

“The Least of These”: Ministering to Those in Need Worship the Creator

Lesson #6 for August 10, 2019

Scriptures: Psalm 101:1; 115:1-8; Deuteronomy 10:17-22; Isaiah 1:11-15; 58; Mark 12:38-40.

1. In this lesson we will try to discover the depth of meaning in the messages of the Old Testament prophets. They were bold and brave in presenting their messages, even when addressing kings. They had a particular sense of anger and grief at the injustice being done to people around them.
2. Notice that, often, these messages from the Old Testament prophets about taking care of the poor and needy were given in the context of instructions about worship. Could it be that attending church and Sabbath school once a week is not God’s first choice for how to worship Him? Could it be that living a life of generosity and selfless giving to others is really what God wants most of all? (See Matthew 25:31-46.)
3. As we know, very soon after the children of Israel were called out of slavery in Egypt, they were given the Ten Commandments at the foot of Mount Sinai. Even before they had heard those commandments, they promised to do whatever God asked them to do! (See Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7.) Was that presumptuous? How well did they do?
4. While Moses was enjoying incredibly close fellowship with the God of heaven on the top of Mount Sinai, the children of Israel were dancing, drunk and naked, in a fertility cult ceremony around a golden calf at the foot of that same mountain! (Exodus 32:6,30-34)
5. Try to imagine what you would think or do if your pastor, leading an expedition with limited supplies through the desert disappeared into a fiery cloud on the top of a nearby mountain and was not seen for more than a month.
6. We often think about the challenge of feeding 2 million people in the desert. We have discussed the issue of the *manna* and what it implied. A bigger question is actually how did they feed all the animals? And where did they get the alcohol that they used in that drunken feast? Where did they get the olive oil needed for carrying out various ceremonies at the temple?
7. Read Exodus 32:32. Imagine Moses, offering to have his name removed from the books of heaven because of the sins that the people had done! Would God have done that?
8. Of course, we need to remember that the children of Israel had been surrounded by idolatrous practices for hundreds of years in Egypt. How do you think that impacted them? Read Psalm 115:1-8. In effect, God said: “All who make idols and trust in them will become like those idols!”

It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence. Man will never rise higher than his standard of purity or goodness or truth. If self is his loftiest ideal, he will never attain to anything more exalted.

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Rather, he will constantly sink lower and lower. The grace of God alone has power to exalt man. Left to himself, his course must inevitably be downward.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* 555.1.†

9. Why would a group of people or a nation choose to worship a god of war? Or, a god of fertility? If you were a subsistence farmer whose life depended on what you could grow each year or even on how successful your animals were at reproduction, would you be tempted to worship a god of “fertility”? Did they ever get any positive evidence that those fertility cult gods or the gods of war did anything for them?
10. How many young people today are doing everything they can to imitate and idolize some movie star, rock star, or music legend? How is that impacting them? How many older folks are trying to imitate the retirement practices of some successful business person?
11. What kind of reasons for worshiping God are most important to you? See Deuteronomy 10:17-22; Psalm 101:1; 146:5-10; Isaiah 5:16; and Isaiah 61:11. He made us. God is described as Someone who is fair to everyone, who does not show partiality, and does not accept bribes. He treats orphans and widows fairly. He loves foreigners and gives them food and clothes. He brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, having helped them to multiply from that group of 70 that first entered Egypt. He is a God of loyalty and justice, the Creator of heaven and earth and sea. He always keeps His promises. He is fair to the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. He gives sight to the blind and lifts up the fallen. He loves righteous people, protects strangers, helps widows and orphans; but, if they insist, He allows the wicked to go their own way to their ruin.
12. If God did all of those things for the ancient people of Israel, how much more has He done for us, living this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Jesus not only died to answer the most important questions in the great controversy, but also He died to save each one of us if we are willing to let Him. But, He has also given us a clear pattern to follow in living out our own lives.
13. Unfortunately, even in relatively prosperous times when the children of Israel were trying to follow God’s will for their lives, their religious rituals did not lead them to help the poor and the oppressed. Amos described the people of his day like this:
Amos 8:4-6: ⁴ Listen to this, you that trample on the needy and try to destroy the poor of the country. ⁵You say to yourselves, “We can hardly wait for the holy days to be over so that we can sell our corn. **When will the Sabbath end, so that we can start selling again? Then we can overcharge, use false measures, and tamper with the scales to cheat our customers. ⁶We can sell worthless wheat at a high price.** We’ll find a poor person who can’t pay his debts, not even the price of a pair of sandals, and we’ll buy him as a slave.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Amos 8:4-6). New York: American Bible Society.†
14. God had some very strong things to say to the people who had turned away from Him despite His many blessings. Read Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; and Micah 6:6-8. God did not spare words in describing the terrible conditions of His people in those days. Which would Amos or Micah describe as a better form of worship: Attending church and

Sabbath school? Or, distributing food to the needy at a feeding center?

