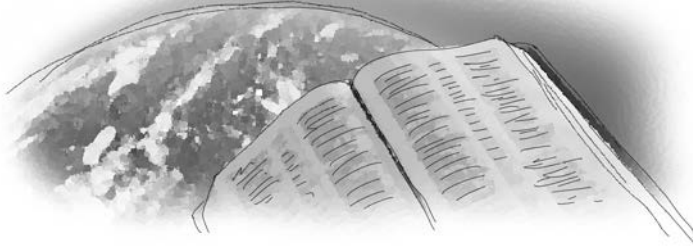


Discipling *the* Nations



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 56:6–8; Matt. 11:20–24; John 12:20–32; Rom. 15:12; Acts 1:7, 8.*

Memory Text: “‘For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’” (*Isaiah 56:7, NKJV*).

Christ's message, from its inception, was destined for everyone everywhere. Early on, the gospel went worldwide, because it is universally applicable. Doubtless, this concept challenged the disciples' thinking. Their initial reaction, for instance, to Christ's conversing with the Samaritan woman illustrates this challenge. They thought that Jesus as the Messiah was merely the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies and hopes. Somehow they had missed or misinterpreted the prophets, especially Isaiah, whose message encompassed all peoples. Jesus, the Desire of all nations, was not to be limited to a single group. Salvation might be of the Jews, but it was for everyone. Christ's followers would transcend national boundaries, international conflicts, language differences, and other difficulties, because He had established the pattern of cross-cultural evangelism.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we especially see this call in Revelation 14:6—“Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 8.

The Prophets Foretold

Ancient prophets foretold the conversion of non-Jewish people (Gentiles) to a scripturally based faith. Heathen deities, pagan worship, and destructive lifestyles would be toppled by uncompromising submission to, and faith in, Jehovah. Israel’s enemies would stream into Jerusalem begging for admission, thirsting for spiritual knowledge. Israel’s commission was to broadcast God’s universal invitation to the surrounding nations.

Unfortunately, Israel’s missionary passion was derailed by earthly concerns. The grand vision was buried beneath complacency. Christ’s coming resurrected that vision, at least for some.

Read Isaiah 56:6–8; Micah 4:1, 2; Jonah 3:7–10; 4:1. What do these verses teach about universal outreach, and about how limited some in Israel were in understanding it?

Israel was to be the light of the nations. Seeing the wonderful advantages that the Israelites had, heathen nations would inquire about the Israelites’ monotheistic faith, and thus many of them would be converted to the true God.

Unfortunately, that’s not how things generally turned out, as Israel became so inwardly focused that it lost sight of its larger purpose and, often, the God who had offered it so much.

Modern Christians face a similar challenge. Will they sacrificially invest in furthering the gospel, or will they become inwardly focused, forgetting their larger purpose? It’s an easier trap to fall into than we realize.

“In the name of the Lord let us lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving for the results of work abroad.

“And still our General, who never makes a mistake, says to us: ‘Advance. Enter new territory. Lift up the standard in every land. ‘Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.’”

“Our watchword is to be: Onward, ever onward. The angels of God will go before us to prepare the way. Our burden for the ‘regions beyond’ can never be laid down until the whole earth shall be lightened with the glory of the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 28, 29.

Woe Unto Thee!

Read Matthew 11:20–24, Luke 4:25–30, 17:11–19, John 10:16. What crucial message comes from these texts? How can we take what is written here and apply it to ourselves, in our own time and context? What principle is revealed here that we have to be very careful about?

Christ wanted His own people, those who had so many advantages, to wake up to what their true calling and purpose was as a people. He wanted them to see that salvation, even for the chosen nation, was not something that a person is born into. It's not passed on in the genes or by a birthright. It was something that requires a conscious choice to accept, a choice that even those who weren't of Israel could, and did, make.

Athletic coaches sometimes challenge their athletes by comparing them with competing schools or organizations. "If you'd practice as faithfully, energetically, and intensely as they do, you'd enjoy success." The coach's obvious motivation is to inspire, to build up desire rather than diminish it.

In the same way, Jesus wanted His own people to share the fullness of salvation as some non-Jewish people were already doing. No doubt His words scandalized some because He preached something that they didn't want to hear, however much these truths should have already been known and understood by them.

Some people might indeed have many spiritual advantages that others don't have, but those who have these advantages must realize that, whatever they have been given, they are all gifts from God, to be used for His glory and not their own.

What about us? What about all the advantages that we, as a people, have been given by God? Why is it important, first, to recognize those advantages; then, second, humbly to realize the responsibilities that come with them?

“We Would See Jesus”

Read John 12:20–32. How is the universality of the gospel message revealed in these verses?

