



**As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”** LUKE 19:41–42

## Peacemaking and Nonviolence

**A**ctive, nonviolent, persistent, creative peacemaking is central to the Christian calling. Jesus’ way of love for enemies, the way of the cross, offers the world a way out of its addiction to violence, weapons, and war. From his astounding Sermon on the Mount to the way he refused to allow his followers to form him into a militant Messiah to the way he responded to his torturous passion, Jesus modeled a new kind of peacemaking in the face of injustice—a way that refuses to either withdraw in timidity or retaliate with violence.

Jesus does not bring his followers to a religion of personal salvation separated from the challenges of history, to a private world of prayer and devotions apart from the struggles of people. He calls his followers to the heart of the world with its burdens and tribulations. He teaches that God’s kingdom is here and now among us and that genuine peace must be founded upon truth, justice, freedom, and charity. He demonstrates how the image of God in each person enables us to acknowledge one another as sacred gifts endowed with immense dignity.

Proclaiming the peace of God’s kingdom, Jesus tells his disciples to renounce hostile retaliation, learning to love enemies and to struggle for justice with creative nonviolence. Peacemaking practices, rooted in his life and

teachings, show antagonists how to resolve situations of conflict, confront injustices without combativeness, reconcile people engaged in cycles of violence, and unleash the transformative power of love in action. By reading the prophets, the gospels, and the letters of Paul and Peter through the lens of his cross, we can become Christian peacemakers for the sake of our world today. The more that Christians embrace the Scriptures and become a community of peacemakers, the more attractive and credible the church will be as a witness of hope for all God's people.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- For what reasons are Christians called to be peacemakers in the midst of the world?
- How can becoming a peacemaking church lead to increasing credibility for the gospel today?

### **Peacemaking throughout the Scriptures**

Although many pages of the Bible speak of the reality of violence and war, visions of peace also abound. But, in Scripture, peace is more than an absence of conflict. Depending on the context, peace may refer to well-being, security, harmonious relationships, relief from oppression, and abundant life. It comes to us as a blessing from God, but it is also the goal toward which we must strive.

In its biblical context, peace is not an abstract term expressing an immaterial idea. Rather, it is dynamic and concrete. It must be sought in the international arena, within communities and families, and within one's deepest self. The antithesis of peace is the disorder and brokenness brought to the world by sin. Human selfishness and injustice, manifested by individual acts

or social structures, rupture the bonds of peace and deprive humanity of the well-being, security, and community that God desires for us.

In ancient Israel, the king was God's agent of peace through his concern for justice, his care for the poor, and his faithfulness to the order of creation. Likewise, the priests were mediators of peace by promoting true worship, and wisdom teachers facilitated peace through their instructions. These ancient institutions demonstrate that peacemaking cannot succeed without attention to just laws, economic fairness, and social responsibility. Despite the continual failure of Israel's leaders to establish peace, the prophets envisioned a time in which the instruments of war would be abolished and justice would fill the land. The reign of God's Messiah, anointed by God's own Spirit, would be an era of peace, brought about through a new temple, a new covenant, and a new creation.

Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Prince of Peace, the Messiah in whom all of God's promises are fulfilled. He announced the peace of God's kingdom in word and deed, calling his followers to be instruments of that peace. He proclaimed on the mountain: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9). The making of peace is a central aspect of the coming of God's reign and identifies followers of Jesus as members of God's family. Since peace is the product of the reign of God, it is not a human achievement but a divine gift. In Jesus' farewell discourse, he told his disciples that peace is his departing gift to them, a peace that the world cannot give (John 14:27). Yet disciples of Jesus must receive this gift and convey it to the world, showing others the way to experience peace in him.

