



JUNIOR HIGH GROUP STUDY

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

KARA POWELL
General Editor



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Contributing writers: Kara Powell, Ph.D.; Gregg Farah; Chap Clark, Ph.D.;
Donna Fitzpatrick and Siv Ricketts.

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How to Use the *Uncommon* Junior High Group Studies

Each *Uncommon* junior high group study contains 12 sessions, which are divided into 2 stand-alone units of 6 sessions each. You may choose to teach all 12 sessions consecutively, or to use just one unit, or to present each session separately. You know your group, so do what works best for you and your students.

This is your leader's guidebook for teaching your group. Electronic files (in PDF format) of each session's student handouts are available online at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/. The handouts include the "Reflect" section of each study, formatted for easy printing, in addition to any student worksheets for the session. You may print as many copies as you need for your group.

Each individual session begins with a brief overview of the "big idea" of the lesson, the aims of the session, the primary Bible verse and additional verses that tie in to the topic being discussed. Each of the 12 sessions is geared to be 45 to 90 minutes in length and is comprised of two options that you can choose from, based on the type of group that you have. Option 1 tends to be a more active learning experience, while Option 2 tends to be a more discussion-oriented exercise.

The sections in each session are as follows:

Starter

Young people will stay in your youth group longer if they feel comfortable and make friends. This first section helps students get to know each other better and focus on the theme of the lesson in a fun and engaging way.

Message

The Message section enables students to look up to God by relating the words of Scripture to the session topic.

Dig

Unfortunately, many young people are biblically illiterate. In this section, students look inward and discover how God's Word connects with their own world.

Apply

Young people need the opportunity to think through the issues at hand. The apply section leads students out into their world with specific challenges to apply at school, at home and with their friends.

Reflect

This concluding section of the study allows students to reflect on the material presented in the session. You can print these pages from the PDF available online at www.gospellight.com/uncommon_jh_the_christian_life.zip and give them to your students as a handout for them to work on during the week.

Want More Options?

An additional option for each section, along with accompanying worksheets, is available in PDF format at www.gospellight.com/uncommon_jh_the_christian_life.

UNIT I

The Basics of Christianity

Brad got in trouble with your church's security guard . . . again.

Davison punched a hole in your youth room wall.

Teresa ditched her small group.

In the midst of this chaos, you tried to teach about the difference between creation and evolution. Now you're driving home, battling with the same old weekly question: *What difference did that last 90 minutes with those junior-highers make in their lives?*

Here's the great paradox of junior high ministry: We find out later that the junior-highers heard, observed and processed much more information than we ever thought possible! As many of us who work with this age group are well aware (even though we sometimes forget), there is much more to each of these young souls and minds than what we see during the Sunday morning and weekly meetings.

They are emerging as thinkers. They are constantly changing and being challenged by life, friends, love and parents, and they want to know what God has to say about it all. Thus, even though we may feel that our lessons are bombing, an emerging axiom of junior high ministry is that we must teach these early adolescents how to reflect theologically as followers of Jesus Christ.

They *are* capable, if only in short little blips, of interacting with Scripture, of wrestling with God, and of deep, intimate relationships with the One who loves them best. Allow me to suggest three goals for every time you teach your junior-highers:

1. *To build young theologians.* This sounds far more ominous than it really is. We build young theologians simply by teaching our students that God cares about them, their lives and their world, *and* that He passionately wants to communicate to them through His Word and the Holy Spirit. There are no areas of their lives that can (or should) be fenced off from their relationships with Christ.

2. *To bring the Bible to life.* The Bible is not just about stories and rules, but is a comprehensive love letter through which God speaks to the souls of each of us—even junior-highers. When we teach our students how to meditate on the Word of God and how to look for the living God within its pages, they will be able to see the Christian faith as something that actually makes a difference in their day-to-day lives.
3. *To help them share their faith.* The primary task of youth ministry—or ministry to any age group—is to draw students into a personal, trusting faith in Jesus Christ. As youth leaders, our task is not about classes or programs or games, but about seeing God connect with our students in a way that changes them forever. Of course, that is not our task alone; it is our students' task as well.

As your students experience that “aha!” moment of understanding the basics of Christianity, they will want to invite their friends to experience the incredible ride of following Christ. The things we do—the fun, the interaction, the teaching—are simply tools to bring students like Brad, Davison and Teresa to a place of warm interest and wild devotion to the God who has come for them.

Good theology does that!

