

Selfless Service



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

GERMAN PHILOSOPHER Immanuel Kant boiled down life to three great questions: What can I know? What ought I do? What can I hope?

This week’s lesson looks at the second question, What ought I do? even though it’s tied directly to the answer to the other two questions. We can know that Jesus died for our sins, and we can hope in the promise of eternal life offered us because of His death. And, in the meanwhile, we ought to do what God asks us to do, and that is, live our lives in selfless service for others, as He lived His life for us. As John succinctly expressed it: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16). This isn’t always easy, not for beings whose default mode is *self, self, self*. Only through Christ and an understanding of what we have been given through Him can that change to *others, others, others*.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What have we received from the Lord that we can share with others? How can selfish beings live unselfishly? Why is death to self so important? How do we die to self? What should be our motives for service? What kind of sacrifices must we make for others?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 21.

FREELY GIVEN, FREELY GIVING.

“And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:7, 8).

Heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils, preach about the kingdom of God. What’s important here isn’t so much the specifics of what Christ told His disciples to do but the motives behind their actions. In a sense, what Jesus said to them was, *Look what God has done for you. Now, using the power of God, go do the same for others.*

Of course, what Christ has done for us, that is, redeemed us from death, is something that we cannot do for anyone else. But just as Jesus ministered to others and gave of Himself for them, we can do the same. What Christ has given us, He has given to us freely (even though it cost Him so much); we, too, then, should be willing to give freely to others. Here is the heart and soul of Christian service.

Write out what we have received from God and the texts you find that reveal what we have been given:

Example: Forgiveness of sin (Eph. 1:7).

When we think about all that Christ has done for us; when we realize the security, the hope, the promises, the peace, and all that we have received, by grace; how could we not want to give to others? As we make Christ a reality in our lives; as we experience for ourselves His grace, mercy, and forgiveness; as we know for ourselves the joy of what it means to love and serve the Lord, we will have the right motives in wanting to share our blessings with those who need them, as well.

Of all the blessings we have been given from Christ, what are those we can give to others? What are those we can’t give but can merely tell about?

Key Text: 1 Peter 4:1, 2, 8.

Teachers Aim:

1. To stress that because Christ has freely given all to us, He expects us to do the same for others.
2. To show that being first is really about dying to self.
3. To show that to give, as Christ gave, one must know and trust Him implicitly.

Lesson Outline:

I. Selfless Service (Matt. 10:8).

- A. What Christ has done for us is our motivation for service.
- B. Christ in our life makes us want to share our blessings with others.
- C. True greatness means becoming a servant.

II. Die to Self and Become a New Creature in Christ (Gal. 2:20).

- A. Human nature is basically selfish.
- B. To be a servant, like Christ, we die to self.
- C. The power to die to self comes from the Spirit.
- D. The choice to die to self often results in a battle with self.

III. Giving From the Heart (Phil. 2:5-8).

- A. John the Baptist knew that the spirit of Christ is to give your all.
- B. Christ did for us what we cannot do for ourselves.
- C. Christ asks us to do for others what they cannot do for themselves.
- D. Giving of ourselves is the ultimate in giving.
- E. The early church members willingly and selflessly gave all they had.

Summary: “The spirit of liberality is the spirit of heaven. This spirit finds its highest manifestation in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The principle there illustrated is to give, give.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 339.

Commentary.

Selfless Service.

God so loved us that He gave His only Son to be an atonement for our sins. Our gratefulness for that unselfish action leads us to desire

THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE.

“If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave—like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people” (Matt. 20:26-28, TEV).

If you want to be great, you must become a servant? If you want to be first, you must become the lowest, even a slave? Look at how Jesus here totally undermines worldly concepts of greatness.

The context of Christ’s statement was a mother’s request that her two sons would have the two positions of honor in His kingdom (see Matt. 20:20-23). She was covetous for the advancement and success of her sons. Yet, James and John themselves were party to the request. Their mother did not make the request without their knowledge. The Bible says that they came with her (vs. 20). They shared her desire that they be given position and power. The reaction of the other ten disciples reveals that they were not immune from the same desire. Their anger on hearing what had transpired reveals that they begrudged their two colleagues the positions to which they aspired.

One can only wonder, *Had not all those years of being with Jesus, and seeing His self-abnegation and self-denial all for the good of others, had any effect on these people?*

Read carefully what Jesus said (in the texts for today). He used Himself as an example of what He meant. In what ways did Jesus lower Himself to serve others? Give some specific examples; and in what ways can we, in our own spheres, emulate those examples? (See, for instance, Mark 6:37-44; Luke 22:31, 32; John 13:5.)

Jesus (in the texts for today) made it so clear that greatness came not from being first, not from being the richest, the smartest, the most spiritual, or religious but from a willingness to serve others.

