

saint mary's press

LIVING JUSTICE and PEACE



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THE CALL to JUSTICE

Learning to Act
with Compassion

In This Chapter

Responding to Suffering

The Way God Created
the World to Be

Justice: The Reign
of God's Goodness

The Compassionate
Way of Jesus



Responding to Suffering

What is the world as you know it like?
What do you feel is good about it?
What do you feel is bad about it?
Imagine you have the power to change the world. What would this new world look like?


Many people find the world to be full of goodness and joy: a first kiss, music and lyrics that speak to you, the jeweled beauty of new snow, the vastness of the ocean, basketball played so hard your body aches, friends who make you laugh, extra-cheese pizza, a loving family . . . the list could go on and on.

But, for many people, this world is not only one of goodness and light but also one of shadows and suffering. Perhaps you have already encountered the shadow side of the world, as the following young people have.

Twelve-year-old Craig Kielburger was looking for the comics in the *Toronto Star* one morning when he saw this front-page headline: “Battled Child Labour, Boy, 12, Murdered.” The story told of Iqbal Masih, a twelve-year-old Pakistani boy who had been sold to a carpet factory owner when he was four, and forced to weave carpets, chained to a loom, along with other boys. When human rights activists bought his freedom, he traveled the world, speaking out against the widespread practice of child labor—until he was shot dead, presumably by the carpet manufacturers.

The story deeply troubled Craig. But what could he do for kids halfway around the world?

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The world is a place of
beauty, wonder, and joy.
But for many, there is
also pain and suffering.

“You aren’t sick; you’re pregnant,” the nurse said. “You can have an abortion, but if you do, it will need to be soon.”

Abortion? Mary was still trying to wrap her mind around the word *pregnant*! She opposed all forms of killing, including abortion, but she was scared.

Mary knew that the school didn’t really offer any assistance for pregnant students or single moms. She wasn’t sure how to tell her parents, and she knew they would be disappointed. Would she have to sacrifice a decent education to choose life for her child?

When Elliot started high school, it wasn’t the fun, social, engaging environment he had been hoping for. As a gay student, he often found himself the target of bullying. It was exhausting trying to plan where to sit, who to have lunch with, and which people to avoid in the hallways. He tried to stick with his small group of friends who accepted him for who he was, but that wasn’t always possible. And the people who bullied him were bold and aggressive. Walking into the cafeteria was open season for mockery.

Over the course of the year, he had been pushed and shoved in the hallways, openly made fun of in the cafeteria and commons, had his gym clothes stolen twice, and had his books knocked out of his arms. Elliot felt he would make the situation worse if he went to his parents or administrators. He often wondered, *Why am I trying so hard to stay where people hate me?*

Exploitation of children, desperation, discrimination, and violence—the world is far from perfect, as the young people in these scenarios discovered. Confronted with the harsh reality of such suffering and darkness, each of them had to decide how to respond.

In different ways, we each face the same decision. We will return to the true stories of these people later in the course. First, let’s look at some possible responses to the suffering we encounter in the world.

How Do We Respond to Suffering?

When we confront suffering in the world around us, we have two choices: we can do something about the situation, or we can do nothing. People choose one option or the other for many different reasons. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will consider only four reasons: hopelessness, individualism, enlightened self-interest, and compassion.

Hopelessness

Sometimes it feels as if we hear too much about suffering in the world. Many people deal with the overwhelming nature of all the suffering in the world by choosing to ignore it. Others see or hear news of people suffering but choose not to act. They might offer several reasons for not responding, such as the following:

- “There are so many problems, and I’m just one person. Even if I make a small contribution, *what difference will it make* in the big picture?”



More than half of young people in the US experience feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. When you feel that you cannot change your situation or alleviate the suffering in the world today, those feelings are magnified.

- “The problems in our community are beyond my control. . . . *I have no power* to change the situation.”
- “I’m *afraid* that if I speak up, people might get mad at me. My personal safety might even be at risk. I’d rather stay silent than rock the boat.”

These responses to the world’s suffering, though understandable, reflect a lack of hope on the part of the people who offer them. To hope is to believe in the possibility that what one wants can actually happen. If people do not believe they can make a difference—if they have no hope—they are not likely to act to change things.

Individualism

The independence of individuals to pursue their own destiny is an important value that has led to such good things as democracy, the promotion of equal opportunities for all people, and the notion that people can achieve anything if they try hard enough.


Too much emphasis on individual independence, however, can break the ties that connect people with God and one another as a community. Have you ever heard comments similar to the following?

- “*That problem doesn’t affect me personally, so why should I care?*”
- “If homeless people want shelter, they should get a job and work for it like everyone else. *They should help themselves* instead of expecting everyone else to help them.”
- “The trouble she has now is the result of her own decisions—*she’s just getting what she deserves.*”
- “The pollution our paper mill puts into the water is a necessary *trade-off*. Cleaning it up would cost so much that we would probably lose our jobs.”


Such responses to suffering might be called individualistic. Someone who is motivated by **individualism** believes that each person should take responsibility for their own life, and that when people fail to take responsibility for themselves, others should not be expected to help them. An overemphasis on individualism can lead to a me-first attitude in which individuals seek good things only for themselves—even if others must suffer as a result.

Enlightened Self-Interest

Hopelessness and individualism lead many people to respond to suffering by doing nothing. However, many other people respond to suffering in the world by attempting to relieve it.



Many people respond to suffering in the world by attempting to relieve it.



individualism A belief that each person should take responsibility for their own life, and that others should not be expected to help them if they fail to take responsibility for themselves.

