

Quotations about Justice, Peace and Nonviolence

Abuse of power for the individual is motivated by fear and by the resulting desire to control the power of life. This fear and arrogance are then used to create societies in which structures of domination create special possibilities for the privileged at the expense of shared power for all persons. The power that is intended by God for everyone who lives is used to destroy relationships in exchange for control. Rather than live in insecurity, some persons choose to create structures that dominate and control others for personal gratification and false security. – James Newton Poling, The Abuse of Power

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Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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The mission entrusted to the church community is a hard mission: to uproot sins from history, to uproot sins from the political order, to uproot sins from the economy, to uproot sins wherever they are. What a hard task! It has to meet conflicts amid so much selfishness, so much pride, so much vanity, so many who have enthroned the reign of sin among us.

The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: “You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that. Believe in Christ. Be converted.”

A Christian community is evangelized in order to evangelize. A light is lit in order to give light. A candle is not lit to be put under a bushel, said Christ. It is lit and put up high in order to give light. That is what a true community is like.

A community is a group of men and women who have found the truth in Christ and in his gospel, and who follow the truth and join together to follow it more strongly. It is not just an individual conversion, but a community conversion. It is a family that believes, a group that accepts God. In the group, each one finds that the brother or sister is a source of

strength and that in moments of weakness they help one another and, by loving one another and believing, they give light and example.

In such a group the preacher no longer needs to preach, for there are Christians who preach by their own lives. I said once and I repeat today that if, unhappily, some day they silence our radio and don't let us write our newspaper, each of you who believe must become a microphone, a radio station, a loudspeaker, not to talk, but to call for faith. – from Oscar Romero, The Violence of Love (Romero, martyred in El Salvador in 1980 for his advocacy for the poor and oppressed, was Archbishop of San Salvador)

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At some thoughts one stands perplexed, above all at the sight of human sin, and wonders whether to combat it by force or by humble love. Always decide, “I will combat it by humble love.” If you resolve on that once for all, you can conquer the whole world. Loving humility is a terrible force: it is the strongest of all things, and there is nothing else like it. – Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

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Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will. – Frederick Douglass

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Merely to resist evil with evil by hating those who hate us and seeking to destroy them, is actually no resistance at all. It is active and purposeful collaboration in evil that brings the Christian into direct and intimate contact with the same source of evil and hatred which inspires the acts of his enemy. It leads in practice to a denial of Christ and to the service of hatred rather than love. – Thomas Merton, Passion For Peace

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How do we learn to love our enemy? By seeing him as a brother who is tempted as we are, and attacked by the same real enemy which is the spirit of hatred and of “Antichrist.” This same enemy seeks to destroy us both by pitting us against one another. – Thomas Merton, Passion For Peace

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Very often people object that nonviolence seems to imply passive acceptance of injustice and evil and therefore that it is a kind of cooperation with evil. Not at all. The genuine concept of nonviolence implies not only active and effective resistance to evil but in fact a more effective resistance ... But the resistance which is taught in the Gospel is aimed not at the evil-doer but at evil in its source. – Thomas Merton, Passion For Peace

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Honest, direct confrontation is a true expression of compassion. The illusion of power must be unmasked, idolatry must be undone, oppression and exploitation must be fought, and all who participate in these evils must be confronted. This is compassion. – Donald P. McNeill, Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life

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Our compassionate efforts toward justice guarantee a deepened faith and prayer life. They will lead us to disciplines of the spirit and of the heart. By engaging with suffering, we learn true joy. By touching despair, we discover what it means to embrace hope. By coming to know Christ crucified, we participate in his resurrection. By pouring ourselves out, we gain our lives. – Joyce Hollyday, Then Shall Your Light Rise

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If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has his foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality. – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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It is one thing to say with the prophet Amos, “Let justice roll down like mighty waters,” and quite another to work out the irrigation system. Clearly there is more certainty in the recognition of wrongs than there is in the prescription for their cure. – William Sloane Coffin

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Lincoln had it right. Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God’s blessing and endorsement for all our national policies and practices – saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, we should worry earnestly whether we are on God's side. Those are the two ways that religion has been brought into public life in American history. The first way – God on our side – leads inevitably to triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology, and, often, dangerous foreign policy. The second way – asking if we are on God’s side – leads to much healthier things, namely, penitence and even repentance, humility, reflection, and even accountability. We need much more of all those, because these are often the missing values of politics.

Of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. did it best. With his Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other, King persuaded, not just pronounced. He reminded us all of God’s purposes for justice, for peace, and for the “beloved community” where those always left out and behind get a front-row seat. And he did it – bringing religion into public life – in a way that was always welcoming, inclusive, and inviting to all who cared about moral, spiritual, or religious values. Nobody felt left out of the conversation. – Jim Wallis, editor of “Sojourners” Magazine

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The only purpose of the gospel is to reconcile people to God and to each other. A gospel that doesn’t reconcile is not a Christian gospel at all. But in America, it seems as if we don’t believe that. We don't really believe that the proof of our discipleship is that we love one another (see John 13:35). No, we think the proof is in numbers ... Even if our “converts” continue to hate each other, even if they will not worship with their brothers and sisters in Christ, we point to their “conversion” as evidence of the gospel’s success. We have substituted a gospel of church growth for a gospel of reconciliation. – John Perkins, With Justice for All

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On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it politic?” And Vanity comes along and asks the question, “Is it popular?” But Conscience asks the question, “Is it right?” And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, the true neighbor will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the gospel. A preaching that makes sinners feel good, so that they become entrenched in their sinful state, betrays the gospel’s call. A preaching that awakens, a preaching that enlightens – as when a light turned on awakens and of course annoys a sleeper – that is the preaching of Christ, calling: Wake up! Be converted! – Oscar Romero

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People tend to think of nonviolence as a choice between using force and doing nothing. But the real choice takes place at another level. Nonviolence is less a matter of “not killing” and more a matter of showing compassion, of saving and redeeming, of being a healing community. One can only choose between doing good to the person placed in one’s path, or to do him evil. To do good is to love a person; but not to do that is as good as killing him. To love someone is to restore that person physically, socially, and spiritually. To neglect and postpone this restoration is already to kill. – André Trocmé, Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution

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Nonviolence confronts systematic injustice with active love, but refuses to retaliate with further violence under any circumstances. In order to halt the vicious cycles of violence, it requires a willing acceptance of suffering and death rather than inflicting suffering or death on anyone else. – John Dear, Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action

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Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. ... The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars – must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. – Martin Luther King Jr.

