

“The Least of These”: Ministering to Those in Need Blueprint for a Better World

Lesson #2 for July 13, 2019

Scriptures: Exodus 3:7; 22:21-23; Matthew 22:37-40; Deuteronomy 6:5; 14:22-29; 26:1-11; Leviticus 19:18; 25:8-23.

1. God has always had a plan for this earth. The original plan, of course, was the Garden of Eden. But, when that failed, God’s long-term plan, i.e., the plan of salvation, was inaugurated. Down through the years, God has had to work with the select few who were clearly on His side. They have not been many. Some examples include Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But, there were others like Job. It is interesting to note that this list of individuals were all rich men. But, God specifically promised Abraham—and I am sure that promise belonged to others as well—that if he followed God, he would be a blessing to all peoples of the earth, and they would be a blessing to him. (See Genesis 12:2-3.)
2. The greatest part of that blessing, of course, was the Messiah. But, long before that, God chose to work through the children of His friends Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the descendants of these people were later known as the children of Israel. As we read through the Old Testament, we discover what an incredible journey it was for God.
3. God’s plan after the exodus was for Israel’s home to be placed at the crossroads of the world and for them to be witnesses to His loving care and the superiority of His form of government so that nations and individuals everywhere could hear the truth about the only true God. Do you think that plan could still be true?
4. God made an incredible promise to Abraham as He called him out of Ur of the Chaldees. He was told that, one day, the land of Canaan would belong to his descendants. Then, 400 years passed. Who could have guessed at that point that hundreds of those years would be spent in Egypt and much of that time in slavery. What do you think the angels in heaven thought as they watched everything that was happening **while God was apparently doing nothing to resolve their problems?**
5. Then, try to imagine their amazement when they saw God call Moses—a disgraced refugee and former prince, herding sheep in the desert—to lead His people. And what a job Moses did!
6. For those who carefully studied the lessons last quarter about Revelation, this should remind you that God has waited 2000 years to finish the work of telling His story to the world! Are we doing our share?
7. Read Exodus 3:16-17. There were probably only a relatively few of the leaders of Israel that heard those words as they came from the lips of Moses. What do you think they said to their families that night when they got home? Did they believe it?
8. As we now know, God finally stepped in and did something about Israel’s suffering. That should again remind us of the fifth seal as recorded in Revelation 6:10 as we hear about the blood of the martyrs crying out at the base of the altar, “How long?”
9. The children of Israel had served the Egyptians for a long period of time. Now, God was about to call them out of their home in exile. But, He was not asking them to leave empty-handed. They were to go and “collect” many valuable things from the Egyptians

(See Exodus 3:22.) as a kind of delayed payment for their many years of hard work.

10. And what kind of government would God set up for the new nation? If they had only followed God's will for their lives, they would have had a model government. They would have become shining lights to the entire world.
11. Read Exodus 4:31. Think what this verse implies about God's relationship with human beings.
12. Read Matthew 22:37-40 and Exodus 20:1-17. The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking Him which was the most important commandment. As usual, Jesus came up with an answer different from what they thought and gave a beautiful summary of all ten.
13. Can you think of anything that you could add to improve on the Ten Commandments if you were starting a new nation? Many nations in the world even today have constitutions somewhat based on those original principles.

While many of these statements are brief, we should not underestimate the breadth of their impact and the comprehensiveness of the Ten Commandments as the law of life. For example, the sixth commandment—" 'You shall not murder' " (*Exod. 20:13, NIV*)—summarizes and includes "all acts of injustice that tend to shorten life" as well as "a selfish neglect of caring for the needy or suffering."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 308. Similarly, the prohibition against stealing (*see Exod. 20:15*) condemns "slave dealing, and forbids wars of conquest." It "requires the payment of just debts or wages," as well as prohibiting "every attempt to advantage oneself by the ignorance, weakness, or misfortune of another."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 309.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, July 8].[†]

14. It is fairly easy for a person to look at the Ten Commandments and interpret each commandment narrowly and claim that he is obeying all ten. But, when one broadens the meanings associated with each of the Ten Commandments, one will come up with something like the Sermon on the Mount and more. See Matthew 5:21-30.
15. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a society where everyone actually understood and rejoiced in keeping the Ten Commandments? Wouldn't God whisk those people off to heaven almost immediately?
16. But, almost immediately following the giving of the Ten Commandments, God began to explain some of the details to Moses. Read Exodus 21-23. In these chapters there is a great deal of emphasis on how we should treat slaves, widows, fatherless, and even foreigners. How well are we doing at following the principles laid down in these three chapters? God intended for those who had been slaves not to forget what it was like or what a marvelous redemption God had given them. They were to tell it to their children over and over again. But, the most important point of those chapters is that we are to help the needy, the homeless, and the disadvantaged.
17. Try to imagine what the nations surrounding Israel in those early days might have thought about God's commandments. There was no other government that came even close to the wonderful provisions being suggested in Exodus 20-23. Even foreigners were to be treated fairly and not just killed as enemies!
18. So, how should people living in the more affluent societies of the world today regard those

who desperately want to join their societies? What about “illegal” immigrants?

