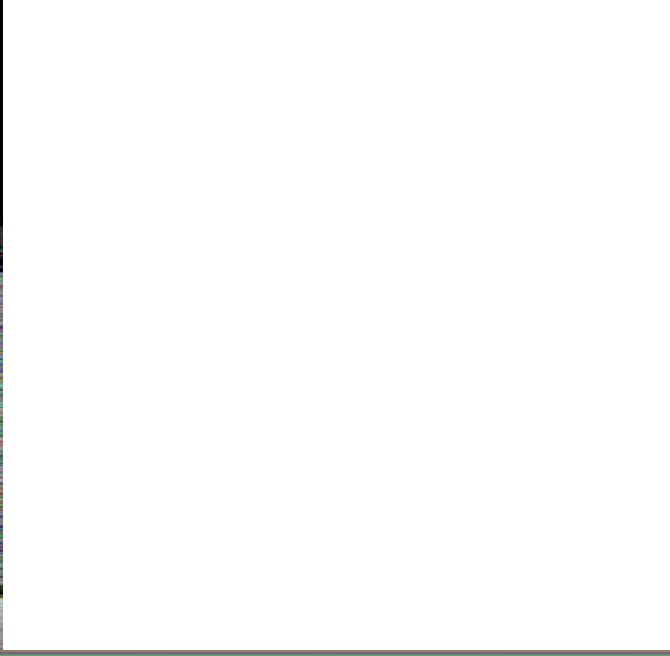
BIBLE

Mark 9:33-37; 1 Timothy 6:11-18;
Proverbs 27:17

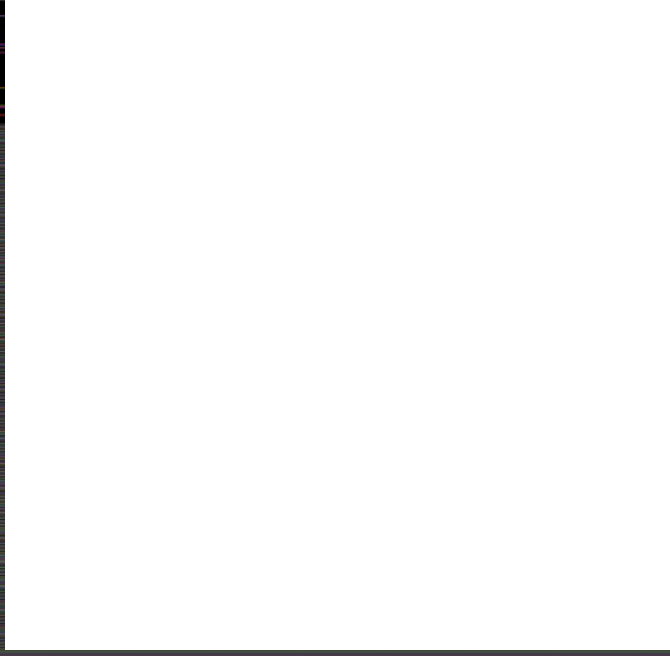
QUESTIONS

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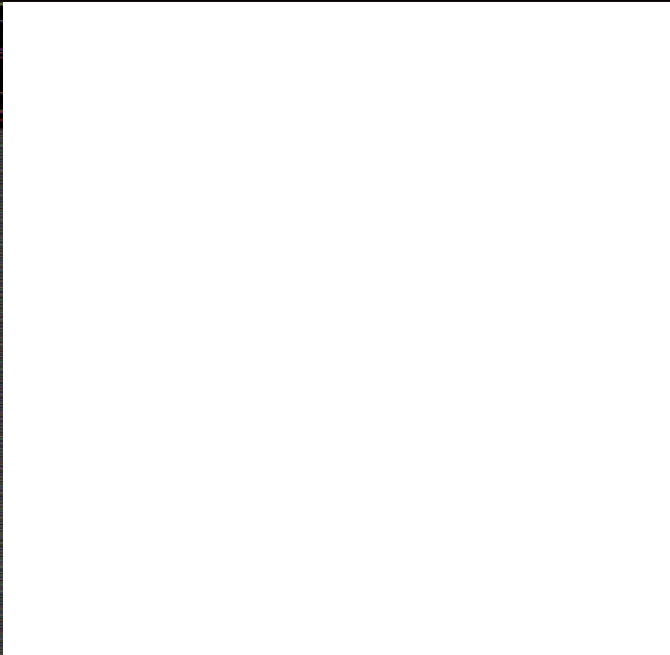
**THANK
YOU FOR
HELPING
ME GROW**



