

The Book of Matthew

Idols of the Soul (and Other Lessons from Jesus)

Lesson #9 for May 28, 2016

Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 9:10; Matthew 18:1-4,21-35; 19:16-30; Galatians 3:21-22.

1. Read Matthew 18:1-4. In this lesson we will discover some surprising lessons that Jesus sought to teach His disciples. We have already discussed how difficult it is to unlearn lessons that one has grown up with and which have become a part of one's thinking or paradigm. The disciples, like most of the other Jews, were certain that Jesus as the Messiah had come to be king of the Jews; and they could not understand why, seemingly, He was not moving toward that goal.
2. Every one of us is born naturally selfish. As infants, all we can think about is our own personal needs. That is normal for a small baby. But, at what point are we supposed to grow out of that selfishness and gradually learn more of the values, morals, and standards of God's kingdom?
3. To most of us, this is a puzzling illustration. What does it really mean to become like a little child?

It was not enough for the disciples of Jesus to be instructed as to the nature of His kingdom. What they needed was a change of heart that would bring them into harmony with its principles. Calling a little child to Him, Jesus set him in the midst of them; then tenderly folding the little one in His arms He said, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." **The simplicity, the self-forgetfulness, and the confiding love of a little child are the attributes that Heaven values. These are the characteristics of real greatness.**

Again Jesus explained to the disciples that His kingdom is not characterized by earthly dignity and display. At the feet of Jesus all these distinctions are forgotten. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, meet together, with no thought of caste or worldly preeminence. All meet as blood-bought souls, alike dependent upon One who has redeemed them to God.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 437.1-2. [Bold type is added.]

4. God is trying to prepare people to be citizens of His kingdom. There will be no place for selfishness there. Are we ready to recognize that? Greatness in the sight of God will be found in those who adopt Christ's plan for their lives and become truly loving. If we grow to be more like Jesus, it will be a natural consequence; it will show itself in our behavior.
5. How many of us would think of using a small child as an example of greatness? Think about the time when you were in perhaps the seventh or eighth grade. If someone had come to your class and asked the class members to describe what great thing they wanted to do or become in their lives, would any of them have said they wanted to be like a little child? Very unlikely.
6. God is apparently looking for humility. When we are humble, it is easier to serve others. Think of the example of Moses. Read Numbers 12:1-3. No one wanted to be humble in Moses's day.
7. Think of some times in the Bible in which a little humility would have made a huge difference. Would it have made a difference to Adam and Eve? Does humility automatically lead to obedience? We all know very well that not every small child is humble and obedient; but, some are.

8. Do we naturally possess attributes, characteristics, attitudes, or ideas that are contrary to the kingdom of God and could not be accepted into the heavenly kingdom?
9. The very essence of Satan's kingdom is a desire to have one's own way, that is, to be selfish. God's kingdom is based on love and the desire to do others good. How many of our actions and thoughts every day are motivated by selfishness? How many are motivated by love?
10. Read Genesis 3 again. What was one of the early results of that first human sinful experience? It was a breakdown in interpersonal relationships. Everyone wanted to blame someone else, even to blame God! That is what leads to all kinds of conflicts.
11. Read Matthew 18:15-35. Have you ever tried to do that in real time? Why is this pattern so incredibly difficult for most people? Is it because we are afraid that people will not like us? There are some people in the world who love to point out the sins of others; but, seldom do they do it in a loving and private way to the individual they are criticizing. It is so much easier to criticize or complain to others behind that person's back. How do you suppose this would work in God's kingdom in the future? How would things be different even in the Adventist Church if every person who had a complaint about another member would go to that person directly and try to work it out. In Matthew 18:20, God promised: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (NKJV) Notice that these words were spoken in the context of potential discipline then restoration of another person. Do we really believe that the Holy Spirit would help us if we approached the person whom we feel has wronged us or perhaps has wronged others and tried to work it out?
12. Read again Matthew 18:21-35. What was Jesus trying to tell us? When Jesus said we are supposed to forgive seventy times seven times, does that mean that we do not have to forgive the 491st time? Or, was Jesus saying that forgiveness is in the very nature of God, and we really need to learn how to do it if we want to be a part of His kingdom? More than that, think how much we have been forgiven! How could we possibly refuse to forgive those who have wronged us over some relatively minor matter? Consider the following verses about forgiveness: Exodus 32:32; Acts 5:31; Colossians 1:14.
13. How should we feel when we consider the cross which followed that incredible life that Jesus lived on this earth and that very unfair trial and we realize that all of that was done for our benefit as well as that of the onlooking universe and then we remember that the onlooking universe is watching us to learn something about God? (Ephesians 3:8-10)
14. Read Matthew 19:16-30. The rich young ruler thought that he had done nearly everything possible to earn his place in heaven. He could not have imagined that Jesus would tell him to sell all that he had—which in the eyes of the Jewish people was proof that he was a good man—and give it all to the poor. To the Jew, if one was a good person, God would bless her/him and s/he would be rich; if one was a bad person, God would curse her/him and s/he would be poor. So, in their eyes, it was easy to tell who the good people were!
15. We do not know very much about that young man. Clearly, he still felt some inner need that had not been met. As he watched the mothers bringing their children to Jesus and watched Jesus bless those children, perhaps he thought that he could be blessed in the same way and that it would meet his inner need.

