



# Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

# 13

Youth Ministry  
Discipleship -  
Compassion and  
Service

**Youth Ministry Training**  
**Lesson Thirteen: Youth Ministry Discipleship—Compassion and Service**

**Lesson Introduction**

**Session Overview**

- The Right Focus
- Open Our Eyes, Open Our Ears
- Refuse to be Consoled
- Responding: Prophetic Imagination

**Learner Objectives**

At the end of this session you should:

- Understand Jesus' witness and call to a life of compassion and service as not just an option, but a central calling for all Christians
- Identify the range of social issues in their own contexts that lead to suffering in their community and the world within their reach
- Identify strategies for helping youth learn to lament/mourn with those who suffer
- Articulate the practices of the church catholic (universal) that their own church might employ to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, particularly to those who suffer
- Articulate at least three practical next steps for nurturing a more compassionate youth group

**Introduction**

This session focuses on developing a compassionate view of the world from God's perspective and working to provide not only compassionate care but also peace and justice through the church.

**Lesson Body**

**The Right Focus**

It is becoming increasingly obvious to Christian youth that God's work in the world includes care for the proverbial widow, orphan and stranger (see Deuteronomy 24:17-18, Exodus 22:21-24; Matthew 25:31-46; James 1:27). Making disciples of all nations includes teaching the practices of compassion, service, and justice. However, we must guard against these acts of justice becoming a new works-righteousness; we show mercy because God first showed mercy to us.

Faithful youth ministry includes discussions of the temptations to avoid. When working with idealistic young people, youth workers will be particularly challenged by their temptations:

- To be heroic—try to save the world themselves
- To wallow in despair—“it's far too complex,” “I'm only one person”
- To forget that hope is in what God is already doing
- To allow youth to slip into the comfortable apathy of cynicism—“I can't believe that THOSE PEOPLE could do such a thing;” not confessing our own complicity

It helps to keep the focus on what God has done and is doing in the world around us in very practical, material terms.

### **Open our Eyes, Open our Ears:**

#### *Listening to the depths of exploitation in our world*

The pursuit of justice and reconciliation is at the heart of our Christian heritage, the foundation of our church and the life of holiness. We pursue justice when we let the oppressed go free, share our food with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our homes, clothe the naked and satisfy the needs of the afflicted (Isaiah 58). Living a Christian life involves being able to name injustice and to confront the powers that cause injustice. More importantly, living a Christian life involves being the kind of people that live God's justice and reconciliation practically in the world.

Historically the church has responded to the bodily needs of the community around them through what have been called the "Works of Mercy":

1. feeding the hungry
2. giving drink to the thirsty
3. clothing the naked
4. harboring the harborless
5. healing the sick
6. releasing the captives

Often, they can be used to categorize different ministries at work.

- Feed the hungry: Fair trade and the globalization of food
- Give drink to the thirsty: Lack of access to clean drinking water
- Clothe the naked: Sweatshops and the global garment industries
- Harbor the harborless: Homelessness and aid efforts for refugees
- Heal the sick: The unequal distribution of global health care to those who can pay for it
- Release the captives: The modern global slave trade

These works of mercy serve not only as individual practices but also as different lenses through which to see the injustices in our world. As we grow in the awareness of the problems, and the responses of different people, we begin to see options and opportunities where young people can enter into God's work with these issues. If you are looking for a place to start, many options are available through the Church of the Nazarene itself, both through Nazarene Compassionate Ministries ([www.ncm.org](http://www.ncm.org)) and The Justice Movement ([www.justicemovement.com](http://www.justicemovement.com)).

## **Refuse to be Consoled: Mourning with those who mourn**

Remember that in the very first book of the New Testament, the story of Jesus starts with a mother in mourning. “A cry of anguish is heard in Ramah—weeping and mourning unrestrained. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted—for they are dead” (Mt 2:18, NLT).

We are constantly tempted to seek easy consolation and quick fixes. We have little tolerance for pain and suffering. Mourning and lament are Christian practices that help us to connect the pain of the past with a hope for the future. Our rapid-paced, consumer, youth-oriented culture makes this very difficult for us. We have to learn how to pray, how to mourn with those who mourn. Jesus’ says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5.4).

