

GENERATION REGENERATION MINISTRIES

WHO'S IN THE GROUP CHAT?

CHOOSE YOUR FIRE

Love everyone. Forgive freely. Choose access wisely.

Full Youth Sermon Manuscript

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“The easiest fire offers acceptance without accountability. The second fire offers truth, restoration, and true friendship.”

Primary Texts: John 18:15–27; John 21:9–19

Supporting Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:33; Hebrews 4:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17

SUPPLIES + STAGE SETUP

- A clear glass jar with an opening too small for the whole plate
- One whole ceramic plate that does not fit into the jar
- One second, prettier whole plate hidden inside a closed box labeled JESUS
- A towel large enough to cover the first plate
- A hammer and appropriate eye/hand protection
- A safe tray or protected surface for breaking the plate
- A second clear container or the original jar for holding broken pieces
- Two visual fire images or props, if desired

[SAFETY: Break the plate only on a stable protected surface. Wrap it completely, wear eye protection, keep students back, and handle sharp pieces with gloves or tongs.]

BIG IDEA

The people around us influence the people we are becoming. The easiest circle to remain in is often the one that asks nothing of us and holds us accountable for nothing. But Jesus does not invite us into shame. He invites us to the fire of truth, restoration, purpose, and true friendship.

OPENING — FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE TO THE GROUP CHAT

Last time we were together, we talked about The Great Divide.

We saw how offense can get between people. Rejection, gossip, betrayal, jealousy, comparison, and unforgiveness can create distance between people who once stood shoulder to shoulder.

But here is what I want us to understand tonight: sometimes the divide is not only created by the people who hurt us. Sometimes the divide is created by the people we are trying to impress.

Sometimes we become so desperate to belong that we slowly create distance between ourselves and the person God has called us to be.

Last time, we talked about what happens when the wrong things get between us. Tonight, we are going to talk about what happens when we give the wrong people access to us.

Because you can forgive everyone without giving everyone the same level of influence. You can love everyone without standing around every fire. And you can refuse to live in bitterness while still recognizing, 'These may not be the people I need closest to me.'

That brings us to a question almost every person in this room understands: Who is in the group chat?

I do not only mean the literal group chat on your phone. I mean your circle—the people whose opinions matter to you, whose approval you want, and whose behavior starts influencing your own. A group chat is really a circle of access.

The people in it can influence what you laugh at, what you normalize, what you hide, how you speak, how you treat people, how seriously you follow Jesus, and who you are becoming.

‘Bad company corrupts good character.’ — 1 Corinthians 15:33

That does not mean we hate people, reject people, or act like we are better than anyone. Jesus calls us to love everyone and forgive freely. But Scripture also teaches us to choose access wisely, because the people around you will help shape the person you are becoming.

Peter learned that lesson while standing around two very different fires. At one fire, Peter was surrounded by people whose acceptance mattered so much that he denied Jesus to fit in. At the other fire, Peter sat with Jesus and people who knew the truth about him—and loved him enough to help restore him.

Same Peter. Two fires. Two circles. Two completely different outcomes.

So tonight, we are asking: Who is in your group chat—and which fire will you choose?

THE FIRST FIRE — JOHN 18:15–27

That is exactly the kind of pressure Peter faced on the night Jesus was arrested.

[Invite everyone to open to John 18:15–27. Read the complete passage aloud.]

Peter followed Jesus—but at a distance.

That detail matters. Peter had not completely walked away. He was close enough to see what was happening. He was close enough to care. But he was also far enough away to protect himself.

Another disciple helped Peter enter the high priest’s courtyard. Peter stepped into a circle of servants and officials who had gathered around a charcoal fire because it was cold.

The fire itself was not evil. The people warming themselves were not presented as cartoon villains. They were simply the circle Peter chose to stand in while Jesus was being questioned.

Then a servant girl looked at Peter and asked whether he was one of Jesus' disciples.

"I am not." — **John 18:17**

Peter did not begin with a speech against Jesus. He simply changed his answer so he could remain comfortable around the fire.

He wanted the warmth without the identification. He wanted to remain close enough to know what happened to Jesus without being recognized as someone who belonged to Jesus.

That first fire was the easiest fire to stand around because no one there was going to hold Peter accountable to the man Jesus had called him to become.

