

# Introduction

Engaging teens in conversation can be challenging, particularly around such complex issues as dating and tending to one's physical and mental health. This also rings true for discussing faith beliefs and practices. It is vital to approach each topic with an openness to a young person's views while also providing gentle guidance and direction. This series of booklets provides a range of ideas for approaching these topics with sensitivity and openness. The booklets' authors provide helpful information about the topic, along with suggestions for conversation starters and activities that are grounded in faith and rooted in loving concern for a young person's well-being and growth. Prayers for and with the teen conclude each section. Parents as well as youth ministers, catechists, teachers, and confirmation sponsors will find these useful in developing a deeper connection with their teen's life and concerns.



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# Talking to teens about Being the good Samaritan

## FROM APATHY TO EMPATHY

Jesus said, “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robber’s victim?” The scribe answered, “The one who treated him with mercy.” Jesus said, “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:36–37).

The parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), which concludes with the above verses, is likely familiar to young people about to receive the sacrament of confirmation. It’s actually a “story within a story” that Jesus tells in response to a question asked by a scribe who “wished to justify himself.” And who *is* my neighbor? Certainly not the priest or the Levite who walk past the traveler beaten up and left for dead by robbers. Only the Samaritan cared enough to help.

What’s the key difference between the two “upright” citizens and the Samaritan who would have been despised by most of the Jews who made up Jesus’ audience? Martin Luther King Jr. put it best: “The priest and the Levite,” Dr. King said, “asked, ‘What will happen to me if I help him?’ But the Samaritan asked, ‘What will happen to him if I don’t help?’” The difference between the two questions is the difference between apathy and empathy.

It’s an often subtle difference that young people can misunderstand. Caring and concerned adults tend to be good at pointing out children’s sins of commission—actions that cause pain or harm to others. We teach our children, and do our best to model for our children, the difference between playing fair and cheating, between work-

ing out differences peacefully and using threats to get what we want. We encourage our children to develop an honest work ethic and not take things that don't belong to them. We seek to raise children of good character.

The priest and the Levite were men of good character. They served the spiritual needs of the Jewish people in the Temple precincts in Jerusalem in many ways: offering animal sacrifice, leading the people in prayer, and performing any number of other essential rituals. From Jesus' point of view, however, the pair failed in their most basic duty of loving their neighbor. They showed no empathy for the injured man on the side of the road.

We must help our young people recognize that while sins of commission cause pain to others and are to be avoided, sins of omission—refusing to act when action is necessary—can be even more dangerous. Such sins occur when we fail to see the common humanity we share with the person in need. Had the priest or the Levite seen the injured man as a fellow human being whose fate could easily have been their fate, their entire sense of priorities would have shifted.

Apathy can be hard to identify because it involves what is not done rather than what is done. We can demonstrate what empathy looks like, however, by going out of our way to help the person in need right in front of us. The young people in our lives will notice and perhaps ask why we do such things. Even better, we can invite them to join us in our acts of mercy and compassion wherever possible. Especially when opportunities present themselves to reach out to the Samaritans of our own day—the people against whom our own prejudices serve as stumbling blocks that prevent us from experiencing the empathy of our common humanity.

#### **CONVERSATION STARTERS**

- When has someone gone out of her/his way to help you? What did that feel like?
- Which character in the story do you most identify with—the priest and Levite, the Samaritan outsider, or the victim of the robbery? Why?

## **Suggestions for parents, sponsors, catechists, and youth ministers**

The next time your teen comes home from school, rather than ask, “How was your day?” (which tends to evoke a monosyllabic answer), ask, “What did you do today to make the world a kinder place?” See what happens.

### **Action/activity idea**

Keep an eye out as you inform yourself each day of the happenings in the world for stories about people who go out of their way to help perfect strangers. For example, several years ago in New York City a man fell onto the train tracks as a subway train was rushing into the station. A second man immediately jumped down on top of the first man and held him down in the hollow between the tracks until the train had come to a full stop. Both men were unharmed. Discuss such obvious examples of empathy with your teen and then ask what he/she thinks about such “good Samaritan” actions.

