

# Loyalties



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**MEMORY TEXT:** “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37, 38).

**I HAD TRAVELED** eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square . . . with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream—grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City.”—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: New American Library, 1957), pp. 89, 90.

Life, however, does not have to be so futile. God offers us a much better end than what Kerouac depicted here, one that can make this existence full of meaning and purpose now. However, the Lord does not force that end upon us. We have to choose, a choice that is made manifest every day of our lives by the little things we do, things that reveal where our loyalties really lie.

That is what we will look at this week: loyalties. Are we loyal to our God or to something else? This is a crucial question, for whatever our other loyalties are, in whatever form they manifest themselves, one thing’s for sure: In the end, they can lead only to one of those awful “cemetery cities,” wherever they happen to be.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** What is the most important commandment, and why? Why can’t we serve two masters? Why is loyalty to God so crucial? What are some of the other things that vie for our loyalty?

\*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 24.

**THE PRINCIPLE OF LOYALTY (Exod. 20:2, 3).**

Notice, the first commandment listed in the law isn't the Sabbath commandment; it isn't the commandment against adultery, murder, or covetousness. Instead, the Lord commands them to have no other gods before Him.

What is He saying here? Is He saying, "Well, there are other gods out there, but I want you to give Me your best allegiance"? Some scholars argue that, in a sense, this is what the Lord is saying here but only because the Israelites were so steeped in idolatry and false thinking (see, for instance, Exod. 32:4) that God needed to phrase it in ways they would understand.

On the other hand, the real point of the text seems to be not that other gods (as in supernatural deities) exist but that Israel should have nothing that stands between them and the Lord. He alone must come first.

It's no different today, is it? As long as any other "god" claims the first affection of our hearts, as long as we endeavor to divide our allegiance between the God of heaven and the gods of this earth, as long as any darling idol, pet vice, or cherished sin is permitted to share the throne of our hearts with the only true God, then we will have some other "god" before the Lord. And if we are violating that commandment, there's no question—violation of many of the others, to one degree or another, will follow.

**Why is obedience to the first commandment so important? Why can we have no other "god" before the Lord?**

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Read carefully Matthew 6:24, where Jesus, more or less, reiterates the message of the first commandment. Though the wording is different, Jesus here is clearly showing why obedience to the first commandment is so crucial. He doesn't leave any middle ground. There's not much room (in fact, there's none) for compromise, for some sort of half-allegiance. Jesus takes the position that our loyalty to the Lord either will be all or nothing at all. That's pretty stern.

**Why is it impossible to serve two masters? What examples can you find from the Bible or from personal experience that reveal the truth of this important principle? Have you ever tried to divide your loyalties between the Lord and something else? If so, what happened?**

**Key Text: Matthew 22:38.**

**Teachers Aim:**

1. To show that God requires total loyalty.
2. To help the class understand that anything we cherish above our heavenly Father becomes our god.
3. To reveal that money is not the only thing we can place above God.

**Lesson Outline:**

**I. Loyalty (Exod. 20:3).**

- A. Jesus said we are to love God with "all" our heart, soul, and mind. Nothing less will do.
- B. Divided allegiance results in having other "gods" before the true God.

**II. The Other Gods (Luke 12:15-23).**

- A. The rich young ruler and the certain rich man made money their god.
- B. All the combined wealth of this world cannot buy salvation.
- C. Understanding and knowing God glorifies Him.

**III. The Objects of Our Love (Rom. 6:16).**

- A. Is there anyone or anything you love more than God?
- B. In the last days, self-love and pleasure-loving will be common.
- C. God gives us wealth, wisdom, and power that we might glorify Him, not ourselves.

**Summary:** "Only when selfishness is dead, when strife for supremacy is banished, when gratitude fills the heart, and love makes fragrant the life—it is only then that Christ is abiding in the soul, and we are recognized as laborers together with God."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 402.

