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Seventh-day Adventists are called to proclaim “the everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6) to all the world. By so doing, we are simply obeying Jesus’ words about making disciples, baptizing them, and “‘teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you’” (Matt. 28:20, NKJV). And among the things He commanded we are called upon to minister to the hurting, the downtrodden, the poor, the hungry, and the imprisoned.

After all, it was Jesus who, after telling the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–36), then commanded His listeners: “‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:37, NKJV). It was Jesus who, in depicting the time when He would divide the nations before Him as a “‘shepherd divides his sheep from the goats’” (Matt. 25:32, NKJV), talked about just how important helping the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned really is. “‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me’” (Matt. 25:40, NKJV).

In other words, along with proclaiming the great truths about salvation, the sanctuary, the state of the dead, and the perpetuity of the law, we are to minister to the needs of others. And what better way to reach people than by working in their behalf too? As Ellen G. White famously wrote: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’” —The Ministry of Healing, p. 143.
According to one count, Scripture contains 2,103 verses expressing God’s special concern for the poor and oppressed. Compared to many other aspects of faith, doctrine, and Christian living in general, the weight of references about ministering to those in need is overwhelming. We must get serious about working to relieve the pain and suffering that exist around us. This doesn’t take away from our work of spreading the gospel; on the contrary, it can become a powerful way of doing it.

Of course, it’s a good thing to help others, just for the sake of helping them. We should “do justly” (see Mic. 6:8) simply because it is both right and good to “do justice.” And yet, is it not even better when doing justice, when helping others in their immediate and temporal needs, also to point them to the “reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15, NKJV), which is the promise of eternal life in Christ?

Jesus healed disease, gave sight to the blind, cured lepers, and even raised the dead. But all those to whom He ministered were going to die sooner or later anyway, right? So, in the long run, whatever good He did for them and their immediate needs, He also did more. Yes, He ministered to the hurting, but then He bade them, Follow Me. And that’s precisely why we, too, should minister to the hurting and then bid them, Follow Him.

No question, by seeking justice and goodness in the world, we are rehearsing the kingdom of God (see Luke 4:18, 19) in a way that is at least as faithful, valid, and perhaps as effective as preaching it. When we care for the poor and the oppressed, we are actually offering honor and worship to God (see Isa. 58:6–10). But if we fail to minister in behalf of the hurting, the suffering, and the broken, we misrepresent Him (see Prov. 14:31).

This quarter, then, we are going to see what the Word of God says (and it says a lot) about our duty to minister to the needs of those around us.

“‘Freely you have received, freely give’” (Matt. 10:8, NKJV). That says it all.

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How to Use
This Teachers Edition

“The true teacher is not content with dull thoughts, an indolent mind, or a
loose memory. He constantly seeks higher attainments and better methods.
His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a
freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his [class].”
—Ellen G. White, Counsels on Sabbath School Work, p. 103.

To be a Sabbath School teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege
because it offers the teacher the unique opportunity to lead and guide in the study
and discussion of the week’s lesson so as to enable the class to have both a personal
appreciation for God’s Word and a collective experience of spiritual fellowship with class
members. When the class concludes, members should leave with a sense of having tasted
the goodness of God’s Word and having been strengthened by its enduring power. The
responsibility of teaching demands that the teacher is fully aware of the Scripture to be
studied, the flow of the lesson through the week, the interlinking of the lessons to the theme
of the quarter, and the lesson’s application to life and witness.

This guide is to help teachers to fulfill their responsibility adequately. It has three seg-
ments:

1. **Overview** introduces the lesson topic, key texts, links with the previous lesson,
and the lesson’s theme. This segment deals with such questions as Why is this lesson
important? What does the Bible say about this subject? What are some major themes
covered in the lesson? How does this subject affect my personal life?

2. **Commentary** is the chief segment in the Teachers Edition. It may have two or
more sections, each one dealing with the theme introduced in the Overview segment.
The Commentary may include several in-depth discussions that enlarge the themes
outlined in the Overview. The Commentary provides an in-depth study of the themes
and offers scriptural, exegetic, illustrative discussion material that leads to a better
understanding of the themes. The Commentary also may have scriptural word study or
exegesis appropriate to the lesson. On a participatory mode, the Commentary segment
may have discussion leads, illustrations appropriate to the study, and thought questions.

3. **Life Application** is the final segment of the Teachers Edition for each lesson.
This section leads the class to discuss what was presented in the Commentary segment
as it impacts Christian life. The application may involve discussion, further probing
of what the lesson under study is all about, or perhaps personal testimony on how one
may feel the impact of the lesson on one’s life.

**Final thought:** What is mentioned above is only suggestive of the many possibilities avail-
able for presenting the lesson and is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its scope.
Teaching should not become monotonous, repetitious, or speculative. Good Sabbath School
teaching should be Bible-based, Christ-centered, faith-strengthening, and fellowship-building.
God Created . . .

SABBATH AFTERNOON


Memory Text: “He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy” (Proverbs 14:31, NKJV).

Have you ever worked to create something—perhaps an item of art or craft, a meal, or some other creative work—only to have it broken or rejected by the person you gave it to? If so, you might have just a small glimpse of what God experienced when He made this world and gave human beings life, only then to see what He created broken by sin.

The Bible says that the world was created carefully and created “very good.” How God felt about His creation is evident in the accounts of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2. This is the context in which we should read the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 and the heartbrokenness of God as He confronts the people He has made.

Remarkably, our world continues to be something that God loves, even despite millennia of sin, violence, injustice, and outright rebellion. And even more remarkably, while God set in motion His plan for redeeming and re-creating the world, He has given us, as believers, roles to play in the fulfillment of His larger plans. Yes, we are the recipients of His grace; but, from the grace we have received, we have been given our work to do as colaborers with our Lord. What a solemn, sacred responsibility!

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 6.
God: A Glimpse of Creation

This world and all life on it, our own life and all we do with it, the lives of everyone around us and how we interact with others, life itself and how it is best lived—all these begin with God, “‘for in Him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28, NKJV).

Here’s where the Bible’s story begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, NKJV). And the fact that He spoke it into existence points to a power and a process that we can’t even begin to imagine.

And yet, God didn’t create from a distance; He was intimately involved, especially when it came to creating the first human being (see Gen. 2:7).

Read the story of the creation of the first human beings in Genesis 1:26–31. What important things does this account tell us about God? What important things does it tell us about people?

It has often been said that we can learn a lot about God from spending time in nature, from looking at His creation, and seeing in it glimpses of the character of the Creator Himself. But we also can see glimpses of how God created the world to be from examining our understanding of God Himself. For example, if God is a God of order, we should expect to find order in His creation. Or if we believe that God is a God of creativity, we should not be surprised to find incredible examples of that creativity in the world He made.

Similarly, we believe that God is a God of relationships, and so, we find relationships as a core element in how God put the world together. He created each element of the world in relation to the rest of creation. He created animals in relational harmony. He created human beings in relationship with Himself, with each other, and with the rest of creation.

While our understanding of God is limited in many ways, what we can see of His character should prompt us to reconsider how the world should be.

How helpful is it to your understanding of the world to see it as a reflection of the character of God, even with the ravages of sin so readily apparent?
A Complete World

It is easy to feel homesick for Eden. There is something in the brief descriptions of the Garden that God created as the home for Adam and Eve that sparks a note of longing in our hearts. We may not understand how such a world would work, but we feel we would like to experience it.

It seems the sense of satisfaction and completeness also was something that God felt: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31, NIV). God made something that was both beautiful and functional. It was exquisite in its design, in both form and practicality. It was vibrant with life and color—but also filled with everything necessary for life to flourish. No wonder God kept pausing to muse that this world that He was making was good.

Read Genesis 1. What do you think is meant by the repeated statements that “God saw that it was good”? See Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, and 31.

Even though written entirely after the Fall, the Bible is filled with celebrations of the natural world, such as in Job 38 to 41 and Psalm 148. And we must remember that these are not written as a glimpse looking back to how the world was when first created and before sin; they are written in the present tense, celebrating the goodness that is still evident in our world.

Jesus, too, drew examples of God’s goodness and care from the natural world (see, for example, Matt. 6:26, 28–30), commending both our reliance on God and an appreciation of the simple gifts that surround us with wonder. If we open our eyes and look at the marvels of creation, we can see that we are truly the recipients of marvelous gifts from our Creator. Our response, even amid trials, should be one of gratitude, thankfulness, and humble surrender to the Gift-Giver.

As Seventh-day Adventists—those who both celebrate Creation and anticipate God’s coming kingdom—we should realize that the beauties, joys, and goodness we see and experience in the world are glimpses of what our world once was and what it will again be.

In your experience of the natural world, what do you especially appreciate about the wonders of Creation? In your daily life, how might you be able to know the Lord better through the wonders of the natural world?
Stewards of the Earth

According to the Bible’s record, the Garden of Eden and the newly created earth were places of abundance, created for life to flourish and particularly for human beings to enjoy.

But God also gave the first man and woman—and the rest of us who would come after them—a role to play in His creation. It quickly became obvious—and not just from His method of creation—that Adam and Eve were to have a special status in this new world.

Adam was first given the job of naming the animals and birds (see Gen. 2:19). Then he was given another role, presented as a blessing from God Himself: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’ ” (Gen. 1:28, NIV).

Read and compare Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:15. How would you characterize the human job description in a sentence or two?

Too often in Christian history, Genesis 1:28 has been used by some as a license to exploit, even to the point of destroying the natural world. Yes, the world obviously was created for human life, benefit, and enjoyment. But the human responsibility is to “work it and take care of it”—in the words of Genesis 2:15 (NIV).

When we talk about stewardship, our first thought is often about money, but the first command for stewardship in the Bible is to care for the earth that God has created and entrusted to us. The command to Adam and Eve also foresaw that the earth would be shared with their children and with future generations. In the original plan for the world, the created world would continue to be a source of life, goodness, and beauty for all human beings, and Adam and Eve would have a big role in taking care of it.

The earth is still the Lord’s (see Ps. 24:1), and we are still called to be stewards of all that God has given us. Perhaps we could conclude, as well, that in a fallen world our responsibility as stewards is even greater.

What does it mean to you to be a steward of the earth today, in a fallen world? How should the realization of this responsibility affect how you live on a day-to-day basis?
A Broken World

One thing God gave Adam and Eve that He didn’t give anything else on earth was *moral* freedom. They were moral beings in ways that plants, animals, and trees could never be. God valued this moral freedom so much that He allowed the possibility that His people would choose to disobey. In doing so, He risked all that He had created for the larger goal of a relationship with His human creatures based on love and free will.

But there was also a destroyer (this moral freedom existed for angels, as well), one who wanted to disrupt the good and complete world God created and sought to use God’s special creation on earth—human beings—to do that. Speaking through the serpent, the devil questioned the completeness and sufficiency of what God had provided (*see Gen. 3:1–5*). The primary temptation was to covet more than God had given them, to doubt the goodness of God, and to rely on themselves.

In that choice and that act, the relationships that were integral to the creation as God had designed it were broken. No longer did Adam and Eve enjoy the relationship with their Creator that they had been designed for (*see Gen. 3:8–10*). These two human beings suddenly realized they were naked and ashamed, and their relationship with each other was almost irreparably altered. Their relationship with the rest of the earth also was strained and broken.

**Read** Genesis 3:16–19. What do these verses tell us about the changed relationships between human beings and the natural world?

Because of the reality of sin, life suddenly got a lot harder for Adam, Eve, and the rest of creation. The consequences of sin are real, particularly as they affect humanity and our relationships. In a sense, we are distant from God our Creator. Our families also are affected in many ways, and our relationships with others are often a challenge. We even struggle in relation to the natural environment and the world in which we live. All aspects of our lives and our world show the brokenness caused by sin.

But this is not how God created the world to be. The “curses” of Genesis 3 also come with a promise that God would make a way to recreate our world and to repair the relationships that had been broken by sin. While we continue to struggle with sin and its effects in our lives, we are called to uphold the original goodness of the world and to seek to live out in our lives the plan God has for this world.
The Family Web of Humanity

With the arrival of sin, it did not take long for the world to break down further. Sparked by jealousy, misunderstanding, and anger, the first murder involved the first pair of brothers. When God questioned Cain about his sin, his reply was ironic and rhetorical—“‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’” (Gen. 4:9)—and the answer implied by God’s initial question was, “Yes, absolutely, you are your brother’s keeper.”

Read Proverbs 22:2. What is implied in this apparently simple statement? What does it tell us about our relationship to our fellow human beings?

Everyone we meet is one of God’s creatures, created in His image, and part of the network of relationships that connects us all in God’s creation, fractured and broken though it might be. “We are all woven together in the web of humanity. The evil that befalls any part of the great human brotherhood brings peril to all.”—Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, p. 345. Like it or not, because of this common link, we have a God-given responsibility to God and to each other (see Matt. 22:37–39).

Throughout the Bible, the claim that God is our Creator is recurring. For example, it is one of the reasons given for remembering the Sabbath (see Exod. 20:11) and for worshiping God in the end time (see Rev. 14:7). It also is a primary motivation given for caring about others, for being concerned for the less fortunate.

We are all linked by the bond of our common origins in God. Whoever “oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Prov. 14:31, NIV). How much clearer could that link be?

God as our Creator has a claim on us that demands our entire life, including our worship and our service and care for others. As difficult and frustrating and inconvenient as it might be at times, we are, indeed, our “brother’s keeper.”

Why do you think God’s claims as Creator are such a recurring theme throughout the Bible? Why is this so important, and how should this reality affect how we treat others?

“‘God is love.’ . . . His nature, His law, is love. It ever has been; it ever will be. ‘The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity,’ whose ‘ways are everlasting,’ changeth not. With Him ‘is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.’ . . .

“Every manifestation of creative power is an expression of infinite love. The sovereignty of God involves fullness of blessing to all created beings.”—Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 33.

“If men would do their duty as faithful stewards of their Lord’s goods, there would be no cry for bread, none suffering in destitution, none naked and in want. It is the unfaithfulness of men that brings about the state of suffering in which humanity is plunged. . . . God has made men His stewards, and He is not to be charged with the sufferings, the misery, the nakedness, and the want of humanity. The Lord has made ample provision for all.”—Ellen G. White, Welfare Ministry, p. 16.

Discussion Questions:

1. Look carefully at the last Ellen White statement above. What is she saying? Who is she saying is ultimately responsible for so much of the poverty we see? What should this tell us about the importance of faithful stewardship?

2. After thousands of years of the brokenness caused by sin, how possible is it for us still to see the goodness of creation? As people who believe in the Creator God, what can we do to help others see the goodness of His creation?

3. What do you understand by the word stewardship? Has anything in this week’s lesson expanded your thinking about what it means to be a steward, particularly as we are called by God?

4. How might it change the way we relate to and treat others if we were to see a sign on every person we met that reminded us that this person is “created by God in His image and loved by Him”?

Summary: God created a good and complete world, and He appointed human beings, created in His image, to “tend and care for” His creation. Though sin broke the relationships that God originally had intended for us, we still have a role to play as stewards of the goodness of creation and caretakers of our fellow human beings. Fulfilling this role is one way we can honor God as our Creator.
Girl Prayed for Angels

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Food ran out on Sunday morning in nine-year-old Joanne’s home. Father abandoned the family after Mother started attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the U.S. state of Oregon. Father, who had immigrated with the family to the United States from South Korea, made it clear he would never help them. “If you choose God, let your God feed you,” he said. “Let your God clothe you.”

Mother, who didn’t have a job, prayed and cried in her bedroom that Sunday. When lunchtime came, Joanne’s younger sister complained forlornly, “I’m hungry.” Her older brother sat stone-faced, trying to be brave even though he was helpless. Then Joanne remembered reading in Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories about children who prayed and received help from angels.

“All we have to do is pray!” she exclaimed. “Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories say that if we pray, the angels will bring us food. Let’s pray!”

Brother rolled his eyes. Little Sister complained again about her hunger. Joanne didn’t know how to pray. “Hello, God,” Joanne said. “We are really hungry. Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories say that You can send us food, so would You send us something to eat, please?”


Then Joanne said, “Oh, I know what we did wrong! God doesn’t think that we believe Him because we didn’t set the table.”

She told her little sister to fetch metal chopsticks from the kitchen. The children set the table and sat down. “Sorry about that, God,” Joanne prayed. “We probably did it wrong. Could You send us some food now? We’re ready!”

But nothing came. The children climbed into bed disappointed and hungry that night. Early in the morning, they woke up to go to school. They had no food for breakfast and no money to buy lunch. “Don’t bother Mother,” Joanne whispered.

The children opened the front door to leave the house, but their path was blocked—by a huge box filled with food. Excitedly, the children called their mother to the door. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Joanne was overjoyed. “The angels were just a little late!” she said.

At that moment, Joanne knew that God lives and that He hears and answers prayers. Joanne Kim (née Park) is now the mother of four children. She and her husband, Jon, a dentist, are missionaries in Mongolia.

After the food miracle, Joanne, pictured left, is convinced that angels are Korean. “I will tell you today that angels are Korean,” she said. “The food that they delivered was all Korean—everything you need to make rice, kimchi, and seaweed soup.”
Part I: Overview

Wonder and awe are essential to a full life. As we read the Creation account in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, we get caught up in watching God speak the cosmos into existence. We then see Him focused on forming humankind with His own hands and making man and woman in His image. We stand in wonder and awe at the mystery of Creation. Like the psalmist we declare: “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (Ps. 8:3, 4).

In this lesson, we marvel at the character of the Creator and appreciate His finished creation. Conversely, we weep at the results of our broken relationship with God and nature. This lesson challenges us to be stewards of God’s handiwork as He calls us to an existence of love, compassion, and stewardship in this broken world.

Teacher’s Aim:
As you teach the lesson this week, explore how our focus on the wonder of God’s creation and our calling to care for His earth, and all that is therein, affects our attitudes and actions.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration: The following story has been attributed to Sir Isaac Newton. Newton had an atheist friend. Because the friend did not believe in God, he preferred the position that the universe just happened. One day when Newton’s friend was visiting him, Newton showed him a model of the solar system. The sun, planets, and moons were all in their proper place. The sizes of the planetary and lunar spheres were in proportion and revolved around the sun at their relative speeds. The atheist was impressed with the model. “It’s intriguing,” he said, “who made it?”

“Nobody,” said Newton, “It just happened.”

Scripture: Albert Einstein has often been thought to have mused that he “who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.” The glories of creation clearly indicate an Intelligent Maker: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Humankind is part of God’s perfect creation (Gen. 1:31). God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26).
Discuss in Class: What does it mean to be made in God’s image?

“When Adam came from the Creator’s hand, he bore, in his physical, mental, and spiritual nature, a likeness to his Maker.”—Ellen G. White, Education, p. 15 (emphasis added).

God’s image in humanity also is reflected in Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.” God can create; He has given some of this ability to humankind.

Discuss in Class: How is God using you and your church to restore “the image of God” wholistically in broken people in the community around your church?

Discuss in Class: Really, how good is God’s “very good”? Give some examples.

Here is an example of how good “very good” is: “If Adam, at his creation, had not been endowed with twenty times as much vital force as men now have, the race, with their present habits of living in violation of natural law, would have become extinct.”—Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, pp. 138, 139 (emphasis added).

We do not really know exactly what Ellen G. White meant when she referred to “vital force.” Some scientists have suggested that part of the answer could be found in the energy-producing organelle “powerhouses” in the cell structure of living creatures. These powerhouses are called the mitochondria. The more mitochondria in your body, the more energy you will have.

Research has shown that endurance athletes have more than two times (200 percent) as many of these mitochondria “powerhouses” as non-athletes. When energy was measured in these athletes, it was found that they had around 25 percent more energy.¹

Adam had 20 times (2,000 percent) the vital force that people now have. If an increase in mitochondria is related to an increase in “vital force,” that could mean that Adam had 20 times (2,000 percent) more mitochondria than the average person today. Can you imagine what it would be like to be in Adam’s presence? You could likely feel the energy exuding from him!

Adam and Eve were not only endowed with great vital force, but we also learn that “as Adam came forth from the hand of his Creator, he was of noble height, and of beautiful symmetry. He was more than twice as tall as men now living upon the earth, and was well proportioned.”—Ellen G. White, Spiritual Gifts, vol. 3, p. 34 (emphasis supplied).

When God says His creation is “very good,” it is very good!

Discuss in Class: What would it be like to be in Adam’s presence—someone with 20 times more vital force than we have now? What would it be like to walk with him?

Discuss in Class: Contrast the “very good” handiwork of God and humankind, made in His image, with an evolutionary perspective in which humankind is a product of time + matter + chance.

Discuss in Class: How does the evolutionary perspective affect the way in which we view people?

In our broken condition, we need “vision correction.” Such spiritual “eyeglasses” will enable us to see all people as human beings made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), even though we all are broken and some people may not look or act as you would wish. It is important to see people through eyes of love and respect—not necessarily as they are now but as they can be when God works in their lives to restore them.

“The Lord is disappointed when His people place a low estimate upon themselves. He desires His chosen heritage to value themselves according to the price He has placed upon them. God wanted them, else He would not have sent His Son on such an expensive errand to redeem them.”


Discuss in Class: Why are all people valuable? What is the difference between pride and self-worth in light of Creation and Redemption? How does the high value of every person affect your church’s ministry?

Scripture: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion [let them rule] . . . over all the earth” (Gen. 1:26). “And God blessed them, and God said unto them . . . have dominion over . . . every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress [till] it and to keep [watch over] it” (Gen. 2:15).

Dominion or rulership over God’s creatures and the earth is part of being made in God’s image. God owns (Ps. 24:1) and rules the earth, and we are His managers—the stewards of His earth and of its creatures. Amazingly, the Ruler made humans corulers along with Him!

Each human is not only linked to each human; all creation is linked. God Himself is linked to His creatures. (See Acts 17:24–26.) Consider the similarities in Scripture between humans and animals, tying them closely together. Both humans and animals (texts refer to all living creatures unless otherwise noted):

• Are created by God from the earth [land creatures (Gen. 1:24, 25; Gen. 2:19); humans (Gen. 2:7); birds (Gen. 2:19)].

2 While there is no Bible text that says that sea creatures were created from the earth, sea creatures and birds were created on the same day: “And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:21). Either the sea creatures were created ex nihilo or from the earth. Because sea creatures and birds, like all living creatures, return to the earth when they die, we can assume they were created from the earth, though ex nihilo creation is possible.
• Have within them the breath of life (Gen. 2:7, Gen. 7:15).
• Receive God’s blessing [aquatic creatures and winged birds; humans (Gen. 1:21, 22, 28) and divine affirmation [all living creatures (Gen. 1:31)].
• Are originally given a vegetarian diet [humans (Gen. 1:29); animals on the earth; winged birds (Gen. 1:30)].
• Are capable of killing [humans (Gen. 4:8); wild animals (Gen. 37:33; 2 Kings 2:23, 24; Dan. 6:24); domestic animals (Exod. 21:28–32)] reptiles (Num. 21:6).
• Are included in God’s covenant (Gen. 9:12).
• Are beneficiaries of Sabbath rest [humans; domestic animals (Exod. 20:10)].
• Are set apart for the Lord, if firstborn male [humans; domestic animals (Exod. 13:12, Num. 3:13)].
• Are told to be fruitful and multiply [aquatic creatures; winged birds (Gen. 1:22); humans (Gen. 1:28)].

How is your theology linked to your ecology? What is included in our stewardship of “all the earth”? How does your caring for the environment, all creation, and also being your “brother’s keeper” (Gen. 4:9) impact your lifestyle and ministry? Have class members share what they already are doing about these important truths.

Part III: Life Application

Remember that the purpose of a Sabbath School class is not merely to sit around and have a nice discussion about fascinating historical and theological issues. In this lesson, we have noted that sin broke the relationships that God originally had intended for us. But we still have a role to play as stewards of the goodness of creation and as caretakers of our fellow human beings. With that in mind:

1. Observe and appreciate what is left of the “very good” in nature. This week, take a walk out in nature. Look around you and notice all the “good” that you see. Bring home a beautiful stone or shell, feather or leaf. Keep it as a reminder that we need to appreciate God’s creation more.

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2. The next time you or your church gets involved in serving the poor, ask yourself, “Is what we are doing causing them to become slaves to our generosity?” In other words, are you offering services that help move the poor from relief to individual development, helping them envision a better future, while nurturing within them a spirit of stewardship? Discuss your answer in light of this reflection: if we limit our outreach to giving out day-old bread and other food every Wednesday, and the same people come back, month after month, year after year, for 10 years, we as a church are failing to help the poor to move toward wholistic dominion over their lives and surroundings. Consider parallel ministries that provide skills such as budgeting, literacy, language, job skills, and so forth that will provide a horizon of possibilities for a better life.

Notes
Sabbath Afternoon


Memory Text: “‘You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord’” (Leviticus 19:18, NKJV).

In His mercy, God has always had people with whom He has maintained a special relationship. In the stories of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—among others—we see God yearning to rebuild the broken relationship with human beings. But this was not just for the benefit of these few individuals and their families. When they were connected with God and blessed by Him, it was part of a larger plan to repair that relationship and share the blessing with others. As God said to Abraham, “‘I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’” (Gen. 12:2, 3, NIV). As he was blessed, he could be a blessing to others.

This blessing was to come through the nation of Israel and, ultimately, the Messiah, who would come from that nation. With the creation of the people of Israel, God was now working with an entire nation. So, He set about giving them laws, regulations, festivals, and practices that would be a way to live so that those who were blessed by God would be able to bless others, as well.

No doubt this principle still exists today.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 13.
The God Who Hears

“‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering’” (Exod. 3:7, NIV).

Four hundred years is a long time to wait, especially when waiting in conditions of increasingly harsh slavery. God had promised that He would return to His people and bring them out of Egypt, but for generation after generation they were left to build the wealth and prestige of their idolatrous oppressors, and all the while God seemed silent.

Then God manifested Himself in a unique way. He appeared in a burning bush out in the remote desert to an unlikely leader, a fugitive prince and humble shepherd named Moses. He gave the reluctant Moses a job to do, and the first part of that job was to go back to the Israelites in Egypt with the message that God had heard and seen their oppression—and, yes, He did care. In fact, He was about to do something to change their situation dramatically.

Read Exodus 3:16, 17. Why was it important for God to begin outlining His plan for these people with this specific message? What catches your attention about this statement from God?

But God does not stop there. Not only does He have a plan for a better land, He does not intend for the people to escape from Egypt destitute. For hundreds of years, they had contributed to the wealth of the Egyptian Empire. God foresaw the initial resistance from Pharaoh, but He assured Moses that the Israelites would be compensated for their years of hard labor: “‘And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed’” (Exod. 3:21, NIV).

After their years of oppression, God took the opportunity to establish a new kind of society with these former slaves. He wanted them to live in a different way and to establish a society that would continue to be sustainable and viable. His plan was that this new kind of society would be a model for the surrounding nations and, like Abraham, that the blessings they received from God also would bless the whole world.

How important is it to you that God is a God who sees the suffering of people in the world and hears their cries for help? What does this tell you about God? Consider Exod. 4:31.
The Ten Commandments

Read Matthew 22:37–40 and then Exodus 20:1–17. How does Jesus’ summary of the commandments help your understanding as you read each of the Ten Commandments?

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The Ten Commandments read like a constitution. After a brief preamble that sets out the basis on which these statements are made—in this case, the fact of God’s deliverance of His people—the document lists the core principles on which the nation is founded. In this case, there were specific commands about how human beings could best live out their love for God and love for each other. It is little wonder that many nations with a Christian heritage have drawn the basis of their laws from these guiding 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.

We can easily tell ourselves that we are not bad people. For example, if we are not directly involved in murder or obvious stealing, it might seem we are doing OK. But when Jesus talked about the commandments, He made it clear that the commandments are not fulfilled simply by not doing a few specific acts. Rather, our thoughts, motivations, and even failure to do things we know we should can break the law of God (see Matt. 5:21–30).

So, imagine a society in which each of the Ten Commandments was taken seriously and lived out fully. It would be an active, vibrant society in which everyone enthusiastically acted on their love for God by loving and caring for one another.

Why do we tend to read the Ten Commandments “narrowly,” often ignoring the broader applications of these important principles to our lives? Why is the narrower reading easier to follow in practice?
Slaves, Widows, Fatherless, Foreigners

Read Exodus 23:9. What is God’s message to Israel here?

As newly freed slaves, the Israelites knew what it was to be oppressed, exploited, and marginalized. And while they celebrated their freedom, God was concerned that they not forget where they had come from, what it was like to be excluded, and what He had done to rescue them. He instituted the Passover as a memorial event and an opportunity to retell the story: “With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod. 13:14, NIV).

Read Exodus 22:21–23. How important was the memory of their own slavery in the instructions about how the people should treat the least fortunate in their new society?

Barely had the echoes died away after the giving of the Ten Commandments when Moses is called to spend more time with God, who gives him detailed instructions as to how these grand commands should be lived out in Israelite society. Even before the instructions for building the tabernacle, God gives three chapters of laws about such things as the appropriate treatment of slaves, laws that would have stood out in stark contrast to the treatment many of the Israelites had experienced. There were laws dealing with violent crimes, laws related to property, laws for everyday living, and principles for establishing courts to implement these laws and to administer justice (see Exodus 21 to 23).

Prominent among these laws was concern for fellow citizens in this new society, as well as concern for the outsiders and those most vulnerable. These people were not to be exploited; they were even given rights to access food in ways that would respect their dignity, such as gleaning leftover crops from the harvested fields. Such treatment for “outsiders” and foreigners was not common in the ancient world. Even today some seem to forget the important moral principles found here regarding the treatment of others.

What memory in your experience makes you more compassionate and concerned about the suffering or injustice of others?
Second Tithing

Many Christians recognize and follow the Bible’s instructions on returning tithe. Usually referenced from Malachi 3:10, it is a simple formula, with believers giving 10 percent of their income—or “increase”—to support the work of the church in spreading the gospel. Entrusted with these tithes, churches usually have strict guidelines about how to use these funds, primarily applying them to support direct ministry and evangelism.

Read Deuteronomy 14:22–29. In these instructions, what is the primary purpose of tithing?

The temptation is to think we have fulfilled our giving when we give that 10 percent. But the instructions given to the Israelites suggest that the 10-percent figure was a starting point. Studies suggest that an ancient Israelite living and giving according to the guidelines in the Levitical laws would on average give almost one fourth of the year’s income to the work of God, to support the priests and sanctuary, and to help the poor.

Some scholars describe this giving—particularly to support the foreigners, orphans, and widows—as a second tithe. It is obvious that the people were to enjoy the results of their work and to celebrate their harvests. God promised to bless them, particularly in their new land, but they were not to take that blessing for granted or to forget those who were not so blessed.

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).

According to God’s instructions, at least some portion of the Israelites’ giving was to be focused on providing financial and practical assistance to those who most needed it. Again, this was based on the people’s memory and appreciation of how God had been merciful and just to them.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11. What is the Lord saying to them? How should we apply this to our own attitude toward giving to those in need?
The Year of Jubilee

Meeting the Israelites as a people who had no home of their own and who were waiting for their arrival in the Promised Land, God knew the importance that the land would take on as they established their new society in Canaan. Under the leadership of Joshua, God oversaw an orderly distribution of the land by tribe and family groups. But He also knew that over time the wealth, opportunity, and resources that were connected with landholding would tend to become concentrated in the hands of the few. Family difficulties, ill health, poor choices, and other misfortune might cause some landholders to sell their lands for short-term gain or simply to survive, but this would mean the family might be dispossessed for successive generations.

God’s solution was to decree that land could never be sold absolutely. Instead, land would be sold only until the next “year of jubilee,” at which time the land would revert to its allotted family, and any land sold could be redeemed by the seller or another member of the seller’s family at any time. Again, God reminds the people of their relationship to Him and how that affects their relationships with others: “‘The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers’” (Lev. 25:23, NIV).

Read Leviticus 25:8–23. How do you imagine society would be different if these principles were applied, especially the words “you shall not oppress one another”?

“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, p. 534.

Bible historians are unsure as to whether these economic and social rhythms were ever fully followed for any significant period of time (see 2 Chron. 36:21). Even so, these rules offer an intriguing glimpse into how the world might work if God’s laws were fully followed. Moreover, they underline God’s particular concern for the poor and the marginalized, as well as His concern that fairness be manifested in practical ways in our world.

“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, pp. 530, 531.

“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, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves.”—Pages 534, 535.

Discussion Questions:

1. Of the blueprint God gave to Moses and the Israelites for the kind of society they were to establish, what feature, law, or regulation most catches your attention (whether it be specifically mentioned in this week’s study or from your wider reading)?

2. Why do you think God seems so focused on the most vulnerable in the laws He gave to His people?

3. How should we understand and relate to these laws today? How do we choose which of these are applicable and relevant to us today? What is the most important thing we can learn from these detailed instructions as to how the Israelites were to order their society and lives?