### **Prayer for/with teens**

*Lord Jesus,*

*We know that, today, there is someone who will cross our path  
who is lonely,*

*who is close to giving up,*

*who wonders if anyone cares about him or her.*

*Give us eyes to see,*

*ears to listen,*

*and courage and compassion to act.*

*Give us the capacity for empathy,*

*and remove from us the chill of apathy.*

*Amen.*

# Talking to teens about Personal sin and social sin

In addition to sins of commission and sins of omission, another helpful distinction teens need to make is one between personal and social sin. Traditionally, Catholic moral teaching has emphasized the reality of personal sin—those decisions individuals make that go against God’s will—and the consequences of this behavior. The implications for social sin have always been there; choosing to follow the Ten Commandments or to disregard them is a decision that affects both the individual’s welfare and the welfare of society, for example. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, with the publication of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (“New Things”), Catholic moral teaching increasingly emphasized the reality of social sin. The ever more complex interactions among individuals and corporate entities brought about by the Industrial Revolution meant that the cumulative effect of individual sins—greed, selfishness, lust for power—was creating enormous structures of social injustice that oppressed millions. The rapid growth of manufacturing in America, for example, resulted in the accumulation of almost unimaginable wealth for a privileged few but left millions of workers performing backbreaking labor without even the security of a living wage.

What is the difference between personal and social sin? Theologian Gregory Baum says this: “Personal sin is freely chosen; social sin is collective blindness.” Personal sins are individual actions we take with the knowledge and sufficient reflection that what we are doing is

wrong. Walking out of a store with an expensive piece of jewelry that one did not pay for is a clear example of theft—a personal sin that violates the seventh commandment. Paying one’s workers a substandard wage so that one can reap ever greater profits, a clear example of wage theft, can be considered a social sin because the employer is blind to what a living wage looks like and of his responsibility to provide one to his workers. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* gives a sense of the scope: “Social sin is every sin committed against the justice due in relations between individuals, between the individual and the community, and also between the community and the individual” (118).

The more we can help our teens recognize the reality of social sin, and perhaps how they are unwittingly benefiting from it, the more we will encourage them to be informed, to look at injustice through the eyes of Jesus, and to become more determined to speak up for the poor and oppressed.

#### **CONVERSATION STARTERS**

- What is the biggest social injustice that you notice in our country or our world today?
- Why do you think it is so hard to eliminate it?
- If you knew you could make a real difference, what would you be willing to sacrifice to make things better?

#### **Suggestions for parents, sponsors, catechists, and youth ministers**

Because social sins are so vast and so complex, it is difficult for our young people to fully comprehend them. Even more challenging, we who are adults and have grown up in a society damaged by social sin can have a hard time recognizing its effect. It might be worthwhile to start a dialogue with your teen by sharing your own personal example of a time, recently or in the past, when you became aware of how a major social injustice affected your life or your ability to see the

suffering of another person. The next three topics will all offer good examples to pick from.

### **Action/activity idea**

To help explore the connection between personal and social sin, invite your teen to reflect on a time when a classmate or teammate made things harder for everyone in the group by his/her bad behavior. Did the whole class, for example, have a harder time preparing for a test because a few were disruptive? Was there a time when the team lost an important game because one or two players neglected their responsibilities? Encourage your teen to talk about the experience.

Next, give your teen an opportunity to reflect upon a wider horizon. You might ask, for example: Rather than one disruptive classroom, what do you think happens to a student's education if every classroom is disruptive because of a shortage of good teachers and necessary supplies? And why do you think such underperforming schools seem so often be concentrated in low income or minority neighborhoods?

### **Prayer for/with teens**

*Transform our hearts,*

*O Holy Spirit.*

*Let the love of God*

*soften all of the hard spots,*

*and light up all of the darkness*

*within them.*

*Loving Spirit,*

*expand our capacity to love*

*and our desire to serve God,*

*that we may be people of justice*

*and loving friends to the oppressed.*

*Amen.*