

# TED and Theology – For youth!

*6 weeks*

TED talks are a great resource for generating conversation in groups. Experts speak about their life's work and their deepest passions; it's easy to connect with many of these speakers and to use their mini-lectures as springboards of reflections on a whole host of issues. I love to use resources like TED talks for both youth group and adult engagement for many reasons:

1. It introduces participants to leaders, speakers, voices, and ideas that they might not otherwise learn about
2. In youth groups especially, it gives leaders the opportunity to model how to put the “secular” ideas and advice given in TED talks in conversation with scripture and the history and traditions of the church
3. It translates well to a virtual setting

This is a guide for how to use 6 popular TED talks to engage youth, ages 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. This study is prepared to run for 6 weeks in January and February before the start of Lent. Some of the topics are intended to coincide with the calendar in important ways (e.g. a talk that translates well into creating resolutions for early in January, and a talk on non-violence on MLK weekend, etc.), but these can be used in any order and at any time of year. The talks I feature are:

**Shawn Achor: The happy secret to better work (resolutions)**

**Erica Chenoweth: The success of nonviolent resistance (MLK weekend)**

**Takaharu Tezuka: The best kindergarten you've ever seen**

**Drew Dudley: Everyday Leadership**

**Mena Fombo: No. You cannot touch my hair!**

**Dylan Marron: Empathy is not endorsement**

Each of these talks is generally appropriate for youth, but I'm careful to note passages within them that you may want to skip due to mildly inappropriate language or adult-themed examples if you have a younger audience. I generally find that it's a good practice to summarize key points in the talks right after you watch them, or to prime youth to watch for certain points right before you begin. Erica Chenoweth's talk is a bit more academic than the others, so this is particularly important for her talk about nonviolent resistance.

Each lesson includes the following components:

- Link to the TED talk (youtube)
- A summary for group leaders
- A meditation/devotional prep for group leaders, which can be incorporated into the discussion as desired
- A few warm up questions to use before you watch the talk as a group
- Reflection questions and scripture engagement for your discussion

As is often the case, there will be more questions in the discussion section than you can realistically use, but each talk has multiple jumping-off points for great conversations and I wanted to provide plenty of options so that this usable across many different groups. You could expand some of these talks into multi-session discussions, depending on the interest of your group and themes you want to highlight. I've occasionally suggested multiple scriptures and you can either use all of them, or to choose the one that best fits the direction you intend to take the conversation.

I've tried to include decent representation across gender, sexuality, race, and age though if you'd like to feature additional brilliant Black speakers, the following lectures are amazing. I've already used some of these with my youth, and in an adult study I've created as well. These lectures include **Bryan Stevenson's "I want to talk about an injustice,"** and **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The danger of a single story."** If you're curious about my perspective on them (and 5 others), you can review the TED and Theology class for adults on my blog, which features 6-10 minute audio devotions in place of the written preparation materials provided here.

My youth group has also recently read one of Ibram X Kendi's books (*Stamped: A Remix*, his collaboration with Jason Reynolds), or I would have chosen **Megan Ming Francis' "Let's get to the root of racial injustice."** Kendi also has a TED talk, but it's a bit long and is more academic than would be ideal – at least for my group. A mature high school group could definitely use **Kimberle' Chrenshaw's "The urgency of intersectionality,"** which is deeply powerful, but would be more challenging to use with middle schoolers due to the themes of the content.

You'll notice that **Brene' Brown** is missing from this list. This is because I love her talks too much, and am building a full 2020 Lenten series for my youth around shame, vulnerability, and confession. I'll use her two wonderful talks though the study won't be exclusively TED talk reflections! If you're hoping to use one or both of her talks in this series, I also included **"The power of vulnerability"** in my adult TED study, so you can listen to the audio devotion that comes with that study if you'd like my reflections on the talk in light of Ephesians 3:14-21.

I hope this format inspires you to expand the study and investigate how to use the great resources of TED talks to enhance the connection and growth in your ministry!

## Mena Fombo: No. You cannot touch my hair!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLQzz75yE5A>

*16 minute run time*

**Summary:** In this talk, Mena Fombo recounts her experiences of the racism directed towards her body, and engages some of the history of the white fascination with black bodies. She is vulnerable and powerful and some of her stories about her experiences as a child in school will resonate well with youth, and the examples she names of how racism has manifested in history may be new to youth of all ages. The conversations about police violence, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the motivation of racist ideas and policies are vitally important, but this talk's calls to action are more concrete in ways that are helpful for youth.