Summary: God heard the cries of the suffering people of Israel in Egypt and intervened to rescue them. He sought to build a special covenant relationship with them and to work with them to establish a new society that would be a blessing to all, even those often forgotten, marginalized, and vulnerable.
Man With Crooked Stick

By Wilson Measapogu

Indian villagers faced constant trouble from an intruding tiger. The wild animal crept by night into Gudem Madhavaram, a remote village with no electricity on a mountainside in India’s Andhra Pradesh state.

The villagers—dependent upon goats, cows, and bulls to produce milk and cultivate crops for their rich landowners—watched in despair as their animals were devoured one by one. They prayed to their gods for protection, but nothing happened.

One day, a tall white man with a crooked stick arrived on horseback. He spoke the local Telugu language, and the villagers stared at his crooked stick. When the stick coughed, animals went to sleep. Permanently.

The villagers learned that the man was an American named Dr. Theodore R. Flaiz. He had opened a small hospital in Nuzvid, 30 miles (50 kilometers) away from the village, and a training school for workers in Narsapuram, 110 miles (180 kilometers) away. When he wanted to rest from his work, he hunted on their mountain. He donated the game to the villagers.

On Saturdays, he sat in the shade of a village tree, removed his coat, and sang songs. When the villagers asked what he was singing, he explained that he was worshiping the Creator God. “We want to see the Creator God,” the villagers said.

The white man opened a black Book and read aloud about the Creator God.

As the tiger problem grew, the village elders won a promise from the white man to help. They tied a goat to a tree trunk in the village center. In the branches, they built a platform where the white man could sleep. That night, they tied a rope to his leg and retreated to their huts to keep watch.

In the night’s darkness, a large tiger approached. The watching villagers jerked the string, waking up the white man. He caused his crooked stick to cough. The tiger, however, was only wounded and fled. Later, the tiger returned, was shot, and fled again. After several attempts, the tiger was shot dead.

After that, the friendship between Dr. Flaiz and the villagers grew greatly, and a small Seventh-day Adventist congregation was established. One of the first converts—a young man who had helped tie the goat to the tree and kept watch at night—was Sundar Rao, my father. He was baptized in 1955.

Today, Gudem Madhavaram is an Adventist village. It has produced 40 pastors and Bible workers and many educators and health professionals. On Saturdays, the whole village comes to a halt to worship the Creator God.

Wilson Measapogu, left, is executive secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Southern Asia Division, whose territory includes India. Dr. Theodore R. Flaiz was a medical missionary who headed the Adventist world church’s medical work from 1947 until his retirement in 1966. He died in 1977 at the age of 80.
Part I: Overview

In our study of last week’s lesson, we celebrated God’s creation and recognized the sad reality that, with the entrance of sin, His perfect world became a broken world. Immediately God put into place a restoration plan to reflect the way His world “ought” to be.

We are living in the “now, but not yet” stage of this restoration plan, meaning that the fully restored kingdom of God will not be realized until Jesus comes to end sin. But we can embrace and live some of His kingdom’s blessings now.

The biblical-justice theme for this quarter reflects God’s blueprint for a better world, while we wait for the “not yet.” Justice can be defined as the demonstration of God’s righteousness through right action. In fact, “righteousness” and “justice” are often used interchangeably when translating from both Hebrew and Greek. Together, “righteousness” and “justice” can mean “rightness.”

Teacher’s Aims:
- In this lesson explore with your class the implications of the relationship between righteousness and justice.
- Rejoice together that God hears and knows the plight of broken humanity.
- Challenge the class to understand the deeper meaning of the Ten Commandments in light of biblical justice.
- Highlight God’s exhortation to His people to give offerings beyond the 10 percent tithe in support of the Lord’s righteous and just work.
- Search for greater insights into the God-instituted jubilee system that was intended to level the social and economic plight of humanity.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: “Righteousness [tsedeq] and justice [mishpat] are the foundation of your throne; Lovingkindness and truth go before you” (Ps. 89:14, NASB). “The righteous [and just; dikaios] man shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17, NASB).

These verses are only two of many examples of how “righteousness” and “justice” are closely related in the Old and New Testament and can be used interchangeably. If anyone has access to a concordance of the New Testament, look for other references to “righteousness” and also translate that word as “justice.” Notice how this exercise illuminates the interchangeability of these two words. Discuss with your class the impli-
cations in daily life of the close relationship between “righteousness” and “justice.” How do we apply this relationship between “righteousness” and “justice” to humans?

**Scripture:** “And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know” (Gen. 18:20, 21, emphasis supplied).

“I will know” implies that God “took knowledge of; noticed; discerned.” Other passages portray “know” to be similar in meaning to “save” or “show pity” (see Ps. 1:6 and Amos 3:2). Amos 3:2 (NASB) says, “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth.” In Hebrew, that verse is rendered: “You only have I known.” The Hebrew verb yādā’ here is used in the covenantal sense of “recognize in a special way.”

Invite class members to share experiences when they felt that, in a marked way, God “took knowledge of” their cries. How did God have pity on them and save them? Ask class members to share examples of people they “know” who are groaning (Exod. 2:23, 24) and crying out to God because of oppression. In what tangible ways can they, together with their church, partner with God to show pity on these oppressed ones and relieve their suffering?

**Illustration:** God knows the real situation of each person in the world. 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 USD$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!”

We need to pray that God will open to us His perspective on the situations around us. We especially need to be careful to avoid being judgmental about the people we meet.

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2. The NET Bible, p. 1643.
Discuss With Your Class: What do we need to do to ensure that we have a reliable, accurate understanding of the needs and desperate situations around us? How will “being in the know” help us to be more relevant, efficient, and effective in serving others?

Scripture: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me, . . . Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s” (Exod. 20:3, 17). The first and last commandments are like bookends, encompassing the other eight (Exod. 20:4–16) and laying a foundation for the entire Decalogue. For example, not having other gods before the Lord and not coveting what belongs to another person may help identify things we put before God. These two commandments also indicate anything that is self-serving and that will work against keeping the other eight commandments.

Discuss examples that show how the various other commandments relate to the Decalogue’s “bookends”—the first and tenth commandments. How does Jesus’ summary of the Ten Commandments—the so-called “first” and “second” commandments (Matt. 22:37–40)—compare with the “bookends”?

Go through each of the last six commandments and explain how each relates to biblical justice. For example, how do people who are experiencing injustice die a little inside every time we disrespect them or deny them opportunities that are rightfully theirs? Discuss examples of groups of people, possibly right in our midst, who are dying a little inside each day because they experience a lack of respect or because they lack access to opportunity? Also, in what ways might the first four commandments be related to biblical justice?

Illustrations: Someone said that there are three kinds of givers: the flint, the sponge, and the honeycomb. To get anything from a flint you must hammer it. Even then, you get only chips and sparks. To get liquid out of a sponge you need to squeeze it. The more pressure you apply, the more you get. However, the honeycomb merely overflows with its own sweetness.  

Church members who can be categorized as “sponge” givers feel obligated to give 10 percent of their income because of the Malachi 3:10 mandate. But they do not “squeeze out” any additional offerings beyond the stipulated 10 percent tithe. However, verse 8 admonishes God’s people that He expects both tithes and offerings from them to support His work. The “honeycomb” givers cheerfully give offerings above the requisite tithe to support those in need. (Read Deut. 26:1–12.) As a result, both giver and receiver are blessed.

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Anthony Rossi was a poor immigrant from Sicily who accepted Jesus as his personal Savior. While in church one morning, he prayed, “Lord, if You give me an idea for a business, I will be faithful to give back to Your work a portion of everything I make.” That morning, “Fresh-squeezed orange juice” popped into his head. Rossi became a prominent Christian businessman who founded the Tropicana Company. He kept his promise to God and gave not just 10 percent of his income but 50 percent of his income to God’s work for 60 years!5

Illustration: The Institute of International Finance (IIF) put out a troubling report that global debt hit a record high of USD$247 trillion in the first quarter of 2018.6 This represents an increase of USD$32 trillion from the first quarter of 2017. The figure includes households, governments, financial and nonfinancial corporations.7

Some people spiral into such huge debt that getting free of it seems an impossible goal to achieve. Many countries have bankruptcy laws that are designed to protect citizens who are unable to meet their financial obligations. These laws allow the debt-ridden to have a fresh start. However, there are usually severe consequences for those who choose the protection of bankruptcy.

In Leviticus 25, God reveals a bankruptcy alternative—jubilee. Jubilee was designed to be a reboot of society, an economic-stimulus package. It is a way of life with a mandate for society to provide for the marginalized and deprived, while preventing unequal distribution of wealth.

What did this reboot/reset button look like? To help your class get a sense of what this plan entailed, list on a board, if available, jubilee elements such as:

• The restoration of property to its original owner.
• Debt forgiveness.
• Emancipation of prisoners and slaves.

Discuss: How does debt, ownership, and oppression today compare with the scenarios portrayed in Leviticus 25? How can God’s church live out the principles of jubilee today? Invite class members to share stories of how the Lord has been the God of fresh starts and new beginnings in their lives. Then ask them to share how they partnered with God to bring fresh starts and new beginnings to other people.

Part III: Life Application

God challenges church members to go beyond thinking about the need for justice and reforms solely in terms of their own situations. Often these situations may center around race-relation and religious-liberty issues that personally plague them, such as the right to have Sabbaths off or the right to be a conscientious objector in the military. Biblical justice for all humans, however, should be an automatic way of life that fosters within us a concern for what will happen to others, not just ourselves.

Seek ways to help your class members apply the principles of this lesson to their lives. Use examples that are related to personal experiences or to the issues covered in the lesson. As you do, consider the following:

1. Invite class members to give a personal testimony about the application of this quote in their lives: “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*, p. 527. (See Mal. 3:8–12.)

2. Jubilee was about restoration and new beginnings: financially, spiritually, and socially (see Lev. 25:8–17). Jubilee also was connected with the Day of Atonement—a time of spiritual restoration and redemption, as well (read Lev. 25:9). Suppose it is brought to your attention that there is a family who just lost everything, including one of their children, in a fire. How would your church endeavor to give this bereft family a new beginning—a jubilee experience—both financially and spiritually?
Sabbath Afternoon


Memory Text: “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27, NKJV).

God created the Sabbath as the final act of the Creation week. It has been said that on the seventh day, God not only rested, but He created rest as an integral part of the way that the world was to be. The Sabbath was a demonstration of how we were created to interact with God and with each other.

So, it is hardly surprising to find the Sabbath, as one of the commandments in God’s plan for His people, appearing early on in the establishment of the new Israelite nation. It was to have a pivotal role in the life of the Hebrews.

Often when we talk about the Sabbath, the conversation quickly moves to how to keep it. What are the things that we should not do, and the like? However important these questions are, we need to understand the integral role that the Sabbath was designed to play in the world and in the lives of God’s people as a symbol of God’s grace and provision.

As Jesus said, the seventh-day Sabbath was created for all humanity. When we truly “remember the Sabbath day,” it will change us every day of the week, and—as Jesus demonstrated—it can be a means of blessing others, as well.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 20.
Manna Enough

After generations of slavery and the social degradation that such a condition could inflict on His oppressed people, God sought to lift up the newly freed Israelites, pointing them to a better way of living and giving them laws for the best ordering of their new society. But one of the first parts of this process came in the form of a practical and instructive object lesson.

Continuing for the full 40 years of their wilderness wanderings, this rhythm of life, visible evidence of God’s provision and practiced unselfishness, should have become part of the culture of Israelite society. It came in the form of manna, a food that appeared each morning on the ground around the Israelites’ camp.

Read Exodus 16:16–18. What do you think is the significance of the specific measure for each person emphasized in these verses?

In 2 Corinthians 8:10–15, Paul references this story as an example of how Christians should give: “At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14, NIV).

The lesson for the Israelites, and us, was that God has provided sufficiently for His people and His creation. If we take only what we need and are prepared to share our excess with others, all will be cared for and provided for. Taking only enough for the day required the people to trust that there would be more the following day. Oppressed people, such as the Israelite slaves, tend to focus on their own survival, but God wanted to demonstrate to them a life of trust, generosity, and sharing.

But there was also another, more remarkable, dimension to this practice. Each Friday a double portion of manna appeared on the ground, and on that day—and only that day—the people were to collect the extra manna in preparation for the Sabbath. The special provision for the Sabbath became an additional way for them to learn to trust the Lord for all their needs. This extra portion of manna, an act of grace on God’s part, enabled them to enjoy even more fully the rest that God had promised them on the seventh-day Sabbath.

What can we do on Fridays that will help us better enjoy what God offers us on Sabbath?
Two Reasons for Sabbath

Read Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. How do these two versions of the fourth commandment complement each other?

Remembering is an important part of the relationship that God seeks to reestablish with His people, a relationship centered on the fact that God is our Creator and Redeemer. Both roles appear in the two versions of the fourth commandment and are thus linked closely with Sabbath and its practice.

Coming out of a land dominated by so many false gods, the Israelites needed to be reminded of the true God’s role as the Creator. The Sabbath was a crucial way to do that, made all the more significant in the context of the weekly cycle of providing extra manna on Friday, a powerful example of His creative power. In the Exodus 20 version of the fourth commandment, God as our Creator is revealed most clearly.

By contrast, their rescue, redemption, and salvation is the focus of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5. This was a story that the Israelites were to retell regularly; they could reconnect with it especially every Sabbath. Their first story was one of actual, physical rescue from slavery in Egypt, but as their understanding of God and His salvation grew, Sabbath also would become a weekly symbol and celebration of their spiritual salvation.

Both of these motivations for Sabbath were about restoring the relationship between God and His people: ‘‘I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy’’ (Ezek. 20:12, NIV). And, as we have seen, this was never about this group of people only. On the foundation of this relationship, they were to establish a new kind of society, one that was kind to outsiders and a blessing to the wider world.

‘‘Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day’’ (Deut. 5:15, NIV). By keeping the Sabbath as a way of remembering and celebrating both our creation and redemption, we can continue to grow in our relationship, not only with the Lord but with those around us. God is gracious to us; therefore, we need to be gracious to others.

In what ways should Sabbath keeping make us better, kinder, more caring, and compassionate people?
A Day of Equality

One of the things obvious from a quick reading of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is that the fourth commandment is the most detailed by far. Whereas some of the commandments are recorded in as few as three words in some versions (in the Hebrew some can be expressed in only two words), the fourth commandment gives space to the why, how, and who of remembering the Sabbath day.

Read Exodus 20:8–11. What does it say about the servants and strangers, even animals, and what does it mean?

Notable among these Sabbath details is the focus on others. Sigve K. Tonstad argues that this kind of command is unique among all the cultures of the world. The Sabbath commandment, he explains, “prioritizes from the bottom up and not from the top looking down, giving first considerations to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien, and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention. In the rest of the seventh day the underprivileged, even mute animals, find an ally.”—The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), pp. 126, 127.

The commandment has a special focus on urging that the Sabbath is a day to be enjoyed by everyone. In the light of the Sabbath, we are all equal. If you are an employer during the week, you have no authority to make your employees work on Sabbath. And that’s because God gave them, too, a day of rest. If you are an employee—or even a slave—for the rest of your days, the Sabbath reminds you that you are equally created and redeemed by God, and God invites you to celebrate this in ways other than your usual duties. Even those outside the Sabbath-keeping people—“any foreigner residing in your towns” (Exod. 20:10, NIV)—should benefit from the Sabbath.

This idea would have been a remarkable change of perspective for the Israelites, fresh from their own experiences of slavery and marginalization. Now that they were to be established in a new land, God did not want them to adopt the habits of their former oppressors. As well as giving them detailed laws for their society, He gave them (all of us, actually) a weekly reminder, in a powerful way, of just how equal we all are before God.

How can you share the Sabbath in your community, meaning how can others in your community benefit from your Sabbath keeping?
A Day of Healing

While the original vision for the Sabbath and Sabbath keeping was broad and inclusive, the Sabbath had become something quite different for many of the religious leaders by the time Jesus came to earth. Instead of a day of freedom and equality, Sabbath had become a day of human, traditional rules and restrictions. In His day, Jesus stood up against such attitudes, especially as they were imposed on others.

How interesting that He did this most significantly by performing a number of healings on Sabbath. It seems that Jesus intentionally performed these miracles on Sabbath, as opposed to any other day, to demonstrate something important about what the Sabbath should be. Often in these stories, Jesus made comments about the appropriateness of healing on Sabbath, and often the Pharisees used His statements as an excuse to further their plots to have Jesus killed.

Read the stories of Jesus’ Sabbath healings in Matthew 12:9–13, Mark 1:21–26, 3:1–6, and John 9:1–16. What are the most significant things you notice in these stories?

Jesus confirmed that the Sabbath is important. We need to put boundaries around Sabbath time to keep it special and to allow this weekly time to be an opportunity to grow our relationships with God, our families, our church, and our community. But Sabbath keeping should not be selfishly about just us. As Jesus said, “‘It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath’” (Matt. 12:12, NKJV).

Many church members do much good work to care for others. But many of us also feel that we should do more to help. We know God cares about those who are hurting, oppressed, or forgotten, and that we should care, too. Because we are commanded not to pursue our regular work and are freed from the pressures of the week, on Sabbath we are given time to focus on this concern for others as one of the ways of true and active Sabbath keeping: “According to the fourth commandment the Sabbath was dedicated to rest and religious worship. All secular employment was to be suspended, but works of mercy and benevolence were in accordance with the purpose of the Lord. . . . To relieve the afflicted, to comfort the sorrowing, is a labor of love that does honor to God’s holy day.”—Ellen G. White, Welfare Ministry, p. 77.

What do you do for the good of others on Sabbath?
Sabbath Rest for the Land

As we have seen, Sabbath was an ingrained part of the life cycle of the Israelite nation. But the Sabbath principle was not just about a day each week. It also included a special rest each seventh year, culminating in the year of jubilee after seven sets of seven years, meaning each 50th year.

Read Leviticus 25:1–7. What is remarkable about this kind of instruction? In what possible ways could you incorporate this kind of principle into your life and work?

The Sabbath year allowed the farmland to lie fallow for the year. It is a remarkable act of stewarding the land, and the wisdom of this as an agricultural practice has been recognized widely.

The seventh year also was significant for slaves (see Exod. 21:1–11). In the event that any of the Israelites became so indebted as to sell themselves into slavery, they were to be freed in the seventh year. Similarly, outstanding debts were to be canceled at the end of the seventh year (see Deut. 15:1–11).

Like the manna God provided to the Israelites in the wilderness, not planting crops for a season was an act of trust that God would provide enough in the previous year and from what the ground produced by itself in the Sabbath year. Similarly, to release slaves and cancel debts was an act of mercy but also an act of trust in the power of God to provide for our needs. In a sense, the people needed to learn that they didn’t have to oppress others in order to provide for themselves.

The principles and pattern of the Sabbath were to be closely tied to the structure of the Israelite society as a whole. Similarly, contemporary Sabbath keeping should be a spiritual discipline that transforms all our other days. In a practical sense, the Sabbath is one way of living out Jesus’ instructions to seek first His kingdom: “‘Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs... and he will give you everything you need’” (Matt. 6:32, 33, NLT).

What difference should keeping the Sabbath make to the other six days of your week? After all, if you are greedy, selfish, and uncaring from Sunday through Friday, what does it really matter if you are none of these things on Sabbath? (Or truly can you not be those things on Sabbath even if you are that way the rest of the week?)

“Jesus stated to them that the work of relieving the afflicted was in harmony with the Sabbath law. It was in harmony with the work of God’s angels, who are ever descending and ascending between heaven and earth to minister to suffering humanity. . . .

“And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God’s holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day.”—Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, pp. 206, 207.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways have you experienced the Sabbath as a demonstration of your trust in God? Have you had a manna-like experience in your life, where God has provided in response to your trust in Him? If so, share it with the class and tell them what you have learned.

2. As we have seen in the fourth commandment as found in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, God emphasized different aspects of Sabbath. What is the one aspect of Sabbath that you most appreciate?

3. In class or individually, brainstorm some ways you can share the blessings and benefits of the Sabbath in your community.

4. What are some of the ways the Sabbath changes your life? Are there other parts of your life in which the patterns and principles of the Sabbath should have a greater impact?

Summary: God gave the Sabbath as a way of remembering Creation and Redemption, but it also has many practical benefits. It teaches us to trust in God’s provision for us; it teaches us to practice equality; and it can become a spiritual discipline that can transform all our relationships. Jesus demonstrated His ideal for the Sabbath by healing the sick and emphasizing the Sabbath as a day to benefit those in need.
Snakebite Transforms Village

By Wilson Measapogu

Sundar Rao, a 27-year-old farm worker, was intrigued when a white man showed up at his Indian village and read about a Creator God from a black book on Saturdays. Sundar was attracted to U.S. missionary Theodore R. Flaiz’s Bible stories and decided to follow his God. Sundar’s employer was furious when he didn’t go to the field the first Sabbath. His anger grew as Sundar kept refusing to work on Saturdays.

At home, Sundar angered his relatives by no longer participating in family religious festivals, including the worship of Naga, a snake god.

After a time, Sundar sought peace by building a house just beyond the brook that marked the village’s border. Soon he got married and had a daughter. One day when Sundar was 29, his employer asked him to work on a Saturday. “After your worship ends on Saturday, come and help count bales of hay,” he demanded.

Sundar reluctantly obeyed. He arrived at the field after sunset but before darkness had set in. With help from others, he counted the bales. Noticing a small bale off to one side, he kicked it toward a larger bale. In a split second, a young cobra sprang from the bale, struck him on the leg, and fled.

No medical help was available, and Sundar knew he would die soon. The villagers had no doubt that Naga was punishing him.

“Naga is very angry at you,” one said.

“It’s because you disobeyed all the village gods,” said another.

Sundar started to sweat. Formerly estranged family members gathered around him and wept. The village waited for him to close his eyes and die.

But nothing happened. A snakebite specialist was summoned to check his leg. He was astounded at what he found. He declared that the cobra had struck Sundar with the top of his mouth, not with the poisonous fangs and had fled in fright without trying to bite a second time.

The next day, the villagers were amazed to see that Sundar was healthy and happy. “The protection of the white man’s God has saved him from the cobra bite,” they said.

From that moment, in 1957, many villagers joined Sundar in keeping the Sabbath. Five years after the snakebite, I was born to Sundar. Today, Gudem Madhavaram is an Adventist village. It has produced 40 pastors and Bible workers and many educators and health professionals. On Saturdays, the whole village stops to worship the Creator God. This is the power of the God who turned a snakebite into a blessing.

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Part I: Overview

The seventh day of the Creation week—Adam and Eve’s first full day of life—was a day of rest. “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made” (Gen. 2:2, emphasis supplied). The Sabbath is a monument that honors God as our great Creator. The reiteration of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:15 ties Sabbath observance to God’s work of Redemption. Therefore, God intended the Sabbath as a memorial of His creative and redemptive work. It is not designed to be a reward for our own work and toil throughout the week.

Teacher’s Aims:

• Remind your students that God performed a manna miracle for 40 years before Moses reiterated God’s law on the borders of the Promised Land (see Deut. 4:1, 5:6–21). This miracle included a daily provision of manna (Sunday through Friday), as well as a Sabbath provision given on Friday.
• Note that the fourth commandment calls God’s people to accord the universal, equal privilege of Sabbath rest to all people, including slaves and aliens. God’s injunction for Sabbath rest extends to our domestic animals too. Our belief in the equal privilege of Sabbath rest for all people and domestic animals must govern our thinking, our attitudes toward others, and our personal activities on the other six days of the week, as well.
• Remind your students that even the land under the control of the Israelite nation was allowed to rest every seven years.
• Draw your students’ attention to Jesus’ attitude toward healing on the Sabbath. Remind your students that Jesus’ attitude toward healing must govern their attitudes and actions on the other six days too.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration: “Eat your dinner! There are children in other parts of the world who are starving!” This parental cliché has been heard in many a home to prevent food waste. There is a spoonful of truth in this familiar rebuke. In the United States, for example, more than 35 million tons of food are thrown away every year, which constitutes 40 percent of all the food bought annually by that nation.

The story of the manna exemplifies the principle of taking only what we require of our God-given food supply to meet our needs, thereby avoiding waste. This principle should govern the way we meet all our
other needs too. The Israelites had trouble trusting this principle at first. Rather than believe that God would repeat the miracle the next day, some people hoarded extra manna that they did not need, exchanging God’s miracle for maggots. This lesson from the manna distills a biblical precept that is repeated over and over in other contexts throughout Scripture. For example, invite the class to read Leviticus 19:9, 10 and Mark 6:34–44.

Discuss: What is the Lord, in Leviticus and Mark, asking us to leave behind for the poor? Is it food? Money? Time?
  • How does God view hoarding? (See Luke 12:16–21.)
  • What additional Sabbath principles do we see demonstrated in the provision of manna for the Sabbath?
  • How does the absence of manna on the Sabbath day, and the lack of maggots in the extra provision of manna collected before the Sabbath, teach us lessons of (1) trust in God and (2) the importance of preparation for Sabbath?
  • How does God’s mandate for His people to rest from regular labor on the Sabbath reinforce the principle of equality?
  • What other biblical principles does the absence of manna and the lack of maggots teach us?

Scripture: Creation and Redemption go together. The Bible connects Christ’s creative activity with His redemptive activity. Hebrews 1:1–3 describes Christ as the One who “made the universe” (Heb. 1:2, ISV). Immediately after this assertion, Paul mentions Christ as the One who “made purification of sins” (Heb. 1:3, NASB). Colossians 1:16, 20 presents a similar pattern, presenting Christ as Creator and Redeemer. To top it off, Paul called the Christian “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV). Truly, Redemption is a creative act.

Deuteronomy 5:15 presents redemption from slavery as the reason for keeping the Sabbath. For slaves, that is fabulous news! They no longer need to work for their former masters, and freedom is part of their lives forever. Slaves cannot skip a day of work, but free people can. To keep the Sabbath is to exercise one’s freedom. Thus, on the Sabbath, freedom from work means freedom from bondage.

Discuss: How do you exercise your freedom on the Sabbath? What guidelines do you use? What is the difference between principles and rules? Share in class some Sabbath observance principles and some rules that can derive from these principles. Share and evaluate some rules that are not based on principles. How effective or good are these rules?

Illustration: Yes, the Sabbath is a day of healing. Seven of Jesus’ healing miracles take place on the Sabbath. The Gospel writers record
these miracles as a testament to God’s intention for the Sabbath to be a time for healing. (See Matt. 12:9–15; Mark 1:21–28; Luke 4:38, 39; 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18; 9:1–41.) Through these healing miracles, Jesus makes a point of reeducating the minds of His people about Sabbath observance. His holy day had become a day plagued by the burdensome rules imposed on it, a day infected by the attitude of the rule-inventers.

Jesus also healed people on other days that were not recorded as Sabbath days. The Sabbath sets the tone for the work He did—and that He calls us to do—for the rest of the week. Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “The Sabbath is the inspirer, the other days the inspired.” The healing peace of the Sabbath flows into the new week, permeating our attitudes and our way of life.

Below are some illustrations that portray the reality of true Sabbath observance.

1. The Jewish Havdalah ceremony marks the closing of the Sabbath. In addition to lighting the Havdalah candle, with its twisted multi-wicks that symbolize Sabbath family togetherness, the worshipers place a goblet in a saucer and pour wine or grape juice into the goblet until it overflows. This act signifies the belief that the Sabbath has overflowed with joy and blessing for the family. It also symbolizes overflow of the Sabbath influence into the new week.

2. Then the family passes around a special Sabbath box filled with a mixture of spices called besamim. (One can be made by filling a small decorative box with cinnamon and cloves.) The besamim represents the fragrance of life that the family experiences with one another during the Sabbath. As family members pass the box to one another, they might say: “May the fragrance of the Sabbath remain with you throughout the coming week,” or something to that effect.

3. The Sabbath is like orange juice concentrate when mixed with water. When we concentrate on Jesus on the Sabbath, we receive a concentrated dose of Him. As we go through the week (whose days are symbolized by the water), we mix the “Sabbath concentrate” into our work, activities, and interactions with people. In this way, the weekdays take on the flavor of the Sabbath.

**Discuss:** How does the Sabbath’s healing fragrance, or flavor, affect how
we relate to the people around us every day? Read 2 Corinthians 2:15 for further insights.

**Scripture:** The Three Sabbaths


2. *The Sabbath of Years* follows the pattern of the weekly cycle of six days, followed by the Sabbath rest day, extending the pattern to a cycle of seven years. The land, and not only the tenants, were included in the Sabbath rest. In the Sabbath of years, the pattern of the weekly Sabbath shows up again, for the weekly Sabbath “prioritizes from the bottom up and not the top looking down, giving first considerations to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien, and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention.”

3. *Jubilee:* The year of jubilee joins the sabbatical year and provides care for the land and concern for those who are underprivileged. (This Sabbath was covered in lesson 2.)

**Discuss:** As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, how successfully do we apply the principles of the “Three Sabbaths” idea to our lives today? Is this question meant to suggest that we must observe all three Sabbaths literally? Why, or why not?

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**Part III: Life Application**

God commands us to rest on the Sabbath from our weekly labor and to cease pursuing our own interests, financial or otherwise, during these sacred hours. Yet, the pen of inspiration tells us that, even on the Sabbath, we are beholden to God’s continuous sustaining power in our behalf:

“God could not for a moment stay His hand, or man would faint and die. And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God’s holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 207.

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How do the “acts of mercy” we perform on the Sabbath harmonize with Jesus’ teaching that the Sabbath was made for humankind (Mark 2:27)? Invite class members to share testimonies in which they put Jesus’ teaching into action. Perhaps, in their experiences, your students encountered people in need or in an emergency—people who were in the “ox in the pit” scenario (Luke 14:2–5). How did your class members maintain the sacredness of the Sabbath as they sought to alleviate the suffering of others on this holiest of days?

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Notes
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Mercy and Justice in Psalms and Proverbs

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: Ps. 9:7–9, 13–20; Psalm 82; Psalm 101; Psalm 146; Prov. 10:4; 13:23, 25; 30:7–9.

Memory Text: “Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:3, 4, NKJV).

Psalms and Proverbs depict the experience of living with God in the common things of life, not just in times of worship or in other religious activities. While the book of Proverbs offers a range of practical wisdom—from relationships and families to business and government—Psalms is a collection of songs that cover a variety of emotions and spiritual experiences from laments to exultant praise and everything in between. It is easy to see that our faith should make a difference in every aspect and experience of our lives, because God cares about every aspect of our lives.

Meanwhile, any reflection on life in this fallen world could hardly ignore the injustice that so permeates the human condition. In fact, injustice is repeatedly described as something that our Lord cares about and seeks to relieve. It is He who is the hope of the hopeless.

Though we can only touch on what these books say about this topic, perhaps this lesson might inspire you to be more proactive in ministering to the needs of the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten who exist all around us and whom we are obligated to help.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 27.
Psalms: Songs of Hope for the Oppressed

As we have already noted, God sees and hears people who are in distress and trouble. Most often in the Psalms we hear those cries from people who have trusted in God but are not seeing justice done. The affirmations of the goodness, justice, and power of God can seem overwhelmed by the injustice and oppression that the voices in these songs experience or observe.

Yet, these are the songs of those who are still singing. Neither their life nor their faith has been quenched. There is still hope; and the urgency is for God to act before it is too late, before evil triumphs, before the oppressed are destroyed by the weight of the evil brought against them. In this way, the writers of the Psalms try to bridge the gap between the affirmations of their faith and the trials and tragedies of life.

Read Psalm 9:7–9, 13–20. Can you imagine the circumstances David—the writer of the psalm—was in? Can you feel the tension between his faith in God’s goodness and his present experience? How have you dealt with the struggle of faith in God amid times of severe trial?

Throughout the Psalms, the repeated answer to this tension is the hope and promise of God’s good and just judgment. Evil and injustice may seem triumphant for now, but God will judge the evildoers and the unjust. They will be punished, while those they have hurt and oppressed will be restored and renewed.

In Reflections on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis describes his initial surprise at the excitement and longing for God’s judgment as expressed repeatedly in the Psalms. Observing that many Bible readers today consider judgment something to be feared, he considers the original Jewish perspective and writes, “Thousands of people who have been stripped of all they possess and who have the right entirely on their side will at last be heard. Of course they are not afraid of judgment. They know their case is unanswerable—if only it could be heard. When God comes to judge, at last it will.”—C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 11.

In the Psalms, we see hope for the oppressed, even now, even amid their present sufferings and disappointments.

What reasons do we have to view the idea of judgment as positive, and not something to be feared?
“Do Something, God!”

Read Psalm 82. What is the message here to us?

Despite the ordering and rules of society that God gave to them, at various times in their history the Israelites failed to live up to this plan. They too easily became like the nations around them, living by a pattern of injustice and oppression. Leaders and judges looked after only themselves, and their favor could be purchased with bribes. Without courts to protect them, ordinary people, and the poor especially, were subject to exploitation.

