

Teach 4 the Heart Podcast Transcript

Episode 361 – From Insecurity to Confidence: Helping Students Discover their True Identity in Christ

0:00 Intro to Student Identity

Linda Kardamis (00:00)

Do you have students who struggle with identity issues? I'm willing to guess that you do. So join us as Jonathan Holmes shares five key areas where students struggle and how to help our students build their identities in Christ. Whether you teach at public or Christian school, you're gonna find a lot of helpful insights and key takeaways from this conversation. Well, welcome back to the Teach for the Heart podcast where we tackle teaching challenges from a biblical perspective. Why are we here?

because we don't believe that our spiritual walk and teaching profession should exist in two separate domains. Rather, the hope we have in Christ should change how we approach everything, not just at home, but at school as well. So join us as we explore both the spiritual and practical sides of key teaching challenges, integrating them together so we can succeed at teaching, glorify God, and make a lasting difference in our students' hearts and lives. This episode is brought to you in partnership with the Herzog Foundation.

Well, as I said today, I'm really excited to share with you a conversation with Jonathan Holmes. And this conversation is actually part of our Rise Up Summit, which has been happening all weekend. And if you're listening to this, when this episode comes out, is still available for free today and tomorrow. So go to riseupchristianeducators.com to check it out. And then if you're listening to this later, you can still grab the All Access Pass to get all of the session recordings. So check that out at riseupchristianeducators.com. But today,

we are going to play you a portion of our interview with Jonathan Holmes that is part of this year's Rise Up Summit schedule. And in this conversation, Jonathan is sharing key insights from his book, *Grounded in Grace*, helping kids build their identity in Christ. And as I said in the intro, whether you teach in a Christian school where you can actually...

talk to them about Christ or a public school where you have to be a little bit more careful, these insights are gonna be really helpful for you in understanding what's going on in your students' hearts and minds and what's really at the heart of the issue and how you can help them. So we're gonna dive right into that conversation right now.

2:00 Helping Students Find Their Identity

Linda Kardamis (02:00)

So in your book, you talk about five different areas that in particular that teens or kids, kids, kids and teens tend to struggle and where this shows up. Can you share just as over like what are those areas you noticed?

Jonathan Holmes (02:14)

Yes. Well, the five areas are sports, academics, moralism, sexual orientation, and gender confusion. And maybe an easier way to think about those five. The first three is identity in what I do. And the second two are identity based off of what I feel. And I think that a lot of kids and teens today can be in both categories. I am what I do and I am what I feel.

And so it doesn't mean that you just have to pick one out of the five. A lot of kids struggle with a couple out of that five. But that root issue of I am what I do or I am what I feel are definitely, I think, dynamics that kids and teens face today in terms of what they build and root their identity in.

Linda Kardamis (02:59)

Yes. Okay. And I'm really excited. We're going to kind of talk through at least at a high level of like each of these. But before we do that, maybe it would be helpful to give people that haven't seen your previous sessions or anything, a little bit of an idea of ~ you're saying people think I am what I do or I am what I feel. And I think even we as adults can easily fall into those same things. Just a little maybe preview. Where should our identity as Christians be placed?

Jonathan Holmes (03:25)

Our identity ultimately, Linda, is not in what we do and in what we feel, but it is in who God is and what He says about us. Or another way to say it is this, we live in a culture that is obsessed with figuring out who am I. And Scripture actually says the actual more important question is, whose am I? We belong to the Lord. We were created by the Lord.

The big message of the book, Grounded in Grace, is that the Lord gives us an identity. It's an identity that is received and not achieved. It's not something that we have to earn, that we merit through good works, through behavior. And it's also not something that we have to dig deep into our feelings to figure out and discern. We can go to the truth and the beauty of Scripture and find out good words that the Lord has already declared about us, what He has said is the purpose of our creation and why we're here on earth. And that actually, think,

for both kids, teens and us today, I think really provides a level of stability and coherence that so many kids and teens and even adults are really searching for today.

