

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?

Key Text: *Mark 9:35*

Teachers Aims:

1. To stress that service to God is not limited to spiritual superheroes.
2. To demonstrate that our effectiveness as servants of God does not result from our intrinsic goodness.
3. To compare and contrast the standards of God's kingdom with those of the world.

Lesson Outline:

I. Spiritual Failure (*Mark 9:34*).

- A. God can do great things through us when we recognize our dependence on Him.
- B. When we attribute our spiritual accomplishments to our own worthiness, we invite failure.
- C. We cannot advance God's cause while wrapped up in our own egos.

II. Jesus and Divorce (*Mark 10:2-12*).

- A. Jesus seemingly contradicted Old Testament authority in denying almost all grounds for divorce.
- B. In reality, He confirmed the Old Testament by going back to the ideal of marriage as presented in Genesis.
- C. Jesus' attitudes on divorce denied then-current attitudes that made the husband the sole person to exercise discretion in such instances.

III. Greatest in the Kingdom (*Mark 9:36, 37*).

- A. Jesus attributed particular value to children, then—as now—the least powerful yet most vulnerable members of society.
- B. His choice of children as models of kingdom citizenship denied human notions of spiritual self-reliance.
- C. Jesus regarded human greatness—wealth, for example—as a spiritual snare.

Summary: We want to think our own efforts are “good enough” to please God and reach His kingdom. We create a hierarchy of people who are certainly good enough to be saved, people who are doing “just enough,” and those who are certainly lost. God's standards, however, are so impossibly high not even the best of us can reach them on our own. Only by depending on God can any of us hope to reach His kingdom.

COMMENTARY

The Christian life is not all glory. A genuine disciple is neither overly elated by the cool breeze of the mountaintop nor disheartened by the heat of the valley below. Our study this week reviews

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?

four elements of the Christian life: strength, relationships, family, and attitude toward riches.

I. The Christian Life: Its Strength.

On the mountaintop, Peter, James, and John were filled with joy. But discipleship is not all ecstasy. At the bottom of the mountain, Jesus and the disciples noticed that a father had brought his devil-possessed son to be healed by the rest of the disciples. But they could not heal the boy, even though on earlier occasions they had been able to perform such miracles (*Mark 6:7, 13*). So, Jesus took command and healed the boy. Then He told the disciples it was because of their unbelief (*Matt. 17:20*) and lack of prayer (*Matt. 17:21, Mark 9:29*) that they had been unsuccessful.

Every person experiences a constant battle between faith and unbelief, prayerful dependence upon God and confidence in one's own strength. True discipleship recognizes this battle, keeps self crucified and Christ exalted, and chooses to wrap itself in the strength of faith and prayer. The believing heart and the bended knee bring Heaven's infinite power to our side, while keeping at bay Satan's deceptions.

II. The Christian Life: Its Relationships.

If the Christian's strength lies in faith and prayer, the quality of Christian life consists of the basic principles Jesus lists in *Mark 9:33-50*.

1. Be a servant leader. The common concept that leadership consists of being first in power and position began with Lucifer, who said " 'I will ascend . . . ' " (*Isa. 14:13, 14*). In the world, leaders are served by followers; and the greatest leaders are those who have the greatest number of followers. However, " 'it shall not be so among you,' " said Jesus, " 'but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant . . . just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many' " (*Matt. 20:26, 28, NKJV*). This is a revolutionary principle. It leaves no room for pride.

2. Be open to receive (*Mark 9:36, 37; see also 10:13-16*). Because of their innocence, trust, receptivity, or "immature" behavior, children are often treated as unimportant. However, Christian discipleship demands that we accept each person at the level of his or her maturity then help them to grow.

3. Be inclusive (*Mark 9:38-41, 50*). Christian relationships should not be marked by exclusion, jealousy, and isolation. Christians may differ in culture, methods of witness, and styles of worship; but these are not to be causes for separation. Without sacrificing the unifying principle of absolute loyalty to Christ and His teachings, we can be friends with all. Just as salt exists to enhance the taste of food, so we should exist to enhance the quality of life and to season the life of

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?

others with the salt of Christ's love and life.

4. Be complete in your commitment (*Mark 9:42-48*). Jesus' call to the kingdom is so radical it has zero tolerance for sin. Even if it is something as dear as an eye, as important as a foot, or as defining as the mind—it is better to chop it off than to forfeit the kingdom because of it.

III. The Christian Life: The Family.

The family, like the Sabbath, is rooted in the divine plan and was inaugurated before sin's entrance on the earth. But the hardness of the human heart and its eagerness to compromise with the world

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Mark 9:14–10:31*

① Most of us, if given a choice, would probably choose to live somewhat removed from the congestion, crime, and complications of modern society (the mountaintop). But most of Jesus' ministry was in places where He could do the most good—where the concentration of sin and suffering was the highest (the plain). List at least three Bible characters (other than Jesus) who boldly proclaimed truth in teeming, cosmopolitan settings.