19. Read Malachi 3:10. Since early in our days as Seventh-day-Adventist Christians, we have quoted this verse to promote the giving of a faithful tithe. God was asking us to give a tenth of our increase, that is, our income, to support the ministry of the church.
20. But, God had an even broader plan! Read Deuteronomy 14:22-29. Some conservative Seventh-day Adventists will be shocked when they read how God’s tithe was to be used! Have you ever set aside a portion of your tithe to purchase “beef, lamb, wine, and beer” to celebrate? When you do, you must invite the poor, the widow, the orphan, the homeless, as well as the pastor, to join you! These are the two strongest words for non-distilled alcohol in the Bible. (See *Yayin* and *Shekar*.) Compare Proverbs 31:6-7.
21. We need to remember, of course, that the ten percent of their income that was set aside to support the Levites was just the beginning. There was an additional portion set aside every third year for the support of the poor, including widows and orphans. This portion may have involved as much as another ten percent of their income.

In regular years, this portion of the harvest was to be brought to the sanctuary and shared from there. But every third year, there was to be a special focus on sharing their blessings in their own community. In these harvest celebrations, there was a special focus on those who might easily have been overlooked or forgotten: “You shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (*Deut. 26:12, NIV*).—*Ibid.** for Wednesday, July 10.

Deuteronomy 26:12: “Every third year give the tithe—a tenth of your crops—to the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows, so that in every community they will have all they need to eat.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Deuteronomy 26:12). New York: American Bible Society.

22. How do you understand the words in Deuteronomy 26:1-11?
23. Every seven years, Israelite slaves were to be set free, and a certain amount of readjustment of wealth was to take place. But, after seven cycles of seven years—on the 50th year—there was to be a jubilee. What happened in the year of the jubilee? All land was to be returned to its original owner; and slaves, of course, should already have been freed if they were Israelites who had sold themselves into temporary slavery to pay their debts.
24. There are rumblings in some part of the United States that we need a jubilee today. Do you think such a thing could ever happen? How would it actually be implemented? And who would claim to be the original owner of each piece of land? Would we be able to sustain ourselves from the harvest and profits of the 1st through 6th years?

The regulations that God established were designed to promote social equality. The provisions of the sabbatical year and the jubilee would, in a great measure, set right that which during the interval had gone wrong in the social and political economy of the nation.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 534.3; *2MCP** 625.4.

25. How do you think that would impact our society today if everyone recognized that all goods including all land actually belongs to the Lord? After World War II, it soon became apparent that it would be impossible to reconstruct the banking records of the German people. So,

it was decided that a new currency would be invented call the *Deutschmark*; every person who could prove that s/he was German was to be given 40 Deutschmarks to start over again. Was that a good plan?

The Lord would place a check upon the inordinate love of property and power. Great evils would result from the continued accumulation of wealth by one class, and the poverty and degradation of another. Without some restraint the power of the wealthy would become a monopoly, and the poor, though in every respect fully as worthy in God's sight, would be regarded and treated as inferior to their more prosperous brethren. The sense of this oppression would arouse the passions of the poorer class. There would be a feeling of despair and desperation which would tend to demoralize society and open the door to crimes of every description.... [Is that true today?]

These regulations were designed to bless the rich no less than the poor. They would restrain avarice and a disposition for self-exaltation, and would cultivate a noble spirit of benevolence; and by fostering good will and confidence between all classes, they would promote social order, the stability of government. We are all woven together in the great web of humanity, [535] and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves. The law of mutual dependence runs through all classes of society. The poor are not more dependent upon the rich than are the rich upon the poor. While the one class ask a share in the blessings which God has bestowed upon their wealthier neighbors, the other need the faithful service, the strength of brain and bone and muscle, that are the capital of the poor.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 534.3-535.0. [Compare 2 Thessalonians 3:10.][†]

26. Do we believe these words? How could they possibly be applied to us today? Could a plan like this be implemented by the Seventh-day Adventist Church without being implemented by the entire nation or society? What might happen?
27. Unfortunately, we do not have any record of any time down through the generations of the Old Testament where this plan was actually fully implemented. It may have happened; but, if so, we have no record of it.

2 Chronicles 36:21: ²¹And so what the LORD had foretold through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "The land will lie desolate for seventy years, to make up for the Sabbath rest that has not been observed."—*Good News Bible*.*

28. Does that verse at the end of 2 Chronicles imply that it was never implemented?

There is nothing, after their recognition of the claims of God, that more distinguishes the laws given by Moses than the liberal, tender, and hospitable spirit enjoined toward the poor. Although God had promised greatly to bless His people, it was not His design that poverty should be wholly unknown among them. He declared that the poor should never cease out of the land. There would ever be those among His people who would call into exercise their sympathy, tenderness, and benevolence. Then, as now, persons were subject to misfortune, sickness, and loss of property; yet so long as they followed the instruction given by God, there were no beggars among them, neither any who suffered for food.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs*

and Prophets* 530.3-531.0.

