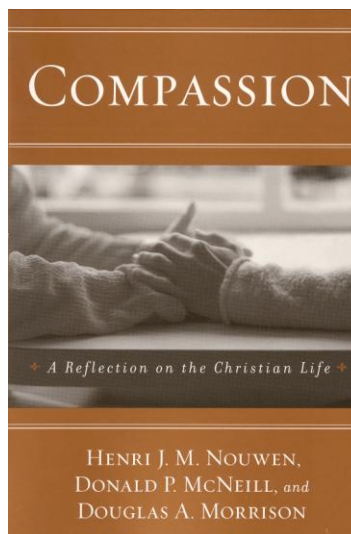


COMPASSION

A Reflection on the Christian Life

By Henri J.M. Nouwen
Donald P. McNeill
Douglas A. Morrison



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1982, 2005 New York: Image Books/Doubleday. 137 pp. (softcover)

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Prepared by Steven E. Berry

Recommended number of meetings for this book: 10

Meeting #1: pp. 3-8

Read **Introduction** out loud, taking turns.

Introduction

The authors begin by stating that the word “compassion” generally evokes positive feelings. They state that we like to think of ourselves as basically good, understanding, compassionate people. We identify being compassionate with being human. “An incompassionate human being seems as inconceivable as a non-human being.” Then come the questions: If being human and being compassionate are the same, then why is humanity torn by conflict, war, hatred and oppression? Why do so many suffer from hunger, cold, and lack of shelter? Why do differences of sex, race and religion prevent us from approaching each other and forming community? Why are millions suffering from alienation, separation or loneliness? Why do we hurt, torture and kill each other? Why is our world in such chaos?

Discussion Questions – Week 1

1. What does it mean to be compassionate? (What is the Latin?)
2. Why is compassion not a natural phenomenon?
3. If compassion is at odds with individual freedom, why?
4. What does Peregrine Worsthorne say about a genuine compassionate society?
5. Hubert Humphrey stated: “The main part of life is competition; ... in politics compassion is just part of the competition.” (page 6) Discuss his comment and give examples.
6. The authors say that our primary frame of reference is competition, not compassion. Why do they say this? What is your opinion?
7. The authors recognize the ambiguous place compassion holds in our lives. The perspective they advance to understand the place of compassion is found in

Jesus' words: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)
What do they think about this passage? What do you think? Why is this a radical command?

8. What are the three movements of Christ's call to compassion that will be revealed in the book? Discuss.

Notes

Meeting #2 - Part One: *The Compassionate God*

Discussion Questions – Week 2

Chapter I: *God-with-Us*

In Solidarity

1. The authors begin by stating that God is a compassionate God. “This means, first of all, that God has chosen to be God-with-us.” How do they explain what this means?
2. What is the simple gift that the authors say we have lost? Do you think it’s true? Why or why not?
3. What is the advantage of calling God Immanuel (God-with-us)? Why is it even necessary?
4. Where is God’s compassion anchored?

With Gut Feelings

5. The authors ask, “How do we know that God is our God and not a stranger, an outsider, a passerby?” Discuss.
6. What is the mystery of God’s compassion as it becomes visible in the healing stories of the New Testament?
7. What is meant by the quote “Jesus Christ reveals God’s solidarity with us?”

Toward New Life

8. What is the mystery of God’s love? How does Jesus reveal this?
9. Discuss the authors’ statement, “The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pains and participates in the fullness of the human struggle.” How does this God differ from other perceptions of God? How is this God to be viewed in light of archaic religion and contemporary understanding of religion?

Our Competitive Selves

10. The authors say that competition, not compassion, is the main motivation in life. Is this true? How so? Give examples.
11. While the authors speak about competition they do not mention the word desire. How might the role of desire influence our competitive selves?
12. How much of our value is found in pointing to attributes that set us apart from others? Is competition all-pervasive?
13. Does competition stand in the way of our being compassionate? How?
14. The authors suggest compassion is frightening and evokes resistance. Do you agree? Why?
15. What are some end results of competition? Where do you find illustrations of competition in the Bible, and what are the outcomes?

