





# THE Beautiful MESS of Girls' MINISTRY

## Q&A WITH ANNIE DOWNS

With a passion for mentorship and relatable authenticity, Annie Downs speaks into girls' lives both in her local community and on a national stage. The author of "Perfectly Unique" and blogger at "Annie Blogs" took some time out of speaking on the Girls of Grace tour to share what she's learned so far in student ministry, and girls' ministry in particular.

### Q: What do you see teen girls struggling with?

Gosh, what are teen girls NOT struggling with? The truth is, all teen girls are hearing the same lie that they are worthless or have no value, but it comes in different forms. Either someone is bullying them and telling them they have no value or they look in the mirror and don't like what they see so they feel like they have no value or they feel like they've screwed up and will never be forgiven for what they've done so it makes them feel like they are worthless... So that's kind of my goal: To get in front of these teen girls to say, "You are really valuable and God made you on purpose. He knew what He was

doing and you have not sinned beyond what you can be forgiven for."

### Q: How can youth leaders and parents help with that message?

One thing that parents are doing and need to continue to do is be engaged with what's going on with their students' lives online. If your daughter or son is being picked on online and you don't know, you can't help them.

Another way is giving students an opportunity to serve and to live outside of themselves. I think that's a really great way to speak into someone's identity. A good thing that a lot of churches and youth leaders do for their students is talk about healing the hurts on the inside, but it is equally important to teach students to care about the world around us. I lead a small group right now for college sophomore girls and I often have to say, "I understand that you are hurt but we really need to dig into the Truth of what God says, because that's where we are going to find the real healing."

We need to be teaching them the value of the Bible and how they can read it

with abandon, trusting that what they read, they can believe. If we will teach teenagers to let the Bible define them instead of letting culture define them, that's when we are going to raise a really strong generation.

### Q: How did you get interested in girls ministry in the first place?

When I graduated out of youth group and went to University of Georgia, I knew I wanted to volunteer in a youth group because I loved it so much. I attribute that to how my parents raised me in the church and how my youth group leaders were so fun and so great to be around. I grew so much spiritually because the adults invested in me and the opportunities they gave me.

Then as I've gotten older, it is a lot easier to be an adult woman and speak into younger females. The Bible says the older women should disciple and mentor the younger women. I love young men too – being a part of helping younger men become godly men as they grow up – but my real passion is how I can speak into these young women's lives and impact them for Christ. I want to live my life



investing in the next generation.

**Q: What do you wish all mentors and youth ministers knew about ministering to teen girls?**

If I could stand in front of every youth minister and mentor I would say, don't give up. A lot of my issues were so deep and I was so quiet about them, but people didn't give up on me. I think their not quitting on me saved me. It feels like it would be easier to walk away and live your life, but people remember the kind of example they set for me. It may not be you the youth minister is investing in heavily, but the rest of the youth group is seeing that you're not quitting and that impacts them.

**Q: One thing that really stood out to me from your book was this concept of not only loving God, but loving ourselves before we can love others. That can be so hard. Why is that self-love or self-acceptance so important?**

Jesus said to love others as yourself. If we really want to love other people deeply, we have to understand how we are loved. If you know how much God loves you, you love yourself too.

It's important for you to be healthy for you, but it's also important for you to be healthy because God wants us to love other people well and to do that, we have to love ourselves. This world isn't about us. We can't spend our whole lives worrying about how I feel about me while watching other people perish. I'm not OK with other teen girls suffering through some of the things I had to suffer through. Self-hate is a really ugly beast. If I can protect anybody else from that, I'm going to.

Don't hear this as I'm totally over it. Still there are days when I have to readjust my thinking and my speaking; it is still a battle I fight. But the difference between adult Annie and teenage Annie is teenage Annie

didn't know it was a battle. She just knew it was her life. But adult Annie knows it is a battle to be won, not just something I have to suffer through forever.

**Q: Do you think teens can twist that and maybe use it as an excuse not to serve? Is there that girl who thinks she is too broken, too imperfect, too (whatever) to serve others well?**

I don't think they are intentionally going "I don't want to go clean up on that mission trip in Guatemala so I'm going to think about me." There are some that are probably that manipulative, but more just can't get out of themselves in their head. I think if they are being sneaky, they are going to do things that make them feel better, not worse. That's where we have to speak truth and love and God will heal her.

**Q: What are some ways that youth leaders and parents can stamp a healthy identity on their teens?**

Part of me wants to say smother them with Bible verses. I think you have to speak into that identity whether they ask you to or not. **I think there are a lot of times when I choose to be polite over truthful because I don't want to hurt my small group girls when what they need from adults more than anything is truth.** With what God is doing on Earth, if I may be so bold as to assume that I know, these teens don't need to wait until they are adults to do real ministry. We have to trust that God speaks to teenagers and that they can hear His voice.

The beauty of being an adult is we can say, "God is not telling you to move to Russia as a 14 year old, but if that's in your heart, let's talk about how we can build to that." A lot of teens say, "When I grow up..." I say, "Why are you waiting?" You don't have to be an adult to do what God has put on your heart to do. I want teenagers to speak into other

teens' lives right now. I wonder what God could do if we started doing ministry "with" youth instead of "to" youth.

**Q: Working with teen girls can be a bit scary with the gossip and drama... did you encounter fears like that? How did you get past them?**

The truth is, if you are one step ahead of the girls you minister to, you are going to be helpful. **No one has to be perfect before they do ministry.** God doesn't say "Go do ministry once you're all better." He says "Go and tell them about Jesus." Part of that goes into our issues as adults. Teens don't realize that I have the exact same issues they have in a lot of ways. You've got to let go of your own issues too.

If you can find the thing that makes you feel more alive to do, that's what will keep you hanging on in the hard times. I'm doing what God has put on my heart to do.



Annie Downs is an author and speaker who loves living in Nashville, Tenn. She received her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from the University of Georgia. Annie writes books for teen girls and women braving college and the years after. You can keep up with her at [AnnieBlogs.com](http://AnnieBlogs.com) and invite her to speak at your event.

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