

Youth Week Lesson: Chapter 5

Title: Living Lives Bigger than Ourselves

Students Should Learn:

1. Holiness is more than a series of personal behaviors; rather, it is characterized by a life lived for others.
2. To live one's life for others implies that one will seek justice for his/her neighbor and have compassion for the downtrodden.

Scripture Focus:

Isaiah 58:1–12

Micah 6:1–8

What You'll Need:

Bibles

Paper

Pens or pencils

Lesson Background:

I have two jobs in order to make ends meet. My calendar is a scribbled mess in my futile attempts to keep on top of the scheduled chaos. This does not include my occasional writing responsibilities; nor does it take into account the fact that I love spending time with my family, am planning a wedding, and like to pretend I have some semblance of a social life. I try to

exercise on a fairly regular basis, eat healthy, and do the occasional crossword puzzle to keep my mind sharp. I am involved with music at church, and I am a member of a community music group. I like to read and think and pray, all over a good cup of coffee. I have a full life.

Sometimes (and I have multiple examples which convince me of this), God plays jokes on me. I am not saying that God ever laughs at me *per se*, but I do think that God enjoys lining things up in my life in order to teach and prune. I call it a joke because sometimes it seems that just when the message is beginning to resemble a dead horse, God shows up around a corner with yet another reminder of that very thing with which I am wrestling.

As I already shared, I have a full life—all good things (OK, *mostly* good things), but it is very easy for me to get caught up in my own drama. I am the main character, and I perform monologues: Work. Family. Personal. Church. Repeat. So when I learned that I would be writing a lesson on holiness as living life *for others*, I had to shake my head and chuckle. This is the very thing the Holy Spirit has been whispering to my soul for some time now. OK, fine. You win. I have been around long enough to know that I am not the only one who lives life from one task to the next. It seems to me that the fabric of our culture is knit to promote such fast-paced living. I will never forget what one friend said to me. This particular friend is European, and he commented on our task-oriented culture (my paraphrase): “As I walk across campus, people say hello, but they never stop to have a conversation. This is foreign to me.” You know what? He is right. It is simply counter-cultural to slow down and deliberately live life in the presence of others, let alone *for* others.

In his book *Everyday Saint*, Jim Hampton challenges us to think about holiness in terms of loving our neighbor. He shows us that holiness cannot be separated from justice for our neighbors and compassion for the vulnerable. In today's world, justice and compassion are not only unfamiliar concepts, they are often misunderstood. Justice is more than the slamming of a judge's gavel. Compassion means more than listening to a friend in need. On the other hand, they are not ideals to which only the likes of Nelson Mandela and Gandhi can strive.

As Christians, we are God's own. We are in a relationship with the Lover of the universe; and as we become more like Christ, we see with new eyes what God sees. An encounter with another person is an encounter with Jesus. So really, how can we not seek to restore things to their rightful order (justice) and enter into the deepest hurts of our neighbor (compassion)? These are, in fact, the prime elements of hospitality—through justice and compassion, we are watching out for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. It is no wonder that throughout Scripture, the Lord exhorts His people to the very task of hospitality.

Growing up in the holiness tradition, I learned at a young age that holiness meant things you do and things you refrain from doing. Unfortunately, I can even remember being taught these lists! What resulted in my college years was a general confusion about the meaning of holiness. It is only through God's patient grace that I am coming to a more holistic understanding of what it means to be a part of a holy people seeking to live in God's Kingdom.

My guess is that many of our Youth today have the same misconception of holiness. We have a unique opportunity to teach our students in the ways of holiness: not a set of prohibitions and

mandates, but a life lived with the purpose of growing into our identity and calling as children of the King. The scripture passages in this lesson attack these common misconceptions head-on. In Isaiah 58, we read that our actions must be more than just “‘pushing a button’ to get God to act, or just a religious practice to appear holy” (Hampton 74). God describes the types of actions He desires; this means taking our religious practices outside the church and applying them to every area of our lives. Similarly, in Micah 6, we read that God does not desire our impressive acts of devotion. Rather, He desires that we seek justice and compassion—not because we want to feel good about doing “selfless” deeds, but because we cannot do otherwise.