A New Self

16. Explain what you think the authors mean when they state that “Only God is not in competition with us.”
17. What is the new self and identity that the authors invite us to receive?
18. What does the new self make possible?

19. How does divine compassion differ from self-made compassion, which may be part of the competition?
20. The Apostle Paul is deeply moved by God's compassion. This is the mystery of a new way of being together. What might living into God's compassion look like in your life?

Notes

Meeting #3 – Part One: *The Compassionate God*

Discussion Questions – Week 3

Chapter 2: *Servant God*

Jesus Emptied Himself

1. In Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God's compassion. The authors draw upon the beautiful and profound hymn of Christ which Paul uses in his letter to the Philippians. Read aloud from Philippians 2, found on the page following the dedication written to Joel Filartiga. Read the entire page beginning with Paul's words, "If our life in Christ means anything to you, ... concluding with verse 11 "to the glory of God."
2. How is it that our understanding of compassion is linked with Jesus humility?
3. Jesus is said to be the second Adam. There are striking differences between Adam 1 and Adam 2 in the Bible. Discuss this in light of Philippians 2:6: "His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality in God, but emptied himself..."

He Was Humbler Yet

4. Jesus took on the conditions of a slave/servant. What significance does that have for people who seek status, security, and special favor?
5. Jesus gave up privilege for what reason?
6. Why did Jesus suffer? What does his ultimate servanthood have to teach us about God's compassion?

The Downward Pull

7. If compassion is not reaching out from on high to those less fortunate, what is it? What is God's downward pull?
8. How is servanthood the self-revelation of God?

In His Path

9. What is the path of compassion that Jesus reveals to his disciples?
10. How do we participate in the on-going self-revelation and compassion of God?

Our Second Nature

11. Discuss this statement: "The Christian Life is a life of witnessing through servanthood to the compassionate God, not a life in which we seek suffering and pain."
12. Discuss how service is an expression of the search for God and not just the desire to bring about individual or social change.
13. Radical servanthood challenges us to do what?

Joyful Servants

14. The authors state "wherever we see real service we also see joy." What examples do they use? How does this tie into the passage from Philippians 2:9-11?
15. Where does God's compassion end?

Meeting #4 – Part One: *The Compassionate God*

Discussion Questions – Week 4

Chapter 3: *Obedient God*

The Inner Life of God

1. “In Jesus Christ God’s compassion is not made manifest simply by becoming a suffering servant in obedience.” What does this statement mean?
2. Why do the authors state that “In Jesus Christ we see that God’s compassion can never be separated from obedience?”
3. What is intimate listening? How is it expressed?

Attentiveness to the Beloved

4. What is the role that listening plays in our understanding of servanthood?
5. How and where does Mark’s gospel provides insight in the movement that exists between intimate listening and compassionate action?

With God’s Love In Us

6. Express how fellowship with Jesus Christ is to listen with Jesus to God’s love without fear.
7. What is the part love plans in obedient listening and the movement of compassion?
8. What do the authors say about the “will of God” as it relates to our relationship with God and being in the world?
9. Discuss Nietzsche’s critical appraisal of Christianity siding with what is weak. How does our understanding of God-with-us speak to his negative evaluation?
10. Do Christians love suffering?
11. What attracts people to the cross?

Without Fear

- 12: How does listening to God and discerning God’s voice help us?
13. Once again the authors remind us that obedience is giving attention to what God says. Citing John 4:18 they speak about fear melting away in God’s presence. Discuss the role fear plays in our lives and how it can keep us from listening to God’s voice.

Notes

Meeting #4 - Part Two: *The Compassionate Life*

Discussion Questions – Week 5

Chapter 4: *Community*

No Individual Stardom

1. The New Testament message is that the compassionate life is a life together. What does this mean?
2. Share about the compassionate life in community within the context of Philippians 2:1-4. What insights are brought forth that may be to key compassionate community?
3. Share your understanding of the communal nature of the compassionate life.

