

Discipling *the* Powerful



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 13:1–7, Mark 2:23–28, Matt. 8:5–13, 26:57–68, 27:11–14, Acts 4:1–12.*

Memory Text: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (*Acts 6:7, NRSV*).

The disciples were not endowed with the courage and fortitude of the martyrs until such grace was needed. Then the Saviour's promise was fulfilled. When Peter and John testified before the Sanhedrin council, men ‘marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.’ *Acts 4:13*. Of Stephen it is written that ‘all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel’ [*Acts 6:15*]. Men ‘were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.’ [*Acts 6:10*]. And Paul, writing of his own trial at the court of the Caesars, says, ‘At my first defense no one took my part, but all forsook me. . . . But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.’ *2 Tim. 4:16, 17, R. V.*—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 354, 355.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 1.

Respecting Authority

Over the long centuries, people have struggled to understand the role and function of government and how citizens should relate to it. What gives rulers the right to rule? What is the best form of government? Should people always obey their governments? If not, why not? These are just a few of a host of questions that we still wrestle with to this day.

Read Romans 13:1–7. What important message is in there for us? How, though, can these texts and the message they teach be abused? What examples do we have in history of that happening? How can we as a church learn from these mistakes, even in our own history, as well as from the mistakes of the Christian church in general?

Oppression and brutality characterized the Roman Empire during Christ's time. Roman legions terrorized and subjugated civilized nations, forcibly bringing them into the empire. Hundreds of thousands were dispossessed, imprisoned, and murdered. Puppet governments permitted by Rome were probably worse than Rome itself. Yet, interestingly enough, Jesus never advocated any kind of rebellion against this government, or even the withholding of taxes from it (*see Luke 20:25*). Jesus' singular act of civil disobedience—overturning the money-changers' tables—demonstrated the revulsion He felt regarding priestly abuses. It was not against the Romans, per se.

“The people of God will recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment and will teach obedience to it as a sacred duty within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, the word of God must be recognized as above all human legislation. ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is not to be set aside for Thus saith the church or the state. The crown of Christ is to be uplifted above the diadems of earthly potentates.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 402.

“Have You Not Read . . . ?”

Unfortunately, some of the most powerful and influential people with whom Jesus dealt were the religious leaders of His time, many of whom were openly hostile to Him.

Yet, even in His encounters with them, Jesus always sought to be redemptive. He wasn't seeking arguments; He was seeking the salvation of all people, even of those powerful and influential people who would eventually condemn Him to death.

Read Mark 2:23–28, 3:1–6, Matthew 12:1–16. How can we see, in these encounters, that Jesus—despite the overt hostility against Him—was trying to reach these men? What did He say and do that should have touched their hearts, were they not so closed?

It's interesting that, in dealing with these people, Jesus referred to the Scriptures and even sacred history, sources that should have touched the religious leaders. Jesus was appealing to what should have been common ground between them. For instance, He quoted the Bible when He talked about the importance of mercy over ritual. By so doing, He sought to bring the leaders to a deeper meaning of the law that they claimed to cherish and uphold so fervently and devoutly.

In His discourse about pulling an animal out of a pit on the Sabbath day, Jesus then appealed to their most basic notions of decency and kindness, something that these men all should have related to. The problem, however, was that their bitterness and hatred toward Jesus clouded even that.

Finally, the miracles themselves should have spoken loudly to these influential leaders about the extraordinary Man among them.

It's easy, from our position today, to look back in wonder at the blindness and hardness of these men. How, though, can we make sure that we ourselves, when seeking to protect something that we don't want to give up, don't close ourselves to more light from God? Why is that easier to do than we might think?

The Centurion

While several of Christ's encounters with powerful people ended acrimoniously, there were notable exceptions, such as with Nicodemus. Another constructive meeting involved a Roman centurion (ranking military officer).

Read Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10. What can we learn from these accounts about witnessing to people in power?

