

5 WAYS TO FORM CHARACTER AND
CULTIVATE LIFELONG DISCIPLESHIP

FAITH

BEYOND

YOUTH

GROUP

KARA POWELL
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This book is dedicated to our ministry mentors who embodied deep character, giving us living pictures of Faith Beyond Youth Group:

Mike and Kristi DeVito

Kitty Ganzel

Hal Hamilton



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CHARACTER

More Than an Outdated Catchphrase

“‘We just have to make it to Friday night youth group.’ That’s what the girls in my small group text each other. And me.”

That was how one small group leader described the youth group’s impact on the eleventh-grade girls she mentored. The other five volunteers sitting on folding chairs in the center of the youth room nodded in agreement.

I (Kara) could see why this youth group was a refuge. During our research team’s site visit, I sensed it too. The worship music was simple, but the student musicians seemed sincere and passionate about their relationship with Jesus. The youth pastor didn’t talk *at* the kids but *with* the kids, authentically discussing the highs and lows of his faith journey. There was ample time to process afterward in small groups led by an ethnically diverse volunteer team. The groups often ran past their designated end time—a good sign of deepening community. Students showed up early and stayed late because they wanted to be with each other and the adults who poured into them week after week.

This youth pastor and volunteer team were proud of how much students loved their Friday nights together. And rightly so. The spiritual oasis they'd created inspired our team of researchers—all of whom are current or past youth leaders. But then we started to wonder, *What about the rest of the week?*

Our question echoes those we've heard from youth leaders like you . . .

- How does what we teach teenagers actually improve their lives and the lives of those around them?
- What do we do in our ministries that truly forms the faith of students?
- How can we measure the effectiveness of youth discipleship?
- Why do so many students act one way in youth group and another everywhere else? How can we close that gap?
- How can we help students understand that following Jesus is more about being “for” what is good than being “against” certain elements of culture?
- How can we do any of this well when we get so little time with students in our ministries and communities?

By “youth group,” we mean the teenagers in your youth ministry, your weekly gathering, and/or an umbrella term for your youth ministry. Since different leaders and faith traditions use some or all of these definitions, we likewise do the same.

Whether your youth group meets for forty-five minutes on Sunday mornings, two hours on Sunday nights, ninety minutes on Wednesdays, or five hours on Friday evenings, that's only

a small fraction of a young person's week. *How do teenagers fare the other days? And not just the rest of their week but the rest of their lives?*

If you're like us, you want kids to not only feel different during youth group but also *be* different both before and after.

Unfortunately, it's not clear that youth group as we know it makes an immediate or lasting difference. Regular participation in religious services lowers rates of teenage depression and drug usage and raises levels of academic achievement, happiness, and forgiveness.¹ But it's also been found to decrease young people's sense of overall well-being and the quality of their parental relationships.²

While spiritual and religious activity under age eighteen seems to slightly increase the odds of faith lasting after youth group,³ a compilation of studies indicates that about 40 to 50 percent of youth group kids drift from God and the faith community after graduation.⁴

In the longer term, adults who attended church as a child are twice as likely to read the Bible and 50 percent more likely to pray during a typical week as those who didn't. But that same study found that adults who were churched as young people had similar beliefs as adults who grew up unchurched.⁵

When we combine this information with estimates that over one million teenagers leave the faith annually,⁶ it's easy to get discouraged. It's also understandable that we hear so many leaders say they want to quit.

Approximately 42 percent of full-time US pastors have considered quitting ministry in the last year.⁷ In a parallel study of full-time youth leaders, that figure hovered at a similar 41 percent.⁸ Given this widespread pastoral discouragement, we can't help but wonder if in addition to the pressures of the

pandemic, political division, racial unrest, economic struggles, and church conflict, there's another reason so many leaders feel like throwing in the towel.

When we feel burned out, it may be because we're working too much. But one recent employment study indicates that while burnout may be due to too much work, it's often also the result of *too little impact*.⁹

Did you catch that?

Burnout happens when we feel like our work doesn't matter.

There's not a youth leader among us who hasn't felt this way, particularly on the heels of having to constantly pivot as our world and young people continue to change. In fact, it feels like every time we meet with youth leaders, we hear them say things like,

"We definitely have some amazing students, but so many others are spiritually lethargic."

"I'm working more than ever, and it's not making a difference."

"I'm so tired."

"None of my kids come anymore."

"No one cares about what I'm doing."

No wonder we're all exhausted.

We see you.

We hear you say you're doing everything you know how to do to minister to young people.

We agree it's not working.

That's because if teenagers' faith is just a youth group faith, it's too small to captivate their entire week . . . let alone their entire lives. What teenagers need is a relationship with Jesus that changes not just ninety minutes of their week but 100 percent of their lives.

To unwrap young people's full potential, maybe it's time we reorient our focus to one game-changing gift: *character*.