Linda Kardamis (04:28)

Yes, so I love that it is received, not. That's amazing. So we're going to kind of dive deeper into that, but I think that's helpful to have that framework right up front. So let's let's talk through some of these different areas. So the first two areas you talked about were sports and academics, and obviously those are different, but I think of a lot of commonalities. Who can you share a little bit? What does this look like and how could teachers and parents help with?

Jonathan Holmes (04:32)

How to see

Yes,

yes. Well, especially thinking about teachers, I don't want any teacher to listen to this and think, OK, academics are not important. We don't want to build identity around that. And we don't want to build identity primarily around academics. But what we're saying in the book is that academics and sports aren't the only thing that we want to build our identity on. And I think that there is a huge push today, Linda, in our culture, especially for kids and teens, to put all of their eggs in maybe one or two of those baskets, whether it's on the basketball field or soccer field.

or whether it's in the classroom, right? Kids today are facing enormous pressure in early grades to perform well so they can get into the college of their choice or their dreams or to participate very early in youth sports and club sports so they can get scholarships and whatnot. And again, those things are good. Those are great pursuits. But over time, what can happen is that we measure our sense of who we are, our sense of work, our sense of belonging, our sense of approval and affirmation.

can get directly tied to how many goals we scored on the soccer field or what our GPA is. And again, those things are important, but they're not ultimate. And the amount of pressure that I see so many parents today placing on their kids sometimes as it relates to sports and academics, ~ it's a pressure that our kids and teens today just really aren't built for. And I think when we think about identity, those are two really easy things to build your identity on because they do tend to be so measurable, right?

looking at your GPA or test scores or looking at your basketball stats or your soccer stats or your lacrosse stats or whatever it might be. And again, scripture is going to come in and reframe a lot of those pursuits to say, what's the purpose of academic excellence? What's the purpose of athletic success? And scripture comes in and oftentimes turns the wisdom of the world upside down and says, this is what we're ultimately pursuing. This is what we're ultimately aiming for.

Linda Kardamis (06:52)

Yeah, and that is an interesting thing. think, yes, as teachers, a lot of times we're focused academically on those students who are struggling. We're like, I wish they cared about their academics. But I think sometimes we ignore, not ignore, but we don't maybe aren't recognizing on the opposite end of the spectrum. Maybe some of our best students are actually really struggling with identity as relates to grades. I know personally, I wasn't able

A student all through high school. And I remember I had a bit of an identity crisis. The first time I couldn't get an A in college. just, was a, you know, was a creative writing. was, it was good, but not that good. And I didn't get the A and I was like, I had to really, but it was actually very good for me. And I had to go through this and realize, no, like I'm who I am. God doesn't need me to get an A if I did my best and that's enough. But I do think then there's, yes, there's definitely an opportunity for us to help.

help students as we work as they notice this in academics or sports. what are some things that a teacher and obviously in a Christian school and a public school you'd have different amounts of freedom in what you say, but what are some things that teachers could do or say to help students that might be in this dynamic?

Jonathan Holmes (07:54)

That's a great question, Linda. would say, let me take the category of those who are in more public school settings or in settings where the ability to integrate their faith feels a little bit more limited. I would say the main thing I'd want to do is I would want to communicate that my love for my students as a teacher is not rooted in how they either underperform or overperform academically. Meaning that my desire to teach and to love and to give them a good education

isn't based off of their GPA. My love for them is based off of my sense of calling, of how I view my calling as a teacher in that local school to be the best teacher that God has called me to be. And if you're in a Christian school, think maybe you do have a little bit more latitude to even further communicate that message to say, hey, we do have academic seniors. We want you to perform well. We want you to ~ be academically excellent based off of your skill level and maturity level. But at the end of the day, if you don't get the grade that you want,

that shouldn't undermine or completely deconstruct your sense of who you are. So if you get a B, that's not the end of the world. At the end of the day, the most important thing about you as an individual is your personal relationship with the Lord and investing in that. So if you get a B or an A or whatever it might be, at the end of the day, what enables you to weather through that disappointment over a bad grade is actually relying on that core sense of identity that is received and not achieved. And so in many ways,

understanding the beauty of identity as scripture lays it out actually gives I think teachers more freedom because you have a stable base to work from of listen at the end of the day we are who God says we are but it also gives you the freedom to pursue encouragement to do well academically and to pursue athletic you know excellence in whatever particular sport you might engage in.

