

Ethnicity and Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 15:21–28; Luke 7:1–11; John 1:3; Acts 10:28, 34, 35; 11:25–30.*

Memory Text: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (*1 Corinthians 9:22, RSV*).

Jim felt called to take the gospel to a foreign country. Upon arrival, he discovered that the people had a test for foreigners to earn the right to stay among them. The foreigner had to swallow, and not regurgitate, a potion. If the person failed the test, he or she had to leave immediately; otherwise, they could be eaten by the tribe. Jim watched the tribe prepare the potion of milk, human saliva, blood, chewed-up herbs, and other herbal concoctions. It looked and smelled sickening. All he could do was pray—and drink. To everyone’s amazement (especially his own), Jim drank it and held it down, earning the right to remain.

Making disciples might require us to do strange things: eat or drink strange mixtures and be all things to all people so we can win some. This is the call and challenge of discipleship, especially as the gospel goes around the world and into cultures sometimes radically different from our own.

The Week at a Glance: What other examples do we have of Jesus ministering to others besides Jews? Who were the God-fearers, and what can we learn from them about discipleship? What can we learn today from the Antioch model of discipleship?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 9.*

Disciples Among the Samaritans

Look up the following texts. What can we learn from them about God's attitude toward all races and people? *John 1:3; Acts 10:28, 34, 35; 17:26–28; Heb. 2:9.*

Scripture is clear: Not only did Christ create all humanity, He died for all humanity as well, regardless of race, nationality, or ethnic origin. The universality of Christ's death, the fact that His death was for every human being, should be more than enough to show us how repugnant prejudice is to God.

It is no wonder, then, that when Jesus was here, He ministered not just to the Jews but to non-Jews, as well. Though Paul is understood to be the *apostle to the Gentiles*, Jesus was already witnessing to them when here in the flesh.

Read Luke 17:11–16 and John 4:39–42. What is going on here? What message should we take away from these texts?

Last week's lesson showed that the woman at the well left her water pots and went to invite the villagers to meet Jesus after He had told her everything she ever did. She even introduced the possibility of His being the Messiah. Scripture says that many of the villagers believed because of the woman's testimony. When they met Jesus, they persuaded Him to stay, presumably to teach them.

The story of the ten lepers (*Luke 17:11–16*) also speaks to Jesus' work for Samaritans. The tenth leper, who returned to give thanks, was a Samaritan. By praising God in a loud voice, he showed his gratefulness for what Jesus had done for him. Jesus told this Samaritan that his faith had made him well. The Greek word used for this healing denotes the idea of being saved. This implies that the Samaritan's faith had saved him not only physically but spiritually. Jesus also called the Samaritan a foreigner. Despite knowing him to be a Samaritan and a foreigner, Jesus did not discriminate against him but rewarded his faith. These encounters show that Jesus did not conform to the prejudices of His time.

It is one thing to say we should not harbor prejudice against anyone; it is another, actually, to be free of these poisonous emotions. What practical steps can you take to help break the bonds of prejudice in your own heart?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 15:21–28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify how the gospel breaks all racial barriers.

Feel: Sense complete dependence on His grace to overcome hatred.

Do: Resolve to overcome all obstacles through faith in Jesus.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus Breaks Down Barriers

A Why does the woman call Jesus the Son of David? What does this suggest she knows?

B How does Jesus react to her request? Why does she refuse to be discouraged?

C This woman doesn't ask for a loaf of bread or even the crusts. She asks for crumbs that fall to the master's dogs. Notice the implications. She accepts she is a dog—a heathen. But she asserts she is the *Master's* dog. Look where the dog is positioned to get the scraps—it is *sitting at its master's feet*, the posture of a disciple. What is she suggesting? What shows that Jesus accepts her?

II. Feel: The Canaanite's Need

A The Jews detested the Canaanites of all races. In His first interaction with the Canaanite woman, Jesus appears to share these views. Did He? What might have been His purpose in appearing to do so?

B What indicates the disciples shared the prejudices of their time? What changed them? Why?

III. Do: Persevere in Faith

A How does the Canaanite woman teach us the importance of persevering in our faith, no matter what the obstacles?

B Who is overlooked in our efforts to share the gospel? How is withholding bread from others starving ourselves? What can we do to change this?

► **Summary:** The gospel embraces all people.

The God-Fearers

In the first century, some Gentiles were called God-fearers. They nominally accepted Judaism, made gifts to synagogues, and attended Sabbath services. They did not, however, submit to proselyte baptism or adopt all the rabbinic regulations. One such God-fearer was the centurion of Luke 7:1–11.

Read Luke 7:1–11. From these texts, what can we learn about the faith and character of this Gentile disciple?

For Jesus, the faith of this centurion “was an earnest of the work which the gospel was to accomplish among the Gentiles. With joy He looked forward to the gathering of souls from all nations to His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 317.