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ONE-MINUTE SERMON SCRIPTS

REAL

ONE-MINUTE SERMONS

After you teach each week, we recommend **filming a video of yourself re-teaching your message in one minute or less**. Then post it on social media! We've written the beginnings of a script for you each week, and we've also filmed complete [One-Minute Sermon Videos](#) for you too, in partnership with [Rescue a Generation](#). Make your own or post ours – whatever you want!

WEEK 1

There are a lot of reasons to be someone's friend. Maybe you think they're cool, they make you laugh, you have similar interests, or it's just convenient. But these things alone don't necessarily make someone good friend material, right? Some of those things can actually be pretty superficial reasons to be someone's friends. A person can be cool, funny, have a lot in common with you, and always be available to hang out, but still not be a great influence. A lot of passages in the Bible seems to tell us pretty clearly not to hang out with people who are bad influences. It's good advice – but then why did Jesus hang out with so many "sinners?" Jesus wasn't just thoughtlessly hanging out with whoever he happened to meet or whoever was easiest to plan hangouts with. Jesus chose his relationships wisely and, through his example, invites us to do the same. Real friends don't have to be perfect, but **real friends choose each other wisely**.

WEEK 2

Have you ever really messed up in a friendship? Maybe you hurt a friend in a big way. Or maybe you were making bad decisions your friend had to call you out on. At some point, we all wander a little bit off course and need a little grace from our friends. I think the simplest definition of "grace" is "giving someone a gift they don't deserve" – like kindness, patience, forgiveness, or a second chance. In the book of Acts, a guy named Saul experienced God's grace in a big way when he was forgiven for doing some pretty terrible things. After God's grace changed his life, he committed his life to giving that same grace to others. In the same way, when we recognize the grace that's been given to us, it becomes so much easier to offer grace to others when they mess up. No friend is perfect (and neither are you). But when a friend messes up or caused someone pain, **real friends show each other grace**.

WEEK 3

Have you ever been in a really hard situation and wished you'd had a friend to comfort you? Maybe you lost a loved one, got disappointing news, were sick or in pain, got embarrassed about something, or felt like a failure. If you've ever experienced any of the situations, you know how important friendship can be during the moments when we need comfort. In John 11, there's a story about Jesus mourning with and comforting his friends after their friend Lazarus dies. In that moment, we see Jesus comfort others with his words, his presence, and his actions. It's a great reminder to not only be comforters to each other, but to also remember that Jesus is the best source of comfort we have. Sometimes, you'll be in need of comfort. Sometimes, you'll be the friend who can comfort someone else. Either way, real friendships are an opportunity for us to love and care for each other the way God loves and cares for us. **Because real friends comfort each other.**

WEEK 4

The idea of learning from our friends might sound fun when we're talking about learning to play pickle ball or ride a hoverboard. But learning from our friends gets a little more uncomfortable when you're talking about the mistakes you've made, the ways you've hurt them, or the places in your life you still have room to grow. In Scripture, we see a lot of stories where Jesus' disciples learned something from him. They learned through his example, through his words, and sometimes through his correction. In Mark 9, it became clear Jesus' disciples still had some things to learn. So Jesus used that moment to help them grow by giving them some gentle (but direct) correction. But Jesus wasn't making fun of them, embarrassing them, or making them feel inferior. Jesus loved his friends and wanted to help them grow. So he did! When we talk about what "real" friendship is, we can't forget this part. Even when it's uncomfortable, difficult, or a little bit awkward, **real friends help each other grow.**

