

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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 6:7*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Be assured that when standing before powerful people he or she doesn't stand alone.

Feel: Be confident that just as the Holy Spirit spoke through believers in the past, He can use him or her now.

Do: Engage with others, no matter their social status, as he or she witnesses for Christ.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Nobody Can Serve Christ Effectively Without First Knowing Him as Lord and Savior.

A What made the disciples and other believers such powerful witnesses?

B What impression do you hope to leave with those to whom you witness?

II. Feel: Serving Christ Means Using the Talents and Gifts We're Given for His Glory.

A Are you an "up-front" or "behind-the-scenes" person? Does it matter? Explain.

B Over time the disciples developed talents that enabled them to stand before councils and judges. In what situations can you imagine having to stand up for your faith?

III. Do: We Know Best the People We Serve Most.

A What are you known for in your community, both as an individual and as a congregation? Does that increase your profile among the powerbrokers of your community?

B How is success measured when we stand before influential members of our communities? By the number of people who hear us, or by the number of people who respond?

► **Summary:** Jesus' method for reaching powerful people was the same as His method for reaching everyone else: He met and sympathized with them, ministered to them, and won their confidence. Any attempt to "take a shortcut" from His method will be unsuccessful.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 6:7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Faithful disciples serve wherever, and whomever, they are called to serve.

Just for Teachers: In a culture where celebrity is celebrated and our role models include professional athletes, movie stars, politicians, and performers, we may sometimes feel insignificant, or that we have nothing to share with people who are so obviously more “important” than we are. But as disciples of Christ, we have an important message, one which we never know when we’ll have an opportunity to share.

Opening Activity/Discussion: Ask the members of your class to share an experience when they had a brush with a prominent person. It could’ve been a professional athlete, movie star, GC vice president, televangelist, politician, et cetera. What was the setting? What took place? Were any words exchanged? How did your class members feel as they walked away? Did the encounter make them feel in any way inadequate? Or did the members feel as if they were just with another person—who just happened to be famous?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: For most of us, our encounters with greatness will inevitably be brief, impromptu exchanges. But it’s always possible that a situation will arise in which we can plant a gospel seed or two that, with God’s blessing, will develop into something more.

Bible Commentary

I. God-Established Authorities (*Review Romans 13:1–7 with your class.*)

“The authorities that exist have been established by God” (*vs. 1, NIV*). With these words the apostle Paul reminds his readers that earthly rulers have been appointed by God and that they serve according to His will and design.

However, we have to acknowledge that not everything worldly leaders

do is part of His plan. They, like the rest of us, have the power to make their own choices. So, while He allows them to have power, He's not responsible for what they do.

Paul's counsel to the believers in Rome was to obey and honor the rulers of the various levels of government because they were honoring God when they did so.

But two Bible characters did more than obey their earthly rulers—they served them. Joseph and Daniel both had careers that put them in positions to serve at the highest levels of national government. And by all accounts they did it admirably. They served faithfully without compromising their principles. True, they had their enemies, as all public servants do, but they served as trusted and valued servants of kings.

As such, their service directly benefited the subjects of their respective kingdoms. Joseph's plan to save grain in times of plenty for times of drought saved many lives (including those of his father, his brothers, and their families). Daniel's wise counsel to Nebuchadnezzar led to Nebuchadnezzar's conversion (*see Daniel 4*) and led Nebuchadnezzar to be a wiser and more faithful ruler.

Consider This: While it seems most people seek public office because of the perks and authority it affords, the concept of public service is an honorable one. People who serve well should be supported. People who serve poorly should be held accountable. Our choices at the ballot box do both. What are some other ways in which Christians can hold accountable their elected officials? Just as accountability is important in public service, it's also important in the church. List one example of the church showing poor accountability. List one good example.

II. Giving Orders—and Taking Them (*Review Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10 with your class.*)

Not all contact between the Jews and Romans was antagonistic. Here a centurion with a sick servant knows that Jesus has been known to heal the sick. The problem is that he's Roman, and, given the antipathy most Jews felt for Romans, he hesitates to approach Jesus directly. Instead, he asks some of his Jewish friends to appeal to Jesus on his behalf.

Their approach is instructive: "When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, 'This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue'" (*Luke 7:4, 5, NIV*).

In other words, “This man isn’t like the other Romans; he likes us and has done things for us.” Sadly, they miss the point. Jesus doesn’t hand out favors because someone is Roman or Jewish or because people are good or bad. For Jesus, grace goes where it’s needed the most. When the centurion returns home, he finds that his servant has been healed.

Consider This: The powerful often have as many insecurities as the rest of us do. They only have more resources with which to mask them. They may also be more hesitant to express their needs. Many are often surrounded by some kind of entourage, hangers-on, who are hoping to bask in the celebrity status of the powerful. So, who can the powerful really trust? If we were given access to some powerful person, how would he or she know that we weren’t trying to capitalize on his or her celebrity to get something for ourselves?

III. Before Powerful People *(Review Matthew 26:57–68, 27:11–14, Luke 23:1–12, Acts 24–26 with your class.)*

Both Jesus and Paul had to stand before councils and rulers to explain their ministries. They certainly didn’t ask for such opportunities; nor did they shrink from them, although the result in each case was never in doubt.

The challenge then and now is to be respectful and considerate. Jesus and Paul knew their audiences and used terminology that would have been familiar to their listeners. Although Paul used more words, both he and Jesus showed respect for their judges by being clear and concise.

With so much at stake, we can hardly trust ourselves to answer in our own wisdom. There’s no doubt why Jesus promised, “ ‘On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. . . . At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you’ ” (*Matt. 10:18–20, NIV*).

Consider This: We may never have to defend ourselves before judges and magistrates, but we will sometimes be given opportunities to witness for Christ at a bus stop, in an airliner, or at a social gathering when we’re asked, “So then, what is being a Seventh-day Adventist all about?”

Discussion Questions:

- ① If disciples learn from their Master how to live, what lessons should we learn from the way Jesus dealt with the powerful? List at least three.
- ② When you're asked in a simple, nonthreatening setting what you believe, what two or three cardinal beliefs do you highlight?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Although this lesson is about discipling the powerful, the principles discussed apply to people of every age, ethnicity, and social standing. While we may tailor our approach slightly, depending on the situation, basic concepts such as respect, courtesy, and loyalty apply across the board.

Life Application: Christians in the first century faced opposition on two fronts: on one side, they were viewed with suspicion by the Jews, who saw them as heretics. On the other, Romans couldn't understand their devotion to a criminal who was condemned to be crucified. In that setting, lots of baseless rumors caused no end of confusion.

So, how did Christians communicate to the widest number of people what they were all about? How was this message carried to Caesar's own household? How can Christians today adopt that same strategy?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Early Christians risked persecution if they attracted too much attention from people in authority. What do we risk by being unnoticed?

Activity: Ask class members to write letters to the editor of the local newspaper. The letters may commend public officials for their support of some issue, or they may challenge readers to exercise more concern about a matter of public health or safety.

Share and discuss some seed ideas: better marked crosswalks, better enforcement of speed limits near schools, stricter measures to keep tobacco out of the hands of minors, et cetera. Class members don't have to mention they are Seventh-day Adventists, or even Christian. The idea is to be known as people who contribute to the public good in a positive way.