Psalm 82 is a response to such a situation. It describes God’s role as Supreme Judge, and it depicts a scene in which He judges the leaders and even the judges of the people. This psalm emphasizes that those who fill such roles in society “are appointed to act as judges under Him.”—Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, p. 198. They hold their position and conduct their work as representatives and subordinates of God. In the psalmist’s view, the justice of God is a model for how earthly justice should function, and it also provides the measure against which such justice or injustice—and those who dispense it—will be judged.

The psalm concludes with a specific call for God to act (Ps. 82:8), to intervene and to stop the injustice that is so prevalent in the nation. Like many of the psalms, this one gives a voice to the voiceless and to the oppressed, those whose voices have been silenced by the unjust systems in which they live and work.

Psalm 82 makes an appeal to God in His position of Supreme Judge and Sovereign Ruler of the universe and of all the nations. There is no higher court or authority to which such an appeal could be made. The assurance comes that when earthly courts do not hear or uphold the cries of the poor and oppressed, which is so often the case here, there is still an undeniable opportunity to call for help.

At different times in our lives we might find ourselves as victims of injustice, but at other times we might be the one committing or profiting from injustice. In passages such as Psalm 82, we can find insight and wisdom, whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor. God is concerned for the unjust judges, too, describing them as His children and wanting them to choose to live better (see Ps. 82:6). Thus, there’s hope even for those on the wrong side of oppression, if they will allow themselves to be changed.
A King’s Promises

Read Psalm 101. Though written for leaders, what important counsel can we take from it for ourselves, whatever our position in life?

Psalm 101 is a text for leaders. It is thought that these verses were composed by David in the early days of his reign as king of Israel. They may even have been adapted from vows that he made at the time of becoming king. In his experiences as a warrior for Saul and then a fugitive from him, he had witnessed for himself how a king who loses his way could damage the nation and his family. David determined that he was going to be a different kind of leader.

Few of us might be political or national leaders, but we all have roles in life in which we have the opportunity to influence and encourage others. These might be in our working life, community involvement, family, or church. As Ellen G. White comments on one of these settings of leadership, “the vows of David, recorded in the 101st psalm, should be the vows of all upon whom rest the responsibilities of guarding the influences of the home.”—Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, p. 119.

As we have opportunity, we should be prepared to suggest and uphold these principles to those who fill positions of leadership over us. And all of us, in our leadership and places of influence, have the opportunity to apply David’s leadership principles in order to help us be a blessing to others.

The starting point for David is honoring God for His mercy and justice (Ps. 101:1), which became the foundation for everything David sought to uphold by his leadership. He sought to learn and practice these same characteristics in his life and work. To do this, he must resist the temptations toward wrongdoing, corruption, and dishonesty, all of which are particular traps for those in positions of power and leadership.

Knowing how important good counselors were to help him to do right, David pledges to seek out trustworthy advisers and to appoint honest officials. Justice and mercy were to mark his leadership, even among those who worked with and for him.

We might not be in a position to have advisers and officials, but how can we fill our lives with influences that help us to live and to lead (where we can) with justice and mercy for those who need it?
Walking With the Lord

As we near the end of the book of Psalms, the exclamations of praise seem to grow in crescendo after crescendo. The final five psalms begin with a simple and direct command to “Praise the Lord!” but the first of these—Psalm 146—has a particular focus on God’s concern for the poor and oppressed as a primary reason for such praise.

Read Psalm 146. What is the message here to us? What is the psalmist saying, especially in Psalm 146:5–9?

As surely as God is Creator of this world (see Ps. 146:6), this psalm describes God’s continuing work in the world as judge, provider, liberator, healer, helper, and defender—all of these focused on people in specific need of these kinds of help. It is an inspiring vision of what God does and seeks to do in our lives, in our communities, and in our world.

Sometimes we think of caring for the needy as something we ought to do because God said so. But Psalm 146 says this is something God already does—and we are invited to join with Him. When we work against poverty, oppression, and disease, we are truly working with God and His purposes. What greater privilege can there be than partnering with God in fulfilling something as inspiring as Psalm 146?

But there also are benefits for us. Christians often talk about their search for God and their desire to have a closer relationship with Him. Yet, verses such as Psalm 146:7–9, and so many others throughout the Bible, indicate to us that one way to find God is to join in with what He does. So, if He is working to lift up the poor, sick, and oppressed, as Psalm 146 says He is, we should be working with Him, as well. “Christ came to this earth to walk and work among the poor and suffering. They received the greatest share of His attention. And today, in the person of His children, He visits the poor and needy, relieving woe and alleviating suffering.

“Take away suffering and need, and we should have no way of understanding the mercy and love of God, no way of knowing the compassionate, sympathetic heavenly Father. Never does the gospel put on an aspect of greater loveliness than when it is brought to the most needy and destitute regions.”—Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 7, p. 226.

What has been your experience in how we become close to God by serving others?
Proverbs: Mercy on the Needy

As a collection of wisdom sayings, the book of Proverbs touches on a diverse range of topics and life experiences. Among these are reflections on poverty, riches, contentment, justice, and injustice—and sometimes from differing angles. Life is not always simple and straightforward, and Proverbs alerts us to the different circumstances and choices that influence how life is lived, even among those who are faithful to God.

Read and compare Proverbs 10:4; 13:23, 25; 14:31; 15:15, 16; 19:15, 17; and 30:7–9. What are these texts saying that is relevant to wealth, poverty, and helping those in need?

Proverbs emphasizes the concern and attention God has for the poor and vulnerable. Sometimes people are poor because of circumstances, poor choices, or exploitation, but whatever the causes of their situation, the Lord is still described as their Creator (see Prov. 22:2) and Defender (see Prov. 22:22, 23). These people are not to be oppressed or taken advantage of, whatever their mistakes.

While Proverbs does offer a better life through choosing wisdom and obeying God, riches are not always the result of God’s blessing. Faithfulness to God is always seen as more important and ultimately more rewarding than material gain: “Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice” (Prov. 16:8, NIV).

Another concern in Proverbs is honesty and fair dealing in business, government, and in administering justice (see Prov. 14:5, 25; 16:11–13; 17:15; 20:23; 21:28; 28:14–16). Proverbs is not only concerned with the lives of individuals but also offers insight as to how society as a whole should function for the benefit of all, particularly for those who need protection. We are reminded again that at their best, those who govern and lead do so with the help of God (see Prov. 8:15, 16) and should be acting as agents of His grace and compassion toward those in need.

It’s easy for anyone to feel sorry for those in bad situations. How, though, can we take that feeling of sorrow and turn it into action?

“The psalms of David pass through the whole range of experience, from the depths of conscious guilt and self-condemnation to the loftiest faith and the most exalted communing with God. His life record declares that sin can bring only shame and woe, but that God’s love and mercy can reach to the deepest depths, that faith will lift up the repenting soul to share the adoption of the sons of God. Of all the assurances which His word contains, it is one of the strongest testimonies to the faithfulness, the justice, and the covenant mercy of God.”—Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 754.

Referring to the wisdom in the book of Proverbs: “These are principles with which are bound up the well-being of society, of both secular and religious associations. It is these principles that give security to property and life. For all that makes confidence and cooperation possible, the world is indebted to the law of God, as given in His word, and as still traced, in lines often obscure and well-nigh obliterated, in the hearts of men.”—Ellen G. White, Education, p. 137.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways would you consider yourself a leader or in a position of influence? How can you be an agent of justice in that aspect of your life?

2. Think about the culture and social structures of the place where you live. In what way can you work within the existing system to better the lot of those in need?

3. Why are the principles of justice and fairness so important for building a strong society?

4. While the book of Proverbs is focused on wisdom for living well, what does it tell us about what God is like?

Summary: Psalms and Proverbs are two books particularly tuned to the challenges of living faithfully amid life’s common experiences and trials. Both offer insights into God’s vision for society and His special concern for the poor and oppressed. The cry of the Psalms and the wisdom of Proverbs are that God does notice and will intervene to protect those too often ignored or exploited. And if that’s what God’s about, it’s what we should be about, as well.
Missionary SUV

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Parking at home in the U.S. state of Maryland, Joe Marcellino saw a trail of oil winding up the street from his Isuzu Trooper SUV. “Uh-oh,” he said to his wife, Susan. “Things aren’t good.”

Joe, a 33-year-old IT manager at the Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, called a friend for help. The friend, Eric Armer, found oil spewing from the oil filter and warned that engine repairs probably would cost more than $3,000.

Joe and Susan, recently married, had exactly $3,000 in the bank. But Joe was reluctant to spend the money on the SUV because the couple had fallen behind in returning tithe. They owed $1,500 for the past three months. Susan saw no room for discussion. “We need to give our firstfruits,” she said.

Joe and Susan prayed and decided to return tithe rather than repair the SUV. After the decision, Eric advised Joe to call the filling station that had changed the oil shortly before the spill. The filling station sent a mechanic to Joe’s house and, after an inspection, offered to rebuild the engine for free. Joe, however, wasn’t sure he trusted the gas station, so he accepted a $3,000 payment instead. Joe asked another friend, Bill Brody, a car mechanic, to rebuild the engine. When the repairs were finished, Joe received the bill—for $1,500. To his surprise, the $3,000 from the gas station had been enough to cover repairs and tithe.

Bill cautioned Joe as a friend to sell the SUV, saying it could break down at any time. Days later, Wayne Calbi, purchasing director at Adventist Church headquarters, asked Joe whether he would be willing to sell the SUV. “A missionary in Africa has asked specifically to buy an Isuzu Trooper,” he said.

Joe immediately shared the SUV’s history, but Wayne said he was willing to take the risk. He gave Joe a fair price and shipped the vehicle to Africa. The SUV had about 40,000 miles (64,000 kilometers) on it. About 18 months passed, and Wayne told Joe, “You remember that SUV? Now it has more than 100,000 miles on it.”

“Praise the Lord!” Joe said. “I didn’t think it would last that long.”

A couple years later, Wayne announced that it had passed 200,000 miles. Then 300,000 miles. Joe was amazed. “It is the Lord who kept it going for this missionary!” he said.

Joe, now 61 and pictured left, said the experience taught him a lesson about mission and tithe. “The Lord met our needs when we sat down [and decided] as husband and wife to give our firstfruits to Him,” he said. “He didn’t only meet our needs, but He also met the needs of the missionary in Africa. The SUV became a blessing that kept on giving year after year after year.”
Part I: Overview

Music is a mnemonic device. We learn the alphabet best by singing it. Likewise, one of the best ways to memorize Scripture is to set it to song. The psalmists implicitly understood this connection between memory and music, between the message God gave them and melody as a vehicle for transporting that truth.

No wonder, then, that cries and pleas for God’s mercy and His justice are expressed melodically in the Psalms. In these divinely inspired lyrics, we encounter expressions of eager yearning and longing for God’s presence. We find fervent prayers and sacred songs of joy, of anger over injustice, of praise, repentance, trust, and even of believers wrestling with despair. These prayers and songs are expressed in beautiful and inspired terms.

Likewise, in the book of Proverbs we find similar themes and exhortations to depend on God’s justice and mercy. Through the vehicle of figurative maxims and aphorisms, the splendor of God’s infinite wisdom confronts us. In this encounter, God illuminates His people with divine directives to express compassion for the excluded, oppressed, and marginalized.

This lesson highlights songs of hope for those oppressed and in need of mercy and justice.

Teacher’s Aims:

- Challenge class members to recognize God’s passion for compassion and His intentional judgment in favor of those who suffer.
- Invite students to listen to the pleading lyrics of the voiceless in Psalm 82, calling for God’s intervention in their behalf because earthly courts have failed to hear their cries.
- Discuss the principles of righteous leadership that King David pledged to live by.
- Enjoin your students to implement these principles in their smaller, more intimate circles of influence.
- Assure class members that God will sustain and deliver the oppressed and the disadvantaged.
- Emphasize the point that God calls us to be partners in His efforts.
- Inspire class members to move toward imitating God.
- Ultimately, as we journey toward understanding the themes of justice and mercy, seek with your class to answer the questions: Why do we, and the church, exist?
Part II: Commentary

Scripture: King David was the only person God described as “a man after mine own heart” (Acts 13:22). Yet, David was not without sin. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, sinning against her greatly, then arranged to have Uriah, her husband, killed. In response, the prophet Nathan approached the king with a convicting story of the rich man who took a poor man’s only lamb.

David’s verdict in 2 Samuel 12:5, 6 to Nathan’s parable was that the man should die and restore fourfold what he had extorted by stealing. When David was confronted with the fact that he was the extortioner, he did not excuse himself. His response was simple and straightforward: “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:13).

David repented deeply. As a consequence, God extended to him a mercy equally deep, for David himself did not have to die for his own sin and God allowed him to continue to reign over Israel. But the mercy that God extended to David did not eliminate the repercussions that included the death of four of his sons.1

In the aftermath of his fall and subsequent contrition, David wrote Psalm 51, one of his most moving poems. It expresses his full remorse and repentance. David asked God to forgive him and to extend mercy to him: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness. . . . For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me” (Ps. 51:1–3).

Discuss With Your Class: Why would God show so much mercy to King David and still allow the terrible consequences of his sins to happen? How do mercy and justice relate to each other?

Scripture and Illustration: “Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. . . . Arise, O God, judge the earth” (Ps. 82:4, 8).

The Psalms reveal that people struggle to make sense of injustice and inequity in the world (see, for example, Psalm 73). Numerous, continuous, and senseless tragedies all over the world cause people to ask questions such as: Why do innocent people suffer at the hands of evil people? Why does God not prevent the violence from happening? When will the oppression and violence, which only seem to increase in intensity and frequency, ever end?

In the United States alone three exceptionally brutal mass shootings

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1 (1) Infant son (2 Sam. 12:13–19), died seven days after his birth; (2) Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28, 29), murdered at the command of his half-brother Absalom; (3) Absalom (2 Sam. 18:9–15), killed by Joab; (4) Adonijah (1 Kings 2:19–25), executed on Solomon’s orders.
rocked the nation within 17 months, from late spring 2016 to the autumn of 2017, as follows:

• November 5, 2017—A gunman walked into a worship service in a small church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and shot and killed 26 people, leaving 20 seriously wounded.

• October 1, 2017—in Las Vegas, Nevada, a gunman opened fire from his hotel room on the 32nd floor. He shot at a large crowd of people at an outdoor concert, leaving 58 dead and over 500 injured. This crime constituted the deadliest mass shooting committed by one individual in the United States.

• June 12, 2016—A gunman killed 49 people and wounded over 50 others at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

Invite class members to read Psalm 73:2–16 and Psalm 82 aloud. What do these psalms teach us about the harsh reality of human oppression and injustice in this world?

End your discussion by reading the rest of Psalm 73. In verse 17, the psalmist says that he did not understand why the wicked prospered “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end” (Ps. 73:17). How does the sanctuary doctrine, with its teaching of a judgment in which we must face our life’s record, help put this life, with its injustice and inequity, in the proper perspective? Read also 1 Corinthians 4:5 and 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10. How do these verses, along with Psalm 73, help you with your questions about the justice of God and the injustice in this world? (For further study, read Habakkuk.)

Illustration: Psalm 146:7–9 describes the activities of our God. As His people, we are invited to join Him in His work.

In light of this psalm, consider the following: a local pastor held a retreat every year for church leaders. At the most recent retreat, they wrestled with two questions:

1. Where is God active in our community?

2. Where, and how, does God want us to join Him?

If your class is large enough, break into smaller groups to respond to the pastor’s two questions. How can your class join God in what He is already doing in your community through other people and organizations? On a board, if available, list the good things that are happening in your church’s community. Ask your class how their church can join and support the good things that already are happening. Begin to lay plans. If you do not know what is transpiring in your community, make appointments to visit community leaders. Ask them about what is happening and how your church can help.
**Illustration:** As a train was leaving a large railroad station, the conductor began making his rounds to take tickets. He looked at the ticket of the first passenger and said, “Friend, I think you’re on the wrong train!” The man replied, “But the ticket agent told me this was my train.” The conductor decided to check with the ticket agent, and he discovered that he was on the wrong train!^2^ 

**Discuss With Your Class:** When a leader is lost, how can followers stay on the right track? In the aftermath of his sin against Bathsheba, how did King David stay on the right track, ruling with justice and mercy? Review Psalm 101 with your class.

**Scripture:** Drawing from John Stott, one advocate for justice and mercy lays out a portrait of the poor as found in the book of Proverbs. The portrait of the poor is based on three verses in Proverbs: Proverbs 14:31, 29:7, and 31:8. If possible, a few days ahead of time, assign each one of these three passages to different class members; ask them to prepare some comments on what their verse means to them. Invite them to share their comments with the rest of the class.

1. Proverbs 14:31—“He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor.”

   Our attitude about the poor is reflected in our attitude about God. Our attitude about God, in turn, is reflected in our attitude toward the poor. *The poor have God-given dignity, and are of inestimable value.* Take a paper money bill that has become worn and show it to the class. Ask them, “How much is the worn bill worth? Is it worth any less because it is creased and faded?”

2. Proverbs 29:7 *(EXB)*—“Good [Righteous] people care [know] about justice for [the rights of] the poor, but the wicked are not concerned [do not understand].”

   Read this verse together, putting emphasis first on good (righteous) people, then on care, and then on justice. Discuss what each highlighted word looks like in action. How does this verse clarify what it means to be righteous or wicked?

   Read 2 Corinthians 8:13, 14 in class. Notice: equality appears twice. The Greek word *isoteis* is used here for equality, and can mean *fairness or justice—which, in turn, must be applied to all people.* Show a picture of the scales of justice to illustrate the concept: equality = justice.

3. Proverbs 31:8 *(NLT)*—“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.” The King James Version poignantly renders the last part of this verse as: “in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction.”

   These verses clearly portray the third feature of the biblical portrait of the poor: *The poor are powerless and voiceless.* How can we, and our church,

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speak up for the powerless and voiceless? What place does advocacy in behalf of the poor and oppressed have in the mission of the church? Note how the Holy Spirit and Jesus play the role of Advocate in behalf of powerless humanity. See John 14:26 and 1 John 2:1. The Greek word *paráklētos* in John 14:26 is sometimes translated Advocate, Comforter, or Helper. Advocacy is a characteristic of God, and His Church should reflect His character.

**Part III: Life Application**

As you move to the application part of your class’s lesson study, here are two stories to share and apply:

1. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was a courageous advocate for justice and mercy and was imprisoned as a result. He wrote from prison: “Here and there people flee from public altercation into the sanctuary of private *virtuousness*. But anyone who does this must shut his mouth and his eyes to the injustice around him.”

   Ask Your Class: What does the above statement by Bonhoeffer mean to you? What implications does it have for living as an Adventist Christian where there is injustice and a lack of mercy?

2. **Alex** and several men in his church took turns spending the night at a homeless shelter. That is where Alex met Greg. Greg had just been released from prison and said, “Forgive me if I don’t smile a lot; I’m missing a tooth from a jailhouse fight.” The Holy Spirit nudged Alex to do something about Greg’s smile. Alex told Greg’s story to his Sabbath School class and to a compassionate dentist in the congregation. The generosity of the class and of the dentist resolved Greg’s problem. Greg tearfully said, “I don’t want to mess up my new look, so I’m not using tobacco anymore.” Then he added to his friend, “Look Alex! I’ve got my smile back.” Alex concluded that there is a relationship between Sabbath School and compassion. How can your class cause a story like that to happen?

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The Cry of the Prophets

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: 1 Sam. 8:10–18, Amos 5:10–15, Mic. 6:8, Gen. 19:1–13, Ezek. 16:49, Isa. 1:15–23.

Memory Text: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NKJV).

The Old Testament prophets are among the most interesting characters in the Bible. Their strident voices, their bold messages, their sense of grief, anger, and outrage, and the occasional performances of their messages made them people who couldn’t be ignored, even if they might not have always been comfortable to be around.

Sent primarily to Israel and Judah, they were beckoning the chosen people back to faithfulness to God. The people and their leaders were too easily swept up by the idols and lifestyles of the surrounding nations. It was the prophets’ thankless task to urge them to repent, sometimes by reminding them of God’s love for them and His past action on their behalf and sometimes by warning of the consequences if they continued to walk away from God.

As we will see, too, that among the sins and evils that they warned the leaders and people against, one of the biggest was the oppression of the poor, the needy, the helpless among them. Yes, worshiping idols was bad; yes, following false religious practices was bad; but, yes, taking advantage of the weak and poor was worthy of condemnation, as well.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 3.
The Recurring Call to Justice

Despite God’s clearly detailed plan for the Israelite nation, the Israelite people rarely lived up to their calling. Not many generations after they were established in the land, they asked Samuel, the prophet and judge, to appoint a king to lead their nation, “‘such as all the other nations have’” (1 Sam. 8:5, NIV).

Read 1 Samuel 8:10–18. What was Samuel’s warning to the people in response to their request for a king?

Samuel recognized this as a step toward being like the other nations in other ways, as well. While Samuel sought to counsel the first king, Saul, it was not long before his prophecy began to become reality. Even at the height of the Israelite kingdom, David and Solomon did not escape the temptations, corruption, and excesses of their power.

Throughout the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah, one of God’s responses was to send prophets to speak His will and to remind the Israelite leaders and people of their God-given responsibilities to the forgotten members of their society.

In the writings of the Hebrew prophets, we see a continuing and recurring call to live justly and to do justice in society. Confronting the unfaithfulness of Israel and its leaders, the prophets were a regular and urgent voice for the voiceless, particularly those who were hurt by Israel’s failure to follow God’s will.

Reflecting on the passion of the Old Testament prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel contrasts our complacency with their urgent calls for justice: “The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. . . . Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.”—The Prophets (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 3, 4.

What these prophets offer us is an insight into the heart and mind of God. Speaking on behalf of God, they can help us see the injustice and suffering of our world through God’s tear-filled eyes. But this passion is also a call to action, to work with God to relieve and remedy the oppression and sorrow of those around us.

How do we sometimes seek to be like “all the other nations” in ways that might be harmful to us and others?
Amos

“‘I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel” ’” (Amos 7:14, 15, NIV).

Amos was quite open in admitting his lack of qualifications for being a prophet, but as he presents his message to the Israelite nation, he shows an obvious ability to draw his hearers into what he wants to tell them. He begins on a popular note, listing off the surrounding nations—Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, and Moab—and detailing their crimes, outrages, and atrocities for which God will punish them (see Amos 1:3–2:3). It is easy to imagine the Israelites applauding these indictments of their enemies, particularly as many of the crimes of these nations had been directed against the Israelites themselves.

Then Amos moves a little closer to home, declaring God’s judgment against the people of Judah, Israel’s southern neighbors in the now-separated kingdoms. Speaking on behalf of God, Amos cites their rejection of God, their disobedience to His commands, and the punishments that would come to them (see Amos 2:4, 5). Again, we can imagine the people in the northern kingdom applauding as Amos points out the wrongdoing of those around them.

But then Amos turns on his audience. The rest of the book focuses on Israel’s evil, idolatry, injustice, and repeated failures in the sight of God.

Read Amos 3:9–11; 4:1, 2; 5:10–15; and 8:4–6. What sins is Amos warning against?

While Amos is not diplomatic in his language and his warnings are those of doom, his message is seasoned with entreaties to turn back to their God. This will include a renewal of their sense of justice and care for the poor among them: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24, NIV). The last few verses of Amos’ prophecy point to a future restoration for God’s people (see Amos 9:11–15): “In their hour of deepest apostasy and greatest need, God’s message to them was one of forgiveness and hope.”—Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, p. 283.

Are there times we need to be prepared to speak harshly to correct wrong? How do we discern when such language might be appropriate?
Micah

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8, NKJV). What are ways, right now, that you can live out these words?

Micah 6:8 is perhaps one of the best-known texts in Scripture. Yet, like many of the verses we make into slogans or “posters,” we are probably less familiar with the context of the verse than we might admit.

Read Micah 2:8–11 and 3:8–12. What were the people doing that Micah condemned?

The reign of Ahaz as king in Judah saw God’s people reach a new low in the history and spirituality of their nation. Idolatry and its various evil practices were increasing. At the same time, as other prophets of the time also noted, the poor continued to be exploited and preyed upon.

Micah is no less a prophet of doom than were his contemporaries. Most of his first three chapters express God’s anger and sorrow at the evil His people had done, as well as the destruction that was coming their way.

But God had not given up on His people. Even the strident voices and harsh messages of the prophets were an indication of God’s continued interest in His people. He gave them warnings because of His love and care for them. He longed to forgive and restore them. He would not stay angry forever (see Mic. 7:18–20).

Such is the context of the well-known “formula”—act justly, love mercy, walk humbly. It might sound simple, but living such a faith in practical ways is much more challenging, especially when to do so seems so out of step with the surrounding society. Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly requires courage and perseverance when others profit from injustice, scoff at mercy, and ride proudly. Yet, we don’t do this alone; when we act this way, we are walking with our God.

What is the link between doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly before God?
Ezekiel

If we were to ask a group of Christians about the “sins of Sodom,” chances are many would launch into a description of its various sexual sins and other forms of depravity. After all, Genesis 19:1–13 does depict a sick and warped society more than ripe for destruction.

Interestingly enough, though, the answer is more complicated than just that. Consider Ezekiel’s description: “’Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy’” (Ezek. 16:49, NIV). Though clearly the Lord was not going to overlook the other forms of depravity found in the city, Ezekiel’s focus here was on economic injustice and a lack of care for those in need.

Could it be that, in the eyes of God, these economic sins were just as bad as the sexual ones?

Coming after the time of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, Ezekiel’s early prophecies sound a similar note of warning of the coming destruction. However, after Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians and its people are taken captive, Ezekiel’s focus shifts more fully to God’s promises of restoration.

Read Ezekiel 34:2–4, 7–16. Compare God’s assessment of the corrupt leaders of Israel with His own shepherding. How does their treatment of the weakest “sheep” contrast with His methods?

Even as bad as they have been, so as to be compared to Sodom, the Lord still was reaching out to them in hopes of turning them away from their wickedness. In God’s renewed plan for His people, they would be back in their land, Jerusalem would be restored, and the temple would be rebuilt. The festivals God gave would again be celebrated, and the land would again be divided equally among the people as their inheritance (see Ezek. 47:13–48:29). It seems obvious that God’s intention was that His plan for His people, as first given to Moses and the people of Israel after their rescue from Egypt, would be restarted with the return of His people from captivity. This included concern for the weakest members of society, as well as those who might be considered outsiders.

How important is it to you that our God is a God who offers second chances—and more—even to His people who have done wrong after having had the chance to make better choices?
Isaiah

Read Isaiah 1:15–23; 3:13–15; and 5:7, 8. How would you describe the prophet’s response to what he observes in society around him?

Isaiah’s opening sermon—the first five chapters—is a mix of scathing criticism of the kind of society God’s people had become, warnings of impending judgment in response to their rejection of God and continued wrongdoing, and offers of hope if the people would turn back to God and reform their lives and society. But perhaps the strongest emotion that comes through his words is a sense of grief. Based on his understanding of who God is and what He wants for His people, the prophet is mourning what has been lost, the countless forgotten people who are being hurt, and the judgment that is to come on the nation.

Isaiah continues this pattern through his prophetic ministry. He urges the people to remember what God has done for them. He also offers these people the hope of what God wants to do for them in the future. Thus, they should seek the Lord now, for this renewed relationship with Him will include repenting of their current wrongdoing and changing the way that they treat others.

In chapters 58 and 59, Isaiah specifically returns to the concern for justice. He again describes a society in which “justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter” (Isa. 59:14, NIV). But he also affirms that God is aware of it and that God will rescue His people—the “‘Redeemer will come’” (Isa. 59:20, NIV).

Throughout the book of Isaiah, a significant part of the prophet’s attention is given to proclaiming the coming Messiah, one who would ultimately reestablish God’s reign on earth and would bring justice, mercy, healing, and restoration with Him.

Read Isaiah 9:6, 7; 11:1–5; 42:1–7; and 53:4–6. How do these prophecies fit with what you understand of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus? What do these prophecies suggest about the purpose of His coming to this world?

“Against the marked oppression, the flagrant injustice, the unwonted luxury and extravagance, the shameless feasting and drunkenness, the gross licentiousness and debauchery, of their age, the prophets lifted their voices; but in vain were their protests, in vain their denunciation of sin.”—Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, p. 282.

For Isaiah, “the outlook was particularly discouraging as regards the social conditions of the people. In their desire for gain, men were adding house to house and field to field. . . . Justice was perverted, and no pity was shown the poor. . . . Even the magistrates, whose duty it was to protect the helpless, turned a deaf ear to the cries of the poor and needy, the widows and the fatherless. . . .

“In the face of such conditions it is not surprising that when, during the last year of Uzziah’s reign, Isaiah was called to bear to Judah God’s messages of warning and reproof, he shrank from the responsibility. He well knew that he would encounter obstinate resistance.”—Pages 306, 307.

“These plain utterances of the prophets . . . should be received by us as the voice of God to every soul. We should lose no opportunity of performing deeds of mercy, of tender forethought and Christian courtesy, for the burdened and the oppressed.”—Page 327.

Discussion Questions:

1. We often understand the function of prophecy as predicting the future. How does the recognition of the Old Testament prophets’ focus on the world in which they lived change your perception of the role of a prophet?

2. The lives and message of the prophets demonstrate how difficult and dangerous it can be to stand up for truth. Why do you believe they did what they did and spoke in the way they did?

3. In the writings of the prophets, God seems to alternate between being angry and showing deep concern for His people. How do you fit together these two aspects of God’s character?

Summary: The Old Testament prophets were passionate and often angry and upset defenders of the way and will of God to their people. Reflecting the expressed concern of God Himself, this passion included a strong focus on justice for the poor and oppressed. The prophets’ calls to return to God included putting an end to injustice, something God also promised to do in His visions for a better future for His people.
Revenge and Forgiveness

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

The long blade of the machete glinted as 21-year-old Wilder swung it over his head.

His eyes flashed with anger. He aimed for his stepfather’s neck.

At that moment, his stepfather, Alberto Rui Quaresma, raised his arm, and the blade sliced deeply into his forearm.

Alberto spent the next 24 days in the hospital in São Tomé, capital of the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe off the West African coast. He underwent surgery, and doctors put a metal plate in his arm. He angrily plotted revenge. He would get a machete and cut Wilder’s arm too.

After his biological father pulled some connections, Wilder wasn’t arrested. He had attacked his stepfather over a scolding.

Lying in the hospital bed, Alberto noticed that a woman, Maria Rita, came every day to visit her brother, injured in a motorcycle accident, in the same room. He admired her kindness to her brother and announced one day, “I have fallen in love with you.”

“No,” Maria Rita replied. “I don’t want to have a husband. All men should be thrown in the fire.”

Her reaction surprised Alberto, who realized that she was carrying hurt from a past relationship. He could understand. At the age of 44, he had had three common-law wives, and the son of his most recent wife had tried to kill him.

Maria Rita didn’t want to discuss marriage. She changed the subject to God. “God is love, and God can change your life and make you a new creation,” she said. “God will help you to forget what happened and forgive that boy.”

After being released from the hospital, Alberto saw Maria Rita occasionally on the street. One day she invited him to attend a 40-day revival meeting at her Seventh-day Adventist church.

Alberto was fascinated by the presentations and was baptized five months later. Later, he proposed to Maria Rita, and she accepted.

Today, Alberto, pictured below, is 50 and works as foreman at a cement warehouse. He also is the treasurer, stewardship director, and Sabbath School teacher at his local church.

He is praying for an opportunity to share with Wilder how God changed his life. The two sometimes meet on the street and exchange greetings.

He laughed when reminded that Wilder tried to kill him the last time they had a serious conversation.

“I’m not worried because God is with me,” he said.
Part I: Overview

Old Testament prophets often saw themselves as watchmen on the walls of Zion. They were jealous for the well-being of God’s people and sought to warn them of danger from without and within. They were called by God to cry out for justice and to declare God’s judgments. This duty was serious business for prophets such as Ezekiel, whose marching orders were very clear: “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou has delivered thy soul” (Ezek. 3:17–19).

In this lesson, we become aware of God’s persistence in calling His people to justice. The lesson opens our eyes to social and spiritual reforms advocated by various prophets, such as: (1) the shepherd-prophet Amos, who calls his people to justice and righteousness; (2) Micah, whose message to Ahaz is given during a time when the kingdom reaches an all-time low in justice; (3) Ezekiel, who speaks to the exiles in Babylon; and (4) Isaiah, who calls God’s people to live out the Messianic hope for a just nation. Where are the voices calling for justice and mercy today?

