

Teaching *the* Disciples



SABBATH AFTERNOON

A MOTLEY BUNCH. A Christian magazine once suggested how a consultant team might have evaluated the disciples of Christ: “Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no leadership qualities. The sons of Zebedee, James and John, place personal interests above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale.

“We feel that it is our duty to tell You that Matthew has been black-listed by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

“One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness. . . . We recommend Judas Iscariot as Your controller and right-hand man.”—*The Baptist Messenger*, Sept. 27, 1984.

The Week at a Glance: What can cause us to be spiritual failures? In what ways did the disciples show their spiritual failing? What did Jesus say about divorce? Why did Jesus treat children as He did? What crucial point did Jesus make about the potential dangers of wealth?

Scripture Passage for the Week: *Mark 9:14–10:31.*

Memory Text: “‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all’ ” (*Mark 9:35, NIV*).

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 14.*

A Public Failure *(Mark 9:14-32)*.

Peter would have liked to have remained on the mountain with Jesus, Elijah, and Moses (*Mark 9:5*). He suggested that he build three shelters for the Master, Moses, and Elijah. How nice if Jesus could stay a while in that place of glorious light. But Jesus' mission called Him to leave the peace, encouragement, and heavenly communion of the mountain top and return to the valley. To the people, difficult, smelly, slow to learn, but needy—that is where His work lay.

From the glory of heaven to the pain of a fallen world. From the heights to the depths of human depravity. From the fellowship of Moses and Elijah to a despairing man with a demon-possessed boy who cannot speak and rolls foaming on the ground. From heavenly light to the disciples who have failed miserably.

Read Mark 9:14-32. Previously they had gone out without Jesus and had been able to cast out demons (see Mark 6:12, 13), but now they failed. What do we find in the texts that reveal why they failed?

The disciples had often witnessed Jesus casting out demons and healing the sick. They themselves had been able to do the same miracles when Jesus sent them out two by two. But familiarity had bred carelessness. That which was marvelous and accomplished only by divine power had begun to seem commonplace.

“Their unbelief, that shut them out from deeper sympathy with Christ, and the carelessness with which they regarded the sacred work committed to them, had caused their failure in the conflict with the powers of darkness. . . . In order to succeed in such a conflict they must come to the work in a different spirit. Their faith must be strengthened by fervent prayer and fasting, and humiliation of heart. They must be emptied of self, and be filled with the Spirit and power of God. Earnest, persevering supplication to God in faith—faith that leads to entire dependence upon God, and unreserved consecration to His work—can alone avail to bring men the Holy Spirit's aid in the battle against principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of the world, and wicked spirits in high places.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 430, 431.

In what ways has your spiritual life been a failure? What do you attribute those failures to? What do you need to change about your spiritual life, and what principles did you learn from today's lesson and texts that could help you make those changes?

True Greatness *(Mark 9:33-50).*

Mark 9:32 is incredibly instructive, for it gives great insight into the minds of the disciples at this point. Here's their Master, giving them words of truth, and yet, because it's not what they want to hear, they make no attempt to learn more. They, in a real sense, are hiding from the truth when the truth isn't exactly what they want to hear. How do we, in our own way, do the same thing?

How were the spiritual consequences, the fruits, of such an attitude readily seen in the next few verses? How did their words reveal just how far they were from the true principles of Christ's kingdom?

Read the whole section for today, focusing in particular on verses 33-37 and 42-50. Though Jesus is not talking about the same subject in each section, there's an underlying spiritual theme in His words here that are crucial for anyone who claims to be a Christian. It's a theme that goes to the heart of the spiritual problem that was revealed by the disciples' quest to be the "greatest." What is it, and why is it so important? What other verses can you find in the Bible that express the same idea?

There's a branch of philosophy called "ethical egoism," which teaches that each person ought to look after his or her own interests and disregard the interests of others, except where the interest of others contributes toward his or her own interests. In other words, people ought to look out only for themselves. That's an attitude which, really, doesn't need to be taught, because it's already wired in our genes.

If there were no God, no final judgment and final reckoning, what grounds would you have to defend "ethical egoism"? Why, though, for the Christian is such a position unacceptable?

