

# Be Holy

Does the Bible contain the rules to live by that will protect us from experiencing or inflicting pain? Are the people who read it more perfect than they were before they knew what was in it? What about the church? Does this book have some magic formula that makes a community of people nicer to one another and more enlightened? Today's passages contain many instructions given by various people to others who seek guidance. But we miss the point if we read their words as a simple formula for living rather than a vision for who God is in our midst.

## Focus scripture: Luke 6:27–38

People get different things from the Bible. Part of this is because of the diversity in the Bible itself; part of this is influenced by what people are looking for when they approach it. Perhaps the reader wants to know about the history of God's people? Perhaps, the reader wants hope in a time of personal trial. The Bible gives a variety of narratives, advice, comfort, and challenge. Many of the passages are not new ideas but responses to the wisdom and events of the time in which they are written. This makes the Bible an interesting read when we look to its words for insight into our times.

How do we know that people read, related to and used scripture differently? It's in the stories themselves. What do we get throughout the Bible? Everywhere, we see God-fearing people quoting scripture and relating it to the context of their own lives. Jesus was a master of Hebrew Scripture and of contemporary wisdom. In Luke 6:27–38, Jesus relates to the wisdom of the day and interprets God's commandments for his time. Jesus teaches disciples that It's not enough to love what is easy to love. We must love as God loves – as a gift freely given, regardless of the worthiness or response. Jesus continually pushes his followers to greater and greater depths of compassion and to higher and higher visions of love and inclusion.

Jesus understood scripture developmentally. He pushes us to move to the next stage of spiritual maturity. To hear stories and instructions with new ears, to meet characters with empathetic eyes. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" is a call to delve into our own vulnerability to see our mutual need for forgiveness, healing, and restoration. The line echoes earlier scriptural lessons to be holy because God is holy. That is a lofty

vision. The imperatives of this Sermon on the Plain set high standards, but Jesus is not asking us to be perfect on our own. Our holiness cannot be achieved alone but only through a merciful relationship with one another. Holiness, as God has created as our birthright, is wholeness, we cannot do it apart from divine love and all it's beloved.

"Come closer to me," Joseph says to the brothers who betrayed him but now seek his help in **Genesis 45:3–11, 15**. Mercy is not something given from afar. It is an act that requires coming to terms with our own vulnerability as well as our power as we draw back into intimate relationship with others. Joseph kissed and wept over his brothers as he offered mercy to reset their relationship. And then with Joseph as one of them again, they all talked as brothers.

Sometimes the path to holiness, the way to offer mercy, is not by what we do but by what we do not do. **Psalm 37: 1–11, 39–40** reminds us to contain our reactivity. "Do not fret" over the actions of others, and refrain from anger when it is unproductive and not directed towards the reconciliation of those who shall live long and peacefully in the land.

**1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50**. God has planted a seed in all of us. We have yet to know the full beauty and perfection of the body into which this seed will grow.

• • • • •

"Be holy, be perfect" is only attainable for the whole of God's creation. In our vulnerability, we find holiness together. As we strive to grow into the people God imagines us to be, as we follow the commandments and the way of Jesus, let us remember that what we will become is more beautiful than what we can imagine because it is God who has created us.



### Focus scripture

**Luke 6:27–38**

### Additional scriptures

**Genesis 45:3–11, 15**

**Psalm 37:1–11, 39–40**

**1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50**

**Merciful One,  
Holy God, inspire  
us to deepen our  
vulnerability so  
that we may be  
more merciful and  
holy in your im-  
age. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



## The Focus for Adults

This week's focus passage picks up where last week's reading left off; both readings are excerpts from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Last week, the focus was on the idea being a "blessing." The reading this week is more difficult because Jesus talks about loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, etc.

It is important to realize here that it is not our perfection that makes us more like Christ, but our compassion. There are many situations in life when when we naturally feel compassion towards others, when we encounter someone in pain or grieving, for example. Responding compassionately is much harder when we perceive that someone

has hurt or slighted us in some way. It's harder to recognize their humanity, and it's easier to lash out.