In some cases, such responses are primarily motivated by **enlightened self-interest**—the realization that by helping others we are really helping ourselves in the end. People who act out of enlightened self-interest understand that every person needs other people to live a satisfying life. People acting out of enlightened self-interest might make the following comments:

- “The government should spend more money educating people about how to avoid health problems because it costs less to prevent health problems than to treat them later. *It may take more resources now, but the benefits will be greater in the long run.*”
- “If we continue to allow toxins to pollute our drinking water, people in our community will face an increased risk of cancer. *We must act now, or we’ll face the consequences later.*”
- “I help my elderly neighbor keep his yard and sidewalk neat because someday I may be in his shoes, unable to do yard work. *If I don’t help others, I can’t expect them to help me.*”

As these examples illustrate, one reason people choose to help others is that they might receive benefits in return. Sometimes, helping others does not result in direct benefits though. The person in the third example might never receive help in return from their neighbor. But they know that in a

society in which people value helping one another, they are more likely to get help for themselves if they need it someday. By helping their neighbor, they are contributing to the importance their community places on that value.

Compassion

The realization that everyone in a society benefits when people help one another is one reason people respond to suffering with action. But what about people who help others well beyond any benefit they might receive in return?

Consider the young men in the Notre Dame chapter of the Knights of Columbus who support the Women’s Care Center in South Bend, Indiana. Pregnant teens and young adult college students come to the Women’s Care Center desperate for the services provided. Many of these women do not have health insurance, and even if they do, they still can’t afford the high costs of prenatal care and childbirth. Finding solutions for health care, baby items, and childcare while trying to finish school or find a livable-wage job are just some of the issues that can lead to more than just monetary problems. These young mothers face high levels of stress that can lead to mental-health concerns including depression, suicidal ideation, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Scared, often alone, and in high-risk situations, women who seek help at the Women’s Care Center don’t have anywhere else to turn.

enlightened self-interest The realization that by helping others we are, in the end, really helping ourselves.



The young men of the Notre Dame chapter of the Knights of Columbus raise money for local charities by grilling and selling steak sandwiches at the home football games. Their concerted effort to alleviate the suffering of the clients of the Women's Care Center has allowed them to purchase an ultrasound machine every year since 2011.

A more precious gift than money is that of time. Meeting the clients of the care center and spending time with them helps the young men understand what these women are experiencing. Twice a week, a group from this chapter heads over to the Women's Care Center to help with childcare and packaging diapers. They experience how satisfying it is to see the fruits of their labor in the grateful faces of the mothers and babies they are serving. Clients at the center are treated with compassion and dignity by these young men, who are eager to rock and feed babies, and package diapers and clothes. There is no substitute for understanding the struggle and suffering these women experience than by serving them in person.

Pope Francis on Charity

Charity is born of the call of a God who continues to knock on our door, the door of all people, to invite us to love, to compassion, to service of one another. Jesus keeps knocking on our doors, the doors of our lives. He doesn't do this by magic, with special effects, with flashing lights and fireworks. Jesus keeps knocking on our door in the faces of our brothers and sisters, in the faces of our neighbors, in the faces of those at our side. (Pope Francis, "Greeting of the Holy Father," September 24, 2015)





Which of the four responses to encounters with suffering in the world most closely matches your own? Why?

These young men are motivated by **compassion**, a word from the Hebrew plural of the word *womb*. The biblical sense of compassion is similar to the feeling a mother has for the child in her womb—a feeling of life-giving closeness and protective care. People who have compassion understand, both in their mind and heart, others' experiences of struggle or suffering. When compassion is accompanied by hope, it moves people to commit themselves to easing suffering. In other words, it moves them to love.

Called to Respond with Compassion

Although we cannot avoid the shadows of suffering in this world, we can choose how we respond to that suffering. Fortunately, we have many models who have demonstrated in words and actions how we might respond. For Christians, and for many non-Christians as well, Jesus is such a model. Jesus shows us that we can respond to the world's suffering as he did, with compassion—even to the point of giving oneself for the good of the world.

Such a response might seem unreasonable and even extreme to some. Are people who are willing to give of themselves in service to others naive fools? If not, what would bring them to sacrifice themselves to help alleviate the suffering of others? How can we find hope amid ongoing suffering in the world? Understanding something about how God created the world to be will help clarify the Christian response to these questions.

Read your local newspaper or watch a local TV news program. Clip, copy, or write down examples you find that illustrate hopelessness, individualism, enlightened self-interest, and compassion.

compassion Concern for the suffering of others and the desire to relieve it.