Rediscovering Character in Scripture

Character can be a loaded term. For some of us, the word is filled with baggage because of how it has been used to get us to conform to a certain set of standards. It's inseparably tied to morality. For others, character feels dated, like something that was valued in a bygone era by our grandparents but is not necessary now. Others of us might primarily associate character with elementary school curriculum that tries to instill qualities like honesty, forgiveness, and resilience in kids.

Still others might associate character with a set of spiritual rules to follow and behaviors to avoid. When we come from traditions that emphasize purity, holiness, piety, or other versions of strict norms that feel more like control than "freedom in Christ," it's understandable that mentions of character can make us bristle.

Based on a comprehensive review of character from Scripture, our research team defines *character* as:

Living out Jesus' goodness every day by loving God and our neighbors.

When we say "our team" and "our research team," we're referring to the incredible staff at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), where we serve alongside committed team members who care deeply about turning research into resources that equip adults who influence young people to live faithfully. FYI is also the backbone organization for TENx10, a national collaboration that seeks to make faith matter more for ten million young people over the next ten years, in the spirit of John 10:10. To find out more, visit FullerYouthInstitute.org and TENx10.org.

We believe we can rediscover how Scripture keeps character and faith integrated rather than either obsessing over rules or separating spirituality from the rest of life. If faith is what is believed, then character is faith lived out in real time.

Character in the Old and New Testaments

From the earliest verses of the Old Testament, it is clear that God values character. Despite their flaws, our early Bible protagonists are often recognized for their flashes of character.

In a time of wickedness, Noah finds favor in the eyes of God and is saved from the flood because of his righteousness.

When God chooses David—a leader who later uses his power egregiously—God tells Samuel, “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

As a young person herself, Esther courageously steps forward to advocate for her Jewish people during the Persian diaspora “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

In the New Testament, when God becomes incarnate and chooses to live among us, Jesus embodies God’s character. Jesus models character for his followers and teaches explicitly about character on multiple occasions, perhaps most famously in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus calls his followers to live according to the future kingdom in the present world.

From the earliest days of Jesus’ ministry, love is what marks his followers. In John 13:35, Jesus teaches, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Of all the options Jesus could use as the metric for his success, he chooses love—a virtue. He spends three years loving his disciples and teaching them how to do the same.

By focusing on character, Jesus instills his discipleship DNA in his friends. His identity shapes theirs. By forming a community with his twelve closest apostles, he gives his followers a place to belong that reinforces the character he is forming in them. He then sends them out into the world with a clear mission to do what he did—to love God and others and, through that love, make disciples.

Only one out of Jesus' twelve apostles leaves the community he formed. The eleven apostles who stay, plus a number of other men and women close to Jesus, consistently demonstrate their character and faith throughout their daily lives.

The New Testament epistles also wrestle with how the early church should live—and so much of this is about character.

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3–5)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Gal. 5:22–25)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col. 3:12–14)

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

Across the Scriptures, character lies at the core of being Christian.

Talking about Character Today

Many of us look not only to Scripture but also to other wise voices to understand character. Here are some of the ways others have described character as well as *virtue*, a word often used to describe specific character qualities.

"In justice is summed up the whole of virtue." —Aristotle¹⁰

"[Character is] a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness." —David Brooks¹¹

"[Character is] choosing what is loving and right, cultivating the habits of virtue so that they may become natural, or second nature." —Amy Peterson¹²

"[Character is] the pattern of thinking and acting which runs right through someone, so that wherever you cut into them (as it were), you see the same person through and through." —N. T. Wright¹³

"Character is revealed in how well we love." —Rich Villodas¹⁴

How do today's teenagers describe character? One diverse group of students landed on "How you describe yourself" and "Who you are . . . mostly." We thought the inclusion of "mostly" was particularly insightful, because these young people recognized that none of us are consistent everywhere all the time.

A seventeen-year-old young woman reflected, "Character is who someone is deep down, the way that they treat other people, and the way that they carry themselves." And an eighteen-year-old young man summed up, "Simply put, character is the thing

that separates you from a stereotype.” He went on to share, “I think character can often be overlooked, because people don’t see the other parts of someone outside their stereotype. I do think that there are people who present their character more. It takes bravery not to hide within a stereotype. People don’t develop character as much as they learn to let people, including themselves, see it more.”

Is Forming Character the Same as Forming “Good Kids”?

To be clear, forming character is not about trying to manipulate young people into behaving a certain way so that they can earn God’s love (or ours!). It’s also not about trying to form “good kids,” an expression we’re quite confident you’ve heard before—likely at your own church.

In one congregation I (Jen) served, our high schoolers led worship every year on Youth Sunday. At the end of Youth Sunday, parishioners would inevitably tell me, “We have such good kids.”

They were right. We had *good* kids.

The problem is the goal of Christian formation isn’t just to make good kids. It’s to form disciples with the character of Christ. While good kids and disciples with Christlike character are related, they aren’t the same.

Good kids are generally nice people, particularly when they’re on display.¹⁵ Teenagers with Christlike character do the right thing even when no one is watching.

