

To Love Mercy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 6:25–33; James 1:5–8; 2:15, 16; Isa. 52:7; 1 John 3:16–18; Isa. 58:1–10.*

Memory Text: “Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness; he is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous. A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion” (*Psalms 112:4, 5, NKJV*).

As we have seen, the Bible is filled with passionate descriptions of God's concern for the poor and oppressed, as well as calls for His people to work in their behalf. Despite the attention given to these issues, this biblical mandate has seen just sporadic and partial fulfillment and will be made complete only with the return of Christ and the supernatural events that follow.

Until then evil persists in many forms, fueled by the dark spiritual influences of the devil and his angels. This evil is often made most visible in poverty, violence, oppression, slavery, exploitation, selfishness, and greed. In such a world, our communities, our churches, and our families need to stand up against these evils no matter how hard at times it is to do so. In response to the love and commands of God, living in light of the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus and empowered and guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we must be compassionate, creative, and courageous in seeking “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God” (*Mic. 6:8, NIV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 21.

Kingdom Priorities

As was made clear in the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers, those who choose to live as members of the kingdom of God live by a different set of values and priorities than does the world.

Read Matthew 6:25–33. What is the reassurance we are given in these verses, and how should this reassurance impact our priorities?

Jesus taught that “ ‘life [is] more than food, and the body more than clothes’ ” (*Matt. 6:25, NIV*). These things are important, of course, but we must see them in light of the kingdom of God, which means we must reprioritize our lives in real and practical ways. When we recognize the call throughout the Bible to lift up and care for others, this call also becomes one of our priorities as we who seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Ideally this call should help us focus less on ourselves and more on others.

This different set of priorities also changes our relationship with those in power over us and over the oppressed. While the Bible instructs Christians to respect and obey their governments, as far as possible (*see, for example, Rom. 13:1–7*), there comes a point where we need to echo the words of Peter: “ ‘We must obey God rather than human beings!’ ” (*Acts 5:29, NIV*). Jesus put these two principles in balance in His answer to those trying to trick Him on this question: “ ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’ ” (*Matt. 22:21, NIV*).

Those who have power, whether in government or otherwise, often enforce and maintain that power by threats or force. As we have seen in the life of Jesus, faithful living does not always and in every situation require passivity in the face of evil. For example, dealing with slavery in America, Ellen G. White wrote: “When the laws of men conflict with the word and law of God, we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be. The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God’s workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 201, 202.

Where is the line between obedience to authorities and standing up for those who might be victims of an oppressive authority?

Compassion Fatigue

Resisting the possibility of letting our good intentions be overwhelmed by “all the trouble in the world,” many of us would like to do more to make a difference in the lives of the suffering. There are a number of attitudes and actions that can help us make positive responses to those in need.

Compassion: As we have seen, recognizing and empathizing with the pain of those who are hurting are first steps toward action. We need to grow and maintain our sensitivity to the suffering. Today, people talk about “compassion fatigue,” the idea that we are so exposed to sorrow and tragedy that many of us become weary of the many causes that call for our emotional energy and financial support. Jesus was keenly aware of the evil and pain around Him; yet, He remained compassionate. So must we.

Education: Because many situations of injustice and poverty are complicated, listening and learning what we can about these situations is important. There have been many examples in which well-intentioned people have caused damage to other people’s lives by trying to help. While this is not an excuse for inaction, we should seek to get involved in ways that are informed and thoughtful.

Prayer: When we see a problem, our first thought is to take “practical” action. But the Bible reminds us that prayer *is* practical. We can make a difference in the lives of the poor and oppressed by our prayers for them and for those who have power over them (see 1 Tim. 2:1, 2), as well as seeking God’s guidance for how we can best respond further in offering help (see Prov. 2:7, 8).

Expectations: Another important element in working to alleviate suffering is to have proper expectations, given the complexity of social, political, and personal circumstances. Our hope should be to give people choices and opportunities that they might not have had otherwise. Sometimes what people do with these opportunities will disappoint us, but we must respect those choices. In whatever way we might try to work in behalf of the suffering, our guiding principle must be to “‘do to others what you would have them do to you’ ” (Matt. 7:12, NIV).

Read James 1:5–8. What role should prayer play in Christian action? What does James 2:15, 16 suggest about how we can contribute to answering our prayers for others?