Jesus himself lived in violent times. Yet he taught that the true battlefield, where violence and peace meet, is the human heart: for "it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come" (Mk 7:21). Those who accept the gospel of Jesus are able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God's mercy, becoming, then, instruments of reconciliation. The peacemaking ministry of Jesus in the world encountered continual resistance, and he warned his disciples that the church would experience the same struggle. When Jesus was preparing his disciples for their mission, he told them, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt 10:34). By this, he is not calling his followers to armed conflict against their Roman oppressors; rather, he is warning them that God's kingdom will encounter great resistance

from the supernatural powers of evil seeking to prevent the manifestation of God's peace. He wields the sword against the powers of selfishness and hatred, while struggling to inaugurate God's reign of peace.

Jesus consistently preached God's unconditional love, teaching his disciples to love their enemies, to repent and forgive, and to be abundantly merciful. As the influences of evil and sin sought to bind their human victims to a life of misery, Jesus demonstrated his power through divine forgiveness and healings. He marked out the path of nonviolence when he stopped the accusers of the woman caught in adultery from stoning her, and when, on the night before he died, he told his disciple to put away his sword. And Jesus walked that path to the very end. Ultimately, the powers of evil and sin led Jesus to the cross, where he defeated them through his self-giving love and offered his disciples the peace of his resurrection.

The battle is ongoing between Christ present in his church and the powers of evil, manifested by hatred, injustice, war, and violence in the world. Although the victory has been won by Christ on the cross and his ultimate triumph is certain, disciples of Jesus continue the struggle through the ages. The era of peace promised by God is assured, but the church continually experiences determined resistance to God's reign in the world. The mission of the church is to carry forward Christ's peacemaking mission, the manifestation of God's kingdom of peace on earth as it is in heaven.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what sense is peace more than an absence of conflict and strife?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- In what sense did Jesus bring a sword to the world? In what sense is Jesus the embodiment of God's peace?

## Peace through Nonviolent Struggle

During the ministry of Jesus, the Jewish factions offered three different ways forward in the face of the Roman occupation: fight, flight, or accommodate. The Sadducees and priestly families chose accommodation, collaborating with their oppressors in order to maintain their own power and influence. The Essene community chose flight, withdrawing into the desert to form their own isolated community at Qumran. And the Zealots chose to fight, which resulted eventually in violent devastation. Jesus knew that these ways were ineffective and inevitably disastrous. When arriving in Jerusalem, he wept over it, lamenting that his own people did not understand “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42).

In contrast to these three dead ends, Jesus guides his followers along an alternative way, the path of active nonviolence. His way is not merely a tactical strategy but a way of being, an attitude of the heart that is unafraid to confront evil with the authority of God’s truth and the strength of divine love. Jesus opposes both passivity and violence as responses to evil, and he teaches a way in which evil can be opposed without being mirrored. When Jesus exhorts his followers, “Do not resist an evildoer” (Matt 5:39), he is not advocating passivity; rather, he is urging them not to strike back against violence with violence. They must not retaliate with violence against anyone who does them harm.

By teaching and modeling this path throughout his life, Jesus shows his oppressed followers how nonviolent practices enable them to overcome docility, unsettle their persecutors, assert their own human dignity, and seize the initiative in the situation. The creative nonviolence of Jesus calls forth strength and courage in the oppressed, giving them new self-respect. At the same time, it robs oppressors of the power to humiliate and dehumanize their victims, while also unmasking the cruelty of the system that allows such oppression.

This nonviolent way is not just an act of defiance designed to confront an oppressor. It is also designed to change the oppressor’s heart. Rooted in Jesus’ command to “love your enemies and pray for your persecutors” (Matt 5:44), the nature of creative nonviolence offers the opponent the opportunity of repentance. Loving respect for one’s opponent avoids not only external physical violence but also the internal violence of the spirit. Love of enemies allows

for the separation of the deeds from the doers, the evil act from the person, allowing for the possibility that the doers of evil may change their behavior and perhaps also their beliefs.

Violence is a great deceiver: it tries to convince us that it is the only way to protect oneself, that power grows out of the barrel of a gun, that military conflict is the only way to defeat a tyrant or win lasting change. But when we study the teachings of Jesus and his apostles, we never find an exception to the constant teaching that disciples must refrain from violence. Countering violence with violence leads to greater suffering, including more deadly conflicts, terrorism, crime, human trafficking, refugees, environmental devastation, and many other evils. Violence cannot be a cure for our broken world, it never achieves anything of lasting value, and it never comes from God.