**Commentary.**

**Loyalties.**

The story of the rich young ruler is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. This young man seems to have come to Christ in all sincerity, eager to learn how he could acquire eternal life. His words make it obvious that he had tried to live a respectable, law-abiding life. Yet, by the end of the story, it is clear he lacked the one quality

**WHOLEHEARTED ALLEGIANCE.**

**“Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:35-38).**

**H**ow fascinating: Jesus is asked to name “the great commandment in the law,” and He answers by giving them not even one of the specific commandments in the Decalogue. Read Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; the words that Jesus spoke in Matthew 22 are not listed in the Ten Commandments. And yet, He specifically calls those words the “first and great commandment.”

**To understand better the point Jesus is making, we need to look at the text, in context, He quoted to the lawyer. This is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. Read the first ten verses of Deuteronomy 6. What is the Lord saying to Israel there, and why would Jesus quote it as the “first and great commandment”? Also, in what ways does that verse reiterate the idea found in the first commandment in the Decalogue?**

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We are to love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. This does not leave room for much else.

But that’s the point. As the first commandment says, as Jesus said in Matthew 6, as is expressed in Deuteronomy 6, and as Jesus repeats in Matthew 22, love for God has to dominate every aspect of our lives. If not, if there is something that we will not surrender to Him, then that thing that we are holding onto becomes an idol, another god; even worse, it can become the means through which Satan gets control of us. We can not give the enemy any place, anywhere. That’s why our loyalty to the Lord has to be complete, undivided, and total. When we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, we have given all of ourselves to Him. Then He can work in us and make us into the people He wants us to be.

**If love for God is the first and great commandment, how would you answer someone who asks, “Please explain to me what it means to love God. How do you love a being that you have never seen, felt, touched, or heard with your senses?”**

**TEACHERS COMMENTS**

he needed—a genuine love for Christ. Instead, he loved himself so much there was no room for loving others. He had become his own idol, thus disqualifying himself for eternal life. As this story shows, loving one master means you cannot love another master.

As we studied in lesson 7, Christ stated that God’s law is formulated on two basic, yet all-important, precepts: love for God and love for humankind (Matt. 22:37-40). These precepts cannot be separated from each other. It is clear, however, that love for God takes precedence. Ellen G. White wrote, “The law of God requires that man shall love God supremely, and his neighbor as himself. When through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is perfectly done, we shall be complete in Christ (Letter 11, 1892).”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1097. The love of God, in fact, makes it possible for us to love others.

Love for God should be central to our lives. There is no room for divided loyalties in the Christian’s heart. As James 1:8 points out, any attempt to split loyalties causes instability. It is impossible to divide one’s loyalties equally between two entities. Inevitably, allegiance begins to lean in one direction or the other. This is especially true in religion, which, by its nature lays claim to the entire life, heart, and soul. “There is no neutral position. He who is not wholly on God’s side is effectively, and for all practical purposes, on the devil’s side.”—Page 351. When genuine love for God is present in the heart, it will permeate the entire soul and influence the way we relate to others.

Misguided attempts to divide loyalties result in eternal consequences. “To be an apostate, a traitor to the cause of God, is more serious than death; for it means the loss of eternal life. . . .

“Double-minded men and women are Satan’s best allies. . . . All who are loyal to God and the truth must stand firmly for the right because it is right.”—Ellen G. White Comments, page 1086. Those who profess to be Christians while secretly treasuring idols greatly damage the cause of God. They are living lies, and those lies will negatively impact their testimony. The truth about their loyalties will eventually come to the fore and crush those who have looked to them as examples. Though we do not believe in establishing our faith based on another person’s good example, we must admit that those we look up to can influence our understanding of Christianity. When leaders or others who are well respected in the church have their idols exposed, the church shares in their reproach. *The SDA Bible Commentary* explains the impact of split loyalties: “Through the years the behavior of nominal church members, that is, those who profess loyalty to God’s way of life and yet reveal no tangible evidence of a development in Christlikeness, has been a greater handicap to the progress of the gospel than any other factor.”—Volume 7, p. 342.

In discussing professed Christians who have not fully surrendered to Christ, Ellen White states, “Almost Christians, yet not fully

**MONEY AND GOD (Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 12:15-23).**

American author Mark Twain wrote: “Some men worship rank, some worship heroes, some worship power, some worship God . . . but they all worship money.”

Maybe those words are a bit exaggerated, but the point is well made, and it helps explain why Jesus said the things He did in both the accounts listed above.

**What are the parallel traits in the two men talked about in these texts? What do they have in common?**

In one sense, both these accounts are telling the same story. Indeed, what the rich young ruler did is not much different from what “the certain rich man” did. Both were so consumed by their money that they lost sight of what really matters. Basically, they loved their money and wealth more than God, and thus they proved who had their loyalty. In the end, the gist of both accounts seems to be that both lost out on eternal life. They sold their place in eternity for a few monetary pleasures here. Both, in short, were ripped off.

Think about this: No one ever bought his or her way into the kingdom of heaven; not enough money exists to get a soul there (besides, the price has already been paid). However, it doesn’t take much money to keep a person out. Millions of dollars, when contrasted to the promise of eternity, are just a pile of rubbish, and souls will be lost for a lot less than millions of dollars.

Money, of course, has its place; the problem is that it can so easily get out of its place and get into places it does not belong. “Take heed,” Jesus said, “and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15). Though we all claim to believe those words, trying to live out that belief is not always so easy. Money has a powerful lure upon people that can blind them from seeing what they need to see.

**Make a list of the things money can definitely buy. Make another list of things people often think money can buy but, more often than not, it does not, or at least not for long. Then make a list of the things money definitely cannot buy. Compare your lists. What conclusions can you draw about what money can and cannot do? Share your lists with the class.**

**TEACHERS COMMENTS**

Christians, they seem near the kingdom of heaven, but they cannot enter there. Almost but not wholly saved, means to be not almost but wholly lost.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 118.

The remedy for split loyalties is to surrender completely to Christ. Doing so means accepting God’s love and transmitting that love to others. Christians must become thoroughly acquainted with God’s character through a close, daily relationship with Him. They must “die to self that Christ may live in them . . . [and] overcome unholy

**INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY**

**Texts for Discovery: Deuteronomy 6:1-12; Jeremiah 9:23, 24; Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 12:15-21; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.**

how well can we practice, let alone, understand a love that is beyond our human ability to comprehend? What characteristics are shared by both love and forgiveness?

1. One of the immutable laws of the universe is that we become like that which we worship and admire (see 2 Cor. 3:18). Can you give examples from the secular world that demonstrate this fact? What about examples from the Bible? Examples from your own life?
2. This week’s lesson cites two stories from the life of Jesus, one a parable (Luke 12:15-23) and one a real-life experience (Matt. 19:16-22). Could it be that economic security is one of the few “acceptable” forms of idolatry in the twenty-first century? Is “mandatory poverty” the reason these stories are in the Bible? If not, what should we learn from these stories?
3. The word translated to mean “lovingkindness” in Jeremiah 9:24 is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word *agape*, which means unconditional love. Just
4. There are lots of things God’s people have to be on the lookout for these days. It’s not just false doctrines and heresies that will get us off the narrow path; it’s our own inability to control our fallen desires. Paul warns against being satisfied with a “form of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5). What does he offer as an antidote to being swept away by carnal desires? (See 2 Timothy 3:16, 17.) What does the Bible offer that will keep our focus clear and our resolve firm?
5. In these days of so many distractions, Paul urged the believers in Philippi to adopt the attitude of Christ, which he outlines in Philippians 2:5-11. According to this model, where should we focus our energies as we look for Jesus’ return?

**OTHER GODS.**

**“Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord” (Jer. 9:23, 24).**

Look at these beautiful verses, some of the most profound and deep in all Inspiration. Notice the three points it talks about: wisdom, might, and riches, three things that in and of themselves are not evil. God is not saying do not have these things, do not enjoy these things, do not prosper in these things. Instead, He is saying keep them in perspective; do not let them cloud out your view of what really matters.

**What are the aspects of the Lord that these verses tell us to glory in? Why these?**

If Jeremiah’s words had relevance when he first uttered them, how much more so today, when humanity all but glories in its intellectual and technological achievements. Indeed, these achievements are quite impressive, something we might be inclined to glory in.

Nevertheless, think about this: Of all the things we can know, what is the most important? Of course, that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that through faith in what He has done for us at the Cross, we have the promise of eternal life. After all, in contrast to that, what else really matters? (Matt. 16:26).

Yet, how do we know this, the most crucial aspect of wisdom? Is it something we can learn from pure reason alone? Or from science or technology? Can a study of mathematics lead us to it? Can we deduce the Cross—and the great truth of justification by faith through faith in the shed blood of Christ in our behalf—from nature? Can we, on our own, figure out the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ? Of course not. Instead, this truth is something that had to be told us, spoon-fed to us through revelation.

**What does it say about the limits of human knowledge (unaided reason) and wisdom that it can never teach us the most important thing we need to know? Why, then, would it make no sense to worship or make a god out of what cannot even answer the most crucial of all human questions to human existence: How are we saved?**

**TEACHERS COMMENTS**

ambition and their love for worldly attractions. They [must] take up the cross and follow Christ in the path of self-denial and sacrifice.”—Page 118. “If men waste their opportunities in self-pleasing, they cut themselves off from everlasting life. . . . By their own choice they have fixed an impassable gulf between them and their God.”—Page 260. A life of self-denial and sacrifice translates into service for others.

“There are today close beside us many who are hungry, naked, and homeless. A neglect to impart of our means to these needy, suffering ones places upon us a burden of guilt which we shall one day fear to meet.”—Page 261.

When love for God is supreme in our hearts, we will not even think of glorifying self. “The gospel of the kingdom is designed to take men’s thoughts away from self and direct them upward toward God and outward toward their fellow men.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 797.

**WITNESSING**

Everyone is loyal to someone or something. We show our devotion to holidays with yearly rituals and celebrations. We faithfully attend the same churches week after week for many years. We are committed to jobs, friends, and even hobbies. Many hold on to traditions handed down from previous generations for the rest of their lives. Some would even die for a cause, giving no thought for their own lives or the lives of others. Flags, posters, bumper stickers, and songs all speak of the things to which we yield our affections and devotions. But where is our loyalty to God?

As God’s witnesses, we face the challenge each day to do what He would have us do in every situation. We can do this only when

we are connected to Christ. The Lord says “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4). To abide means to continue or remain. We must remain in the Lord—committed to prayer, committed to Bible study, committed to service, committed to telling others the good news of salvation.

As we continue in the Lord each day, our loyalties will begin to change. We will become more committed to spiritual things than earthly things. We will spend more time with the Savior. We will “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). And we will share the gospel with others. They will see it on our bumper stickers and nailed to our doorposts. They will hear it in our songs and see it in our actions.



“LOVERS.”

“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Paul here talks about the last days as “perilous times.” He is not referring, it seems, to peril in the sense of having to worry about physical danger, such as from an errant nuclear weapon; rather, the message seems to be warning of spiritual danger.

**Who is Paul talking about here? When you read the list of characteristics, they seem pretty bad, and, yet, whom is he referring to? That answer might help explain what he meant by “perilous times.” What does it mean to have the “form of godliness”?**

Two times in the texts above, Paul talks about “lovers”: lovers of themselves and lovers of pleasures. It is not wrong to love oneself (Matt. 22:39); and there’s nothing wrong with loving pleasure. God didn’t create us with physical desires and create all around us the means of satisfying them, only to hold them back from us, did He?

Of course not. Instead, what’s being said here is what has been touched on all week: the danger of allowing things to spin out of control, even good things such as wealth, wisdom, power, or pleasure, until they assume a place in our lives they should not. We cannot serve two gods: Jesus made that clear, and whatever we love supremely becomes our god.