For Review

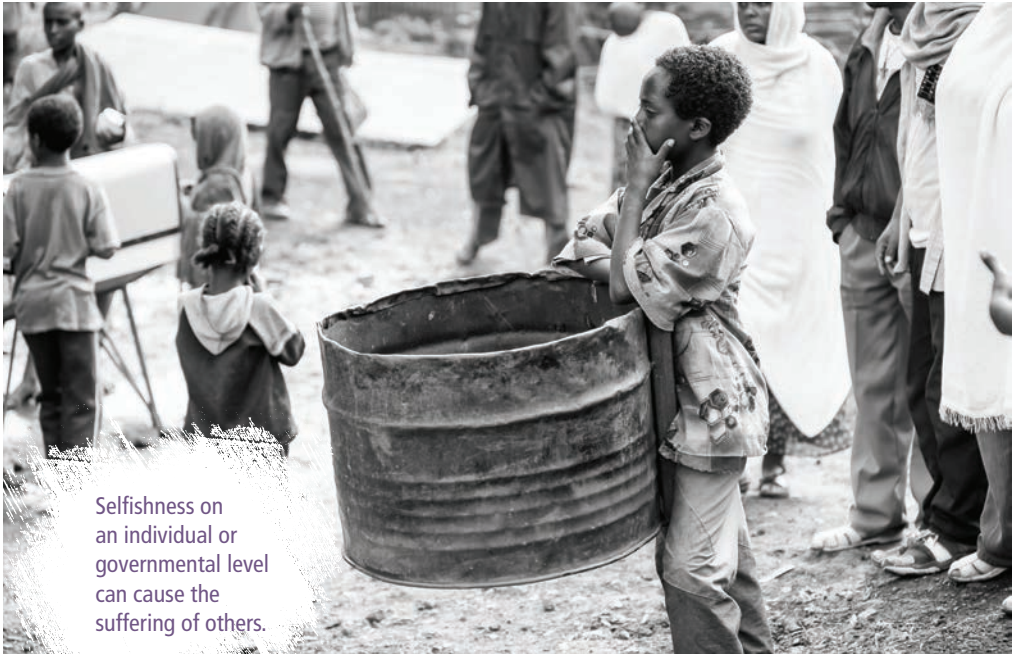
1. When confronted with suffering in the world, what are two basic ways we can choose to respond?
2. Name four reasons for our responses to suffering, and provide a definition for each.
3. When accompanied by hope, what does compassion lead to?
4. Provide your own example of each of the four types of responses to suffering.

The Way God Created the World to Be

Why is there suffering? It is an important and challenging question, especially for anyone who believes in a good and all-powerful God. Why doesn't God just stop the suffering of the world with the snap of a finger? To answer that question, Catholics turn to the Tradition of the Church and to Scripture, which they believe contain the truth God has revealed to humanity. Two main themes found in this revelation provide some insight into the question of suffering:

- **God is love.** Love has many meanings in our culture, but in the way Christian faith means it, to love is to will the good for another. God is love because he is the source of all goodness, bringing everything into being and bringing everything into harmony with itself and the rest of creation.

**God is love
because he is
the source of all
goodness, bringing
everything into
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of creation.**



- **When humans fail to love as God does, the result is disorder, destruction, and suffering.** The opposite of love is selfishness—seeking things for oneself in a way that ignores the good of others and causes suffering. According to Scripture, God did not create a world of suffering. The original state of the world was one of harmony and abundant goodness. You have heard the Creation story many times by now. Still, it contains religious truths that so significantly influence the Christian response to suffering that it is worth examining the story again on a deeper level.

As we revisit the Creation story (you can begin by reading Genesis, chapters 1 to 3), it is important to know that Catholics focus on the religious, rather than the scientific, truth of the story. After all, Genesis was not written for the purpose of recording a scientifically accurate account of Creation; rather, the purpose of the Genesis Creation story is to reveal the more important truths about the nature of God, humanity, and creation (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 282–289).

Creation: God Saw It Was Good

The Genesis Creation story begins by describing the universe as a deep darkness that would be completely empty except for the Spirit of God, which moves through it like a wind (see 1:1–2). God could let the universe remain that way, full of nothing but God. Instead, out of love, God creates something else. And so the darkness is dispelled with the words, “Let there be light” (1:3).

God continues to speak new things into being: water, land, plants, stars, animals, and so on. He is depicted working much like an artist does, stepping back occasionally to judge what is being made. God judges it to be *good*. As if to emphasize the point, the phrase “And God saw it was good” is repeated five times in the Creation account. Creation is good because it unfolds from God’s own goodness.

Humans are capable of imitating God’s creative giving. Childbirth is the most obvious example: a pregnant woman gives up part of her physical self for the sake of bringing a new person into being. And both parents inevitably give up part of their lives to help their child grow into the best person they can be.



Humans: Made in the Image of God

Genesis tells us that the similarity of human love to God’s love is no accident. In fact, God intentionally made humans in the image of God:

God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

(1:27)

What does it mean to be made “in the image of God”? Think of your reflection in a pool of still water: your reflection, or image, is not you, but it resembles you. Similarly, as images of God, humans are reflections of God. Because God is a mystery, what it means to be an image of God is also something of a mystery. But we can be certain of at least three truths: we were made good, we were made to be in relationship with God and others, and we were made free.

**Creation is good
because it unfolds
from God’s own
goodness.**

Can you think of three other examples in which people sacrifice something for a good cause?

Human Dignity

The first attribute of human beings is that they are made good. God says “very good,” in fact (Genesis 1:31). The only reason anything or anyone in creation exists is because God wills it to exist because he loves it.

The basic goodness of human beings that comes from always being loved by God is called **human dignity**. Only humans were created to share in God’s own life by knowledge and love; this special destiny is the reason for their dignity. Nothing can take away the love of God, so nothing a person does can take away their inherent dignity.

Made to Love and Be Loved

God made creation in order to love it by sharing his goodness with it. God desires to be loved in return. Because we are made in God’s image, people also desire to love and be loved. In other words, human beings are made not to be alone but to be in relationship.

With other people. In the Genesis story, God makes humans to be “partners” or “helpers” to one another because “it is not good for the man to be alone” (2:18). God brought Adam and Eve together to form a family—the most basic unit of society.

The very nature of God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) united as one through their shared love. As images of God, each of us is also made to be united with all other people through love.