Prayers often involve a range of responses toward God:

- praise and adoration
- thanksgiving
- confession
- repentance
- intercession

However, we must be sure not to neglect prayers of confession and repentance while moving on to intercessory prayers too quickly. Prayers of confession and repentance can help make the connections for your youth between the local/global injustice and their own passive/active participation in that injustice. Most of all, we need to spend time right now bowing before God, praying for hurting people and the needs they face.

## **Responding: Prophetic Imagination**

In *Compassion: A Reflection on Christian Life*, Henri Nouwen cautions that our actions on behalf of the poor should not come from a sense that we, as privileged people, “reach down” to people in need. We cannot think we are higher or better than others we assist. We do not practice compassion out of a sense of “pity” or polite sympathy upon people who failed to be as successful as we are. Instead compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there.

Compassion and service grow out of the heart of God and must spring up from who we are as Christians. Our actions of compassion and service are grounded in our worship of God and our calling to love one another. God calls us to pour ourselves out for other people in thanksgiving as Christ poured Himself out for us on the cross. God asks us to radically reorient our lives to make possible this kind of love. Just as Jesus invites us to the Lord’s table, He invites all to join together and be transformed. When we glimpse what God might do, much like the prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist, or even the apostles, we begin to “see,” to imagine a new way of addressing the poor, those needing justice, and respond accordingly. Our responses might include providing resources, or working with communities to develop their own strengths and resources, or we might be called in advocacy against policies and social structures that harm people and keep them poor. Regardless our ability to see the problem afresh, to envision what God might do through our efforts, remain crucial as needs change.

Christians are called to participate in God's justice as a response to God's grace, as a gift, as the fruit of the forgiveness we have received. We should not be so pretentious as to assume that we can end all suffering, as if it only took our creative and communal action to bring about God's justice. However, as Christians we are the Body of Christ, the hands and feet of the incarnated God who suffered on our behalf. We can be better witnesses to the justice of God already at work in the world by paying special attention to those who suffer most in our world.

Often, compassionate action responds to particular contexts based upon the needs of the people and the capabilities of youth. Context might call for specific ministries. Different circumstances or levels of need require different interventions. When people experience sudden crises (flood, fire, typhoon, or other natural disaster) often the response might include crisis care and even counseling to cope with the trauma. Specific, immediate resources often come through agencies that provide basic services, medical treatment, housing, and nurturing presence. Other circumstances may call for ministries that provide prevention and treatment ministries. Children suffering from natural disasters or poverty-ridden areas may need basic medical care or safe sanitation. In other contexts, compassion may take the form of basic education (vocational skills training) or enrichment (afterschool programs) that help develop methods for self-improvement or self-esteem. Finally, other context or situations may call for ministries of advocacy or empowerment working with people to gain a sense of agency and confidence in circumstances that seem to limit their options and opportunities. Often a key question might be: "what do God's people need in this circumstance to be able to live through the moment... first? Compassionate responses might include a blending of ministries; however, youth may be best suited in a given circumstance to help people at their most pressing need.

Overall ministries tend to reflect three basic approaches: provider, development, and advocacy. Provider ministries offer resources that help people in daily life. Young people serve in food pantries, sort for clothing ministries, and create crisis-care kits... providing basic resources for people who live in the day to day. Often these ministries provide the first line of direct care in areas suffering from immediate disasters or long-term struggles. Such ministries may be short term, strategic, and crucial during crises. Other ministries commit to more difficult situations that require longer commitments. Usually these ministries develop networks to replenish their resources. Vital in many settings, these ministries sometimes create a sense of dependency among the poor unless other approaches are used.

Development ministries attempt to change the basic circumstances of people, often providing resources or education that assist people to grow and improve their situation. Development ministries often take much longer than provider ministries and engage multiple areas of need such as life skills training, tutoring children after school, even providing micro-loans to start local businesses. Youth often serve as resource for these long-term ministries, serving alongside each phase of community effort, often learning from people who they assist through these ministries. Development projects often result in people who are able to reclaim their lives, finding new means to break the cycle of poverty in their community. Unfortunately, some projects falter as agencies realize there are forces that often restrict the people's ability to help themselves. The restrictions may come from local laws, the presence of economic forces

opposed to local development, unfair tax systems and other obstacles. Development alone may not be enough.

