
SESSION FIVE



Practicing the Compassionate Life

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

THE FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

At our last meeting each of us agreed to try one of the exercises in the Charismatic Tradition. Let's share our experiences by answering the following question:

What did you learn about God and about yourself while doing the exercise?

After a few minutes of silent prayer, open with a time of sharing that the leader begins by reading this opening paragraph and answering the question posed.

JESUS AND THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE

Gospel Passage: Matthew 25:31–46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the

When everyone has had a chance to respond, ask a member to read this Scripture passage.

king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Reflection Question

Have you ever been a stranger? Describe some of the feelings you had. Did anyone welcome you? Describe that experience.

After a brief discussion, choose someone to read this section.

THINKING IT THROUGH

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is a powerful indictment of those who neglect the needy. Though it reads like a parable, it actually describes the future judgment of all the nations. Jesus uses a simile ("He will separate people one from another *as* a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats") to give us a mental picture of what that reckoning will be like. Jesus, like a shepherd, will separate all people into two groups: those who cared for the needs of the hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, or jailed; and those who did not.

One detail about the judgment towers above all others: Jesus tells his listeners that when they have (or have not) cared for the needy, they have (or have not) cared for *him*. When Jesus blesses the first group, they are surprised and ask, "When did we see you . . . ?" They remember helping the needy, but they do not recall serving food to Jesus in a soup kitchen, or giving water to Jesus in the desert, or welcoming Jesus into their fellowship, or buying clothes for Jesus during a recession, or caring for Jesus in a nursing home, or visiting Jesus in a penitentiary. Though the second group never did these things, they offer the same plea: "Lord, when was it that we saw you . . . ?" Jesus then delivers his powerful punch line: he says, in effect, "Truly I tell you, just as you helped [or did not help] the people who needed it the most, you helped [or did not help] me." Jesus' reply stresses that when we serve the needy, we actually serve him.

The picture of the judgment becomes all the more vivid when we note that both groups call Jesus "Lord." But in Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." The judgment standard is not that they recognize Jesus as Lord, but rather that they do the will of God by meeting the physical and spiritual needs of Jesus' family.

We may be tempted to turn this teaching into a law that we must follow or a dogma that says we can become friends with God by doing good deeds ("works righteousness"). Here we must be careful. Martin Luther said that "Christ did not free us from the law; he freed us from a wrong understanding of the law." The "wrong understanding" that Luther refers to is the belief that we can restore our relationship with God by observing the law, or by doing good works. Christ frees us from these soul-killing notions. But the fact that we have been saved by grace through faith—"this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"—does not free us from our responsibility to do God's will (Eph. 2:8). In fact, our faith increases, not decreases, our responsibility. We are not free to neglect the needy. We cannot hide under our "faith umbrella" and neglect those who need our help. Jesus told his disciples about the final judgment, and the account has been passed on to warn us that he expects more, not less, from those who call him "Lord."

Besides the six groups of needy people mentioned in Matthew 25, who else fits into the "least of these" category?

Reflection Question

GOD AND THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

God cares deeply about how we treat one another. When asked which commandment in the law is greatest, Jesus responded, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40). As we discussed in Session 3, the commandments are God's instructions to us: he gave them to us so that we know how to act. The call to love one another is grounded in God's love for us. God loves us, so we should also love one another (1 John 4:11). Jesus too said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). God reveals his love for us through the commandments and the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and he expects us to respond by loving him and one another.

When we look at the call to practice social justice from God's perspective, we see it much differently. Each and every human being—in fact, the entire universe—is a precious work of God. The book of Proverbs tells us, "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him" (Prov. 14:31). If we could see the world through the eyes of God, we would look through a filter of compassion. God cares about our needs, our hurts, our brokenness. He understands our sinfulness—it does not shock or surprise him. And instead of judging us, God is ready to forgive, to heal, to restore us. We are all precious in God's sight, and the Lord longs for us to see others as he does—priceless, unique people who need love and compassion.

Have one member of the group read this entire section.

