

“The Least of These”: Ministering to Those in Need Ministry in the New Testament Church

Lesson #9 for August 31, 2019

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 9:36-41; Matthew 25:38,40; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Romans 12; James 2:1-9,27.

1. Matthew 28:18-20 has been considered to be a mission statement for the Christian church. How should those words impact each of us? Could we all go, teach, baptize, and make disciples? Or, is that only the work of the pastor? Jesus also said that we should do everything else He commanded us to do. What things do you think are included in that challenge?
2. What happened during the ministry of Jesus Himself that led His disciples to organize a new community the way they did? As we know, most of the disciples had come from Galilee. Then, most of them seemed to have moved to Jerusalem. At least some of them were married. Did their families move to Jerusalem also? And what of the thousands of people who soon joined the group? How did they support themselves? (Acts 2:41; 4:4) Providing for up to 5000 men, not counting women and children, was a big job. That was a lot of people to feed and provide accommodations for sleeping. How many were just visitors?
3. However, Jerusalem was accustomed to dealing with crowds. An estimate was made of the number of people who went to the Passover about 10 years after the death of Jesus; that estimate was about 2 million people! So, where did all those people stay? Most of them would have had homes somewhere else. Did they return to their homes each day?
4. We know that in the early days of Christianity when they went to Jerusalem, the disciples liked to meet in the home of John Mark’s parents in what came to be known as *the upper room*. But, there is no way that the entire Christian group could meet in one room. If the number of men was from 3000 to 5000, it would be difficult even for them to fit in the courtyard of the temple. How did the Pharisees and Sadducees feel about their presence?
5. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37. Without a doubt, those were momentous occasions. We do not know exactly how much time passed between Acts 2 and Acts 4.

Acts 2:42-47: ⁴²They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.

⁴³ Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. ⁴⁴All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. ⁴⁵They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. ⁴⁶Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, ⁴⁷praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 2:42–47). New York: American Bible Society.

6. So, how did the group support themselves during that period of time? Some members sold their land and houses and contributed the funds. (Acts 4:32-36) Were Ananias and Sapphira the only ones who tried to cheat when they sold their property? (See Acts 5:1-11.)
7. How many people joined the group because they were healed? Did some of those people contribute to the support of the group? (Compare Luke 8:1-3.)
8. Read Acts 3:1-11 and Acts 5:12-16. It seems that literally hundreds and maybe even thousands of people were healed. Did all of those people join the Christian group? Did they help to support the group? Did Peter's shadow heal anyone?
9. Read Acts 6:1. Unfortunately, it was not long before some conflicts arose. In this case, it was the question of how the widows among them should be supported fairly.

The same principles of piety and justice that were to guide the rulers among God's people in the time of Moses and of David, were also to be followed by those given the oversight of the newly organized church of God in the gospel dispensation.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 95.2.

10. Try to imagine what it was like to be among that early group of Christians. In our day, would it even be possible to develop some kind of commune or kibbutz similar to the New Testament model? People were willing to give up almost everything because they really believed that Jesus would come back very soon. Were they deceived? Do we believe that Jesus is coming back very soon? How should that impact us? How does it impact us?
11. Great things were being done to promote the work of God in other places besides Jerusalem. Read Acts 9:36-41.
12. Was Dorcas trying to fulfill the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 and in Matthew 25:38,40? It is interesting to notice that Dorcas was called a *disciple*. Why do you think that was? Surely, the ministry of Dorcas had an impact on the city of Joppa. (Acts 9:42) And the miracle of her being raised from the dead must have had an incredible impact.
13. What kinds of miracles will attend the final outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain? Will there be miraculous healings? Even resurrections from the dead? How would the unbelieving world respond if such things happened? Would that lead to a lot of attention suddenly being focused on God's true people?
14. If something were to happen to you, how many people would be mourning? How many of us have practical skills such as Dorcas had that we are using in the service of others?
15. Not everyone who became one of the new Christians had his life and health preserved or perpetuated. Think of the story of Stephen. (See Acts 7.)
16. Consider also the example of Paul. After that dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, (See Acts 9:1-25.) he spent about three years studying and preaching and preparing himself for a new ministry. Then, he went out with the intended purpose of going to un-entered areas. This led to another crisis in the early church. Gentiles were becoming Christians!
17. In its early days, the Christian church was a subunit of Jewish believers. When the missionaries to Antioch began openly preaching to non-Jews (**Acts 11:19-26**) and Paul and Barnabas went out into southern Turkey and spread the gospel to more Gentiles, the same

church had to deal with a whole new group of Gentiles becoming Christians. In fact, that new group were the first to be called *Christians*!