Teacher’s Aim:
Challenge your class to join the voices still calling for justice today in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration: There has rarely been a need for advocates of justice as there was during the time of American slavery and the aftermath of the Civil War in America. Adventism had its opportunity to show whether it would rise to the challenges of that time and start getting serious about ministry to their black brothers and sisters. Delbert Baker, in his series In Search of Roots: Adventist African Americans, shares a turning point in Adventist history on the subject:

“The decisive turning point in the history of the church’s Black work was the year 1892, when Ellen White presented a historic message:
‘Our Duty to the Colored People.’ It was delivered to the delegates of the twenty-ninth General Conference session, held in Battle Creek, Michigan. Ellen White insisted that after years of neglect, the church could not go on ignoring its charge to the Black race without encouraging God’s increasing displeasure. Fully aware of the confrontational content of her message, she conceded, ‘I know that which I now speak will bring me into conflict. This I do not covet, for the conflict has seemed to be continuous of late years; but I do not mean to live a coward or die a coward, leaving my work undone. I must follow in my Master’s footsteps.’

Discuss: It is interesting that Ellen White identifies cowardice and by implication, courage, as a dynamic of biblical justice. What biblical justice issues require “courage” today, in your local context?

Scripture: The Bible has an “others’ orientation.” This principle may be seen in the work done by the biblical prophets. The prophets were advocates. They were not preoccupied with pleading their own cases. Instead, they pled, persuaded, prayed, and protested on behalf of others. They spoke in behalf of those who did not have a voice or who were suppressed when they rightfully protested. Advocacy aims to increase the welfare and quality of life of humanity.

Sometimes church members avoid engagement in protesting and advocacy for fear of being seen as too political. Read Jeremiah 22:1–3, 13–17. Jeremiah, yet another advocacy prophet, interceded in behalf of the oppressed before the government leaders of his day. Next, read the quote by Jan Paulsen and discuss its implications.

“There is a vast difference between seeking a voice in the public discourse, and seeking to wield political power. As a church—and individuals—we have not only the right but the obligation, to be a moral voice in society; to speak clearly and eloquently on that which touches our values. Human rights, religious freedom, public health, poverty, and injustice—these are some of the areas in which we have a God-given responsibility to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves.”

Scripture: Invite class members to take turns reading these additional verses from Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. How are the passages related to advocacy? Ideas for teacher’s comments are in parentheses.

1. Amos 5:21–24. (Even though God created the religious feasts and rituals referred to in these verses from Amos, God is even more interested in how we treat the people around us whom He created

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in His image. In contrast, what does God love and delight in? See Isa. 61:8, Jer. 9:24.)

2. Micah 6:1–5. (In these verses, the prophet pleads the Lord’s case, as His advocate, in a court scene before the hills and mountains, which served as the witnesses [Mic. 6:1, 2]. When God gave His Moral Law [Exodus 20], the hills and mountains also were present. In Micah 6:6, 7, we read Micah’s rhetorical questions on behalf of the people. Find an answer to these rhetorical questions in 1 Samuel 15:22. Then read Micah 6:8, a point which God’s people missed. Their spiritual blindness led them to offer to God everything except the one thing He really wanted—commitment from the heart that translated into just behavior [see Deut. 10:12–19 and Matt. 22:37–39]. For more insights into the problem with putting shallow religiosity before true spiritual commitment, see The Desire of Ages, p. 396.)

3. Ezekiel 16:49–52. (Compared with Judah, the cities of Sodom and Samaria appeared more innocent. Usually we are more concerned about sins of commission. Matthew 25:41–46 makes it clear that sins of omission of simple acts of love do not work out well in the final judgment. “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” [James 4:17].)

4. Isaiah 59:2–4, 8, 9, 14–16. (God says that His people’s iniquities and sins have separated them from Him. Their sin included a dearth of justice in their land, such as oppression of the poor. God was appalled that there was no one to intercede and speak up regarding this sin [Isa. 59:16]. Sin is transgression of God’s law of love and justice [1 John 3:4].)

Discuss: In what specific ways can we join the prophets and wholeheartedly and wholistically help our church to fulfill its mission, part of which includes advocacy for the poor (Isa. 59:16)?

Scripture: The Micah 6:8 principles take us beyond the mere forms of worship (burnt offerings, etc.) to three principles that form the heart of “what is good”: (1) “do justly,” (2) “love mercy,” and (3) “walk humbly with your God.” The first two principles are about horizontal human-to-human relationship, and the third one deals with the vertical human-to-God relationship. Walking humbly with our God will improve our horizontal

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human-to-human relationships, for He will help us reflect His just and merciful character to humanity.

**Illustration:** British preacher William E. Sangster asks the question, “Can one be good and not religious—or religious and not good?” Some people claim that they are good and decent without religion. For example, they remind us to look at all the unselfish and just actions they do and claim that all this goodness is accomplished without a weekly diet of worship and sermons. Really, can religion and morality be torn asunder?

Sangster, in one of his sermons, entitled “Good Without God,” a sermon on Micah 6:8, points out that people who are quoted as being “good without God” are often, in a special sense, a product of the faith that they have chosen to despise. The very foundation of their character was constructed under direct Christian influence. One of many examples is the life of Sir Samuel Romilly, who rejected the Christian faith but did a remarkable work of humanizing the national prison codes in England. He was indeed a good man, but not a religious one. However, his biographer makes it clear that he was the grandson of Huguenot refugees, who choose to flee to a strange land rather than to give up their faith in God. He grew up in a home where Christ was put first, and his high moral character that advocated for justice and mercy ran back to those early years.

**Part III: Life Application**

Over and over, Ellen G. White’s prophetic voice is clear on the subject of justice. Read this quote in class: “Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be. Every individual exerts an influence in society.” — *The Advent Review and Sabbath and Herald*, October 15, 1914.

Discuss some realistic and intentional steps that each class member can take to fulfill God’s calling for them to be proactive and “exert an influence in society.”

Throughout Adventist Church history, there has been an emphasis on the prophet’s eschatological role. At the same time, Scripture demonstrates another important dimension of the ministry of the prophets and, by extension, of the church: God’s calling of His people back to His socio-economic and ethical principles. Jesus further elaborates upon these

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principles in Matthew 5:7–48, which also are summarized in Matthew 22:35–40 and Luke 10:27.

**Discuss With Your Class:** How can we balance the important role of proclamation about future events before the second advent of Jesus with calling people back to God-given principles of helping the needy, based on the law and prophets and modeled by the life and ministry of the greatest Prophet of all—Jesus Christ? Not only that, how can we embody these principles in our existence as a church? Invite class members to share how they personally proclaim and live this important, and sometimes under-emphasized, part of the “everlasting gospel,” along with proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ second coming.

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**Notes**
**TOTAL MEMBER INVOLVEMENT TIME**

**What is Total Member Involvement?**

- Total Member Involvement (TMI) is a full-scale, world-church evangelistic thrust that involves every member, every church, every administrative entity, every type of public outreach ministry, as well as personal and institutional outreach.

- It is a calendar-driven, intentional soul-winning plan that discovers the needs of families, friends, and neighbors. Then it shares how God fulfills every need, resulting in church planting and church growth, with a focus on retaining, preaching, sharing, and discipling.

**HOW TO IMPLEMENT TMI TIME IN SABBATH SCHOOL**

*Dedicate the first 15 minutes* of each lesson to plan, pray and share:

- **TMI IN-REACH:** Plan to visit, pray, care for missing or hurt members, and distribute territory assignments. Pray and discuss ways to minister to the needs of church families, inactive members, youth, women and men, and various ways to get the church family involved.

- **TMI OUT-REACH:** Pray and discuss ways of reaching your community, city, and world, fulfilling the Gospel Commission by sowing, reaping, and keeping. Involve all ministries in the church as you plan short-term and long-term soul-winning projects. TMI is about intentional acts of kindness. Here are some practical ways to become personally involved: 1. Develop the habit of finding needs in your community. 2. Make plans to address those needs. 3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

- **TMI UP-REACH:** Lesson Study. Encourage members to engage in individual Bible study—make study of the Bible in Sabbath School participatory. Study for transformation, not information.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TMI</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>15 min.*</td>
<td>Pray, plan, organize for action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
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<td>Care for missing members.</td>
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<td>World Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesson Study</td>
<td>45 min.*</td>
<td>Involve everyone in the study of the lesson.</td>
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<td>Ask questions. Highlight key texts.</td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>Plan lunch for the class after worship.</td>
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<td>THEN GO OUT AND REACH SOMEONE!</td>
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*Adjust times as necessary.*
It’s not enough to stay inside the walls of a church and shout at the community, “Come and see!” Come and see what? We need to take Christ’s love to the places where people are—at the mall, supermarkets, laundromats, schools, places of work, restaurants, coffee shops, and so forth. People are not coming to us; we have to go to them!

Are you ready to transform your world?
SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** Ps. 115:1–8, Deut. 10:17–22, Ps. 101:1, Isa. 1:10–17, Isaiah 58, Mark 12:38–40.

**Memory Text:** “‘Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?’” (Isaiah 58:6, 7, NKJV).

Even a quick reading of the Old Testament prophets alerts us to their concerns about the mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. The prophets and the God for whom they spoke were outraged about what they saw being done in all the surrounding nations (see, for example, Amos 1 and 2). But they also had a particular sense of anger and grief at the acts of iniquity done by God’s people themselves, those who had been the recipients of so many divine blessings. Given their history, as well as their God-given laws, these people should have known better. Unfortunately, that wasn’t always the case, and prophets had a lot to say about this sad state of events.

It is interesting to discover, too, that many of the best-known statements concerning justice and injustice from the Old Testament prophets are actually given in the context of instructions about worship. As we will see, true worship is not just something that happens during a religious ritual. True worship also is about living a life that shares God’s concerns for the well-being of others and that seeks to lift up those who have been downtrodden and forgotten.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 10.
Idolatry and Oppression

Soon after God led the people of Israel out of Egypt, He met with them at Mount Sinai, giving them the Ten Commandments in written form, including the first two commandments about not worshiping other gods and not making idols (see Exod. 20:2–6). In response, the people promised to do everything they had been commanded and to live as His people (see Exod. 24:1–13).

But then Moses was gone up the mountain and stayed there for almost six weeks and the people began to wonder what had become of him. Under pressure from the mob, Aaron made a golden calf and led the people in making sacrifices before it, after which “they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry” (Exod. 32:6, NIV). Both the Lord and Moses were outraged at how quickly the people had turned away from God to idol worship—and it seemed that it was only Moses’ intercession that saved Israel from its deserved punishment (see Exod. 32:30–34).

Idolatry, however, was a temptation God’s people fell into way too often. The history of the kings of Israel and Judah is punctuated by periods of idolatry, which include the outrageous acts some of the kings led their people to commit in the worship of these gods. Such unfaithfulness was a recurring focus of the prophets God sent in order to call the people back to Him. Often, too, amid the calls for revival and reformation were calls for better treatment of the poor, the needy, and the helpless among them.

Read Psalm 115:1–8. What crucial point is the author making there?

It is a human tendency that we become like the thing or person we worship and focus on. So, it was only natural that concern for others and for justice would diminish when God’s people turned from worshiping a God of justice to worshiping the false gods of the surrounding nations, who were often styled as beings of war or fertility. When they chose other gods, the people changed their attitude in a lot of things, including how they treated others. Had they been faithful to the Lord, they would have shared His concern for those in need among them.

Dwell more on this idea of becoming like what we worship. How do we see contemporary manifestations of this principle?

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____________________________________________________
A Reason to Worship

Throughout the Bible, God’s people are urged to worship God, but we also are repeatedly offered reasons for doing so. We are told to worship Him because of who He is, what He has done, and because of His many attributes. Among these are His goodness, justice, and mercy. When we are reminded of what God is like, what He has done for us (especially in the cross of Christ), and what He promises to do, none of us should ever be without reason to worship and praise God.

*Read* Deuteronomy 10:17–22, Psalm 101:1, 146:5–10, Isaiah 5:16, and 61:11. What are the motivations for worship and praising God given in these verses?

____________________________________________________
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Such reasons for worship were not new to God’s people. Some of the most enthusiastic times of worship of the newly freed Israelites happened in response to the obvious intervention of God on their behalf. For example, after being brought out of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam led the people in singing praise to God for what they had just seen and been rescued from (*see Exodus* 15).

God’s justice and mercy, as revealed in such events, were not to be forgotten. As the people kept these stories alive by retelling them regularly, the acts and justice of God continued to be an inspiration for their worship years later and in following generations. One example of this retelling and worship is recorded in Deuteronomy 10:17–22.

God’s justice is, first, simply part of who He is, a core component of His essential character. “It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice” (*Job 34:12, NIV*). God is just and is concerned with justice—and that is a reason to worship and praise Him.

Second, God’s justice is seen in His just and righteous acts on behalf of His people and on behalf of all who are poor and oppressed. His justice is never merely a description of His character. Rather, the Bible portrays a God who “heard the cry of the needy” (*Job 34:28, NIV*) and is active and anxious to right the wrongs that are so obvious in our world. Ultimately, this will be fully realized in God’s final judgment and His re-creation of the world.

If ancient Israel had reason to praise the Lord, how much more so do we, after the Cross, have reasons to praise Him?
Religious Oppressors

During the better times of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the people would return to the temple and the worship of God, although even then, their worship was often mixed with inroads from idolatry and the religions of the surrounding nations. But according to the prophets, even their best attempts at religion were not enough to turn them from the evils perpetrated in the land in their daily lives. And no matter how hard they worked at being religious through their rituals of worship, the music of their hymns could not drown out the cries of the poor and oppressed.

Amos described the people of his day as those who “trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land” (Amos 8:4, NIV). He saw their desire to get done with their rituals so they could reopen the market and get back to their dishonest trade, that of “buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 8:6, NIV).

Read Isaiah 1:10–17, Amos 5:21–24, and Micah 6:6–8. What was the Lord telling these religious people about their rituals?

Through His prophets, God uses strong language to ridicule religion and worship that is disconnected from and in contrast with the suffering and oppression of those around them. In Amos 5:21–24 (NIV), we read of God saying that He “hates,” “despises,” and is generally disgusted by their worship. Their gatherings are described as a “stench,” and their offerings and music are dismissed as less than worthless.

In Micah 6, we see a series of increasingly inflated, even mock- ing, suggestions as to how they can most appropriately worship God. The prophet mockingly offers the suggestion of burnt offerings, then increases the offering to “thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil” (Mic. 6:7, NIV) before going to the horrific—but not unknown—extreme of suggesting sacrificing his firstborn child to gain God’s favor and forgiveness.

In the end, though, what the Lord truly wanted for them was to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [their] God” (Mic. 6:8, NIV).

Have you ever found yourself guilty of being more concerned about religious forms and rituals than about helping those in need right around you? What did you learn from that experience?
A Way to Worship

In their explanation of the relationship between worship and justice, there is another step urged by the prophets: that an active concern for relieving the poor and oppressed and helping those in need is an important part of worship itself. Isaiah 58 is one chapter that makes this link obvious.

Read Isaiah 58. What has gone wrong in the relationship between God and His people as described in the early part of this chapter?

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.

Such activities are not presented as the only way to worship, but God does urge them as a way to worship—and a form of worship that might be preferable to some of the people’s more traditional worship practices. As such, worship is not only inwardly focused but something that brings blessing to all those around the worshipers of God. “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, p. 306.

In Isaiah 58:8–12, God promises blessings in response to this form of worship. In effect, God is saying that if the people were to be less focused on themselves, they would find God working with them and through them to bring healing and restoration.

Interestingly, this chapter also connects this kind of worship with a renewal of “delight”-filled Sabbath keeping. We have already considered some of the strong connections between Sabbath and ministry, but these verses include both these activities in this call for the people to revitalize their worship and to discover God’s blessing. Reflecting on these verses, Ellen G. White commented, “Upon those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord is laid the responsibility of doing a work of mercy and benevolence.”—Welfare Ministry, p. 121.
Mercy and Faithfulness

When Jesus was confronted by some of the religious leaders of His day who criticized Him for eating with “sinners,” He quoted the prophet Hosea, telling them to go back to their books and discover what God really meant when He said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13, NIV, quoting Hos. 6:6).

As we will see, Jesus lived a life of caring and service. His interactions with others, His healing miracles, and many of His parables demonstrated and urged that a life lived in such a way was the best way to express true devotion to God. The religious leaders were His greatest critics but also were the target of His harshest criticism. Like the religious people of Isaiah’s day, they believed that they ensured their special relationship with God because of their religious practices, while at the same time they were exploiting the poor and ignoring the needy. Their worship was out of step with their actions, and Jesus was not reserved in His condemnation of such hypocrisy.

Read Mark 12:38–40. Does Jesus’ comment that they “devour widows’ houses” seem out of place in this list, or is that the point Jesus is trying to make? How would you explain why “these shall receive greater damnation”?

Perhaps Jesus’ most frightening sermon—particularly for religious people—is that found in Matthew 23. Not only did Jesus describe their religion as not helping people who are disadvantaged in life, He considered such religion as adding to their burdens. By their actions or at times their lack of action and caring, Jesus said, they “‘shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces’” (Matt. 23:13, NIV).

But echoing the prophets of centuries earlier, Jesus also directly addressed the gap between their serious religious practices and the injustices they condoned and profited from. “‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness’” (Matt. 23:23, NIV). Jesus was quick to add that the religious practices and observances are not wrong in themselves, but they should not take the place of treating others fairly.

How can we avoid the trap of thinking that having and knowing the truth is enough?

“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, pp. 326, 327.

“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, p. 29.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever thought about doing justice and loving mercy as acts of worship? How might this change your approach to caring for others? How might this change your approach to worship?

2. How can we guard against neglecting the “more important matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23, NIV) in our Christian lives, both individually and as a church community? Can you recognize some examples in your own experience where you might have strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel (see Matt. 23:24, NIV)?

3. Why is hypocrisy considered such a sin? Isn’t it better at least to try to look like we are doing good?

4. How does God’s vision and passion for the poor and needy, as expressed through the prophets, change how you view the world? How might you read or hear your local news reports in a different way if you saw and heard with the eyes and ears of a prophet?

Summary: While the prophets were concerned about evil in the land, they were particularly focused on the evil committed by people who claimed and worshiped God as their own. For the prophets and for Jesus, worship is inconsistent with injustice, and such religion is hypocrisy. The real worship that God seeks includes working against oppression and caring for the poor and needy.
Dreams of Jesus

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Susumu Kanai had his first vision of Jesus as he lay in bed at 5:00 A.M. in Osaka, Japan. He had spent some time contemplating life every morning for 12 years in his hometown of 2.6 million people, located 310 miles (500 kilometers) southwest of Tokyo. But this time, he was startled to see a bright light. In the light, he saw a back-lit figure with outstretched arms.

Curious to know more, Susumu searched online and found a photo of the giant Christ the Redeemer statue with outstretched arms in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He concluded that perhaps he had seen Jesus.

A short time later, Susumu had a nighttime dream in which he was seated across from a Man at a table. The Man had His hands on the table and was surrounded by a bright rainbow. When he visited a barbershop several days later, Susumu realized that the Man in the dream was Jesus. Leafing through a book of famous paintings as he waited for a haircut, he saw Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper and recognized Jesus from the dream. The dreams and visions continued. Susumu had a dream that he and seven other men had been captured in a foreign country. He watched as the seven men were killed one by one. When his turn came to die, someone grabbed him from behind and whispered, “I’m of the Coptic religion. Come with me.”

Susumu woke at that moment. He looked up “Coptic” online and was astonished to find a Coptic church located only 35 miles (55 kilometers) away. For the first time he wondered whether he should go to church.

A few mornings later, Susumu had another vision. He saw the words “Gospel of Matthew” run across his mind’s eye from left to right, like a digital advertisement. He didn’t know what the words meant; so, he looked online and learned that Matthew was a book of the Bible. He immediately downloaded an audio version of Matthew and started listening in his car.

At the same time, he asked his landlady, whom he knew was a Christian, where she worshiped. She brought him to the Osaka Center Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Susumu, pictured left, is among dozens of unsolicited guests who showed up at unprecedented evangelistic meetings at 161 sites across Japan in 2018. Church leaders have never seen anything like it in a country where Christians account for only 0.7 percent of the population. “The Holy Spirit is doing something extraordinary in Japan, bringing people to the church and convicting them,” said Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson, who met Susumu. “We need to pray for the latter rain of the Holy Spirit so countries like Japan and many others become completely inundated with the Advent message.”
Part I: Overview

It would stand to reason that those who worship a God of justice, righteousness, and mercy would practice these virtues. But that is not always the case with God’s people. True worship should not be inconsistent with the character of the One being worshiped.

In this lesson, we note that when God’s people turned to idol worship their concern for others was lost. We are encouraged to consider seriously the fact that worship of Jehovah includes a covenant relationship in which He works through His followers to demonstrate His values, among which are mercy and selfless service for the oppressed. We are reminded that religious sacrifice and routine, as well as heartless and meaningless offerings, are no substitute for mercy and justice toward those less fortunate. Furthermore, in studying the message in Isaiah 58, we learn that God defines the true fast as selfless service to “loose the chains of injustice,” feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, and clothe the naked. He will not hear prayers that arise from self-centered worship. He will not approve of His people dragging self-centered worship into the Sabbath. Looking at His example, we become aware of Jesus’ ultimate concern that the worship of His followers will result in a passion for meeting the needs of others.

Teacher’s Aim:

Explore with your class the meaning of “worship integrity,” which suggests that our lives must match what we know in order to be true to God. Thus, we must worship in spirit and in truth.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration: Hurricane Irene struck the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States with fury in late August 2011. After Irene left a path of destruction in the state of New Jersey, members of a nearby Seventh-day Adventist Church distributed relief goods for two days to the victims in their neighborhood. Who in your neighborhood needs your help? In the story of the good Samaritan, how does Jesus answer the question: Who is my neighbor (Luke 10:25–37)? It has been said that our neighbor is anyone in our sphere who needs our help. What can your church do to meet the needs of the people in your neighborhood? How does serving the needs of others help to deepen our worship experience with our Creator?
Scripture: In *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, Dwight Nelson explains that Isaiah 58 has two bookends: The Day of Atonement (judgment/cleansing of the sanctuary) at the beginning of the chapter (Isa. 58:1) and the Sabbath at the end of the chapter (Isa. 58:13, 14).

The Feast of Trumpets marked the beginning of 10 days of consecration and repentance before the Day of Atonement. Trumpets were blown on the first day of the seventh month in preparation of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the seventh month. *(See Lev. 23:23–27.)*

“My people” (God’s people) in Old Testament times and today embrace the judgment and the cleansing of the sanctuary.

The second bookend, the Sabbath, is another belief claimed by God’s people. God’s complaint is not about His people’s neglect of either of these important beliefs—the Sabbath or the Day of Atonement. Rather, He vehemently objects to their blatant neglect of what comes in between the two bookends—true “fasting” and showing mercy to the poor and oppressed.

As Isaiah lays out the characteristics of the true fast, two words summarize the issues covered in Isaiah 58: orthodoxy and orthopraxy. These terms can be defined as thus:

- “Orthodoxy [Greek: *orthos*—right, and *doxa*—opinion] thus, ‘right-thinking’ or ‘right-believing’”
- “Orthopraxy [Greek: *orthos*—right, and *praxis*—acts] thus, ‘right practicing’ or ‘right behaving.’”

Another way to define orthodoxy is knowing the truth, and orthopraxy is showing (living, practicing) the truth. Discuss this statement: “The passion of orthodoxy must be wedded to the compassion of orthopraxy.” Then discuss: Where are orthodoxy and orthopraxy shown, or not shown, in Isaiah 58?

Now read the end-time parable in Matthew 25, followed by this commentary on the story from *The Desire of Ages*:

“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, p. 637, emphasis supplied.

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2 Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, pp. 18, 19.
4 Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, p. 29.
How do believing and practicing the right doctrines relate to the final judgment in Matthew 25?

**Scripture and Illustration:** Read John 2:12–16, Matthew 21:12–17, and Isaiah 56:7. In Jesus’ time, the central place of the worship for God’s people had become a place of injustice.

We can use our church buildings and our Sabbath worship services in our churches to foster an atmosphere of hope and help for all people.

Discuss with your class how your worship service can promote hope and compassion. During the last 15 minutes of class time, ask your class members to begin planning a sample worship service that fosters biblical mercy and help for the poor and the oppressed. Below are some ideas to get them started:

- 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.

Evaluate your church. Is it a place of healing or oppression? How so? What can be done?

**Illustration:** If the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* is available, read with your class the words or sing hymn number 581, “When the Church of Jesus.”

Fred Pratt Green wrote this hymn at a time when the church was criticized for being overly concerned with its own life and failing to be engaged with the world around it.³

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Discuss how your local church measures up to the challenge of this hymn.

**Part III: Life Application**

One church has posted a sign at the exit of its parking lot. As the worshipers leave the church lot into the community around the church, they pass this sign that reads: “Service Entrance.”

If our Sabbath “worship service” is true worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23, 24), we will leave the worship place ready to serve God in the way that He calls us in the world. True worship is “of the heart, rather than worship consisting essentially of ritual forms conducted at some particular place.” If “in spirit and in truth” means “in all sincerity, with the highest faculties of the mind and emotions, applying the principles of truth to the heart.” If we have truly worshiped, we will not only be closer to our God but closer to the objects of His tender regard—those who are poor, needy, and suffering. “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.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimony Treasures*, vol. 2, p. 255.

Read Amos 5:21–24, Amos 8:4–6, and Jeremiah 7:4–7. These texts show that church affiliation and attendance are not enough.

**Ask:** Each Sabbath, generally, where is your mind during and after worship? Where is the attention and affection of your mind and heart directed during the remaining Sabbath hours? Discuss intentional ways to convert Sabbath worship into service during the remainder of the week.

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7 Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 940
Notes
Jesus and Those in Need

SABBATH AFTERNOON


Memory Text: “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’” (Luke 4:18, 19, NKJV).

Among other reasons for His incarnation, Jesus came to show us what God is like. He did this by His teaching, by His sacrifice, and by His life; that is, by how He interacted with ordinary people. Many of His actions made immediate, real-world changes in the lives of others.

This aspect of the Messiah’s ministry had been predicted by the Old Testament prophets, by Jesus’ mother, Mary, and even by Jesus Himself when He defined His mission in His first recorded sermon (Luke 4). In addition, the Gospel writers often used the language of the Old Testament prophets to explain what Jesus was doing as they narrated His story. In this way, Jesus’ life was seen clearly in the tradition of these prophets, including their compassion for the poor and oppressed.

The religious leaders, however, perceived Jesus as a threat. In a horrible example of injustice and cruelty, they had Jesus arrested, unjustly tried, and crucified. In Jesus, God knows what injustice feels like—and, in His death, He exposed the horror of evil. In His resurrection, though, He triumphed for life, goodness, and salvation.

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 17.*
Mary’s Song

Imagine the scene: Mary had received a message from the angel Gabriel just a few days earlier. He had told her that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of the Most High. She has not yet told anyone but goes to visit Elizabeth, her older relative, who also is expecting a miracle baby. With spiritual insight Elizabeth recognizes Mary’s news before Mary has a chance to say anything, and together they celebrate the promises and goodness of God.

Read Luke 1:46–55. Notice the mix of praise between what was meant only for her—“‘for the Mighty One has done great things for me’” (Luke 1:49, NIV)—to the much more general. Why should our praise and worship to God include both personal and general emphases?

This is a remarkable song that could fit well among the psalms or in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Mary is overflowing with a sense of wonder and gratitude to God. She has obviously seen God working in her own life, but she also is well aware of the larger implications of God’s plan for her nation and for the human race.

But in Mary’s understanding, not only is God powerful and praise-worthy, He also is merciful and seems to have a particular regard for the humble, the downtrodden, and the poor. The angel had barely left after announcing the “good news” of the impending birth to Mary before she was singing the following: “‘He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty’” (Luke 1:52, 53, NIV).

Right at the beginning of the story of Jesus’ life on earth, He is introduced as a ruler (see Luke 1:43)—but as the ruler of a different kind of kingdom. As many commentators have described it, the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate and establish was to be an “upside-down kingdom” when compared to the usual social ordering of the kingdoms of this world. In the descriptions we have of Jesus’ kingdom, the powerful and wealthy of this world are the least, and the poor and oppressed are liberated, “filled,” and lifted up.

If the church should be an expression of the kingdom of God, how well does the church do in modeling the “upside-down kingdom” that Mary described? How could something such as this be modeled—but without being unfair to the rich and powerful, as well, who also are recipients of Christ’s love?
Jesus’ Mission Statement

Whether it was the prescribed reading for the day or whether Jesus intentionally found the relevant verses (Isa. 61:1, 2) in the scroll He was given to read, it was no coincidence these verses were the text for His first public sermon. Neither is it a coincidence that the story of Jesus’ short sermon in Luke 4:16–21—“ ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Luke 4:21, NIV)—begins Luke’s record of Jesus’ public ministry.

Jesus seemed to be picking up the tune from Mary’s song of an “upside-down kingdom” and beginning to put it into effect in His ministry. Jesus—and Luke in his retelling of Jesus’ story—used the prophecy of Isaiah to explain what Jesus was doing and was about to do, but it also was another way of expressing what Mary had described 30 years earlier. The poor, the hurting, and the oppressed are the special focus and recipients of the good news that Jesus was bringing.

Jesus adopted these verses from Isaiah 61 as His mission statement. His ministry and mission were to be both spiritual and practical, and He would demonstrate that the spiritual and practical are not as far apart as we sometimes assume. For Jesus and His disciples, caring for people physically and practically were at least part of caring for them spiritually.

Read and compare Luke 4:16–21 and 7:18–23. Why do you think Jesus answered in this way? How would you respond to similar questions about the divinity and Messiahship of Jesus?

When Jesus sent out His disciples, the commission He gave to them also was in accord with this mission. While they were to announce that “ ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’ ” (Matt. 10:7, NIV), Jesus’ further instructions to His disciples were to “ ‘heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give’ ” (Matt. 10:8, NIV). Their ministry in His name was to reflect and enact the values and principles of Jesus’ ministry and the kingdom He invited people to. The disciples, too, were to join with Jesus in His mission to lift up the last, the least, and the lost.

How do we balance this work with the crucial message of preaching the three angels’ messages to a lost world, as well? Why must all that we do be related, in one way or another, to the proclaiming of “present truth”? 

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Jesus Heals

The Gospels are peppered with the stories of Jesus’ miracles, particularly those of healing. As Isaiah had prophesied, He healed the blind and released those who had been held captive by disease, sometimes after many years of suffering (see, for example, Mark 5:24–34, John 5:1–15). But He did more than this: He made the lame walk again; He healed lepers—not just by word but by touching them, “unclean” though they were; He confronted demons who were possessing people’s minds and bodies; and He even raised the dead.

We might expect these miracles to have been about attracting crowds and proving His powers to His many doubters and critics. But this was not always the case. Instead, often Jesus gave instructions to the person healed not to tell anyone about it. While it seems the just-healed people were unlikely to follow these instructions and keep their wonderful news to themselves, Jesus was trying to show that His miracles were about something more significant than a spectacle. The ultimate goal, of course, was for the people to receive salvation in Him.

Yet, the healing miracles of Jesus were an expression of His compassion. For example, in the lead-up to the feeding of the 5,000, Matthew narrates, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14:14, NIV). Jesus felt the pain of those who were hurting and did what He could for the people He came into contact with to help them and lift them up.

Read Isaiah’s prophecy in Matthew 12:15–21. In what ways do Isaiah and Matthew identify what Jesus was doing as something larger than healing a few—or even a few hundred—sick people?

“Every miracle that Christ performed was a sign of His divinity. He was doing the very work that had been foretold of the Messiah; but to the Pharisees these works of mercy were a positive offense. The Jewish leaders looked with heartless indifference on human suffering. In many cases their selfishness and oppression had caused the affliction that Christ relieved. Thus His miracles were to them a reproach.”—Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 406.

Jesus’ healing miracles were acts of compassion and justice. But in all cases, they were not an end in and of themselves. Ultimately all that Christ did was for the purpose of leading people to eternal life (see John 17:3).
Clearing the Temple

When we read the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, we are often attracted to the gentle images of Jesus—His care for the sick and for children, His stories of searching for the lost, and His talk about the kingdom of God. This might be why other stories in which we see Him acting forcefully and bluntly—particularly against the religious leaders of His day and some of their practices—can take us by surprise.

Read Matthew 21:12–16, Mark 11:15–19, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–17. What is the significance of the fact that these similar stories are told in every one of the Gospel accounts?

It is hardly surprising that this incident is included in each of the Gospels. It is a story filled with drama, action, and passion. Jesus was obviously concerned about the use of the temple in this way and about the replacement of true worship with the sale of sacrificial animals. What a desecration of all that those sacrifices were to represent, which was His substitutionary death for the sins of the world!

