

***“The Least of These”*: Ministering to Those in Need To Love Mercy**

Lesson #12 for September 21, 2019

Scriptures: Matthew 6:25-33; James 1:5-8; 2:15-16; Isaiah 52:7; 58:1-10; 1 John 3:16-18; Psalm 112: 4-5.

1. This lesson will focus on the challenge of trying to reach out to the poor and needy in our world today. We have discussed the ways in which God set up the Hebrew system which was supposed to take care of the poor and needy, even returning property to its original owner after a certain period of time.
2. But, that was long ago. Nothing like that is happening in our world today. Has God allowed some people to be poor, oppressed, disabled, or needy to test the rest of us?
3. The Devil has made sure that our world is riddled with poverty, violence, oppression, slavery, exploitation, selfishness—which is his trademark—and greed.
4. God calls us as Christians, and as Christian groups, to live in that environment, showing compassion, creativity, and courage. Can we really act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God? (See Micah 6:8.) What would that mean today?
5. How do Christian churches become “compassionate, creative, and courageous” in reaching out to those in need? The Christians in our world who are truly following Jesus are marching to a different drummer. They have different values and different priorities than does the world. Are we making the finishing of the gospel our top priority?
6. Read Matthew 6:25-33. Clearly, God has provided what is needed to sustain life and health on this earth. If everyone living on this earth were looking out for others, there would be no problem at all! But, how are Christians who are a relative minority of this earth’s population supposed to reach out in these ways? Was it easier to follow the suggestions of Jesus in His day than it is today? We are aware of a much larger world than was known in His day.
7. For those living in the more developed countries of the world, there are government programs designed to deal with many of these problems. Does the government do a better job than we could? Often, those programs are inadequate or even failing. Some government programs are very well-intentioned; but, others are not. Romans 13:1-7 makes it clear that even in Paul’s day, in dealing with the Roman government—which would ultimately behead him—he encouraged us to cooperate with the government unless it was in direct opposition to God’s plans. (See Acts 5:29.) Jesus also dealt with government issues in His statement about paying tribute to Caesar as recorded in Matthew 22:21. Do we know which is which?
8. So, how should we determine what is Caesar’s and what is God’s?
9. As we as Seventh-day Adventist Christians know, a day is coming when governments around the world will pass laws that are directly contrary to the law of God. Are we prepared to deal with those events?
10. The stories of martyrs down through the generations and especially of the treatment of Jesus is a clear indication that faithful living will not always prevent evil.

When the laws of men conflict with the word and law of God, we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be. **The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey**; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. **The slave is not the property of any man.** God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God’s workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,* vol. 1, 201.2-202.0 (1859).† Compare GC 459.0.

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11. And where is the line between obedience to authorities and standing up for those who might be victims of an oppressive authority? Will there be times when we have to stand up for others against the national Sunday law? Would that put us at risk also?
12. Some Christians are experiencing “compassion fatigue.” What do we mean by *compassion fatigue*? There are so many problems around us and so many needs calling for help that it is easy, finally, to just turn a deaf ear.
13. How should we decide among the many, many requests for financial support? There are groups which report on the Internet regarding charity organizations. Some organizations use most of the money raised to support their administration and fund-raising costs. If an organization is using a large portion of the money it raises for its own uses, should that disqualify it from our funding?

Because many situations of injustice and poverty are complicated, listening and learning what we can about these situations is important. There have been many examples in which well-intentioned people have caused damage to other people’s lives by trying to help. While this is not an excuse for inaction, we should seek to get involved in ways that are informed and thoughtful.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, September 16.