Think of His words in the context of the great controversy. Sin began with Satan seeking more than he already had, seeking a greater position for himself. Here is the foundation of sin, of rebellion. No wonder, then, Jesus told us that true greatness comes from doing the opposite, from being willing to serve others, to minister to them, to be willing to become a “slave,” the lowest rung on the ladder.

Who wants to be a slave? Who wants to lower oneself? These are not natural tendencies in human nature. What is the *only* way we can do these things that Jesus asks of us?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

His presence in our lives. His presence brings with it the desire to serve others as God serves us. We receive so much from Him that we cannot help but give back what we can; and where we best can serve God is through service to other people.

When Christ dwelt on earth, He trained His disciples for their role in the plan of salvation. Every day He sought to impart some truth to them, so they would be prepared to help others as He Himself did.

Ellen White points out that “Doing, and not saying merely, is expected of the children of God. . . .

“Christians are to represent Christ. 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. . . .

“If we are Christians, we shall not pass by on the other side, keeping as far as possible from the very ones who most need our help.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 504.

We are not Christians if we do not make sacrifices in practical ways. What a powerful, thought-provoking principle for those of us who wish to follow God. True Christians, with their Christlike attitudes and behavior, are involved in service to others. “Among the citizens of the heavenly kingdom, power, position, talent, and education are to be devoted exclusively to serving others. . . .

“He who is greatest will serve others most unselfishly.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 466.

With our fallen natures, however, it is impossible of ourselves to live an unselfish life, a life of true service. Fortunately, God has made provision for our needs. “Every command of God implies the power needed to carry out the command. . . . God ever works through men to meet the physical and spiritual needs of their fellow men. This principle is fundamental to the gospel commission.”—Page 617.

God knows we are selfish by nature. So, He provides us the means to rise to the standard He sets. “We can impart only that which we receive from Christ; and we can receive only as we impart to others. . . .

“Successful work for Christ depends not so much on numbers or talent as upon pureness of purpose, the true simplicity of earnest, dependent faith.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 370.

Christians who would reach out to others for Christ’s sake must first die to self. “They need a change of heart and mind that will lead them to seek ‘first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness,’ in full confidence that the necessities of life will ‘be added.’ . . . God calls upon all who would love and serve Him to view the material things of life in their true perspective, and to subordinate these to things of eternal value. . . . Happiness depends, not on ‘things,’ but on the state of one’s mind and heart.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 796.

God has the ability to increase whatever small amount you give. “The little that is wisely and economically used in the service of the

DYING, TO LIVE.

“He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 10:38, 39).

How much easier our religion would be if we had only a few clear-cut simple rules to follow. Don’t steal, don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, and so forth. But Jesus brought the law to a higher level than a mere outward compliance to a few “do’s” and “don’ts.” He elevated the written code to where it reaches the inner sanctum of our soul, to where it echoes through the fiber of our entire being. He so magnified the law, bringing out elements in it far beyond the immediate words themselves that, in and of ourselves, we could never follow it. Its demands are too high, its standard beyond our reach, at least without divine aid. Something greatly has to change in us in order for us to be able to obey. And that change comes when we, through the power of God, die to self and become new creatures in Christ.

What is Jesus saying in the above texts? What does it mean to lose our life for Christ’s sake? Why must we, in a sense, die in order to serve Christ? See also Luke 9:23; Rom. 6:1-8; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:13, 20; 2 Tim. 2:11.

We are fallen beings, and our basic nature is selfishness. We are all big babies, for just as babies think only of themselves and their immediate needs, we do the same, only a bit more subtly. That’s why, in order to be what Christ wants us to be—a servant to others—we need to die to self, and we can do this only at the foot of the Cross, where we make a conscious choice to surrender all to Jesus, to die to ourselves and our selfishness and live, instead, for Him.

As we, through the power of the Spirit, experience this death, we can then live in Christ and through Him serve and minister to others. However, this is a choice we have to make, a choice that often comes with a severe battle against the carnal nature. But only then will we be able to minister as we have been ministered to. Only as we are filled with the fullness of what we have been given can we give to others.

Jesus said a person must lose his or her life in order to find it. What does it mean to “find it”? How does service to others play into the idea of finding one’s life?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Lord of heaven will increase in the very act of imparting.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 371.

When a person is baptized into the family of God, he or she assumes the responsibility of working for Him. “In baptism we are given to the Lord as a vessel to be used. Baptism is a most solemn renunciation of the world. Self is by profession dead to a life of sin.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1074. Those who have been baptized “are to use for Him all their entrusted capabilities. . . . They are to surrender all they have and are to God, employing all their gifts to His name’s glory.”—Page 1075. It is “only when self is buried in the furrow of the world’s need does man

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Matthew 10:38, 39; 20:20-28; Luke 3:7-14; 15:11-32; John 13:1-17.