Jerusalem was buzzing with rumors. Christ’s triumphal entry had just occurred. Hosannas, though, were quickly replaced by questions. What was going to happen next? Would Jesus be crowned king?

Among the crowd assembling for Passover were Greek worshippers. Notice their words to Philip, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” In other words, they wanted to see Jesus. They wanted to be with Him. They wanted to learn from Him. What a testimony to the universal character of Christ and His message! How sad, too, that those who should have said the same thing were the very ones who wanted to be rid of Him.

The Greeks probably approached Philip because he carried a Greek name. Coming from Bethsaida, a commercial fishing center—hence, a cultural melting pot—he probably spoke their language too. The text suggests that Jesus was not immediately present. Perhaps He worshiped nearby in places reserved for Jews.

However, then joining His disciples and the Greek interviewers within the outer court, Jesus granted these men their wish. Notice what He said to them: “If any man,” meaning any man, woman, Jew, or Greek, wanted to follow Him, they could, but it would come at a cost.

What was that cost? How do we understand the meaning of this? See *John 12:25*.

Then, with these foreigners still present, heaven thundered a confirming message of judgment and conquest. That Voice was heard, Jesus said, not for Him but for them, Jew and Greek, that their faith could be strengthened. Christ’s words immediately affirmed that His death was to be for all the world.

Breaking Down Barriers

Read John 7:35, 8:48, Luke 10:27–37. In what way do these verses show why regional, ethnic, and other barriers should have no place among Christians as they seek to make disciples among all nations?

Some of the leaders' contempt for Jesus knew no bounds. Again, the terrible irony was that those who should have been in the forefront of receiving Him and His message were the very ones who fought against Him the hardest. Priests of Israel scorned the Son of God when those not of Israel accepted Him as the Messiah. What a powerful and sobering lesson is here for those who deem themselves (perhaps with some justification) spiritually advantaged!

When condemning Christ, they not only labeled Him as having a devil, they made it worse by calling Him a Samaritan, as well. They even mocked Him for His witness among the Greeks, showing obviously their contempt for those not of their own nation and faith. Israel's leaders found it unthinkable that Jesus would consider teaching Greeks. Jesus countered this by emphasizing character above ethnic origin.

How interesting, too, that He used the true story of a Samaritan in order to teach a powerful spiritual lesson about what it meant truly to fulfill God's law. Religious leaders, doubtless restrained by their twisted understanding of Levitical law and defilement, had earlier bypassed the wounded man. The despised foreigner, a Samaritan, had conscientiously defied ethnic prejudice, saving the stranger's life. What a stinging rebuke to all those who spurn and scorn someone in need only because the person is not of their own ethnic, social, or cultural background.

Think of the last time that perhaps you did not help someone in need. What justifications did you use not to help? Looking back now, what should you have done differently?

The Great Commission

Read Romans 15:12; Acts 1:7, 8; John 11:52, 53; Matthew 28:19, 20. What's the essential message here, and how does this message fit in so well with the three angels' messages of Revelation 14?

God's final work is incomplete until the eternal gospel expressed in the message of the three angels found in Revelation 14 has crossed every racial, ethnic, national, and geographical boundary. Without divulging the precise timing, Scripture unequivocally states that this gospel will reach around the world. God's triumph and its proclamation are assured.

The nations' acceptance of that message is prophesied. This must happen, but who will offer themselves as God's channels of grace? Who will join Christ in the overturning of the racial, ethnic, and language barriers that impede the gospel's progress? Who will empty their wallets and pocketbooks? Who will sacrifice earthly comforts and family associations in order to advance heaven's cause? These are the questions that we all must ask ourselves. What are we doing to reach out to others, whoever and wherever they are? How unfortunate that some believers allow racial stereotypes, cultural prejudices, and satanically designed social barriers to dissuade them from vigorous gospel proclamation when their fellow believers are scattered across the globe, willingly yielding their lives that the gospel might be preached.

"Our missionary success has been fully proportionate to our self-denying, self-sacrificing effort. God alone can estimate the work accomplished as the gospel message has been proclaimed in clear, straight lines. New fields have been entered, and aggressive work has been done. The seeds of truth have been sown, the light has flashed upon many minds, bringing enlarged views of God and a more correct estimate as to the character to be formed. Thousands have been brought to a knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. They have been imbued with the faith that works by love and purifies the soul." —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 28.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Great Commission,” pp. 25–34; “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46; in *The Acts of the Apostles*; “In the Outer Court,” pp. 621–626; “The Good Samaritan,” pp. 497–505, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“A certain Samaritan, in his journey, came where the sufferer was, and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. He did not question whether the stranger was a Jew or a Gentile. . . .