Reformation in Divorce (*Mark 10:1-12*).

Read *Mark 10:1-12*. What point is Jesus making here about divorce? What message does He have for us today on this painful topic? See also *Matt. 19:1-10*.

Probably no issue causes more debate among Seventh-day Adventists today than divorce and remarriage. The same was true of Jesus' time. The Jews had only the Old Testament, but one passage in it was fiercely debated. This was Deuteronomy 24:1, 2: "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife." The two schools of rabbis of Jesus' time, the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai, argued over the meaning of "some uncleanness," some believing that it could mean something as trivial as burning a meal, while others took a much more strict approach. Jesus, though, makes it clear that there should be no divorce except in the case of marital infidelity.

Notice how Jesus, in the discussion, moves away from Deuteronomy and goes back to the early chapters of Genesis as His scriptural authority. What point was He making from those texts? (Also, what does that tell us about how He viewed, not only the historical accuracy of Genesis but also its authority?)

Mark tells us that the disciples asked Jesus for further explanation of His answer to the Pharisees (*Mark 10:10*). Indeed, Jesus' view of marriage, adultery, and divorce ran counter to many of the ideas current in Jewish society, which placed husbands and wives on different footings. Christ's words, however, showed that men as well as women can both be guilty of adultery.

How do we as individuals, and as a church, strike a balance between demanding that members adhere to the Bible standard about marriage and divorce and yet show mercy toward those who fall short?

The Children *(Mark 10:13-16).*

Mark tells us that Jesus was “much displeased” at the disciples’ attitude toward the little children. The original Greek word is strong, suggesting indignation. Considering previous examples of their attitude toward each other (*Mark 9:33, 34*) and toward Gentiles (*Matt. 15:23*), why do you think the disciples reacted as they did toward the children?

Our attitude toward children reveals much about us. To communicate with children requires that we go outside the world of our own self; we have to listen and seek to understand a wholly different reference point. Thus, people who are wrapped up in themselves cannot get close to children. Likewise, people who are always looking to gain some benefit or advantage for themselves from any encounter will have little time for children. The fact that Jesus was so open to children and they to Him speaks volumes about the Master as One whose life flowed out to others, regardless of status. Likewise, the disciples’ attitude to the children who were being brought to Jesus shows how much they need to grow in self-forgetfulness and blessing to others.

Jesus told the disciples, “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (*Mark 10:15, NIV*). What did He mean? In what ways were His words reflecting a principle that the disciples, by their attitude toward the children, really needed to understand? Compare what you write with what others in the class have to say. See also *Matt. 6:9, Luke 11:13, Eph. 5:8, 1 Pet. 1:14, 1 John 5:21*.

There’s an innocence to children, an openness, a trusting and humility in them that followers of our heavenly Father need to have in their own lives. Children, in their innocence, are much less likely than adults to judge or to manifest prejudice toward others. Children are helpless, totally depending upon the mercy and love of those who can do for them what they cannot do for themselves. No wonder Jesus told us that we need to be like them.

Write out a prayer asking God to give you a more childlike faith. What things are you asking for? What practical things can you do, even now, to help get them?

Attitudes Toward Riches *(Mark 10:17-31)*

In the final area of teaching for the disciples that we study this week, we see Jesus trying to correct their wrong views about wealth. The disciples at first were “astonished” at Jesus’ words and then were “greatly astonished” (*vss. 24, 26, NKJV*). They had accepted the prevailing understanding—one fostered by the scribes and Pharisees—that material prosperity and health were evidence of God’s blessing, while poverty and sickness indicated God’s displeasure. The same thinking led them, on seeing a man blind from birth, to ask Jesus: “ ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ” (*John 9:1, 2, NIV*).

Study the story of the rich young ruler in **Mark 10:17-22** (*see also Matt. 19:16-22 and Luke 18:18-23*). **Summarize what you think the basic spiritual message there is for us today.**

Consider the following characteristics of the young man who had so much but lacked the most important quality of all: He was young. He was energetic (came running to Jesus). He was respectful (knelt before Jesus). He already was in a position of authority. He had great wealth. He was concerned about spiritual things. What a great candidate for the kingdom of God!