Generosity

“God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, *NIV*), and generous giving is an important aspect of the Christian life. While we must allow the Bible to challenge our giving and financial priorities, generosity is more than just throwing money at a cause, no matter how worthy.

Instead, generosity is one of the largest of life attitudes and a key quality of “those who fear the LORD,” as noted a number of times in Psalm 112: “Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice” (*Ps. 112:5, NIV*).

What do the following texts teach about generosity toward those in need? *Lev. 25:35–37, Ps. 119:36, 2 Cor. 8:12–15, 1 John 3:16–18, 1 Tim. 6:17–19.*

In his New Testament letters, Paul regularly cited the generosity of God—expressed most fully in Jesus’ giving His life for us—as the source of the Christian hope. In turn, His death for us also was the motivation for our living a life of generosity toward others: “I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ” (*Philem. 1:6, NIV*).

Generosity is an attitude toward life that is large, bold, and embracing. So much in our individual lives, societies, and cultures prompts us to focus on ourselves, to keep as much as we can for ourselves. And let’s face it, for most of us the default mode is always *self, self, self* anyway.

If it is real, our faith will cause us to die to self and live more for others. Our faith helps us imagine the world and its people as God sees them, in both their goodness and their brokenness, and it impels us to seek to help those in need, to whatever degree possible.

As a quality of living, generosity is readily appreciated by fundraisers and charities. Such generosity is measurable and directly practical. But large donations do not necessarily indicate a generous life (*see Mark 12:41–44*). A generous life is larger and more valuable than any donation. We need better to appreciate and cultivate a generous spirit in all that we do. For most people, generosity doesn’t come naturally; it is grace that we need to express in our lives proactively and purposely, regardless of the pull of our sinful, selfish humanity.

Besides giving money, even generously, what are other ways that we should manifest a generous spirit?

Peacemaking

Read Matthew 5:9. In the kind of world we live in, how do we do what Jesus says here? Ultimately, how successful can we be? See *Mark 13:7*.

Violent conflict is a significant cause of suffering. Included in the costs of war are the direct victims and shattered lives, the attention and resources devoted to military machinery that would be better diverted to alleviating other human needs and the ongoing suffering of war survivors and veterans, even among the “victors.” Then there are the many smaller conflicts that scar countless lives in families and communities. As such, a passion for justice cannot ignore the mandate to peacemaking.

At the heart of the gospel of Jesus is God’s gracious and grand act of peacemaking, reconciling sinful human beings to their Creator (*see 2 Cor. 5:18–21*). And the reconciliation we receive becomes the pattern for us to be “ambassadors” for this reconciliation for others, as well.

Read Isaiah 52:7. How do we live out this text too?

The gospel of peace also becomes the motivation, pattern, and resource for working for peace in our violent world: “The heart that is in harmony with God is a partaker of the peace of heaven and will diffuse its blessed influence on all around. The spirit of peace will rest like dew upon hearts weary and troubled with worldly strife.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 28.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ ” (*Matt. 5:9, NIV*). Taking this further, not only did He affirm the commandment against killing, He said that we should not be angry or hold a grudge (*see Matt. 5:21–26*) and that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (*see Matt. 5:43–48*), meaning that we should take active steps to seek their good. There are many inspiring stories of people who have devoted their lives to peacemaking in the world’s trouble spots, bringing glimpses of reconciliation and healing, and often alleviating much of the injustice and suffering these conflicts have brought.

What are ways that your church, at its local level, could act in the role of peacemaker?

A Voice for the Voiceless

Solomon wrote that there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak” (*Eccles. 3:7, NIV*). He was right, and finding that balance is not simple for any of us. However, when it comes to speaking for the oppressed and being a voice for the voiceless and seeking to overcome evil with good, is it possible that as a church we have erred on the side of too much silence when our voice should have been heard?

Christians have often talked about being the hands and feet of Jesus, referring to the call to practical service for others as Jesus would have us do. But in the prophetic role as demonstrated in the Bible, God’s first call is for men and women to be His voice—and in speaking on behalf of God, also speaking up on behalf of those God wants to defend (*see Ps. 146:6–10*).

Read Isaiah 58:1–10. What should this message, given in its specific time and place and context, say to us today in another time, place, and context? How much has really changed between the time Isaiah wrote this and our world today?

