

Living *the* Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 8:20–23; John 3:16, 17; Matt. 9:36; Eph. 2:8–10; 1 John 3:16, 17; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

Memory Text: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (*Ephesians 2:8–10, NKJV*).

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?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “ ‘God With Us,’ ” pp. 19–26, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Saved to Serve,” pp. 95–107, in *The Ministry of Healing*.

“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.)

“Whatever 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 MCCHESENEY, 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.”