Such direct action fits well in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. This point is suggested in each of the Gospel accounts by either Jesus or the Gospel writers quoting from Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Psalms to explain what was happening in this story. The people recognized Jesus as a prophet (see Matt. 21:11) and came to Him as He healed and taught in the temple court after He had driven out the merchants and money changers. It was the people who found healing in His touch and hope growing in their hearts as they listened to His teaching.

The religious leaders also recognized Jesus as a prophet—as someone who was dangerous to their power and the stability of their social order—and went away to plot to kill Jesus, in the same way as their predecessors had plotted against the prophets in previous centuries (see this contrast in Luke 19:47, 48).

As church members, how can we do our part to make sure that our local churches never become places that need what the temple needed in Christ’s day? How can we avoid those spiritual dangers? What might some of them be, in fact?
The Cross of Christ

That God is a God who sees and hears the cries of the poor and oppressed is comforting. That God is a God who, in Jesus, has experienced and endured the worst of our world’s inhumanity, oppression, and injustice is astounding. Despite all the compassion and goodness Jesus demonstrated in His life and ministry, His death came as a result of hatred, jealousy, and injustice.

From Jesus’ anguished prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane to His arrest, “trials,” torture, mocking, crucifixion, and death, He endured a grueling ordeal of pain, cruelty, evil, and oppressive power. All of this was exacerbated by the innocence, purity, and goodness of the One who suffered it: “He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:7, 8, NIV). Through the lens of salvation’s story, we see the beauty of Jesus’ sacrifice for us, but we should not forget the brutality of the suffering and injustice He experienced.

Read Isaiah 53:3–6. What does this tell us about what happened to Jesus, the innocent suffering for the guilty? How does this help us understand what He went through in our behalf?

In Jesus, God knows what it feels like to be a victim of evil and injustice. The execution of an innocent man is an outrage; the murder of God more so. God has so identified Himself with us in our broken and fallen condition that we cannot doubt His empathy, compassion, and faithfulness: “For we do not have a high priest [Jesus] who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb. 4:15, NIV). What a revelation of the character of our God! How do we even begin to wrap our minds around the good news about God that the Cross represents?

In all that we do for the Lord, especially in reaching out to the needy, why must we always keep the death of Jesus, as our Substitute—not just for ourselves but for those whom we help—at the center of our mission and purpose?

“God has given in His word decisive evidence that He will punish the transgressors of His law. Those who flatter themselves that He is too merciful to execute justice upon the sinner, have only to look to the cross of Calvary. The death of the spotless Son of God testifies that ‘the wages of sin is death,’ that every violation of God’s law must receive its just retribution. Christ the sinless became sin for man. He bore the guilt of transgression, and the hiding of His Father’s face, until His heart was broken and His life crushed out. All this sacrifice was made that sinners might be redeemed. In no other way could man be freed from the penalty of sin. And every soul that refuses to become a partaker of the atonement provided at such a cost must bear in his own person the guilt and punishment of transgression.”—Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, pp. 539, 540.

Discussion Questions:

1. Read the Ellen G. White statement above. Talk about the reality of injustice: Christ, the innocent, suffering the penalty of the guilty! Why is it so important to keep this crucial truth before us?

2. Jesus never advocated political reform in order to bring about the kind of “kingdom” He referred to. After all, history is filled with very sad stories of people who used violence and oppression, all in the name of helping the downtrodden and the oppressed. So often all that had been accomplished was the replacement of one oppressive class with another one. Though Christians can and should work with the powers that be in order to try to help the downtrodden, why must they always be wary of using politics to achieve these ends?

3. Think about what the plan of salvation entailed. Jesus, the just, suffering for the unjust—which means each one of us. Why should this great sacrifice, in our behalf, make us new people in Christ?

Summary: In the Gospels, Jesus’ ministry is introduced and explained with reference to the work of the Old Testament prophets. Good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and healing for the broken were proclaimed as markers of the Messiah—and something Jesus demonstrated throughout His ministry. Yet, in His death, He also suffered the brunt of injustice and ultimately overcame the worst of fallen humanity and inhumanity. Thanks to His unjust death in our behalf, our sins can be forgiven, and we have the promise of eternal life.
Fired for the Sabbath

By Aurora Carlos Justino

I grew up in Nampula, Mozambique’s third-largest city, where 80 percent of the population is Muslim. I didn’t feel comfortable with the faith of my mother, who got divorced when I was small. Something in my mind kept telling me that I should examine Christianity to find peace in my heart.

One day, I told my mother about my desire. “Mommy, I want to be a Christian.”

My mother said, “If you want to be a Christian, don’t call me ‘Mommy’ anymore. You will no longer be my daughter.”

Her words frightened me. I stopped going to her place of worship. I didn’t go to any place of worship. I wanted to see how Mother would react. When Mother saw that I wasn’t worshiping at all, she said, “Fine, you can go look for a Christian church.”

I was so happy! But I didn’t immediately start looking for a church, because I was drinking and going to parties.

One day, a young man approached me on the street.

“Do you know that God loves you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“You must leave all your sins,” he said.

Those words bothered me. The man introduced himself as Armando and invited me to his church nearby.

After we parted ways, however, I couldn’t remember the name of the church. A month later, I looked around the neighborhood and learned that the only local church was Seventh-day Adventist. The pastor at the church, Eleuterio Marage, didn’t know Armando, but he offered me Bible studies. Three months later, I was baptized.

Life became difficult immediately. The restaurant where I worked scheduled me to work on Saturday, and I thought, If I don’t work on Sabbath, then I won’t have any work. If I don’t have a job, how will my mother and younger sister survive, because I am the only one taking care of them?

After spending a month wondering what to do, I read Jesus’ promise in Matthew 6:33, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (NKJV).

I quit my job. My mother was upset initially, but God has provided. One of my three older brothers has stepped in to support my mother and sister.

But what has impressed me the most is how drastically my thinking has changed. I have a peace that I never had before. I thank my Lord for changing my life. I am now 22, and I haven’t been able to find a full-time job. But by God’s grace I have led four people to baptism during the past year.
Part I: Overview

In Matthew 11:1–15, we read that after Jesus had finished instructing His twelve disciples He went to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. While John the Baptist was in prison, his disciples visited him. They told him about “the works of Jesus” (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 214; see also Matt. 11:2) and how the people flocked to Him. But John’s disciples “questioned why, if this new teacher was the Messiah, He did nothing to effect John’s release. . . . These questions were not without effect. Doubts which otherwise would never have arisen were suggested to John.”—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 214, 215.

John anticipated that Jesus would come to judge and liberate God’s people. But when Jesus did not do what John expected, John “became perplexed and troubled.”—Page 215. John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus for clarification concerning His mission. John’s disciples said to Jesus, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3). “Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:4, 5).

This lesson reminds us that, though most people, including John the Baptist, misunderstood the true nature of Jesus’ ministry, the Hebrew Scriptures anticipated it. Moreover, Jesus expressed His mission to the poor and oppressed as a fulfillment of prophecy in Isaiah 61.

**Teacher’s Aims:**

- Explore with your class a comparison of Mary’s Joyful Song in Luke 1:46–55 and Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10.
- Next, explore the implications of Jesus’ mission statement on your church’s mission statement.
- Ask: What is the “spirit of victimization”?
- Discuss: What is the role of the cross of Christ in the work we do for Him?
- Explore with your class how the cross is the ultimate demonstration of the Godhead’s love for humanity.

Part II: Commentary

**Scripture:** After the angel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary,
she went to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. During that visit, Mary, Elizabeth, and her unborn baby rejoice. Read Luke 1:41–44. Mary then breaks out in a song (Luke 1:46–55). This song is filled with Old Testament concepts and phrases. It reveals Mary’s total surrender to the will of God, her grasp of Scripture, and gratitude for her Savior. Like the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10), Mary’s song reveals a God who vindicates the downtrodden and ministers to the hungry. It also exhibits a Messianic element and shows Mary’s humble consciousness of her own exalted role as one chosen of God.

Read Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. What parallels do you see between Mary’s song and Hannah’s song?

**Scripture:** In Luke 4:14–30, we read about the return of Jesus to His hometown to announce His mission statement, which is found in verses 18 and 19. Here Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1, 2 and ends His reading just short of the last half of verse 2, omitting the words “and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.” Jesus wants to emphasize that the time had not yet come for a judgment of vengeance (see John 3:17). Instead, Jesus’ focus was on jubilee restoration. A genuine commitment to jubilee restoration would ultimately result in a transformation of community. Note what is promised in Isaiah 61:3, 4: The Lord desires “to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; . . . And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.”

There is little evidence of Israel’s full compliance with the jubilee mandates. But by the time of Jesus, leaders of the Sanhedrin devised a way of circumventing the mandates legally, which makes Jesus’ proclamation in Luke 4:19 of the year of the Lord’s favor (jubilee) even more remarkable.

**Discuss:** How does Jesus’ mission statement compare with your church’s mission statement? Review your church’s events and projects for last year and note the direction of your church.

**Illustration:** Sundar Singh (1889–1929) was a Christian missionary from India who spread God’s Word among the people of Tibet in the Himalayan mountain ranges.

One afternoon, as he and a companion traveled on foot along a hilly path in Tibet, they were caught in a severe snowstorm. During a brief lull in the storm, Singh happened to look down from the edge of a steep slope and saw the body of a traveler lying in the snow at the foot of the cliff, over 30 feet below the path. Obviously, the
stranger had fallen from the path and needed urgent assistance. As Singh climbed down to rescue the man, his companion discouraged him from doing so. The companion warned Singh that if they lost time in the effort to save the stranger, all three of them would freeze to death in the snowstorm before they would reach their shelter. However, Singh was determined to save the helpless man and asked his companion to cooperate. But he refused to help and walked away to save his own life.

Singh carefully climbed down the slope and reached the helpless man. He was badly hurt and had broken a leg in the fall. Singh carried the stranger on his shoulders, covering him with his blanket as he climbed up the slippery and steep path with the heavy load. After hours of difficult travel with the heavy load in the terrible snowstorm, Singh approached the nearest village just before dark. He was soaked in sweat. Suddenly he stumbled over a human body, half-buried, “in the ice-covered road.” It was the frozen corpse of the companion who had deserted Singh and continued alone to save his own life.

Singh carried the stranger to the warmth and safety of a shelter in the village and provided him with all necessary assistance. He realized that by saving the stranger he had actually saved himself. The exertion of carrying the heavy load, the perspiration and the contact of their living bodies had heated them up and saved their lives. He remembered the words of Jesus, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it” (Luke 9:24).

One of Sundar Singh’s disciples once asked him, “What is life’s most difficult task?” Singh replied, “To have no burden to carry!” The gift of selfless service is that it also helps the one who serves.1

Scripture: Read John 5:1–15. Jesus takes a Sabbath stroll by the Sheep Gate near the Pool of Bethesda (house of mercy/grace) just north of the temple in Jerusalem. He sees a man who has been an invalid for 38 years. Jesus asks, “Do you want to get well?” Ostensibly, the invalid’s answer simply should have been “Yes, I want to be made whole!” Instead, the man focuses on the obstacles: “Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me” (John 5:7).

When confronted with an obstacle, do you focus on the obstacle instead of on the grace offered to overcome it? If so, you will come to suspect that where you are is where you will end up. Focusing on obstacles causes you to believe that you do not have the power to do anything about your condition. Further, you will believe that everyone

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else wants to get ahead of you. You will believe that you cannot accomplish your goal because your mother did not affirm you as much as she should have when you were a child, or because your father abandoned you, or because your family is not around to help. You might not be able to control circumstances. You might even be victimized by them. But you do have a choice in how you respond to those circumstances. You do not need to let the spirit of victimization control your life or your choices. Victimization invalidates our personhood, turning the injured into invalids. We need to turn our eyes from the problem to the solution. Jesus is proactive in offering the man an instant solution: “Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked” (John 5:8, 9).

Questions: Who, due to their negative response to unfortunate circumstances, has become “invalid” in your community? Are we, and if so, in what ways? Are some of those whom we serve enveloped in a spirit of victimization? How can we help them to rise above their situation?

Scripture: The apostle Paul declares, “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). Note in this passage three aspects of the cross: (1) the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the only object worthy of our praise; (2) the crucifixion of the world in the heart of the believer; and (3) the crucifixion of self to the world. What can these three aspects of the Cross signify in our daily walk with God? How do these aspects of dying to self and the world affect everything we do?

**Part III: Life Application**

“The world needs today what it needed nineteen hundred years ago—a revelation of Christ . . . and it is only through the grace of Christ that the work of restoration, physical, mental, and spiritual, can be accomplished.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143 (emphasis supplied).

“The object of the medical missionary work [holistic ministry] is to point sin-sick men and women to the Man of Calvary.”—Page 144.

Invite your class to be alert for opportunities to point the people whom they serve to “the Man of Calvary.” Ask them to share ways they can do that. Follow up with them in the coming weeks, asking them to share with the class their experiences of success. To get you started, here are some ideas that others have tried:

1. Invite someone to a small-group study, using an annotated Bible
specifically designed with small-group study in mind. Questions and issues brought up there may trigger opportunities for you to give more-in-depth doctrinal Bible studies to interested members.

2. Share your personal testimony with someone whom you feel God is leading you to share your conversion experience. See Acts 26:11–27 to read how Paul did it. Following Paul’s approach before King Agrippa, include in your testimony (1) your life before Christ, (2) how you met Christ, and (3) the result of meeting Christ. Then ask for a response. Invite class members to practice sharing their personal testimonies in groups of two.

As the Spirit leads, give a gospel presentation to someone who desires to follow Jesus. Include these elements: the sin problem (Rom. 3:23, Isa. 59:2); the sin solution (Rom. 6:23); personal acceptance of solution (Eph. 2:8, 9). Then invite the person to accept Christ as his or her personal Savior. Say a prayer, inviting him or her to repeat each sentence after you, as follows: “I realize I’m a sinner and deserve to die. I accept Your gift of eternal life. I want You to be my Lord and Savior. Thank You for Your gift.”

Notes

“The Least of These”

SABBATH AFTERNOON


Memory Text: “‘And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”’ (Matthew 25:40, NKJV).

After seeing that Jesus lived a life concerned about others, particularly those who were hurting and lost, we should expect that Jesus also would have a lot to say about care for others. He did.

Jesus’ teaching is practical, focused on what it means to live as a follower of God. As such, we can see that Jesus urges us toward acts of justice, kindness, and mercy, like those that Jesus Himself did while here on earth. If we follow His example, we will minister to others, as He did.

Jesus also talked about the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus’ description, the kingdom of heaven is a reality that we can be part of, even now. It is a way of life that functions with a different set of priorities and values and morals than are found in earthly kingdoms. Jesus’ teachings set out the blueprint for this kingdom, and it includes a strong focus on how we serve God and, in serving Him, how we are to relate to others. We also discover that serving others—caring for their needs and uplifting them—is one way in which we can directly offer service to God.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 24.
Introducing the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus’ longest sermon—or collection of teachings—is the Sermon on the Mount. His three-chapter survey of life in God’s kingdom begins with a statement of values that has come to be known as the Beatitudes.

Read Matthew 5:2–16. What are the common features of these nine values or kinds of people described by Jesus as “blessed”?

Along with the deep spiritual application of these words, we must not miss the practical reading of them, as well. Jesus talked about recognizing the poverty in ourselves and in our world. He also talked about righteousness (translated as “justice” in some Bible versions), humility, mercy, peacemaking, and purity of heart. We should take note of the practical difference that these qualities will make in our lives and in our world when they are lived out. Such a practical reading is emphasized in Jesus’ following statements in which He urged His disciples to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13–16).

When used appropriately, salt and light are to make a difference in the contexts in which they are added. Salt brings out flavors, as well as preserves the foods it is added to; it is symbolic of the good that we should be for those around us. Similarly, light pushes back the darkness, revealing obstacles and hazards, making a house or city safer, and providing a point to navigate by, even when some distance away. Like a light on a dark night, Jesus said, “‘Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven’” (Matt. 5:16, NIV).

Both these salt and light symbols point us to the responsibility of disciples to influence and improve the lives of those around them. We are salt and light when we live lives that mourn appropriately, have purity of heart, practice humility, show mercy, make peace, and endure oppression. So, Jesus begins this sermon with the call to embody these sometimes “undervalued values” of His kingdom.

In what ways does your church community work as salt and light in your community? How is your community a better place because your church is at work there? On the other hand, if you were to disband, what difference would it make in your community?
Overcoming Evil With Good

When we consider the teaching of Jesus, it is worthwhile to keep in mind the people He was talking to and the circumstances in which they lived. Jesus had begun to attract large crowds of people from the regions where He had ministered (see Matt. 4:25, 5:1). Most were common people, living under the imperial rule of the Roman Empire, but some were the Jewish rulers and religious leaders. The existence of the common people was difficult. They had few choices for their own lives, burdened by heavy taxation and weighed down by religious tradition.

In teaching these people, Jesus was obviously concerned with offering them a way to live well, to live with dignity and courage, whatever their circumstances. One example of this is found in Matthew 5:38–48. In the English language, these instructions—“turn the other cheek,” “give them the shirt off your back,” and “go the extra mile”—are so well known as to be clichés. But this familiarity belies the radical actions and attitudes that Jesus is teaching here.

The scenarios Jesus described were common experiences for many of His listeners. They were often violently assaulted by their “superiors” or masters. They were often indebted and lost their property to the landlords and lenders. They were often pressed into labor by the occupying Roman soldiers. Jesus taught the people to respond with integrity, to treat the oppressors better than they deserved, and, by so doing, to resist the loss of their humanity. While these oppressors tried to exert their power, the people always had the freedom to choose how they would respond, and by resisting nonviolently and responding generously, they exposed the evil of the oppression and injustice that was being done.

**Compare** Matthew 5:38–48 with Romans 12:20, 21. How are we to live out these radical principles in our lives?

Jesus summarized all of “the law and the prophets”—all of the sacred writings we often describe as the Old Testament—in a simple principle that has come to be known as the golden rule: “‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you’ ” (Matt. 7:12, NIV). In what ways, right now, can you make an effort to do what He commands us here, regardless of the cost?
The Good Samaritan

Read Luke 10:25–27. The lawyer who questioned Jesus offered a standard summary of the Old Testament commands for living a life acceptable to God. How are these two commands linked?

When Jesus was questioned, He often concluded His answers with an outcome quite different from what the questioner was seeking. In response to the instruction in Leviticus 19:18 (NIV) to “love your neighbor as yourself,” it seems many of the religious people of His day had spent much time and energy debating the extent and limits of this “neighbor” principle.

Jesus had already sought to expand His followers’ understanding of this term, urging that not only should they love their neighbors, but they should do good to everyone: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:44, 45, NIV).

But when an expert in religious law sought to test Jesus, he fell back on the much-debated question: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, but the ultimate response to the lawyer’s question was not to define the “neighbor” terminology. Instead, Jesus said—in effect—“Go and be a neighbor to anyone who needs your help” (see Luke 10:36, 37).

Read Luke 10:30–37. What is the significance of the contrast Jesus makes between the three characters who see the man on the side of the road needing their help?

As was common in Jesus’ teaching, His harshest criticism was aimed at those who claimed to be religious but showed little concern for the suffering of others. “In the story of the good Samaritan, Christ illustrates the nature of true religion. He shows that it consists not in systems, creeds, or rites, but in the performance of loving deeds, in bringing the greatest good to others, in genuine goodness.”—Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 497.

In Jesus’ teaching, He points to an outsider, someone considered unfaithful to God, to demonstrate what the call of God is to all who claim to be His followers. Like His first hearers, when we come to Jesus asking what we need to do to inherit eternal life, He ultimately instructs us to go and be a neighbor to anyone in need.
The Rich Man and Lazarus

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (see Luke 16:19–31), Jesus contrasts the lives of two men—one rich, one desperately poor. In the absence of social welfare, community hospitals, or soup kitchens, it was a common practice for those in need, disabled, or otherwise disadvantaged, to beg outside the homes of the wealthy. It was expected that the rich would be generous in sharing a little of their wealth to alleviate the suffering. But in this story, the rich man was “selfishly indifferent to the needs of his suffering brother.”—Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 261. In life, their respective circumstances remained unchanged; but in death, as judged by God, their positions were dramatically reversed.

**Compare** Luke 16:19–31 with Luke 12:13–21. What are the similarities and differences between these two stories, and what do they teach us?

There is no evidence in either of these stories that the men became rich by doing anything wrong. Perhaps they had both worked hard, managed carefully, and been blessed by God. But something seems to have gone wrong in their attitudes toward life, God, money, and others, and this cost them significantly and eternally.

Drawing from popular afterlife imagery of Jesus’ day, the story of the rich man and Lazarus teaches that the choices we make in this life matter for the next one. How we respond to those who seek or need our help is one way our choices and priorities are demonstrated. As “Abraham” points out to the suffering rich man, the Bible provides more-than-adequate direction for choosing better: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them” (Luke 16:29, NIV).

Jesus taught that the temptations of wealth—whether having it, keeping it, or seeking it—can draw us away from His kingdom, away from others and toward self-centeredness and self-reliance. Jesus called us to seek His kingdom first and to share the blessings we receive with those around us, particularly those in need.

**Whatever your financial status, how can you be careful not to let money or the love of money distort your perspective about what Christians should focus on in life?**
“The Least of These”

Another occasion when Jesus was asked a question and gave an answer quite different from what might have been anticipated is found in the sermon recorded in Matthew 24 and 25. The disciples came to Jesus and asked about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the time of Jesus’ return (see Matt. 24:1–3). The conclusion of Jesus’ extended answer to this question referred to feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. He assured them, “When you did it to—or refused to help—one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!” (see Matt. 25:40, 45).

This is connected with the questions that began this teaching as a picture of the final judgment. Throughout Matthew 24, Jesus presented more direct answers to the disciples’ questions, giving signs and warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age; but He emphasized the need to “keep watch” and live well in light of the promise of His second coming. In the first part of Matthew 25, the story of the wise and foolish virgins urged the need for preparation for an unexpected or delayed return; the story of the three servants introduces the need to live well and productively while waiting; then the parable of sheep and goats is much more specific about the tasks God’s people should be busy with.

**Read** Matthew 25:31–46. What is Jesus telling us here? Why is this not salvation by works? But what do His words here teach about what it truly means to have a saving faith?

Jesus’ statement—that when we serve others, we are doing it to Him—should transform all our relationships and attitudes. Imagine being able to invite Jesus for a meal or visit Him in the hospital or prison. Jesus said that we do this when we offer that service to people in our community. What an incredible opportunity He offers to us in this way!

**Read** prayerfully what Jesus said in these verses. How do we understand the idea that He all but equated Himself with the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned? What powerful obligation does this put on us and how we live?

“Christ tears away the wall of partition, the self-love, the dividing prejudice of nationality, and teaches a love for all the human family. He lifts men from the narrow circle that their selfishness prescribes; He abolishes all territorial lines and artificial distinctions of society. He makes no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. He teaches us to look upon every needy soul as our neighbor and the world as our field.”—Ellen G. White, Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, p. 42.

“The standard of the golden rule is the true standard of Christianity; anything short of it is a deception. A religion that leads men to place a low estimate upon human beings, whom Christ has esteemed of such value as to give Himself for them; a religion that would lead us to be careless of human needs, sufferings, or rights, is a spurious religion. In slighting the claims of the poor, the suffering, and the sinful, we are proving ourselves traitors to Christ. It is because men take upon themselves the name of Christ, while in life they deny His character, that Christianity has so little power in the world.”—Pages 136, 137.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which is your favorite of the passages studied this week? Why?

2. Look at what Ellen G. White wrote about how a faith that “would lead us to be careless of human needs, sufferings, or rights, is a spurious religion.” Why must we be careful to avoid the easy trap of thinking that because we have the “truth” (which we do), nothing else matters?

3. How do the verses in Thursday’s study show us what having the “truth” also entails?

Summary: Jesus’ teachings set out a different way of living for those who are citizens and agents of the kingdom of God. Building on the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures, He echoed and broadened the focus on caring for the poor and oppressed, emphasizing that His followers will live as people of compassion and mercy while they wait for His return.
Doctor Demands Abortion

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Dina, a 60-year-old grandmother living in the Soviet Union, prayed every morning, “Lord, send me someone who I can talk about You.”

One day, Dina noticed a pregnant woman as she waited at the bus stop in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. “Are you expecting?” she asked.

The woman, Lyuda Savostina, began to weep. She was expecting a son, but the physician had insisted that she have an abortion. “The doctor says that if I try to have this child, he will be stillborn, and I will die,” she said.

Dina comforted the woman and invited her to visit her house church on Sabbath. Lyuda had never attended church but agreed to go.

On Sabbath, Dina and Lyuda joined 12 other church members listening to Pastor Yakov Kulakov preach about God’s faithfulness. Afterward, Lyuda shared her dilemma with the pastor. He encouraged her to trust God, and he prayed for her.

On Monday, Lyuda told the doctor that she would keep the baby.

“Have you gone mad?” the doctor said.

When he couldn’t sway Lyuda, he summoned her husband, Vladimir. Later at home, Vladimir scolded Lyuda. “Are you so selfish that you are willing to die and leave your daughter without a mother?” he said.

“I will keep this baby,” Lyuda replied. “I trust in God.”

“Who is this God that you are talking about?” he asked. “There is no God!”

The next Sabbath, Lyuda returned to church. And the next Sabbath. Soon she was baptized.

The doctor turned out to be wrong. The baby was born alive, and Lyuda did not die. Little Sergei, however, was sickly and suffered seizures.

One day, Sergei suffered a severe seizure. His breathing stopped for 10 seconds. Twenty seconds. His lips turned blue. Lyuda fell to her knees, crying, “Lord, You gave life to this boy; please don’t take it away!”

Her husband rushed into the room. “Come here and pray!” Lyuda told him. “We need your faith too!”

Vladimir sank to his knees. “Lord, I believe!” he cried.

At that moment, the baby began to breathe.

The whole family became Adventists, and Sergei, now in his 40s, remains a faithful church member to this day, said Pastor Kulakov, 66, who retired after 41 years of ministry and lives in Podolsk, south of Moscow.

Why did this family become Adventist? The reason is that an elderly woman prayed every morning, “Lord, send someone who I can lead to You today,” said Pastor Kulakov, pictured left. “There is power in this prayer,” he said.
Part I: Overview

As we look at Jesus’ ministry on earth, we are struck by how selfless He was in His daily approach to people. He sought to deepen relationships with others by first assessing and discovering their felt needs and then leading them to recognize their greater needs. “Our Lord Jesus Christ came to this world as the unwearied servant of man’s necessity. . . . It was His mission to bring to men complete restoration; He came to give them health and peace and perfection of character.”—Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, p. 17.

Teacher’s Aims:
• Examine with your class basic principles and insights found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), including the blessings and attitudes (the Beatitudes) that Jesus sought to clarify in the minds of His followers.
• Encourage class members to wrestle with their response to injustice.
• Challenge them to look in a new light at the injustices committed against them.
• Remind your students that when confronted by the need of a “neighbor” they must think more of them than themselves.
• Likewise, remind your students that while we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, we will be judged by how that faith works in service to “the least of these.”
• Explore with your class how living Jesus’ teachings and ministry during His first advent will prepare our communities and ourselves for His second advent.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: In Christ’s sermon on the mount, He laid out the values of the kingdom of heaven that also will be manifested on earth by His people. The Lord’s Prayer, given during the Sermon on the Mount, implores: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). It has been said that the Beatitudes are Christ’s kingdom manifesto. These principles will be manifested in our actions.

The Beatitudes possibly reference justice. For example, the Greek word for “righteousness” in the well-known beatitude in Matthew 5:6 is sometimes translated as “justice.”
In fact, as we noted in an earlier lesson, the words *righteousness* and *justice* are at times used interchangeably in both the Old and New Testaments. Primarily one Hebrew (*tsedeq*) and Greek (*dikaiosune*) word is used for both terms. One example of the interchangeability of “justice” and “righteousness” in English is seen in the New Living Translation (*NLT*): “God blesses those who hunger and thirst for *justice*, for they will be satisfied” (*Matt. 5:6, emphasis supplied*).

Matthew 5:6 presents a metaphor for moral uprightness. This figure could be an allusion to Psalm 37:12–17, which speaks of a time when the power of the oppressors “shall be broken” (*Ps. 37:17*). Ask your class to read and discuss this passage, which expresses a desire for personal righteousness as well as for a whole world that is characterized by God’s righteousness (or justice). Also discuss: What other parts of the Beatitudes are related to justice and mercy?

Directly after the Beatitudes, Jesus establishes the identity of Christians: “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world” (*Matt. 5:13, 14, NKJV, emphasis supplied*). And we are truly salt and light when we live the principles of the Beatitudes. Someone once said that it is harder to be salt than light. Have the class discuss that statement in the context of engaging and mingling with the community. What important role do both salt and light have in social ministry? (e.g., light generally shines from afar, makes darkness disappear, and helps us find what is lost. Being “salt,” however, takes extra commitment because it must *mingle* with ingredients different from itself in order for its healing properties to have an impact.)

**Illustration:** Years ago, a group of psychologists conducted a study based on the story of the good Samaritan. They met with a group of theology students and asked each of them to prepare a short talk on the theme of the good Samaritan. Then, they were to walk through an alley to a nearby building to present the talk. On the way there, each student encountered an actor, playing the part of a man, sprawled in the alley, groaning and coughing.

Few students stopped to help the man or ask him if he was OK. Some even stepped over the victim to get to their speaking appointment in the next building. The psychologists concluded that compassion and love for humanity all too often works in theory but not in practice. C. S. Lewis is credited with saying: “It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital ‘H’ than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.”

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Discuss with your class the personal and church implications of the above story and the C. S. Lewis quote. List on a writing board (if available) specific ideas from the group on how to move from theory to serving particular people or groups in their community.

**Scripture:** Invite class members to read Luke 10:25–37 aloud, assigning one verse per student. Then, if feasible, sing together one verse of “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 569). Ask: “Sometimes I sing and pray, ‘Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior,’ but do I pass by, and look the other way, when I see someone in need?”

Share and discuss the following:

1. Talk about a time when someone in your life came and helped you where you were.
2. Mention a time you came upon someone in need and helped this person.
3. How have I, or our church corporately, looked the other way from the suffering and needs of others?
4. What happens to ourselves, as well as others, when we look the other way?

Summarize the parable of the good Samaritan by contrasting the attitudes of the main characters in the story. Then, ask your students to respond to the following questions as exemplified by the different mind-sets in the story:

The mind-set of the priest and Levite: *If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?*

The mind-set of the good Samaritan: *If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?*

**Scripture:** Read Mark 14:7. Some people use this verse as an excuse to ignore one type of “the least of these”—the poor. They reason: “Because the poor will always be with us, the problem will not go away. Anyway, Jesus Himself said it: ‘For ye have the poor with you always’” *(Mark 14:7).* So why try to solve the problem?”

Please note: Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 15 in Mark 14:7. Looking to Deuteronomy, we can better understand the context of His comment in Mark 14:7. There are two important references to the poor in
Deuteronomy 15. One is in verse 11: “For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.” Seven verses earlier, in verse 4 (RSV), however, we read: “But there will be no poor among you.” So, how do we reconcile verses 4 and 11, as in, “There should be no poor,” with “the poor shall never cease out of the land”?

There will continue to be poor people because of the injustice of other people. But God's will is that there be no poor (Deut. 15:4), because God has provided resources to take care of the hungry and the poor. Unfortunately, the injustice of human beings ensures there always will be the poor (Deut. 15:11). The continuation of poverty in the world is not an excuse for inaction, however, but a mandate for generosity.

**Discuss This Quote:** “Christ has said that we shall have the poor always with us, and He unites His interests with that of His suffering people. The heart of our Redeemer sympathizes with the poorest and lowliest of His earthly children. *He tells us that they are His representatives on earth.* He has placed them among us to awaken in our hearts the love that He feels toward the suffering and oppressed.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 535 (emphasis supplied).

**Part III: Life Application**

In your class discuss the following: while you wait for the Second Advent, evaluate your church and yourselves on your effectiveness in living out Christ’s ministry methods and teachings that He exemplified at His first advent. For example:

1. Rate yourself on each of the attitudes of the Beatitudes: 1 being low, and 4 being high.

2. In light of Matthew 5:14, is the light in your personal life and your church life shining like a 5,200 lumens bulb or a 200 lumens bulb? Why?

3. Read the following quote about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: “The rich man did not belong to the class represented by the unjust judge, who openly declared his disregard for God and man. He claimed to be a son of Abraham. He did not treat the beggar with violence or require him to go away because the sight of him was disagreeable. If the poor, loathsome specimen of humanity could be comforted by beholding him as he entered his gates, the rich man was willing that he should remain. But he was selfishly indifferent to the needs of his suffering brother.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ Object Lessons*, p. 261 (emphasis supplied).
This statement could implicate church members in good standing. It is about what the “rich man” didn’t do. What can your church do for the “Lazaruses” in your community? How can you overcome indifference?