When the centurion learned that Jesus was approaching, he dispatched several friends to dissuade Christ from coming. Deeply respecting Jewish worship and Jesus' spirituality, he felt undeserving of Christ's personal attention. Finally, just before Jesus arrived, he ventured to approach Him. He explained the situation, expressing faith that Christ's declaration alone could restore the servant. Drawing on military experience, he understood authority. He obeyed his commanding officer, and his subordinates obeyed him. How amazing that this man of power and influence (and a Roman, as well!) could show such deep faith when many who had so many more spiritual advantages spurned Jesus.

Honest self-examination is profitable here. We need to ask ourselves whether we have become complacent and are merely espousing correct doctrines instead of experiencing living faith. Have newer, lesser-equipped believers nevertheless expressed deeper faith than those raised within Christianity? Have our spiritual advantages become occasions for self-dependency? Have spiritual opportunities escaped unnoticed? Whenever we answer affirmatively, Christ is the answer. Anyone can enjoy the centurion's experience. This story should encourage those evangelizing among people in powerful positions. How many twenty-first century centurions are there? May their faith inspire and strengthen ours.

There is a power to a selflessness and self-abnegating ministry that can touch anyone of any rank or class. What of these traits do we manifest in our own lives and witness?

Judgment Day

Read Matthew 26:57–68, 27:11–14, Luke 23:1–12, John 18:19–23, 31–40, 19:8–12. What can we learn from Jesus’ witness to these powerful men?

Within these final scenes of Jesus’ earthly sojourn, Christ’s followers glimpse the painful price of unflinching faithfulness. From arrest until crucifixion, Christ bears witness before the most powerful in the land: monarchs, governors, priests. Person by person He studies those intoxicated with worldly authority. Apparently, they control Him. Soldiers shuffle Jesus between their courtrooms, their councils, their palaces, and their judgment halls, unaware that ultimately this is His world. Whatever judgment they pronounce against Christ is ultimately the judgment they pronounce against themselves.

While Christ witnessed to make disciples, sometimes the outcome was vastly different from what He Himself would have wished. How Jesus would have rejoiced had Pilate, Caiaphas, Herod, and others surrendered their hearts and repented. Stubbornly, they refused His entreaties, callously bypassing their final invitation to salvation.

Likewise, Christ’s twenty-first-century followers should recognize that while they witness to make disciples, the outcome often appears vastly different from what they would wish and pray for. Measurable success may not always attend their efforts. This should neither discourage them nor inhibit further witnessing. The genuine disciple is, like Christ Himself, faithful until death, not faithful until disappointed. Calling listeners to a decision separates wheat from chaff. The wheat is celebrated. The chaff is mourned. The harvest continues. Notwithstanding Christ’s apparently unsuccessful witness before these powerful men, something marvelous happened, for, according to Acts 6:7, not only did the number of disciples multiply, but “a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (*NKJV*). God alone knows how many of those priests were there, listening and watching Jesus in those final hours.

The Early Explosion

Christ's earliest disciples energetically advanced the gospel throughout the civilized world. Houses, synagogues, public stadiums, judgment halls, and royal palaces became stages for kingdom proclamation. Jesus, however, prophesied arrests, trials, and hostile royal audiences for those disciples (*Matt. 10:16–20*). Unfortunately, those saturated with earthly power were slowest to receive Christ.

Read through as much of Acts 4:1–12; 13:5–12, 50; 23:1–6; 25:23–26:28 as you can. Though one can get the idea that so many people were instantly converted out of nowhere, that's not what happened. These dramatic results were the visible product of underlying circumstances. Seedtime precedes harvest. Christ had faithfully proclaimed the gospel. Missionaries had witnessed throughout Judea. Early converts no doubt helped to carry the message. When Christ personally conquered death, confirming His message, thousands of fence-sitters leaped into the kingdom. They had secretly followed Him. Their hearts had responded to His invitations. Cultural factors, job security, and family pressures had slowed their overt responses. Christ's resurrection destroyed the fence, forcing a decision.