This ruler had a high estimate of his own righteousness. He did not really suppose that he was defective in anything, yet he was not altogether satisfied. He felt the want of something that he did not possess. Could not Jesus bless him as He blessed the little children, and satisfy his soul want?

In reply to this question Jesus told him that obedience to the commandments of God was necessary if he would obtain eternal life; and He quoted several of the commandments which show man's duty to his [519] fellow men. The ruler's answer was positive: "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?"

Christ looked into the face of the young man, as if reading his life and searching his character. He loved him, and He hungered to give him that peace and grace and joy which would materially change his character. "One thing thou lackest," He said; "go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.

Christ was drawn to this young man. He knew him to be sincere in his assertion, "All these things have I kept from my youth." The Redeemer longed to create in him that discernment which would enable him to see the necessity of heart devotion and Christian goodness. He longed to see in him a humble and contrite heart, conscious of the supreme love to be given to God, and hiding its lack in the perfection of Christ.

Jesus saw in this ruler just the help He needed if the young man would become a colaborer with Him in the work of salvation. **If he would place himself under Christ's guidance, he would be a power for good. In a marked degree the ruler could have represented Christ; for he possessed qualifications, which, if he were united with the Saviour, would enable him to become a divine force among men.** Christ, seeing into his character, loved him. Love for Christ was awakening in the ruler's heart; for love begets love. Jesus longed to see him a co-worker with Him. He longed to make him like Himself, a mirror in which the likeness of God would be reflected. He longed to develop the excellence of his character, and sanctify it to the Master's use. If the ruler had then given himself to Christ, he would have grown in the atmosphere of His presence. If he had made this choice, how different would have been his future!

"One thing thou lackest," Jesus said. "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me." Christ read the ruler's heart. Only one thing he lacked, but that was a vital principle. He needed the love of God in the soul. This lack, unless supplied, would prove fatal to him; his whole nature would become corrupted. By indulgence, selfishness would strengthen. That he might receive the love of God, his supreme love of self must be surrendered.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 518.4-519.4. [Bold type is added.]

16. How do you understand the words of Jesus in this story? Was He really trying to suggest that if we keep the commandments, we could be saved? If that were the only criteria, this young rich ruler might have been ready for the kingdom! But, especially in Paul's writings, we see that keeping the law does not bring us salvation; rather, it points to our need of salvation. (See Romans 3:28; Galatians 3:21-22; Romans 7:7.)
17. For the gospel to be effective, the love of God and an understanding of His kingdom must so penetrate our lives and our thinking that nothing else will stand in the way of our serving Him. How do we get to that position?
18. Many people down through the generations have thought that this story had to be wrong.

But, it is interesting to notice that as recorded in Luke 19:1-10—shortly after the telling of this story—another rich man did get the point and joined the kingdom of God. Are we more like the rich young ruler? Or, more like Zacchaeus? If we were given permission to ask Jesus directly the question that the rich young ruler asked, how do you think Jesus would respond to us?