Acts 10 mentions another Roman official. Cornelius was a devout God-fearer and a centurion. He was generous to the needy and prayed earnestly to God. God sent an angel to inform him of the acceptance of his gifts and prayers and sent him in search of Peter. Peter went to his home, contrary to Jewish scruples, and was even reprimanded for it. But God told him not to call common or unclean those, like Cornelius, whom He had cleansed.

As Peter preached to Cornelius’s assembled household (*Acts 10:44–46*), the Holy Spirit interrupted him with the Gentile Pentecost, to the amazement of his Jewish companions.

Read Acts 11:1–3. What was the reaction of the Jewish followers of Jesus? What makes that reaction so shocking to us today? What message can we take away from their actions?

Here they were, themselves followers of Jesus, yet not understanding the fullness of the gospel. How careful we should be not to allow any cultural, educational, or social influences contrary to the principles of Christ to hinder us from living to the fullest the profession we claim for ourselves.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Key Concept: **Jesus’ death on the cross for everyone shows us we must not exclude anyone in our efforts to win souls to Him.**

A Hindu priest of the goddess Kali lay dying. None of the other priests would touch him. He served in a temple for the goddess in the poorest section of Calcutta. It was a slum where some of the people were too sick to beg. Others had no clothes and were ashamed to beg naked in the streets. Still others were dying of loathsome diseases that caused their loved ones to turn their backs on them. Now this priest had become one of those people.

A nun had also chosen to live there, among the poorest of the poor—the untouchables, those with leprosy, those too sick to beg for food or who had no clothes to wear. She converted an abandoned Hindu temple into a free hospice for the poorest of the poor. The priests at the nearby Kali temple in the city were not pleased when the Albanian nun and her sisters began their work. But then the nun was told that one of the Kali temple priests who had opposed her was dying of a contagious disease. His body was skeletal. She gathered him in her arms and took him to her home. After this, the local people asked the nun known to the world as Mother Teresa to stay. A Hindu priest of the temple of the goddess Kali said to her, “‘For thirty years I have worshiped the goddess Kali in stone, but today the goddess Mother stands before me alive.’”

Consider This: Who are the forgotten groups in your society? What are we doing to reach out to those who need us as a community or a church? What did the Hindu priest mean when he said that he worshiped the goddess Kali in stone for 30 years but now she was alive before him? How can we make Christ come alive for those we reach out to?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Bible Commentary

I. The Samaritan Leper (*Read Luke 17:11–16 with your class.*)

A band of lepers lived on the border between Samaria and Galilee. They

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The Canaanite

At one point in His ministry, Jesus withdrew to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. He had to, in a sense, get out of town because things were getting tense with the leaders. In this Gentile territory He entered a house but did not want anyone to know it (*Mark 7:24*). Yet, a Canaanite woman soon found Him.

Read Matthew 15:21–28 and answer the following questions:

1. Why did the woman call Jesus by a Messianic name, “Son of David”? What did that imply concerning her knowledge of Jesus?

2. How did His disciples react to her, and why was that typical of them?

3. What kind of appeal did she make? How helpless is she?

4. What things happened that should have discouraged her but did not?

Despite coming from a *despised* nation that had a long history of enmity with Israel, despite being ignored at first by Jesus, despite the attitude of the disciples, even despite Christ’s own words to her at first, she knew that Jesus was her only hope. Perhaps it was a tenacity born out of desperation. Who knows? But in the end, we are all just as dependent upon Christ, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Jesus also has a powerful lesson for His own disciples. Christ’s purpose was to teach them about the need to work for non-Jews, and this He did by acting out the contrast between the usual attitudes and His own. These Twelve had a lot to learn about what it meant to be disciples.

Look again at this woman. What can we learn from her attitudes, actions, words, and faith that can make us better disciples?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

may have shared a crude hut out in an open field far from the closest village. What made these lepers unique was that one of them was a Samaritan and the rest were Jews. Suddenly, when you have leprosy, no one cares if you're Jew or Samaritan; you're still unclean. Their shared tragedy broke down the racial barriers between them. These were men who knew they were in need. And their need for healing drew them all together.

The law forbade them from approaching the clean, thus barring them from the presence of Jesus. But the combined sound of their voices crossed the distance that separated them from Him. Jesus was on the final journey that would take Him to His death. The momentousness of what He was about to do must have been weighing on Him. Every step closer to Jerusalem was one step closer to the cross. But He still made time for those who were suffering.