Linda Kardamis (09:41)

Yes, that makes a lot of sense. you know, as I think, obviously, in a Christian school, we should completely tell them your identity is in Christ. But in a public school, what you're saying is, yeah, I can't go all the way there, but I know it's true and I can tell them, this is right. Your worth is not dependent on it. Like you can say all the way up to there. You can use that in their lives. Right.

Jonathan Holmes (10:03)

If God can, you're cleaning seeds there, and I just commend everybody who's in that public school setting because you are a bright light shining for the Lord in that area. And in many ways, you are embodying Christ's very presence to those students to say, listen, I don't treat you on the basis of your

grades, your sports, or even your social. You know, I'm not going to be, as James says, partial to one group or the other. And that's because

I know my own identity before the Lord is not based off of my performance or my grades or my athletic success. And so I think even the subtle ways that the teacher brings in ~ the character and spirit into the classroom, I think can have an impact. Again, you're planting seeds that someone at another point, even perhaps another teacher or a coach or someone might come alongside and harvest at a later time.

Linda Kardamis (10:51)

I just got to attend a Herzog event a few weeks ago - and, wow, it's amazing how much God is doing at the Herzog Foundation! They are pouring into Christian schools in an incredible way, and if you're teaching at a Christian school, you should definitely check them out. In particular, take a look at their amazing lineup of free trainings (even lodging & meals are included for free). And another resource everyone can enjoy is their Faith & Freedom 250 video series which tells stories of faith, sacrifice & courage from America's history. Check out these - and so much more - at herzogfoundation.com

Linda Kardamis (11:52)

Yeah, that's awesome. Okay, so sports, academic, those are kind of, think, a little more obvious. can think, yeah, this kid is dead. You can think of like, times in our own lives or people that, yeah, we've seen that. The next one I thought was really interesting because it also resonated with me, but I don't think I would have thought of it. And that's moralism. Can you talk about what this might look like?

Jonathan Holmes (12:13)

Yes, well, Linda, this is, you know, I'm a self-confessed moralist. you know, I was very good in school. I never got in trouble. You know, I was so afraid of getting detention or suspended or, know, I never put a foot at a line when I was in school. But on the other side of that good behavior, I think was a weakness in the Keeley's heel for me in that I believe that my identity was rooted in my good works. It was rooted in me being a good person. And so

The gospel wasn't good news to me because I didn't first understand the bad news. And the bad news was I was a sinner in need of saving grace. I thought I was just a good person and I had done enough good things that the Lord would accept me. It wasn't until really my middle, kind of in between my freshman and sophomore year when I heard the gospel preached that I realized, listen, there's no amount of good deeds or good words that are going to merit the Lord accepting me into heaven.

And that was a big game changer for me and continue to be a game changer for me all throughout high school and college. think as I came to grips with at the end of the day, Christ saves us because of Christ's work on the cross, on our behalf, not my good works. And so the way this, think, can work out with kids, and I see this especially in Christian homes with Christian parents, is that the standard is good behavior and good morals, right? That's what we're looking for. Who doesn't want a well-behaved kid, right? When I talk to most parents, they say, I would love it if my kid had great behavior all the time.

And that's a fine expectation to have, but what we don't want to miscommunicate is that that good behavior is what merits God's grace. That that good behavior is what merits God's favor on people's lives. Now, good works are an overflow of faith, right? We know that from scripture, but our good works don't merit our salvation. And so, again, this one is much more subtle because it kind of goes below the surface of just, you know, kind of coasting by and

You know, the good kids in your class sometimes might get overlooked because they're not making a, you know, a big ruckus or whatnot. But sometimes you can see moralism coming out, especially as it relates to misplaced identity. It can kind of come out as judgmentalism, self-righteousness, condescension. ~ You can, you know, sometimes see some of those threads or those behaviors come out from kids whose identity is rooted in their own good works. And that's where both

Public school teachers might have a little bit more of a limited bandwidth on how to address that, but especially those who are more Christian settings, you really can hammer home this, at the end of the day, you are not to some total of your good works. You are who the Lord says you are. ~

Linda Kardamis (14:53)

Yes. So that's a great thing to be saying. Are there other things that we could be looking out for or just incorporating into our discussions that can help with this one?