Walking on the Same Path

4. Explain how you understand “the mind of Christ”.
5. How does the mind of Christ gather us together in community?
6. Why is it stated that compassion cannot be separated from community?

Bombarding the Senses

7. Does mass media, which depicts all sorts of global suffering, do more harm than good? Does a psychic numbness and anger exist because we see so much suffering?

Community as Mediator

8. “The Christian community mediates between the suffering of the world and our individual responses to suffering.” Explain how this happens, even in the midst of technological overstimulation.
9. Discuss the authors’ statement that “wherever true Christian community is formed, compassion happens in the world”. How is this possible? What are the community characteristics?
10. What does community afford us an opportunity to do in regard to being compassionate?
11. The marks of the compassionate life lived in community do what?

Sense of Belonging

12. “How can we build community” ask the authors. What is the better question they offer, and how do we answer?
13. “People who live together do not necessarily live in community, and those who live alone do not necessarily live without it.” Discuss this statement.
14. Do you agree with the statement “apart from a vital relationship with a caring community, a vital relationship with Christ is not possible? Why or why not? Give examples.

Meeting #6 – Part Two: *The Compassionate Life*

Discussion Questions - Week 6

Chapter 5: *Displacement*

Moving from the Ordinary and Proper Place

1. What is the value of voluntary displacement in relationship to Christian community?
2. What do we discover in voluntary displacement? Why is displacement so important?

Following the Displaced Lord

3. Jesus voluntarily displaces himself (Phil:2:6-7). He gave up the heavenly place and took a humble place. Discuss the ways Jesus voluntarily displaced himself. Where have you voluntarily displaced yourself in following Christ.

To Disappear as an Object of Interest

4. How are we to understand the difference between displacement and voluntary displacement?
5. The authors give examples of persons who chose voluntary displacement. "Their sole aim was to disappear as an object of interest...and thus became real members of the human family in hiddenness and compassion." How can we gain distance from the world?

St. Francis of Assisi

6. St. Francis is viewed as an example of voluntary displacement. Share thoughts on Francis and his choice to be naked before God.
7. Share your understanding of the authors' statement "In short, as long as we avoid displacement, we will miss the compassionate life to which Jesus calls us." Why do you agree or disagree?

Something to Recognize

8. The authors suggest that voluntary displacement can only be an expression of discipleship when it is a response to a call – an act of obedience. What do they mean? Give examples.
9. Discuss the following statement: "Displacement is not primarily something to do or accomplish, but something to recognize."
10. How can recognition help us to move from involuntary to voluntary displacement and find ourselves being converted through the process?

No Ordinary Citizens

12. How might you be called to a more drastic form of displacement? What might be God's call for you to enter more deeply into Christian community?

Meeting #7 - Part Two: *The Compassionate Life*

Discussion Questions - Week 7

Chapter 6: *Togetherness*

The Miracle of Walking on the Floor

1. There are many motives to bring people together. What is the motive of togetherness in Christian community? What distinguishes Christian community?
2. Explore the illustration of Philippe Petit and share how displacement can create a new togetherness.
3. How does the main effect of being different reveal a deeper level of sameness?

Seeing Each Other's Unique Gifts

4. Discuss the authors' statement "This new, non-competitive togetherness opens our eyes to each other. Here we touch the beauty of the Christian community."
5. What is the basis for a "new togetherness"?
6. Use the metaphor of the mosaic to speak personally about new togetherness in community.
7. Share how compassionate togetherness calls forth unique talents into a type of fruitfulness.

Self-Emptying for Others

8. Share together examples of self-emptying and what it means to receive others into our intimate inner space.
9. How might we "empty" ourselves for another?
10. What do the authors mean when they say, "Every time we pay attention we become emptier, and the more empty we are the more healing space we can offer." What example do they use? What examples can you share from your experience?