Imagine that you are the Samaritan leper, listening to Jesus' instructions to go present yourself to the priests. There's little doubt as to which priests He is referring to. There's no love lost between your nation and the Jewish nation. So, it must have taken a greater act of faith for this despised Samaritan to start walking toward the temple than for the other nine lepers. But his healing is a rebuke to the priests who not only believe Jesus is not the Messiah but who have despised the Samaritans. By healing him Jesus is telling the world that His grace is for all people. No wonder the Samaritan leper turned back to Jesus after he was healed and fell at His feet and worshiped Him. This man wasn't just thanking Jesus for healing him; he was thanking Him for giving him the gift of eternal life, which the Jews had felt the Samaritans did not deserve.

Consider This: What is the significance of where the lepers lived between the borders of Galilee and Samaria? How does sin make us lepers? Why is Jesus the only cure? The lepers were not cured in Jesus' presence, but only after they moved away from Him in faith. What is the lesson here for us about doing God's work? What barriers did Jesus tear down in healing this Samaritan leper, and what can we learn from His methods?

II. The Syro-Phoenician Woman *(Read Matthew 15:21–28 with your class.)*

The problem with Jesus, if you asked His disciples, was that He gave away the gifts of heaven too freely to those who weren't worthy. And in their minds Jesus couldn't have chosen a worse person than the Syro-Phoenician woman. His kindness to the Samaritans was bad enough.

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Philip and the Ethiopian Official

One of the most fascinating stories about discipleship is found in Acts 8:26–40. It is the story of Philip and the eunuch.

Read the whole story (*Acts 8:26–40*) and answer the following questions:

1. What indications show us that this man already had some knowledge of truth and was a seeker after truth?

2. What role did the Scriptures play in his becoming a disciple?

3. What can we learn about discipleship from the role of Philip in this story? What characteristics did Philip show that made him such an effective witness for the Lord?

In this story, providence played a powerful role, did it not? After obeying the angel, Philip met the eunuch on the road. Interesting, too, that Philip was to go from Jerusalem to Gaza (what symbolism do you see there?). The Ethiopian was, apparently, another God-fearer. He also just happened to be reading the Bible, and not only the Scriptures but Isaiah, and not only Isaiah but the greatest Messianic prophecy in all the Bible, chapter 53. This chapter, of course, depicts Christ's substitutionary death for us. Then, after Philip explained to him the meaning of the Scripture, they came to a certain water, and the eunuch wanted to be baptized. Everything fell right into place.

Read Acts 8:39. The eunuch went on his way *rejoicing*, surely about His newfound discovery of Jesus' dying for His sins. We say that faith is not feeling and that we need to maintain faith even when we feel bad. At the same time, why should we, as disciples who have been forgiven our sins through the death of Jesus, always have a place in our heart for rejoicing, regardless of our immediate circumstances?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

But at least He didn't actually perform a miracle for them, and they *did* believe in the law of Moses. And the centurion whose servant He healed had built a synagogue for the Jews. But the Syro-Phoenician didn't have the mind to appreciate the gospel. She was a heathen, a foreigner, a stranger, and a female on top of that. Her race didn't even believe in the true God. What right did she have to ask anything of Jesus? One rabbi wrote that hell was the only destiny of the Gentiles. Josephus, writing about the Phoenicians, said that of all the heathen races, the Canaanites bore the Israelites the most ill will. After all, Israel took their ancestral land from them during the time of Joshua. Certainly there was no love lost between their races.

Jesus read the hearts of His disciples. In their minds, she was no better than a dog, one of those *kunaria*, the wild mongrels that roamed the streets scrounging for scraps to steal. How their hearts must have thrilled when He used that very word to describe her when He said, "Why should I take the bread from the children and give it to the dogs?" But the word He used for dog was not the same as theirs. He used the word for the domesticated dogs that sat at the feet of their masters. The disciples were so blinded by their prejudice they failed to discern the compassion in Jesus' voice. But the Syro-Phoenician woman heard it. Her own gods had failed her. She had heard rumors of the great Healer that even the demons obeyed. His words gave her hope. She accepted she was a dog—but she was *His* dog. She did not ask for a loaf of bread or even for a slice. She begged only the crumbs at His feet. To gather them at His feet made even a "dog" a disciple.

Jesus treated her as the disciples would have so that when He granted her request, contrary to their expectations, they would see how evil their prejudice was. By ministering to this woman, He taught them a valuable lesson. Race is no barrier to the gospel, which is meant for all people. And as His disciples they must minister to both Jew and Gentile, for He was not just the Savior of the Jews but of the whole world.

Consider This: What method did Jesus use to show His disciples their prejudice? Was it effective? What does Jesus' granting of the Phoenician woman's request reveal about God's attitude toward caste and racism?

► STEP 3—Practice!

Witnessing

Make my eyes blue.

Maybe you haven't wanted blue eyes but who hasn't, at one time,

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The Antioch Church

The persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen and the pre-conversion activities of Saul of Tarsus took the gospel to many lands. Among the places it went was Syrian Antioch, where the first organized presentation of the gospel for Gentiles occurred. Luke says that the Lord was with this initiative and that “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (*Acts 11:21, NIV*). So phenomenal was the growth that the Jerusalem leaders sent Barnabas to assist them.