Compassion arises from a recognition of our shared humanity and vulnerability. Jesus call us to love the person who has hurt us, to be kind to them, to renounce violence and to work for healing and justice. When we admit the truth of our vulnerability and need for others, we can be more "holy" in the sense of being connected and a part of the whole. Pray that your group will open themselves to the wisdom of Jesus and be willing to explore how the tensions and conflicts that so often disrupt our relationships might be healed through love and compassion.

## Prepare

### Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Genesis 45:3–11, 15; Psalm 37:1–11, 49–50; Luke 6:27–38; 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 79).
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Set a worship space with green fabric, an open Bible, and a candle.
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 8) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 8), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca).

### Gather

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "God Is Our Shelter" (p. 18 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #12 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

### Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Speaking Peace:** copies of resource sheet "[Speaking Peace](#)"
- ❑ **Peaceful resisters:** copies of resource sheet "[Peaceful Resisters](#)"
- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** nothing extra required

### Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "I Am Sent by God/*Enviado Soy de Dios*" (p. 20 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #5 on *Seasons Music CD*, , Vol. 8).
- ❑ Bring copies of [biblical background](#) material for March 3 (p. 85).



# Be Holy

## Scripture

Luke 6:27–38

**FOCUS** To explore Jesus' call to love our enemies and work for peace

## Gather

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

### Opening ritual

**Gather** in the worship space and light the candle.

**Pray** Form two groups to read Psalm 37:1–11 as an opening prayer, alternating verses.

**Sing or listen to**, if possible, the song "God Is Our Shelter" (p. 18 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #12 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

### Making Connections

- **When have you been driven by a vision of perfection either for yourself, your community, or for others?**
- **When have you experienced the mercy of another person? When has mercy been asked of you?**

## Engage

### Setting the scene

Remind participants of the setting of last week's reading. Jesus has just come down from a mountain where he went off by himself to pray. The disciples are with him. He finds a crowd of people waiting for him. Today's reading picks up where last week's reading left off. Ask a volunteer to read Luke 6:27–38.

Jesus makes controversial demands in regards to how to treat those who believe and act differently: Love your enemies. Sustain all regardless of your judgment of them as good or bad. Be merciful for God is merciful. Jesus turns our focus from an obsession with perfection to a posture of compassion.

- **What do you think about what Jesus says to do? Do you think it is possible? Could you do any of these things?**
- **Why do you think Jesus says these things?**
- **When was a time you saw the humanity in the position of your opponent?**

Invite someone else to read verses 33–36 aloud and then ask

- **Why do you think Jesus says we should love everyone, not just our friends and families, or people who can help or love us back?**

In Jesus' time and culture, people believed that God punished people who were bad and rewarded people who were good. But Jesus told them that God loves everyone, even those who are ungrateful or who seemingly don't "deserve" it. Then he said we should be like God.

- **In what ways can we be like God?**
- **Does loving someone who has hurt you always mean staying in relationship with them?**
- **Does "turning the other cheek" mean letting people walk all over you?**
- **When might it be okay to end a relationship with someone who is hurting you? What might "love" mean or look like in a situation like this?**
- **Make a list of ways you can foster compassion for people you feel a need to judge.**

Invite another person to read Luke 6:37

Jesus says if you don't judge or blame others, God won't judge or blame you; if you forgive someone, God will forgive you.

- **What do you think about this? Do you think God really treats us the way we treat others?**
- **What about forgiveness? Do you think God forgives us, even when we can't meet the high standards that Jesus sets?**

**Other readings** Psalm 37:1–11, 39–40 “Do not fret,” the life of your enemy is too short to waste your life on, writes the psalmist. Spend time meditating and observing your thoughts.

- **What can you do to redirect the energy you use to fret on things out of your control?**
- **If you meditate, what thoughts keep coming up? How are they related to things and people you cannot control but wish to change?**

**Genesis 45:3–11, 15** When Joseph sees his brothers, he expresses concern for their father, but his brothers are dismayed to see him even though they need his help.

- **Describe a time you experienced complex feelings in an encounter with a person you knew.**
- **How did you work through your feelings in order to offer mercy or be reconciled?**

### Making life connections

“What you sow does not come to life unless it dies,” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50.