Good kids don’t question what grown-ups in their lives expect. Teenagers with Christlike character sometimes question (or even defy) others’ expectations in order to live out Jesus’ command to love God and others.

Good kids don't bully others. Teenagers with Christlike character confront bullies. Like Jesus, they use their voices to advocate for those on the margins.

Good kids get involved in causes because they long to make the world a better place (while also beefing up their college résumés). Teenagers with Christlike character get involved in causes because that's what following Jesus compels them to do (whether or not it looks good on their college résumés).

Good kids stay out of trouble. Teenagers with Christlike character sometimes get into "good trouble," the kind of holy trouble Jesus made when he confronted powerful people and systems of oppression.¹⁶

Two of the primary differences between good kids and teenagers with Christlike character are action and motivation. That's why we define *character* as *living out* Jesus' goodness every day by loving God and our neighbors.

Character is what extends faith beyond youth group. It's what we want our *good* youth group kids to take with them when they leave church so that wherever they go and whatever they do, they reflect and imitate Jesus. They're still generally good kids—but so much more.

Faith Beyond Youth Group

I (Jen) first met Ryan when he was a fourteen-year-old freshman at the church where I'd just started serving. Ryan was a tall, lanky teenager who was the quintessential *good* youth group kid. He went on to graduate as valedictorian of his high school class and become an Eagle Scout. His family was a pillar in our faith community, and Ryan was a regular at youth group gatherings. Regardless of what topic we were ex-

ploring, Ryan engaged—mostly by questioning everything I said.

Eventually, Ryan became part of our student leadership team, where he was instrumental in starting an end-of-the-year youth group banquet. At this banquet, student leaders affirmed each of their peers for their character—for the ways they lived out Jesus’ goodness inside and outside youth group.

When he was seventeen, Ryan was a part of a mission trip to Rwanda, during which he visited a refugee camp. There, Ryan interacted with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo who had been in the camp for almost two decades. He heard (and saw) how they lacked healthcare and dental care. Before we left the camp, Ryan said he had found his life’s purpose: he was going to become a dentist and return to the camp to care for refugees.

Now, a lot of young people utter a lot of well-intentioned words at the end of mission trips. But when Ryan says something, he follows through. He’s now twenty-eight years old and a dentist with the US Navy.

When I recently saw Ryan, he recounted how difficult it was to serve in the military during COVID. Upon seeing how demoralized his colleagues were, he decided to do something about it. Ryan asked for a budget and set up a room on the ship where sailors could go to “find someone like them so they could belong.” He led a book club. He started a series of fitness challenges. He created the equivalent of a Navy yearbook that affirmed his fellow sailors.

When he talked about his experience leading his colleagues through a global pandemic, he described how he relied on the Christlike character he had formed during youth group. Just as he had wanted his youth group friends to belong at

the end-of-the-year banquet, he now wanted his fellow sailors to belong. He used the virtues of compassion, humility, and love—all of which were modeled and reinforced in our church—to tangibly care for those stationed on the ship with him.

Ryan has taken his faith with him to Japan, Australia, Spain, and many other places. As he makes decisions that allow him to practically love others across the globe, he consistently demonstrates his Christlike character.

And as for his dream?

Ryan hasn't made it back to that refugee camp.

Yet.

But he's pursuing a special classification within the Navy that will enable him to be part of the healthcare teams deployed by the military after global disasters. He is doing so because he still believes that compassionately loving others is his God-given purpose.

Like Ryan, the young people in your ministry want to see adults who authentically live out a faith that matters. They want to experiment with, figure out their relationship with, and feel out their commitment to a faith that can make a difference in who they are and how they relate to our world. Otherwise, they don't want it.

In short, they want a *faith beyond youth group*, which we unpack in the rest of this book and define as *Jesus-centered character that matters every day*. They want a faith that demonstrates not only that Christianity is true but also that Christianity is good.

We know you want that kind of faith for the young people you care about most. Every page of this book is geared to expand your missional imagination and equip you with practical

ideas so that young people leave your ministry with faith beyond youth group.

We believe in you and know you can do it. We are with you and cheering for you.

And for young people.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Early on in this chapter, we asked, “What do we do in our ministries that truly forms the faith of students?” How would you answer this question?
2. Burnout is often the result of too little impact. When have you wondered if you’re making too little impact? What compels you to stay in ministry even when you don’t see a lot of impact?
3. We propose that “if teenagers’ faith is just a youth group faith, it’s too small to captivate their entire week . . . let alone their entire lives.” How would a faith beyond youth group captivate young people’s entire week and entire lives?
4. Our research team defines *character* as “living out Jesus’ goodness every day by loving God and our neighbors.” How does this definition compare to how you have previously thought about character? How would you contextualize it for your ministry?
5. To you, what is the difference between “good kids” and teenagers with Christlike character?
6. Why did you pick up this book? What are you hoping to gain through reading it? Think about the best ways

you tend to process content and form action steps. Is it marking up the book? Journaling alongside your reading? Processing with a colleague or your ministry team or with a leader from another church? Whatever works for you, put it in motion starting now!