Chap Clark, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Youth, Family and Culture
Director of Youth Ministry Programs
Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA



SESSION I

GOD THE FATHER

THE BIG IDEA

God is our heavenly Father and loves us no matter what we do.

SESSION AIMS

In this session, you will help students to (1) learn what Luke 15 teaches about the Father's "no matter what" love; (2) understand that their heavenly Father loves them at all times and in all places; and (3) respond by identifying one way in which remembering their Father's love will help them feel okay about themselves this week.

THE BIGGEST VERSE

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

OTHER IMPORTANT VERSES

Luke 12:6-7; 15:11-32; John 13:34-35; 17:23; Romans 8:38-39

Note: Additional options and worksheets in 8¹/₂" x 11" format for this session are available for download at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/jh_the_christian_life.zip.

STARTER

Option 1: Super Sing Off. For this option, you will need a list of this week's "Top-20" songs from your community's most popular contemporary radio station.

Greet students and introduce this new series to them. Then explain that they're going to have a "Super Sing Off." Divide students into two teams based on what kind of shoes they're wearing. (*Note:* Because we don't know what kind of shoes your students will be wearing, you're going to have to make this call—maybe by whether or not they have shoelaces, or tennis shoes versus everyone else, or something even more relevant to your own students.)

Explain that you will yell a word or phrase and then point to one of the two teams. Someone from that team must run to the front of the room and lead his or her team in 10 seconds of a song that has that word or phrase in it. Secular songs, worship songs and commercial jingles are all fair game. After the song is sung, that person sits down. Then you point to the second team and they likewise have one person run forward to lead in a song with the word you yelled out. This goes back and forth until one team gets stumped, at which point you award points to the other team and yell the next word.

The words, in their recommended order, are as follows:

- rock
- car (or a type of car)
- any number
- arm (or hand)
- any color
- love

When you're finished with all six words, congratulate the winning team. Then read some song titles from the Top-20 list and ask: *What are the most popular themes in these song titles?* Hopefully, love will be one of the first things mentioned, but if not, introduce it yourself and then begin a discussion based on these questions:

- Why are love and relationships such common themes?
- What does this say about what people want?
- Where do people tend to look to find love?
- How long does that kind of love last?

Transition to the next step by explaining that in this session, you'll be exploring the most perfect type of love that could possibly exist, the only kind of love that can meet our ultimate need for love, forever.

Option 2: Infomercial. For this option, you will need a three-minute video clip of an infomercial, a way to play the clip and a copy of *TV Guide*. Before the meeting, get hold of three minutes of the corniest infomercial you can find (you can find many clips on YouTube or Google video). Watch the clip and come up with 10 trivia questions, such as, “What color watch was the woman wearing?” or “What did they offer after the promise: ‘But wait, there’s more?’”

When the meeting begins, welcome students and explain that you are launching a new series today. To kick it off you need three volunteers who like to watch television. Gather the volunteers in the front of the room and explain that you’re going to play three minutes of an infomercial for them. They need to pay attention, because afterward you are going to be asking them trivia questions. If any of the three contestants knows the answer to the question, he or she should raise his hand and then give his or her answer once you call on that person.

Watch the clip, and then begin the trivia game. If the student raises his or her hand before you finish reading the question, immediately stop reading and have him or her give the answer. If the answer is wrong, continue to read the question and ask one of the other volunteers to respond. If none of the contestants has the right answer, ask the audience. After all 10 questions have been answered, give the winning contestant a copy of *TV Guide* as a prize.

Ask the group to name some of their favorite infomercials or commercials. Then ask, “What is the purpose of commercials?” Then suggest that the ultimate focus of commercials is that they are trying to help people feel loved. Advertisers sell things such as acne cream to make your skin glow or a gym membership to cause the girls to flock to your buff, 13-year-old body.

Explain that today you are going to study something that isn’t advertised on television but can meet everybody’s need to feel loved. You can’t order it from television, but you can walk away with it today for free.

MESSAGE

Option 1: Prodigal Drama. For this option, you need a Bible. Ask for seven volunteers, and then assign the volunteers the following roles: father, older son, younger son, two pigs and two servants. (Make sure that the student you assign as the younger son is fairly dramatic and self-confident.) If you have fewer than seven students, ask some to play multiple roles (which could make the activity even more humorous).

Explain that the Bible is alive and exciting, and today the group will act out a fun story that comes word-for-word from the Bible. State that the seven

volunteers are to do exactly what the story says. Also, if any character has a speaking part more than six words, he or she must move his or her lips as you say the lines—this is called “Godzilla-movie style.” The rest of the students are the audience, and their main job is to cheer on the student actors.