29. So, what is your overall impression of God's blueprint? It sounds good! Does it seem completely beyond the realm of possibility in our day? Why do you think God focused particularly upon reaching out to the poor, the widows, and the orphans?
30. Where would God place the large group of homeless that we have in our society today?
31. It is interesting to notice that both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the ideas of *justice* and *righteousness* are often represented by a single word. How would you say that *righteousness* and *justice* are related in our day?
32. Is it clear in your thinking that God has a detailed understanding of the thoughts, actions, and events of every life? Every day? How does that make you feel? Read Psalm 89:14. How does that relate to Romans 1:16-17?

Romans 1:16-17: ¹⁶ "For I am not ashamed of the good news of the Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to every one who is believing [has faith], both to Jew first, and to Greek. ¹⁷For **the righteousness of God in it is revealed** from faith to faith, according as it hath been written, 'And the righteous one by faith shall live.'"—Young, R. (1997). *Young's Literal Translation** (Romans 1:16–17). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.^{†‡}

33. While *righteousness* has continued to be a word in modern terms which is closely related to God and His behavior, *justice* has moved considerably away from that ideal to include an enormous legal system set up to deal with criminals. This has resulted in a change in the general understanding of the word *justice*.

Amos 3:2: Of all the nations on earth, you are the only one I have known and cared for. That is what makes your sins so terrible, and that is why I must punish you for them.—*Good News Bible.**

34. Does it seem unfair to you that God singled out the children of Israel for His special blessings? Why do you think God did that? Why didn't He just pick out those people who were willing to follow His plan for their lives no matter where they lived, what language they spoke, or the culture or society of which they were a part? Think of Ruth, Rahab, Job, etc.
35. It is very easy for some of us living in more affluent societies to think less favorably about the poor and especially the homeless. But, we need to remember that God knows all the details about every person's life; that could make a huge difference in how we relate to some of those people. For example, consider the following story.

In contrast, consider the story of a business owner who learned a valuable lesson about interfering when he was not "in the know." This owner decided to take a tour around his business to see how things were going and how efficiently his employees were working. He went down to the shipping docks and saw a young man leaning against a wall, apparently doing nothing. The owner walked up to the young man and said, "Son, how much do you make a day?"

The young man replied, "150 dollars."

The business owner pulled out his wallet, gave him US\$150, and told him to get out and never come back.

As soon as the young man left, the shipping clerk came out to the docks,

looked around, and then asked the owner, “Have you seen the UPS (United Parcel Service) driver? I asked him to wait here for me!”—Ed Vasicek, “Meet Jethro,” Sermon Central, November 10, 2006, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/meet-jethro-ed-vasicek-sermon-on-10god-in-the-hardships-97796?ref=SermonSerps>.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 27 with the reference in a footnote].[‡]

36. How cognizant are the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the needs of those around them? How many of us live in little cocoons, trying to stay as isolated from the world as possible? How many non-Adventists do you associate with on a regular basis?
37. Read Exodus 20:3,17. The first and last commandments serve as bookends for the ten. How would you relate the first and last of the Ten Commandments with the two great commandments that Jesus quoted in Matthew 22:37-40?
38. Scan through the last six commandments. Can you think of any way you could improve any of them?
39. Our world is full of greedy people. So many are only concerned about what they can get for themselves. And many, it turns out, cannot afford what they are getting. The amount of international debt is beyond fathom. The total amount of debt estimated at the beginning of 2018 was US\$247 trillion. What would happen to all those debts in a jubilee? Many of the more organized and advanced civilizations in the world have laws to protect people who fall into debt. But, those laws have serious consequences.
40. How well are we doing at thinking about the needs of others? So many of us are so wrapped up in what we regard as our own needs that we hardly have time to think of others. Where does *agape* love fit in that picture?
41. If the plan of jubilee and the other regulations set up by God for the beginning of the nation of Israel had been followed carefully, would Israel have ended up being a poor nation? What might have happened?

The contributions required of the Hebrews for religious and charitable purposes amounted to fully one fourth of their income. So heavy a tax upon the resources of the people might be expected to reduce them to poverty; but, on the contrary, the faithful observance of these regulations was one of the conditions of their prosperity.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 527.[†]

See Malachi 3:8-12.

42. Where would you fit in a jubilee? Would you lose all of your retirement savings? Would you end up with a fresh beginning, having all your debt forgiven? Would people multiply debt because it would be forgiven? What are the spiritual implications of having a jubilee?

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