4. List on a board, if available, some of the pressing “least of these” issues today in your community: for example, people with special needs and human trafficking (an extremely serious and prevalent issue). Even though it may be virtually impossible for your church to intervene in every issue, chose an issue to start with and plan a first step.²

Notes

² For additional ideas see the Adventist Review, August 2016, an issue that focuses on “The Least of These.”
Ministry in the New Testament Church

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; Matt. 25:38, 40; Acts 9:36; 2 Cor. 8:7–15; Romans 12; James 2:1–9.

Memory Text: “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27, NKJV).

The verses known as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) are among the best known in the Bible, at least by Christians. The texts often have been described as our mission statement and have been the inspiration for all kinds of mission and evangelistic projects. Indeed, inspired by these texts, Christians have gone all over the world, sometimes at great personal cost, in order to spread the gospel.

And what did Jesus say in the Great Commission? To make disciples, to baptize, and to teach people “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20, NKJV). And, as we have seen, so much of what Jesus commanded us has to do with taking care of those in need, those hurting, those who are unable to take care of themselves. As such, we need to remember that these instructions to Jesus’ first disciples were not so much a new assignment, something that they hadn’t heard or seen before, but more a continuation of the mission Jesus already had been working among them. This aspect of Jesus’ teaching can be seen clearly in the lives of the new church community as part of fulfilling the Great Commission.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 31.
A New Kind of Community

After Jesus’ ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the group of believers grew rapidly and created the early church, a new kind of community among the followers of Jesus, and initially led by His original disciples. However, this new community was not just something that they made up among themselves; rather, it was built on the teachings and ministry of Jesus and drew on the long history of the Hebrew Scriptures and their prophets.

Read Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37. What do you identify as the key elements in these descriptions of the early church community?

While it seems the Israelites had failed to ever fully live out the blueprint for a just and generous society, the early church community took seriously the instruction that “‘there need be no poor people among you’” (Deut. 15:4, NIV). One of the practical expressions of their faith was sharing their material resources—even selling land and contributing the funds raised (see Acts 4:34–5:2)—to meet the needs of their fellow believers, as well as to be a blessing to those outside the fledgling community, particularly through the ministry of healing (see Acts 3:1–11, 5:12–16).

Yet, this community was not a utopian society by any stretch of the imagination. As the number of believers increased, tensions grew about the administration of these resources, particularly in relation to the daily distribution of food to widows (see Acts 6:1). The disciples, who were the natural leaders of the group, wanted to focus on preaching the gospel. In order to deal with the situation at hand, they needed to do some reorganizing.

Thus, seven people were appointed to focus on the practical matters of the church community. This was perhaps the first recognition of the different ministries and abilities to be exercised in the church; at the same time, it demonstrated the importance of practical ministry for the church’s life and witness. “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, p. 95.

Try to envision what it must have been like in that early community. How can we reflect those same principles today?
Dorcas’s Ministry and Witness

As the church began to spread—as Jesus predicted—“‘in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 1:8, NIV), new believers took up the faith and ministry of Jesus. Among these was Dorcas—also known as Tabitha—in the city of Joppa. She obviously took seriously Jesus’ particular instruction that when clothing the naked, she was doing it for Jesus Himself (see Matt. 25:38, 40).

Read the description of Dorcas and her ministry in Acts 9:36. How might your life and ministry be described in a similar format to this verse? How would you like to be described?

It seems that Dorcas’s ministry was such that the description of her as a “disciple” (see Acts 9:36) and her faithfulness, energy, and focus on others were recognized even beyond her hometown.

Peter was visiting the nearby town of Lydda, and the people of Joppa asked him to come in response to Dorcas’s untimely death (see Acts 9:37–41). On his arrival in Joppa, Peter was met by many of the people Dorcas had helped through her work for the poor. They showed him the clothes that she had made and undoubtedly told him many stories of how she had helped them and others.

That Peter then prayed for Dorcas and God returned her to life is, of course, no guarantee that life will always work out well for those who devote their lives to serving others. After all, Dorcas had already suffered illness and death; and Stephen, one of those first deacons appointed to minister to the widows in the church, also had become the first martyr (see Acts 7:54–60). A life of service is not a smooth path; at times it could even be the rougher road.

However, in this story God used the recognition of His love and power in both Dorcas’s life and death to make a strong impact on the people of Joppa: “This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42, NIV).

If you were to pass away, would your contribution be mourned and missed like the ministry of Dorcas was remembered and mourned? How can we leave a better legacy of service? What practical skills do you have—such as Dorcas’s skills of making garments—that you might use in service to others?
Giving as a Way of Sharing

After his conversion, the apostle Paul took up the mission to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. The success God gave him raised significant questions about the relationship between the Jewish roots of the emerging Christian faith and the new Gentile followers of Jesus. A council of Jewish and Gentile Christian leaders met in Jerusalem to discuss the matter and seek God’s guidance in relation to these complicated questions. The meeting and its outcomes are recorded in Acts 15.

However, in Paul’s report of this meeting found in Galatians 2, he adds another important element to the instructions he received from the Jerusalem Council for his continuing ministry among the Gentiles: “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along” (Gal. 2:10, NIV).

And Paul continued to pursue this focus personally (see, for example, Acts 20:35) and throughout his ministry. Like the early church in Jerusalem, Paul expanded the vision of the Christian community to embrace all fellow believers.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:7–15. How does Paul link the gospel and giving generously?

Paul also drew on two Old Testament references to urge the believers to generosity and care for their fellow believers in difficult circumstances. He cited the story of God’s generous provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness as a model of giving and sharing among the wider church community (see 2 Cor. 8:15). He also quoted from Psalm 112:9—“‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever’” (2 Cor. 9:9, NIV).

Paul urged his readers to be intentional about giving, to put aside regularly a portion of their income so that it would be easy to give when he or Titus visited their church to collect their offerings and deliver them to the Christians in need in Jerusalem. He used the example of one church to encourage other churches to similar generosity. “Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves,” Paul wrote, “others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (2 Cor. 9:13, NIV).

How should we prioritize giving when we are unable to give to every cause or need presented to us?
Paul’s Guide to Living and Loving Well

Paul’s letter to the Romans is best known for its in-depth explanations of the great doctrine of salvation by faith through the death of Christ. But after 11 chapters of such teaching, there is a change of emphasis. Paul offers a practical guide to living and loving well, based on the grace and love of God as revealed in Jesus and the gospel story: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom. 12:1, NIV). In effect, Paul is saying that because of what God has done for us in Jesus, this is how we should live.

Read and summarize Romans 12, particularly noticing the instructions to love and care for others, especially those in need.

In a sense, Romans 12 acts as a summary of many of the topics Paul gives more detailed attention to in some of his other letters. He talks about the different roles and gifts within the church body, including serving and encouraging others, and giving generously (see Rom. 12:3–8). But not only should these things be done, they should be done well, with enthusiasm and—above all—with love (see Rom. 12:9–11).

Paul describes in practical terms what this kind of life is about. He urges the believers to be patient in difficulties and persecution, to care for the needy, to be peacemakers wherever and whenever possible and—as we have seen previously—to respond to evil and injustice with kindness, overcoming evil by doing good (see Rom. 12:20, 21).

This chapter outlines what it means to live as a new person, serving God individually and as part of a community of faith. Paul told these new followers of Jesus that their lives, priorities, and actions should be changed because of their response to what Jesus had done for them by His death on the cross and the hope of eternal life. Living as they were in an oppressive and often cruel society in the heart of the Roman Empire, Paul instructs them to live differently: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2, NIV).

What are some attitudes and practices you need to resist in your community to help you live and love well as a follower of Jesus today?
James “the Just”

Christian tradition suggests that James, the brother or stepbrother of Jesus, became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem and was the James who acted as chairman for the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15, as well as Galatians 1 and 2). If so, it is likely that he was the author of the letter preserved in the Bible as the book of James.

James was a common name at the time, but if these were the same person, he also may have been the church leader known as James “the Just,” which suggests a wise leader who properly prioritized his treatment of others and cared for those often forgotten or downtrodden. The book that bears his name has been described as “the New Testament’s book of Proverbs,” focused on practical godliness and living wisely as followers of God.

The author of James was anxious to remind his Christian readers to “not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22, NIV), and that the religion that matters—that is pure and lasting in God’s sight—is focused on caring for the needy and the oppressed and resisting the corrupting influences of the society around them (see James 1:27).

Read James 2:1–9 and 5:1–5. How is James’s attitude toward those who are rich different from that commonly held in most societies? What are his particular instructions regarding how rich and poor are to be treated within the church community?

James argues that wishing someone well—even wishing them God’s blessing—will be of little comfort if they are suffering from cold and hunger. The provision of real food and clothing will be far more useful in expressing and demonstrating our concern for them than all the noble sentiments and good wishes (see James 2:14–16). James uses this as an example of the interaction between faith and works in the context of our relationship with God. He also repeats (James 2:8) what Jesus taught about loving your neighbor as yourself, showing how this commandment is to be obeyed in daily life. It is lived out in service to God and to others, not to earn salvation but because it is the manifestation of true faith.

Why is it so easy, even subconsciously, to prefer the rich over the poor?

“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, p. 640.

“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, p. 344.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can your church community become more like the one described in the first few chapters of the book of Acts? What might be some practical steps your church leadership could take to encourage the church in this direction?

2. The Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide uses some of the principles discussed in this week’s study to dictate how tithes and offerings are shared between different parts of the world. What are the benefits of this kind of system of worldwide resource sharing?

3. Are instructions for living, such as those summarized in Romans 12, for example, realistic, practical ways to live? Do they work in the “real world”? Or do they feel more like idealized pictures for stained-glass window “saints”?

4. James 5:1–5 uses strong language that echoes the kind of harsh warnings given by the Old Testament prophets. Why is such strong expression appropriate and necessary?

Summary: Spurred by Jesus’ commission and the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples and the early believers set out to share the message and mission of Jesus as widely as possible. Drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures, the members of the early church formed a new kind of community, sharing what they had with those in need, both within and beyond their community. By their example and their teaching recorded in their letters to these churches, the first Christian leaders urged the believers to lives of faithfulness and service, particularly to those in need.
Finnish Father’s Forgiveness

By Sakari Vehkavuori

Finland was mired in a bloody civil war in 1918. The Reds, mainly comprised of the working class, were locked in conflict with the Whites, mostly from the middle and upper classes.

My great-grandfather Viktor Ståhlberg pleaded with his son, my great-uncle Väinö Ståhlberg, not to join the White troops. Viktor, who had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church three years earlier, quoted the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:52, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (NKJV).

“Please, my son, do not take off with your friends to join the army,” he said.

But Väinö felt a strong urge to fight for what he believed, and he left home under the darkness of night. He met friends on the ice-covered Gulf of Finland early one Sunday morning.

Almost immediately, Red soldiers seized Väinö and the others. It later emerged that a housemaid who had fallen in love with Väinö had revealed his plans to a Red sympathizer, who, in turn, had tipped off the Red army.

That night, the young men were put on a horse-drawn sleigh, and two armed Red soldiers drove them back onto the frozen Gulf of Finland. The soldiers cut a hole in the ice and ordered the prisoners to stand in a row. Väinö refused and was shot dead on the spot. Then three more young men were killed. Two tried to escape and were shot dead.

After that, a second group of prisoners fled. As the two soldiers chased them, one of the prisoners, who had pretended to be dead near the ice hole, fled to freedom. He told others what had happened.

Back in the gulf, the Reds threw the bodies of the dead into the ice hole. Väinö’s father, Viktor, and the rest of the family mourned for days.

After some time, the Whites gained the upper hand as the 1918–1920 civil war wound down. They captured 10 Red prisoners and decided to execute them in revenge for the death of Väinö and his friends.

Viktor grabbed his Bible and hurried to the hilltop execution site.

“Now this slaughtering is enough,” he declared. “You cannot kill any Reds for my son’s lost life, not one.”

As he preached on the hill, the cycle of revenge was broken, and the lives of the Red prisoners were spared. Among those 10 Reds were the two sons of a local blacksmith. Seeing his sons saved, the joyful blacksmith started to read the Bible and joined the Adventist Church.

God also has blessed the family of Viktor, pictured left. Eight family members have served as Adventist pastors, including me and Väinö’s brother Toivo Seljavaara, a public evangelist who baptized more than 1,500 people.
Part I: Overview

Jesus begins the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19, 20) with the word therefore. Whenever we come across this word, we need to look at what precedes it to find the reason behind the statement that follows. In this case, the Great Commission is given based on Jesus’ declaration: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18, NASB).

Jesus’ command to make disciples, to baptize, to teach, and to abide with Him is based on His authority. Too often, we see this Great Commission simply as a command to “go.” Yet, it is a call to rely on His power and authority as we reflect His character and teachings to others. His call to ministry includes His compassion for the poor and the helpless as revealed in the Gospels.

In the lesson this week, we look at how the New Testament church embraced Christ’s compassion for the poor. We saw how the early church after Pentecost organized itself around ministries of compassion and how the disciples and leaders of the growing Christian church made ministries of compassion central to their mission.

Teacher’s Aims:

- Explore with your class the balanced wholistic ministry model as portrayed in Acts 2:41–47.
- Examine the role of the spiritual gifts that were given to facilitate the church’s ministry and the calling of every member to minister to the needs of others.
- As a class, evaluate your church’s effectiveness as you endeavor, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to continue the wholistic ministry of the New Testament church.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: Invite the class to read Acts 2:41–47. Review the five elements of ministry found in the life of the early church as reflected in this passage. How many of these elements are an intentional part of the ministry of your church?

- Worship (Acts 2:42, 46, 47)
- Fellowship (Acts 2:42)
- Community Services (Acts 2:45)
- Reaping (Acts 2:41, 47)
- Discipleship (Acts 2:42)
Scripture: Read Acts 9:36–42. Dorcas, or Tabitha, a Christian disciple, lived in the city of Joppa, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Dorcas is a Greek name meaning “gazelle,” and Tabitha is the Aramaic rendering of the same name. Dorcas was a charitable person who made things, especially clothing, for the needy in Joppa. Dorcas was much loved in the community of Joppa. When she became ill and died, the believers who knew Dorcas urgently sent for Peter.

When Peter arrived at the home where Dorcas’s body had been laid out, there were many widows weeping. They all showed Peter the clothing that Dorcas had made. Having sent them out of the room, Peter prayed and said to the dead woman, “Tabitha, arise” (Acts 9:40). She rose from the dead. As a result, many people in Joppa believed in the Lord.

Bringing Dorcas back from the dead was not done for Dorcas’s sake alone. Part of Peter’s motive for raising Dorcas to life most certainly was for the sake of the widows and others in Joppa who needed the help Dorcas could provide. Dorcas is a fine example of how we are to minister to the needs of those around us. Has the spirit of Dorcas been resurrected in your church? What ministry does your church have that would be sorely missed by your community if it were to disappear suddenly?

Illustration: The characteristics of the early church as portrayed in Acts 2:41–46 and in the life of Dorcas lives on today. Here is an example: For the last 18 years a group of compassionate community-minded members of the Spencerville, Maryland, Seventh-day Adventist Church, U.S.A., have been involved in a ministry that they call “Keep in Stitches.” They meet weekly in the morning to study and pray, fellowship, and work together to meet needs in their external community. At noon, they “break bread” by eating lunch together. They have met leaders in their neighborhood and discovered that there were many needs. The group has provided for expressed needs by sewing baby blankets for the children of homeless women in shelters; making pillow cases; assembling personal care kits for homeless men; and responding to requests from overseas mission projects for quilts, blankets, hats, and clothing. What has your church done to discover the needs in your community? What would it take to follow up when you discover the needs?

Scripture: Read the following three biblical passages about spiritual gifts in the early church: Romans 12:4–6; 1 Corinthians 12:4, 5; 1 Peter 4:10.

Note that these spiritual gifts are not simply talents provided to people to do as they please. These are gifts provided for the church to meet its ministry needs. The apostle Paul lines up an impressive list of spiritual gifts that God provides His church through its members. With your class, review these lists in Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 27–31; and Ephesians 4:11–13. Make a list of the gifts of the Spirit that your class members think they have. Ask them to share how they have been using
their spiritual gifts for ministry inside and outside your church.

**Illustration:** Consider this: “The New Testament churches were ministering fellowships and in the communities ministering agencies. No difference in rank or status divided the people of God. Church leaders were primarily responsible for preparing the congregation for productive service and witness to the people about them. The church was not viewed as a musical society which hired the performers and sat back to enjoy the performance. The church was an orchestra in which each member was assigned his part to play.”1

Discuss the implications of the above quotation. Ask your class the question, How has each of you been called to minister to others in behalf of Jesus? Encourage class members to discuss the answers in relation to the concept of “every believer, a missionary.”

**Illustration:** In the New Testament church, and today, dynamic Christian communities were, and are, full of believers who serve others and are involved in wholistic ministry. Wholistic congregations come in many forms, but they have certain features in common: (1) a wholistic understanding of the church’s mission, (2) Christ-centered spirituality, (3) healthy congregational dynamics, and (4) wholistic ministry practice.

What follows are some intentional activities that a wholistic church engages in:

**Striving for wholistic understanding of the church’s mission, the wholistic church:**

- Encourages a vision of well-balanced ministry that includes, discipleship, evangelism, and social action.
- Supports charity, compassion, community development, and justice advocacy. Anywhere humans are suffering provides opportunity for the church to shine as the body of Christ.
- Sees ministry as fundamentally relational, seeking to develop long-term relationships with ministry recipients and welcoming them into church fellowship.
- Views mission as both local and global in scope.

**Striving for sanctification and Christ-centered worship, the wholistic church:**

- Centers congregational life around meaningful worship, with an emphasis on profound gratitude for salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

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• Relies on the power of God’s Spirit for fruitful ministry.
• Is led by the inspired Word of God and teaches doctrines that are solidly grounded in the principle of *sola Scriptura*—the Bible and the Bible only—as the absolute moral standard for right and wrong.
• Encourages a devotional life of worship, prayer, and study for the purpose of growth and discipleship.
• Shares God’s self-sacrificial love for the lost, lonely, and broken and cultivates a commitment toward outreach as a natural outgrowth of the worship of God.

*Striving for healthy congregational dynamics, the wholistic church:*
• Realizes that the relationships within the church need to be loving and healthy. No one wants to walk into a church where the tension can be felt because families aren’t getting along with one another.
• Prays for and supports our pastors and leaders with empathy for the burden the Lord has placed on their shoulders and also remembers to be patient and forgiving if they make mistakes.

*Striving for wholistic ministry practice, the wholistic church:*
• Calls, trains, equips, and organizes members for ministry, building on the full range of spiritual gifts.
• Sustains ministry by working harmoniously with others in an organized way. Not thinking of oneself as a maverick, know-it-all, or martyr who is not accountable and dependent on fellow brothers and sisters.
• Remembers that ministry has a dual focus: to those inside the church and to those outside. A lopsided focus on one can sometime undermine the other.

As a class, evaluate how your church rates in the above categories. Pray together that the wholistic ministry approach of the New Testament church will become a reality in your church.

**Part III: Life Application**

In the New Testament, ministry is service to God and to the community in His name. Jesus provided the pattern for Christian ministry. He did not come to receive service, but to give it (see Matt. 20:28, John 13:1–17).

• Ask your class what they expect the church to do for them.
• Challenge them to understand that the success of the church’s ministry depends more on what *each* member contributes to the ministry than...
on what the church members expect to receive.

- List the ministries and services that your church provides internally and in the neighborhood.

- Invite your class members to identify which of the listed ministries and services they are involved in, and write their names on the list under the ministry in which they are involved.

- Thank those who are involved and challenge the others to minister in these areas.

Ministry should certainly place emphasis on sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others so they can come to know Him and receive Him as the personal Savior and Lord of their life. It should inspire them to go even further, causing them to aspire to know Christ as the essence of their existence and life ministry. Christians, additionally, are called to minister by meeting people’s needs with love and humility on Christ’s behalf. Take turns reading the following: Matthew 20:26; John 2:5, 9; Acts 6:1–3; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; and Colossians 4:12. If you were to examine the minutes of your church board over a period of time, what percentage of the decisions made do you think would deal with direct ministry in the community where the church is? How can your board meetings become more missional?

Notes
As soon as we talk about God’s commands, requirements, or instructions, we run the risk—or even face the temptation—of thinking that somehow what we do can earn or contribute to our salvation or otherwise gain favor with God. But the Bible tells us repeatedly that we are sinners saved by God’s grace through Jesus and His substitutionary death for us on the cross. What could we possibly add to this in any way? Or, as Ellen G. White has written: “If you would gather together everything that is good and holy and noble and lovely in man and then present the subject to the angels of God as acting a part in the salvation of the human soul or in merit, the proposition would be rejected as treason.”—Faith and Works, p. 24.

Thus, too, even our works of mercy and compassion toward those in need should not be seen as legalistic. On the contrary, as we grow in our understanding and appreciation of salvation, the link between God’s love and His concern for the poor and oppressed will be passed on to us, recipients of His love. We have received, so we will give. When we see how God so loved us, we also see how much He loves others and calls us to love them, as well.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 7.
“For God So Loved . . .”

John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world . . .” (NIV; emphasis supplied)—and the original Greek word is kosmos, meaning “the world as a created, organized entity.”—The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 5, p. 929. This verse is about salvation for humanity, but the plan of salvation has implications for the whole of creation too.

Read Romans 8:20–23. What does this teach about the broader issues in the plan of salvation?

Of course, on one level, salvation is about each one of us in our personal relationship with the Lord. But there’s more. Justification is really not just about getting our sins forgiven. Ideally, it also should be about how, through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord creates the family of God, the members of which celebrate their forgiveness and assurance of salvation by, among other things, being witnesses to the world through their good works.

Read John 3:16, 17. How does verse 17 contribute to a broader understanding of verse 16?

We can accept that God loves people other than just ourselves. He loves those we love, and we rejoice in that. He also loves those we reach out to, and our recognition of this truth is often our motivation for our own reaching out to them. But He also loves those whom we are uncomfortable with, or even afraid of. God loves all people, everywhere, even those whom we might not particularly like.

Creation is one way we see this demonstrated. The Bible consistently points to the world around us as evidence of God’s goodness: “‘He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous’” (Matt. 5:45, NIV). Even life itself is a gift from God, and regardless of the individual’s response or attitude to God, every person is a recipient of that gift.

How should it change our attitude toward others and their circumstances when we recognize them as beings created and loved by God?
Compassion and Repentance

The intermingled stories of salvation and the great controversy call us to acknowledge a truth about life that is foundational for our understanding of our world and ourselves, and that is: we and our world are fallen, broken, and sinful. Our world is not what it was created to be, and though we still bear the image of the God who created us, we are part of the world’s brokenness. The sin in our lives is of the same nature as the evil that causes so much pain, oppression, and exploitation all over the world.

Thus, it is right for us to feel the hurt, discomfort, sorrow, and tragedy of the world and of the lives around us. We would have to be robots not to feel the pain of life here. The laments in the book of Psalms, the sorrows of Jeremiah and the other prophets, and the tears and compassion of Jesus demonstrate the appropriateness of this kind of response to the world and its evil, and particularly to those who are so often hurt by that evil.

**Read** Matthew 9:36; 14:14; Luke 19:41, 42; and John 11:35. What was it in each of these verses that moved Jesus with compassion? How can we have a heart that is softened to the pain around us?

We also need to remember that sin and evil are not just “out there,” or the result of someone else’s brokenness: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8, NIV). In the understanding of the biblical prophets, sin was a tragedy not primarily because someone had broken “the rules,” but because sin has broken the relationship between God and His people, and also because our sin hurts other people. This may take place on a small or large scale, but it is the same evil.

Selfishness, greed, meanness, prejudice, ignorance, and carelessness are at the root of all the world’s evil, injustice, poverty, and oppression. And confessing our sinfulness is a first step in addressing this evil, as well as a first step toward allowing the love of God to take its rightful place in our hearts: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV).

**Look at yourself (but neither too closely nor for too long). In what ways are you broken and part of the bigger problem? What’s the only answer and the only place to look?**
**Grace and Good Works**

*Summarize* Ephesians 2:8–10 in your own words. What do these verses tell us about the relationship between grace and good works?

The Bible tells us that among other things, we were created to worship God and to serve others. Only in our imagination can we try to understand what these acts would be like in a sinless environment.

For now, because of sin, we know only a broken and fallen world. Fortunately for us, God’s grace, expressed and enacted in Jesus’ sacrifice for the sins of the world, opens the way for forgiveness and healing. Thus, even amid this broken existence our lives become more fully God’s workmanship, and God uses us to partner with Him to seek to heal and restore the damage and hurt in the lives of others (*see Eph. 2:10*). “Those who receive are to impart to others. From every direction are coming calls for help. God calls upon men to minister gladly to their fellow men.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 103.

Again, we do not do good works—care for the poor, lift up the oppressed, feed the hungry—in order to earn salvation or standing with God. In Christ, by faith, we have all the standing with God we will ever need. Rather, we recognize ourselves as both sinners and victims of sin who are, nonetheless, loved and redeemed by God. While we still battle with temptations to self-centeredness and greed, the self-sacrificing and humble grace of God offers a new kind of life and love that will transform our lives.

When we look at the Cross, we see the great and complete sacrifice done for us and realize that we can add nothing to what it offers us in Christ. But this does not mean that we shouldn’t do something in response to what we have been given in Christ. On the contrary, we *must respond*, and what better way to respond to the love that has been shown us than by showing love to others?

Read 1 John 3:16, 17. How do these verses so powerfully capture what our response to the Cross should be?
Our Common Humanity

By His ministry and His teaching, Jesus urged a radical inclusiveness. All who sought His attention with honest motives—whether women with bad reputations, tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, Roman centurions, religious leaders, or children—He welcomed with genuine warmth and care. As the early church was to discover in transformative ways, this included the offer of the gift of salvation.

As the first believers slowly recognized the inclusiveness of the gospel, they were not merely adding good works for others onto their faith as a “nice” thing to do. It was core to their understanding of the gospel, as they had experienced it in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. As they wrestled with the issues and questions that arose, first individually for leaders such as Paul and Peter (see, for example, Acts 10:9–20), then as a church body at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15), they began to realize the dramatic shift this good news had brought into their understanding of God’s love and inclusiveness and how that should be lived out in the lives of those who profess to follow Him.

What do each of the following texts teach us about our common humanity? How should each idea influence our attitude toward others?

Mal. 2:10

Acts 17:26

Rom. 3:23

Gal. 3:28

Galatians 3:28 is a theological summary of the practical story Jesus told about the good Samaritan. Rather than arguing about whom we are obligated to serve, just go and serve, and perhaps even be prepared to be served by those we might not expect to serve us. The common element of the global human family is realized at a higher level in the common family of those who are bound together by the gospel, by the saving love of God that calls us to oneness in Him: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free” (1 Cor. 12:13, NIV).
The Everlasting Gospel

The transforming invitation and appeal of the gospel “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6, NIV) has continued throughout Christian history. However, Revelation describes a renewed proclamation of this message—the good news about Jesus and all that entails—at the end of time.

**Read** Revelation 14:6, 7. How is the common understanding of the gospel—most commonly summarized by John 3:16—included in the angel’s specific message in verse 7?

Revelation 14:7 brings together three key elements we have already noted in this study of God’s concern about evil, poverty, and oppression throughout the Bible story:

*Judgment.* The appeal for judgment—for justice to be done—has been a repeated call of those who have been oppressed throughout history. Fortunately, the Bible portrays God as One who hears the cries of those in distress. As often expressed in the Psalms, for example, those who are being treated unfairly regard judgment as good news.

*Worship.* The writings of the Hebrew prophets often link the subjects of worship and good deeds, particularly when comparing the worship of those who claimed to be God’s people with the wrongs that they committed and continued. In Isaiah 58, for example, God explicitly stated that the worship He most desired was acts of kindness and care for the poor and needy (see Isa. 58:6, 7).

*Creation.* As we have seen, one of the foundational elements of God’s call for justice is the common family of humanity, that we are all created in His image and loved by Him, that we all have value in His sight and that no one should be exploited or oppressed for the unjust gain and greed of another. It seems clear that this end-time proclamation of the gospel is a broad and far-reaching call to accept the rescue, redemption, and restoration that God wants for fallen humanity. Hence, even amid the issues regarding true and false worship, and persecution (see Rev. 14:8–12), God will have a people who will stand for what is right, for the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, even amid the worst of evil.

**How can we find ways of ministering to those in need while at the same time sharing with them both the hope and the warning that are found in the three angels’ messages?**

“God claims the whole earth as His vineyard. Though now in the hands of the usurper, it belongs to God. By redemption no less than by creation it is His. For the world Christ’s sacrifice was made. ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.’ John 3:16. It is through that one gift that every other is imparted to men. Daily the whole world receives blessing from God. Every drop of rain, every ray of light shed on our unthankful race, every leaf and flower and fruit, testifies to God’s long forbearance and His great love.”—Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, pp. 301, 302.

“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free. All are brought nigh by His precious blood. (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:13.)

“Whatsoever the difference in religious belief, a call from suffering humanity must be heard and answered. . .

“All around us are poor, tried souls that need sympathizing words and helpful deeds. There are widows who need sympathy and assistance. There are orphans whom Christ has bidden His followers receive as a trust from God. Too often these are passed by with neglect. They may be ragged, uncouth, and seemingly in every way unattractive; yet they are God’s property. They have been bought with a price, and they are as precious in His sight as we are. They are members of God’s great household, and Christians as His stewards are responsible for them.”—Pages 386, 387.

Discussion Questions:

1. In seeking to do good works and help others, how can we resist the temptation to think that this somehow makes us better and gains us merit that God should recognize?

2. Is your church a community in which there is “no difference”—but all are one in Christ? How can it become more so? How inclusive of others is your church?

3. How do we find the right balance in doing good for those in need, if for no other reason than that they are in need and we can help them, while at the same time reaching out to them with the truths of the gospel? How can we learn to do both, and why is it always better to do both?

Summary: God’s love as expressed in the plan of salvation and enacted in the life and sacrifice of Jesus offers us forgiveness, life, and hope. As recipients of this grace, we seek to share this with others, not to earn salvation, but because it is what we have been created and re-created to do. As such, the gospel transforms relationships and moves us to serve, particularly those most in need.
Half Loaf of Bread

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Maya approached Valentina with a loaf of white bread after the worship service. “Valya, please take this,” she said, holding out the loaf.

Valentina, 40, looked at the bread hungrily. She hadn’t eaten a crumb of bread in more than six months. It was impossible to find bread on store shelves in Sukhumi, capital of Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia. It was 1993, and a months-long armed conflict between Georgian and Abkhaz forces had resulted in a major food shortage.

“Take this, please,” Maya, 45, said again, still offering the bread. “This is from me to you.”

Valentina slowly shook her head. “I can’t take this from you,” she said. “You need it just as badly as we do.”

Maya began to cry. “Please, take this,” she said. “You walked so far to help us. This is a gift that I want to give you, but you are refusing to accept it.”

“OK,” Valentina said, finally relenting. “But let’s cut the bread in half. You take half, and I’ll take half.”

The women divided the bread with a knife from the kitchen of the house church, where about 40 people gathered regularly to pray and read the Bible under the leadership of Valentina’s husband, Pavel Dmitrienko, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. Moments later, Valentina and Pavel left the house and started the nine-mile (15-kilometer) trek back to their home.

Valentina smiled as she thought about the bread in her purse. She looked forward to enjoying it with a simple soup of barley and water that evening.

“I will make soup, and we will eat it with real bread,” she said.

Pavel returned her happy smile. He also wanted to eat the bread.

Partway home, the couple met an elderly woman on a bridge. She was thin, and her clothing was filthy. She looked at Valentina.

“Daughter,” she said with a wavering voice, “would you happen to have a piece of bread?”

Valentina immediately removed the half loaf from her purse and presented it to the woman. “Yes, I have, dear Grandmother,” she said. “Please, take this.”

The elderly woman wept as she accepted the bread. “Thank you,” she said, tears streaking her dirty, wrinkled cheeks. “I haven’t eaten in three days. You’ve saved me from death.”

Valentina and Pavel continued on their way home. They were happy that they had been able to sacrifice their precious bread. “We gave the one thing that we wanted most of all to the grandmother and saved her life,” Valentina, now 65 and pictured left, said in an interview in her home in Belgorod, Russia. “It was a real sacrifice—and it made us happier than ever before.”
Part I: Overview

God is proactive in His desire to draw people to Himself. He seeks to make disciples who, in turn, become channels of service that exhibit His grace to the world. This intention is made clear in Titus 2:11–14: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”

In this lesson, we ponder the love of God on which the entire plan of redemption rests. We sense the compassion of Jesus for the brokenness of humanity around Him. Each of us is part of that brokenness. We recognize that when we confess our brokenness and repent, we will experience God’s grace. How we live our personal lives will then be changed. In response to God’s grace to us, we will be motivated, empowered, enabled by God to show, without condemnation, His self-sacrificing love and grace to other broken people. This love will be demonstrated when we live the everlasting gospel in word and deed in our interaction with all humanity, regardless of nationality, race, or background.