Upon his arrival, Barnabas secured the help of Saul of Tarsus for this discipleship mission. This had a positive effect on the church. It not only caused the church to grow but also gave it a sense of social concern, stewardship, and mission.

Read Acts 11:25–30. What were the issues? How did the church respond? What lessons can we take away from this account for our mission today?

Notice, too, that when Paul and Barnabas got to Antioch, they taught much people for a year. What should that tell us about the importance of teaching in the question of discipleship?

Acts 13:1–3 reveals more about the makeup of the early church. We know that Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew; Saul, of course, came from Tarsus, another city that was not part of Israel proper. Manaen was either a good friend or foster-brother of Herod Antipas. Simeon was called *Niger*, the Latin word for “black.” Lucius hailed from Cyrene in North Africa. This means that the leadership of the church was ethnically diverse, with some of the leaders not being Jews at all.

These leaders took their discipleship seriously. They worshiped the Lord with fasting and prayer. It was to this church, one that took discipleship seriously, that the Spirit revealed God’s will for missions. Saul and Barnabas were commissioned and consecrated to take the gospel to the ends of the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

Thus we see in these texts mission, teaching, consecration, and dedication of both Jew and Gentile, as the cornerstones of discipleship.

The needs of others present the church with great opportunities for service and witness. No doubt there are a great many needs around you. How well have you taken advantage of these needs to serve others and to witness to them about Jesus?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

wanted to be different?

Amy, the Irish girl who asked God for blue eyes, grew up without ever getting her wish and went to India as a missionary. She saw young girls who were unwanted by their families and were sold to the temples as prostitutes for the priests. She knew then what God had wanted her to do. She dyed her hair and skin with coffee. She wore saris to fit in with the people and started a home for these unwanted girls. “An Irish with brown eyes,” an Indian friend of hers once said. “It is a good thing. I don’t think you could save these girls if your eyes were blue.” Amy knew now why God had given her brown eyes instead of blue. As Paul says in the memory verse for this week, “I became all things to all men so that by doing so I could save some.” Amy Carmichael did not just go to India to live, she *became* an Indian. This was something Amy felt she could not have done so fully if God had given her blue eyes instead of brown. Two thousand years before, Jesus also became like the outcasts He was trying to save by taking our bodies, skin, hair, and eyes.

Consider This: Think about the things in your life that you have wished were different. How has God used the things we cannot change to make us a blessing and to bring about positive change in the lives of others?

■ *Like Amy, we may have had to change things about ourselves to reach some, becoming, as Paul said, “all things to all men” so that some can be saved. God may not be calling us to dye our skin as Amy did, but in what ways can we practice the truth of this in our lives?*

► STEP 4—Apply!

Consider these questions with your class as a way of taking steps to break down barriers that exist within your church:

- 1 Do converts feel comfortable within the structure of our church?
- 2 Do we have a system whereby new people can make new friends within six months of joining our church?
- 3 Do new members have someone to sit with them and orient them to the church ceremonies and services?
- 4 Does our church have a receptionist system at the church door that knows how to say hello without saying goodbye?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 626, 627, 1021–1025; Ellen G. White, “The Centurion,” pp. 315–318; “Barriers Broken Down,” pp. 399–403; “In the Outer Court,” pp. 621–623, in *The Desire of Ages*; John 12:20–33, Acts 9:1–31, 22:1–21, 26:2–18.

“He [the Centurion] had not seen the Saviour, but the reports he heard had inspired him with faith. Notwithstanding the formalism of the Jews, this Roman was convinced that their religion was superior to his own. Already he had broken through the barriers of national prejudice and hatred that separated the conquerors from the conquered people. He had manifested respect for the service of God, and had shown kindness to the Jews as His worshipers. In the teaching of Christ, as it had been reported to him, he found that which met the need of the soul. All that was spiritual within him responded to the Saviour’s words.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 315.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Look more closely at the Antioch model. What things could your local church learn from this model that could make it a more effective witness for Christ?
- 2** As a church, the Adventists are very good at getting people to join, as our growing numbers of baptisms prove. We are, though, struggling with the question of discipleship, the question of what to do with these people after we baptize them. As we know, far too many who join soon leave. What are your own thoughts on this problem? What has been your experience with being disciplined after you were baptized and joined the church? What do you wish might have been done differently with you? What do you think your local church could do, must do, to disciple new members better? Be prepared to talk about this issue in your Sabbath School class.
- 3** The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53. Go over the chapter and review what it tells us about the death of Jesus on our behalf. What does the text tell us that Jesus did for us? What hope does it offer? Why is it so important to keep His death for us at the forefront of all our witnessing? Why is it so important that we keep the Cross at the front and center of all our discipling, as well?