Gathered by Vocation

11. How do we begin to hear the call to community?
12. Share your thoughts on God calling us together from different places and alone enabling us to cross the many bridges that separate us.
13. Life in community is a response to a "call". How might God be calling you into community? Share thoughts and reflections.
14. Does the illustration about John and Mary speak personally to you? How and why?

Notes

Meeting #8 – Part Three: *The Compassionate Way*

Discussion Questions – Week 8

Chapter 7: *Patience*

A Discipline That Unveils

1. As we now move into the final portion of the book, the questions raised are:
What have we learned so far about The Compassionate God and The Compassionate Life?
2. Is there a specific compassionate way to be practiced daily?
3. Share insights on discipline and speak about why discipline and discipleship cannot be separated.
4. What differentiates the typical understanding of discipline from the Christian understanding?
5. Why is discipline indispensable to the compassionate life?

Entering Actively into the Thick of Life

6. What role does patience play as a discipline of compassion?
7. Can one be truly compassionate without being patient? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the negative associations attributed to patience, and compare them with the authors' understanding.
9. Share your thoughts on patience as the movement beyond fleeing or fighting, and as the entrance into the more difficult third way.
10. Active patience is synonymous with endurance, perseverance and fortitude. Does knowing this impact in any way your understanding of the discipline? Do the authors' Biblical examples help? How so?

Living in the Fullness of Time

11. What does it mean to live in the fullness of time?
12. Compare “clock time” and the New Testament conception of time. What difference do you note?
13. Do you think that all human events have the potential to become divine events? Why or why not?

Time for Celebrating Life with Others

14. Share your thoughts on how patience opens us to God, the world, and others.

Notes

Meeting # 9 – Part Three: *The Compassionate Way*

Discussion Questions - Week 9

Chapter 8: *Prayer*

With Empty Hands

1. “The discipline of patience is practiced in prayer and action.” Discuss the role of prayer in connection with patience.
2. How do the authors define what prayer is and what it is not?

In the Spirit

3. Why is it impossible to speak about prayer without speaking about the Holy Spirit?
4. Explain why the Holy Spirit makes true discipleship possible.
5. The spiritual life is life in the Spirit or the Spirit in us. Share your thoughts on prayer as the work of the Holy Spirit and the discipline of prayer.

An All-Embracing Intimacy

6. Prayer, say the authors, is the first and indispensable disciple of compassion. How do they explain this?
7. Share your thoughts about prayer as entering “into a deep, inner solidarity with all human beings so that in and through us they can be touched by the healing power of God’s spirit.

Our Enemies Too

8. What does praying for enemies do as part of the discipline of prayer?
9. Discuss this statement: “Compassionate prayer does not encourage the self-serving individualism that leads us to flee from people or to fight them.” Why is knowledge of this so important?

Faithful to the Breaking of the Bread

10. “The breaking of bread stands at the center of Christian community.” How does this act link us to the life of Christ?
11. What do we reclaim in the breaking of bread?
12. What is one of your personal “bread connections”?

Notes

Meeting # 10 – Part Three: *The Compassionate Way*

Discussion Questions – Week 10

Chapter 9: *Action*

Here and Now

1. Compassionate Prayer calls us to compassionate action. Prayer and action are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Share thoughts on compassionate prayer and how it leads to action.
2. Discuss the statement “In prayer we meet Christ, and in Him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ.”
3. Give examples of how “action as a discipline of compassion requires the willingness to respond to the very concrete needs of the moment.”
4. Discuss how action, rather than prayer, is the final criterion of the value of the Christian life.
5. “Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of the compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian.” Discuss why this is so.

The Temptation of Activism

6. Activism can cause spiritual problems when an individual forgets that in Christ everything has been accomplished. Can you relate to this problem? What is the solution?

Not Without Confrontation

7. Compassion does not exclude confrontation but often calls for it. What is the key to compassionate confrontation and patient action? How do folks make sure the confrontation is not tinged with revenge?
8. What, do the authors say, is the best criterion for determining whether our confrontation is compassionate and righteous, rather than offensive and unrighteous?