The prophets’ call to justice was never a path to popularity. But motivated by their commission from God, understanding God’s passion for justice, sympathizing with the plight of the poor and oppressed, and seeking the best for their society, these prophets dared to be a voice for the voiceless in their time and place, despite opposition, discomfort, and danger (*see 1 Pet. 3:17*).

Based on our understanding of the gospel and the call to reflect Jesus to the world, Seventh-day Adventists also have many good things to offer in regard to dealing with the evil in the world.

Such as: “Seventh-day Adventists believe that actions to reduce poverty and its attendant injustices are an important part of Christian social responsibility. The Bible clearly reveals God’s special interest in the poor and His expectations as to how His followers should respond to those who are unable to care for themselves. All human beings bear the image of God and are the recipients of God’s blessing (*Luke 6:20*). In working with the poor, we follow the example and teaching of Jesus (*Matthew 25:35, 36*). As a spiritual community, Seventh-day Adventists advocate justice for the poor and ‘speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves’ (*Proverbs 31:8 NIV*) and against those who ‘deprive the poor of their rights’ (*Isaiah 10:2 NIV*). We participate with God who ‘secures justice for the poor’ (*Psalms 140:12 NIV*).”—*Seventh-day Adventist Official Statement on Global Poverty*, June 24, 2010.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “A Higher Experience,” pp. 503–516, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “Duty to the Unfortunate” and “Man’s Duty to His Fellow Men,” pp. 511–526, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3; “Doing for Christ,” pp. 24–37, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2.

“Search heaven and earth, and there is no truth revealed more powerful than that which is made manifest in works of mercy to those who need our sympathy and aid. This is the truth as it is in Jesus. When those who profess the name of Christ shall practice the principles of the golden rule, the same power will attend the gospel as in apostolic times.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 137.

“Supreme love for God and unselfish love for one another—this is the best gift that our heavenly Father can bestow. This love is not an impulse, but a divine principle, a permanent power. The unconsecrated heart cannot originate or produce it. Only in the heart where Jesus reigns is it found. . . . This love, cherished in the soul, sweetens the life and sheds a refining influence on all around.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 551.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As we have seen in this week’s study, the gospel continues to be the template and motivation for acting on behalf of others as Jesus acted on our behalf. How has this expanded your understanding and appreciation of the good news of what God has done for us and how He shows His love for us?
- 2 Raising our voices for the voiceless, engaging in peacemaking, and similar activities may draw us into public and political arenas. However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been a champion of the separation of church and state. What is the difference between inappropriate political involvement and speaking up and working to make peace in public ways?
- 3 What one step or action discussed in this week’s study would you like to take in your life and community? How can you make it happen?
- 4 What issue of evil and oppression have you decided to pray for in your community or in the wider world?

Summary: Becoming a follower of Jesus will change our lives in many ways, including producing in us a passion to join in with God’s active concern for the poor and downtrodden. Never an easy task and rarely popular, this will change our priorities and motivate us to take active steps to heal the hurt in the world around us.

U.S. Biker Embraces Sabbath

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The invitation startled Richard Smith as he stopped at a senior center to collect meals to deliver on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle to retirees in the U.S. state of West Virginia.

“Would you like to go to the Seventh-day Adventist church with me?” asked Ruth, who also worked at the senior center.

“I don’t know,” Richard said. “I don’t know anything about the Adventist Church.”

Richard, 72, had visited various Sunday churches during two marriages and two jobs. But he had never been baptized. He didn’t know which church to join, and he often thought, *If God wakes me up one day and says go to a different church, I want to be able to pack up and move.*

So, when Ruth invited him to church, he replied, “Let’s try my churches first.”

He asked Ruth, a divorced nurse six years his junior, for her opinion after visiting a church together on Sunday.

“If I just wanted breakfast, it was good,” Ruth said about the church’s doughnuts and fruit juice.

In reply to his query after the second church, Ruth noted that the pastor had spent much more time on the announcements than the sermon.

Ruth’s observations gave Richard a new perspective, and he finally agreed to go with her to an Adventist church. Soon he began to ply its pastor, Bill Hunt, with questions about the Bible, and the answers amazed him.

“It was like I had this veil over my head,” Richard said. “I could see through it, but everything was kind of hazy. Bill yanked that veil off my head, and I said, ‘Wow, things are as clear as a bell!’ ”

Richard also shared a common interest with the pastor; they both are bikers.