Jonathan Holmes (15:03)

for hate.

Yeah, one of the things I think that could be helpful for teachers who are trying to engage and to interact with students who are really stuck on that good behavior, they're always doing everything right, is I would just say, hey, what happens when you don't do something right? What does that do for your sense of who you are? What is your internal dialogue? Do you beat yourself up? Do you try to atone for it and make it better? And then I would just try to extrapolate out from there to say, hey, why are you afraid of messing up?

Why are you afraid of not doing whatever it is that you want to do, especially as it relates to moralism or good deeds? And to try to begin to poke at, listen, at the end of the day, your identity can't be just rooted in your actions because you are a sinner in need of God's grace. You're not always going to be able to maintain that level of perfection. one of the things, especially going back to what we've talked about at the beginning, Linda, a lot of times one of the mental health issues I think that you see

with students who struggle a lot with moralism are high levels of anxiety. Because there's such an anxiousness and such a desire to perform and to be a good person, never step a two out of line, there can be a high level of self-imposed expectations, both at home, in the classroom, personally, that it really can create a significant context where anxiety can develop. so, it's just doing a little, teachers can do a little bit of reverse engineering,

And maybe they see a student who's really anxious or prone to stress or anxiety and maybe just even asking some thoughtful questions about, well, where's this anxiety coming from? What's making you anxious? OK, who told you those narratives? Who imposed those expectations on you that you're feeling like you have to meet right now? And a lot of times, not always, but sometimes some of those conversations, I think, are going to come back to this issue of moralism and an identity that's built on that.

Linda Kardamis (17:01)

Yeah, that's so helpful. As I think about, you know, all these areas too, I'm guessing there are moments where you have a conversation or someone has, and it's like a breakthrough. my goodness, I never saw it this way. But there's also an element where it's like, we need to be told this over and over. I need like to keep coming back to this, like, no, this is not. So it's kind of like, you might have these specific conversations with students, but anything you can just keep dripping that out.

Jonathan Holmes (17:27)

Yes, and again, I borrow this from the best teachers, but I know that repetition is a technique that we use in teaching and education. And just the steady repetition of both your posture, your conversation, different themes that you're hitting as a teacher are going to make an impact. And again, people make an impact. you talk to adults about some of the most influential people in their lives, really pivotal moments, ~ it's often that kids refer to teachers as that group of people.

And I know I had teachers like that in my own life. so teachers hold such a good and influential role in the lives of kids and teens. And so how do we even as teachers steward that identity and steward that identity well as we think about just the impact that we can have on children and teens in classroom?

Linda Kardamis (18:14)

Yeah, thank you so much for helping us think through this. So to recap, we talked about sports and academics, moralism. And then the last two areas you identified are sexual orientation and gender confusion, which I know are on many people's minds. These are more obvious. So can you speak to a little bit about how are these related to identity? What might students be experiencing in these areas?

Jonathan Holmes (18:40)

Great question, Linda. And what you mentioned at the beginning of referencing the talk that we did a few years ago on modern identity, traditional identity. If you haven't listened to that, I'd encourage you to go listen to it. It'll help you understand a little bit of this conversation, or you can pick up the book and read a little bit in those chapters for some more explanation. But just put simply, both the issues that we're facing today with kids and teens as it relates to sexual orientation and gender confusion,

are ultimately issues of we have told kids you are what you feel. If you want to figure out who you are, you have to dig deep into your feelings. What are you attracted to? Who are you attracted to? And build your entire identity on that. And the problem with that at the end of the day, ~ Linda, is you know kids well, you're with kids all the time with your own kids in the classroom. Kids' feelings change.