18. How well is the Seventh-day Adventist Church doing in reaching out around the world? More than 90% of the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is now located in less-developed countries. Since we are a representative organization, that means that most of the people working and voting at the General Conference should be coming from those countries. Is that a problem? Why?
19. Even though Paul went to faraway places in his ministry, he continued to think about the poor that he had left behind in Judea and Jerusalem and elsewhere.

Galatians 2:10: All they asked was that we should remember the needy in their group, which is the very thing I have been eager to do.—*Good News Bible*.*

Acts 20:35: “I have shown you in all things that by working hard in this way we must help the weak, remembering the words that the Lord Jesus himself said, ‘There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.’ ”—*Good News Bible*.*
[From where do these words of Jesus come?][†]

20. It is very interesting to notice that most of the “saints” from the Old Testament were among the rich or powerful. But, as we study the New Testament church organization, it seems that the goal was to reach out to the poor and needy. Why this contrast?
21. Do we have well-thought-out strategies in our day for reaching both the rich and the poor?
22. Read 2 Corinthians 8:7-15. Paul came up with a very interesting idea in his appeal to the believers in Macedonia and Greece. The idea went something like this: The people from Judea who had become Christians were sharing their gospel truth with Gentiles in Europe. Those Gentiles in Europe were fairly well off financially, at that point. Therefore, they should share their monetary goods with the poor people back in Judea who had shared their spiritual “wealth” with the Gentiles.
23. In the giving of the *manna* as described in Exodus 16:4-18, how do you think this equalizing of food actually worked out? Did angels move some of the food from those who had too much to the containers of those who had too little?
24. Paul suggested that the church members should not just give impulsively when an appeal was made, but also that they should routinely set aside money for the support of the ministry and the support of the needs in other parts of the world. Does that principle still apply to us?
25. To what extent should we be giving to local needs, even outside of the church organization, versus giving through the church for needs in other parts of the world?
26. Many scholars have recognized the book of Romans as a kind of *Magna Carta* for the Christian church. Beyond explaining why Jesus had to die and discussing other very important issues, Paul had some very interesting words to say.

Romans 12:1-2: So then, my brothers and sisters, because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a **living sacrifice** to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. **This is the true worship that you should offer.** ²Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God

transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.—*Good News Bible*.*†

27. What does it mean to offer oneself as a *living sacrifice*? Was God telling them to stop killing lambs? In addition to the Romans passage, there are other places in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians where Paul talked about spiritual gifts. Is one of the spiritual gifts the ability to share one's goods with the poor and needy and, thus, reach out to bring them to Christ?
28. In Romans 12 Paul talked about those who have the gift of spreading God's message, of serving, of teaching, of encouragement, and even of having authority. Those who know how to show kindness are to do it cheerfully. He went on to say that love must be extended even to our enemies. Are we doing that? How many of us have tried to serve God in the ways Paul outlined in Romans 12? How would we do that?
29. It was not easy to be a Christian in Paul's day. The Roman Empire considered Christianity to be an illegal religion. What are the challenges of sharing the gospel in our day? We still have the poor! Have we eliminated homelessness? Poverty?
30. When Paul went back to church headquarters in Jerusalem on different occasions, he always talked about James as being one of the leaders of the Christian church. There is good evidence to suggest that this was the James who was the stepbrother of Jesus, the eldest son of Joseph. However, his name was not really *James*.
31. We should know that there was actually no one in the Bible by the name of *James*! The men who are called *James* in the New Testament were actually named *Jacob*. But, English translators of the Bible decided to change the names of all the *Jacobs* in the New Testament to *James* to make it easier to distinguish them from all the *Jacobs* in the Old Testament! The Spanish translators did a similar thing; they called the *Jacobs*, *Santiagos*.
32. In any case, the James/Jacob who wrote the small book of James had some very clear things to say about spreading the gospel and living a Christian life.

James 1:27: ²⁷ What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.—*Good News Bible*.*

33. See also James 2:1-9 and James 5:1-5. Why do you think he spoke out so strongly against showing preference to the rich and then, in turn, speaking of all the problems that would face the rich in the future? Had most of the rich Christians in Jerusalem become poor earlier by supporting the cause of Christ? Was James/Jacob trying to appeal to the rich to share some of their goods with the poor and needy? See James 2:14-17.