With creation. Human beings are meant to have a loving relationship with creation too. Genesis depicts God giving humans “dominion” over everything on the earth (1:28). Some people have interpreted this to mean that humans “own” creation and can do whatever they want to with it, but Genesis makes it clear that creation is a gift from God.

Humans are placed in the Garden of Eden, which represents all creation, “to cultivate and care for it” (2:15). Like God, then, humans are creative. God calls

Draw a portrait of someone you know, or use a mirror to draw a portrait of yourself. The quality of your drawing is unimportant for this activity. Instead, as you form an image of your subject on the paper, reflect on Genesis 2:7, “Then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” When you are finished, record at the bottom of the portrait a few words from your reflections.

human dignity The basic goodness and equal worth of human beings that comes from being created in God’s image and being loved by God.

them to share in his work of creation—work that is carried on today whenever people help make the world the good place God intended it to be.

With God. Finally, humans are made to have an intimate friendship with God. That is the very reason God made us. Humans have a deep longing to complete themselves by connecting with the loving power of God. It has been said that all people have a “God-shaped hole” inside themselves. We may try to fill that inner sense of emptiness with many things, but nothing really makes us feel complete until we enter an intimate friendship with God that begins in this life and reaches its fulfillment when we are united with God. The state of perfect communion with the Holy Trinity is called heaven. Although heaven is something we hope to experience after we die, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us that heaven is not so much a place as it is a way of being (2794). As such, we get a little taste of heaven whenever God lives in us.

**As images of God,
each of us is also
made to be united
with all other
people through
love.**



God's love is present
in all creation.

Respond to each of the following reflection questions in a few sentences:

- In what ways do others see your human dignity?
- What kind of relationship do you have with other people, with creation, and with God?
- What is the most important way you have used free will, and why is it important?

Free Will

Another attribute humans have because they are created in God's image is **free will**, the ability to choose what to do. Without free will, people would not be able to love, because love is always a freely given gift—it cannot be forced or taken, bought or sold.

That is why God does not stop people from doing things that cause suffering for themselves or others. If, for instance, you could be forced by God to be nice to others, you would not have free will, and so you would not truly love others. You would be just a puppet in God's hand, not the reflection of his goodness that you were made to be.

Of course, if humans are free to choose love, it also means they are free not to love. The first humans (represented in Genesis by Adam and Eve) chose to turn away from God's goodness, a choice that disrupted the harmony that existed at the beginning of creation.

free will The ability of a person to choose among options and to make decisions with freedom. Free will or self-determination is the grounds for an authentic relationship with God.

We are all created with free will—the ability to choose what to do for ourselves.






For Review

1. What are three truths about human beings that result from their being made in the image of God?
2. What is human dignity? Can anyone lose their human dignity? Why or why not?
3. What is the difference between wanting what is good for oneself and being selfish?

Justice: The Reign of God's Goodness

God did not bring suffering into the world. People did. The Original Sin of Adam and Eve disrupted the order of creation. God does not take away the freedom that allows people to bring suffering into the world, because that same freedom is what enables us to

love. Although God allows people to bring suffering into the world, he does not want people to suffer. In fact, the whole history of God's relationship with humanity is the story of how he has acted to lead us out of a world of suffering into a world of goodness.



God does not want us to suffer. Throughout human history, God has acted to lead us out of a world of suffering and into a world of goodness. We need only to reach out.

God shows compassion for the poor, the oppressed, the weak, and the outcasts from society . . . because they are more in need of his attention by virtue of their suffering.

God sent Moses to free the Israelites from suffering and oppression in Egypt and lead them to freedom in the Promised Land.

I Have Heard My People's Cry

Throughout the Scriptures, God shows compassion for the poor, the **oppressed**, the weak, and the outcasts from society—not because God loves them more than others, but because they are more in need of his attention by virtue of their suffering.

In the Old Testament, the best-known story of God's concern for oppressed people is in the Book of Exodus, about how God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. As slaves, the Israelites work hard building cities and farming the land—yet all the benefit of their work goes to the Egyptians. To ensure that the Israelites do not become powerful enough to revolt against their oppressors, Pharaoh decrees that all newborn Israelite boys be drowned in the Nile River, which the Egyptians regard as a god.

When the people of Israel cry out to God for help, he responds through a revelation to Moses. The words of God that follow are directed to the Israelites specifically, but they are also an expression of compassion for suffering people everywhere:

But the LORD said: I have witnessed the afflictions of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, flowing with milk and honey. . . . Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7–10)

Note that although God promises to take the people from a place of suffering (Egypt) to a place of goodness (the Promised Land), he will not accomplish that transition with a snap of a finger; rather, God recruits Moses, who at the time is a shepherd and a fugitive from the Egyptians, to help win freedom for the Israelites.

oppressed Those who are subjected to another's abuse of power or authority.

Moses balks at God's invitation to leadership. As it turns out, he has good reason to be hesitant. The road to freedom is not quick and easy, but takes years of struggle and hardship. Moses himself never lives to enter the Promised Land. Yet, in the end, the Lord and his people are victorious.

A Source of Hope for People Everywhere

The Exodus story is the central story of the Jewish people. But it also has long been a source of hope for oppressed peoples everywhere, one that has motivated them to take courageous action for the sake of goodness. Slaves in the United States often referred to the Exodus story in their songs, and it inspired the leaders of the twentieth-century civil rights movement as well. The Exodus story has also influenced movements in support of the poor and oppressed in South America and around the globe.