Teacher’s Aim:

Explore with your class a deeper understanding of these familiar, though life-changing and powerful, truths.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: Bring to class a picture or model of the human body. Ask the class: What does it mean to be human?

Read Genesis 1:26. Review what it means to be made in God’s image (see lesson 1).

“When Adam came from the Creator’s hand, he bore, in his physical, mental, and spiritual nature, a likeness to his Maker.”—Ellen G. White, Education, p. 15. The image of God in man became marred by sin. Thus, the purpose of redemption is to restore in humanity God’s image.

Ever since sin started, and up to now, God’s people are called to graciously reveal Christ and the gospel by partnering with Him in restoring humanity physically, mentally, and spiritually. How is this divine-human collaboration for restoration manifested in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Here is one example: the church operates almost 500 hospitals,
sanitariums, clinics, and dispensaries, not including nursing homes, orphanages, etc. Over 8,539 Adventist schools, from primary to university level, impact communities worldwide. Additionally, churches also exist to aid in restoration of the whole being. However, “[t]oo many times the church has promoted very unbiblical concepts by assigning the physical restoration of people merely to health professions, the mental part to educators, while the pastors and evangelists are expected to deal with the restoration of the spiritual part of a person. This is a very convenient arrangement, but unbiblical because a person cannot be divided into these parts. A person is a whole human being.”

If our churches do not fully proclaim “the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19) in a wholistic manner—addressing the physical, mental, and spiritual (including social) dimensions of humankind—our presentation of the gospel will be deficient. Our mission is not about merely saving souls through proclamation of the gospel, but saving and serving people wholistically.

Draw three columns on a board, if available, entitled: physical, mental, spiritual. Ask your class to think of how your church is serving your community locally in each of these three areas. List the ideas on the board in the appropriate columns. Discuss where your church can improve.

**Illustration:** Graffiti scrawled in the New York subway says, “God is alive—He just doesn’t want to get involved.” Sometimes, in the midst of our painful experiences we might be tempted to wonder if God is interested in our despair and pain. Ask your class: Because God actually wants to be involved with each of us individually, and equally loves everyone in the whole world (John 3:16), in what ways do you see Him loving you and caring for your needs? How is He using you as a channel to show His love and care for others?

Think about this admonition for God’s people to get involved: “Unless there is practical self-sacrifice for the good of others, in the family circle, in the neighborhood, in the church, and wherever we may be, then whatever our profession, we are not Christians.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 504.

**Scripture:** Jesus’ disciples believed that Jesus, as Messiah, would free Israel from Roman oppression and bring judgment and condemnation to their enemies.

But in John 3:16, Jesus overturns this misguided thinking. He reveals

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God’s love for this broken world. God gave His unique Son that, whoever believes (has faith) in Him will not perish, but inherit eternity. Then, in verse 17, Jesus makes it clear that His purpose, during His first coming, was not to bring condemnation and judgment, but to bring salvation. Jesus had to come as Redeemer before He could come as a Judge.

Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus would pay the penalty for our sins so that all humanity would have a choice between perishing and having eternal life. Given that choice, all humanity will then face Jesus at His second coming. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8.

How can we by our words and deeds proclaim, in a balanced way, the truths connected with both Christ’s first and second comings?

Scripture: In Ephesians 2:1–11, God’s people are reminded that they were dead in transgressions and sins. But, because of His great love and grace, they are made alive with Christ and reconciled to Him. (See also 2 Cor. 5:17, 18.)

Notice the same message in Ezekiel 37:1–10. God calls for the dry bones of His broken people to take heed of the fact that He will revive them. In verse 6, we see that God chooses to do this work by placing tendons, flesh, and skin on the bones and breathing upon them to bring them to life. What spiritual lessons regarding revival can you draw from this revival process?

God’s grace, which brings new life to His broken people, is given for two purposes as described in Ephesians 2:7 and Ephesians 2:10.

Revival and salvation of ourselves is not enough. We are saved “to do good works.” Even though we are not saved by such good works (Eph. 2:9), we are saved for good works (Eph. 2:10). Doing good works should not be dismissed as a way of avoiding the risks of legalism. Rather a deep understanding of grace prompts us to good works in response and in partnership with God. Everything we do must be seen through the Cross of Christ. We are not working toward salvation, but from salvation.

Discuss: How does your salvation change your community?

Illustration: The gospel is not only an “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6) for all time, it is an “all-inclusive” gospel for all humanity (John 3:16). All those who accept Jesus are saved (see also John 1:12), and God keeps on loving all those who do not accept Him. Ask your class: What additional “all” verses can you find?

Remember the song many of us grew up with in Sabbath School: “Jesus loves me, this I know”? In light of our greater understanding of the gospel, perhaps we need another verse: “Jesus loves them, this I know.” When we see God’s love encompassing others, even people we might find difficult to love, we gain a larger insight into the greatness of
the love of God. The love Jesus has for all humanity calls for amending the lyrics, as such: “Jesus loves us, this I know.”

This inclusive mind-set also will likely prompt a revision of other songs that we might sing and apply to our lives, such as “I’m So Glad Jesus Lifted Me.” Invite the class to think of other gospel songs that could use some additional inclusivity verses. If appropriate, close the class period by singing together one of these “revised” songs.

**Scripture:** Read Paul’s words about reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:14–21 together in class:

“For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

The gospel works to break down walls erected by social distinctions. It also serves to bring reconciliation, not just between God and humans but in human-to-human relationships, as well. How does this teaching apply to us? What does Paul mean when he says “that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves”? What does it mean to be “ambassadors” for Christ? Why must we become new creatures first?

**Part III: Life Application**

Wholistic biblical justice is central to the gospel and to sharing it. Sharing the gospel can be done by enacting it and living out its implications, as truly as it is done by proclamation. This intention can be accomplished most effectively with all of Christ’s wholistic ministry method, which brings “true success.” (See Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.) No matter what step we are taking in Christ’s method, we can call it “success.” Being a link in the
chain is as important as being the last link.

**Discuss:** As we seek to help others, why is it important to provide opportunities to them to follow Jesus? Or is social ministry alone enough? Why, or why not? As you ponder your answers, consider the following thought: When people accept Jesus into their lives, He will impart to them the power to make and sustain positive life changes. In fact, the gospel awakens a powerful impulse within the converted heart toward social reform. But that impulse must flow forth from an authentic relationship with Christ Jesus, a relationship in which His love abides in us and we abide in Him. United in this way, as the branch is to the Vine *(John 15:5–7)*, our efforts to improve the lives of others and lead them to Jesus will bear much fruit. “The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 100.

Ask class members to share experiences in which they directly introduced the people they served to Jesus. How should we treat people who, up to now, have not accepted Jesus? Why is it important to serve people *anyway*, just because they are in need?

**Notes**

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Living the Advent Hope

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: Luke 18:1–8; Matthew 24–25; 1 Cor. 15:12–19; Eccles. 8:14; 12:13, 14; Rev. 21:1–5; 22:1–5.

Memory Text: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58, NKJV).

Jesus announced the kingdom of God as a present reality that we can be part of today. He sent His disciples to make the same announcement and to enact His kingdom through preaching the gospel and by serving others; that is, by giving as freely as they had received (see Matt. 10:5–8).

But Jesus also was clear that His kingdom was a different kind of kingdom: “not of this world” (John 18:36)—and yet to come in full. By His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection, the kingdom of God was inaugurated, but Jesus also looked forward to a time His kingdom would fully replace the kingdoms of this world, and God’s reign would be made complete.

By definition, Adventists—those who await this coming and this kingdom—are people of hope. But this hope is not only about a future new world. While hope looks to the future, hope transforms the present now. With such hope, we live in the present as we expect to in the future, and we begin working to make a difference now in ways that fit with how we expect the world will one day be.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 14.
“How Long, O Lord?”

Throughout the Bible’s story, there is a repeated call from God’s people—particularly those experiencing slavery, exile, oppression, poverty, or other injustice or tragedy—for God to intervene. The slaves in Egypt, the Israelites in Babylon, and many others called out to God to see and hear their suffering and to right these wrongs. And the Bible offers significant examples of God’s actions to rescue and restore His people, at times even taking revenge on their oppressors and enemies. But these rescues were usually short-lived, and the various prophets continued to point forward to a final intervention, when God would put an end to evil and lift up the downtrodden. At the same time, these prophets continued the cry, “How long, O Lord?” For example, the angel of the Lord asked about the exile of the Israelites, “LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy”? (Zech. 1:12, NIV).

The Psalms are full of laments about the apparent prosperity and good fortune of the wicked while the righteous are abused, exploited, and poor. The psalmist repeatedly calls on God to intervene, trusting that the world is not presently ordered in the way God created it or desires it, and taking up the cry of the prophets and oppressed, “How long, O Lord?” (see, for example, Ps. 94:3–7).

In a sense, injustice is more difficult to endure among those who believe in a just God who desires justice for all His people. The people of God will always have a sense of impatience about evil in the world—and God’s seeming inaction is another source of impatience. Thus, the sometimes harsh questions of the prophets: “How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?” (Hab. 1:2, NIV).

A similar cry is taken up in the New Testament, where even creation itself is portrayed as groaning for God to rescue and re-create (see Rom. 8:19–22). In Revelation 6:10, this cry—“How long, O Lord?”—is taken up on behalf of those who have been martyred for their faith in God. But it is the same cry, calling on God to intervene on behalf of His oppressed and persecuted people.

Read Luke 18:1–8. What is Jesus saying about God’s response to the repeated cries and prayers of His people for Him to act in their behalf? How is this linked to the need for faith?
A Certain Kind of Hope

Religion has often been criticized for a tendency to draw believers away from life here and now toward some better afterlife. The criticism is that the focus on another realm becomes a form of sanctified escapism and renders the believer of less benefit to the world and to society. At times, believers have left themselves open to such criticism, sometimes even cultivating, preaching, and practicing these kinds of attitudes.

And, too, we have terrible examples of those in power telling the poor and oppressed just to accept their sad lot now because, when Jesus returns, all will be made right.

Yes, our world is a fallen, broken, and tragic place—and there is nothing wrong or misplaced in longing for when God will set the world right; when He will bring an end to injustice, pain, and sorrow; and when He will replace the current disorder with His glorious and righteous kingdom. After all, without that hope, without that promise, we really have no hope at all.

In His sermon on the end of the world (see Matthew 24 and 25), Jesus spent the first half of His discourse detailing the need for escape, even getting to the point of saying that “‘if those days had not been cut short, no one would survive’” (Matt. 24:22, NIV). But this is more an introduction to His explanation of the significance of these promises of God. To focus solely—or even primarily—on the “escape” aspect of the Christian hope for the future is to miss some of the deeper points Jesus was making.

Read Matthew 24 and 25. What are the most important points from your reading of this sermon of Jesus? How would you summarize Jesus’ instructions for how we are to live as we wait for His return?

What we believe about the future has important implications for how we live now. A healthy reliance on the promises of God about His future for our world should be the catalyst for energetic engagement, the spark for a life that is rich and deep and makes a difference to others.

How can and should the hope and promise of Jesus’ return impact how we live now, especially in the context of helping those in need?
Resurrection Hope

The Christian hope in the second coming of Jesus is not just about looking forward to a bright future. For the early Christians, the bodily resurrection of Jesus gave the promise of His return a solid reality. If He could come back from the dead—which they had witnessed for themselves—He would surely come back to complete the project of removing sin and its effects and renewing the world (see 1 Cor. 15:22, 23).

For the apostle Paul, the resurrection was the key element of the Advent hope. He was prepared to stake the credibility of everything he preached on this crowning miracle in the story of Jesus: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (1 Cor. 15:17, NIV). Think about his words here and how important the resurrection of Christ is to all that we hope for.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–19. How would you explain to an interested nonbeliever why the truth of the Resurrection is so pivotal to Christian hope?

Witnessing the resurrected Jesus transformed the first disciples. As we have seen, Jesus had previously sent them out to announce and enact the kingdom of God (see Matt. 10:5–8), but Jesus’ death shattered their courage and smashed their hopes. Their later commission (see Matt. 28:18–20), given by the resurrected Jesus and powered by the coming of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:1–4), set them on the path of changing the world and living out the kingdom that Jesus had established.

Freed from the power and fear of death, the early believers lived and shared courageously in the name of Jesus (see, for example, 1 Cor. 15:30, 31). The evil that brings death is the same evil that brings suffering, injustice, poverty, and oppression in all their forms. Yet, because of Jesus and His victory over death, all of this will one day end. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26, NIV).

In the end, no matter whom we help now, they will all eventually die anyway. What does this harsh truth teach us about how important it is to let others know of the hope they can find in the death and resurrection of Jesus?
Judgment Hope

Read Ecclesiastes 8:14. In what ways do you see the stark and powerful reality of what is written here?

While suffering, oppression, and tragedy are hard enough to bear in their own right, the injury or insult is harder still if it appears to be meaningless or unnoticed. The possible meaninglessness of sorrow is heavier than its initial burden. A world without record or final justice is the ultimate in cruel absurdity. No wonder atheist writers in the twentieth century lamented about what they believed was the “absurdity” of the human condition. With no hope of justice, no hope of judgment, no hope of things being made right, ours would indeed be an absurd world.

But the cry of Ecclesiastes 8:14 is not the end of the story. At the end of his protests, Solomon takes a sudden turn. In the midst of his laments about meaninglessness, he says, essentially: Hold on a minute—God is going to judge. So, everything is not meaningless; in fact, now everything and everyone matters.

Read Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14. What does this tell us about just how important all that we do here is?

The hope of judgment comes down to what one believes about the core nature of God, life, and the world in which we live. As we have seen, the Bible insists that we live in a world that God created and loves, but a world that has gone wrong and in which God is working toward His plan for re-creation, all through the life and death of Jesus. God’s judgment is a key part of His setting our world right. For those on the receiving end of so many of the world’s wrongs—those who have been marginalized, brutalized, oppressed, and exploited—the promise of judgment is surely good news.

What does it mean to you to know that, one day, and in ways we can’t imagine, the justice that we so much long for now will finally come? How can we draw hope from this promise?
No More Tears or Pain

Read Revelation 21:1–5 and Revelation 22:1–5 and spend some time trying to imagine what life will be like as described here. Why is it difficult to imagine life without sin, death, pain, and tears?

The Bible’s descriptions of our life after sin are unquestionably wonderful and glorious and no doubt barely represent what is awaiting us. Even in these verses, the descriptions are almost as much about what won’t be there as what will be. When this world is all we have known, it can be hard to imagine life without pain and suffering, death and fear, injustice and poverty.

Not only is there no more of these things, but this description adds a personal touch: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:4, NIV). In the context of those who have been saved, God’s compassion for those who have suffered throughout human history reaches a climax in this single sentence. Not only does He bring an end to their suffering, but He personally wipes away their tears.

Battered and scarred by a life of sin and a world of injustice and tragedy, we can see in the book of Revelation hints at a process of healing for all of us who have been victims of sin in many different ways. Describing the tree of life, John explains that “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2, NIV). Again, God shows His understanding of, and compassion for, what it has meant to be human, to feel, experience, witness, and even participate in the evil of this world. His plan for re-creating our world includes restoring and healing each of us.

Until then, we seek to be all that we can be in Christ, doing our part, as faltering and small as our parts might be, to minister to those around us who need what we have to offer. Whatever it is we can do—kind words, a warm meal, medical help, dental work, clothing, counseling—we should be doing with the kind, self-abnegating, self-denying, self-sacrificing love that Jesus manifested when He was here.

Of course, the world is still going to get worse and worse, despite our best efforts. Jesus knew that; yet, this truth didn’t stop Him from ministering to others, and it shouldn’t stop us, either.

“When the voice of God turns the captivity of His people, there is a terrible awakening of those who have lost all in the great conflict of life. While probation continued they were blinded by Satan’s deceptions, and they justified their course of sin. The rich prided themselves upon their superiority to those who were less favored; but they had obtained their riches by violation of the law of God. They had neglected to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to deal justly, and to love mercy. . . . They have sold their souls for earthly riches and enjoyments, and have not sought to become rich toward God. The result is, their lives are a failure; their pleasures are now turned to gall, their treasures to corruption.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 654.

“The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”—Page 678.

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain how what you have studied this week demonstrates that life, here and now, matters. Compare this with the belief some hold that we need not worry about this life and this world because God will destroy it all and start again. How can we be careful, too, not to use this truth of the promise of new existence to neglect those in need (after all, in the end, God will make it all right)? Even more important, how can we make sure we don’t become one of those who have used this truth to exploit others?

2. The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Bible prophecy expects evil, trouble, and suffering to increase as we get nearer to the return of Jesus. When such things happen, we often refer to Matthew 24. How should we view these tragedies in light of Matthew 25?

Summary: Our God will not allow evil to continue forever. The Bible’s great hope is the return of Jesus to bring an end to evil, to heal injustice and create a new world as it was meant to be. Built on the resurrection of Jesus, this hope transforms today and gives courage to our service for God and others as we wait for His return.
TV Draws People

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

As a child in New Zealand, Coralie Schofield was warned about the potential dangers of television and cautioned to stay away.

Today, she is surprised—and overjoyed—that people are flocking to Seventh-day Adventist churches across the country because of television.

“It’s the most humbling experience to see. It’s just television,” said Coralie, who has a front-row seat as the wife of Neale Schofield, manager of Hope Channel New Zealand, the local affiliate of the Adventist Church’s international channel.

“When I was growing up in the Adventist Church, my television viewing was cautiously monitored,” said Coralie, who oversees correspondence for Hope Channel. “But now viewing choices have expanded. You’ve got an Adventist channel that is witnessing 24/7.”

Viewers approach Coralie and her husband at Sabbath worship services around New Zealand. At one church, an older couple told how an adult daughter had been flipping through the channels and stopped on Hope Channel. Soon she was watching regularly, and she told her parents and sister about the channel. The whole family began to watch.

“Now the four are baptized,” Coralie said.

At another church, Coralie heard about a woman who walked in off the street one Sabbath and asked for Bible studies. When the pastor arrived at her home, he found 11 women waiting to study the Bible. The woman had invited 10 friends. Half of them have been baptized now.

Hope Channel began free-to-air broadcasts across New Zealand in 2016 with help from a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Today it has a monthly viewership of about 200,000 people, or 5 percent of the population, according to market researcher Nielsen. The Adventist Church has about 12,000 members in New Zealand, a country with a highly secularized society where the church has struggled to make inroads.

Viewers surface in unexpected places. While flying domestically, Neale Schofield was working on his laptop, and a fellow passenger saw the Hope Channel logo on his screen.

“What is your association with Hope Channel?” the stranger asked.

The man introduced himself as the pastor of another Christian denomination in Auckland and said he and his 15- and 18-year-old daughters watched only Hope Channel.

“I just find it very humbling to be part of the process—to meet these people and see the absolute joy on their faces,” Coralie said. “It is like they’ve come home.”
Part I: Overview

When considering the unprecedented growth of Christianity in the first three centuries, historian Rodney Stark concludes: “The power of Christianity lay not in its promise of otherworldly compensations for suffering in this life, as has so often been proposed. No, the crucial change that took place in the third century was the rapidly spreading awareness of a faith that delivered potent antidotes to life’s miseries here and now! The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity lay in moral imperatives such as ‘Love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive,’ and ‘When you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me.’”

As we study this week’s lesson, “Living the Advent Hope,” we are challenged to live each day with a burning hope for God’s coming kingdom, while bringing those kingdom values to bear in our lives and the lives of those whom we serve. We empathize with the prophetic cry for a hastened return of Christ in His kingdom. While we wait for the kingdom of glory, we are reminded of the opportunities for ministry right now, as we let Christ live out His life within us.

Teacher’s Aims:
- Ask your students to consider and discuss the following questions:
  - What motivates you and your church in this unjust world while you wait for the Second Coming?
  - How are you using the time you have as Christ’s coming grows closer with every passing day?

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: Read together in class Titus 2:11–14. This passage outlines two kingdoms: the kingdom of grace, and the kingdom of glory. Ask the class the following:

1. Explain what we mean by “kingdom.”
   Answer: A government or territory that has a king as its head; it contains a throne, citizens, laws, etc.

2. What is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven?
   Answer: It is the domain over which the sovereignty of God or Christ extends, whether in heaven or on earth, as demonstrated by

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3. What is the kingdom of grace?
   *Answer:* The kingdom of grace is a phase of God’s rule in which His extended favor toward us (His grace) enables us to become His children and citizens of the kingdom. Our access to this kingdom is through faith in Jesus as Savior, Lord, and King. The kingdom of grace existed before “the foundation of the world” *(1 Pet. 1:20)*. This kingdom is now, and leads to the kingdom of glory.

4. What is the kingdom of glory?
   *Answer:* “When the Son of man shall come in his glory . . . then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory” *(Matt. 25:31, emphasis supplied)*. The kingdom of glory begins at the second coming of Jesus and the final judgment—the not yet.

5. Read Matthew 3:1–12 and Matthew 11:2–6. What was John the Baptist expecting during the first coming of Jesus? Why was he confused with Jesus’ approach and mission?
   *Answer:* “Like the Saviour’s disciples, John the Baptist did not understand the nature of Christ’s kingdom. He expected Jesus to take the throne of David; and as time passed, and the Saviour made no claim to kingly authority, John become perplexed and troubled. . . . Like the prophet Elijah, in whose spirit and power he had come to Israel, he looked for the Lord to reveal Himself as a God that answereth by fire. . . . And now from his dungeon he [John] watched for the Lion of the tribe of Judah to cast down the pride of the oppressor, and to deliver the poor and him that cried. But Jesus seemed to content Himself with gathering disciples about Him, and healing and teaching the people. He was eating at the tables of the publicans, while every day the Roman yoke rested more heavily upon Israel, while King Herod and his vile paramour worked their will, and the cries of the poor and suffering went up to heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 215. Therefore, John was confused.

6. What kingdom did Jesus come to live out during His first coming?
   *Answer:* The kingdom of grace, with its wholistic restoration of humanity. The judgment was for His second coming—the ushering in of His kingdom of glory. Read and discuss some sample kingdom-of-grace passages in Mark 5:21–42 and Luke 19:1–10, et cetera. Also, see Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 346–348, for background information.

7. Christ’s church must position itself to foster heaven on earth. Why
must the church do that now, while we wait for His coming?

Answer: In His prayer, Jesus said, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Again, read Matthew 25:31–46.

8. How is social action “a living witness to our soon-returning Lord”?

Answer: “When we take a stand for justice, compassion, and healing, we demonstrate the values of God’s coming Kingdom.”

Illustration: Two “Kingdom” Illustrations:

1. Patricia in South Africa demonstrates coming kingdom-of-glory values, and the kingdom of grace now, as she lovingly cares for nearly 20 children who have contracted AIDS or have lost their parents to AIDS. She does this in her home. When asked why she does it, she replied, “I want them to have a little bit of the Second Coming now.” (How does this example of the kingdom of grace beautifully demonstrate the way the kingdom of glory will be?)

2. The following claim was advertised on the sides of a plumbing van in South Africa: “There is no place too deep, too dark, or too dirty for us to handle.” (How does this slogan aptly express the setting and the work of the kingdom of grace?)

Illustration: Some feel that any concern for ecology and caring for social needs is a waste of time because this world will be destroyed at the end of time anyway.

Some Christians today see this world as a sinking ship. Not only do they see no use in charting a course on such a dire vessel, they see no sense in bailing out the water and plugging up the leaks in order to make the ship seaworthy again. Instead, they spend their time on life rafts, at a safe distance, warning the ship’s passengers that the vessel will soon sink. These doomsayers view any attempt to repair the ship (i.e., improve social conditions in the world) as pointless because Christ will destroy the present world order at His Coming.

Comment on the “sanctified escapism” illustrated above. Is such a philosophical outlook biblically defensible? Why, or why not?

Scripture: Miah Arnold wrote an article in The Michigan Quarterly Review (vol. 50, no. 1 [Winter 2011]) entitled “You Owe Me.” It describes the total nonsensical injustice of the suffering of innocent, dying children

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in the Anderson Cancer Center in Texas. Arnold writes, “I was, like everybody else, trying to make sense of what is nonsensical.”

Discuss the meaning of this statement by Clifford Goldstein, concerning the tragedies in the world—the nonsense of evil: “However bad these tragedies, it would be worse if there were sense to them.” Ask the class: Why is that so?

Read this statement from The Great Controversy to your class and discuss: “It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin.”—Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, pp. 492, 493.

Read and discuss 1 Corinthians 4:5, 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, Revelation 21:4, and other passages the class can think of that indicate that, in His designated time, God will surely bring justice and do away with sin.

Currently this sinful world is full of oppression, suffering, and sadness. While we wait for the designated time of Jesus’ second coming, let us continue the process of undoing the devil’s work as did Jesus (1 John 3:8). His body, the church, has been sent into the world to “preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound . . . and they shall repair the waste cities. . . . But ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord: men shall call you the Ministers of our God” (Isa. 61:1–4, 6).

Part III: Life Application

To be an Adventist Christian who daily lives in the light of the Advent Hope means to avoid two extremes: (1) overexcitement about our expectancy of Christ’s second coming that writes off the present world as doomed, and therefore militates against our putting forth any effort into working for the good of the society in which we live; and (2) indifference to Christ’s advent that makes the present world the main focus for which to live and work. For these indifferent ones, the present world is not a waiting room to the coming world, but a living room to occupy comfortably in a relaxed manner.

Invite the class members to discuss the following: In which “room” do you find yourselves? As you actively wait for the “kingdom of glory,” how is your church progressing in creating a “kingdom of grace” in the “waiting room” (inside and outside of your church) that points to the “kingdom of glory”?

In the “kingdom of glory,” there will be a “tree of life” with leaves that are for “the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2; also Ezek. 47:12). Why

5 Arnold, “You Owe Me,” Michigan Quarterly Review.
would nations need to be healed if evil has been wiped out of existence? As does the healing river of Ezekiel 47:9, the water of life produces healing wherever it goes—even in heaven! Invite class members to share stories of how your church or other churches are a “health place” inside and outside.

Notes
To Love Mercy

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: Matt. 6:25–33; James 1:5–8; 2:15, 16; Isa. 52:7; 1 John 3:16–18; Isa. 58:1–10.

Memory Text: “Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness; he is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous. A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion” (Psalm 112:4, 5, NKJV).

As we have seen, the Bible is filled with passionate descriptions of God’s concern for the poor and oppressed, as well as calls for His people to work in their behalf. Despite the attention given to these issues, this biblical mandate has seen just sporadic and partial fulfillment and will be made complete only with the return of Christ and the supernatural events that follow.

Until then evil persists in many forms, fueled by the dark spiritual influences of the devil and his angels. This evil is often made most visible in poverty, violence, oppression, slavery, exploitation, selfishness, and greed. In such a world, our communities, our churches, and our families need to stand up against these evils no matter how hard at times it is to do so. In response to the love and commands of God, living in light of the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus and empowered and guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we must be compassionate, creative, and courageous in seeking “‘to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God’ ” (Mic. 6:8, NIV).

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 21.
Kingdom Priorities

As was made clear in the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers, those who choose to live as members of the kingdom of God live by a different set of values and priorities than does the world.

Read Matthew 6:25–33. What is the reassurance we are given in these verses, and how should this reassurance impact our priorities?

Jesus taught that “‘life [is] more than food, and the body more than clothes’” (Matt. 6:25, NIV). These things are important, of course, but we must see them in light of the kingdom of God, which means we must reprioritize our lives in real and practical ways. When we recognize the call throughout the Bible to lift up and care for others, this call also becomes one of our priorities as we who seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Ideally this call should help us focus less on ourselves and more on others.

This different set of priorities also changes our relationship with those in power over us and over the oppressed. While the Bible instructs Christians to respect and obey their governments, as far as possible (see, for example, Rom. 13:1–7), there comes a point where we need to echo the words of Peter: “‘We must obey God rather than human beings!’” (Acts 5:29, NIV). Jesus put these two principles in balance in His answer to those trying to trick Him on this question: “‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’” (Matt. 22:21, NIV).

Those who have power, whether in government or otherwise, often enforce and maintain that power by threats or force. As we have seen in the life of Jesus, faithful living does not always and in every situation require passivity in the face of evil. For example, dealing with slavery in America, Ellen G. White wrote: “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.”—Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1, pp. 201, 202.

Where is the line between obedience to authorities and standing up for those who might be victims of an oppressive authority?
Compassion Fatigue

Resisting the possibility of letting our good intentions be overwhelmed by “all the trouble in the world,” many of us would like to do more to make a difference in the lives of the suffering. There are a number of attitudes and actions that can help us make positive responses to those in need.

Compassion: As we have seen, recognizing and empathizing with the pain of those who are hurting are first steps toward action. We need to grow and maintain our sensitivity to the suffering. Today, people talk about “compassion fatigue,” the idea that we are so exposed to sorrow and tragedy that many of us become weary of the many causes that call for our emotional energy and financial support. Jesus was keenly aware of the evil and pain around Him; yet, He remained compassionate. So must we.

Education: 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.

Prayer: When we see a problem, our first thought is to take “practical” action. But the Bible reminds us that prayer is practical. We can make a difference in the lives of the poor and oppressed by our prayers for them and for those who have power over them (see 1 Tim. 2:1, 2), as well as seeking God’s guidance for how we can best respond further in offering help (see Prov. 2:7, 8).

Expectations: Another important element in working to alleviate suffering is to have proper expectations, given the complexity of social, political, and personal circumstances. Our hope should be to give people choices and opportunities that they might not have had otherwise. Sometimes what people do with these opportunities will disappoint us, but we must respect those choices. In whatever way we might try to work in behalf of the suffering, our guiding principle must be to “‘do to others what you would have them do to you’” (Matt. 7:12, NIV).

Read James 1:5–8. What role should prayer play in Christian action? What does James 2:15, 16 suggest about how we can contribute to answering our prayers for others?
Generosity

“God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, NIV), and generous giving is an important aspect of the Christian life. While we must allow the Bible to challenge our giving and financial priorities, generosity is more than just throwing money at a cause, no matter how worthy.

Instead, generosity is one of the largest of life attitudes and a key quality of “those who fear the LORD,” as noted a number of times in Psalm 112: “Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice” (Ps. 112:5, NIV).

What do the following texts teach about generosity toward those in need? Lev. 25:35–37, Ps. 119:36, 2 Cor. 8:12–15, 1 John 3:16–18, 1 Tim. 6:17–19.

In his New Testament letters, Paul regularly cited the generosity of God—expressed most fully in Jesus’ giving His life for us—as the source of the Christian hope. In turn, His death for us also was the motivation for our living a life of generosity toward others: “I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ” (Philem. 1:6, NIV).

Generosity is an attitude toward life that is large, bold, and embracing. So much in our individual lives, societies, and cultures prompts us to focus on ourselves, to keep as much as we can for ourselves. And let’s face it, for most of us the default mode is always self, self, self anyway.

If it is real, our faith will cause us to die to self and live more for others. Our faith helps us imagine the world and its people as God sees them, in both their goodness and their brokenness, and it impels us to seek to help those in need, to whatever degree possible.

As a quality of living, generosity is readily appreciated by fundraisers and charities. Such generosity is measurable and directly practical. But large donations do not necessarily indicate a generous life (see Mark 12:41–44). A generous life is larger and more valuable than any donation. We need better to appreciate and cultivate a generous spirit in all that we do. For most people, generosity doesn’t come naturally; it is grace that we need to express in our lives proactively and purposely, regardless of the pull of our sinful, selfish humanity.

Besides giving money, even generously, what are other ways that we should manifest a generous spirit?
Peacemaking

Read Matthew 5:9. In the kind of world we live in, how do we do what Jesus says here? Ultimately, how successful can we be? See Mark 13:7.

Violent conflict is a significant cause of suffering. Included in the costs of war are the direct victims and shattered lives, the attention and resources devoted to military machinery that would be better diverted to alleviating other human needs and the ongoing suffering of war survivors and veterans, even among the “victors.” Then there are the many smaller conflicts that scar countless lives in families and communities. As such, a passion for justice cannot ignore the mandate to peacemaking.

At the heart of the gospel of Jesus is God’s gracious and grand act of peacemaking, reconciling sinful human beings to their Creator (see 2 Cor. 5:18–21). And the reconciliation we receive becomes the pattern for us to be “ambassadors” for this reconciliation for others, as well.

Read Isaiah 52:7. How do we live out this text too?

The gospel of peace also becomes the motivation, pattern, and resource for working for peace in our violent world: “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, p. 28.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’” (Matt. 5:9, NIV). Taking this further, not only did He affirm the commandment against killing, He said that we should not be angry or hold a grudge (see Matt. 5:21–26) and that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (see Matt. 5:43–48), meaning that we should take active steps to seek their good. There are many inspiring stories of people who have devoted their lives to peacemaking in the world’s trouble spots, bringing glimpses of reconciliation and healing, and often alleviating much of the injustice and suffering these conflicts have brought.