14. In dealing with all of these problems around us, it is not always necessary to think first of financial solutions or even practical actions. Often, the first thing that needs to happen is prayer. (1 Timothy 2:1-2; Proverbs 2:7-8)
15. Unfortunately, sometimes when we reach out to try to help groups and especially if finances are involved, the people receiving the funds may use them in ways that disappoint us. Should we disrespect their choices? How often do some of those funds end up in the pockets of church leaders in receiving areas?
16. Sometimes, well-intentioned and meaningful people, without understanding fully what is going on, turn gifts into “toxic charity.” It can be devastating for a community to feel like they are totally dependent on outside help. So, whenever possible, we need to make merciful intervention a community-driven project rather than a volunteer-driven project through the use of external funds and personnel. We should ask the following questions:
 1. In what ways is capable indigenous (i.e., local, native) leadership behind the effort?
 2. How does the program show that it has the ultimate self-sufficiency of the neighborhood as a primary objective?
 3. In what ways does the plan emanate from the local church, which partners with entities in the community?
 4. How does the plan promote interdependency rather than continued dependency?—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 161-162.
17. However, we cannot just ignore people’s needs.

James 2:15-16: ¹⁵Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don’t have enough to eat. ¹⁶What good is there in your saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!”—if you don’t give them the necessities of life? ¹⁷So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., James 2:15-16). New York: American Bible Society.

18. Read 2 Corinthians 9:7. Here we are told that God loves a cheerful giver. Generosity is an

important aspect of the Christian life. But, generosity includes more than financial assistance.

Leviticus 25:35-37: ³⁵ If a fellow-Israelite living near you becomes poor and cannot support himself or herself, you must provide for them as you would for hired servants, so that they can continue to live near you. ³⁶Do not charge them any interest, but obey God and let your fellow-Israelites live near you. ³⁷Do not make them pay interest on the money you lend them, and do not make a profit on the food you sell them.—*Good News Bible*.*

19. Read also Psalm 119:36; 2 Corinthians 8:12-15; 1 John 3:16-18; and 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Clearly, Paul felt that those who had adequate amounts of money should reach out to help others who were in need.
20. Generosity should be an attitude that permeates the life of Christians. We need to die to self and live more for others, remembering that selfishness is the essence of the satanic kingdom and that love is the essence of God's kingdom.
21. And some might think that their meager funds prevent them from giving anything. Such people should review Jesus's words recorded in Mark 12:41-44.

Mark 12:41-44: ⁴¹ As Jesus sat near the temple treasury, he watched the people as they dropped in their money. Many rich men dropped in a lot of money; ⁴²then a poor widow came along and dropped in two little copper coins, worth about a penny. ⁴³He called his disciples together and said to them, "I tell you that this poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others. ⁴⁴For the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had—she gave all she had to live on."—*Good News Bible*.*

22. There are ways to be generous apart from giving money. The most precious gift of all is time. When we are willing to seek people out and try to help them, it is almost beyond belief! Often, it will lead people to tears of joy.
23. Christians should also be peacemakers. See Matthew 5:9 and Mark 13:7. Violent conflicts are everywhere in our day. It seems that even the least bit of differences of opinion can lead to some kind of conflict. People are shot on the streets, sometimes apparently for no reason at all. But, the biggest conflicts end up in wars. And those wars have terrible consequences not only for those who die but also for those who are survivors and veterans. It would be perfect if everyone would act in Christian ways and no wars ever started. But, what are we supposed to do with the Adolf Hitlers and the Napoleons of the world?
24. God has a very-well-laid-out plan for how we should deal with our enemies.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21: ¹⁸All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. ¹⁹Our message is that God was making the whole human race his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends.

²⁰ Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends! ²¹Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God.—*Good News Bible*.*

The heart that is in harmony with God is a partaker of the peace of heaven and will diffuse its blessed influence on all around. The spirit of peace will rest like dew upon hearts weary and troubled with worldly strife.—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing** 28.0.