So what does all this mean for me the next time I look at my crazy calendar? To be honest, I am not sure. For now, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit would nudge me to lift my eyes off the ground in front of me and, instead, encounter faces as I go through life. But this is bigger than just me (I knew the dead horse would appear again at some point). Imagine what would happen if we all took the time to engage in the daily practice of compassion and justice! Truly, in talking about these things, we are dabbling in a revolution the likes of which the world has not seen in over two thousand years.

So stop walking. Take a look around. Be who God created you to be and live a life that is bigger than you. And enjoy the journey as you invite your students to join you.

The Lesson

Starters

Play “Never Have I Ever”

In this modified version of the game “Never Have I Ever,” the idea is to lead students to think about the motivation behind their so-called “Christian” actions. Explain that you will announce a category. Within each category, allow two or three students to state something they have never done (see the following examples). Once a student states a “never,” anyone in the room for whom the activity *does* apply will get to eat an M & M or other such small candy. Use the following categories; feel free to add your own:

- **Foods** (ex: Never have I ever eaten sushi.)
- **Extreme Activities** (ex: Never have I ever been surfing.)
- **Travel** (ex: Never have I ever seen the Grand Canyon.)
- **School/Extracurricular** (ex: Never have I ever failed a math test.)
- **Charitable Activities** (ex: Never have I ever served in a soup kitchen.)
- **“Christian” Activities** (ex: Never have I ever read the entire Bible.)

Then discuss the following:

- **How did it feel when you got to eat a candy because you had completed an activity?**

Specifically, how did it feel to show you had completed a task in the last two categories?

(The idea is to help students recognize their own sense of righteous satisfaction.)

- **Would you say you try to do “good deeds”? Why or why not?**
- **Do you try to do “Christian” activities? Why or why not?**

In transition, say something such as, **In our desire to become holy people, it is natural to try and do good deeds. However, God calls us to more than merely doing our daily devotions and occasionally donating clothes to a charity. A defining characteristic of holiness is a life lived for others: seeking justice for our neighbors and compassion for the downtrodden.**

Main Course

Dig into scripture.

Invite students to turn in their Bibles to Isaiah 58:1–12. Explain that this passage was written at a time when Jerusalem was unstable. There was great separation between the rich and the poor; the religious people were sacrificing at the Temple, and then turning around and living decadent and even destructive lifestyles. Invite one or two students to read verses 1–12 aloud. Then go back and ask a student to re-read verses 1–5 aloud. After that discuss the following:

- **Describe the actions of the people.** The people appeared to be living good lives on the outside, fasting and seeking God. But their actions were merely convenient. They were turning around and exploiting people, fighting, and quarreling. Their religious behavior did not carry over into other areas of their lives.

- **What appeared to be God’s response and attitude toward these people?** God saw the self-righteousness in their actions. God was almost mocking the people’s hypocrisy (see verse 5).

Sum it up by saying something like, **These people performed all the right religious actions such as fasting and praying, but the rest of their lives did not reflect any concern for others. They treated each other poorly and were out for self-gain; yet they dared to question why God did not see and acknowledge their religious behaviors.**

Now invite a student to read verses 6–12 aloud. Then discuss the following:

- **Describe how God desires His people to live.** Direct students to verses 6–7 and 9b–10a: seek justice and freedom, provide for the downtrodden, accept everyone.

- **How do we normally view fasting? How does this passage change that notion?** In most Christian circles, fasting is seen as a personal, private act of devotion. However, what this passage calls “fasting” is a collection of very outward-focused actions done on behalf of others.

• **What is the result of this type of living?** See verses 8–9a and 10b–12: joy, healing, protection. The Lord will answer cries for help and provide guidance. The people will put down roots.