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I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. – Elie Wiesel

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Violence as a way of achieving justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally it reaches the opponent and

so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it. – Henry David Thoreau

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We often think of peace as the absence of war; that if the powerful countries would reduce their arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we see our own minds – our prejudices, fears, and ignorance. Even if we transported all the bombs to the moon, the roots of war and the reasons for bombs would still be here, in our hearts and minds, and sooner or later we would make new bombs. Seek to become more aware of what causes anger and separation, and what overcomes them. Root out the violence in your life, and learn to live compassionately and mindfully. Seek peace. When you have peace within, real peace with others will be possible. – Thich Nhat Hanh

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The peace witness along with the nonviolent struggle for justice is not some optional accessory in Christian living. It has to do with living out in frail human response an intimation of what Jesus lived out in going to his death for our salvation. – Dale Aukerman

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Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. ...

Yet it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must 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, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities.

If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers around the world wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? That the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours.

We are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside. But 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 is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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I think the greatest source of danger in this world is indifference. I have always believed that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The opposite of life is not death, but indifference. The opposite of peace is not war, but indifference to peace and indifference to war. The opposite of culture, the opposite of beauty, the opposite of generosity is indifference. Indifference is the enemy. – Elie Wiesel

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Men pray to the Almighty to relieve poverty. But poverty comes not from God's laws – it is blasphemy of the worst kind to say that. Poverty comes from man's injustice to his fellow man. – Leo Tolstoy

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We may not like the other but we are called to love. We may certainly not validate or condone his or her actions. But we are called into a radical sense of our interconnectedness as creatures and children of the same God. To perceive this deep level of interdependence, especially with those whose worlds are fashioned differently than our own or perhaps with those who would seek to harm or destroy our worlds, seems a nearly impossible task. Yet the Gospels prod us on. ... At the furthest reaches of our capacities to love, we are urged, “Love even your enemies.” – Wendy M. Wright, The Rising

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Because we ignore the sacrifices that lead to peace, we know nothing of God’s will to unite or of his well-considered thoughts of unity. Peace blooms on the soil of genuine truthfulness that is shown only in a life sacrificed to the utmost and spent in unarmed but out-and-out combat against all opposition to unity and constructive peace. The heart that makes the perfect sacrifice – the mightiest power of all worlds – is the only strength that can bring peace. – Eberhard Arnold, “Out-and-Out Combat”

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Israel is to make no image of Yahweh, but Israel is to be such an image of God in the world. ... We should note, however, that human beings represent God’s cause in the world not primarily in spiritual ways but in very concrete and practical ones. They represent God’s concern for a clean and beautiful earth, a productive earth, one filled with the full variety of the creatures called into being at the Creation. They represent God’s concern for the sharing of the goods of earth in a tolerably fair way, for the maintenance of life and its possibilities, for the furthering of the institutional arrangements that preserve life and make it flower. – Walter Harrelson, The Ten Commandments and Human Rights

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So many people feel so overwhelmed and disempowered by the stresses of modern life that they convince themselves they can't make a difference. So they don't even try. They bury their talents in the ground and let their spirits wither on the vine of life. I hope they will bestir themselves at least to say every day as an anonymous old man did: "I don't have the answers, life is not easy, but my heart is in the right place." – Marian Wright Edelman, Guide My Feet

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It is not a matter of engaging in both the gospel and social action, as if Christian social action was something separate from the gospel itself. The gospel has to be demonstrated in word and deed. Biblically, the gospel includes the totality of all that is good news from God for all that is bad news in human life – in every sphere. So like Jesus, authentic Christian mission has included good news for the poor, compassion for the sick and suffering justice for the oppressed, liberation for the enslaved. The gospel of the Servant of God in the power of the Spirit of God addresses every area of human need and every area that has been broken and twisted by sin and evil. And the heart of the gospel, in all of these areas, is the cross of Christ. – Christopher J. H. Wright, Knowing the Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament

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The job of the peacemaker is to stop war, to purify the world, to get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad, to wake up those who have not yet found God, to create joy and beauty wherever you go, to find God in everything and in everyone. – Muriel Lester

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Social sin is the crystallization ... of individuals' sins into permanent structures that keeps sin in being and makes its force to be felt by the majority of people. – Oscar Romero

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The church ... cannot be content to play the part of a nurse looking after the casualties of the system. It must play an active part both in challenging the present unjust structures and in pioneering alternatives. – Donald Dorr

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The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest. – John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

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History says, Don't hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme. So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge. Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles and cures and healing wells. – Seamus Heaney, The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles's Philocetes

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Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime

That justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

– Seamus Heaney, excerpt from The Cure at Troy

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Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward
justice. – Martin Luther King Jr.

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It is so much easier sometimes to sit down and be resigned than to rise up
and be indignant. – Nellie McClung, In Times Like These

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Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in
ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the
more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled
world. – Etty Hillesum (died in Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of 29), from
An Interrupted Life,