- **When did you have to let go of something in order to grow, to be who Christ intended?**
- **What seeds of God’s grace are being sown in your life? In your church or community?**

---

## Respond

---

Choose from the following activities:

- ❑ **Speaking peace** Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Speaking Peace](#).” Invite participants to read it on their own, or invite a volunteer (or two) to read it out loud to the whole group. Discuss the questions on the bottom of the resource sheet together.
- ❑ **Peaceful resisters** Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Peaceful Resisters](#)” and allow time for people to read it, or invite a volunteer, or several, to read it out loud. Invite discussion. What do members of your group think of the idea of non-violent resistance? During WWII and subsequent conflicts, young men who refused to fight were referred to as “conscientious objectors,” though often much more angry epithets were hurled at them. Do you know anyone who has refused to fight in a war



on moral grounds? What did that person do? What consequences did they suffer? If a draft was declared imposing a term of mandatory military service on “eligible” persons, what would you do? Do you think a war can ever be “just”? What situations other than war might call for “non-violent” resistance? How might you participate?

- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** *Lectio divina* or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice of meditating on scripture. Invite participants to engage in a reflection on the following passage. Read **Luke 6:27–32**. Listen to these words in the context of the day ahead of you, or behind you. Write down your thoughts on those connections. Offer prayer that attends to the movement you hear in this passage and in your life. If time is limited, encourage participants to use this discipline to guide their devotion time at home.

---

## Bless

---

**Gather** around the lit candle again. Invite participants to consider silently a word or thought from this session that has been difficult for them to hear. What might God be speaking to them through this word or thought?

**Sing, or listen to**, if possible, the song “I Am Sent by God/*Enviado Soy de Dios*” (p. 20 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #5 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

**Pray** the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 79).

**Distribute** the [biblical background](#) materials for March 3 (p. 85).

---

## Reflect

---

How did the group react to the idea of non-violent resistance?



# Speaking Peace

“Peace requires something far more difficult than revenge or merely turning the other cheek; it requires empathizing with the fears and unmet needs that provide the impetus for people to attack each other.”  
 – Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*

Mother Teresa wasn't wrong when she said, "if we have no peace it is because we have forgotten we belong to one another." Recently I listened to an insightful podcast interview with Johann Hari, who spoke of his work looking into addiction and depression. He states that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but connection. He says that tests on rats show they do not choose mind-altering substances when their world is joyful and connected, and they have a community around them. Hari also travelled the world interviewing groups, communities, and leading experts on the nature of depression. He discovered that connection is the critical missing piece that leads to depression also. People are getting more and more isolated when what we need is more and more community, a sense of belonging and purpose, and a knowing that we have a tribe who will back us up when we struggle.

I am reminded of a story of an Indigenous tribe who, rather than isolating one who has wronged the community, surrounds them for days on end, telling them all the things they love about them, reminding them who they really are, and restoring their place in the group. Have humans forgotten how much we need each other, and how we are all deeply the same? From the smallest of interpersonal frustrations to larger situations of war where it is hard to grasp how one human can treat another in such a way, we all forget that, indeed, we are all striving to meet internal needs that all of humanity share, and that are precious.

Imagine a young child runs away at a shopping centre. Might they be needing autonomy and freedom? Imagine someone screams at the driver of another car in a fit of road rage. Perhaps what they are really crying out for is consideration, and to be seen? Often

our expressions of unmet needs are tragic rather than productive. Through our actions we cry out, "Please help me meet my needs," not knowing how really to articulate those needs in a more constructive way.

Of course, it is easy to love that which is easy. But the call of Jesus is to stretch our spirituality and commitment well beyond what is comfortable for us. To be people of compassion and peace is a challenging road, and in no way is it for the faint hearted. The call to love those who hurt us is not necessarily an instruction to take whatever they dish out. We can have boundaries, and still set them in love. We can a child from running away and still help them meet their need for freedom. We can support another as they try to find a way to express their pain, without accepting abuse. The underlying key to it all is indeed love, compassion, and understanding. It is the call to look upon another's pain as just that: pain. This particular path takes an incredible commitment to stripping away notions of judgment, of right and wrong, of he should/she shouldn't... It is a call to a deeper understanding of how humans act when they are hurting, and to meet it with compassion and love.

