

Jesus *and the Social Outcasts*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 21:28–32, John 8:1–11, Mark 5:1–20, John 4:5–32, Matt. 9:9–13.*

Memory Text: “The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, ‘Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ ” (*John 4:28–30, NKJV*).

A young woman—having come from an unbelievably sad and horrible background (which included two out-of-wedlock children by the time she was fifteen years old)—sat in prison, awaiting trial for having murdered a social worker who had come to take away her baby, the only person from whom she ever felt any love.

Without a mother, father, husband, any relative, or even a friend, she faced the forbidding future alone. Through the visits of a pastor, however, this hopeless young woman learned that—despite all the mistakes, despite the desperation of the situation, and despite whatever loomed on the horizon—Christ loved and forgave her. No matter how society viewed this young girl, she knew, for herself, God’s eternal love. This social outcast discovered meaning and purpose in her Lord, whose love and acceptance transcended all societal norms and mores, even the “good” ones.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 15.

Bottom Dwellers

Societies establish hierarchies. Wealthy or well-educated people usually acquire the highest positions.

Good moral citizens, the “ordinary” people, normally occupy the middle rungs on the social ladder. That leaves the bottom dwellers, those such as prostitutes, substance abusers, criminals, the homeless, and others. During Christ’s time, that list also included lepers and tax collectors.

Read Matthew 21:28–32 and Luke 15:1–10. What do these passages teach regarding Christ’s attitude toward social outcasts?

What happened that propelled the social outcasts ahead of the self-righteous? What did the bottom dwellers discover that the social elite often missed? Why was Jesus apparently more effective in reaching the bottom strata than He was with the upper echelons?

Although hardened by sinful pleasures, and sometimes encased in self-constructed tough exteriors, the social outcasts were, and still are, easier to reach than the prideful, haughty, and self-righteous elite. Often, beneath the outcasts’ bravado lies emotional emptiness characterized by poor self-worth. Frequently, especially during the teenage years, such people openly rebel, frantically trying to establish a personal identity to compensate for the insecurities felt within. That identity is, purposefully, established in opposition to the wishes of whoever serves as the authority figure (often parents) for that person.

Jesus wasted no effort damaging the outcasts’ already diminished sense of self-worth. Instead, He created a renewed sense of personal value. He established that foundation by consistently loving and accepting the outcasts, whose hearts were often melted by the warm and loving receptions that they had received from Christ.

What is your own attitude toward those whom your society deems to be social outcasts? Be honest: in a lot of cases, don’t you feel a certain sense of superiority? If so, dwell on the implications of those feelings.

“In the Very Act”

Read John 8:1–11. What does this text teach us about Jesus and social outcasts?

Having refreshed Himself spiritually at His Mount of Olives retreat, Jesus returned to the temple. Crowds gathered. While Christ taught, the Pharisees dragged an adulterous woman before Him. They questioned Jesus regarding Moses’ legislation concerning adultery, which prescribed execution. Jesus recognized that this questioning was insincere. The purpose was entrapment, not truth-seeking. Capital (death penalty) jurisdiction had been withdrawn from Jewish courts. Jewish leadership reasoned that Christ’s patriotic Jewish following might be compromised should He publicly reject stoning the woman. Conversely, should He endorse execution, their accusation would be that Christ had violated Roman authority.

Caught amid the leaders’ political intrigue was this helpless and guilty woman. Unfamiliar with Jesus’ ministry, she could not have known His merciful nature. Ironically, He appears to pronounce her death sentence; however, He prefaced His statement with those unforgettable words, “He that is without sin . . .”

Those words leveled the playing field. Sinless people might be authorized to mercilessly execute punishment. Yet, sinful people were, in a sense, obligated to be merciful. But, with the exception of Jesus, there were no sinless people present. Gradually the religious leaders dispersed, and this social outcast, guilty as she may have been, received grace.

“In His act of pardoning this woman and encouraging her to live a better life, the character of Jesus shines forth in the beauty of perfect righteousness. While He does not palliate sin, nor lessen the sense of guilt, He seeks not to condemn, but to save. The world had for this erring woman only contempt and scorn; but Jesus speaks words of comfort and hope.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 462.

Though Ellen G. White does give more details about the intrigue regarding this woman, the woman, nevertheless, was an adulteress, caught “in the very act.” The scheming of the leaders didn’t change that fact. And yet, she was still forgiven. How do we learn to show grace, even to the guilty, while still not “palliating” sin?