• **How does this passage fit the phrase, “Holiness should always result in a life lived for others” (Hampton 73)?**

Say, **Holiness is more than just a series of personal do’s and don’ts. As holy people who are called by a loving God, our response can be nothing other than to seek the well-being of those around us.**

Share the following from *Everyday Saint* (Hampton 76-77):

John Wesley, the father of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement and one of the most ardent supporters of holiness, would have loved this passage, for he understood that all of our money was given to us by God. It was not our money to do with as we pleased. It was God’s and He was simply entrusting it to us to do His work. Therefore, Wesley defined wealth as anything beyond the bare necessities of survival—food, clothing, and shelter. Everything else, according to Wesley was for the care of those who needed it most. Think about that—after you pay your rent, buy food, and pay for enough clothes to get by, everything else you earned would be for those in need. In fact, Wesley so strongly believed in the idea that God had entrusted His financial resources into our care that he believed that if we used those resources for ourselves instead of others, we were robbing God. For Wesley, it was an act of worship, for if we were worshiping only God, then our use of God’s resources would always be for others.

Discuss:

- **How do you feel after hearing this passage?**
- **What do you find challenging about these words?**

- **As a student who may not make much money, how might you apply these words to your life?**

Again, share the following from *Everyday Saint* (Hampton 77):

“One of the primary concepts this passage teaches us is this: Holiness can’t be relegated to just the religious areas of our life—church, youth group, mission trip, fall retreat, and so on. If it doesn’t impact our whole life—every single area—then it’s not really holiness.”

Ask, **What are some different areas of our lives? How might true holiness impact each area in the form of living our lives for others?** Invite students to respond.

Ask students to turn to Micah 6:1–8, and invite one student to read the passage aloud. Then discuss the following:

- **How is this passage similar to the Isaiah passage?** In both passages, the people were participating in religious activities—in this case, bringing a series of increasingly impressive offerings before the Lord. In both places, God called the people away from religious activity and toward a life lived for others.
- **What are the things you tend to bring before the Lord?** Help students identify their own “holy habits” such as Bible reading, daily prayers, singing worship songs, attending youth group, and so forth. In and of themselves, these are not bad things, but we cannot rely on them to define our holiness.
- **Specifically in this passage, to what does the Lord call His people?** See verse 8: to act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with God.
- **Micah 6:8 in *The Message* paraphrase says, “Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.” What might it look like to “be compassionate and loyal in your love”?**

Share the following excerpt from Henri Nouwen's *Compassion* as quoted in *Everyday Saint* (Hampton 80):

“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless.” Ask, **What are your thoughts on these words?** Explain that compassion calls us to invest our lives for the sake of others. If we have compassion for the vulnerable, it follows that we will seek justice for our neighbor.

Say, **Hampton defines justice as “recognizing that all people have things which belong to them and making sure they get to keep those things.” In other words, justice is about “[restoring] things to their rightful order” (Hampton 78, 80). What does this mean for you?**

Invite students to respond.

When you are ready to move on, say, **As we seek to live into our identity as holy people who are for others, we are called to seek justice and live with compassion.**

Afters

Re-write a passage of scripture.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils to students. Students should write *What would I bring?* at the top center of the page, *You know what is good: Justice* one-third of the way down the page, and *Compassion* two-thirds of the way down the page. Invite students to think about Micah 6:8; you may choose to re-read this verse from *The Message* paraphrase. Direct them to prayerfully fill in the spaces on the page in the following manner:

- **What are the specific “spiritual” practices that you bring before God on a regular basis?**

Remind students again that some of these might even be “good” practices such as reading the Bible, praying, or tithing. However, these things in and of themselves are not ultimately the signs of a holy life.

- **As one who is being made holy, how can you seek *justice* for others in your daily life?**
- **As one who is being made holy, how might you live a life of *compassion*?**

Invite a few students to share their thoughts with the rest. This might be a good opportunity to brainstorm together about changes that students can make in their lives to seek justice and compassion in everyday situations.

Closing

Close in a time of guided silent prayer:

We seek justice for our neighbors.

We seek compassion for the vulnerable.

Father God, teach us to live our lives with an awareness of and love for others than can only come through our relationship with You. Amen.