all the time, right? I mean, you can tell a kid one time in the morning, you know, hey, what do you want for lunch? It could be mac and cheese. And the very next day, you could make the mac and cheese for lunch and their feelings have changed. They can say, I hate mac and cheese. I never want to see this again. We know as adults how fluid feelings are. And yet we have told kids at even a really young age, right? In early elementary, you are what you feel and express those feelings. And listen, identity is a hard enough issue for adults. Now we're

placing that burden and that task on children at very young ages. So for instance, as it relates to gender confusion, right? There's so much confusion over roles, over gender expression, both with masculinity and femininity. And culture is giving oftentimes very mixed messages about that on top of social media influences and peer influences. And the kid then is supposed to take all of that data that they've received, all those messages and cultural narratives,

And then they have to kind of take their own internal feelings and figure it all out. And that leads to a lot of confusion. It leads to a lot of instability. I think that that's what you see with kids and teens today. And so again, the beauty of a Christ-centered identity is there's a stability in who we are, that we are what we feel at the end of the day. And, you know, I tell parents all the time, right, there are certain days where you probably don't feel like being a parent, right? You wish you

~ didn't have kids and you could just do whatever it is that you want, go to bed whenever you want, have a lot more financial freedom. ~ But that's not what God has called us to, right? We can't root our identity and our feelings. And I think one of the main messages to our kids and teens today is at the end of the day, feelings are good, right? Feelings are a part of how God designed us, but they're not stable enough to build our entire identity.

And that's a message that I think is, I think hitting home a little bit more with kids and teens today, but we've got to keep beating the drum for it.

Linda Kardamis (21:34)

Wow, that was a really succinct way of saying it. Can you say that again? Feelings? What did you say about the?

Jonathan Holmes (21:38)

Feelings are not what we want to build our identity on. They are good and they're a good part of how God made us, but they're not reliable enough for us to build our entire sense of who we are as individuals.

Linda Kardamis (21:53)

Yeah, that concept is so powerful and it's such a powerful way, I think, to explain this kind of complicated thing in a way that you can do. And that's also something that you can say in a public school. that is not specifically religious or even... mean, everything is controversial these days, but it's good advice.

Jonathan Holmes (22:14)

Right, right. Or another way that I'll say it, and again, to use a metaphor and illustration sometimes helps with kids. I'll just say, hey, feelings are good passengers, but they're bad drivers. You know, do you want your feelings to always be in the driver's seat, making every decision, every turn, every lane change for you? Probably not. Even a kid or a teen, think, probably has enough maturity to understand that. Maybe even as a teacher, you could draw that out and do a little bit of role play to say, hey, has there ever been a time where you know it's probably not good to act out on a feeling?

or not to follow a given feeling and you know, hopefully they'll say, yeah, probably. Then build on that to say, well, do you think that your feelings are strong and stable enough to build your entire sense of who you are? Because culture is saying, yes, they are, right? You build your entire identity really around your sexual orientation or your perception of gender. And again, scripture is going to say, hey, sex and gender are important, but they're not the ultimate thing. They're not the most important thing.

about you as an individual. And again, the most important thing about you is who God is and what He has said about you.

23:20 Linda's Final Thoughts

Linda Kardamis (23:20)

I hope you guys enjoyed this conversation with Jonathan Holmes. Once again, if you want to check out his book, it's called Grounded in Grace,

Kids Build Their Identity in Christ. And then if you want to hear the rest of this conversation, there's more to this conversation that we weren't able to fit into this episode, you can check it out at riseupchristianeducators.com. Once again, everything is free, including the rest of this session today and tomorrow. And if you're listening to this later than that,

The All Access Pass is always available so you can get all of the recordings and keep them forever. So that's at riseupchristianeducators.com. One last resource I wanted to mention to you, Jonathan Holmes is the head of Fieldstone Counseling, an incredible organization that offers Christian counseling for all ages, individuals, and couples. It's available in person in the Northeast Ohio area, but it's available remotely.

all over the country and even around the world. So if you or someone you know needs help, needs some Christian counseling, I highly recommend Fieldstone. You can find out more about them at fieldstonecounseling.org. Well, this episode has been brought to you in partnership with the Herzog Foundation. All views and opinions are our own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Herzog Foundation. Thank you so much for being with us. I look forward to being with you again soon. In the meantime, teach you remember God is at work in you and through you, and he's using you to make a difference.

Keep your eyes on him and teach for the heart.