1. The Old Testament story about Joseph (Genesis 37, 39–45), is the story of a favored son, who is forced by circumstances beyond his control to spend at least two decades as a slave or prisoner. This unlikely path eventually leads to a position of authority over all Egypt. What did a life of service teach Joseph that he could not have learned in his father’s camp? Is service always a prerequisite to greater responsibilities? How does our level of service relate to our level of appreciation for God’s grace?
2. The fruit of true repentance is seen in the way we relate to our fellow citizens. If we’ve experienced the wonder of His grace, we can hardly withhold it from one another. Read Romans 8:31-39. What specific

ways can we apply this kind of love to specific situations? For example: Forgiving an unfaithful spouse. Forgiving a dishonest child. Forgiving an abusive parent. Forgiving the person who, by his or her recklessness, causes an automobile accident that results in permanent injury or death.

3. The other side of forgiveness is the danger of enabling people to continue their destructive behaviors. Read Luke 15:11-32. After his return, what kept the lost and found son faithful and obedient to his father? Can you offer an example from Jesus’ ministry when mercy and forgiveness did not accomplish their desired purpose?
4. Jesus washed His disciples’ feet to teach them humility (John 13:1-17). Who benefits more from such an act? The doer? The receiver? What are the benefits to each?

GIVING INSTEAD OF GETTING (Luke 3:10, 11).

As these verses show, John the Baptist was involved in a head-on collision with the spirit of a world whose motto was *to get all you can out of life for yourself*. John replied, in effect, “That spirit is of Satan, of fallen human nature. The spirit of your Master is not to get all you can but to give all you can give.”

How is the divine principle, implicit in John’s words, illustrated in the plan of salvation as revealed in Romans 8:32?

In many ways, the principle is so simple. Look what has been done for us as sinful, helpless, needy beings. It was the ultimate condescension for God to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. As a result, He asks us to do for others what, perhaps, they cannot do for themselves, at least, in their present state.

How would you respond to someone who says, “Look, I give a lot of money each year to charity. Isn’t that enough?”

While giving to charity is fine, that’s not the essence of Christian giving. Even atheists give to charity. In some ways, that’s easy. Just write a check, and your conscience is covered.

The Bible reveals that the spirit of giving does not consist merely of giving money. It involves the giving of ourselves—of our time, our talents, our compassion, and our love. It means caring, and caring means expending your own time and energy for someone else. It means suffering with the suffering, weeping with the weeping; and weeping and suffering demand something of yourself beyond the loose change in your pockets.

In Christ’s story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), the injured man needed more than sympathy. He needed someone’s time, someone’s care, someone’s money. The priest and the Levite were too selfish to give time and attention. Perhaps they were in a rush to do some religious activity. *Maybe they were in a rush to get home in time for the Sabbath!*

In what ways does giving to others help us understand in our own lives what we have been given by God? How does unselfish ministry for others strengthen our faith?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

discover the true purpose of his existence.”—Volume 5, p. 380.

The church at Corinth is an example of genuine service for others. “A new, a Christian, economy was set up. . . . The new converts would be the more ready to share their material possessions because of their new-found love for Christ and for one another, and their earnest expectations of the Lord’s soon return. . . . [The sharing] was [not] compulsory. . . . [It was] a very natural act for a society founded . . . on the law of sympathy and self-denial. The Spirit of God was showing His power, not only in the specific gifts, but in the way of love. . . .

“Help was dependent upon the degree of need.”—Volume 6, pp. 149, 150. A close relationship “existed between the Christians’ liberality and the grace they enjoyed.”—Page 173. They were beneficiaries of God’s grace, and they were willing to pass that grace along to others.

WITNESSING

Honey bees live in colonies made up of one queen, a few hundred drones, and thousands of workers. The workers spend their entire lives “working” for the survival of the other bees in the colony. They clean the hive, feed the developing bees (larvae) and the other bees, produce wax to build the honeycomb, stand guard at the hive entrance, and hunt for food (nectar). God’s witnesses are like these worker bees, brought into this world to work for the Lord in service to others.

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Jesus took upon Himself the form of a servant. His life’s work was to serve others. He drew all men unto Himself by serving them. As He taught them of the

gift of salvation, He healed, comforted, fed, and ate with them. And while doing so, He taught the disciples to do as He did.

The Savior’s last words to his disciples were “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:19, 20).

We are Christ’s disciples today. We are to carry on the work started by the Lord Himself and continued by Peter, James, John, and others. He wants us to feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowful, and heal the sick. He wants us to serve, putting others before ourselves.