Jesus lived a life of compassion for “the least.” He mended and cared for the sick, he forgave the sinful, and he shared meals with prostitutes and tax collectors. Yet his compassion never undermined his sense of justice. Rather, he blended the two together. His love of God led him to grab a whip and throw out the merchants in the temple. When faced with injustice, Jesus fought against it with a holy passion. In Isaiah God states that “I the LORD love justice” (61:8). Numerous Old Testament prophets proclaimed the justice of God by addressing certain nations and their treatment of the poor and oppressed. The Psalmist declared, “The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed” (Ps. 103:6).

God desires that we “give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute” (Ps. 82:3). In the words of the prophet Micah and others, he *tells* us how to live:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

And in the person of Jesus Christ God *shows* us how to live.

Reflection Question

Allow each person a few moments to respond to these questions.

Have you ever been unjustly treated? Have you seen another person being oppressed? How did you respond?

As before, have a member read this entire section.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION?

As we saw in the last section, Jesus distilled the law into two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. According to Luke’s Gospel, a fellow Jew then asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered the question by telling him a parable about a person whom the Jews considered unclean—a Samaritan—who stopped to help a man who had been robbed, stripped, beaten, and left beside the road to die. A Jewish priest and a Levite had seen the needy man but had passed by him without bothering to stop and help. The Samaritan, when he came along, treated and bandaged the man’s wounds, boosted him onto his own animal, took him to an inn, cared for him for a day, and then paid the innkeeper for his extended care. After telling the parable, Jesus asked the questioner, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man?” and he responded, “The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (10:29–37).

The Social Justice Tradition has always been integral to the life of the Church, emphasizing our responsibility and mandate to love our neighbor. Throughout the history of the Church men and women have dedicated their lives to caring for the hungry, the poor, the naked, the alienated, the sick, and the imprisoned. Their influence upon the Church has been dramatic. For example, the Salvation Army has extended a helping hand to our poor

and needy inner-city neighbors for over a century. Mother Teresa's Sisters of Mercy pick up destitute people from the streets of Calcutta, nurse the sick back to health, and help the dying leave this world with dignity. World Vision and other relief efforts send food and medical care to people who would starve to death or die of disease without help. These touching, genuine, compassionate responses to human need—and others too numerous to mention—testify to God's tender love.

Often the compassionate response demands more than a shipment of food or medicine, however. There is an old proverb that says, "Give a man a fish, and you have fed him for one day; teach him to fish, and you have fed him for a lifetime." Many times bringing justice into a situation goes beyond temporary assistance; it involves helping people learn skills so that they can support themselves. The poor and the homeless need not only immediate food and shelter, but also ongoing help to overcome their plight. Many societal structures and institutions actually oppress needy people by denying them access to certain occupations, job promotions, essential services, educational opportunities, adequate housing, and more. Christ calls us to fight policies that discriminate on the basis of external appearances such as race and gender and social backgrounds such as class and religion, and to stand against societies and governments that oppress their people by denying them basic human rights. The Social Justice Tradition has always called the Church to work for equity in all human relations and social structures. So must we if we truly love our neighbor.

What are some factors that keep us from getting involved in social justice activities?

Reflection Question

Give each member a chance to respond to this question if he or she wishes.

PRACTICING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

One of the most remarkable aspects of practicing the Social Justice Tradition is its double effect: in the process of helping others, we too are helped. John Wesley once said that true happiness comes from helping others. We begin the task of "carrying one another's burdens" out of compassion, but in the end we find that we too have been truly blessed.

There is, however, a pitfall we should be aware of before we enter into any project of service as part of practicing the Social Justice Tradition. In his book *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Foster notes the important difference between self-righteous service and true service (pp. 128–130). He lists nine points to consider as we engage in works of compassion:

- Self-righteous service relies on human effort, whereas true service flows out of a relationship with God. Listen to the promptings of God as you begin and lean on his strength to do the task.

Again, choose a member to read these paragraphs.

Have different members of the group take turns reading the following list.