Life in the Promised Land

Before the people enter the Promised Land, Moses gives them a law to live by. The requirements of the Law seek to promote goodness and harmony among the people. Moses tells the people they must live in a way that promotes goodness and peace among them "so that you may live and possess the land the LORD, your God, is giving you" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

Moses was referring to the land of Israel, but any place where people live in God's goodness is the Promised Land. Like the Garden of Eden, the harmony and abundant goodness of the Promised Land is a rich symbol of God's life-giving love.

The Law Moses gave the people included not only the Ten Commandments but also hundreds of specific rules about the way people were to live. At the heart of all these laws was the **Shema**, which Jews still recite daily. Here is the beginning of that prayer:

Recall a time when you were called on to take leadership or responsibility—in a job, on a sports team, or in a social situation. Describe your experience: Were you hesitant? How did it turn out? How did it affect your willingness to take on leadership roles in the future?

Make a collage depicting a modern Exodus by pasting or taping pictures from old magazines and newspapers onto poster board. Here are some images you might include in the collage: people who are oppressed or suffering, landscapes symbolizing Egypt or the Promised Land, leaders working for change ("Moses"), barriers to freedom, people living in goodness. Use newspaper headlines to serve as captions.

Shema A Jewish confession of faith, which Jews recite daily.

The Law also emphasized that true worship is expressed in the way people live with one another.

Make an inventory, or detailed list, of all the things you own, listing how many types of clothes, sports equipment, games, electronic devices, or cars you have, and how many movies, video games, shoes, shampoos, jewelry, money, and so on, that you have. Now imagine that you live in ancient Israel. The Law asks you to give part of your “harvest” away for the benefit of others. Would you do it? If so, why? What would you give? If not, why not?

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4–5)

The Israelites lived out the Shema in part by following the many rules about worship and holiness. They saw keeping their worship pure and perfect as a way of loving God with everything they had.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

The Law also emphasized that true worship is expressed in the way people live with one another. The Law commanding the Israelites to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19) was expressed in many specific regulations that reflected God’s compassion for poor and oppressed people. For example, Israel was given the following regulations:

- Leave some of the harvest for gleaning by those who are poor.
- Do not set dishonest prices.
- Welcome the stranger; treat foreigners as you would your own people.
- Every seven years, cancel all debts.
- Give God thanks for your harvest by giving the first part of it to foreigners, orphans, and widows, “that they may eat and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 26:12).

Sprinkled in among these laws are constant reminders of how much God has given the people by bringing them from slavery into the Promised Land. The implication is that these are not just rules the people are to follow but a way to give thanks to God by sharing what they have been given.

The Prophets: Voicing God’s Call

Despite the Law, the people of Israel were often unfaithful in their relationship with God. Fortunately for the Israelites, God did not turn away from them but instead chose prophets to call the people back to

divine friendship. But often the prophets had as little self-confidence about their mission as Moses did; it is a habit of God to choose the lowly or the most unlikely people for the most important roles.

A common theme of the prophets' call was the important connection between love of God and love of neighbor. Often, the people would focus on the laws pertaining to proper worship and sacrifice but would neglect the laws about loving their neighbors. The prophets made it clear that following all the rules about worship was pointless—even offensive to God—if that worship was not accompanied by compassion for others.

A common theme of the prophets' call was the important connection between love of God and love of neighbor.

Key Passages Highlighting the Social Justice Messages of the Prophets

Passage	Summary of Prophet's Message
Isaiah 1:11–16, 21–23; 2:13–15	God condemns the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Their religious observances are empty of meaning because they have failed to act justly, and they mistreat people who are poor and vulnerable.
Isaiah 58:5–11	God declares that the fasting he desires is the freedom of oppressed people and the care of those in need.
Jeremiah 22:1–17	God warns the kings of Judah that he will bring their kingdoms to ruin if they do not act justly, care for the vulnerable, respect human life, and give workers fair wages.
Amos 2:6–8, 3:9–10, 4:1–3, 5:7–15, 6:4–7, 8:4–7	In a series of prophecies spoken by Amos, God condemns the mistreatment of people who are poor and vulnerable, material greed, bribery, corruption, and the arrogance of wealthy people who ignore human needs around them.
Micah 2:1–3, 3:1–4	God condemns those who develop schemes to take other people's lands, and leaders who do evil to their people.
Micah 4:1–7	In this optimistic prophecy from Micah, God promises a future in which he will bring justice and peace to the world's people.
Micah 6:8	In this inspirational quotation, Micah proclaims: "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, / and what the Lord requires of you: / Only to do justice and to love goodness, / and to walk humbly with your God."

Do you find echoes of the prophets in the music you listen to? Write down the lyrics of songs you think might be prophetic for people today, and explain why you think so.

The Call to Justice

In both Isaiah and Micah, **justice** is the first thing God names when the people ask what he wants of them. And what happens when justice rules the land? Isaiah says that “your light shall rise in the darkness” (58:10)—the shadows of suffering are dispelled.

God created the world good, but the Fall of our “first parents” disrupts the harmony and goodness of relationships in creation. Justice actively seeks to reestablish the original goodness and order. We might say justice is the establishment of loving relationships among human beings, God, and creation so life can flourish in the way God intends. **Injustice**, on the other hand, is a condition in which people have put obstacles in the way of loving relationships, thus preventing life from flourishing as God intends.

An Impossible Dream?

People are called by God to respond compassionately to suffering with justice so that the world becomes the good place it was always meant to be. That call might seem unrealistic, even impossible, and it would be if people were expected to change the world by themselves. But believers hear the voice of God reply: “Don’t be afraid! I am with you.”