15. Try to imagine a time when people thought that by offering their children as sacrifices on a pagan altar, they might be able to appease an angry god! (Micah 6:8)
16. How many of us have spent any significant amount of our lives serving the poor? Would sending money to take care of poor people in other parts of the world be considered by God as equal to personally serving the poor in our own communities? Or, a start?
17. Read Isaiah 58. It is very clear in this chapter from the *gospel prophet* that unless we do what is right as well as claiming to believe what is right, we are not serving God as we should. How could we remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, letting the oppressed go free in our day?

As we have seen previously, this criticism is addressed to people who are actively religious. They seem to be earnestly seeking God, but apparently it is not working. So, God says they should try changing how they worship, to try a different way of serving God. If He were to choose how they would worship, it would be “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke” (*Isa. 58:6, NIV*). They also would feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, and help those in need.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, August 7. [Italic type is in the source.][‡]

18. Would it be safe to do those things today? How could we implement that form of worship? Might it change the way we spend some of our Sabbaths?
19. God is not suggesting that we abandon our Sabbath services and our fellowshiping. But, He is suggesting that serving the poor and the needy are also acts of worship.

The true purpose of religion is to release men from their burdens of sin, to eliminate intolerance and oppression, and to promote justice, liberty, and peace.—*The SDA Bible Commentary*,* vol. 4, 306.5.

20. Looking at things superficially, one might come to the conclusion that if we were that generous with the poor and needy, we would soon run out of funds for ourselves. But, God said He would bless those who do help the needy. Think of the woman who gave her two mites into the temple treasury in Jerusalem. (Mark 12:42; Luke 21:2) Do you think God allowed her to starve? If we were doing more serving-the-needy kind of worship, would we really have more delight-filled Sabbaths?

The fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah contains present truth for the people of God. Here we see how medical missionary work and the gospel ministry are to be bound together as the message is given to the world. Upon those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord is laid the responsibility of doing a work of mercy and benevolence.—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 22*,* 1901; *Welfare Ministry** 121.3; *Ev** 516.4.

21. Try to imagine for a moment what it would have been like to go to the temple in Jerusalem on a feast day as Jesus was ministering there. Thousands of people were bringing animals for sacrifices as various kinds of religious services were taking place, and Jesus stood there and said to the church leaders:

Matthew 9:13: “Go and find out what is meant by the scripture that says: ‘It is

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kindness that I want, **not animal sacrifices.**' I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts."—*Good News Bible*.*†

Hosea 6:6: "I want your constant love, **not your animal sacrifices. I would rather have my people know me than burn offerings to me.**"—*Ibid.**†

22. What did God through Hosea mean when He said, "I would rather have my people know me"? Compare the following from the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:21-23: ²¹ "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do. ²²When Judgement Day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!' ²³Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you wicked people!'"—*Ibid.**

23. What would our worship services and our Christian lives be like if we truly followed the example of Jesus? The people in Isaiah's day, as well as those in the days of Jesus, believed that strictly following their religious practices would guarantee them a place in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had some very strong words to say to those people.

Mark 12:38-40: ³⁸As he taught them, he said, "Watch out for the teachers of the Law, who like to walk around in their long robes and be greeted with respect in the market place, ³⁹who choose the reserved seats in the synagogues and the best places at feasts. ⁴⁰They take advantage of widows and rob them of their homes, and then make a show of saying long prayers. Their punishment will be all the worse!"—*Ibid.**

24. Compare Matthew 23. Jesus was not condemning the religious leaders for all the good things they did in their acts of worship, but rather, for the needful things that they neglected. How can we avoid falling into that same trap?

25. Do we have the truth? Or, does the truth have us? Is there a real difference? If you have the possibility of doing so, read Isaiah 58 in one of the modern paraphrases such as *The Message* or *The Living Bible*.

In urging the value of practical godliness, the prophet was only repeating the counsel given Israel centuries before.... From age to age these counsels were repeated by the servants of Jehovah to those who were in danger of falling into habits of formalism and of forgetting to show mercy.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 326.2-327.0.