“Thus the question, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ is forever answered. Christ has shown that our neighbor does not mean merely one of the church or faith to which we belong. It has no reference to race, color, or class distinction. Our neighbor is every person who needs our help. Our neighbor is every soul who is wounded and bruised by the adversary. Our neighbor is everyone who is the property of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 503.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does our financial support of the church’s worldwide mission indicate about our real commitment to the gospel commission? Why must our involvement reach beyond mere financial support? In what ways can funds presently allocated to church preservation be channeled into cross-cultural evangelism?
- 2 “We are not to feel that the work of the gospel depends principally upon the minister. To every man God has given a work to do in connection with His kingdom. Everyone who professes the name of Christ is to be an earnest, disinterested worker, ready to defend the principles of righteousness. Every soul should take an active part in advancing the cause of God. Whatever our calling, as Christians we have a work to do in making Christ known to the world. We are to be missionaries, having for our chief aim the winning of souls to Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 427. In class, dwell on the meaning of what is written here and, as a class, ask what more you could do to help finish the work that we have been called to do.
- 3 Dwell more on what Jesus said in John 12:25. What does it mean to “hate” our life “in this world”? In what ways are we to express this “hatred”?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Isaiah 56:7*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Assert that in God’s kingdom, adjectives—such as African, Asian, European, American—are ultimately useless.

Feel: Resist the urge to categorize people by age, ethnicity, economic status, and religion.

Do: Take advantage of every possible opportunity to engage people of different backgrounds and perspectives.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Concern for His Creatures Extends Far Beyond Human Categories.

A Why do we find it so easy to put people into categories: good and bad, resident and alien, saint and sinner?

B Why is this either/or mentality perilous to our attempt to disciple all people?

II. Feel: Our Similarities With Others Often Outnumber Our Differences.

A List ten things we share in common with all our fellow human beings.

B Excluding matters of faith, list ten things that make us different from others.

C Which is easier: to highlight our differences or our similarities? Why is that so?

III. Do: God’s Prophets Were Sometimes Given Messages for His People. But Some Prophets Also Had Messages for Other Nations.

A Did Israel fulfill its destiny of being a light to the nations? Why, or why not?

B What made the nation ultimately ineffective?

C What should Israel have done that it didn’t do? What lesson does its failure hold for us?

► **Summary:** People with a worldwide message are not well-served if they believe God only cares about them, that He is only returning to save them. We have to understand that God longs for us to reveal His love “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NIV*).

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Isaiah 56:7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The kingdom of God is not limited by ethnic or geographic boundaries.

Just for Teachers: While the Bible is often a record of God’s dealings with His people, the Jews, another theme runs throughout the Bible: that God actually regards all people on earth as His possessions. This lesson challenges the claim of exclusivity among God’s “chosen” people.

Opening Activity/Discussion: To the Jewish mind, there were only two classes of people in the world: Jews and everyone else. The “everyone else” they called Gentiles. People could be Babylonian, Assyrian, Roman, Chinese, or Ethiopian—they were all Gentiles. This attitude, however, was common in the ancient world; the Greeks, for instance, viewed non-Greeks as “barbarians.”

What are the implications of this type of attitude? If God cared only about the Jews, what does that say about Him? Fortunately, God is greater than most of us can begin to imagine.

Have you ever traveled somewhere where you were obviously “not from around here”? What was it like to feel like an outsider?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: You don’t have to read much of the Bible to understand that, Yes, God considered Himself the God of the Jews. But He also regarded Himself as God of all humanity. That God had an interest in people other than Jews goes as far back as the Creation story in which He is responsible for the Creation of the entire world, as well as humankind’s first parents, Adam and Eve.

Old Testament stories about Joseph, Rahab, Ruth, Daniel, Esther, and Jonah demonstrate that not only was God aware of people of other nations, He often went out of His way to embrace them and make them part of His faith community.

New Testament characters such as the wise men who appeared from a far country to worship the Baby Jesus, the good Samaritan, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, the Roman centurion who had a sick servant, the woman of Tyre and Sidon whose daughter was

sick, and several others show that Jesus wasn't hindered from helping others simply because they weren't Jews.

Bible Commentary

I. A God Too Good for the Gentiles *(Review Jonah 3, 4 with your class.)*

The story of Jonah is instructive because it shows God's concern for people of other nations as well as how Jews, in this case Jonah, understood their mission, and the difference between the two.

God sent Jonah to Nineveh with a message of judgment: " 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned' " (*Jon. 3:4, NIV*). There was no indication that the people in Nineveh could do anything to avert this evil; their fate was sealed. They had 40 days.

