

The Role of the Church in the Community Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 2

Lesson #4 for July 23, 2016

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14; 47:1-12; Ephesians 2:10; Matthew 5:16; Revelation 22:1-2; Isaiah 61:1-11.

1. What would happen if every Christian or even every Seventh-day Adventist made it his or her challenge to reach out to the community around her/him?

A neighborhood that had flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s had become like a war zone in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The majority of the families moved away, leaving behind a trail of abandoned, run-down, and burned-out tenements. Businesses moved out and drugs and crime moved in, further making the neighborhood very undesirable.

In 1986 a Christian family left their comfortable home in suburbia and moved into this depressed urban community. A pastor from another city joined them. They rebuilt two burned-out buildings and made them their homes. The two families spent time in the streets, meeting with community groups and mingling with those who remained in the area. These two families were the catalyst that God used to begin a church that brought healing and transformation to this dead community. Their work and impact continues today, having made a big difference in many lives there.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Saturday, July 16, 2016.

2. What would it take for Seventh-day Adventists living in the 21st century to live as has been suggested in this story?
3. Even if we all did that, would we be able to eliminate poverty? Jesus Himself said that will never happen. (Matthew 26:6-13)
4. There are many examples in the Old Testament of Hebrew and Jewish people abusing their neighbors and the poor for their own advantage. The laws in the countries in which most of us live make that much more difficult in our day. Does that mean that the problem has gone away? Certainly, poverty has not gone away!
5. Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. This describes an incredible vision which Ezekiel saw of a valley full of dry bones. Those bones came back to life, forming a vast army. What was the purpose of that vision? Remember that Ezekiel was in captivity, speaking to fellow countrymen who were also in captivity. They felt desperate and hopeless. But, through Ezekiel, God said that He would take them back to their homeland and make them prosperous once again. What lesson should we learn from that story or vision that might apply to us?
6. Read Ephesians 2:10 (*GNB*): “God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.”
7. What does it mean to be “created for a life of good deeds”?
8. Consider these words from Ellen White.

Our acceptance with God is sure only through His beloved Son, and good works are but the result of the working of His sin-pardoning love. They are no credit to us, and we have nothing accorded to us for our good works by

which we may claim a part in the salvation of our souls. Salvation is God's free gift to the believer, given to him for Christ's sake alone. The troubled soul may find peace through faith in Christ, and his peace will be in proportion to his faith and trust. He cannot present his good works as a plea for the salvation of his soul.

But are good works of no real value? Is the sinner who commits sin every day with impunity, regarded of God with the same favor as the one who through faith in Christ tries to work in his integrity? The Scripture answers, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." [Ephesians 2:10]

In his divine arrangement, through his unmerited favor, the Lord has ordained that good works shall be rewarded. We are accepted through Christ's merit alone; and the acts of mercy, the deeds of charity, which we perform, are the fruits of faith.—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages, book 3*, 199.3-200.1. [Content in brackets is added.]

9. There are two statements which stand out in that quotation. 1) "Salvation is God's free gift to the believer." This would seem to suggest that our main task should be to encourage people to be believers. (Contrast James 2:19.) How do we do that? 2) What does it mean to be "accepted through Christ's merits alone"? Do we need to learn from the life and death of Jesus Christ so that our behavior becomes more and more like His? Is that not what is implied by Matthew 5:43-48 where it challenges us to be perfect as God is perfect?
10. Read Ezekiel 47:1-8. In the final section of Ezekiel, he had several visions. In one of those visions, he saw a river flowing out of the temple in Jerusalem towards the east. If one travels down the steep path east from Jerusalem to Jericho and continues to the south, he will encounter the Dead Sea. Ezekiel saw a stream getting bigger and wider and deeper flowing into the Dead Sea and turning it into a wonderful freshwater resource.
11. Do you understand this river to be a symbol for God's church? (1 Peter 2:4-5) If we were a source of light and salt to the world as suggested by Matthew 5:13-16, would we not be a tremendous life-giving source to the world? So, what is the best way of doing that in 2016?
12. One of the closest examples in our world today to the vision that Ezekiel saw is the Zambezi River in Africa. It begins as a shallow brook, springing from under a tree. But, when the heavy rains come and streams pour into it from both sides, it becomes a mighty river which cascades over Victoria Falls on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe.
13. Could our church have that kind of an effect on our community?

Our work has been presented to me as, in its beginning, a small, very small, rivulet.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church, vol. 7*, 171.4.
14. So, how can we be more effective in reaching out to the community?
15. Read Luke 4:18-19. What did Jesus do for the poor? He brought them good news. But, it was not the type of good news they wanted! They wanted Him to help them conquer the Romans, make them all rich, eliminate poverty, and feed them and clothe them without any effort on their part. So, what did Jesus mean when He said God had sent Him to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to announce the time when the Lord will save His people? On that occasion, Jesus mentioned

two examples of miracles that God performed for Gentiles. The people of Nazareth, His hometown, became so angry about it they wanted to kill Him! Hopefully, that will not be the effect of our preaching the good news to the poor in our day!