I have been instructed to refer our people to the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah. Read this chapter carefully and understand the kind of ministry that will bring life into the churches. **The work of the gospel is to be carried by means of our liberality as well as by our labors. When you meet suffering souls who need help, give it to them. When you find those who are hungry, feed them. In doing this you will be working in lines of Christ's ministry.** The Master's holy work was a benevolent work. Let our people everywhere be encouraged to have a part in it.—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry** 29.3.† [These are also quoted in the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, August 9.]‡

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26. Have you ever had the opportunity of passing out food to the poor at a feeding center? Did you think of it as an act of worship?
27. The Jews in Jesus's day were so particular about many minute details in their law while at the same time they ignored much larger issues such as justice, mercy, and honesty.

Matthew 23:23-24: ²³ "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God a tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others. ²⁴Blind guides! You strain a fly out of your drink, but swallow a camel!"—*Good News Bible*.*

28. So, **why is hypocrisy considered such a sin?** Isn't it better at least to try to look like we are doing good? Or, is trying to look good too often taking the place of actually doing good? Would that cause others to think that just looking good is all that God requires?
29. Do you think the study of this lesson and reviewing the messages—the very pointed messages of those Old Testament prophets—has expanded your idea about worship? What kinds of activities could we as church members or as a church group undertake to reach out to the poor and needy in our communities? If we fail to do this, will Jesus still be able to come again in our day? Even if we fail to help the poor and needy?
30. One of the things that we can notice by reading the context of our lesson for this week is that when the children of Israel turned from a true worship of God to idol worship, they lost their concern for others. Do you think it is still true that God refuses to hear our prayers if we are basically engaged in a self-centered worship?
31. If we hear about some disaster that affects a person or a group of people in our community, would it be an act of worship to go on Sabbath morning to help?
32. It is very clear from what we have studied that right thinking and right believing must be linked to doing right and behaving correctly. Do we know the truth? Are we practicing it? Compare Matthew 25:31-46 with Isaiah 58. **Could it really be true that the judgment each of us will face at the end of time will be based on how we have treated the poor and needy?**

Thus Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And **He represented its decision as turning upon one point.** When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by **what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and the suffering.**—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 637.1.†

33. How do you think you would be judged if God's entire judgment is based on what you have done for the poor and needy?
34. Read John 2:12-16; Matthew 21:12-17; and Isaiah 56:7. Those outer courts were supposed to be for the Gentiles to go and observe how the Jews worshiped. Are we opening our church doors literally and figuratively to the disabled, the poor, and the oppressed? If not, what could we do to solve that problem? Here are some suggestions:
 - Remember the oppressed in your prayers.

- Read Scripture that focuses on biblical mercy and justice. There are more than two thousand verses from which to choose.
- Plan a worship service with a mercy-and-justice theme; feature what your church is doing to meet the needs in the community.
- Even the offering time can be focused on mercy and help. Collect special offerings for a specific social need that is spotlighted during some point in your service.
- Analyze your church's worship practices. Are they just? Are they meaningful to the poor? To the least? To all races? To young children and the elderly? To visitors from off the street? Are other cultures and languages included? Is there signing for the deaf? Ramps for wheelchairs? How does the sermon sound to the homeless, to the abused, the infirm and ailing, to children, or to someone with AIDS?
- Later, discuss with your church leaders ways to regularly incorporate biblical mercy into your church's worship services.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 82.

35. One church has become famous by posting a sign at the **exit** from their church parking lot which says, "Service entrance." Would that be a correct description of your church?

It is not yet too late to redeem the neglects of the past. Let there be a revival of the first love, the first ardor. Search out the ones you have driven away, bind up by confession the wounds you have made. **Come close to the great Heart of pitying love, and let the current of that divine compassion flow into your heart and from you to the hearts of others. Let the tenderness and mercy that Jesus has revealed in His own precious life be an example to us of the manner in which we should treat our fellow beings, especially those who are our brethren in Christ.** Many have fainted and become discouraged in the [613] great struggle of life, whom one word of kindly cheer and courage would have strengthened to overcome. Never, never become heartless, cold, unsympathetic, and censorious. Never lose an opportunity to say a word to encourage and inspire hope. We cannot tell how far-reaching may be our tender words of kindness, our Christlike efforts to lighten some burden. The erring can be restored in no other way than in the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and tender love.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,* vol. 5, 612.3.†

36. In the days of Jeremiah despite the fact that the city had been besieged and attacked repeatedly, people believed that if they just stayed near the Lord's temple, God would not allow any evil to befall them. (See Jeremiah 7:4-7.) Do we ever exhibit an attitude like that? Surely, the Lord would not let anything terrible happen to a faithful Seventh-day Adventist. Right?

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