Advocacy ministries attempt to help people overcome obstacles either by confronting local restrictions directly or by mobilizing people to change their habits so that the poor have a better chance of improving their lives. Youth may take direct action by mobilizing people to overcome modern day slavery through education and fundraising to help children and young women escape their bondage. Youth may encourage people to purchase products created by local business that often do not enjoy special tax benefits like large corporations. In every circumstance, advocacy often help youth better understand and appreciate the plight of people they work with in compassionate action. Advocacy involves a clear desire to see all people experience justice and peace based upon God's love.

God pays special attention to the poor not because there's anything virtuous in being poor, but in part because they are the ones most often called upon to forgive. We see God's grace and forgiveness no more clearly than when we are with those who suffer—when we are among those who suffer. Enmesh your life in the life of those who regularly suffer most and you cannot help but see the evil powers and principalities that oppress. When we are with and among those who suffer, we do not need extra encouragement to act to resist the oppressive habits and structures that cause suffering. Consider for a moment:

Christians who seek to participate in the justice and reconciliation of God stand in a long tradition stemming at least back to the call of Moses to liberate the Hebrew slaves. Christians around the world have long been at the core of social movements pressing for justice, from the abolition of slavery to leadership in civil rights struggles, from contemporary campaigns to end global poverty to the creation of fair trade networks and an end to exploitative labor practices, from fighting against the traffic in global prostitution to calling for an end to the international debt that is choking the poorest of the poor to death.

You don't have to (although I might encourage you to) join an international debt relief campaign to begin to participate in the justice and reconciliation to which we have been called. You can start by beginning to see and be engaged in the change of oppressive habits that are in your own life.

Churches, schools and local businesses can be encouraged to buy uniforms from sweatshop-free garment companies; you might want to look into the labor and environmental practices of the companies where you buy your clothes. Young people can join efforts to bring about more affordable housing and more livable wages in their neighborhoods; you might want to find out if companies you or your parents (your church) work with pay their lowest-wage employees a living wage. We have to at least begin by making time to see those who are suffering in our community.

In every response we might first ask, how might I locally or globally, provide resources, assist development, or advocate with those needing assistance? Strategies may surface through each of these approaches (resource, development, and advocacy) that connect with the issues at hand.

In each case we must remember that we are working with God and God is already at work before we are. We have to remember that our motivation comes from Christ's love for the poor, not out of our sense of being "different" or "better" than those we help. Young people possess a great capacity to embrace those hurting, to mourn with them. Youth also possess great vision to imagine how God might work through them to raise resources, to create new opportunities, to resist forces that harm others. Our responsibility rests with assisting youth to both help other and alter the patterns of their lives so that we live and work together God's compassion and justice.

### **Application**

Research and summarize the realities facing those that are going hungry, thirsty, naked, etc. in our world either through websites, or through service groups within your community attempting similar efforts.

Create a lesson that encourages young people to show compassion without treating people as somehow less than the youth serving them. Focus on Christ's ability to identify and "suffer with" people in need. What scriptures might you use?

Identify one agency in your area that serves primarily as a provider ministry, one that offers community development, and one that serves as an advocate in your community. Explore how young people in your congregation might join with each of these ministries.

### **Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

*In what ways could you see increasing the role of lament/mourning in the prayer life of your youth group/congregation?*

*Imagine a Church where the people act as one. What might it look like in your community? How can you work with your youth/church to live justice in your world both locally and globally?*

*What practical steps do you need to take in your youth group to see through the eyes of Jesus and hear through His ears?*

*How can we cultivate our "prophetic imagination"? How does this impact the way we live? How does our "prophetic imagination" affect the way we worship? What would a Church that lives by God's "prophetic imagination" look like in practice beyond the walls of the church?*

*How will you help the youth in your ministry develop eyes to see and ears to hear the plight of the widows, orphans and strangers in their worlds? How might the worship life of your congregation change to more faithfully witness to God's concern for the widow, orphan and stranger in our midst?*



Nazarene Youth International