You play the part of the narrator. Read Luke 15:11-32 slowly, one verse at a time, in a very animated voice, letting students act out the story as you read. When you are finished, give the actors some major applause. Continue by letting students know that parables are stories with meaning; and the key to understanding any parable is to understand the actions, motives and symbolism of the main characters. Then discuss the following:

1. In Jesus’ parable, who does the father stand for? *God.*
2. Who do the sons stand for? *Us.*
3. Why did the younger son return? *His plan did not work out the way that he had intended.*
4. Why did the older son resent the father’s love? *The older son had chosen to stick around to work and remained loyal to his dad, but his brother got the hero’s welcome after messing up his life.*
5. What is the difference between the two sons? *The younger brother accepted the father’s love even though he knew he didn’t deserve it; the older brother thought that he deserved the father’s love.*

Conclude by asking, “When might kids you know feel resentment toward someone who loves another person unconditionally?” If students seem open to discussing times when they have felt like the younger or older son, press in and ask them.

Option 2: Unbreakable Love. For this option, you need several Bibles, a chopstick (or a small piece of wood or a twig), and a two-by-four piece of lumber approximately three feet in length (or a similarly unbreakable piece of wood). To begin, ask students if they would still be friends with someone if that person . . .

- Ditched his or her birthday party.
- Spread a rumor that he or she had cheated on a history test.
- Wouldn’t stop calling him or her a really embarrassing nickname.
- Borrowed his or her favorite jacket, then claimed that they hadn’t.
- Hung out with the popular kids at school most of the time and only paid attention to him or her when they were not around.

Most of us would probably break friendships at any one of these points, but God's love is different. We can't even imagine how huge His love is, but we can get an idea from Luke 15.

Place the chopstick and the two-by-four nearby. Read Luke 15:11-32 and then explain that even though the younger son wanted his inheritance—implying that he didn't care whether his dad was alive or dead—the dad welcomed him back. Then suggest that our love for others is often like a chopstick. Hold up the chopstick, and as you snap it in half, share that our love for others can be easily broken. Hold up the two-by-four and compare it with God's love for us, which can't be broken like the chopstick.

Continue by explaining that not only did the son disrespect his dad, but he hung out with pigs, which in his family's Jewish culture was one of the worst insults ever. Yet the dad didn't turn his back on his son. He welcomed him home with open arms and gifts. That is how God loves us—unconditionally.

DIG

Option 1: An Average Day. For this option, you need a video camera and a way of showing what you have recorded. Before the meeting, carry a video camera with you for an entire day. Record yourself (use a tripod or have someone with you do the recording) in all sorts of settings during a typical day: waking up, brushing your teeth, eating breakfast, driving, working at the office, eating lunch, talking on the phone, working out and watching TV.

Try to make the clip as humorous, unpredictable and zany as possible. Make sure to record yourself reading Scripture or walking into church, as these will be important points in your discussion. (As a low-tech alternative, you could simply ask students what they do during an average day, making sure to add some ideas from a typical Sunday.) At the meeting, explain that you want to give students an up-close-and-personal look at a typical day in your life. Play the clip, and then discuss the following:

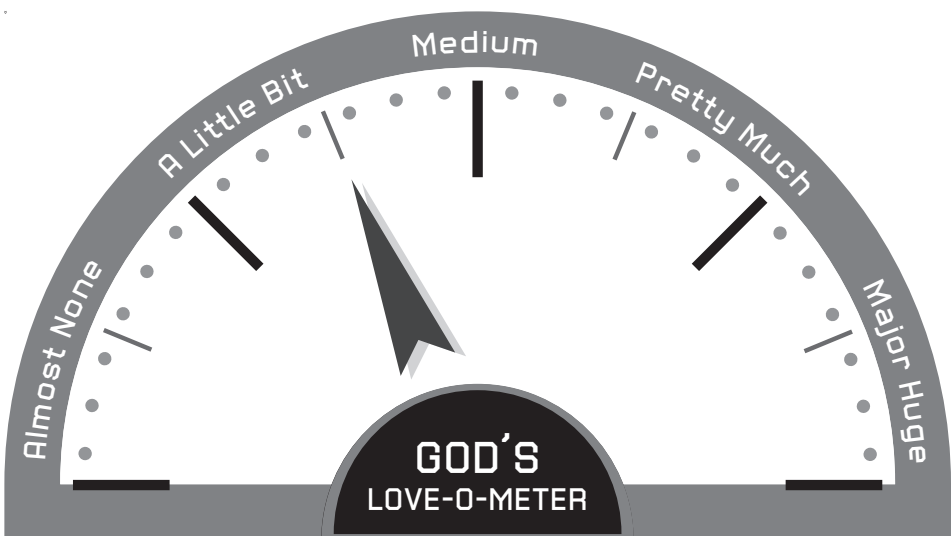
1. When in my day does God love me the most? Does God love me more when I'm praying than when I'm eating? *God loves us equally at all times and in all places. Read Romans 8:38-39 as proof of His love.*
2. Would God love a criminal who murdered a family on their way home from church as much as He loves me? *Yes. God would be angry at the sin, but He loves all people and all sinners just the same.*