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25. Conflicts have been so common in the history of our world that they were one of the first things that Jesus dealt with in His Sermon on the Mount. See Matthew 5:21-26. And as recorded in Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus went beyond just the ordinary ways of dealing with conflicts, suggesting that we should love our enemies.
26. Way back in the Old Testament, Solomon wrote that there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak.” (Ecclesiastes 3:7, *NIV**) The challenge, of course, is finding the right balance. And often, it has seemed that Christians have kept quiet when they probably should have been speaking up. We may claim to be the hands and feet of Jesus; but, how often are we active in the public arena? What God wants from us is clearly spelled out in Psalm 146:6-10 and Isaiah 58:1-10. Remember that the Devil is alive and well on this earth.
27. Working for justice as the prophets outlined in the Old Testament is never a path to popularity. Trying to get society to be fair to those who are underprivileged and hurting is always a challenge.
28. Peter told us:
1 Peter 3:17: For it is better to suffer for doing good, if this should be God’s will, than for doing evil.—*Good News Bible*.*
29. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has an official stand on such issues.
 “Seventh-day Adventists believe that actions to reduce poverty and its attendant injustices are an important part of Christian social responsibility. The Bible clearly reveals God’s special interest in the poor and His expectations as to how His followers should respond to those who are unable to care for themselves. All human beings bear the image of God and are the recipients of God’s blessing (*Luke 6:20*). In working with the poor, we follow the example and teaching of Jesus (*Matthew 25:35, 36*). As a spiritual community, Seventh-day Adventists advocate justice for the poor and ‘speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves’ (*Proverbs 31:8 NIV*) and against those who ‘deprive the poor of their rights’ (*Isaiah 10:2 NIV*). We participate with God who ‘secures justice for the poor’ (*Psalm 140:12 NIV*).”—*Seventh-day Adventist Official Statement on Global Poverty*, June 24, 2010.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, September 19]. [Italic type is in the Bible Study Guide.]†
30. Jesus had a number of things to say about poverty. See especially Luke 6:20 and Matthew 25:35-36. They believed that if one was good, God would bless him with riches. Solomon, David, and Isaiah also had things to say. See Proverbs 31:8; Psalm 140:12; and Isaiah 10:2.
31. So, where should we go from here? Are we doing as much as we should be doing?
 Search heaven and earth, and there is no truth revealed more powerful than that which is made manifest in works of mercy to those who need our sympathy and aid. This is the truth as it is in Jesus. **When those who profess the name of Christ shall practice the principles of the golden rule, the same power will attend the gospel as in apostolic times.**—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing** 137.2; *General Conference Bulletin**, July 1, 1900, par. 10.†
32. **How do you understand this statement? Is this what is delaying the latter rain and the second coming?**

Supreme love for God and unselfish love for one another—this is the best gift that our heavenly Father can bestow. This love is not an impulse, but a divine

principle, a permanent power. The unconsecrated heart cannot originate or produce it. Only in the heart where Jesus reigns is it found.... This love, cherished in the soul, sweetens the life and sheds a refining influence on all around.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 551.2; *RC** 234.5. Compare *SC* 59.3; *AG* 237.5; *LHU* 151.4.

Raising our voices for the voiceless, engaging in peacemaking, and similar activities may draw us into public and political arenas. However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been a champion of the separation of church and state. **What is the difference between inappropriate political involvement and speaking up and working to make peace in public ways?**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, September 20.†

33. So, where do we see the line between: (1) Separation of church and state and (2) working in the public arena to make peace?
34. There are some members in the U.S. Congress who want to require anyone running for national office to renounce any religious affiliation! What does that tell us about how close we are to the end of the history of the world? And what should we be praying for now?
35. Careful and faithful followers of Jesus will find their lives impacted in many ways. Doing the things we have talked about in this lesson is never easy, and is rarely popular. Are we prepared to have our priorities and our motives disrupted and changed in order to help heal a hurting world?
36. This lesson is about mercy. What is *mercy*? The Hebrew word for *mercy* is *hesed*, meaning “loyal love” or “loving-kindness.” The Greek word *eleos* means one has a “deep concern for the welfare of others.” Do those words describe us? Or, the members of our church?
37. So, what are you and your church doing to minister to your community? Are we demonstrating acts of mercy, fairness, compassion, and justice?