Then the pastor invited Richard to attend an evangelistic series—one of 35 evangelistic series in West Virginia that were funded by a 2015 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Richard attended with Ruth and was baptized. In all, eight people were baptized after the 2016 meetings at the Huntington church.



Today, Richard, pictured left, is 72 and sharing his love for Jesus with anyone who will listen.

“The Lord takes such good care of me, and I think, Why?” he said. “I know He takes care of everybody, but why? It’s like I am sitting down at the table, looking at my plate, and everything on it I like to eat. What more can I ask for?”

Part I: Overview

We do not generate mercy—we reflect God’s mercy. Mercy is part of God’s response to human frailty. Also, God shows mercy through His servants. The Hebrew word for “mercy” is *hesed*, which means “loyal love” or “loving-kindness.” The Greek word is *eleos*, which means to have a deep concern for the welfare of others. It is a quality of God seen in both the Old and New Testaments. It is significant that, in the instructions for the building of the Old Testament sanctuary, in Exodus 25, God tells Moses to build a “mercy seat” of pure gold as a cover for the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place (*Exod. 25:21*), even though “mercy seat” is a different word from *hesed*.

In this lesson, we will find biblical assurance that those who serve God can be free of worry as they focus on kingdom priorities. We will examine attitudes and strategies that guide the merciful and generous in coping effectively with the challenges and opportunities of service. We will note the calling and role of merciful people to facilitate reconciliation and peacemaking, as well as speaking up for those who have no voice. If you have a *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, refer to the church’s advice on peacefully maintaining an uncompromising stand for justice and right in civic affairs.¹

In class, explore your church’s progress in responding to pleas for mercy. Try to evaluate the effectiveness of your church in loving mercy and showing it.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture: Our ministry to the world is not only in the realm of doctrines and ideas. It must be demonstrated in acts of mercy, fairness, compassion, and justice. “Practical work will have far more effect than mere sermonizing. We are to give food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and shelter to the homeless. And we are called to do more than this. The wants of the soul, only the love of Christ can satisfy.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 417.

Jesus’ love and prioritization of showing mercy was demonstrated clearly in His parables and healings, both physical and spiritual. For example, in the end-time parable of the sheep and the goats (*Matt. 25:31–40*), Jesus links salvation with merciful ethics. This link surfaces

¹ The Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th edition (Review and Herald®, 2016), pp. 143, 144.

again in the story of the spiritual healing of Zacchaeus. Christ's mercy and grace won Zacchaeus' heart. Zacchaeus responded by pledging to be merciful by giving half of his goods to the poor and four-fold restoration to anyone he had cheated. Jesus then announced to him, "This day is salvation come to this house" (*Luke 19:9*). Again, Jesus links salvation with merciful social ethics—a kingdom priority.

In His ministry, Jesus appeared to devote more time to healing than to teaching and regularly showed mercy by healing the demon-possessed, the disfigured, blind, deaf, dumb, and the wounded in spirit. "The tendency of the religions of all time has been to care more for religion than for humanity; Christ cared more for humanity than for religion—rather, His care for humanity was the chief expression of His religion."²

Invite your class members to discuss the implications of the quotation above. Invite them to read James 1:26, 27 and James 2:15–18 aloud as a prelude to the discussion.

Illustration: Doing justice and loving mercy (*Mic. 6:8*) might seem to be impossible tasks in light of the overwhelming and colossal problems in society.

Discuss: How can your church deal with compassion fatigue by resisting the temptation to do nothing, because you cannot do everything?

The story is told of a boy who was walking on a beach where he encountered hundreds of dying starfish that had washed ashore. The boy began tossing the starfish back into the ocean. Someone saw him and told him that he could not possibly help all those starfish. As he tossed another starfish into the ocean, he answered that the little he could do made a difference to that one.

Even though you would get tired and overwhelmed attempting to help every needy person and situation you encounter, start somewhere. You can make a difference to those whom you help.

Scripture: Showing mercy requires education because many situations are complicated and messy. In time, mercy will collide with an opposing force: injustice. Against this overpowering force, acts of mercy can seem woefully inadequate. What good is a cup of soup and a sandwich when a severe addiction controls a man's life?