**Meditation/Preparation:** This talk starts out with a deceptively simple premise: stop touching Black women's hair. However, Mena Fombo skillfully connects personal stories and the history of the othering, animalizing, and even harvesting of Black bodies because of fascination with characteristics perceived as exotic, "strangely beautiful," and hypersexualized. By my judgment, the talk is appropriate for middle schoolers as long as they are prepared well for it, though she does mention her experience of early puberty, some sensitive interactions with other girls in a camp bathroom, an experience in which she was examined by a school doctor without her guardian's permission in elementary school, and the fact that people sometimes shout things at her such as "your hair looks like my pubes." None of her descriptions are graphic.

Hopefully you talk about racism regularly in your youth group, but even if you don't, this talk is a great place to start. It's not overly philosophical or academic, and its devastating without recounting more overt mechanisms of violence. The violence and trauma of slavery and racialized brutality over the last 400 years is essential to discuss, of course, and I suggest finding ways to do so in youth group. I recommend a few talks that can help you do this in the Introduction to this series. However, some of your youth may find learning about the criminal justice system or the legacy of racist policies or the history of the police to be overwhelming and too removed from their experience to *do* anything concrete in response to them. This talk explores something very concrete – an action that may be ignorantly perceived as insignificant – and connects it to the motivations and actions of horrific racism that most everyone would decry as terribly offensive. I think this is the most important part of this talk: if something like hair touching can be connected to the historical collection of human beings in *zoos*, what other casually racist things are happening every day that people don't properly connect to the ugly history of racist ideas? She sums it up this way: "Is the motivation different if the actions are still the same?"

Our faith engages in the call to interrogate how our actions impact others in tons of scripture passages. Here, I suggest connecting the golden rule with Paul's advice to avoid doing whatever is a stumbling block to others (Romans 14:13-19). Sometimes the command to "do unto others

what you would have them do to you” can be tricky because it implies that everyone has the same values and the same standards for how they prefer to interact safely with others. It can easily – if improperly – be manipulated by those who say “Well, that wouldn’t have bothered me. She’s just being too sensitive.” When read in conjunction with Paul’s advice to the Romans to avoid eating meat sacrificed to idols if it bothers *other* people, even though it’s not inherently wrong, the golden rule becomes not “treat others the way *you* want to be treated” but “treat others the way *they* want to be treated.” This shift is so important to talk about, not because the Golden Rule is *wrong* of course, but just because in cultures as bound to individualism as our is, it can be easily misinterpreted and misused.

You can also consider watching the animated short film *Hair Love*, which is available on youtube as well, perhaps as a warm up or introductory activity for the session.

### **Before talk**

Have you ever heard people make cringeworthy comments about race? If it feels appropriate to you to share them, consider doing so.

What’s the Golden Rule?

### **After talk**

What part of this talk do you think you’ll remember the most in the future?

Have you been aware of this issue of unwanted hair touching? Before this talk, would you have considered it a serious thing? Or would you considered it “not a big deal?”

Were you aware of any of the historical examples the speaker highlighted regarding the treatment of black bodies and the “fascination” with them on the part of people of European descent? One of the speaker’s central questions that she kept returning to, “Is the motivation different if the actions are still the same?” How does the historical examples help you to understand this current problem more thoroughly?

**Read:** (read or summarize) Romans 14:13-19, and read Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule is often summarized this way: “Treat others the way you want to be treated.” This is obviously intended to be a beautiful way for us to consider whether we are treating other people appropriately. However, when read on its own, it makes it sound like each individual can create his/her/their own standard for imagining “how others want to be treated.” How does Paul’s advice in Romans 14:13-19 help us understand another way of determining how to treat others?

Try thinking about the Golden Rule as “treat others the way that *they* want to be treated.” Does this standard of behavior seem better or worse to you than the original way we usually think about it? Why?

Sometimes people think that others are “being too sensitive” when they talk about things that bother them. When might this be an appropriate response? Is it *ever* appropriate? When is it definitely *not* appropriate?

What are some ways that you can learn about the best ways to be sensitive to people’s experiences who might have different experiences than you have had?

In addition to asking them, what *else* can you do that doesn’t put them in the position of teaching you about history and circumstances that may be painful to recount?

Sometimes when we talk about racism, it seems like too big of a problem to really solve. Does the action of helping to call out this specific kind of behavior and help to educate others feel achievable? Can you think of other “small” but important concrete actions?

*Close in prayer*