Is Jesus’ test to the rich young ruler to be applied to everyone who would be Jesus’ disciple? That is, should everyone be expected to sell all their possessions and give to the poor? If not, why not? (Hint: Compare Jesus’ instructions to other rich people who came to Him, such as Zacchaeus [*Luke 19:1-9*] and Nicodemus [*John 3:1-21*].)

In many ways, the key verse for understanding this chapter, and the answer to the above question, is Mark 10:24. The issue isn’t wealth but how the one who has wealth relates to it. Jesus, knowing the rich young ruler’s heart, knew what his weakness was. Indeed, the fact that the rich young ruler turned away from Jesus proved that his wealth was an idol. More than likely, if wealth were the man’s problem, Jesus wouldn’t have said to him what He did.

Read again verse 24. What’s wrong with trusting in riches? What other word could you replace “riches” with that would express the same principle? What point is Jesus teaching? In your own life, what other word might you, if honest with yourself, place in there?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Ministry,” “Who Is the Greatest?” “Blessing the Children,” and “One Thing Thou Lackest,” in *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 426–442, 511–523.

Discussion Questions:

1 As a class, discuss some of the issues that cause even believers to doubt God, to question their faith, to be afraid to trust in the Lord. What causes these feelings? Are they ever justified? How can you help people overcome their doubts, their fears, their lack of faith?

2 As a class, pick out a few names of people whom the world deems as “great”; that is, they are famous for some “good” reason or another. What were the qualities that made them “great” in the eyes of the world? At the same time, think of someone whom God Himself might deem as “great.” What qualities made that person “great” in the eyes of God? How differently would you define the word *great* in both cases? What lesson can we learn from this comparison?

3 The week’s lesson talked about our attitude toward children. What other kinds of people do we interact with who really, in the end, can do nothing for us in terms of material or social or political advantage? How do we treat them in contrast to someone who can indeed do a lot for us? What does Christ’s example say to us about this topic? What can we do to help us treat people the way Jesus treated them? What about us needs to change to enable us to do just that?

Summary: This week we saw Jesus deal with the wrong attitude and behavior of His own followers. And though they often failed, lovingly and patiently Jesus tried to correct their wrong thinking and behaviors.

The Prodigal's Second Chance

Randriamalala Narison Olivier

I grew up in a Christian home in Madagascar, but I chose a different path in life. Eventually I became a drug addict and a thief. One day I borrowed a friend's bicycle to run an errand. I did not return the bicycle but instead sold it to buy drugs. When my parents learned what I'd done, they told me to leave their home. I lived on the streets of my city until I was arrested for the theft.

Prison was miserable, but there I realized my need of God. I began to pray. I learned that an Adventist chaplain held services in the prison, and I decided to go. At the first meeting some prisoners sang a song titled, "Change Me, Jesus." The song touched my heart and became my prayer.

We were given only one meal a day of boiled casava. I was often hungry. But after I began attending the worship services, the Bible became my food. I knew that if I turned away from God this time, it might be my last chance. I gave my life to Christ and enrolled in the prison's Bible study.

I had been in prison only a month when my friend whose bicycle I had stolen asked the judge to free me. Upon release, I found an Adventist church. I attended church faithfully. When I learned that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, I begged God to free me from my addictions to alcohol and tobacco. I asked the pastor and church members to pray for me, and after several weeks, I lost my appetite for these drugs. I continued Bible studies with the pastor and was baptized.

My parents invited me to return home, and I have. They can see the changes in me. I want to be an honorable son, to let my parents see the difference God is making in my life and ask questions about my faith. I want them to ask questions about what I believe rather than to preach at them.

I work with my father, who has given me Sabbaths off to worship. My younger brother goes to church with me and wants to study at the Adventist college. My father has agreed to send him there.

"I have returned to my father's house a changed son," Olivier says. "I am determined to remain faithful to my heavenly Father and honor my parents. I am praying for my parents and younger brothers, that they will not follow my naughty ways but will follow God."

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