MARKETING CHECKLIST

REAL

BEFORE THE SERIES

✓ TO DO

	Print your Series Promo Poster and Series Promo Cards and display them where families and volunteers can see them.
	Customize your Volunteer Hub and Parent Hub web pages for this series.
	Customize and send the Parent Email for this series.
	Send the Volunteer Email for Week 1 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.
	Review the suggested Social Media Posts and Captions for this series.
	Post the Bumper Video on social media with this caption: We're starting a new series on friendship this week called Real! We'll see you there for a conversation about what "real" friendship really is.

AFTER WEEK 1

✓ TO DO

	Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 1 on social media with this caption: In case you missed it, we talked this week about why it is so important to choose our friends wisely. Here's a recap!
	Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 1 on social media and/or send with this caption: This week, ask these 3 wise questions: How are my friendships influencing me? How am I influencing my friends? How can I be more wise with my friendships?
	Send the Volunteer Email for Week 2 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.

AFTER WEEK 2

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 2 on social media with this caption: In case you missed it, we talked this week about what to do when our friends are in need of a little grace. Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 2 on social media with this caption: Friendship isn't about being perfect – that's never going to happen. But when there is hurt, or mistakes, or unwise choices, real friends choose to do for each other what God has already done for all of us.</p>
	<p>Send the Volunteer Email for Week 3 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.</p>

AFTER WEEK 3

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 3 on social media with this caption: In case you missed it, we talked this week about the importance of friends comforting each other during tough times. Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 3 on social media with this caption: God is our Comforter in sorrow. If you know this to be true about God, then a real friend wouldn't keep that to themselves. When your friends need comfort, remember you're not the only comforter they need. Point them toward Jesus.</p>
	<p>Send the Volunteer Email for Week 4 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.</p>

AFTER WEEK 4

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 4 on social media with this caption: In case you missed it, we talked this week about how our friendships should challenge us to keep growing. Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 4 on social media with this caption: What do you think might happen to your friendships if you decided to acknowledge the ways your friends have already helped you grow? What if you gave your friends their flowers now by thanking them for what you've learned from them?</p>
	<p>Get ready for the next series!</p>

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS & CAPTIONS

REAL

Need some help deciding what to post on social media before and during this series? Here's our suggestion: each week, share the media we've provided in your Graphics and Videos folder using the captions below.

BEFORE THE SERIES



BUMPER VIDEO

We're starting a new series on friendship this week called Real! We'll see you there for a conversation about what "real" friendship really is.

AFTER WEEK 1



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 1)

In case you missed it, we talked this week about why it is so important to choose our friends wisely. Here's a recap!

AFTER WEEK 2



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 2)

In case you missed it, we talked this week about what to do when our friends are in need of a little grace. Here's a recap!



BIG IDEA (WEEK 1)

This week, ask these 3 wise questions: How are my friendships influencing me? How am I influencing my friends? How can I be more wise with my friendships?



BIG IDEA (WEEK 2)

Friendship isn't about being perfect – that's never going to happen. But when there is hurt, or mistakes, or unwise choices, real friends choose to do for each other what God has already done for all of us.

AFTER WEEK 3



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 3)

In case you missed it, we talked this week about the importance of friends comforting each other during tough times. Here's a recap!

AFTER WEEK 4



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 4)

In case you missed it, we talked this week about how our friendships should challenge us to keep growing. Here's a recap!



BIG IDEA (WEEK 3)

God is our Comforter in sorrow. If you know this to be true about God, then a real friend wouldn't keep that to themselves. When your friends need comfort, remember you're not the only comforter they need. Point them toward Jesus.



BIG IDEA (WEEK 4)

What do you think might happen to your friendships if you decided to acknowledge the ways your friends have already helped you grow? What if you gave your friends their flowers now by thanking them for what you've learned from them?

What We're Teaching



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What We're Teaching



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What We're Teaching



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