

“The Least of These”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Matt. 5:2–16, 38–48; Rom. 12:20, 21; Luke 16:19–31; 12:13–21; Matt. 25:31–46.*

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?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Good Samaritan,” pp. 497–505, and “ ‘The Least of These My Brethren,’ ” pp. 637–641, in *The Desire of Ages*; “ ‘A Great Gulf Fixed,’ ” pp. 260–271, and “ ‘Who Is My Neighbour?’ ” pp. 376–389, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“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 MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Dina, a 60-year-old grandmother living in the Soviet Union, prayed every morning, “Lord, send me someone who I can tell 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 *minge* 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.¹ 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.”

¹ Bryan Patterson, “Being a Good Samaritan Is More Than Just Showing Compassion,” *Herald Sun*, August 25, 2012.

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.”