In Gratitude

9. Disciplined actions are always characterized by gratitude. How is the compassionate life a grateful life?
10. How is gratitude a sign of an action guided by the discipline of patience?
11. Read aloud together I John 1:1-4. Share together how these words eloquently describe the meaning of compassionate action.
12. Discuss how compassionate action works on the deepest level.

CONCLUSION

The great good news is that God is a compassionate God. Jesus, the obedient servant, emptied himself and became as we are. He became God-with-us. Jesus called us to live as he did – to live a compassionate life. Through the discipline of patience, practical in prayer and action, the life of discipleship becomes real and fruitful. We can become present to each other, live in voluntary displacement in community, and in our little way contribute in making all things new.



About Henri Nouwen

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen's books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L'Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21st, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario, not far from the Daybreak Community.

Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal. He wrote, "By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others." His spirit lives on in the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, Henri Nouwen Stichting (Holland), the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, and in all who live the spiritual values of solitude, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.

For more information about Henri Nouwen, his writing and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society visit: www.HenriNouwen.org.

¹ Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.

² Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.

Nouwen Reading Group

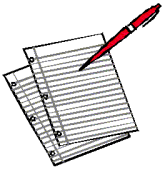
Book: _____

Group Members:

| Name | Phone Number | E-mail |
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Leadership tasks that could be shared within your group:

| Date of meeting | Prayer/song and check-in with each other | DVD segments: <i>Journey of the Heart</i> | Reader: themes, questions, text passages | Discussion leader | Refreshments |
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Nouwen Reading Groups
Feedback Form

Thank you for your interest in Nouwen Reading Groups! We would be most appreciative if you could take a few minutes at the end of your last meeting to complete this feedback form and send to our office in the United States or Canada. We are eager to hear about your experience in the group and about the materials prepared by the Henri Nouwen Society. We continue to learn as we go along and with your help, we hope to improve and expand our offerings. Blessings!

1. Why did you decide to start/join a Nouwen reading group? (check as many as are appropriate for you)

- Enjoy discussing books Interested in discussions of a spiritual nature
- Enjoy getting together with friends for any reason Want to meet new people who are interested in spirituality Nouwen’s writing resonates with me
- Did not know Nouwen’s work but was interested

Other: _____

2. How did you invite people to join your reading group/learn about the reading group?

- Spoke with friends/co-workers Notice in church bulletin/newsletter
- Announcement to congregation Email
- MeetUp.com Other

3. What book did you reflect on?

4. Why were you interested in discussing this particular book?

5. How would you evaluate the Henri Nouwen Society reflection guide? (please circle appropriate number)

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|-------------------|
| Not helpful | | | | | | | | | | Extremely helpful |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

6. How was the reflection guide used?

Used it as a starting point only Followed it carefully Didn't use it at all
What would be one step we could take to make our reading group resources more helpful? _____

7. Was the Nouwen Reading Group a positive experience for you? Yes No
Why? _____

8. Would you consider leading or joining another Nouwen Reading Group in the future?
 Yes No Maybe

Additional comments welcome: _____

Thank you!

Additional questions for group leader:

9. Where did your group meet? Your home Church hall Library School
 Other: _____ City: _____ State/Province: _____

10. How often did your group meet? Once a week Bi-weekly Monthly
 Other: _____ Duration of meeting: _____ hours

11. Your group met from (month) _____ (year) _____ **to** (month) _____ (year) _____

12. How many people were in the group at the beginning? _____ At the end? _____

13. What occurred during your first meeting?

Prayer Fellowship Invited others to take on some leadership roles (ex. introduction to a chapter; organize refreshments, prayer, etc.) Viewed "Journey of the Heart: the life of Henri Nouwen" film Discussion based on reflection guide
 Other: _____

Additional comments welcome: _____

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:
In Canada — 113 St. Joseph Street, Toronto, ON M5S 1J4
In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122