Practicing nonviolence goes deeper than simply abstaining from violent words and behavior. It involves a positive call to action as well as a change of heart. It means overriding the impulse to be vengeful and cultivating compassion at every possible opportunity, even toward those with whom we strongly disagree. Nonviolence is active in its resistance to injustice, not passive; vocal in its engagement, not silent. It is a force more powerful than violence, an effective weapon for women and men, young and old, able-bodied and disabled, rich and poor, a weapon that dignifies the ones who wield it.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What forms of violence persist in my behavior and in my heart?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How is nonviolence a more effective weapon against evil than violence?

### **Developing a Nonviolent Imagination through Bible Study**

As the early Christians discerned how to respond to the resistance and maltreatment they experienced, they were guided by the nonviolent life of Jesus. In the church's apostolic period, the followers of Jesus refused to join their Jewish compatriots in violent revolt against the Romans. In the face of persecutions, they suffered heroically with fidelity to their Lord and love for their enemies. Whenever the issue of military service and warfare was discussed by the theologians of the first three centuries, Christians were prohibited from participating because of the nonviolent character of the Christian faith. Their nonviolent resistance to evil and constancy in faith captivated the ancient world and gradually inspired mass conversions to Christianity.

Although, in later centuries, Christian believers have betrayed this central message of the gospel in many ways—participating in combat, persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination—we are called anew in every age to discern the wisdom of Scripture in order to take on the mind and heart of Jesus. Biblical scholarship in the twentieth century began to rediscover the clear nonviolence of Jesus through a contextual study of his teachings, and today, in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to read the New Testament without being astounded by the nonviolence of Jesus.

The life and teachings of Jesus have inspired movements of creative nonviolence in our modern times. Stirred by the Sermon on the Mount and the literature of other religious traditions, Mahatma Gandhi developed his way of nonviolence, which led to independence and greater justice for India. The faith of Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. led Americans to use the creative nonviolence taught in Scripture to bring about social justice and civil rights, while the nonviolent campaigns of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta secured advances for farm workers in California. Archbishop Oscar Romero and Fr. Rutilio Grande, SJ, were courageous proponents of nonviolent resistance in El Salvador, leading to their martyrdom, and the committed peacemaking of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu helped to overcome the racial injustices of South Africa. The leadership of Lech Walesa and the witness of Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko led to the nonviolent solidarity that ended the Communist oppression of Poland, and the peacemaking efforts of Leymah Gbowee and thousands of women, organizing prayer and nonviolent protests, led to an end to civil war in Liberia.



These heroic lives and movements, and countless more like them, prove that the peacemaking traditions of the Scriptures, when actualized with real-world issues of our day, provide practical ways of empowering people to work for a more just and inclusive society. Indeed, nonviolence can wrest power from an imperial power, gain civil and economic rights, overthrow dictators, and secure peace from warring factions. These people and movements demonstrate that nonviolence is not merely tactical behavior but a spiritual way of being. These heroes inspire others with God's universal and personal love to be unafraid to fight evil with the weapons of truth alone.

As we study these Scriptures, may we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words, and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people building nonviolent communities that care for all the children of God. Let us develop within ourselves the virtues of nonviolence so that we may become artisans of peace.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- How might studying the Bible develop within me a nonviolent imagination?
  
- What person or movement in my lifetime has inspired me to work for peace?

### **Prayer**

*Loving Creator of all people, who sent your Son to proclaim in word and deed the peace of your kingdom, send your Holy Spirit to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I begin this study of your inspired word. Let these sacred texts so transform my mind and heart that I may become a peacemaker in the image of Jesus. Help me to hope in a world freed from violence, to devote my energies to the task of making peace, and to unleash the transforming power of love in action.*