Then, of course, the apostle Paul entered the picture. His witness, however, was not universally appreciated. Sometimes prominent men and women persecuted and expelled him. He was stoned, flogged, imprisoned, and otherwise mistreated—often at the instigation of powerful people. Political motives were frequently the foundation for their anti-Christian sentiments.

Governor Felix imprisoned Paul in order to placate religious opposition to Paul. His successor, Festus, was more fair-minded but lacked the political willpower to release Paul. During an official visit, King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice (descendants of Herod's dynasty), requested an audience with Paul. Unfortunately, like their ancestors before them, they rejected his invitation to salvation. Although facing similar rejection and persecution, Christ's twenty-first-century disciples must likewise persevere.

How can disciple-makers working among worldly and religious authorities avoid the discouragement of frequent rejection? Whenever Christ's followers labor for powerful people, who else might be affected by their witnessing?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Centurion,” pp. 315–318; “Before Annas and the Court of Caiaphas,” pp. 698–715; “In Pilate’s Judgment Hall,” pp. 723–740, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Ministry to the Rich,” pp. 209–216, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “Almost Thou Persuadest Me,” pp. 433–438, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“It is by no casual, accidental touch that wealthy, world-loving, world-worshiping souls can be drawn to Christ. These persons are often the most difficult of access. Personal effort must be put forth for them by men and women imbued with the missionary spirit, those who will not fail or be discouraged.

“Some are especially fitted to work for the higher classes.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 213.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Whenever Jesus witnessed to powerful people, others noticed. Some were in powerful positions, others not. Like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, many among the educated priestly class came to faith gradually. Some bystanders who witnessed Christ’s confrontations with religious leaders likewise believed. Volcanic turbulence usually lies hidden beneath the mountain’s crust. Visually gauging intensity is impossible. Accurately measuring activity requires special instruments. Similarly, the explosive potential of Jesus’ movement remained hidden during His earthly ministry. Following His resurrection, however, the kingdom erupted, evidenced by massive conversions, even among those in influential positions. The faithful planting was finally yielding its abundant harvest. What should these facts tell us about how important it is that we not get discouraged when our witness doesn’t appear as effective as we would like it to be, especially among the powerful elite?

❷ Ellen G. White wrote in the statement above that some were especially fitted for the work of reaching the powerful. What might some of those qualifications be? At the same time, why must we be careful to not limit those who we might think are not qualified?

God's Surprising Answer

I wanted to attend a university after high school, but I didn't score high enough on some of my exams to qualify for the public university. So I decided to work parttime while I studied to retake the exams.

My employers were Seventh-day Adventist Christians. They suggested that I apply to study at Valley View University, the Adventist university in Ghana. My father said that he'd heard good things about the school, so I applied and was accepted.

My roommates were fine Christian women. I saw the difference their faith made in their lives, and I wanted to know what Adventists believe. I asked lots of questions about the Bible, which they answered most willingly.

During the school's Week of Spiritual Emphasis, I became convinced that Adventists are not a cult; they are Bible-following Christians. I asked to join the Adventist Church.

My parents were disappointed to learn that I wanted to join the Adventist Church and threatened to transfer me to the public university. But I asked the pastor and my friends to pray that God would help me to stay at Valley View. My father eventually agreed.

However, the devil had other ways to cause trouble. My father lost his job and couldn't support me in school. Some members of my family accused me of joining a cult and using witchcraft to make my father lose his job. I couldn't do anything but pray for them and for my future at Valley View. I found part-time work and sold books during vacations to pay my school bills. Friends, pastors, and the school faculty helped me stay in school.

When my father found another job, he again paid my school fees. He even asked me to give up the scholarship I was receiving so that someone more needy could benefit from it.

My whole family attended my graduation. I had a chance to introduce them to people who had made a difference in my life. Dad was so glad that the school had helped me complete my education when he couldn't help.

My family doesn't mock my faith now. They listen when I share my beliefs with them. I pray that they will continue to grow in the knowledge of God, as I did while at Valley View University.

Your mission offerings help sustain and expand Valley View University, which has a reputation for excellence in education and faithfulness to God's principles. Thank you.

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