16. Do you think that Ezekiel's vision was intended to be a symbol for God's church in the end time? What relationship do you see between Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:1-2? Were these two prophets—one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament—suggesting that God's final end-time church will provide the water of life to all around them? Certainly, there will be the river of life flowing from the throne of God in the heavenly kingdom. But, is there a symbolic river of life that needs to be flowing in our day through our efforts? How well are we doing at bringing abundant life to the poor in our day? (See John 10:10.)
17. Read Amos 5:21-24. What would God say if He unexpectedly came to one of our church services? Would God's statement to us sound like these words from Amos?
18. What could we do as a church, a Sabbath school class, or as individuals to be a "healing stream" to the communities in which we live?
19. Read Isaiah 61:1-11. Compare Luke 4:18. Does preaching the good news of the gospel to the poor include reaching out to them in material ways? Our lesson suggests that what was being discussed in Isaiah 61 is really a fulfillment of what was supposed to be done in the year of jubilee. (See Leviticus 25:8-22.)
20. Could the Seventh-day Adventist Church practice some kind of jubilee celebration? How could we better serve our communities? Isaiah 61 suggests that we could "delight greatly in the Lord," "rejoice in our God," and "stand clothed in garments of salvation and righteousness" in the midst of our community. Are these interesting clichés applicable in our day?
21. Read Isaiah 61:9. Compare John 13:34-35. Could the time ever come when we as Seventh-day Adventists stand out and everyone recognizes that we are the real Christians?
22. How does all of this fit with the following from Ellen White?

The law of Jehovah was burdened with needless exactions and traditions, and **God was represented as severe, exacting, revengeful, and arbitrary.** He was pictured as one who could take pleasure in the sufferings of his creatures. The very attributes that belonged to the character of Satan, the evil one represented as belonging to the character of God. **Jesus came to teach men of the Father, to correctly represent him before the fallen children of earth.** Angels could not fully portray the character of God, but Christ, who was a living impersonation of God, could not fail to accomplish the work. **The only way in which he could set and keep men right was to make himself visible and familiar to their eyes....**

...Christ exalted the character of God, attributing to him the praise, and giving to him the credit, of the whole purpose of his own mission on earth,—to set men right through the revelation of God. In Christ was arrayed before men the paternal grace and the matchless perfections of the Father. In his prayer just before his crucifixion, he declared, "I have manifested thy name." "I have glorified thee on the earth; I have

finished the work which thou gavest me to do.” When the object of his mission was attained,—the revelation of God to the world,—the Son of God announced that his work was accomplished, and that the character of the Father was made manifest to men. *The Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1890, par. 6,9. [Bold type is added.]

23. If we accept Jesus’s own words that He came to preach the gospel to the poor and also accept these words from Ellen White that His main job was to represent the Father correctly, how are these two goals associated or related?
24. Read Micah 6. Do any of us abuse the poor to get rich? Micah said that if we do so, we will lose everything. Additionally, Micah said we would be despised by others around us, in contrast to the praise mentioned in Isaiah 61:9.
25. Clearly, external forms of religion will not get us to heaven. **Micah 6:8 makes it very clear that religious formalism is useless. *Real religion* means to do what is right—and to do it because it is right.**

True religion is practical. To be sure, it includes the rites and ceremonies of the church, but it is in the life lived before one’s fellows that the presence or absence of true religion is manifest. It is not so much a matter of abstaining from food as it is of sharing food with the hungry. Practical godliness is the only kind of religion recognized at the judgment bar of God (Matt. 25:34-46).—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, 306. (Comment on Isaiah 58:7 regarding the words *deal thy bread*.)

26. What kind of practical godliness is possible in our day?
27. One of the sins of ancient Israel was to barricade themselves away from all of the nations around them. Are we doing something similar to that in our day? How many Seventh-day Adventist communities have become a kind of ghetto where primarily Adventists live and where we do not have to deal with people from the community?
28. Christianity always comes down to the individual. We may act as a community; but, we cannot demonstrate Christianity as a group unless we do so as individuals.
29. Consider again the words of Micah 6:8. What does it mean to do what is right? What does it mean to show constant love? And what does it mean to live in humble fellowship with our God?
30. There are many passages in the Bible that talk about being fair in our dealings with others—especially the widows, orphans, and foreigners—and to be humble and teachable. Consider Isaiah 1; Isaiah 58; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16; Proverbs 21:3; Matthew 9:13; and Matthew 12:7.
31. Could we become so caught up in trying to meet peoples’ material needs that we neglect their spiritual needs? Do you personally know of any Christians who are exerting all of their efforts to deal with other people’s material needs and have neglected their spiritual needs?
32. So far in this lesson, we have talked about reaching out to the poor and needy. Do we as a church, or as a class, or as individuals have any responsibility also to reach out to the rich and wealthy? They are often much harder to reach than the poor! How could we reach out to them through prayer, friendship, and caring?
33. As we already know, there has been a great discussion in the Christian church and in the Seventh-day Adventist Church about the correct relationship between faith and works.

