



New Poor People's Campaign Bible Study Series

#3: A Revolution of Values

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, King addressed the nation from Riverside Church in New York City. With this speech, he broke his silence around what were long-held beliefs: the Vietnam War was immoral and unwarranted. Until that point he had remained mostly quiet about his opposition, because the administration of President Johnson had been instrumental in securing civil rights' legislative victories and had launched the War on Poverty programs.

King's decision was not an easy one. Pressure to remain silent came not only from the Johnson administration but also from established civil rights leaders and their allies. In unison they insisted that to take a stance on the war would be detrimental to the cause of civil rights. For King it was not that he was willing to trade progress on civil rights for a moral stance on the war. It was that he believed racism, militarism and poverty were knotted together. To pretend that they could address one but not the other was a delusion.

This study pairs an excerpt of King's sermon with a biblical text from Isaiah. It is recommended that you read the texts aloud together (15 minutes), share initial responses (10-20 minutes), and then answer the discussion questions (20-40 minutes). If you have less than an hour, you might ask participants to read the texts in advance.

Discussion questions

1. What is the difference between a "person-oriented society" and a "thing-oriented society"?
2. What actions are criticized in Isaiah 58:1-12? What actions are praised? How are these types of actions treated today?
3. What are the barriers (social, economic, political, and personal) to obeying God's commandments as described in Isaiah 58:1-12?
4. Less than a year after the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, King called for a Poor People's Campaign of poor blacks, whites, Latinx and Native Americans. What ideas in the "Beyond Vietnam" excerpt might have contributed to that decision?
5. What would a revolution of values look like today? Where do you see signs of it? How might a new Poor People's Campaign contribute to a revolution of values?

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam"
Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967

We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

[Isaiah 58:1-12 \(The Message translation\)](#)

¹⁻³ "Shout! A full-throated shout!

Hold nothing back—a trumpet-blast shout!
Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,
face my family Jacob with their sins!
They're busy, busy, busy at worship,
and love studying all about me.
To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—
law-abiding, God-honoring.
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'
and love having me on their side.
But they also complain,
'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

³⁻⁵ "Well, here's why:

"The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.
You drive your employees much too hard.
You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.
You fast, but you swing a mean fist.
The kind of fasting you do
won't get your prayers off the ground.
Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after:
a day to show off humility?
To put on a pious long face

and parade around solemnly in black?
Do you call *that* fasting,
a fast day that I, GOD, would like?

⁶⁻⁹ “This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.
Your righteousness will pave your way.
The GOD of glory will secure your passage.
Then when you pray, GOD will answer.
You’ll call out for help and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’

⁹⁻¹² “If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.

The **Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice** works to strengthen and expand transformative movements for social change that can draw on the power of religions and human rights.

The **New Poor People's Campaign** is being called for by nearly fifty community and religious organizations seeking to connect our often isolated battles and begin creating a broader and deeper social movement with the power and vision to transform the structures that create poverty, inequality and oppression, nationally and globally. Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision for a Poor People's Campaign in 1968 that would unite the poor across lines of division to become a "new and unsettling force in our complacent national life," those who are building a new Poor People's Campaign are working to build on struggles now taking place, strengthening our connections to produce the unity that is the only way to move us from merely reacting to different disasters to transforming society. There are many ways to be involved in the emerging campaign, including endorsing the call for the campaign, attending revivals and truth commissions in your region, joining the conversation on social media and raising money to sponsor events. Find us online at poorpeoplescampaign.org or email us at newpoorpeoplescampaign@gmail.com.

For **additional bible studies** that put Martin Luther King, Jr. in conversation with the ministry of Jesus Christ, visit kairoscenter.org/last-week-jesus-christ-last-year-martin-luther-king.