3. If my neighbor tells me that she hates God, does God still love her?
Yes. Although God may feel sad, hate isn't going to stop His love.
4. If God loves us no matter what, can we do anything we want? *God loves us just as we are, but He loves us so much that He wants us to change and be transformed into His image.*

Conclude by asking students to explain in one word how God's no-matter-what love makes them feel.

Option 2: Love-O-Meter. For this option, you need five copies of the "Love-O-Meter" script (found on the next page). Before the meeting, give copies of the "Love-O-Meter" script to five students so that they can practice their parts in advance.

Introduce this exercise by explaining that this drama is one way people view God and His love. When the drama is finished, thank the student actors and then ask the group what they think of the message of the drama, given what they learned from Luke 15. Read Romans 8:38-39 and continue by asking what students would say to Marco if they were his friend Andy, in light of Luke 15 and Romans 8:38-39.



LOVE-O-METER



Cast

Marco Salazar, the main character

Andy, Marco's friend

Angel 1, a mature, sensible angel

Angel 2, a goofy, very enthusiastic angel

Angel 3, a stern, slightly grumpy angel

Props

A chalkboard (with chalk and eraser) or a whiteboard (with pens and eraser) or a poster with the "Love-O-Meter" diagram.

Script

Marco: Hey Andy, how's it going?

Andy: Okay, although I've got a ton of homework.

Marco: Me too, and ever since I started going to this new Christian school, I have to write about the Bible and God and stuff. Today my homework assignment is to write a one-page essay about God's love for me. It's going to take me forever, because I'm sort of confused about God's love. Like, here's what I think . . . *(Marco and Andy pause as the three angels enter and begin their discussion in another part of the room near the Love-O-Meter diagram.)*

Angel 2: *(Turning to Angel 1 and extending his hand.)* Greetings! I'm the angel in charge of the "good-stuff-teens-do" department, reporting for work. *(Turns slightly to the audience, winks and whispers.)* It's my first day on the job.

Angel 3: *(Shaking hand of Angel 1 firmly.)* Hello, I'm the angel in charge of the "not-so-good-stuff-teens-do" department, reporting for work. I'm a veteran of this job.

Angel 1: It's heavenly to be working with both of you.

Angel 3: *(Grunts.)*

Angel 1: I'm the angel in charge of God's Love-O-Meter. *(Points to the Love-O-Meter.)* We have the following categories to show how much God loves us: Almost None, A Little Bit, Medium, Pretty Much and Major

Huge. Right now, we're going to discuss Marco Salazar's afternoon reading. Let's do a quick review. Both of you need to give me a run-down on Marco's behavior. I will adjust the dial on the Love-O-Meter accordingly. Where we finish at the end will be the amount of love he is receiving today. As you probably remember at the end of our noon meter scoring, Marco ended with "A Little Bit" of love based on his talking in class when he was supposed to be listening to his teacher.

Angel 2: I'd like to point out that at lunchtime at Marco's school, a girl dropped her tray of food and he helped her pick up the stuff, even though he thought his friends would probably make fun of him. That would put him up to "Major Huge" love, right?

Angel 1: (*Gently sarcastic.*) I don't think so. Marco's score will reach "Pretty Much" love, but no higher.

Angel 3: However, as soon as he got home, he started bugging his little brother and caused him to start screaming . . .

Angel 1: Tut, tut, tut. (*Moves the dial to "A Little Bit."*)

Angel 3: While his mom was trying to talk on the phone.

Angel 1: Oh . . . (*Moves the dial to "Almost None."*)

Angel 2: But, after he got in trouble for that, he put away the dishes without being asked, which I think should bring him up to "Pretty Much" love.