The Lowest of the Low

Read Mark 5:1–20. Compare this man’s situation with the plight of modern homeless people. Compare his description with that of mentally ill patients. What similarities and differences exist? How does modern society treat people who suffer from mental illness? What explains Christ’s admonition to publicize the event, though He consistently counsels others to maintain secrecy?

From the perspective of many of us today, it’s hard to imagine someone in such a horrific state, living in a cemetery even. Though some argue that this man was merely insane, the text teaches otherwise. (Besides, how does that idea fit with what happened to the pigs?)

A crucial point for us in this story is that no one, no matter how deranged—whether from demon possession, mental illness, drug use, whatever—is to be ignored. In some cases, professional help is needed and should be given when possible.

As Christians, we must remember that Christ died for everyone, and even those whom we might deem to be beyond our help still deserve as much mercy and respect and kindness as possible. Besides, who are we to judge anyone to be a hopeless case, to be beyond the power of God? From our perspective, things can look bad, but from God’s perspective every human being is of infinite worth. Were it not for the Cross, all our cases would be hopeless, a point worth remembering as we confront very disturbed and damaged people.

Dwell on some of the people you know who are truly in bad shape, whether mentally, spiritually, physically, or for whatever reason. Try to view them in the way that you think our unconditionally loving God views them. Besides praying for them, what can you do, in any way, to minister to their needs and show them something of the love of God?

The Woman at the Well

Study John 4:5–32, and then answer the following questions:

1. What social conventions did Jesus break, and why? What should this tell us about social conventions and the way in which they should be regarded when they interfere with witnessing? What social conventions might be hindering your witness to others?

2. In what way did Jesus confront the woman about her sinful life? What lessons could we take from His approach?

3. What does this story reveal about the prejudices of Jesus' disciples? Again we have to ask ourselves, in what ways are we guilty of the same thing?

4. Though obviously impressed by the fact that Jesus knew she had been sexually promiscuous, what did the woman say in her witness that showed she still had some questions about who Jesus was? What lessons can we draw from this about our own need for patience when it comes to the making of disciples?

Publicans and Sinners

It's hard to imagine what our world would have been like had not sin intruded. The beauty of nature, even after millennia, still testifies to the majesty and power and goodness of God. Our sin-darkened minds can barely grasp what humanity and human relations would have been like had our world not fallen. One thing we can be sure of is that the class distinctions, prejudices, and cultural and ethnic boundaries that impact every society and culture would not exist.

Sad to say, too, it's hardly feasible that before Christ returns these boundaries are going to vanish. On the contrary, as our world gets worse, there is no doubt that these barriers will, as well. As Christians, however, we must do what we can in every way possible to seek to transcend these barriers that have caused so much heartache and suffering and pain in our world, especially to those whom society rejects as the greatest outcasts.

Read Matthew 9:9–13. In what way is the essence of true Christianity revealed here, not just in what Jesus said but in that which He did? Focus especially on His words, taken from the Old Testament: “‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ ” (*Hosea 6:6, NKJV*). Especially given the context, why must we be so careful that we do not become guilty of possessing the attitude that Jesus is so powerfully condemning here—especially when we are all to some degree creatures of our particular societies, and thus influenced by the prejudices and social barriers that are inherent in every society?

“The Pharisees beheld Christ sitting and eating with publicans and sinners. He was calm and self-possessed, kind, courteous, and friendly; and while they could not but admire the picture presented, it was so unlike their own course of action, they could not endure the sight. The haughty Pharisees exalted themselves, and disparaged those who had not been blessed with such privileges and light as they themselves had had. They hated and despised the publicans and sinners. Yet in the sight of God their guilt was the greater. Heaven's light was flashing across their pathway, saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it’; but they had spurned the gift.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1088.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “At Jacob’s Well,” pp. 183–195; “Peace, Be Still,” pp. 333–341; “Among Snares,” pp. 460–462, in *The Desire of Ages*; and “Helping the Tempted,” pp. 164–169; “Working for the Intemperate,” pp. 171–182; “Help for the Unemployed and the Homeless,” pp. 183–200, in *The Ministry of Healing*.

“The one class that He would never countenance was those who stood apart in their self-esteem and looked down upon others. . . .