No one around that fire was going to say, "Peter, this is not who you are." No one would remind him of his calling. No one would challenge his compromise. They would accept him—as long as he continued presenting himself as someone who did not know Jesus.

The questioning continued. Again Peter denied Him. Then a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off recognized him from the garden. Peter denied Jesus again, and immediately the rooster crowed.

Three denials. Three moments when Peter decided that acceptance around this fire mattered more than publicly belonging to Jesus.

We may never say the sentence, "I do not know Jesus." But we can communicate it through our actions.

We deny Him when we use our behavior to convince the people around us that following Jesus does not really affect us. We join the cruelty. We repeat the gossip. We hide our convictions. We laugh at what dehumanizes someone. We cross boundaries because saying no might cost us a place in the circle.

Like Peter, our behavior says, "I am not who you think I am. I am one of you."

OBJECT LESSON — THE PLATE, THE JAR, AND FITTING IN

[Bring out the clear jar and the whole ceramic plate. Hold them where everyone can see.]

This jar represents the circle we are desperate to enter. Maybe it is a friend group. Maybe it is a relationship. Maybe it is the group chat where you are finally included. Maybe it is the crowd whose approval feels like proof that you matter.

This plate represents the person God created you to be—whole. Your integrity is here. Your compassion is here. Your convictions are here. Your purity is here. Your public identity as a follower of Jesus is here.

[Attempt to place the whole plate into the jar. Let everyone see that it will not fit.]

The problem is obvious: the plate does not fit.

Sometimes the circle you want to enter is not large enough to hold the person God created you to be. So the circle does not expand. Instead, you begin breaking pieces off yourself.

You silence your convictions. You change your language. You laugh at what you once knew was cruel. You hide your relationship with Jesus. You tell yourself, “It is not a big deal. This is just who I am around them.”

[Place the plate on the protected surface and cover it completely with the towel.]

Most of that breaking does not happen where everyone can see it. It happens underneath the towel.

Your parents cannot see it. Your pastor cannot see it. Your youth leaders cannot see it. Your accountable friends cannot see it.

[Strike the covered plate once as you name each area. Pause between strikes.]

Your integrity.

Your compassion.

Your convictions.

Your purity.

Your courage to be known as someone who follows Jesus.

[Strike the plate one final time. Put the hammer down before continuing.]

Because it happened underneath the towel, you tell yourself that no one can see it.

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight.” — Hebrews 4:13

God sees beneath the towel. But He is not watching because He is waiting for a reason to reject you. He sees you because He loves you too much to pretend hidden compromise is not destroying you.

[Slowly remove the towel and reveal the broken plate.]

You thought that because no one could see the breaking, no one would see the damage. But hiding the plate did not protect it. The towel only concealed what was happening.

Hidden compromise changes how you think. It changes how you speak. It changes what you tolerate. It changes what you believe is normal. It changes who you are becoming.

[Carefully begin placing the broken pieces into the clear jar.]

Now your integrity fits. Your compassion fits. Your convictions fit. Your purity fits. Your public identity as a follower of Jesus fits.

Look at that. You fit in now. You finally earned your place in the group. You made it into the group chat.

But look at what fitting in cost you.

You had to break yourself into pieces to enter a place that was never large enough to hold the person God created you to be.

True friends do not require you to become less whole so they can remain comfortable.

If you must conceal Jesus, compromise your convictions, or break your God-given identity to belong, you are standing around the wrong fire.

PETER'S STORY DID NOT END AT THE FIRST FIRE

The rooster crowed, and Peter had to face what his fear had produced. But Peter's failure was not the end of his story.

Jesus knew Peter would deny Him before Peter ever stood beside that fire.

"When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." — **Luke 22:32**

Jesus did not say, "If you turn back." He said, "When you have turned back." Before Peter failed, Jesus was praying for him. Before Peter denied Him, Jesus was speaking about his return. Jesus saw the breaking—but He also saw Peter beyond the breaking.

THE SECOND FIRE — JOHN 21:9-19

After the resurrection, Peter went fishing. He returned to the familiar place where his calling had begun, carrying the shame of denying the One who had called him.

[Invite everyone to turn to John 21:9-19. Read the passage aloud.]