Angel 1: (*Sarcastic.*) Yeah, right. Maybe that will take him to "Medium" love.

Angel 3: However, when his mother read the note from the teacher about the talking in class problem and she sat Marco down to talk about it, he talked back to her.

Angel 1: Whoops. (*Moves the dial to "A Little Bit."*)

Angel 2: But when he was sent to his room, he started on his homework without being told. That has to bring him back up to "Pretty Much" love.

Angel 1: That's absolutely right—*NOT!* It is very obvious that this is your first day on the job. Actually, it will take him to "Medium" love, and that is where he stops for this afternoon. (*Angels freeze and Marco and Andy resume action.*)

Andy: Wow, that's pretty intense.

Marco: Well, that's what I think. Do you think I'm right?

*Marco, Andy and the angels exit the stage.*¹

APPLY

Option 1: Bird Legs. For this option, you need one dime per student. Begin by explaining that though our heavenly Father’s love for us is bigger and better than we can possibly imagine, we can still get glimpses of that love. Next, read the following humorous story:

Joe, a college student, was taking a class to learn about birds. The night before the final exam, Joe spent all night studying. He had the textbook practically memorized. He knew his class notes backward and forward. Joe was ready.

The morning of the test, Joe entered the auditorium and took a seat in the front row. On the table in the front was a row of 10 stuffed birds. Each bird had a sack covering its body, with only its legs showing. When the class started, the professor announced that the students were to identify each bird by looking at its legs and giving its common name, habitat, preferred food, mating habits, and so forth.

Joe looked at each of the birds’ legs. They all looked the same to him. He started to get angry. He had stayed up all night studying for this test, and now he had to identify birds by their leg! The more he thought about the situation, the angrier he got.

Finally, he reached his boiling point. He stood up, marched up to the professor’s desk, crumpled up his exam paper and threw it on the desk. “What a ridiculous test!” he screamed to the professor. “How could anyone tell the difference between these birds just by looking at their legs?”

With that, Joe turned and stormed toward the exit. The professor was a bit shocked, and it took him a moment to regain his composure. Then, just as Joe was about to walk out the door, the professor shouted out, “Wait a minute, young man, what’s your name?”

Joe turned around, pulled up his pant legs and hollered, “You tell me, Prof, you tell me!”²

Ask for a volunteer to read Luke 12:6-7. Comment on how amazing it is that our loving heavenly Father knows everything about us, including the number of hairs on our head and what our legs look like. Explain to the group that God not only knows *what* we look like, but He also *likes* what we look like. It’s often tough to feel His love if we don’t like how He has made us, especially if we don’t like the way we look.

As the students leave your room, distribute a dime to each as a reminder of the truth that he or she is a perfect 10. (Aren't you relieved we recommend a dime and not a \$10 bill per student?)

Option 2: Encouragement Box. For this option, you need a shoebox covered with wrapping paper or aluminum foil, pens or pencils and copies of the "Encouragement" worksheet (found on the next page).

Begin by explaining to your students that each of them can play a part in helping others know about our heavenly Father's love. Ask two volunteers to read John 13:34-35 and two volunteers to read John 17:23. Ask how the way we share God's love with each other can make a difference in helping others come to know God's love. Be sure to explain that in the context of these passages, Jesus is talking about the way Christians love each other, not the way Christians love non-Christians.

Create a picture in the students' minds of what it would mean to love each other in your junior high group by explaining that gossip would end, judging would end and sarcasm would end. In place of these negatives, encouragement, acceptance and friendship would explode. Ask how this picture is different from what their friends at school are used to.

Next, tell students that today you are going to take a major step toward that goal by making an "Encouragement Box." Hand out copies of the "Encouragement" worksheet and pens or pencils. Ask them to write two or three notes to others in your ministry who need a little bit of encouragement. After you have given them five minutes to do this, collect the papers, shuffle them in the box and distribute them.



Youth Leader Tip

Be sure to have adult staff members write letters to students who might not be as likely to receive a letter from anyone else so that this exercise doesn't create "I-feel-like-a-loner-and-nobody-likes-me" feelings.

ENCOURAGEMENT

*By this all . . . will know that you are my
disciples, if you love one another.*

JOHN 13:35

REFLECT

The following short devotions are for the students to reflect on and answer during the week. You can make a copy of these pages and distribute to your class or print out from the PDF for this session available online at www.gospelight.com/uncommon_jh_the_christian_life.zip.

1—IT'S ALL GOOD

If there's something about how you look that you don't really like, you'll love these fast facts from Genesis 1:1–2:3.