But Jonah was apparently such a convincing evangelist that, when the king heard about Jonah's message, he urged all the people (even the animals) to repent in sackcloth and ashes. " 'Who knows?' " he said, " 'God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish' " (*vs. 9, NIV*).

The Bible record states, " 'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened' " (*vs. 10, NIV*). Good news! Right?

Not to Jonah. An entire city was spared, but that didn't please Jonah one bit. " 'That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish,' " Jonah prayed. " 'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' " (*Jon. 4:2, NIV*). Apparently, Jonah was fine with God being compassionate with him and his fellow Jews; in fact, he confessed as much when he prayed in the belly of the fish, " 'Salvation comes from the LORD' " (*Jon. 2:9, NIV*). But mercy and compassion for the Gentiles? That, in Jonah's mind, was carrying things a little too far.

Consider This: Do you find it at all shocking that God cares as much about Gentiles as He cares about Jews? Does He care as much about Roman Catholics as He cares about Seventh-day Adventists? What about Christians and Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists—does He care about all of them? Even atheists? Explain.

Read Psalm 86:9, and Isaiah 52:10, 56:7, and 61:11. In the context of the story of Jonah, how do you understand these texts?

II. And the Hero Is . . . *(Review Luke 10:25–37 with your class.)*

When Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, there were no "good" Samaritans, according to most Jews. The antipathy between Jews and

Samaritans went back hundreds of years.

The telling of the story comes in the context of Jesus' conversation with "an expert in the law" (*vs. 25, NIV*). The man's question was, "'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (*vs. 25, NIV*).

Jesus' answer was twofold: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . .'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (*vs. 27, NIV*).

When pressed about whom the man should consider as his neighbor, Jesus told the story about a man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead along the Jericho Road. A priest and a Levite passed by without doing anything to help. It was one of those despised Samaritans who stopped to help the victim. Not only did the Samaritan dress the man's wounds, he put the man on his donkey, took him to an inn, and paid for the man's care.

Consider This: Jesus' question, "'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'" (*vs. 36, NIV*), is freighted with some startling implications. If the priest and Levite, who were supposedly closest to God, passed by without doing anything, what right did they have to call themselves God's people? And if the Samaritan stopped and did what any decent person would have done, what does that say about those whom we are tempted to dismiss as unworthy of God's grace? How can grace be grace if it is not undeserved?

III. What the World Needs Now (*Review John 12:20–32 with your class.*)

Following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem less than a week prior to His crucifixion, Jerusalem was abuzz with rumors and speculation about what Jesus would do next.

The Pharisees also were getting more desperate as they saw Jesus' influence increase and theirs decrease. "'Look how the whole world has gone after him!'" they complained (*John 12:19, NIV*).

Such is the setting for the following request from some Greeks who were in Jerusalem for Passover: "'Sir . . . we would like to see Jesus'" (*vs. 21, NIV*).

Interestingly, it's in this context that Jesus made this significant statement: "'But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'" (*vs. 32, NIV*). In other words, when people say that they want to see Jesus, they aren't asking to know about us—they're asking for a glimpse of Christ's character. We aren't being good disciples if we make the message about ourselves—our strengths, talents, or teachings. We're only being good disciples if Christ is reflected in our lives, and we direct people's attention to Him.

Consider This: More than seven billion people live on planet Earth. And each of the several great world religions has its own sacred writings. How do Seventh-day Adventists—even with their familiarity of Bible truth—intend to reach everyone?

Discussion Questions:

How do you feel about the idea that God’s everlasting gospel applies to people of all nations? Confused? Frightened? Delighted? Why? Be honest with your feelings and reasons.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Some parts of the world are sometimes described as “post-Christian.” This is a huge challenge—especially in those parts of the world (North America, western Europe, South Pacific) that were formerly known as Christian. Clearly, we have our work cut out for us.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ If God loves all people, why should we invite them to accept His gospel? Hint: even though we believe in salvation by grace through faith, there’s still a place for works. What is it?
- ❷ Imagine this: a delegation from your community visits your church board with the request “We would like to see Jesus.” What would you say? What would you do?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: We live in a world much more complex than ever imagined by our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers. Who would have thought a generation ago that Islam would be one of the fastest-growing religions in North America? Clearly, we have to be open to new, creative methods for reaching out to others.

Activity: Depending on where you live, you might know someone who practices one of the world’s faith traditions other than Christianity (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, et cetera). Learn from them what they believe and then think through ways you could reach them with our message.

Discussion Questions:

- How well do you know people of other (non-Christian) faiths?
- Do you feel threatened by them? If so, why?
- If you wanted to discuss religion with them, how easy would it be?
- What form of evangelism would be most effective in reaching them?