19. Read Matthew 19:27. Does this question bother you? Was Peter asking a very selfish question? Or, did he simply want to know what is going to happen to those who follow Jesus? Do you suppose that the experience with the rich young ruler triggered Peter's question? The disciples had committed themselves to following Jesus even at considerable cost. We do not have any idea how the disciples' wives and families were supported as those men followed Him. Did God somehow take care of those families? We do not know how many of them were married. We know for sure that Peter was. Were things turning out somewhat unexpectedly?
20. Does this question from Peter suggest that he was still hardhearted and spiritually dense?
21. The spiritual life or the Christian is not easy. But, God has promised us great rewards in the future, even eternal life!
22. Read Matthew 19:28-20:16. How did Jesus respond to Peter's question? This parable seems to us to be incredibly unfair. To say that God will give each person what he deserves seems fair enough; but, it is followed by the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Was Jesus intentionally trying to stir up resentment against His cause? If the master of the vineyard intended to pay all the workers the same, why didn't he at least pay the workers who started work early in the morning first so they would be gone by the time he paid those who came last and were given an equal amount. Was the vineyard owner trying to start a fight? Or, as Morris Venden suggested, was the privilege of working with a master who was so kind the "reward" for those who worked all day with him. Salvation is available to everyone: The Jews who believed that they had been following God for a long time and the Gentile converts who had just come.
23. Have you ever asked—at least in your own private thoughts—the question, "What will I get by serving Jesus?" How would you answer that question? If we were to think about Paul's experience, we might read 2 Timothy 3:12 (*GNB*): "Everybody who wants to live a godly life in union with Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Are we being persecuted? Is that because we are not living godly lives? Or, is it just not time yet? It is true that if we do live godly lives and follow the example of Jesus, we will inherit eternal life some day.
24. Read Matthew 20:20-27 after reading Luke 9:51-56. On His final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus followed a circuitous route which took Him through a portion of Samaria. Jesus was seeking to get as much attention as possible focused on the upcoming events in Jerusalem. When the Samaritans in one village discovered that He was on His way to Jerusalem, they refused to accept Him in their village. James and John, the "sons of thunder," were ready to call fire down on them! It is interesting to note that if one recognizes the location where this happened, it was very near the place where, in fact, shortly before his translation to heaven, Elijah had called fire down from heaven and consumed more than 100 men sent by the king to capture him! (See 2 Kings 1:9-16.)
25. Not too long after that occurred, James and John brought their mother and approached Jesus to ask if they could be given privileged spots next to Jesus in the kingdom. How do you think Jesus felt when they asked that question? He must have been bitterly disappointed. And how did the other disciples respond? They were very upset.
26. Why do you suppose it is that in preparing us to live in a future perfect kingdom where everyone is loving, we have to pass through a time of trial which in some cases may be

even leading to martyrdom?

27. Are you prepared to pay whatever it costs to follow Jesus? As we know, down through the centuries many Christians have paid with their lives. Our lives, in most cases, are very comfortable in 2016. But, it will not always be so.
28. What is regarded as greatness and what is considered to be normal human behavior or natural law is not a part of God's kingdom. We must learn how to rise above it, to practice love to the point even of forgiving and loving our enemies. Those are the kind of people that you would want to live next door to forever. Are you prepared to be that kind of person?
29. Are you prepared to forgive those who hurt you? Even if they are the members of your own family? Do the people around you, that you work with or associate with in one way or another, have any concept of these principles of greatness that Jesus talked about? Real Christian greatness is shown by how well we do at following the example of Jesus Christ. Think about the so-called great people of this earth. How many of them do you think have the humility of Moses? Or, of Jesus? Does that kind of humility get you anywhere in our society today?
30. It is God's plan that we become reflectors of Jesus. How well are we doing at that challenge? Have you ever tried to go directly to someone who has hurt you to see if you can settle the matter with him/her? The lessons we could learn from the events recorded in these chapters are incredible! How well are we doing?

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