

The Tenderness of His Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:44–48; 19:13, 14; 23:37; Luke 10:38–42; John 8:2–11; Acts 6:7.*

Memory Text: “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (*Matthew 9:36*).

Matthew 9:35 tells how Jesus went through many areas of Palestine “preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (*NIV*). In our cynical age, when people suspect that every effort to help them is tinged with some hidden agenda, the motive behind Jesus’ ministry comes as a breath of fresh air: genuine love, described as “compassion” (*vs. 36*). He was moved for the people; His heart went out to them. We see this same general concern in Mark 8:1–3, where Jesus is concerned about the people fainting on their way home. “They have . . . been with Me three days,” He reminds His disciples, “and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance” (*vss. 2, 3, NIV*).

This is a remarkably tender concern that says a lot about Jesus. He knew His audience. He empathized with their needs. He felt their pain. Nor does He ask us to be exactly what He was or to do exactly what He did. Although He had gone through 40 days of fasting, He was concerned about the health and safety of those who had experienced just three days eating next to nothing (though perhaps not totally without food).

This is the kind of loving compassion we want to trace in this week’s lessons in the lives of individuals and that of the nation of Israel.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 31.*

For the Woman Caught in Adultery

(John 8:2–11)

Review the story of the woman caught in adultery. Though Ellen G. White made it clear that the woman was set up (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 461), there was still no question of her guilt. Nevertheless, how did Jesus treat her? What can we learn from this story?

“In His act of pardoning this woman and encouraging her to live a better life, the character of Jesus shines forth in the beauty of perfect righteousness. While He does not palliate sin, nor lessen the sense of guilt, He seeks not to condemn, but to save. The world had for this erring woman only contempt and scorn; but Jesus speaks words of comfort and hope. The Sinless One pities the weakness of the sinner, and reaches to her a helping hand. While the hypocritical Pharisees denounce, Jesus bids her, ‘Go, and sin no more.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 462.

What tender compassion and love on Jesus’ part! He handled the situation in such a way that forever afterward the woman’s accusers would be eager to leave her alone, since they never could be sure what she had read about their private lives on the pavement that morning.

In what ways was Jesus ministering even to the hypocrites who brought this woman to Him in order to try to snare Him?

If you read the story carefully, you can see the compassion of Jesus even for those who were so evil in their intentions. If only their hearts would have been as open to the wooing of Christ as was that unfortunate woman’s.

How would the typical Adventist congregation handle a situation like this? How do we balance adherence to high moral standards with compassion for those who fall?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 9:36*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that Jesus was very compassionate in His interaction with the people around Him.

Feel: Sense the Lord's compassion in your own life.

Do: Reflect the gentleness of the Savior in your own relationships with people.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. The Compassionate Lord

A Jesus was moved with compassion and was always concerned about the needs of others. That was the prime focus of His whole life and ministry.

B Jesus showed compassion for the woman caught in adultery. He also showed compassion for her accusers by not condemning them openly.

C Jesus showed great compassion for children and welcomed them into His presence.

II. Friends or Foes

A In His relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, we see Jesus' concern for the interests and needs of His closest friends.

B Jesus even had compassion for His enemies—giving them opportunities for repentance and forgiveness.

III. Gentle Words

A The gentle nature of the Lord is evident in how He always spoke the truth about people, whether good or bad, without belittling or condemning them.

B The Lord's correction and tough words for the Pharisees always gave the listeners the opportunity to take heed and change their ways.

▶ **Summary:** In the life and ministry of Christ we have the perfect example of gentleness—of compassion, as Jesus was seeking to save as many as would be saved.

For the Children *(Matt. 19:13, 14)*

Children have borne the brunt of suffering over the centuries. Helpless and dependent, they often have been caught in the crossfires of wars and conflicts, public riots and family feuds. It was children, infant males in particular, who bore the brunt of the first hideous “solution of the Jewish problem” under the ancient pharaohs of Egypt (*Exod. 1:15, 16*). And it was infant males who again were decimated in Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (*Matt. 2:16*), leading Matthew to recall another time of indiscriminate slaughter of children at the start of the Babylonian captivity (*Matt. 2:17, 18; compare Jer. 31:15*). Learning about Herod’s slaughter, perhaps on His mother’s knees, how keenly Jesus must have remembered it, knowing that these innocent little ones had died, in a sense, because of Him. (He had come to die for them; but before He was old enough even to conceive of His mission, they had died because of Him.)

