

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference



Reading and Discussing
Greta Thunberg's Book
—A Guide for Churches

About this Guide

Whether entirely accurate or not, the famous theologian Karl Barth is often cited for depicting the faithful and relevant Christian as one who holds the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This past year the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg has been the frequent subject of newspaper articles around the world as she has helped spark a global movement of youth who have forced climate change into the public consciousness with a moral urgency hitherto unknown on such a scale. As Christians, what are we to make of her message? How are we to relate her call for action to our faith?

To encourage conversations on these very questions, this discussion guide has been created for Thunberg's small but powerful book "No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference." The guide essentially seeks to accomplish a Barthian move: it pairs scriptures with the news-making words of Thunberg. With each pairing, questions to stimulate deeper reflection are offered.

At 68-pages, many will read Thunberg's book of collected speeches in one setting. Yet, group discussions of her book may require more than one meeting because her words are so provocative and pertinent to our present day. Indeed, as some of the pairings suggest, her words strike with a succinct, concentrated force reminiscent of biblical proverbs.

The six pairings and corresponding questions that follow are organized according to some of the dominant themes in Thunberg's speeches. Use the pairings and questions over one or more meetings as you see fit. The main goal should be to give the words of scripture and Thunberg time for the thoughtful consideration and reflection that they deserve. When possible, share this resource with group members before meeting. Allow people to ponder the themes, connections, and questions in advance, so that the conversation can have focus and depth.

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Theme #1: Love

The title of Thunberg's first speech comes from its very last line: "Our lives are in your hands." Ultimately, Thunberg wants us to see the seriousness of what climate science tells us in relationship to the future wellbeing of her and other young people. Many of the critical questions that Thunberg forces us to ask fundamentally relate to love and the capacity of adults to look beyond themselves to the impact of climate change on children and youth.

Thunberg Quotes

"What we do or don't do, right now, will affect my entire life, and the lives of my children and grandchildren." (11)

"You say that you love your children above everything else. And yet you are stealing their future." (15-16)

Scriptural Connections

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."
—Philippians 2:4

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
—John 13:34-35

Discussion Questions

How do you read the words of Thunberg in relation to core Christian values such as love? How do you respond as she evokes concern for the future of children and youth?

Theme # 2: Equity and Justice

Thunberg's moral focus goes beyond matters of generational justice. She also addresses matters of global inequity and economic injustice. From her perspective, one cannot address the climate crisis without also addressing these crises.

Thunberg Quotes

"...does no one ever speak about the aspect of equity, or climate justice, clearly stated everywhere in the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol, which is absolutely necessary to make the Paris Agreement work on a global scale?" (9)

"We are about to sacrifice our civilization for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue to make enormous amounts of money. We are about to sacrifice the biosphere so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. But it is the suffering of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few." (15)

Scriptural Connections

"He [King Josiah] defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord.

—Jeremiah 22:16

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

—I Timothy 6:10

Discussion Questions

If the pursuit of justice draws us closer to God while greed causes us to wander astray, what is the spiritual state of affairs in our world today? Where do you see yourself in this?

Theme # 3: The Moral Urgency to Act

Many of Thunberg's most passionate and penetrating words are crafted to provoke a strong sense of moral urgency that compels one to immediately act. In this way, she evokes both ancient and modern prophets. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, spoke of "the fierce urgency of now" in confronting the injustices of his time.

Thunberg Quotes

"They keep saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue of all. And yet they just carry on like before." (7)

"Our house is falling apart. Our leaders need to start acting accordingly. Because at the moment they are not." (49)

Scriptural Connections

"...the complacency of fools destroys them."
—Proverbs 1:32

"Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."
—1 John 3:18

Discussion Questions

What explains climate inaction? How can we as people of faith help foster its opposite: climate action?

Theme # 4: Responsibility for the Powerful and the Rest of Us

Thunberg is clear that not all of us are equally responsible for the present state of crisis. At the same time, she is also clear that all of us are nevertheless responsible for what happens next. In such ways, she calls the powerful to account while also pointing to our own power to stop business as usual.

Thunberg Quotes

“...someone is to blame. Some people—some companies and some decision-makers in particular—have known exactly what priceless values they are sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money.” (18)

“Now we all have a choice. We can create transformational action that will safeguard the living conditions for future generations. Or we can continue with our business as usual and fail. That is up to you and me.” (22)

Scriptural Connections

“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan.”

—Proverbs 29:2

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

—Romans 2:12

Discussion Questions

Who do you see as responsible for the climate crisis? How do you understand your own responsibility and power in changing the present path our society is on?

Theme # 5: Silence vs. Speaking Out for the Truth

For those who realize the dangers faced, there is a particular responsibility to speak the truth regardless of how challenging or difficult that may be. From Moses to Jesus, prophets who speak the truth must frequently cut against the grain and face the risks that come with disrupting the status quo.

Thunberg Quotes

To all of you who choose to look the other way every day because you seem more frightened of the changes that can prevent catastrophic climate change than the catastrophic climate change itself. Your silence is almost worst of all. (4)

“We are now at a time in history where everyone with any insight of the climate crisis that threatens our civilization and the entire biosphere must speak out. In clear language. No matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be.” (23)

Scriptural Connections

“Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

—Proverbs 31:8-9

“These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace.”

—Zechariah 8:16

Discussion Questions

What are the challenges and possibilities that you see in speaking the truth about the climate crisis? What are the potential risks and rewards of speaking out?

Theme # 6: Our Power & Potential Together

Thunberg's warnings of inaction are accompanied by a sense of immense possibility. Her own story points to the potential power of those who join together. This is paired with an awareness of how much would change if only people knew the dangers that we collectively face. Thunberg's sense of the potential people have pairs with scriptures that point to the sharing of burden and the power of solidarity.

Thunberg Quotes

"Because if everyone knew how serious the situation is and how little is actually being done, everyone would come and sit down beside us." (2)

"A lot of people say that Sweden is just a small country, and that it doesn't matter what we do. But I think that if a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not going to school for a few weeks, imagine what we all could do together if we wanted to." (12)

Scriptural Connections

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

—Galatians 6:2

"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

—Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

Discussion Questions

What power and potential do you see within your own church? How might it be fully realized?

The Environmental Justice Ministries of the United Church of Christ oversees the UCC's Creation Justice Churches program, the monthly Creation Justice Webinar, and an environmental justice newsletter called The Pollinator. Learn about these programs and more at www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries.