

Embracing *the* World



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 13:33; 25:31-46; John 17:15-17; 2 Cor. 5:19, 20; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 4:14.*

Memory Text: “‘My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world’ ” (*John 17:15-18, NIV*).

Those who have studied the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church know that it took a while before the church began to understand the immensity of the challenge God had given her. At first, the small band of disappointed Advent believers saw only a very limited task: to encourage fellow Adventists after 1844. Gradually, however, they saw that God had given them a much greater assignment. They sought a wider audience and began to spread their message to Protestant America. In 1874 the horizon widened as the first official missionary left for Europe. By the year 1900 Adventism had gained a small foothold in many parts of the world and was on its way to what it is today: a truly global movement.

Thus the question for us is this: How are we, as Adventist Christians, to relate to the world at large?

The Week at a Glance: What kind of image should we present to the world? How can we be in the world but not of it? What does the universality of Christ's death tell us about the universality of our own mission to the world?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 25.*

Representing the King *(Matt. 13:33, 2 Cor. 5:20).*

What images did Paul use to point out to the church members in Corinth that they are representatives of God?

2 Cor. 2:15-17

2 Cor. 3:1-3

2 Cor. 5:20

Our life should be such that it calls people to a decision, for or against the principles we espouse. For those who reject the Christ we serve, our witness will be an irritant or even a “smell of death” (*2 Cor. 2:16, NIV*). But for those who find Christ through us, we are a “fragrance of life” (*vs. 16, NIV*)!

We also are pictured as ambassadors. Ambassadors are a small but important class of people. They go wherever they are sent to represent their government. Often they must venture into a culture that differs greatly from their own. Their work demands tact and diplomacy, as well as frankness and courage. Their duty is to guard jealously the interests and the reputations of their home country. What a fitting metaphor for those who represent the kingdom of heaven!

What other image is used in the Bible to illustrate the positive influence Christians are expected to have in society? *Matt. 13:33*. And what does it mean?

Leaven is, in general, a symbol for evil influences, carrying infection. In this sense Jesus used it when He spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees (*Mark 8:15 and parallels*). It also is used by analogy as a symbol for a wholesome influence, which spreads out, as well. The working of leaven in dough is not a slow, imperceptible process. At first, it is true, the leaven is *hidden*, and nothing appears to happen, but then the whole mass begins to swell and bubble as fermentation advances.

The moment you identify yourself as a Christian, you are, for better or for worse, representing your Lord. In other words, whether you are *good, bad, or indifferent*, you are still representing the Lord to those around you. You can never be neutral. Think about those whom you are around. What kind of influence are you projecting? Where and how can you improve?

Key Text: *John 17:15, 18.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To reemphasize that the church's mission is a global mission.
2. To recognize that we must meet the needs of the people where they are.

Lesson Outline:

I. Ambassadors for King Jesus.

- A. We are to go to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” with the gospel (*Rev. 14:6*).
- B. We are to be in the world but not of the world as we witness.
- C. God's remnant church is not an elite country club for members only.
- D. The gospel commission requires that we mingle with the people of the world in order to share Jesus with those who do not know Him.

II. Roll Up Your Sleeves.

- A. Faith and love require people who are willing to be proactive servants, not bystanders, on the sidelines of faith.
- B. People must be reached in places as diverse as rural Appalachia in the Eastern United States, the mountains of Nepal, the slums of the cities of the world, the prisons, and suburban neighborhoods.

III. Prayer Changes Things.

- A. Intercessory prayer for others should be a top priority.
- B. It takes earnest prayer to take the message of salvation in Jesus to a dying world.

IV. Into All the World.

- A. True followers of Christ seek to inform the world that Christ paid the price for their sins.
- B. Christ's death offers salvation for the whole world. Our ministry and outreach must be as inclusive.

Summary: “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (*Matt. 25:40*).

COMMENTARY

I. To Love or Not to Love the World.

As Christians, we are called to go to the world with the good news of the gospel. We are also called to remain separate from the world, to be “in, but not of” it. John 3:16 famously informs the

“In the World” but Not “of the World” *(John 17:15-17).*

For many Christians, the church is like a club—strictly for members! Although they will say that they believe in witness and evangelism and want their church to grow, their deeds and their attitude speak a different language!

How are we to relate to the world? Are we to embrace the world and all that it offers? Are we to shun the world? Or is there another option? See *John 17:15-17*. What principles is Jesus expressing?

If we want to be true followers of Christ, we will have to mix with the people around us. We must not spend all our time in pious meditation, thanking God that we differ from all those *worldly* people around us. The opposite is true. While we must be *holy*—as in being radically different in the way we live—we must not keep our distance from those who must also hear the good news. We are told to “ ‘Go into all the world’ ” (*Mark 16:15, NIV*) and, like Paul, identify with the people with whom we come in contact (*1 Cor. 9:19-23*).

Why did God intervene when, after the Flood, the inhabitants of the world decided to build an enormous fortress that would house them all? *Gen. 11:4, 7*.

The descendants of Noah and his sons did not want to move away from where they lived. They wanted to stay together. If ever there was a group of people with a fortress mentality, we find them in Genesis 11. But God intervened. He did not agree with this fortress mentality then, and He doesn't now.

“Babel plays itself out over and over again in the lives of congregations. A new church is formed with excitement, energy and vision. As the years pass, however, the church functions less to introduce Jesus Christ to nonbelievers than to provide a safe, secure and familiar environment to those who already believe and belong.”—Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 25, 26.

Go back and read again John 17:15-17. How does that apply in your own personal situation? Are you really not “of the world”? If you answer Yes, what justification can you give for that answer? How can one be truly “not of this world”?

reader that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” But the same author elsewhere states: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15, NIV).

Rather than reflecting contradictory sentiments, these seeming contradictions demonstrate the difficulties that face us in our efforts to relate to a world that is largely ignorant of—or disinterested in—Christian principles and is both essential and dangerous to our own relationship with God.

What should our attitude be toward the world, here taken to mean the larger part of humanity for whom Christ is irrelevant? We should love it, right? So we are not given the option of isolating ourselves from the world in small enclaves of believers trying to avoid corrupting influences from out there. That is not to say that some Christian sects or organizations have not, in fact, done just that; it is just that it is hard to see how they support it, and history seems to demonstrate that it just doesn’t work.

But, on the other hand, just how much are we to love the world? Are we to become unduly interested in it to the extent that we imitate it in our own life and spirituality? Once again, we are not given that option. We are to remain “in the world, but not of it.” As in the former case, some have tried this approach anyway, with similar results.

In seeking the meaning of all this, perhaps we should examine the meaning of love. As humans, our concept of love can be quite misguided and even crass. In such a way, we can take love to mean unconditional admiration or support for anything the object of that love is or does. If that means that we confirm the bad or destructive aspects of the beloved to the extent of adopting them ourselves, our *love* has been a force for evil, not for good. Or we could love the world because it gives us pleasure that we feel is lacking in our humdrum Christian life. In such an instance our love is selfish, and again, destructive to all concerned.

The love the Christian is to show to the world is a love that ultimately intends to bring the world to salvation, rather like the love of John 3:16 and unlike the love of 1 John 2:16.

II. Useful Quotes on the Christian and the World.

“The world is created and loved by God, and Christ has come to save it. But it is ephemeral, subject to decay and death; moreover, it has fallen under the control of the evil one, and therefore into darkness. The world of men and the world of nature were closely inter-related in the thought of ancient men. Thus in our present passage not only the lusts of a fallen humanity but a love of the creature and the creation is disparaged over against the primal and everlasting ground of existence, the Father and his purpose.”—*The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 12, p. 238.

“Religion in Overalls” (*Matt. 25:31-46*).

The title of today’s study is borrowed from that of a book by William G. Johnsson in which the author takes a close look at the meaning of the Gospel of Matthew. Johnsson writes:

“In an age that proclaims on its T-shirts, ‘Only Believe’ and ‘I love you!’ . . . Matthew insists that practice balances one’s profession, that faith and love put on overalls and get their hands dirty out where the people are—in jail, in the slums, in the poorhouse, in the charity ward.”—William G. Johnsson, *Religion in Overalls* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), p. 22.

What are the following texts telling us about how we are to relate to the world around us?

Matt. 25:31-46

Luke 1:52, 53

The question is not whether followers of Christ should focus on preaching or helping the needy. It is not a matter of either/or but of and/and. Christians share in the universal responsibility of helping fellow human beings who face particular challenges: hunger, thirst, illiteracy, poverty, poor health conditions, imprisonment, discrimination, etc. Christ is our role model. He ministered to all aspects of our human condition—the spiritual, as well as the emotional and the physical. The early church clearly did not forget its social responsibility, and neither should we. Community-service activities, religious-liberty advocacy, educational programs, prison ministries, and ADRA are just a few of the avenues through which we can minister to people.

“Pure and undefiled religion is not a sentiment, but the doing of works of mercy and love.”—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 38.

Serving others in these capacities, however, demands self-denial, just as being a Christian does. Only as we learn to surrender and die at the foot of the Cross will we be in a position to minister to others in the same way that Christ did.

What are you doing for the poor, the needy, and the afflicted in your community? If the next time you see some of them and think of Christ’s words, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (*Matt. 25:40*), why wouldn’t it be so easy just to walk away and ignore them?

“The world at enmity with God is the very world which God ‘so loved . . . that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16; cf. 1 John 4:9). Christ is the ‘Savior of the world’ (John 4:42; 12:47 . . .).

“The word ‘world’ is less frequently used in this sense by Paul, but his whole doctrine of salvation is summed up in the statement: ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (II Cor. 5:19 . . .).

“Insofar as the world is redeemed, it . . . becomes instead the kingdom of God, the ‘world/age . . . to come.’ ”—C. R. North, “World,” *The Interpreters’ Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 4, p. 878.

“*Kosmos* indicates the ethical order in which human responsibility and human sinfulness stand in relationship to God. Thus ‘world’

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 6:10; Mark 16:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 22; James 2:16, 17; 1 John 2:15-17.*

- 1 As Christians, we are usually warned about the corrupting influence of *the world*. Yet, in John 3:16 we are told that God so loved the world He sent His only begotten Son to save it. How do we reconcile our duty to remain separate from the world with our duty to enter it and save it?
- 2 Given that part of our mission to the world is to live a consistent Christian life, are there possibly innocent behaviors we should forego, because they do not *look* right? What might some of these behaviors be, and why might they give the wrong impression?
- 3 Among other things, the church should be a place where believers can take refuge from an often hostile world. But how do we keep the church from becoming a private club? Why is this *club* mentality so natural to us?
- 4 It is not uncommon to regard efforts by the church to help the poor, etc. as evidence that the church is wavering in its evangelistic mission and accepting a merely *social* gospel. While recognizing the incorrectness of this assumption, how might it be possible that the church could begin to focus on good works at the expense of its message? What would result from this? On the other hand, what picture would we present to our communities and the world if we were to engage in evangelism only?
- 5 Why and how should we pray for others? When does it become selfish to pray for others to change in ways we regard as proper?

The Power of Prayer

Intercessory prayer is a reservoir of power that should be tapped to an even larger extent than it is today. Prayer for ourselves, for our own spiritual and material needs, is essential. But prayer for others—for the pastors, literature evangelists and missionaries, the church’s administrators, for the leaders of our countries and, yes, for the world—should rank high on our list of priorities.

If someone were to ask you to compose a 30-second prayer for the world, what would you pray, and why?

Praying for fellow human beings, pleading with God on behalf of others, is a duty and a privilege for every Christian. And, though we can never be sure when and in what manner God will answer our prayers, there is no doubt that they do have effect. The apostle James states it clearly: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (5:16, NIV).

There are countless examples in Scripture of men and women who prayed for others. Read the following texts: Gen. 20:7; Num. 11:1, 2; 1 Sam. 12:19, 23; 1 Kings 13:6-9; Ps. 122:6; Matt. 5:44; Col. 1:9; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1. What do they tell us about the need to pray for others?

“Our intercessory prayers express a sense of solidarity with other human beings. We are embedded in the great fabric of humanity. What happens to others inevitably involves us, and what we do affects them, too. Furthermore, God has ways of working in the world that we cannot understand.”—Richard Rice, *The Reign of God*, p. 297.

In your experience, what impact has prayer had in your own life? How has it changed you? How have your prayers, as far as you can tell, impacted others? What evidence, if any, do you have that prayer does make a difference?

can have a highly negative connotation, indicating a place of corruption, a place antagonistic and antipathetic to God, a place in the grip of the demonic ‘powers.’ It is, nevertheless, the very place that God has chosen as the theater of redemptive activity, an activity that takes place in the midst of human history. This . . . meaning is the principal theological usage in the Pauline and Johannine writings.”—C. J. Hemer, “World,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), vol. 4, pp. 1114, 1115.

III. The Bible on the Church and the World.

“ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ ” (*John 3:16, NIV*).

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (*1 John 2:15, NIV*).

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (*Rom. 12:2, NIV*).

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (*2 Cor. 5:18, 19, NIV*).

Witnessing

When we think about how we are to live in this world yet not be a part of it, Jesus’ life should be our guide. From childhood until His death, we see in His life a constant desire to share salvation with a sinful world.

Jesus was radically different and did not seek to gain the approval of His contemporaries, friends, or family. Yet, so many who met Him wanted to be with Him. We must ask ourselves if we are the type of people others want to be around. Do we share our beliefs in a loving, tactful, open-minded manner, or do we rudely dictate what we believe to be essential to salvation?

When Christ walked the earth He associated with prostitutes and thieves. He cared for the poor, sick, and needy. He was always ready to help people with their problems. How do His actions help us define witnessing?

Based on Christ’s example, discuss how we might respond to the following scenarios: (1) Your church is holding an evangelistic series. One stormy evening, a homeless person attends just to get out of the rain. (2) Because no church in your area can afford to maintain a food or clothing bank, many denominations are suggesting that all churches pool their resources to establish such a center. Planning sessions will be during Sabbath hours. (3) While on vacation, your family meets another family with whom you really get along. They seem genuinely interested in what you believe.

The Cross and the World

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus gives us our calling as a church. Notice it is a worldwide calling. We are to go to all nations with the message of salvation found in Jesus Christ. We see this same basic calling, only in a specific end-time context, in the first angel's message (*Rev. 14:6, 7*).

Thus, God's church is to impact the whole world. And that makes perfect sense, because Christ's mission was for the whole world.

Look up these texts. What are they all saying about the universality of what Christ has done at the Cross? *Isa. 53:6, 2 Cor. 5:19, Heb. 2:9, 1 John 2:2, 4:14.*

The point is simple: Christ's death covered every human being who ever lived. It was complete for the whole world. Thus, the whole world needs to know about Jesus and what He has done for them.

"But the atonement for a lost world was to be full, abundant, and complete. Christ's offering was exceedingly abundant to reach every soul that God had created. It could not be restricted so as not to exceed the number who would accept the great Gift. All men are not saved; yet the plan of redemption is not a waste because it does not accomplish all that its liberality has provided for. There must be enough and to spare."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 565, 566.

We can't be true followers of Christ unless we are, in whatever capacity, seeking to let the world know about what Christ has done for it. Thus, we must not flee the world but must engage the world and make a difference by the way we live and interact with people and by the way in which we respond to the needs of fellow human beings, far and near. This, more than any other way, will open people up to hear what we have to say about the God who not only has created all of us but who has paid for all our sins. Even those living in abject ignorance of Christ have had their sins paid for at the Cross, just as much as ours were paid for there. Thus, these people need to know what we know; and how can they ever learn if we—who do know about the Cross—don't tell them? Hence, our mission to the world.

Not everyone, of course, is in a position to minister directly to those in others lands. What, though, can you, either as an individual or through your church, do to have a part in our worldwide calling?

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to porcupines huddling together on a winter's night. He said, The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter eventually we drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness! —Edward K. Rowell, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, p. 135. Adapted.

Even the homely porcupine can provide valuable lessons. How can we get past the pain of the pokes and get to the heart of the worldly people God has asked us to love? For direction and encouragement, read Isaiah 40:1, 2, 28-31; Proverbs 25:13; Romans 8:35-39; Colossians 3:23.

Thought Questions:

- ① An email story has been circulating about a little boy who learned the power of John 3:16, first by parroting the words and then by feeling the warmth of people who loved the God of John 3:16. Keep a journal for 24 hours of what you say and do. How do your words and deeds compare with what you tell people about the God of John 3:16?
- ② Grandpa rushed to the hospital where his tiny granddaughter had been born so prematurely that she was clinging to life. Shortly before her birth her father deserted what was to be her home, leaving her mother totally distraught. The nurses' directions to Grandpa were, "Gently stroke the baby's arm as you talk to her. She needs to connect your touch with your voice." How can Christians connect God's voice (His Word) with His touch (their ministry to other people)? How many non-Christians do you "touch" for Christ in a week?

Application Question:

Some people in the world are like people in the church. They build what they think are impenetrable walls around themselves. Think of one Adventist who has built solid walls around himself or herself and who is like you in the following areas: gender, age, hobbies, skills, background, family composition, education, diet, physical ability, or lack of it, etc. How does your interaction with this person prepare you to reach similar persons outside the faith?

Further Study: “The suffering and destitute of all classes are our neighbors, and when their wants are brought to our knowledge it is our duty to relieve them as far as possible. A principle is brought out in this parable [of the good Samaritan] that it would be well for the followers of Christ to adopt. First meet the temporal necessities of the needy and relieve their physical wants and sufferings, and you will then find an open avenue to the heart.”—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 118.

“Every provision has been made for the salvation of the fallen race. All power has been given to Him who offered himself as a sacrifice for the redemption of every son and daughter of Adam. ‘As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 7, 1902.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 We are told we are “in the world” and that we must identify with those we want to reach. We must understand how they think and must speak their *language*. How are we able to do this without being impacted in a negative way by some of the negative things they do?
- 2 However important it is to meet the temporal needs of those in the world, we must also remember that meeting the needs of the world isn’t the end but a means to an end. What is that end? How can we avoid the danger of forgetting what our true purpose here is?

Summary: Though we are “not of the world,” we should be very much “in the world,” making a difference and giving a better taste to society. True Christianity is not just a matter of having correct doctrine or calling people to a faith in God. It also is a ministry to the poor and disenfranchised. In addition, we have the responsibility of praying for others, in the church and out in the world. Christ’s death covered the whole world; our ministry must, then, be just as inclusive.