“The fallen must be led to feel that it is not too late for them to be men. Christ honored man with His confidence and thus placed him on his honor. Even those who had fallen the lowest He treated with respect. It was a continual pain to Christ to be brought into contact with enmity, depravity, and impurity; but never did He utter one expression to show that His sensibilities were shocked or His refined tastes offended. Whatever the evil habits, the strong prejudices, or the overbearing passions of human beings, He met them all with pitying tenderness. As we partake of His Spirit, we shall regard all men as brethren, with similar temptations and trials, often falling and struggling to rise again, battling with discouragements and difficulties, craving sympathy and help. Then we shall meet them in such a way as not to discourage or repel them, but to awaken hope in their hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 164, 165.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What personal attitudes might need to be changed in order for you to become an effective witness to social outcasts? What congregational practices should be altered to make your church more effective? How should modern Christians establish reasonable expectations when working for those who are deemed to be the hardest and most difficult cases?
- 2 How did Jesus avoid both excusing sins and condemning sinners? In what ways did Christ utilize trust, encouragement, and confidence in reversing the downward spiral of social outcasts? Since social outcasts were generally suspicious of religious leaders, how did Christ make these potential disciples comfortable with Himself?
- 3 What barriers stand between social outcasts and your church? How can those barriers be overturned?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 4:28–30*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Come to terms with the fact that, compared to others, Christians live lives of privilege. Our standard of living is usually slightly higher than those around us, and we struggle with fewer addictions than our peers.

Feel: Understand deeply that these privileges come with responsibilities.

Do: Commit to being sensitive to the needs of the marginalized in his or her community, as Jesus did, all in order to lift others out of their low estate socially and economically.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Serving Jesus Means Helping Others.

A This week’s lesson gives four examples of the types of people we often consider to be “outcasts.” Which type are you most likely to encounter in your normal daily activities?

B How much does God expect us to go out of our way to help those in need?

II. Feel: Service to Christ by Serving the Outcast Calls for “Radical Discipleship.”

A How far out of your comfort zone are you willing to go in order to serve outcasts in Christ’s name? Where would you draw the line?

B Is it necessary to feel uncomfortable in order to know we’re doing some good? If so, what does that say about our concept of service?

III. Do: Be Aware of Your Surroundings.

A Helping others can sometimes mean handing out food or money. But that’s often treating a symptom of the problem. What is the real problem?

B In addition to the question, What would Jesus do? perhaps another good question is, How can I do the most good in His name?

▶ **Summary:** Helping society’s outcasts represents one of the world’s greatest challenges. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do whatever we can to address it.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 4:28–30*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: **There's probably nothing more difficult than looking beyond the exterior of society's outcasts. Yet, our profession of Christianity is not authentic if we can't detect something of the image of God in each person.**

Just for Teachers: **This week's lesson highlights well-known Bible stories. Although the stories under discussion focus on society's outcasts, most of us will find it practically impossible to imagine the conditions under which they live.**

Opening Activity/Discussion: Write on slips of paper, if supplies are available, the following examples of social outcasts:

- Homeless person
- Meth addict
- High school dropout
- Prostitute
- Emotionally troubled teen
- Person who lives in his or her car
- Illegal immigrant
- Fugitive from justice
- Panhandler
- Pregnant teen

Put the slips of paper in a basket or hat, and then ask each class member to pull one out and read it. Then ask each class member to imagine the life this person must live. Ask leading questions such as:

- Where would you live?
- How would you get money to survive?
- Who would you trust?
- How would people treat you?
- What experience would you have had with church-going people?
- How do you imagine you would get out of your own difficulties?
- What would be your greatest regrets?

Most of us can only imagine the situations with which we've had personal experience. The examples listed above, although true to life, may not be part of our personal experience. How, then, can we identify with people such as these? More important, how do we minister to those who have lived through such experiences?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The following stories are all too familiar—so familiar that you might be tempted to race through them. Resist the temptation to touch only the high points, not bothering to ask penetrating questions.

Bible Commentary

I. Caught in the Act (*Review John 8:1–11 with your class.*)

Jesus was often the center of unwanted attention. But this time the woman dragged and dumped before Him was the picture of desperation. Society’s guardians of morality had hauled her before Jesus under the pretext of defending the law in order to trap Him.

Let’s be clear. These particular Pharisees and teachers of the law cared nothing about justice. If they did, they would have brought both the man and the woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery. No, their only purpose in presenting just her alone to Jesus was to declare Him guilty either of (1) setting aside the law of Moses or (2) assuming prerogatives that belonged to their Roman oppressors. They hoped to paint Jesus into a corner from which there was no escape.