What are ways that your church, at its local level, could act in the role of peacemaker?
A Voice for the Voiceless

Solomon wrote that there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak” (Eccles. 3:7, NIV). He was right, and finding that balance is not simple for any of us. However, when it comes to speaking for the oppressed and being a voice for the voiceless and seeking to overcome evil with good, is it possible that as a church we have erred on the side of too much silence when our voice should have been heard?

Christians have often talked about being the hands and feet of Jesus, referring to the call to practical service for others as Jesus would have us do. But in the prophetic role as demonstrated in the Bible, God’s first call is for men and women to be His voice—and in speaking on behalf of God, also speaking up on behalf of those God wants to defend (see Ps. 146:6–10).

Read Isaiah 58:1–10. What should this message, given in its specific time and place and context, say to us today in another time, place, and context? How much has really changed between the time Isaiah wrote this and our world today?

The prophets’ call to justice was never a path to popularity. But motivated by their commission from God, understanding God’s passion for justice, sympathizing with the plight of the poor and oppressed, and seeking the best for their society, these prophets dared to be a voice for the voiceless in their time and place, despite opposition, discomfort, and danger (see 1 Pet. 3:17).

Based on our understanding of the gospel and the call to reflect Jesus to the world, Seventh-day Adventists also have many good things to offer in regard to dealing with the evil in the world.

Such as: “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.

“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, p. 137.

“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, p. 551.

Discussion Questions:

1. As we have seen in this week’s study, the gospel continues to be the template and motivation for acting on behalf of others as Jesus acted on our behalf. How has this expanded your understanding and appreciation of the good news of what God has done for us and how He shows His love for us?

2. 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?

3. What one step or action discussed in this week’s study would you like to take in your life and community? How can you make it happen?

4. What issue of evil and oppression have you decided to pray for in your community or in the wider world?

Summary: Becoming a follower of Jesus will change our lives in many ways, including producing in us a passion to join in with God’s active concern for the poor and downtrodden. Never an easy task and rarely popular, this will change our priorities and motivate us to take active steps to heal the hurt in the world around us.
U.S. Biker Embraces Sabbath

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

The invitation startled Richard Smith as he stopped at a senior center to collect meals to deliver on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle to retirees in the U.S. state of West Virginia.

“Would you like to go to the Seventh-day Adventist church with me?” asked Ruth, who also worked at the senior center.

“I don’t know,” Richard said. “I don’t know anything about the Adventist Church.”

Richard, 72, had visited various Sunday churches during two marriages and two jobs. But he had never been baptized. He didn’t know which church to join, and he often thought, If God wakes me up one day and says go to a different church, I want to be able to pack up and move.

So, when Ruth invited him to church, he replied, “Let’s try my churches first.”

He asked Ruth, a divorced nurse six years his junior, for her opinion after visiting a church together on Sunday.

“If I just wanted breakfast, it was good,” Ruth said about the church’s doughnuts and fruit juice.

In reply to his query after the second church, Ruth noted that the pastor had spent much more time on the announcements than the sermon.

Ruth’s observations gave Richard a new perspective, and he finally agreed to go with her to an Adventist church. Soon he began to ply its pastor, Bill Hunt, with questions about the Bible, and the answers amazed him.

“It was like I had this veil over my head,” Richard said. “I could see through it, but everything was kind of hazy. Bill yanked that veil off my head, and I said, ‘Wow, things are as clear as a bell!’ ”

Richard also shared a common interest with the pastor; they both are bikers.

Then the pastor invited Richard to attend an evangelistic series—one of 35 evangelistic series in West Virginia that were funded by a 2015 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Richard attended with Ruth and was baptized. In all, eight people were baptized after the 2016 meetings at the Huntington church.

Today, Richard, pictured left, is 72 and sharing his love for Jesus with anyone who will listen.

“The Lord takes such good care of me, and I think, Why?” he said. “I know He takes care of everybody, but why? It’s like I am sitting down at the table, looking at my plate, and everything on it I like to eat. What more can I ask for?”
Part I: Overview

We do not generate mercy—we reflect God’s mercy. Mercy is part of God’s response to human frailty. Also, God shows mercy through His servants. The Hebrew word for “mercy” is *hesed*, which means “loyal love” or “loving-kindness.” The Greek word is *eleos*, which means to have a deep concern for the welfare of others. It is a quality of God seen in both the Old and New Testaments. It is significant that, in the instructions for the building of the Old Testament sanctuary, in Exodus 25, God tells Moses to build a “mercy seat” of pure gold as a cover for the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place (*Exod. 25:21*), even though “mercy seat” is a different word from *hesed*.

In this lesson, we will find biblical assurance that those who serve God can be free of worry as they focus on kingdom priorities. We will examine attitudes and strategies that guide the merciful and generous in coping effectively with the challenges and opportunities of service. We will note the calling and role of merciful people to facilitate reconciliation and peacemaking, as well as speaking up for those who have no voice. If you have a *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, refer to the church’s advice on peacefully maintaining an uncompromising stand for justice and right in civic affairs.1

In class, explore your church’s progress in responding to pleas for mercy. Try to evaluate the effectiveness of your church in loving mercy and showing it.

Part II: Commentary

**Scripture:** Our ministry to the world is not only in the realm of doctrines and ideas. It must be demonstrated in 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*, p. 417.

Jesus’ love and prioritization of showing mercy was demonstrated clearly in His parables and healings, both physical and spiritual. For example, in the end-time parable of the sheep and the goats (*Matt. 25:31–40*), Jesus links salvation with merciful ethics. This link surfaces

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again in the story of the spiritual healing of Zacchaeus. Christ’s mercy and grace won Zacchaeus’ heart. Zacchaeus responded by pledging to be merciful by giving half of his goods to the poor and four-fold restoration to anyone he had cheated. Jesus then announced to him, “This day is salvation come to this house” (Luke 19:9). Again, Jesus links salvation with merciful social ethics—a kingdom priority.

In His ministry, Jesus appeared to devote more time to healing than to teaching and regularly showed mercy by healing the demon-possessed, the disfigured, blind, deaf, dumb, and the wounded in spirit. “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.”

Invite your class members to discuss the implications of the quotation above. Invite them to read James 1:26, 27 and James 2:15–18 aloud as a prelude to the discussion.

**Illustration:** Doing justice and loving mercy (Mic. 6:8) might seem to be impossible tasks in light of the overwhelming and colossal problems in society.

**Discuss:** How can your church deal with compassion fatigue by resisting the temptation to do nothing, because you cannot do everything?

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.

Even though you would get tired and overwhelmed attempting to help every needy person and situation you encounter, start somewhere. You can make a difference to those whom you help.

**Scripture:** Showing mercy requires education because many situations are complicated and messy. In time, mercy will collide with an opposing force: injustice. Against this overpowering force, acts of mercy can seem woefully inadequate. What good is a cup of soup and a sandwich when a severe addiction controls a man’s life?

Having to contend inevitably with the overpowering force of injustice may be why the Bible places equal emphasis on both mercy and justice. God’s basic design for showing mercy is summarized in Micah 6:8, which enjoins God’s people “to do justice, and to love mercy.” Doing justice means treating others with fairness and reasonableness. It means making decisions that are fair and reasonable too. Loving mercy means being compassionate, kind, and forgiving to someone over whom you

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have power. Putting these two virtues together, in keeping with the command in Micah, leads us to wholistic, empowering involvement with those whom we serve. For example, the addict needs both food and treatment. Street kids need friendship and jobs.

What are the implications of the above concepts for your church’s ministry strategy? What Bible stories of Jesus’ healing miracles show individuals cooperating with the Great Physician in their healing or betterment? For example, see Luke 17:11–14, John 5:1–9, John 8:2–11, and John 9:1–7.

Illustration: To illustrate the importance of moving from relief (giving a fish) to individual development (teaching someone to fish), discuss the following story. What guidelines for generosity are given?

One advocate for social reform coordinated an adopt-a-family program for urban families who could not afford to buy Christmas presents for their children. On Christmas Day, the generous gift givers would deliver gifts to their adopted city families. One Christmas, the advocate happened to be in the living rooms of needy families when the gift givers in this adopt-a-family program arrived. The children were very excited and happy about the beautifully wrapped gifts, but the mothers were reserved, though gracious. If there was a dad in the house, he vanished out the back door when he saw the gift givers coming. These parents were suffering from loss of dignity and pride. Their failure as providers for their children was laid bare right in their own home.

After this experience, this advocate’s organization started a family store. Instead of delivering wrapped gifts to their adopted city family, the merciful gift givers were asked to bring an unwrapped gift to the family store, where a Christmas toy shop was set up. A small price would be placed on each item. Parents from the community were invited to Christmas shop. Those who had no money could work at the store and earn what would be needed to purchase gifts for their family, for a cash flow had been generated from selling the gift donations. On Christmas the parents could experience the joy of watching their children open gifts that the parents had provided with their own hands. The name of the program was changed from Adopt-A-Family to “Pride for Parents.” Let the poor give too!

Scripture: Peacemaking is an act of mercy. Because of His mercy, Jesus offers peace to the troubled in heart (John 14:27). God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ. He has given His people the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18) to help facilitate peace between people in fulfillment of His mandate to “strive for peace with all men” (Heb. 12:14, RSV). God even instructed the Israelites, “And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives” (Jer. 29:7).
Peacemaking is linked with being in God’s family. *(Matt. 5:9).* Those who foster God’s Messianic peace will receive the reward of being His sons and daughters, for they reflect His character. This peace is based on the Hebrew word *shalom,* which means total well-being, personally and communally. God wants His people to bring this *shalom* to the communities they serve.

Ask the class to share ways that their church has been a peacemaker—internally and externally.

**Part III: Life Application**

Well-intentioned and merciful people can turn attempts to show mercy into “toxic charity.” Mercy is not a destination but is only the door, an opening to make a difference. Mercy that does not move in the direction of justice—which includes development of the recipients of our mercy—will do more harm than good to both the recipient and the giver. Doing *for,* rather than *with* those who are in need all too often produces toxic charity. We must deeply believe that every person, every community, no matter how broken, has something of worth to bring to the table. Doing for a community what it can do for itself is damaging to community life as well as to an individual.

Solution: Merciful intervention must be community driven rather than volunteer driven, and community led rather than volunteer led.

If your class is large enough, break into pairs and discuss ideas for real-life application of the aforementioned concepts. Have students role play, starting a plan to meet a need that they have discovered in their community. Or have them evaluate an existing community intervention with which they are acquainted. Ask them also to consider these questions (write their ideas on the lines provided):

1. **In what ways is capable indigenous (i.e., local, native) leadership behind the effort?**

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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?

In closing, have class members share with the whole group what they discussed.

Notes
A Community of Servants

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: 2 Cor. 2:14–16, Exod. 32:1–14, 1 Pet. 2:12, Phil. 2:15, Eph. 2:19, Heb. 10:23–25.

Memory Text: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works” (Hebrews 10:23, 24, NKJV).

In seeking to fulfill the Christian mission, we should not underestimate the potential of the church as an organized community of believers. We have already noted the challenges that we can face when seeking to deal with injustice and poverty. But by working with fellow believers in a community of faith, we can be a blessing to those around us.

The temptation is that when we get together as a church we become distracted with keeping the church itself going, forgetting that the church exists to serve the world in which God has placed it. As a church body, we must not ignore the suffering and evil that exists all around us. If Christ didn’t ignore it, we must not either. We must be faithful to our mandate to preach the gospel, and along with that preaching comes the work of helping the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, and the helpless.

Together as a church community and organization, we are the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:12–20). As such, we as a community should walk as Jesus walked, reach out as Jesus did, and serve as the hands, feet, voice, and heart of Jesus in the world today.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 28.
Agents of Change

We have seen in the early chapters of Acts how the first Christian believers established a different kind of community, caring for those in need among them, and together reaching out to those outside the community, offering them help where needed and inviting them to join in with what God was doing among them.

Adding to Jesus’ descriptions of salt and light, Paul uses a number of metaphors to portray the church’s action in the world. Among others, he describes those who live as God’s people as a sacrifice (see Rom. 12:1), as Christ’s body (see 1 Cor. 12:12–20), as ambassadors (see 2 Cor. 5:18–20), and as perfume (see 2 Cor. 2:14–16). Each of these images talks about a role as representatives or agents of God’s kingdom even now, even amid a world ravaged by the great controversy.

**Review** each of these “representative” descriptions above. Which best describes how you would like to represent God and His ways in your community, and why?

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Each of these images has action associated with them, not as a means of being acceptable to God but as people already accepted by God through Christ’s sacrifice, who have responded to God’s love and grace by being His agents in a hurt and dying world.

But they also can be considered on a still deeper level: because God’s love and grace is what the kingdom of God is about, when we act in such a way, reflecting to others in love and grace, we enact and participate in that eternal kingdom, even now.

In international law, a national embassy is considered part of the nation it represents, even when physically located in a foreign country, perhaps a long distance from the home nation. In a similar way, enacting the ways of God’s kingdom offers glimpses of that eternal reality here and now and, as such, points to and is a foretaste of the final defeat of evil. And by so doing—as Christ’s ambassadors, as Christ’s agents—we can experience the reality of His love and justice in our own lives, in the church, and in the lives of those we seek to serve.

**Read 2 Corinthians 2:16. What is the difference between the two aromas, and how can we know which one we are?**

____________________________________________________
A Servant Remnant

The standard definition of the remnant people identified in Bible prophecy is found in Revelation 12:17: those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (NKJV; see also Rev. 14:12). In the Bible’s story, these features mark out God’s people in the later stages of earth’s history. But, also in the Bible stories, we can find examples of how such a remnant acts and particularly how such people serve others.

Consider the example of Moses in this regard. Read Exodus 32:1–14. What is the comparison between Moses in this story and the remnant described in Revelation 12:17?

In His anger at the people of Israel, God was threatening to destroy them and transfer the promises given to Abraham—that his descendants would become a great nation—to Moses and his family (see Exod. 32:10).

But Moses didn’t want that. Instead, Moses had the boldness to argue with God, suggesting that for the Lord to act as He was threatening to act would make Him look bad (see Exod. 32:11–13). But then Moses went further and put himself on the line to urge his case with God.

Moses had been struggling to lead these people through the wilderness. They had been complaining and bickering almost from the moment he led them to freedom. And yet, Moses says to God, “If You are not able to forgive them, ‘then blot me out of the book you have written’” (Exod. 32:32, NIV). Moses offered to give up eternity to save those with whom he had shared his journey.

What a powerful example of self-sacrificing intercession in behalf of those who don’t deserve it! And what a powerful symbol of the entire plan of salvation!

“As Moses interceded for Israel, his timidity was lost in his deep interest and love for those for whom he had, in the hands of God, been the means of doing so much. The Lord listened to his pleadings, and granted his unselfish prayer. God had proved His servant; He had tested his faithfulness and his love for that erring, ungrateful people, and nobly had Moses endured the trial. His interest in Israel sprang from no selfish motive. The prosperity of God’s chosen people was dearer to him than personal honor, dearer than the privilege of becoming the father of a mighty nation. God was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and his integrity, and He committed to him, as a faithful shepherd, the great charge of leading Israel to the Promised Land.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 319.

What does this tell us about how, to the degree possible, we should deal with the erring around us?
Reaching Souls

Church discussions sometimes seem to get stuck on the apparent need to choose between a focus on social work or gospel work, either charity or witnessing, either justice or evangelism. But when we better understand each of these concepts and observe the ministry of Jesus, the difference breaks down, and we realize that preaching the gospel and working to help others are closely linked.

In one of Ellen White’s best-known statements, she explained it like this: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’ . . .

“The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice.”—Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, p. 143.

As we have seen, these two kingdom actions—justice and evangelism—were closely entwined, not only in Jesus’ ministry but in Jesus’ first commission to His disciples: “ ‘As you go, proclaim this message: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give’ ” (Matt. 10:7, 8, NIV). In short, one of the best ways to reach others with our message is to minister to their needs.

Read 1 Peter 2:12 and Philippians 2:15. What do Peter and Paul say about the witnessing power of good works done by God’s people?

With a broader understanding of God’s good news, evangelism does not make sense in the absence of a passion for people. Verses such as 1 John 3:16–18 and James 2:16 emphasize the contradiction in preaching the gospel without living it out. At its best, evangelism—bringing the good news of hope, rescue, repentance, transformation, and God’s all-embracing love—is an expression of justice.

Both evangelism and the desire for justice spring from recognizing God’s love for lost, broken, and hurt people—a love also that grows in our hearts under the influence of God in our lives. We don’t choose one action or another; instead, we work with God in working with people, meeting their real needs, and using whatever resources God has entrusted us with.

How can we make sure, though, that as we do good works for others, we don’t neglect preaching the good news of salvation, as well?
Grace Within the Church

At the beginning of the book of Job, God points to Job and his faithfulness to Him as a demonstration of the goodness of God’s ways and His dealings with fallen humanity (see Job 1:8). It is remarkable that God allows His reputation to hang on how His people live on this earth. But Paul expanded this faith God has in some of His “saints” to include the community of the church: “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 3:10, NIV).

Read Ephesians 2:19. What do you think is included in the idea of describing the church community as the “household” of God? How should this description influence how the organized church operates?

In any community or organization, how that entity treats its members reflects the foundational values of the group. As the household of God, the body of Christ and the community of the Spirit, the church has the highest of callings to live out and live up to: “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people” (1 Cor. 14:33, NIV).

The values of justice, grace, and love—as demonstrated in God’s justice, grace, and love—should govern all that happens within the church. From local church communities to the worldwide church organization, these principles should guide church leaders in how they lead, make decisions, and care for the “least of these” among the church community. They also should guide how we resolve the disputes that arise from time to time among members. If we can’t treat those among us with fairness and dignity, how are we going to do that with others, as well?

Where the church organization employs people, it should be a generous employer, valuing people before any other consideration and working against unfair treatment of members. Churches should be safe places, with all church members doing what they can to protect the vulnerable. And, as we see in the early church, members of the church community should be especially prepared to give to support those of their church “family” who are suffering or in need.

Jesus gave this as a command, saying that this would not only transform the community of faith, but it also would demonstrate the reality of their faith to those looking on: “ ‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ ” (John 13:34, 35, NIV).
Encourage Each Other to Good Works

Even with the best motivations and intentions, and believing that we are on the side of God and goodness, working for the Lord can be difficult and discouraging. The sadness and pain of our world are real. This is one reason we need a church community. Jesus modeled this kind of supportive community with His disciples. He rarely sent people out on their own, and even when that happened they would soon come together again to share their stories and renew their energy and courage.

Read Hebrews 10:23–25. Hebrews 10:25 is the best known of these verses; so, what do the preceding two verses add to our understanding of the well-known verse? What are some of the ways in which we can encourage each other “toward love and good deeds” (NIV)?

In almost any task, cause, or project, a group of people working together can achieve more than all of those people working individually. This reminds us again of the picture of the church as the body of Christ (see Rom. 12:3–6), in which we all have different but complementary roles to play. When we each do what we do best, but do it in a way that allows our influences to work together, we can trust by faith that our lives and work will make a difference for eternity.

While results are important when seeking to do what is right—the results are about people and their lives—we sometimes have to trust God with what the results might be. At times when working to alleviate poverty, to protect the vulnerable, to free the oppressed, and to speak up for the voiceless, we will see little progress. But we have the hope that we are working in a far greater and inevitably victorious cause: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:9, 10, NIV; see also Heb. 13:16).

This is why we are called to encourage—literally, to inspire with courage—one another. Living faithfully is both joyous and difficult. Our God of justice and our community of justice are our greatest supports and what we invite others to join.

Whom do you know or know of who regularly works at alleviating the suffering of others? How could you encourage that person or group in the good work they are doing?

“The work which the disciples did, we also are to do. Every Christian is to be a missionary. In sympathy and compassion we are to minister to those in need of help, seeking with unselfish earnestness to lighten the woes of suffering humanity. . . .

“We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and afflicted. We are to minister to the despairing, and to inspire hope in the hopeless.

“The love of Christ, manifested in unselfish ministry, will be more effective in reforming the evildoer than will the sword or the court of justice. . . . Often the heart that hardens under reproof will melt under the love of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, pp. 104, 106.

“Slavery, the caste system, unjust racial prejudices, the oppression of the poor, the neglect of the unfortunate,—these all are set forth as unchristian and a serious menace to the well-being of the human race, and as evils which the church of Christ is appointed by her Lord to overthrow.”—General Conference president A. G. Daniells, speaking of the work of Ellen G. White at her funeral, in Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, p. 473.

Discussion Questions:

1. There are many people, groups, and organizations seeking to relieve need in the world. What unique strengths, insights, and resources can the Seventh-day Adventist Church bring to this task?

2. Can you remember a time you felt encouraged and supported by your church community? Learning from that experience, how can you extend that same encouragement to others?

3. As well as the support of a church community, what other things can help you avoid becoming “weary in doing good”?

4. What are some of the justice and poverty projects and initiatives you are aware of that the Seventh-day Adventist Church around the world is currently supporting? How might you be able to contribute to this aspect of the church’s work?

Summary: Yes, as Christians, we are called to minister to the needs of others, especially others who are hurting, suffering, and oppressed. And though we have our individual responsibilities in this area, as a community focused on ministering to others, we can be much more effective working together as a church family.
Driving Passengers to Christ
By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

Byungeun Oh, a taxi driver in rural South Korea, had never led anyone to Christ after years in church, and he decided to change that.

Byungeun saw many repeat customers and began to build relationships. He collected passengers’ cell phone numbers and, with his wife, took them out to eat and visited them at home.

One Sabbath afternoon, Byungeun and his wife, Mihyun Yun, visited the home of a passenger named Mr. Choi. They chatted for a while, and Byungeun invited the man out to dinner. As they left the house, Mr. Choi pointed to a small church nearby and said he once had worshiped there.

Byungeun saw an opportunity to share his faith.

“We have a very beautiful church,” he said. “Would you like to visit it?”

Mr. Choi agreed to visit the church in the town of Chuncheon.

Byungeun drove to a local restaurant. Its Adventist owner expressed delight that Mr. Choi planned to attend church and declared that the meal of buckwheat noodles was on the house. The kindness surprised Mr. Choi and strengthened his resolve to visit the church.

After that first Sabbath, Mr. Choi returned to the church every week and was baptized.

Byungeun had won his first soul for Christ, and he didn’t intend to stop.

One day, he saw an elderly man emerge from a house as he drove past. He had seen the man before and stopped to greet him.

“I was about to call for a taxi,” the man said.

Byungeun quickly offered to take the man to his destination. As he drove, he learned that the man was named Mr. Park and decided to visit him at home that evening.

Byungeun and his wife showed up with several small gifts. Mr. Park ushered them into the living room and introduced them to his wife, Chunja An. Byungeun learned that the wife had a problem. She couldn’t attend Sunday services at her church because she worked six days a week, with only Saturdays off.

“We go to church on Saturday,” Byungeun said. “Why don’t you come with us?”

Soon she was baptized.

In two years, Byungeun, pictured left, has led three people to Christ. He is convinced that if he, a 58-year-old taxi driver, can do it, so can anyone.

“Reduce your work so you can do God’s work,” he said.

“Simplify your life, and then fill it with the joy of meeting souls.”
Part I: Overview

“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end” (John 13:1).

“Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, . . . and began to wash the disciples’ feet” (John 13:3, 5). After that, Jesus said, “I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). The Founder of the Christian church, from the very beginning, models servanthood, the modus operandi of the body of Christ.

This week’s lesson looks again at the community of servants in the early church and at the imagery that describes their actions. We also note that the remnant of God will exhibit a servant’s heart for intercession, self-sacrifice, and grace; we observe that serving the needy and preaching the gospel are interdependent; we are challenged to examine justice, grace, and love as the foundation of what it means to be a part of the “household of God;” and we are further encouraged to nurture a collaborative, supportive spirit in the ministry that God calls His church to accomplish.

Teacher’s Aims:
• Explore with your class what it means to be a community of servants for the community outside your church.
• Also, explore why your church exists and the importance of the leadership and departments of your church.
• How do these departments work together toward positive change, inside and outside the church?

Part II: Commentary

Illustration:
A Community of Servants: Belonging to “a faith community” is good for all people spiritually, mentally, emotionally, socially, and physically. Research shows that certain people who belong to a faith community and attend religious services may have longer lives.¹

Reflect: How can you help to make your church a truly healthy environment that heals and fosters abundant life (John 10:10), even potentially longer life, for all who are currently, or will be, part of your faith community?

Being part of a community of servants expands the blessings of being in a church community. The servant dimension is spelled out in Galatians 6:9, 10. Read this passage in class.

When you and your class members belong to a loving community that also is busy doing “good to all people,” internally and externally, there are wholistic blessings for the givers and receivers. In a study of 3,296 volunteers performing acts of kindness, a clear cause-and-effect relationship was established between helping and good health. The physical and mental health of the volunteers had improved significantly. For example, after performing a kind act, the volunteers sensed a rush of good feeling. This “helper’s high” is indicated by a sharp reduction in stress and the release of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers. The initial rush of “helper’s high” is followed by a longer-lasting period of emotional well-being. So, you are “doing good” to yourself too! When you add joy to your service (Ps. 100:2), the positive effect on the giver and receiver is even greater. Read Isaiah 58:10, 11.

Invite class members to share their own experiences of how joyfully helping others has reduced “compassion fatigue” by helping them personally in a wholistic way. Invite them to share how their service has helped others wholistically outside their church too.

Scripture: Ask your class to read Isaiah 42:1–4 and then its fulfillment in Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 12:18–21. This prophecy of Isaiah is clearly about the servanthood of Jesus and His mission. Isaiah 42:1–4 is the first of Isaiah’s “servant songs,” which describe the ministry of Christ, a special Servant who accomplishes God’s purpose for His people and the world. The other servant songs referring to the Messiah are found in Isaiah 49:1–13, Isaiah 50:4–11, and Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

What does Isaiah 42:1–4 say about Christ’s priorities? About His mission? About your priorities as Christ’s disciple? Your mission? Your church’s mission? If you have time, discuss the other servant songs.

The New Testament has a servant song, known as the kenosis song, in Philippians 2:5–11. Kenosis is a Greek word that means “nothing.” Read this kenosis song, so called because Christ “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7, NASB), and made Himself of “no reputation” (Phil. 2:7). Note verse 7. Jesus did not cling to divine sovereignty, which was rightly His, but to servanthood, which was the passion that ruled His life (see Matt. 20:26–28).

By the cultural standards of His time, Jesus seemed to have life’s priorities upside down. It seems that He was always turning things upside down. To begin with, the highly exalted Son of God became a servant. Read Matthew 20:26 and Matthew 23:11, 12. Later, Jesus’ disciples would be accused of turning the “world upside down” (Acts 17:6). They would serve instead of rule. Robert Banks captured their
unconventional philosophy with these words: “What we need today are not, as is so often suggested, more servant leaders, but properly understood, more leading servants.”

Discuss the difference between “servant leaders” and “leading servants.”

Also, consider yet another angle of the issue: It is not enough to say we are servants for Christ, for there are bad servants, as well, who claim to be Christ’s servants. Some servants do not understand Christ’s “upside down” philosophy. In their zeal to be servants of Christ they have tried to take over, rule, and dominate in Christ’s name. Basically, they have Christ upside down.

**Discuss:** What historical examples come to your mind of servants who dominated in Christ’s name? Any recent examples? How can we avoid being bad servants who are actually masters/lords over those whom we serve?

**Scripture:** Not long before Jesus was crucified, He spent some intense quality time with His disciples, giving them words of comfort and encouragement. Read John 15:15.

**Discuss:** Does this verse mean that Jesus’ disciples were now to stop being a community of servants and switch to being a community of friends? What does this mean?

A hint to this question can be found in the Greek word, in John 15:15, for servants, *douloi*, which indicates a servant with likely a restricted status. Because Jesus had taken His disciples into His confidence and had just revealed many things to them, they would not be obeying blindly as an ordinary slave. Thus, it seems that Jesus is calling His disciples to envision Him now more as a Friend, rather than simply as an authoritative figure. Also, Jesus knew that servants could turn into lords, but friends do not. Professional servants might operate from the assumption that “you will be better because I know better,” but friends are collaborators and believe that “we will be better because we share in each other’s lives.” How will this consideration affect our approach in serving our communities?

**Illustration:** The definition of “synergy” is “the interaction of elements that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual elements, contributions, etc.” A church has synergy within when its members and departments work and serve their community

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together instead of separately. This synergy will produce a total effect that is greater than if each of the church elements worked separately. Here is a little “parable” to illustrate:

A family was planning for their vacation six months in advance. The father divided up the planning with his family members. He was in charge, choosing the place and ordering the airline tickets. He bought tickets to Orlando, Florida. His wife was in charge of finding a hotel, and she reserved a hotel in Los Angeles, California. His son was in charge of taking care of the food, and he made reservations in restaurants in Chicago, Illinois. His daughter was in charge of activities, and she planned for activities and places to visit in New York City. Are they going anywhere? They were cooperating, but not communicating with one another as they made their plans.

It is not enough to merely plan for disconnected events for the community around your church. Departments of the church must work together (collaborate) to develop a process to make greater differences in your community. Discuss in your class how all the departments of your church community can plan together to be more effective change agents in the community outside your church building.

**Part III: Life Application**

A missionary doctor went back to his home country to find a Seventh-day Adventist church that, he was told, was near his house when he was growing up. (He was not an Adventist back then). He went to the spot where he was told the church was located. He saw no church building and found a man across the street from where the church was supposed to be. The doctor asked if there was an Adventist church there. The man replied, “There is a group of people who show up on Saturdays at that house across the street. I don’t know much about them because they come, they sing, they go.”

Contrast the above church, that was merely a “spiritual health club” for members, to a church in Swaziland, Africa. The most urgent need was adequate nutrition for the many AIDS orphans in their community. Mrs. Busi Vilakazi, a retired member, and other members started feeding these orphans a solid meal six days a week. They began with 50 children and 10 years later were serving 300 children per day. Also, they started a preschool. Other services have included distributing clothing, sharing vegetables from their church garden, caring for the sick, and operating a skills development program for women and men. This demonstration of Jesus’ love spawned a new church.

“The Saviour has given His precious life in order to establish a church capable of caring for sorrowful, tempted souls.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire*
of Ages, p. 640. It is not simply that the church of God has a mission. It is the missional God that has a church.

**Discuss:** Why does your church exist? Which of the churches described above is like your church? Write a list of ideas on how your church can become a “capable” community of servants.

**Notes**
Ezra and Nehemiah is the title of the fourth quarter guide by Jiří Moskala. Both of these exceptional leaders desired that God’s people prosper and that His name be proclaimed worldwide. Their lives model what God can do through faithful leaders. This quarter’s lessons focus on the books that bear their names. When obstacles appear and opposition arises, only God can secure victory. The themes of these books are God’s providence, His faithfulness, and His covenant. Through His servants, God called His people to revival and reformation. By carefully studying the pattern revealed in these two books, we can discern God’s actions and leadership. As we study this quarter, may the Lord transform our thinking and enable us to daily follow Him faithfully.

Lesson 1—Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra

The Week at a Glance:
SUNDAY: The First Return of Exiles (Jer. 25:11, 12)
MONDAY: Overview of Kings and Events (Ezra 4:1–7)
TUESDAY: The Second Return of the Exiles (Ezra 7:1–10)
WEDNESDAY: Artaxerxes’s Decree (Ezra 7:11–28)
THURSDAY: Importance of Education (Ezra 7:6, 10)
Memory Text—Ezra 1:2

Sabbath Gem: God promised that His people would return home after 70 years of Babylonian exile. King Cyrus was God’s instrument to allow this to happen, but God was the guarantor that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. The people, in turn, responded to God’s mighty and gracious acts.

Lesson 2—Nehemiah

The Week at a Glance:
SUNDAY: Nehemiah Receives Bad News (Neh. 1:1–4)
MONDAY: Nehemiah’s Prayer (Neh. 1:5–11)
TUESDAY: Nehemiah Speaks Out (Neh. 2:1–8)
WEDNESDAY: Nehemiah Sent (Neh. 2:9, 10)
THURSDAY: Nehemiah Prepares for His Task (Neh. 2:11–20)
Memory Text—Nehemiah 1:4, 5

Sabbath Gem: The lesson speaks of two groups of captives who have already returned to Judah in at least partial fulfillment of God’s promises to the Hebrew nation. However, God is preparing a final company of exiles who are commissioned to carry out His will to build Jerusalem and its walls.

Lessons for People Who are Legally Blind

The Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide is available free in braille, on audio CD, and via online download to people who are legally blind or physically disabled. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services for the Blind, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981; email: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.