James 2:14-17: ¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it for people to say that they have faith if their actions do not prove it? Can that faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. ¹⁶ What 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? ¹⁷ So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.—*Good News Bible*.*

34. Why is it so easy, even subconsciously, to prefer the rich over the poor? Is the book of James speaking of dealing with believers only? He did refer to them as *brothers and sisters*.

35. So, when He left His disciples, what kind of Christian church did Jesus have in mind?

The Saviour has given His precious life in order to establish a church capable of caring for sorrowful, tempted souls. A company of believers may be poor, uneducated, and unknown; yet in Christ they may do a work in the home, the neighborhood, the church, and even in “the regions beyond,” whose results shall be as far-reaching as eternity.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 640.4; compare *ML* 225.4.

Unselfish liberality threw the early church into a transport of joy; for the believers knew that their efforts were helping to send the gospel message to those in darkness. Their benevolence testified that they had not received the grace of God in vain. What could produce such liberality but the sanctification of the Spirit? In the eyes of believers and unbelievers it was a miracle of grace.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 344.2.†

36. Is there evidence that the generosity exhibited in Jerusalem actually led to the spreading of the gospel to other parts of the world? No! Remember that the Jerusalem group did not really spread out until Stephen was stoned! Is something like that what we need today? A few stonings? What will happen to large institutions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and their surrounding “ghettos” when a national Sunday law is passed? Will there be a mass exodus?

37. In what ways should our churches today become like that early Christian church? If we developed a society that freely shared money and goods with others, would we attract a large group of homeless people? Is that what God intends?

38. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a well-defined system of tithing and offerings. That has served the church very well. It has been a very good way to sponsor work in un-entered areas. There are still plenty of un-entered areas in the world and even in more developed countries. Do we have clear plans for reaching out to those areas? Could we actually live out the directions given in Romans 12?

39. Should the Seventh-day Adventist Church have well-thought-out plans to reach the rich as well as the poor? Often, the rich feel little need, and they do not want help or to be asked for help. That makes it difficult for us to reach them and difficult to get them to help in reaching out to others.

40. Did new Christian churches which sprang up following Paul’s outreach follow the example of the Jerusalem church? If you lived in a place where Christians were forbidden from gathering, would you dare to do what the Jerusalem believers were doing? How might a Paul or a small group of people like Paul’s group approach an un-entered city today?

41. In what ways have you personally accepted the challenge of Matthew 28:19-20?

42. Those early days of the Christian church were something like a giant camp meeting. Camp meetings are great to attend, and they work for a while; however, sooner or later, some people are going to have to find ways to support the group. Today, should we be selling property and houses to support the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

43. Read again Acts 2:41-47. (See #5 above.) In these verses we see that there were five main areas of emphasis: Worship, fellowship, community services, reaping, and discipleship. And

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we need to remember that community services included miraculous healings and even resurrections from the dead. Are we doing any/all of these things?

44. In earlier days, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had a fairly well-known group, mostly of women, who formed Dorcas societies. Those people prepared food and clothing and collected used or unused items to spread to the poor and needy. Should more Dorcas societies be formed in our day?
45. Review the different spiritual gifts that are mentioned in Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; and 1 Peter 4:9-11. Are we doing well in using our spiritual gifts?
46. In that early Christian church, many women must have spent nearly all their time preparing food. Would that be considered a spiritual gift?
47. It is important to remember that spiritual gifts are not just given to please us or for our personal benefit; they are given to help spread the gospel.
48. So, how do you relate to your church? Do you think of it like a musical concert which you attend once a week and sit back to enjoy the performance? The church was intended to be a place where everyone, every individual, is involved in ministry. How well are we doing at that?
49. Our lesson has focused on reaching out to the poor, the needy, and those who are suffering. Do we have a plan for reaching out to people who are not suffering?
50. Do we recognize that as we reach out to touch the lives of other people around us, we are supposed to be developing long-term relationships which will lead some of them to join God's people?
51. When speaking about the church and doing evangelistic programs, do we frequently refer to the inspired Word of God rather than just giving our own ideas?
52. Unfortunately, there are times when certain issues have split the membership of Seventh-day Adventist churches. No one wants to walk into a church that is fighting! What can we do to prevent such events?
53. As exemplified by the early Christian church, we need to recognize that the church's primary function is to train church members to minister. We need to find ways to minister to those around us outside the church as well as to minister to those within the church. Think of all the ways that Jesus ministered, even washing the dirty feet of His disciples. Do you think the disciples began washing each other's feet soon thereafter?
54. Make a list of the services that your church performs in order to reach the local community and also to reach beyond your local community. Are you involved in several of those services? If you are not involved in reaching out to others, are you truly following Jesus's plan for you?

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