When the disciples reached the shore, they saw another charcoal fire. Fish was cooking. Bread was waiting. Jesus said, "Come and have breakfast."

John mentions a charcoal fire in only two scenes: the courtyard where Peter denied Jesus and the shore where Jesus restored Peter.

Imagine what Peter remembered when he smelled the charcoal.

At the first fire, Peter stood with people he wanted to impress. At the second fire, Peter sat with Jesus and the disciples—people who knew him and could hold him accountable to the person Jesus had called him to become.

At the first fire, Peter concealed his identity. At the second fire, Jesus called him back into his identity.

At the first fire, Peter said, “I am not.” At the second fire, Peter said, “Lord, You know.”

Jesus did not begin with humiliation. He prepared a meal. He gave Peter warmth. He gave Peter bread. He gave Peter His presence.

Jesus did not build that fire to humiliate Peter. He built it to restore him.

TRUTH, LOVE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

After breakfast, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?”

Jesus asked three times. Peter had denied Him three times. Three denials. Three questions. Three honest answers. Three commissions: feed My lambs, take care of My sheep, feed My sheep.

Jesus was not reopening the wound to punish Peter. He was entering the wound to heal it.

That is important, because we sometimes imagine love as the absence of difficult conversations. But the second fire shows us something better.

Real love brings truth. Real love brings accountability. Real love refuses to pretend that nothing happened. And real love refuses to allow failure to become the end of someone's story.

The first fire offered Peter acceptance without accountability. No one cared whether Peter became less like the man Jesus called him to be. The second fire offered truth with love. Jesus knew exactly what Peter had done, confronted it honestly, and restored him completely.

The second fire produces restoration and true friendship.

Jesus did not merely say, “Fine, Peter. I forgive you.” He entrusted people to him again. He restored Peter's voice. He restored Peter's purpose. He restored Peter's calling.

“Follow Me.” — John 21:19

Peter did not have to make another dramatic promise. He had to receive the truth, accept restoration, and follow Jesus forward.

FROM BROKEN TO FULLY RESTORED

[Bring the jar containing the broken pieces to the closed box labeled JESUS.]

These are the pieces you broke while trying to fit in. The pieces you hid underneath the towel. The pieces your parents did not see. The pieces your leaders did not see. But Jesus saw every piece.

And tonight He is not asking you to continue hiding them. He is asking you to give them to Him.

[Pour the broken pieces from the jar into the JESUS box.]

Give Him your compromised integrity. Give Him your wounded compassion. Give Him your surrendered convictions. Give Him your broken boundaries. Give Him the parts of your faith you concealed to fit in.

“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.” — 2 Corinthians 5:17

We often picture Jesus gluing our broken pieces together so every crack permanently defines what we did. But Peter's failure became part of his testimony; it did not remain the definition of his life.

[Reach into the box and pull out the whole, new plate.]

The man who denied Jesus in front of a few people soon stood before thousands and boldly proclaimed Him. The man frightened by a servant girl stood before powerful authorities and refused to be silent. The man who said, “I do not know Him,” spent the rest of his life making Jesus known.

That is restoration. Jesus gave Peter his identity back. His voice back. His courage back. His purpose back. His calling back.

BOUNDARIES ARE BIBLICAL WHEN ROOTED IN LOVE

Now we need to talk about boundaries, because some of us hear a message about leaving the wrong fire and immediately imagine anger, bitterness, revenge, or public drama.

Biblical boundaries are not walls built from bitterness. They are decisions built around obedience and rooted in love.

A boundary is not: “I hate you, so I am going to punish you.” A healthy boundary says: “I can love you, pray for you, and forgive you without allowing your influence to continually pull me away from Jesus.”

You can forgive someone without immediately restoring their former access. You can serve someone without allowing them to lead you. You can care about someone without giving them permission to continually shape you.

Last time we talked about bridging the gap created by offense. Bridging the gap does not require standing around every fire. Forgiveness and boundaries are not enemies. You can forgive freely and choose access wisely.

EVEN JESUS HAD BOUNDARIES

Look at Jesus. Thousands gathered around Him. He loved them, taught them, healed them, and served them.

But He did not live His daily life with the thousands. He intentionally walked with twelve disciples.

