



Focus verses

*"If there is anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD our God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be."
Deut. 15:7-8 (NRSV)*

*"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."
1 Peter 4:8-10 (NIV)*

Teaching Leaflet A
"Systems of Care Overview"

Teaching Leaflet B
"Eight Degrees of Charity"

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON THREE: ANCIENT ROOTS OF CARE

Opening prayer

*Holy Spirit,
giving life to all life,
moving all creatures,
root of all things,
washing them clean,
wiping out their mistakes,
healing their wounds,
you are our true life,
luminous, wonderful,
awakening the heart
from its ancient sleep.*

– Hildegard of Bingen, translated by Stephen Mitchell

Introduction to the lesson

Last week, we looked at personal life experiences and teachings that informed our understanding of what it means to serve others. We also have inherited societal responses to caring for those in need. In today's lesson, we will trace some of these ancient roots of systemized care to see how these philosophies intersect with ours.

Last week's challenge

Share from the challenge you chose to do during this past week.

Systems of care

We will look at five societies from ancient history – Egyptians, Greeks, Imperial Romans, Jews and Early Christians. There are numerous societies we could have explored, but each of these has an ideological perspective that has served as a building block for why and how some people were helped and others were not.

More information on each of these periods is provided in Teaching Leaflet A titled "Systems of Care Overview." The chart on the next page summarizes this information.



Jesus did not get into trouble with the powers of his day simply by challenging his individual hearers. He challenged the very systems of his society - the cornerstones. Just as the values of Madison Avenue, Wall Street, and the Pentagon conflict with the gospel, so too with Jesus and the institutions of his time: he took on the power structures of his own day, religious and civil alike.... Yes, discipleship does have its cost - anyone who has dared to bring the gospel to bear on his or her own life knows that - whether we feel it may be a good litmus test for discerning if we are truly following on his path, or pursuing a false trail.

– Jeanne de Celles, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*

	Ancient Egyptian Society	Ancient Greek Society	Roman Imperial Society	Ancient Jewish Society	Early Christian Church
Time period	Ca. 5000 BC	Ca. 400 – 100 BCE	Ca. 100 BCE – 500 CE	Ca. 4000 BCE – 100 CE	Ca. 1 – 500 CE
World-view	Emphasis on the afterlife; the Book of the Dead	Emphasis on many gods/idols, philosophy and science emerging	Emphasis on productivity and belonging; many races & cultures	Emphasis on obeying the law; doing for others what you would have done to you	Emphasis on following the example of Jesus' life by showing love to others
Concept of God	Pharaoh was supreme; worshipped many gods	Worshipped many gods; believed in self-accomplishment	Imperial cult imposed; deified the state; allegiance to Caesar	Worshipped one God, Yahweh	Worshipped one God; Jesus as the Son of God
Concept of Giving	Give with no expectation of return; your deeds will be rewarded in the afterlife	Give to gain honor and self-respect; give to those who "deserve" help	Public aid given to those who belong to the state; assigning responsibility for care; exercise authority over; on the dole	Give to the alien & stranger, orphan & widow; give to honor God; no means test	Give to the "family of God"; believers sold their possessions and gave to church and poor; willingly and joyfully
Key Concepts to caring for "the poor"	Book of Dead listed negative & positive confessions; Acts of Mercy; absence of harm	Reciprocity; Worthy vs. unworthy poor; an "exchange" b/t giver and receiver	Concept of citizenship – who has responsibility for you?	Justice and mercy' care for others out of obedience to God; charitable acts	The call of the church was to embody Christ; love (<i>agape</i>) not based on merit acts

Overview

The Egyptian, Greek and Roman societies were polytheistic, worshipping many gods; the Jews worshipped one God, Yahweh. The first three societies were motivated to help those in need primarily to elevate status of self or state; Jews were motivated out of obedience to the Mosaic Law, which includes the admonition to "do unto others what you would have them do unto you." **Each of these societies has some key concepts we want to note:**

Egyptians gave us the concepts of negative and positive confessions. They showed compassion to others more often by choosing not to harm someone than by proactively helping someone. Their acts of mercy – or lack of them – were recorded in the Book of the Dead, which they believed would earn them a better afterlife.

- "negative confession" – not helping, but not harming either

The **Greeks** also were polytheistic. Athens was “full of idols,” as Paul discovered as he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him there (Acts: 17:16-23). So religious were they, in fact, they even had an altar to “An Unknown God” (v. 23). The Greeks taught us about the extremes of wealth and poverty and introduced the concept of the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. The Greeks believed that the helping relationship was an “exchange” between a giver and receiver. People who worked with their hands (the artisans) were considered to be the “worthy poor”; people who did not work were considered by the aristocrats to be “unworthy” of help. The motivation for giving was to accrue honor and status.

- “deserving” and “undeserving” poor

Roman society became increasingly diverse as tribes from conquered regions were assimilated into the Empire. Romans placed great value on productivity and to “belonging,” i.e., their status as a Roman citizen. Roman citizens were afforded certain rights and privileges, which others did not receive. Care included benevolence from the state if you were in need, i.e., a Roman citizen was cared for as a matter of honor and respect for the state. They gave only to people who could return the favor in some way, and they gave to receive the title “Benefactor” (Luke 22:25). From the Romans we learned the concept of determining who was responsible for the poor; however, giving to them was often a means of exercising authority over others to keep them in subjection.