How do the following passages capture Jesus’ tender love and concern for infants and children? What messages are being given to us in these accounts that go beyond how we should treat children? *Matt. 18:2–6, 19:13–15*.

Those children who sat on Jesus’ lap that day and to whom His hand had been outstretched in blessing, what might their future have been? What memories did they take from that day, those old enough to remember? Did some of them later accept Jesus as the Messiah? And how must they have felt to know that that loving Person who had put His hands on them in blessing was now in the highest heavens ministering in their behalf? What depth of assurance that must have brought them! Politicians kiss babies for their parents’ votes; but Jesus loved the children for their own sake. “Let the little children come to me,” He scolded His protective disciples, “and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (*Matt. 19:14, NIV*).

What children, if any, are within your own sphere of influence? How do you respond to them? Think carefully about how you treat them. What steps can you take to make sure your influence is as positive as possible?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

What comforts you when you are stressed or fearful? What memories of peaceful times and gracious people does this question bring to mind? Invite each class member to share a memory of care given when most needed during a difficult time. Then discuss what qualities of the person who came to your rescue most attracted you. How did those qualities especially meet your need?

Take at least ten minutes of class time to make a specific list of people in the congregation and/or friends outside the fellowship of the church who are facing trying circumstances. Lift up their names and situations in prayer. Commission members of the class to contact them during the week through a phone call or visit.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus, a Model of Love Lived Out Through a Human Life

If Jesus had used strictly human discernment and eyesight while looking out over the nation of Israel from the crest of a hill, He would have seen a motley group of misfits. Instead, Scripture records that He used heavenly eyesight. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (*Matt. 9:36, NIV*). Looking down through history, He also saw each of His children who would live on the face of the earth. Instead of seeing broken, incompetent people, He saw, through the power of infinite love, disciples able and willing to suffer and serve for the cause of reaching others with the good news of the gospel.

Consider This: Using a concordance, find all the times the word *compassion* is used in conjunction with Jesus’ ministry. What does this tell you about the nature of compassion? How might these insights impact how you relate to the people in your sphere of influence?

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For the Lazarus Family *(John 11:5)*

We do not know a great deal about the Lazarus family of Bethany. The Gospels provide us with little about them. But it seems clear that they were three unmarried adult siblings keeping house together. Probably not your typical Jewish family, but that is where Jesus chose to go whenever He came to town. John informs us that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister [Mary] and [their brother] Lazarus” (*John 11:5, NIV*).

Study the incident recorded in **Luke 10:38–42**. How do you see Jesus’ handling of Martha? How, even here, do we see the loving compassion of Jesus being manifest?

Martha’s request seems eminently justified. After all, the meal lay at the center of Eastern hospitality, and preparing it had to count for something. Perhaps too poor to afford servants, Martha in the kitchen needed help. In light of all this, Jesus’ response to her comes across as uncharacteristically uncaring.

Perhaps the key to understanding it is to consider the wider dimension of Jesus’ mission. For Jesus, nothing was ordinary, as His own parents discovered during the incident at the temple (*Luke 2:48, 49*). For Jesus, destiny hung upon every minute of His time with us, and in that context, kitchen work did not count, regardless of its importance.

Still, we misunderstand Jesus if we think He was unsympathetic to Martha. Quite the opposite is the case. The Gospels do not provide us with video clips of the incidents they report. We cannot see the face of Jesus as He responded to Martha. We cannot hear the pathos in His voice. Using our imagination, however, and informed by what we know of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels, we may picture Him rising from His place as He addresses Martha, affectionately calling her name twice. “Martha, Martha,” He says, making His way to the kitchen, Mary following, “there’s something infinitely more important than entertaining, and Mary has found it” (*Luke 10:41, 42, paraphrase*).