② When it comes to greatness, doesn't it often seem as if Christians are just as clueless as the world? We honor those whose faces we know from television, books, and personal appearances; we go out of our way to listen to the president of this or vice president of that. Yet, those who tutor unwed mothers, feed the homeless, visit the elderly, counsel the addicts, etc., get barely a mention. If you were going to honor the "truly great" in your congregation (according to Jesus' definition), who would they be? Name three candidates.

③ Do we need Jesus' counsel about divorce to know it's bad? With alimony payments, child support, visitation rights, etc., doesn't everybody know divorce is a minefield? What practical suggestions will strengthen the relationship between husbands and wives in your congregation? How can you redemptively reach out to people whose lives have been disrupted by the tragedy of divorce?

④ Now, as in Jesus' time, many people have little regard for children. Yet, for children, Jesus had the most tender regard. How does your congregation show its regard for the "least of these"? What could you do better?

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?

have minimized the Word's prescription for family. Jesus' response to divorce returns us to Creation, when God created male and female as a sacred unity, an insoluble oneness. When a man and a woman enter marriage committed to its basic principles of love, unity, and permanence, divorce becomes a question for which the solution is already provided.

IV. The Christian Life: Attitude to Riches.

Jesus' answer that the rich young ruler should give away all his possessions and follow Him (*Mark 10:17-31*) was not an indict-

Witnessing

Angela, her husband, Don, and their three children have been active and faithful members of your church for many years. Lately, however, you notice that over the past year Angela and the kids have become withdrawn and uncommunicative. The pastor mentions he has attempted to visit the family on several occasions but can't get past Don at the front door.

Late one evening the pastor calls and asks you to accompany him to the hospital where Angela has just been admitted. One look at Angela tells you she has been severely beaten. The doctors tell the pastor this isn't the first time she's been admitted in similar condition. Later, you learn Angela has regularly been physically abused by Don. The children generally are witnesses to the abuse. To save her life and possibly the lives of her children, Angela separates from Don.

In time she meets a fine Christian man who loves her and her children. He offers to marry her. Angela talks to the pastor, who tells her that only marital infidelity is grounds for divorce. Angela now has tough decisions to make.

What counsel can you share? Describe the appropriate action for Angela and the church to take. Defend your answer.

Speaking of children, Jesus always demonstrated great tenderness and compassion for the littlest of sinners. His example is one to be followed in our homes, our schools, and our churches. Do a bit of soul-searching while reviewing the following questions: Are you satisfied with the amount of resources your local church allocates to children and their needs? What is your reaction to church statistics indicating that nearly half of our children leave the church? What can and are you doing to help children in your immediate neighborhood hear about Jesus? What have you learned from a child this week that has made an impression on you? What do you think a child would say about his or her interaction with you this week? Are you confident you have mirrored Christ in all ways?

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 us? In your own life, what other word might you, if honest with yourself, place in there?

ment against riches. The ruler defined his life according to how good a man he was (*Mark 10:19, 20*). So, he was eager to learn if there was anything else he needed to do in order to be good. His religion was a do-it-yourself religion. But in Christ, there is no room for such.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Lenin, the implementer of communism in the Soviet Union, while meeting with a small group of people in London in the early 1900s, set down these four “totals”:

1. Total acceptance of the cause
2. Total dedication to the cause
3. Total discipline in the cause
4. Total action for the cause

Back then the communist movement was only a handful of people. How quickly that movement spread.

The four totals of communism are very similar to the qualities of good discipleship. If people were willing at one point to be so totally dedicated to communism, why are so few ready to fully commit themselves to being a disciple of Christ?

Thought Questions:

- ① Professing a total commitment to Christ is easy. But often-times our commitment begins Friday evening and ends at Sabbath sundown. How do we continue to be Seventh-day Adventists when it's not the seventh day?
- ② Jesus preached to all but called only a few. Why do you think this was so? Why are divine expectations made of those who are called by God to serve in a specific area? Are special powers or gifts bestowed upon those called to serve? Explain.

Application Questions:

- ① How does Jesus' command “Follow Me” summarize the spirit of discipleship? What are the factors in your life that affect your response to Jesus' invitation to follow Him?
- ② Jesus spent a considerable amount of His time teaching His disciples to be disciples, grooming them for the time when they would be on their own. It was this instruction that enabled them to be effective witnesses after Christ returned to heaven. How can we continue to nurture disciples within our church? What is the church lacking in the area of discipleship?

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.