

# Living the **Good** Life

## Session 5: **Choosing the World as It Should Be**

### Opening Prayer

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God of timeless wisdom  
and new beginnings,

Help us to imagine the world as it should be,  
and not be stuck in the way it is now.

Your Son came to wake us up to new possibilities  
and invite us to follow him.

Give us the wisdom and creativity to help you  
build your Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Visualize Goodness

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*Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.*

- As we have seen in this series so far, many factors can come between us and living the *Good Life*, or making a good decision in a difficult situation. Sometimes we tend to act out of our selfishness. We don't always focus enough on developing good habits and virtues. We don't recognize and learn from our past mistakes. We don't do enough to form our consciences. We aren't always thoughtful enough about our decisions.
- But another major factor that can particularly keep us from living the life that God wants for us: we may simply *lack imagination*. Often we can find ourselves trapped in situations with two unappealing options that we weigh back and forth in frustration. Through creativity and imagination, we can often find another way... a better way.
- Jesus frequently pulled a "third way" out of his hat, both in the way he lived and in the stories he told. That is why he was so shocking, unconventional, and popular. We often don't appreciate just how surprising and unexpected his insights were in his own time.
- If we can't even imagine another way—God's way—then we can't live into it. This is why Jesus spent so much of his time talking about the Kingdom of God. Whenever we hear this phrase in the Gospels, it is Jesus helping us imagine the world as it should be... the world as God intended.
- Unconventional "third way" thinking is associated with other visionaries who changed the world. For example, consider demonstrators against racial segregation in the South during the 1960s. Instead of accepting the system or fighting back with violence, they protested non-violently. They sat at lunch counters, claimed the front seats on buses, and marched peacefully. That witness changed the conversation and changed the world.
- Living the *Good Life* is about creating a better world not only for us, but for all of God's people. Jesus invites us to help create an "upside-down" kingdom, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Sometimes it takes throwing away our assumptions to give us the imagination and freedom to do what is truly right.

## Reflection Questions

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① What examples can you share about situations where you have seen an unexpected response diffuse a situation in a positive way?

② Our faith teaches that we all participate in building God's kingdom on earth. In what specific ways does God want you to participate?

## You Have Heard It Said...

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*Read aloud the Gospel verses **Matthew 6:38-48** from a Bible, then continue with the following talking points.*

- Does Jesus want us to be cowardly doormats? This passage may be one of the most misunderstood of Jesus' sayings because we aren't familiar with the historical context and the subtleties of his directions.
- The typical responses to violence, oppression, or injustice are "fight" or "flight." Fighting seeks revenge and what we consider "justice." Flight involves running or otherwise avoiding the challenge. In *Engaging the Powers*, Scripture scholar Walter Wink argues that Jesus is offering a more empowering "third way" based in creative (and defiant) love.
- Did you notice the reference to the *right* cheek in this passage? Since the purity laws of Jesus' time only allowed striking a person with the right hand, this situation would require a backhanded slap (to connect with the right cheek). Jesus is describing an act of humiliation, only allowed against a person of an "inferior" class, race, gender, age, etc.
- Turning the *left* cheek meant the aggressor would have to then hit the person with a fist, treating the victim as an equal. So to turn the other cheek, in Jesus' honor-based culture, meant "You will not demean me. I am just as human as you are."
- What about the clothing? This is an all-too-common situation of a poor person who is down to just the clothes on his or her back. Poor peasants were shaken down for all they were worth by an unjust system. The creditor claims the outer garment, and Jesus encourages surrender of the inner garment as well, leaving the debtor naked!
- Nakedness was extremely shameful in this culture, but the greatest shame was put on the ones *causing* the nakedness or *viewing* it. This was another defiant act of protest, saying, "You might as well take everything," and laying bare the injustice.
- Going the extra mile relates a common resented situation in which Roman soldiers forced subjects to carry their packs for them. Abuse of this practice led to Roman laws that limited its use to only one mile and set potentially strict penalties beyond that.
- The Roman soldier would be immediately confused and thrown off balance. Is this cheerful person trying to help or trying to get me in trouble? Would he have to chase after this person to get his pack back?
- Needless to say, Jesus' suggestions in this passage would have brought loud gasps and/or laughter from his audience. What is common about his "third way" answers? In each case, he is replacing "fight" or "flight" with a completely unexpected, creative alternative that befuddles the aggressor and offers a chance for him to do the right thing. *This isn't right*, the actions say. *This isn't who you are*. *This isn't the world as it should be*.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What is your natural response when you are attacked or confronted in some way?
- ② How does this interpretation of the Bible passage affect how you view Jesus?
- ③ Where might you be invited to embrace a “third way” approach in your life?

## Discernment of Spirits

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- Perhaps you have seen a cartoon in which a person has a little angel on one shoulder giving good advice and a little devil on the other shoulder giving bad advice. It can feel that way when we are faced with significant decisions, except we can't see if the source has wings or horns on his head.
- The church offers specific wisdom about how to discern, especially from St. Ignatius of Loyola. You may have heard the term “discernment” casually tossed around, but Christian discernment is not as simple as just choosing what feels right.
- St. Ignatius teaches that the starting point is to understand where we are at in our relationship with God in general. Am I generally a good (though imperfect) person doing my best to live as a Christian? If so, you can expect positive feelings of peace, hope, comfort, encouragement, and strength to come from God (“the good spirit”).
- When we are in tune with God and heading in the right direction, negative feelings that disturb our peace with doubt, fear, confusion, or obstacles do not come from God. They come from the evil spirit, trying to throw us off course.
- But when we are already seriously off-course in life and not in tune with God, it will be God who will make us feel uncomfortable through our conscience to encourage us to take corrective action.
- St. Ignatius offers a process for paying attention to the movement of the spirits for those trying to live the *Good Life*. The key is to *invite God into the process*: to stop and listen so we can hear how God wants to lead us.
- We begin by praying for the grace to choose the option that is for “the greater glory of God,” not just what we want for ourselves.
- St. Ignatius encourages you to talk to someone else you trust about the decision. It is a bad sign if you are tempted to keep something secret, as the evil spirit likes to work in the dark.
- You may have nervousness, resistance, or doubts as you consider your options. Imagine that you've made the decision and pay attention to how you feel. Do you feel more peaceful, courageous, and settled? Or do you feel more confused and uncomfortable? The former is from God, the latter isn't. It can help to “try on” each option for a number of days.
- Then make a decision. Deeper peace and a sense of freedom will come if you chose well. “Peace is the confirmation.” This peacefulness will come even when making a decision that could make life more difficult for you. Feeling less at peace is a sign that you should reevaluate.
- Good decisions always lead to greater freedom and more hope, deepening our relationship with God. This process works for decisions large and small, but you will want to spend more time with more important questions.
- It can be helpful—especially for important decisions—to consult with a spiritual director, a person who is trained in the art of Christian discernment.

- St. Ignatius also recommends a “Daily Examen” practice to pray through each day, paying attention to what happened and how God is working in your life. Learn more by reading the extra handout and/or searching online.

## Reflection Questions

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① What experiences have you had in making large decisions? Have you experienced “resistance” when considering what turned out to be the right choice? What did you feel after the decision was made?

② What have been your experiences praying over decisions in your life? What has worked or not worked for you?

## Closing Prayer

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Lord God, our source of life,  
each day is a gift from you.

Help us to remember this,  
and to look for the ways in which  
you are working in our lives.

Give us the grace to seek your greater glory  
in all that we do.

Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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