First, there's the bump on your nose. And then there's your frizzy hair. And of course, you can't forget the two mountainous moles on your cheek. Every time you look in your mirror, that's all you see: bumps, frizz and moles.

God made you, bumps, frizz and all. He spent a ton of time making sure the earth, animals, plants and water were right in the beginning, and He spent a lot of time making sure you were just right. Nothing about you is a mistake. You are His perfect creation. He looks at you and says, "Wow, that's good. Better than good, that's really good. Better than really good, that's perfect!"

Maybe it's not bumps, frizz and moles, but you probably have a few things you'd like to change about yourself if you could. Today when you look in the mirror, remember that God thinks it's all good. Because the God who created you thinks you look good, maybe you should too.

2—PRETTY LAME

To read one of the craziest stories in the Bible, turn to Hosea 3:1.

Just to give you a bit of background: Hosea is this really cool guy who knew God wanted him to marry Gomer. Gomer, in addition to having a pretty strange name for a woman, kept leaving Hosea to go sleep with other men. (Sounds like a scriptural soap opera, doesn't it?) What commands does God give Hosea in Hosea 3:1?

- Go, show and love.
- Stop, drop and roll.
- Shake, rattle and roll.

Raisin cakes are more than just a healthy after-school snack. People used to offer them to fake gods like Baal as a thank-you gift. What does this tell you about how the Israelites were acting?

How does God respond to the Israelites, even though they're hanging out with other "loser" gods?

What does Hosea 3:1 say about how much God loves you, even when you may be doing some pretty lame stuff?

3—GOD DOESN'T CHANGE HIS ADDRESS

Read Romans 8:38-39, and then imagine that one day your best friend told you that her dad had gotten a new construction job in Kansas City. She and her entire family packed up and moved. Now, she is hundreds of miles away in a whole other state, and you're left alone. You really miss all that you and your best bud used to do together.

God is never going to move away from you to Kansas City—or anyplace else for that matter. He's never going to remove His love from you. His love is permanent and goes with you wherever you go.

Think of everything you're going to do today: You'll get ready for school . . . then have breakfast . . . next bike to school . . . take tests . . . eat in the cafeteria . . . go to piano practice . . . talk on the phone . . . have dinner . . . watch television . . . and finally, go to bed. God is with you through every part of that.

Think of the part of your day that is your least favorite and picture God sitting right next to you as you're taking your English test or running laps at soccer practice. Any time you feel sad or lonely this week, think of God sitting right next to you, whispering how much He loves you.

4—DEFINING GOD'S LOVE

Finding out more about God is easy if you read 1 John 4:7-18. What is the best description of God's love?

- Windy: It goes where it wants to, but you can never count on it.
- Sunny: It's with you only when life is good and easy.
- Stormy: It's quick to get revenge on you when you do something wrong.
- None of the above.

How would you define God's love?

Since God is perfect love, what should happen to our fear?

What is your biggest fear?

What is something you could do today for someone in your family to let them know how much you love them?

Get a Life. Live for Jesus.



Junior-highers are full of energy, questions and passion—just like Jesus' earliest followers! Now you can help them channel their energy, answer their questions and focus their passion with the help of *The Christian Life*, part of the *Uncommon Jr. High* group study series created by youth-ministry expert Kara Powell. Twelve sessions of Bible study and activities will challenge the young teens in your group to walk in the Way of Jesus . . . and will help them understand what that phrase even means. You can also download reproducible student handouts and additional options for every session in the book—find out how inside!

- Every session is an interactive study of God's Word created with junior-highers in mind
- Flexible format—use for Sunday School, midweek meetings, camps and retreats
- Each session has two activity options to fit the needs of your group
- Created by Kara Powell, one of today's leading authorities on youth

These studies flesh out two absolute essentials for great curriculum: biblical depth and active learning.

Duffy Robbins

Professor of Youth Ministry
Eastern University, St. Davids, Pennsylvania

Great biblical material, creative interaction and user friendly! What more could you ask?

Ken Davis

Author and Speaker



KARA POWELL, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute and a faculty member at Fuller Theological Seminary (see www.fulleryouthinstitute.org). As a 20-year youth ministry veteran, she speaks regularly at youth ministry conferences and is the author or co-author of a number of books, including *Deep Justice Journeys*, *Essential Leadership*, *Deep Justice in a Broken World*, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World*, and the *Good Sex Youth Ministry Curriculum*. Kara lives in Pasadena, California, with her husband and three children.



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