After having said in Ephesians 2:8-9 that we are saved by faith not works, Paul said in Ephesians 2:10 that we were created for good works! Paul and James are often contrasted; but, how do you understand Romans 2:13 in comparison with James 2:18-26?

34. What kind of good works do you think would make the biggest difference in your local community?
35. Surrounding us are many people living under the burden of depression and despair. Should dealing with despair and depression be left to medical professionals in our day? If we do have some responsibility to help them, what could the rest of us do?
36. Isaiah 61:8 tells us that God loves justice. Very few of us have any role to play in the court systems in our nations. So, how can we work for greater justice in our communities? Should we be marching in the streets for causes that we believe in?
37. Read Matthew 25:35-36. Is it really true that when Jesus conducts His judgment at the end of time, the only question He will consider will be the good works that we have done for the most disadvantaged among us? How does correct theology relate to this?
38. Does that mean that theology is not really that important? Or, does it mean that any person could give food and drink to a hungry person and that Jesus was making the message as simple as possible so no one can say that it is only the pastor who is qualified to reach out to others? How does real theology relate to that?
39. Often issues of poverty and need become political issues. But, they are certainly not issues that involve only politicians. The Scriptures speak a great deal about these issues. So, in what political themes—if we choose to call them that—should we be involved? What about drug abuse, murder, abortions, same-sex marriages, etc. Many of us may feel that those issues do not directly affect us and are not part of our religion.
40. A German Lutheran pastor by the name of Martin Niemöller had this to say:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.—Martin Niemöller. “First They Came...” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2016.
41. So, about what issues should Seventh-day Adventists in various parts of the world with different issues be speaking out? Wouldn't that depend on the local situation?
42. Does working for social issues and justice mean that we are turning away from our true calling which is to preach the gospel? Are we doing a good job of preaching the gospel? How many members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church understand the really important theological issues such as why Jesus had to die?
43. In years past, Seventh-day Adventists were discouraged from becoming involved in politics. Should we now get involved? Or, are we supposed to do our good works as an example for others rather than to get the government to change its policies about the poor?

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses,—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men,

but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 509.3.

44. What forms of injustice do you see in your community? What could we as individuals or as a group do to deal with those injustices?
45. The story of Jesus's return to Nazareth as described in Luke 4 is a puzzling one. Did Jesus really proclaim liberty to the captives? He did heal blind people. Did He set at liberty those who were oppressed? (What about John the Baptist?) He did proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Jesus spoke these words very early in the year of His Galilean ministry. As suggested in Leviticus 25:10-13, was Jesus speaking specifically about canceling debts? Setting slaves free? Returning land to its original owner?
46. Did Jesus actually do any of that? If our job is to follow the example of Jesus who was a poor Man Himself, how are we to understand this application? He told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor and come and follow Him? (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22) How does that fit into the picture? Why do you think the tide of public opinion turned against Jesus so quickly when He mentioned Naaman and the widow of Zarephath?
47. In Ephesians 2:10 (NIV), we read: "For we are God's **poiēma** created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." [Bold type is added.] There is only one other occurrence of the word **poiēma** in the New Testament; it is found in Romans 1:20. In Ephesians 2:10, it can be translated God's "workmanship," and in Romans 1:20 it is often translated "what has been made."
48. It is possible that the English word *poem* derives from this Greek word **poiēma**. A good look at nature would demonstrate that God is the Creator of beauty, of poetry, and of art.
49. So, what kind of good works is God speaking about in this verse? Certainly, it will include more than just feeling sorry for the poor and the oppressed.
50. What does it mean to "live lives of simplicity and modesty"?
51. It might be easy to just sit back and say: "Soon God will destroy this world and everything evil in it; so, why should we care?"
52. What benefits are there for those who reach out to others? In what sense is it more blessed to give than to receive? (Acts 20:35)
53. What percentage of Seventh-day Adventists in the developed world are reaching out in any way to the disadvantaged, the poor, and the needy? Could you be a Christian and not care for the poor and needy at all? Why? Or, why not?

© 2016, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution of all or of a portion of this material such as to a Bible study class is encouraged. Info@theox.org

Last Modified: June 4, 2016

Z:\My Documents\WP\SSTG-Hart\Church & Community\SS-4-Church&Comm-2016_07_23-Fin+.wpd