Christians believe that God’s compassion for humanity is so great that the Son of God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God dives deep into human suffering and uses that suffering to break open a way through death into goodness and eternal life. When we follow the way opened by Jesus, we too can pass through a world of suffering to a world of hope.

justice The establishment of loving relationships among human beings, God, and creation so life can flourish in the way God intends.

injustice A condition in which people have put obstacles in the way of loving relationships, thus preventing life from flourishing as God intends.

For Review

1. Name at least three ways God asked the Israelites to live out the Law “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19).
2. According to the prophets, what kind of worship does God want from humans?
3. Define *justice* and *injustice*.
4. Why is worship of God pointless if people do not love one another?

The Compassionate Way of Jesus

Who is Jesus? Christians believe Jesus is the second person of the Holy Trinity, Son of the Father, and the one God sent to save the world from sin and death. They believe that those who follow Jesus will live a new life, both on earth and in heaven.

But what does justice have to do with following Jesus? Justice is a central part of the Christian faith. In other

words, a full response to Jesus involves more than just believing in him, praying to him, and going to church—although those are essential parts of the Christian faith. Truly following Jesus means more than just saying yes to God with our lips; it means actually *living* that yes as Jesus did. A closer look at the life and teaching of Jesus reveals the meaning of justice.

Living a life of justice means more than believing in Jesus. We must put our intentions into action by finding ways to ease the suffering of others.

The compassion that moved God to enter humanity is imitated whenever Christians have compassion for those who suffer, by being with them.

God Is with Us

The Gospel of Matthew calls Jesus Emmanuel, a name that means “God is with us.” Jesus’ followers eventually came to recognize that in him, God was quite literally with them, for Jesus Christ is “true God and true man,” to use the language of the Church—that is, fully the divine Son of God and fully a human being at the same time.

That must have been a stunning realization: God the Father loved humankind so much and thought humankind was so good that he sent his Son to be “coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance” (Philippians 2:7) in the person of Christ. The **Incarnation**—the Son of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ—was the result of God’s choice to be with humanity to lead us out of suffering and death, just as Moses led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. The compassion that moved God to enter humanity is imitated whenever Christians have compassion for those who suffer, by being with them.

Scripture tells us that God is like a mother comforting her child (see Isaiah 66:13). Think of a time you were suffering from sickness, disappointment, or rejection. How did the presence of a friend or parent make you feel better? Are there times when you would rather be alone when you suffer? Why or why not?

Jesus’ Mission of Justice

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry by going to the synagogue in his hometown and reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, whose vision of a just and peaceful world was described earlier. The passage Jesus reads is about one who was sent by God

to bring glad tidings to the poor, . . .
to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.
(Luke 4:18–21)

Incarnation The central Christian belief that the Son of God assumed human nature and became flesh and lived among us.



What is one example of a loving relationship in the world today?

In choosing to read that passage, Jesus identifies himself with the one who would bring about the just world imagined by Isaiah. In fact, Jesus' ministry is characterized by the same outpouring of God's love that made the world such a good place to begin with. Through his words, actions, and miracles, Jesus works to restore a world of loving relationships.

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The Kingdom of God

For Jesus, the **Kingdom of God** was not an earthly kingdom held together by armies and soldiers. Nor was it a specific place at all. Because God's rule is love, we can say the Kingdom of God is the way things are when love is more important than anything else in people's lives.

We know from our experiences, though, that people's actions in the world are characterized not only by love but also by cruel indifference. Clearly, the

Kingdom of God The center of the preaching of Jesus and the way things are when love is more important than anything else in people's lives. It is both initiated and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.



Kingdom is not yet completely here, or the world would be a different place. But Jesus' call is that we continue to strive for the Kingdom of God here on earth. How do we do that? We must love not only God but also one another. Jesus teaches that love of God (a commandment from the Shema) is impossible without love of neighbor (a commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy):

One of the scribes . . . asked [Jesus], "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One, and there is no other than he.' And 'to love him with all your heart, with all

your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that [he] answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:28–34)

Jesus does not answer with just one commandment but with two. The scribe sees that Jesus is teaching that love of neighbor is essential to loving God. Jesus says that those who understand this important lesson "are not far from the kingdom of God."

Love God by Loving One Another

Jesus takes his point even further in the story of how the Kingdom of God will be fulfilled through Jesus, the king, in the final judgment at the end of time. Jesus shows how his Kingdom is based on love:

Then the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the

kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?” And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:34–40)

Jesus and the prophets agree that *true love of God is best shown by loving one another*. Genuine worship comes from a sincere heart, one that recognizes God in the needs of others.

Love Turns the World Upside Down

As strange as it may sound, Jesus’ “kingdom of love” frightened the political leaders of the time. If love reigned, they would lose their power.

We hear the word *love* so much that it may be difficult to imagine how it could be so threatening. But, in fact, when love, willing the good for one another, is the most important law in a society, everything changes. By making love the law of the land, Jesus was turning the world of first-century Palestine upside down.

He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands

It is not uncommon to feel discouraged or overwhelmed as you learn about all the suffering and injustice in the world. That’s okay. Some of the greatest figures in the Bible and in Christian history have had similar feelings.