Having to contend inevitably with the overpowering force of injustice may be why the Bible places equal emphasis on both mercy *and* justice. God's basic design for showing mercy is summarized in Micah 6:8, which enjoins God's people "to do justice, and to love mercy." Doing justice means treating others with fairness and reasonableness. It means making decisions that are fair and reasonable too. Loving mercy means being compassionate, kind, and forgiving to someone over whom you

² Henry Drummond, *The Programme of Christianity* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1891), p. 9.

have power. Putting these two virtues together, in keeping with the command in Micah, leads us to wholistic, empowering involvement with those whom we serve. For example, the addict needs *both* food and treatment. Street kids need friendship and jobs.

What are the implications of the above concepts for your church's ministry strategy? What Bible stories of Jesus' healing miracles show individuals cooperating with the Great Physician in their healing or betterment? For example, see Luke 17:11–14, John 5:1–9, John 8:2–11, and John 9:1–7.

Illustration: To illustrate the importance of moving from relief (giving a fish) to individual development (teaching someone to fish), discuss the following story. What guidelines for generosity are given?

One advocate for social reform coordinated an adopt-a-family program for urban families who could not afford to buy Christmas presents for their children. On Christmas Day, the generous gift givers would deliver gifts to their adopted city families. One Christmas, the advocate happened to be in the living rooms of needy families when the gift givers in this adopt-a-family program arrived. The children were very excited and happy about the beautifully wrapped gifts, but the mothers were reserved, though gracious. If there was a dad in the house, he vanished out the back door when he saw the gift givers coming. These parents were suffering from loss of dignity and pride. Their failure as providers for their children was laid bare right in their own home.

After this experience, this advocate's organization started a family store. Instead of delivering wrapped gifts to their adopted city family, the merciful gift givers were asked to bring an unwrapped gift to the family store, where a Christmas toy shop was set up. A small price would be placed on each item. Parents from the community were invited to Christmas shop. Those who had no money could work at the store and earn what would be needed to purchase gifts for their family, for a cash flow had been generated from selling the gift donations. On Christmas the parents could experience the joy of watching their children open gifts that the parents had provided with their own hands. The name of the program was changed from Adopt-A-Family to "Pride for Parents." Let the poor give too!

Scripture: Peacemaking is an act of mercy. Because of His mercy, Jesus offers peace to the troubled in heart (*John 14:27*). God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ. He has given His people the "ministry of reconciliation" (*2 Cor. 5:18*) to help facilitate peace between people in fulfillment of His mandate to "strive for peace with all men" (*Heb. 12:14, RSV*). God even instructed the Israelites, "And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives" (*Jer. 29:7*).

Peacemaking is linked with being in God’s family. (*Matt. 5:9*). Those who foster God’s Messianic peace will receive the reward of being His sons and daughters, for they reflect His character. This peace is based on the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means total well-being, personally and communally.³ God wants His people to bring this *shalom* to the communities they serve.

Ask the class to share ways that their church has been a peacemaker—internally and externally.

Part III: Life Application

Well-intentioned and merciful people can turn attempts to show mercy into “toxic charity.” Mercy is not a destination but is only the door, an opening to make a difference. Mercy that does not move in the direction of justice—which includes development of the recipients of our mercy—will do more harm than good to both the recipient *and* the giver. Doing *for*, rather than *with* those who are in need all too often produces toxic charity. We must deeply believe that every person, every community, no matter how broken, has something of worth to bring to the table. Doing *for* a community what it can do for itself is damaging to community life as well as to an individual. Solution: Merciful intervention must be community driven rather than volunteer driven, and community led rather than volunteer led.

If your class is large enough, break into pairs and discuss ideas for real-life application of the aforementioned concepts. Have students role play, starting a plan to meet a need that they have discovered in their community. Or have them evaluate an existing community intervention with which they are acquainted. Ask them also to consider these questions (write their ideas on the lines provided):

- 1. In what ways is capable indigenous (i.e., local, native) leadership behind the effort?**

³ *The English Standard Version Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 1828.

2. How does the program show that it has the ultimate self-sufficiency of the neighborhood as a primary objective?

3. In what ways does the plan emanate from the local church, which partners with entities in the community?

4. How does the plan promote interdependency rather than continued dependency?

In closing, have class members share with the whole group what they discussed.

Notes