In the world of the Nonviolent Communication movement, we challenge ourselves to live like a giraffe: big hearted and standing tall enough to look out over the chaos with our big hearts, rather than get embroiled in it. May your big giraffe heart be filled with compassion and understanding and may we each look upon each other with the mercy God offers us.

– Sarah Williamson  
 a Deacon of the Uniting Church in Australia, serving in Belairand Christ Church congregations, South Australia. Sarah is passionate about social justice and has been training for a number of years in the movement of Nonviolent Communication.



■ **If loving those who hurt us doesn't mean we have to take whatever they dish out, what other things can we do to bring healing, or to prevent similar situations from happening again?**

■ **What are some ways we can create peace to ourselves, and for others?**  
 ■ **Has there ever been a time when you have lived like a giraffe?**



# Peaceful Resisters

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

(Luke 6: 27–28)

**H**uman nature is drenched in the bloodstains of violence. But is this deeply embedded aggressiveness ineradicable? Are the bulk of humans, as Jonathan Swift put it, “the most pernicious race of odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth”? Psychologist James Hillman argues that, whatever else is true, humans are deeply addicted to violence, that the god Mars is still alive and well in the human psyche, and that to ignore our deep attraction to him is to remain in denial.

However, if we consider the examples of many spiritual mentors, mystics, and teachers throughout the ages, we discover there is another figure within that has scarcely shown its face on the social-political stage – that of the peaceful *anthropos* or spiritual human being. In the Gospels, in the visions of the ancient Hebrew prophets Daniel and Ezekiel, and in the writings of some of the Gnostics, this figure is called the Son of Man, a term that can be translated as “offspring of the human,” “the one like the person,” or the “emergent human being.”

In his studies on violence, philosopher René Girard explores the primal roots of human conflict, pointing out that people discovered how a community’s scapegoating of a designated victim brought about a temporary peace-inducing awe, a brief dispersal of the violence, and a continuation of the cycle. He argues that Jesus’ death exposed the futility of the scapegoat mechanism. The point is that violence as a deterrent to more violence hasn’t really worked...

## What Lies Deepest Within Us?

[A]lthough the image of the “beast” or self-serving, violent human resides within us, so does that of the spiritual *anthropos*, or child of divine creativity and compassion...

## Jesus and Non-Violence

In the case of Jesus, what stands out is his complete, unabashed commitment to non-violence. He refuses to retaliate in the face of the forces of Empire that are threatened by him. He chooses not to react with violence to the violence that is done to him and instructs his followers to put away their swords when he is arrested in the

garden. He forgives his enemies from the cross, and has compassion for them in their ignorance. The violence stops with him. Even when he expresses outrage in the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, his is a symbolic act of peaceful resistance that flows from a place of unity with the one he calls Father.

Though some may feel uncomfortable with the image of a tortured, crucified figure on a cross, we need to recognize that Jesus was *not* a victim. Jesus died because of the reaction of the power structures of his day to his radical acts and teachings. He was perceived as a potential insurrectionist by Rome and by the authorities of the temple system who were complicit with Roman occupation. But by “setting his face steadily toward Jerusalem” and confronting the Roman seat of power, he deliberately placed himself in the way of the Roman crucifixion machine that dealt brutally with troublemakers.

Jesus’ radical non-violence has to be brought together with his teaching on divinization (how to become what we already are – divine) so that we don’t end up with a passive version of non-violence. Jesus’ God is the active, evolutionary power of non-violent, non-punishing, non-retaliatory, emergent agape love embedded into the cosmos from its very beginning. Therefore, since this kind of love lies at the root of our being, it is time to get on with the works of peace. To move toward divinization is to open to a place where the innermost centre of the human intersects with the innermost of the cosmological divine. We and the divine within us can then become conjoined outpourings of peace, love, and creativity...

Love your enemies is as radical today as it was in ancient Galilee. Most political leaders who embrace conventional forms of Christianity ignore this saying because they consider it impracticable. The problem is that although peacemaking has been exemplified in the lives of our spiritual forerunners, it has not been lived out on a large scale on the socio-political-economic plane. Jesus’ way, and the way of peace in the major religions, is still pretty much an untried experiment.

Excerpted from *Arousing the Spirit: Provocative Writings*, copyright © Susan McCasling. Published by Wood Lake Publishing, 2011. All rights reserved. Used by permission.