APOSTOLIC CHRISTIANITY (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35).

Whatever difficulties this type of arrangement might lead to in modern practical application, one thing is certain: The members of the early church had their priorities straight. To them the things of the spirit far outweighed in importance the things of the flesh. Temporal considerations were made subservient to the eternal. The interests of the group superseded those of the individual. The church and its mission were their number-one concern. It is mind boggling to contemplate what could happen if the church today were, even in part, to recapture that apostolic outlook.

Read carefully the texts for today. What specifically are the people doing? What principles are seen there that we can draw, and apply, to our own experience today?

The important thing to remember, too, is not only what good the giving of their money did for those who received it but what it did for those who gave. To sell your goods or give them to others is an act of faith, and every act of faith can only strengthen faith. There was no saving merit in what they gave; the giving could never save them (no one ever possessed enough goods for that). The giving merely showed that they understood what they had already received, and these acts were expressions of thanks—expressions of people so close to the Lord that they trusted Him for all things, even to the point of selling their possessions and giving to others. Talk about faith! Talk about a people who had experienced a death to self!

In what ways does paying a faithful tithe express this same principle?

The spirit manifested by these early Christians exists even today. How many people, heeding the prompting of the Holy Spirit, have given up all their worldly comforts to spend years of their lives as missionaries, be it in some distant jungle or in some concrete jungle? In fact, the giving up of our material comforts could be even one of the lesser sacrifices that we make in service to others.

No doubt, the giving up of material possessions in service to others involves sacrifice. But what are other things—even more precious than material things—that people have sacrificed in selfless service? Explain why you think these are even more of a sacrifice than material goods?

LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: Read Psalm 86:12 and 13: “I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever. For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths of the grave” (NIV). With what service will you glorify your Lord today and until He comes again?

Thought Questions:

1. Search the book of John to find keys that Christ had died to self. How early in His service to humanity can you find evidences that Jesus had died to self? How late in His life? How can we give up control but retain the power of choice?
2. “A middle-aged woman who lost her husband and three small children in a private plane crash finds courage and strength in Christ to go on and live a full life helping others and being a blessing to those in need. She tells herself, ‘I shall always miss my family, but I do not want to prolong grief and sorrow beyond the limits of God’s will. It is His will that I be happy and useful—and I am!’”
—William Backus and Marie

Chapian, p. 33. What does her attitude reveal?

3. What persons in modern history are known for selfless service? Who in your family or community has this reputation? Does giving selfless service mean that a person must renounce all worldly possessions, all creativity, all beauty, and all comforts?

Application Questions:

1. In addition to Jesus, which other Bible men and women are your personal models for forgiveness?
2. Miriam, David, and the Israelite maiden who initiated the healing of Naaman the leper illustrate that children and youth can choose *selfless* service. What other Bible examples can be held before your children? What modern examples can you cite, choosing examples that fit the children’s interests and abilities? How is your church mentoring these age groups in giving selfless service? Can you serve as their model?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 190, 191; *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 93–101.

The spirit of unselfish labor for others gives depth, stability, and Christlike loveliness to the character, and brings peace and happiness to its possessor. The aspirations are elevated. There is no room for sloth or selfishness. Those who thus exercise the Christian graces will grow and will become strong to work for God. They will have clear spiritual perceptions, a steady, growing faith, and an increased power in prayer. The Spirit of God, moving upon their spirit, calls forth the sacred harmonies of the soul in answer to the divine touch. Those who thus devote themselves to unselfish effort for the good of others are most surely working out their own salvation.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 80.

At the Passover feast, “Christ would have His disciples understand that although He had washed their feet, this did not in the least detract from His dignity. . . . And being so infinitely superior, He imparted grace and significance to the service. No one was so exalted as Christ, and yet He stooped to the humblest duty. That His people might not be misled by the selfishness which dwells in the natural heart, and which strengthens by self-serving, Christ Himself set the example of humility. He would not leave this great subject in man’s charge. Of so much consequence did He regard it, that He Himself, One equal with God, acted as servant to His disciples. While they were contending for the highest place, He to whom every knee shall bow, He whom the angels of glory count it honor to serve, bowed down to wash the feet of those who called Him Lord. He washed the feet of His betrayer. . . .

“[Jesus’] whole life was under a law of service. He served all, ministered to all. Thus He lived the law of God, and by His example showed how we are to obey it.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 649.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Why are motives so important for the Christian who serves others? Can we give for the wrong reasons? If so, what could some of those reasons be? Also, if motives are important, why must we have a proper understanding of salvation by grace alone in order to have right motives? Otherwise, could there be the danger of thinking that our generosity to others is a means of earning salvation? Discuss.