Of course, Jesus saw through the Pharisees’ and teachers’ artifice. Instead of answering them directly, He simply stooped to the ground and began writing in the sand. Then He asked the question that must have sounded to the woman like a death sentence: “‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’ ” (*vs. 7, NIV*). Then He bent again and wrote in the sand.

When Jesus stood up and found only the woman before Him, He asked, “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ”

“‘No one, sir,’ ” she said.

“‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin’ ” (*vss. 10, 11, NIV*).

While some may see Jesus’ act as being “soft on sin,” most of society’s outcasts don’t have to be reminded of their mistakes. After all, they have to live with their mistakes every day. People who insist on “calling sin by its right name” would do well to remember Jesus’ words, “‘For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him’ ” (*John 3:17, NIV*).

Consider This: The life of discipleship is a life of discipline. But discipline doesn’t have to be harsh or condemning. After all, in life we experience both positive and negative reinforcement. Which type should Christians be known for? Why?

II. A Hopeless Case (Review Mark 5:1–20 with your class.)

This story has all the trappings of a Hollywood horror film: a deranged man lives in the local graveyard. From time to time, brave people go out there, subdue him, chain him, and pray that he doesn't hurt anyone. In the meantime, he can be heard crying out day and night, and he cuts himself with stones.

The proof that the man was not completely hopeless was evinced when Jesus approached him, for he recognized Jesus. “ ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’ ” he shouted (*vs. 7, NIV*).

At Jesus' word, the evil spirits left the man. When the villagers approached to see what all the commotion was about, they found the man “sitting there, dressed and in his right mind” (*vs. 15, NIV*).

As Jesus prepared to leave the area, the man pleaded to go along as one of Jesus' disciples. But Jesus told him, “ ‘Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you’ ” (*vs. 19, NIV*).

That seems a rather odd approach to discipleship. We have to assume that the influences that led to the man's fallen condition were still there. Why did Jesus leave him? What support could the man have expected from those who knew him? What kind of rumors would those who knew him likely spread?

Indeed, the Bible record is that “the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region” (*vs. 17, NIV*). Why did the people do that? Could it be because they preferred things the way they were before Jesus came along? Were their lives somehow disrupted by the man's healing? If so, how?

Consider This: All we know now about mental illness and addictions was virtually unknown to the people who lived in Jesus' time. And it would be a mistake to assume that we should ignore established medical practices and simply pray for people who are mentally unstable. But we also have to affirm that God's power is available in situations in which nothing more can be humanly done.

III. Asking a Favor (Review John 4:5–32 with your class.)

The story of the woman whom Jesus met at Jacob's well is an example of Jesus' ignoring established social standards to reach out to an individual in need.

For example, Jews typically didn't have anything to do with Samaritans. Furthermore, it was highly unlikely that a Jew would ask a favor of a Samaritan (a reflection of the antipathy they shared for one another). Finally, it was unusual for a woman to speak to a man to whom she wasn't related. Yet, here's Jesus, shattering all these cultural taboos.

It's unlikely that any of Jesus' disciples would have been comfortable doing what Jesus did. But the fact that this story is in the Bible is a powerful reminder that human traditions shouldn't stop us from reaching people of all classes. After all, Jesus' activity on the woman's behalf was also the means of reaching the entire village.

Consider This: Sometimes our efforts to reach others require us to ignore or set aside established traditions or social standards.

Discussion Questions:

① What social standards have changed in your memory? How has the church been involved in initiating those changes?

② In general, do you see religious people demonstrating resistance or facilitation with regard to outreach to social outcasts? Give examples of each.

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Part of our ability to reach out and disciple people of other social backgrounds depends on how familiar we are with how those people live.

Life Application: Most of the people with whom we have contact on a regular basis are a lot like us. But reaching people of different social strata—especially society’s outcasts—requires us to leave our established patterns and comfort zones. Think of a moment in which you attempted to do this. What was the result? In what way(s) did it change your life?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Reaching life’s social outcasts may appear to require a rather serious reorientation. But, in fact, our Christian tradition already puts a premium on reaching out to people who are most at risk of being marginalized and left behind.

Activity: Read the following texts, substituting “outcast” for “sinner.”

Psalm 25:8	Psalm 51:13	Matthew 9:13
Matthew 11:19	Luke 15:1, 2	Luke 19:7
Romans 5:8	1 Timothy 1:15	

How is God’s attitude toward “outcasts” shown in these texts? How seriously should we take this attitude? In other words, how would our behavior change if we saw these people as God sees them?