And even within the twelve, Peter, James, and John were invited into moments the others did not experience in the same way. They entered the room when Jairus's daughter was raised. They witnessed the Transfiguration. They went farther with Jesus in Gethsemane.

Jesus loved the thousands. He lived life with twelve. He invited three closer.

Everyone received His love, but not everyone received the same level of access.

Jesus also withdrew from crowds to be alone with the Father. He refused to allow people's expectations to replace God's instructions. When others tried to force Him into their plans or timing, He remained obedient to the Father.

If Jesus did not give everyone the same access, Christian love does not require you to give everyone the same access either.

You do not give the same access to everyone.

WHO ARE YOUR THREE?

Who knows the real you? Who recognizes when something is happening underneath the towel? Who asks hard questions? Who refuses to celebrate the things that are destroying you? Who reminds you of your calling when you begin breaking pieces off yourself to fit?

Maybe you realize tonight that you do not have three. Begin praying: "Jesus, send me people who will help me faithfully follow You."

And become that person for someone else. Become the friend who speaks truth with love. Become the friend who refuses to encourage hidden compromise. Become the friend who can sit beside someone during restoration without using their failure to shame them.

WHICH GROUP CHATS DO YOU NEED TO LEAVE?

Maybe it is an actual group chat. Maybe it is a private conversation. Maybe it is a relationship. Maybe it is a circle where gossip is the cost of admission. Maybe it is a place where sexual pressure has become normal. Maybe it is a fire where cruelty earns acceptance.

You do not have to leave with bitterness. You do not have to post an announcement. You do not have to embarrass anyone. You can forgive. You can pray for them. You can love them. And you can still leave the fire that keeps teaching you to deny Jesus through your actions.

WHICH FIRE WILL YOU CHOOSE?

Peter stood around two fires.

The first fire was easier. It offered warmth without truth, acceptance without accountability, and a place in the circle—as long as Peter continued denying who he really was.

The second fire required honesty. Jesus confronted Peter's failure. But that fire also offered grace, restoration, purpose, and true friendship.

One fire let Peter fit in while he broke apart. The other fire called Peter back to wholeness.

Which fire will you choose?

Will you choose the fire where no one holds you accountable because no one cares whether you become who Jesus called you to be?

Or will you choose the fire where truth is spoken in love, hidden things come into the light, restoration is possible, and real friends help you follow Jesus?

Love everyone. Forgive freely. Choose access wisely.

Find your three. Leave the wrong group chat. Choose the fire where restoration and true friendship are possible.

And when Jesus says, "Follow Me," do not return to the fire where you learned to deny Him.

PRAYER AND ALTAR RESPONSE

[Invite students to bow their heads. Slow down. Leave room between each response invitation.]

Maybe tonight you realize that you have been standing around the wrong fire. You love Jesus, but around certain people you act as though you do not know Him. You change how you speak. You hide what you believe. You cross boundaries. You break pieces off yourself because you are afraid of being rejected.

Jesus is not standing here waiting to humiliate you. Just as He met Peter beside another charcoal fire, Jesus is offering you grace, truth, accountability, restoration, and a new beginning.

Maybe your prayer tonight needs to be: “Jesus, forgive me for denying You through the way I have been living.”

Maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, show me what I have been hiding underneath the towel.”

Maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, restore the pieces I broke while trying to fit in.”

Maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, show me where I need a boundary—and keep my heart free from bitterness.”

Maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, give me courage to leave the wrong fire.”

Maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, send me three people who will help me follow You.”

And maybe it needs to be: “Jesus, make me the kind of friend who tells the truth with love and helps others remain whole.”

[Invite students to respond according to your ministry's normal altar practice.]

Jesus, You see everything we have hidden underneath the towel. You see every compromise, every broken boundary, and every piece we have given away while trying to fit in. Thank You that You do not move away from our brokenness. You meet us there.

Forgive us for the times we have denied You through our words or our actions because we wanted to belong. Restore what we have broken. Give us courage to leave the wrong fires and wisdom to establish boundaries from love rather than bitterness.

Surround us with people who know us, love us, challenge us, and hold us accountable to the people You have called us to become. Make us those kinds of friends for others.

Teach us to love everyone, forgive freely, and choose access wisely.

And when You say, “Follow Me,” give us the courage not to return to the fire where we learned to deny You.

In Jesus' name, amen.