In what ways might you be in the position of Martha, so busy with the cares of this world that you forget what is really important? Most important, how can you tell if your priorities are not right?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Compare and Contrast: Using a dictionary, look up the words *compassion* and *love*. As a group, write a definition of compassion as modeled by Christ. How would you describe what you know of Jesus' compassion to someone who is struggling with feelings of being abandoned by God? What in your personal life journey could be shared as a witness of the authenticity of His love?

II. Those Who Need Love (But Don't Deserve It)

Do you make lists of things you like and those things you most definitely don't like? Do those lists include people? Matthew 5:44–48 mandates love for those who are openly hostile—our enemies. Discuss why verse 48 equates love for our enemies with “perfect love.” Consider the people in your life who are difficult for you to love. Pray for a change of heart in your attitude toward them. Covenant to exhibit God's love toward at least one of those people in a tangible way during the coming week.

III. Making Love the Defining Characteristic of Your Life

Each congregation is called to a specific mission on behalf of the kingdom of God. Many even write vision and mission statements in an attempt to stay focused on that purpose and as a means to invite others to become involved. These focus statements constitute core principles that are used by the church in making decisions on ministries to pursue. God invites us as individuals to answer two core questions: Do I believe with saving faith in the Son of God? Is my life modeled after His? In class, discuss how the answers to these questions might help your group focus on a mission.

IV. Loving Enough to Be Misunderstood

“All who received Him would . . . be conformed to His character. This involved the relinquishment of their cherished ambitions. . . . The insincere,

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For His Enemies *(Matt. 5:44)*

One of Jesus' most famous sayings is found in Matthew 5:44–48. Review the verses. What is the essence of this important message to all who would follow Jesus?

In a real sense, one could say that Christ's whole life and death were a manifestation of this principle, that of loving your enemies, that of doing good even to those who do not do you good.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, the whole world became, in a sense, *enemy territory*, a race of fallen and rebellious beings living in opposition to God. What, though, did God do to this enemy planet? Did He send an army of angels down to sweep it away in its iniquity? No, instead He sent Jesus, His Son, who came to save the world, not to condemn it.

What overt examples can you find in the Gospels that show the love of Jesus, even for His enemies? Which ones stand out the most in your mind?

How about, for example, when He healed the ear of the servant when Peter cut it off (*Luke 22:50, 51*)? Or how about the time He revealed to Judas His foreknowledge of what Judas was going to do, giving the hardened disciple another opportunity to turn away from his sin (*Matt. 26:25*)?

Of course, the greatest example has to be His prayer to the Father as He was being crucified: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (*Luke 23:34*). In many ways that is the ultimate example of love for those who do not deserve it; though they did not know what they were doing, they had no excuse. During His time here, Jesus gave ample opportunity, to both Jews and Romans, to know who He was or at least to know enough to know that Jesus did not deserve what He was getting. Despite that, Jesus showed His compassion for them anyway.

It is one thing to say you are supposed to love your enemies; it is another to know how to do it. What is the key to manifesting this attribute in your own life? How willing are you to make the changes needed in order to be able to love your enemies?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the selfish, who had sought Him, no longer desired Him. If He would not devote His power and influence to obtaining their freedom from the Romans, they would have nothing to do with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 391.

Compare and Contrast: Read John 6:25–66. A crisis of decision confronted the multitude that followed Jesus. Discuss the difference between those who turned away and those who became more deeply convicted that Jesus was the Messiah. How can we remain courageous in sharing a gentle, genuine witness, even when we are misunderstood?

► STEP 3—Practice

Thought Questions:

- 1 In our culture, with all its technology and opportunities for entertainment, we seldom have time to follow Mary’s example. Luke 10:39 (*NIV*) records that she “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.” How could you reorder your priorities, beginning tomorrow morning, so that you could have at least ten minutes to hear God speak His love to you through His Word?
- 2 Entrapment in sinful choices leads many down what seem like irreversible paths. Gossip and outright slander seem to confirm the worthlessness of those individuals who are the objects of negative rumors. Jesus dealt with an apparently hopeless situation—a life obviously broken beyond redemption—in John 8:2–11. Read this passage and then, as a group, discuss each of the characters in the narrative. How might Jesus’ example in this story change how we interact at work or church?

Application Question:

Acts 6:7 describes the impossible happening. Even “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (*NIV*). When we look at growth in the church, we think in terms of addition instead of multiplication and the obvi-

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For Israel *(Matt. 23:37)*

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” *(Matt. 23:37)*.