- citizenship, exercising authority over others, subjection

Jewish society was shaped by Mosaic Law and the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Justice and mercy were primary motivators for care giving (Micah 6:8). In fact, the Hebrew word for “charity” is more accurately translated to mean “justice.” There was an obligation to do positive acts of good, and not just to ensure an absence of harm. Furthermore, it was accepted that recipients of good deeds had a right to such help. If a Jew had the ability to meet another person’s need and did not do it, it would have brought God’s displeasure. Commitment to the stranger, i.e., hospitality, was important to this society. (See *Teaching Leaflet B*, titled “Eight Degrees of Charity.”)

- charitable acts, justice, hospitality and journeying together in life

»» Class discussion

Reflect on the two topical events listed below and discuss if or how they relate to the systems above:

- Residents of Ninth Ward in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina
- Debate about how to respond to increasing number of immigrants

Early Christian Church

Jesus began his ministry in a milieu of these cultural influences. His message and modeling of *agape* love was countercultural and revolutionary – disturbing those in both the Jewish and Roman societies. Following his resurrection and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit, the first disciples began in earnest the work of the early Christian church. Their motivation is summed up in 1 John 4:11: “... since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (NIV). There was a new Way.



*It is not you who shapes
God, it is God who
shapes you.
If then you are the work
of God, await the hand of
the artist
Who does all things in
due season.
Offer God your heart, soft
and tractable,
And keep the form in
which the artist has
fashioned you.
Let your clay be moist,
Lest you grow hard and
lose the imprint of God's
fingers.*

– Irenaeus Shalem News,
www.shalem.org

What made the teaching of Jesus different and apparently so hard to accept then as now, was that it required a critical reassessment of the structures and values, and attitudes of human society as his listeners and followers shared in it.

- Monika K. Hellwig,
Jesus: The Compassion of God



This radical theology of care was lived and taught first by his disciples and apostles and later throughout the early church. The Book of Acts recounts the actions of those who took seriously their conviction to follow Jesus' teachings.

Providing for all in need – regardless of circumstance, family connection or societal worth – was a belief and practice that existed within the early church, but it was not widely accepted. Many people converted to following the teachings of Jesus and forming a community of faith that shared freely with one another. They provided food for all, cared for orphans and widows, sold what they owned in order to share. As followers of Jesus, their commitment was to choose daily to accept all people as deserving of care, i.e., because God loved them (*agape* love), they practiced love (Christian charity) to those in need.

In the letter to the church at Ephesus, the early Christians are given additional instruction about helping those in need: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Eph. 4:28; NIV).

The commandment echoes throughout the New Testament; we are to "live a life of love, just as Christ loved us" (Eph. 5:2; NIV). There is no acceptable excuse for doing otherwise.

» Context for today

Listen as a class volunteer reads the following scenario and then discuss the questions that follow:

Joe and Angela had just met a young couple with two small children who were visiting the church. The four adults hit it off, and soon Joe and Angela were invited to Felipe and Maria's home for a simple supper. Felipe and Maria had a 3-year-old daughter and a newborn son. They were renting a large, older home in an inner-city neighborhood, but only one room – their bedroom (where they all slept) – was cooled, with a window unit. Because of the heat, they took their plates of food into the bedroom to eat.

"Oh, Maria goes a little crazy trying to keep the babies happy in just this one room all day," Felipe said, "but we're just grateful to have this place. We'll get by."

Joe and Angela were struck by their new friend's hospitality and gratitude for their less-than-ideal situation. "You know," Joe said, "we have that window unit just sitting out in the garage. Why don't we give it to them so they can open up another room?" Angela readily agreed.

When Angela mentioned this to her parents, though, she got another reaction. "You just gave it to them?" her father demanded. "You could have got at least \$100 for it!"

- What do you think of Joe and Angela's response?
- What do you think of Angela's parents' response?
- How do we know when to offer our help or when not to?

- Are there situations in which offering help could be offensive? How?
- Which model of care described in the lesson today does this scenario reflect?

» Silence before God

The focus verses today from 1 Peter say that “whatever gift” we have received should be used to serve others. Think about what your gift is – that one thing about which you are passionate – and how you might use it to comfort those in need. Conclude by writing a prayer (for yourself only) as the Spirit leads you.

Key points from today’s lesson

- Ancient societies developed systems of taking care of their poor.
- These systems developed from different motivations and expectations.
- Some of what we believe today about caring for the poor originates from the concepts in these ancient societies.
- Jesus’ radical call to love was countercultural and revolutionary in his day, and it is still so today.
- We love because God first loved us; worthiness is not a factor.

» Challenge

Choose from the following options for the coming week:

- Meet with your church’s staff person or committee chair responsible for community outreach and service. Make a list of your church’s current ministries. Find out what percent of your church’s annual budget is allocated to service ministries. Offer to report your findings to the class next week.
- Reflect on 1 Peter: 4-8. What words do you, or others who know you, use to describe your gifts? Beside these words, list any actions you have taken or could. How does this action show God’s grace?
- Pray daily for one person, family or community challenge, seeking the Spirit’s direction on any further involvement with that situation.



To show great love for God and our neighbor we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God.

Mother Teresa,
A Gift for God

The church is not going to be different until someone in it is different. God waits for each of us to hear: “Behold, I do a new thing - through you!” The question is always, can we open our lives so that the Holy Spirit may descend and new power break that we may be the kind of person around whom renewal begins?

– Elizabeth O’Connor, *Call to Commitment*