At the same time, Christians find reason to hope when they remember that God has a plan for peace and justice to reign. For Christians, all work for justice and peace flows out of God’s plan of salvation, which can be summarized as follows:

- God is love.
- God made the world good.
- Sin is the root of injustice.
- Jesus Christ is the source of all justice and peace.
- Christ continues to transform the world through his church.
- We are called to continue Christ’s saving mission in the world, to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Understanding God’s plan helps us realize that it is ultimately God who saves the world, not us. God invites us to fulfill our human dignity by participating in his ongoing work of creation. Pursuing justice and peace is part of that work. Moreover, Scripture makes it clear that we cannot really love God while ignoring the suffering of others.

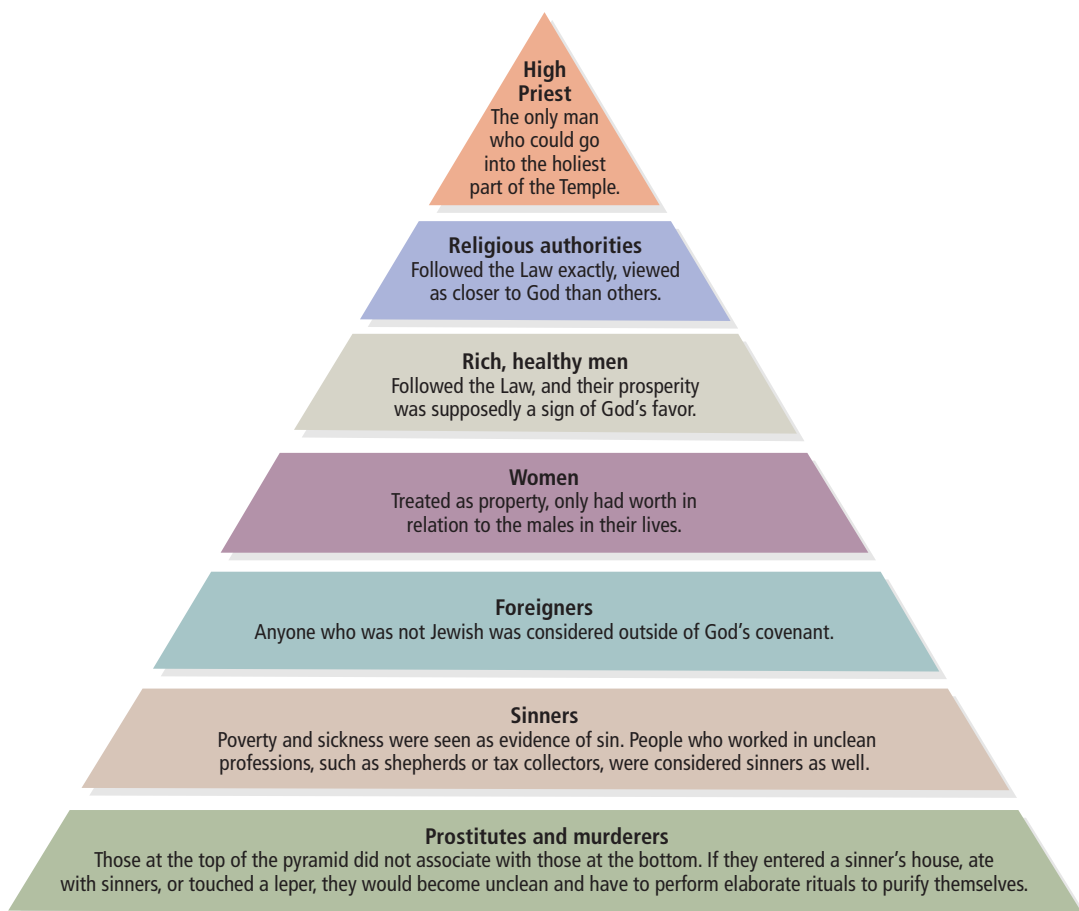
As we work for justice and peace, knowing that we are not responsible for saving the whole world can be a source of hope. As the old Christian hymn says, God’s “got the whole world in his hands”: he is doing justice for us, alongside us—and, if we let him, through us.

The Social World of First-Century Palestine

By knowing the social situation of Jewish society at the time of Jesus, we can more fully appreciate the impact of Jesus' mission. Jesus did not challenge only Jewish society but all societies not ruled by love—and his challenge is as valid today as it was then.

Imagine the Jewish society of Jesus' time as a pyramid, with those at the top of the pyramid closest to God (and therefore "most holy"), and those at the bottom farthest from God ("least holy"). Below is how the "pyramid of society" might have looked at the time of Jesus.

Of course, this quick sketch of ancient Jewish society does not reflect its complexities. But the point is clear: Jewish society was one of division, as ours is today.



The Last Come First

In the Kingdom of God, that pyramid is turned on its head. Jesus taught that, far from being unloved by God, the well-being of people who are poor, suffering, and oppressed should be given special preference. In the **Beatitudes**, Jesus calls them “blessed.” They are blessed not because poverty, suffering, and oppression are good, but because their experience teaches them the importance of love and justice—a lesson that rich and comfortable people may have more difficulty understanding.

On the other hand, anyone who wants to be “first” must not be selfish but must bring goodness to others:

Let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? I am among you as the one who serves. (Luke 22:26–27)

Can you imagine what society would look like if instead of trying to get ahead, everyone tried to serve everyone else? Cofounder of the *Catholic Worker* and social activist, Peter Maurin, put it this way:

Everybody would be rich
if nobody tried to become richer.

And nobody would be poor
if everybody tried to be the poorest.

And everybody would be what he ought to be
if everybody tried to be
what he wants the other fellow to be.