How is the character of Jesus revealed in the above text? What does it tell us about God’s love for His people? What does it tell us about the limits of what love can do? At the same time, before you start pointing fingers at anyone, ask yourself: How might those words be applied directly to me?

If God shared the same emotions as humans, then the story of His relationship with Israel would amount to four thousand years of almost continuous disappointment and frustration. To be sure, there were high points, times when the nation brought God joy, but those times were rare and comparatively brief. Eventually, His phenomenal patience running out, God gave the nation a period of 490 years (*Dan. 9:24*) that would reach to the coming of Messiah. Jesus was that Messiah; and what we see in Him, from start to finish, was an attitude of compassion, a love at once tough yet tender.

How does Matthew 23:25–35 exemplify the toughness of Jesus’ love?

What we are watching here is the phenomenon of Divine patience nearing its end. Yet, however severely provoked, and however protracted the provocation, tenderness breaks through the outer crust of Jesus’ toughness. He would not have spoken those harsh words were there not hope that some of these people eventually would see the error of their ways.

Read Acts 6:7. Notice who was also “obedient to the faith.” Might some of them have been among those Jesus rebuked earlier? What is the message to us here about being quick to judge or condemn?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

ous and possible instead of becoming involved in what only God can do. When we consider Jesus' love and its impact and results, we have to wonder, "How can we see this same type of growth happening through our congregation?" Form your Sabbath School class into a task force that seeks answers on how to become more productive witnesses so that even the apparently unreachable may be won for Christ. Share your findings and suggestions with your church leadership.

Witnessing

The little song "Jesus Loves Me" has impacted many lives. But somehow its true impact is missed much of the time. Jesus very personally loves YOU! Using a concordance, look through the passages in the Gospels that use the words *love*, *loved*, or *loves*. What impression do they make about the depth and life-changing power God's love is to have in your life? If you haven't told Jesus "I am so thankful You love ME," do that right now. Then take the next step. With courage and the Holy Spirit's presence, ask God to send you to someone who needs to experience this same assurance right now.

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: Make a list that includes any work associate, neighbor, or other acquaintance with whom you have enough of a relationship that you know something about their family or life situation. Then try to picture them sitting at the feet of Jesus, hearing His parables and seeing His miracles. Jesus modeled the Father's love by coming to this earth and serving broken, rebellious humanity. He stated that mission in the synagogue recorded in Luke 4:18, 19. He then made application of that mission to us. " 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' " (*John 20:21, NIV*). Which of the people on your list need you to serve them? How can you change the picture on the hillside to include you as the serving, compassionate teacher? How will you start that journey today?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Lazarus Come Forth,” pp. 524–536; “Before Annas and the Court of Caiaphas,” pp. 710–715; “Judas,” pp. 720–722, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In the work of soul-winning, great tact and wisdom are needed. The Saviour never suppressed the truth, but He uttered it always in love. In His intercourse with others, He exercised the greatest tact, and He was always kind and thoughtful. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave unnecessary pain to a sensitive soul. He did not censure human weakness. He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity, but tears were in His voice as He uttered His scathing rebukes. He never made truth cruel, but ever manifested a deep tenderness for humanity. Every soul was precious in His sight. He bore Himself with divine dignity; yet He bowed with the tenderest compassion and regard to every member of the family of God. He saw in all, souls whom it was His mission to save.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 117.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Dwell on this idea of loving your enemies. What does that mean, in a practical sense? How is this love to be manifested? Is there a time when it would be impossible to love your enemies? If so, what might that situation be?
- ❷ What is the situation of the children in your local church? How much attention is paid to their needs? What could you as a church be doing better in that regard?
- ❸ In what ways is it easy to confuse love with cheap grace? That is, what danger is there of allowing people to get away with things that they should not be doing, all because we want to reveal to them *love*? When is love sometimes best manifested by strict, moral accountability? How can we strike the right balance? If you are going to err, which side is it best to err on?
- ❹ What parallels can you find between the Jewish nation (during the time it was a theocracy) and the Adventist Church today? What lessons should we learn from their example? Are we learning them?