When people become lovers of themselves, at the expense of everything and everyone else, they make themselves out to be their own gods (Gen. 3:5), and when that happens, evil follows.

In fact, look again at the list of how people would be in the last days. It is not that hard to see how those things can stem from a life in which love of self rules. The problem, Paul says, will become so acute that people who claim to love the Lord will create a theology that justifies them in their selfish actions and attitudes.

**Read Matthew 16:24. What is Jesus saying here that can spare someone from these “perilous times”? What does He mean by those words, and how can we take what He said and apply it to our own lives?**

LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH

**Icebreaker:** One of the key components of love is loyalty. Imagine a situation where a person professes love to someone but displays little or no loyalty to the person. It would be hard, then, to say that the one person really loves the other, would it not?

in Acts 5:1-9, should have discouraged Sapphira from placing her loyalty in him? What attributes revealed in the story should have discouraged Ananias from giving his allegiance to her? Examine Acts 1-4 to find reasons why the couple should have been able to give God their allegiance?

**Thought Questions:**

1. Does deep, mature love require a specific intelligence quotient, a certain level of physical stamina, or a determined bank balance, in order to thrive? What light do Jeremiah 9:23, 24; Matthew 8:20; and 1 Timothy 5:8 shed on the relation of love and loyalty?
2. Seventh-day Adventist children are often introduced to the story of Ananias and Sapphira as an object lesson about honesty (see Acts 5:1-9). The story also illustrates disloyalty. What was the means by which Satan gained control of this couple? What became their god? This idol led them to commit at least three sins. Name three of those sins.
3. What attributes inspire your loyalty? What characteristics of her husband, revealed in the story
4. Name at least two personal experiences that lead you to give God your allegiance. What one thing—concrete or abstract—threatens to steal your affections from God and your service to Him?
5. Are time and money measures of loyalty? If so, why does God ask for so little—one-tenth of our income and, in a specific and unique manner, one-seventh of our time? Why does He give so much—His Son, His protection, spiritual gifts, talents, etc. and ask, in contrast, so little in return? Or maybe He asks of all that we have to give? Who is the most loyal person you know? Explain what those characteristics are that make this person so loyal.
6. Is loyalty a gift or a debt, or both? Or, even, neither? Explain your answer.

## FURTHER STUDY:

Whatever shall draw away the heart from God must be given up. Mammon is the idol of many. The love of money, the desire for wealth, is the golden chain that binds them to Satan. Reputation and worldly honor are worshiped by another class. The life of selfish ease and freedom from responsibility is the idol of others. But these slavish bands must be broken. We cannot be half the Lord's and half the world's. We are not God's children unless we are such entirely."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 44.

“‘No man can serve two masters.’ We cannot serve God with a divided heart. Bible religion is not one influence among many others; its influence is to be supreme, pervading and controlling every other. It is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but it is to pervade the whole life, as if the canvas were dipped into the color, until every thread of the fabric were dyed a deep, unfading hue.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 312.

“No outward shrines may be visible, there may be no image for the eye to rest upon, yet we may be practicing idolatry. It is as easy to make an idol of cherished ideas or objects as to fashion gods of wood or stone. Thousands have a false conception of God and His attributes. They are as verily serving a false god as were the servants of Baal. Are we worshiping the true God as He is revealed in His word, in Christ, in nature, or are we adoring some philosophical idol enshrined in His place? God is a God of truth. Justice and mercy are the attributes of His throne. He is a God of love, of pity and tender compassion. Thus He is represented in His Son, our Saviour. He is a God of patience and long-suffering. If such is the being whom we adore and to whose character we are seeking to assimilate, we are worshiping the true God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 173, 174.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In the context of this week's lesson, how does what Jesus says in Matthew 6:33 solve the problems presented?
2. If things like wealth, wisdom, and power are not wrong in and of themselves and a person can possess these things and still faithfully serve the Lord, how can a person tell when these things have gotten out of hand? What are the warning signs that should tell a person that he or she has a problem?