(*Easy Essays*)

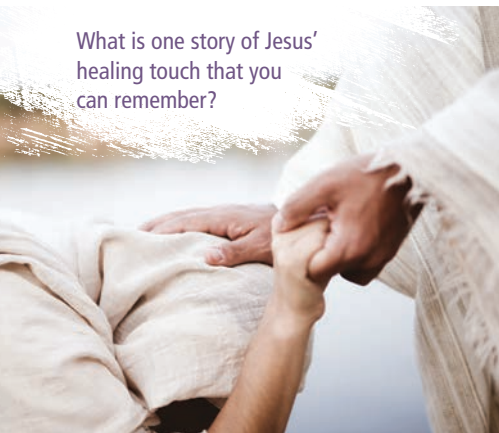
Consider what would happen if people suddenly started living out Peter Maurin’s vision. Draw an image that represents what this would be like, or write or create a skit with others.



Beatitudes Blessings spoken by Jesus as part of the Sermon on the Mount and the sermon on the plain that reveal the path to happiness and holiness. The Beatitudes are often considered to represent the heart of the preaching of Jesus.

**In the Kingdom
of God, love is
more valuable
than gold.**

What is one story of Jesus' healing touch that you can remember?



A New Family

In Jesus' Kingdom, *all* people are related to one another when they love one another: "[For] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus constantly breaks through society's divisions to bring everyone into his family, including the following:

Women. Jesus talked to women in public all the time—his disciples "were amazed that he was talking with a woman" at the Samaritan well (John 4:27). Jesus touched women to heal them, and he was touched by them in return. Jesus taught women and had them among his disciples. And women, who were not thought to be reliable witnesses, were the first witnesses of the **Resurrection**.

Sick people. Jesus challenged the notion that all sickness was the result of sin. He touched the sick and healed them. Over and over, the religious leaders charged Jesus with breaking the command not to work on the **Sabbath** because Jesus healed people on that day. Jesus said that having compassion for the suffering "keeps the Sabbath holy," but ignoring them to honor God does not.

Sinners. Jesus frequently associated with sinners and even ate at their homes, an act that would have made him ritually unclean. Likewise, he forgave sins—an act punishable by death. On the other hand, Jesus said that the ones who think they are holier than everyone else are also sinners because they sin by scorning others.

Rich and powerful people. Jesus must have known that the top of the pyramid can be a lonely place. He challenged rich and powerful people to give up their wealth and power—not just to benefit poor and oppressed people, but because doing so would allow those who are rich and powerful to love. In the Kingdom of God, love is more valuable than gold.

Resurrection The bodily rising of Jesus from the dead on the third day after his death on the cross and his burial in the tomb.

Sabbath The weekly day of rest to remember God's work through private prayer and communal worship.

Enemies. Jesus even wanted to bring our *enemies* into the Kingdom of God. He said people should respond to violence not with retaliation but with love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44). This is a hard saying for people to accept even today because it seems to be the way of weakness. In fact, the power of love is stronger than the power of violence.

Love’s Surprise: The Cross and the Resurrection

As we have seen, the mission of Jesus was to take a world built in large measure on selfishness and turn it upside down to make it a world built on love. But the people in power feared Jesus’ new Kingdom based on love. They were afraid of a man who questioned everything about how the world works, everything that made sense to them. In a world based on Jesus’ teaching, how would they fare? In fact, love multiplies God’s goodness for everyone—but

their deep fear kept them from understanding that truth, so they sought to kill Jesus.

Jesus could have avoided suffering and death by giving up the mission God had given him. After all, he was afraid of pain, suffering, and death just like any other human being. But Jesus was totally committed to following the will of his Father, which is for people to love one another as God has loved them. Jesus loved God and humanity completely, even though this meant that some people would cause him to suffer and die. On the cross, Jesus gave up everything he had for the sake of love. He lived out the will of his Father through his loving sacrifice for us, and, in doing so, restored the relationship of all humans with God.

That was not at all what the political leaders expected to happen; the Resurrection was a complete surprise to them. But to those who believed, it was a sign that God, through his Son, had succeeded in turning the world upside down. Unselfish love, not selfishness, led to goodness, joy, and life.



Recall a time when you were surprised by love. If you cannot think of a personal experience, think about a way you or someone you know might like to be surprised by love.

Read the following statements:

- God alone can bring justice to the world.
- Humans can bring justice to the world on their own.

Do you agree or disagree with each statement? Why?

It is through the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ that people receive the grace to follow him by loving God and neighbor, even through suffering. In loving God and neighbor, they live in Christ and become more fully images of God, whose love never runs out, even though it is constantly given away.

The Story Continues

Christians believe that the source of compassion is the Holy Spirit alive and moving within us. God gave himself to humanity in Jesus, and Jesus continues to give all of himself—his Body and Blood—to his followers in the Eucharist. Just as the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus, those who receive the Eucharist with open hearts are changed as well. They are called to become like Jesus, giving themselves in love for the goodness of the whole world. Responding to the call of grace unites us more closely with God, who makes it possible for us to work for God's justice in the world.

Of course, it is easy to talk about the *idea* of justice; responding to God's grace by *doing* justice is a messier matter, one that requires good supplies of imagination, creativity, endurance, courage, and hope. Yet we seek it anyway, because, in doing so, we find the true joy that comes only from being united in love with God and one another.

For Review

1. Why did the Son of God become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ?
2. What is the Kingdom of God?
3. According to Jesus and the prophets, how is true love for God best shown?
4. Briefly explain how Jesus invited each of the following groups of people into the Kingdom of God: women, sick people, sinners, rich and powerful people, enemies.

To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, the face of Jesus.

—Pope Francis



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