- Self-righteous service is impressed with the “big deal,” whereas true service makes no distinction between the large and the small. Be indiscriminate in your choice, knowing that God often considers the small task the most important.
- Self-righteous service requires external rewards, whereas true service rests contented in hiddenness. Avoid doing things for others as a means of getting applause or reward, relying instead on the divine nod of approval.
- Self-righteous service is concerned with results, whereas true service is free of the need to calculate them. Do not let your expectations guide your service, and do not be disappointed if your service effects no external change.
- Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve, whereas true service is indiscriminate in its ministry. Be careful not to neglect the poor and the lowly in favor of the rich and powerful—or vice versa!
- Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims, whereas true service ministers on the basis of need. Do not let your feelings, which ebb and flow, determine your actions; rather, let the service discipline your feelings.
- Self-righteous service is temporary, whereas true service is ongoing. Compassion is a way of life that spontaneously meets human need, not merely an occasional helping hand.
- Self-righteous service is insensitive, whereas true service withholds as freely as it gives. Listen with tenderness and patience before you begin. Be sensitive to what people really need, not merely what *you* think they need.
- Self-righteous service fractures community, whereas true service builds community. Be careful not to let your “good works” become debts that others must repay. Direct your efforts toward building unity in the community.

These guidelines will be extremely important as you do one of the following acts of service. The best way to start your task this week is to begin with this simple prayer: “Lord Jesus, show me someone whom I can serve.” God loves to answer this prayer.

EXERCISES IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION1. *Write a kind, encouraging letter.*

This may seem like a small task, but it can work miracles. Take time to write a letter that tells someone how important he or she is to you. We seldom let people know how much they are appreciated. Or perhaps you know someone who is struggling with something—a decision, a failed marriage, a disappointment. Write a letter that tells him or her that you care and that you are available to talk or listen. “Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up” (Prov. 12:25).

Have each member read over the exercises silently, or have members read them aloud, one at a time. Spend a few moments considering them as each person chooses the exercise he or she will do before the next meeting.

2. *Volunteer to help at a local food bank or soup kitchen.*

Relief efforts and service organizations always need helping hands. Look in the telephone book or ask someone in your church for the name of a food bank or soup kitchen. Call and volunteer to help in any area. Such organizations usually need workers to stock shelves, serve food, clean storerooms, do clerical work, and undertake other such tasks. A few hours of your time will be greatly appreciated.

3. *Guard the reputation of another person.*

Although you cannot see it, a person’s reputation is valuable, and you can guard and protect it by refusing to gossip or backbite. Paul urged Titus “to speak evil of no one” (3:2a). By refusing to take part in discussions that focus on half-truths or fault-finding, you can contribute to the death of a rumor or criticism. If people you are talking with start to say things that are gossipy or critical of someone, smile and gently say, “We don’t know that’s really true, do we?” or “That doesn’t sound like him [or her] at all.” Then simply change the subject. Your gentle demeanor and response in protecting another person’s valuable reputation can help others become aware of the harmful nature of their words.

4. *Look for an injustice and address it.*

If you open your eyes, you will begin to see areas in your home, workplace, community, and church that support injustice. As a first step, examine yourself to make sure that you are not looking for a speck in your neighbor’s eye and overlooking the two-by-four in your own (Matt. 7:3–5). In other words, ask yourself, “Am I doing something that oppresses someone else?” Look for ways you might be taking advantage of someone, abusing that person’s kindness, or stifling his or her growth. After a thorough self-examination you will be more able to look at the injustice around you.

You should always avoid advising people on a problem or condemning them for their actions, but if you are true to the task of addressing injustice, you will—at some point—need to voice your concern. For example, if someone in your workplace is doing something unethical (perhaps lying to customers about a product), you can bring

the issue up with your coworker in a calm, tactful, and non-accusatory manner. Remember, the goal is not to hurt people but to see justice reign.

5. *Take a stand.*

Is there racism, sexism, or some other form of discrimination in a club or a business or a community or an institution that you need to address? If so, discuss with the Spiritual Formation Group what your response should be. If your action involves some form of civil disobedience, engage in it peacefully, prayerfully, and compassionately. Be sure that the other members of the group support you with prayer and other appropriate actions.

ENDING AND BEGINNING

Allow each member time to share which of the above exercises he or she plans to do during the week. Encourage each other in this venture. After everyone has shared, join hands in a circle and pray the Lord's Prayer aloud and in unison.

Ask for a volunteer to lead the next meeting.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 Thy will be done,
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread;
 And forgive us our trespasses
 As we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.
 Amen.