Practical work will have far more effect than mere sermonizing. We are to give food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and shelter to the homeless. And we are called to do more than this. The wants of the soul, only the love of Christ can satisfy.—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons** 417.4; *Reflecting Christ** 233.3; *Be Like Jesus** 261.2.

“The tendency of the religions of all time has been to care more for religion than for humanity; Christ cared more for humanity than for religion—rather, His care for humanity was the chief expression of His religion.”—Henry Drummond, *The Programme of Christianity* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1891), p. 9.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 159]. [Reference is in a footnote in the Bible Study Guide.]†

38. The safest way for Christians is always following the example of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is our example. He came to the world as the servant of mankind. He went from city to city, from village to village, teaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing the sick. **Christ spent more time in healing than in teaching.**—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* September 10, 1908, par. 4.†

During His ministry **Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching.**—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 350.3.† Compare *GW* 43.2; *MH* 19.4; *4T* 225.2.

How many different kinds of healings did Jesus do?

39. Does it seem to you like doing justice and loving mercy as suggested by Micah 6:8 would be almost impossible in our world today?

The story is told of a boy who was walking on a beach where he encountered hundreds of dying starfish that had washed ashore. The boy began tossing the starfish back into the ocean. Someone saw him and told him that he could not possibly help all those starfish. As he tossed another starfish into the ocean, he answered that the little he could do made a difference to that one.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 159.

40. Unfortunately, in our world today, those who are recipients of personal financial assistance sometimes use it for very bad things. On the street corners of America, there are people begging for money; sometimes, we wonder if all they want is more alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes. So, how do we reach out to such people? Even street children need friendship and training for jobs.
41. How will God judge all of this? God's judgment is perfectly fair, just, and merciful. Everything He does is completely transparent before the eyes of the universe. He does not do anything without the complete approval of the intelligent beings of the universe. (See Revelation 4-5.)
42. There are a number of amazing stories in the Bible of Jesus, healing people. See for example Luke 17:11-19; John 5:1-9; and John 8:2-11. The story in **John 8:2-11** is so radical in its dealing with the love of Jesus that early Christians did not know what to do with it. Try to imagine how the story was regarded by early Christians when they were trying to separate couples because marriages were regarded by some as too sensual/material. Remember that some early Christians, called gnostics, had adopted the idea that anything material that one could actually touch was sinful while anything spiritual was untouchable. As a result, several early manuscripts left the story in John 8:2-11 out completely while others placed it in other parts of John's Gospel. But, the story is true wherever it is found.
43. One group of people seeking to do something good for families in a poor area developed a program they called "Adopt-a-Family." As a part of that program, they got people to donate Christmas gifts which they delivered to the homes of the needy. When these strangers appeared at the door and offered gifts, the mothers were somewhat reserved and the fathers sometimes disappeared out the back door when they saw the gift givers coming. At first, the givers were puzzled. But, then they began to realize that they were making the parents look bad. And so, the organizers developed a "Christmas shop." Those who had no money could work at the store to earn what would be needed to purchase gifts for the family, and the price of the gifts was very reasonable. Thus, on Christmas day, parents could experience the joy of watching their children open gifts that the parents had provided with their own hands. They changed the name of their program from "Adopt-a-Family" to "Pride for Parents."
44. One of the major acts of mercy is peacemaking. See John 14:27; 2 Corinthians 5:18; and Hebrews 12:14. Jesus intended for us to be at peace no matter what is going on around us. And Paul also reflected that idea.
45. The challenges in this lesson seem almost insurmountable. But, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can reach out in ways that are meaningful and helpful to those who need it most. Do we need to balance addressing the spiritual needs and the physical needs of people? May God help us.

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