

The Christian Life



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 8:11–17; Phil. 2:3, 4; 1 Cor. 15:51, 52; Rev. 22:1–5; Matt. 22:39; Gen. 2:21–25.*

Memory Text: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16, NKJV).

Key Thought: Anyone can call himself or herself a Christian. What, though, does that mean in practical terms?

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?” (*James 2:14, NLT*).

The Bible emphasizes “sound doctrine,” but this emphasis is in the context of holy living (*1 Tim. 1:10, Titus 2:1–5*) in order to point out that the true goal of biblical teaching is an ethical life, one that is manifested in obligations to others. In fact, if you look carefully at those texts in Timothy and Titus, they link sound doctrine with correct living *as if correct living itself is sound doctrine!*

The Christian is saved in order to be God's agent for the salvation and good of others amid the great controversy between good and evil. To be “so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good,” however much a cliché, does represent a reality that Christians need to avoid. Certainly, heaven is our ultimate home, but for now we're still on earth, and we need to know how to live while here.

This week we'll look at how some practical, “hands-on” Christianity should be manifest in our lives.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 15.*

Stewardship

When we think about salvation translating into service to others, we cannot avoid the Christian concept of stewardship. *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* defines *stewardship* as “the responsibility of God’s people for, and use of, everything entrusted to them by God—life, physical being, time, talents and abilities, material possessions, opportunities to be of service to others, and their knowledge of truth.”

Look at the following passages. With each one ask yourself, given my particular circumstances, how can I manifest in my own life the wonderful principles taught in these texts? How should these truths impact the way I live and how I relate to others, to God, and to the gifts that He has given to me?

Deut. 8:11–17 _____

Ps. 24:1 _____

Phil. 2:3, 4 _____

1 John 3:16 _____

The Bible teaches that the fundamental purpose for all of God’s creation is to glorify Him. Sin derailed this reality in a very big way, but God directed His saving action toward us in order to bring us back to participate with all creation in glorifying Him. Christ purchased us for the sake of God’s glory (*Eph. 1:11–14*). We bring glory to God when we acknowledge in both word and deed the complete lordship of Christ over our lives. The complete expression of Christ’s lordship over our lives will involve our service to others through the use of our time, talents, abilities, and material possessions.

Read again the texts for today. Which ones touch you the most, and why? What motivates you to try to live a life that involves seeking the good of others, as well as your own good? Why is it so important for you, spiritually, to live for others?

Tithe: A Mere Pittance

“And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house. For the children of Israel and the children” (*Neh. 10:38, 39*).

Think about your life; think about the brevity of it; think about the utter inevitability of your death (unless Christ returns in your lifetime). Think what it would mean if, as many believe, the grave is the ultimate end. You’re here, a spasm of cellular metabolism that does its thing (often in pain, hardship, fear), and then ends; one way or another, when all those cells die, nothing’s left but a carcass on which bugs and bacteria feed until they also expire.

Such would be the fate of all of us in a universe so large that our planet, much less our individual lives, could appear to be so meaningless as to be nothing but a cruel joke that most of us don’t find funny.

In contrast to that scenario, look at what we have been given in Christ. Look at what has been offered to us through Jesus. Look at what the plan of salvation tells us about our worth and about what was done for us so that we don’t have to meet the fate pictured above.

What have we been given in Christ? *1 Cor. 15:51, 52; Rev. 21:4; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:6, 7; Rev. 22:1–5*. **What** should these things mean to us? **How** should these promises impact every aspect of our existence?

“I speak of the tithing system, yet how meager it looks to my mind! How small the estimate! How vain the endeavor to measure with mathematical rules, time, money, and love against a love and sacrifice that is measureless and incomputable! Tithes for Christ! Oh, meager pittance, shameful recompense for that which cost so much! From the cross of Calvary, Christ calls for an unconditional surrender.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, pp. 119, 120.

After all that Christ has done for you, can you not exercise enough faith and give back to Him a mere pittance of what you’ve been given?

The Responsibility to One's Self

Jesus tells us very clearly that “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (*Matt. 22:39*). This is a very interesting text in light of the idea that we often look at love for self as the height of all that is opposed both to Christianity and to the idea of disinterested selflessness. What did Jesus mean by this text? How do we interpret and apply it in a way that reflects what true Christianity should be about?

Love of self, in the Christian sense, isn't selfishness; it isn't putting yourself first before everyone and anything else. On the contrary, love for self means that, upon realizing your own worth before God, you seek to live the best possible life, knowing that the results of such a life will be a benefit not just to yourself (which is fine) but also, and even more important, to those with whom you come into contact.

How would you relate Jesus' admonition above to the following texts?

Phil. 2:5, 8 _____

2 Cor. 5:14, 15 _____

1 Cor. 10:31–33 _____

1 Pet. 1:13–16 _____

The redemption that the sinner obtains in Christ brings about such unity with Him (*Gal. 2:20*) that the Christian desires to live a life that is ordered after Christ's impulses. The sinner desires to have Christ's mind, to live no longer for one's self but for Him, and to heed the call to holiness (separation from such things as our passions, the sinful trends in culture, and moral impurity). If you love yourself, you want what's best for you; and what's best for you is a life that is committed to God, a life that reflects the character and love of God, a life that is lived not for self but for the good of others. The surest way to guarantee yourself a miserable existence is to live only for self, never thinking of the good of others.

Dwell more on what it means to love yourself in the Christian sense. How easy is it for this kind of love to degenerate into a self-destructive self-centeredness? What's the only way to protect yourself from this trap?

Christian Marriage

Humans are social beings. At home and work and in public and civic places, people are involved in all kinds of relationships. Responsible Christian behavior ought to be evident at all these levels, and the Bible has relevant principles by which to guide these relationships.

Study the following Bible passages in order to come up with a biblical definition of marriage: *Gen. 2:21–25, Mal. 2:14, Eph. 5:28.*

To define something is to provide its meaning. Today it is said that marriage is difficult to define because the meaning of marriage differs for different people, times, and cultures. The Bible, however, has no such flexible idea of marriage. According to the Bible, marriage is an institution put in place by God, in which two adults of different gender covenant to share an intimate and lasting personal relationship. Biblical marriage is marked by an appreciation of the equality of the male and female, a deep bond of unity where goals are blended, and there is a sense of permanence and faithfulness and trust. As with a relationship with God, the relationship between a husband and a wife should be sacredly guarded.

Of course, as we know all too well, marriage, even within the church, has become something that's often treated lightly. People enter into a union that they believe God has created, and then, when things get rough, they stand before a human judge who, through man-made laws and rules, separates what God has united. We all know that something is terribly wrong with this picture; yet, as a church, we struggle with what to do in these situations.

Together with issues of polygamy, cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, and the practice of homosexuality, what challenges of human sexuality can you identify in today's society? What biblically based counsel can you bring to bear on these issues?

Adultery, fornication, and pornography abound in society today, and these are hardly the worst of things that are out there. Nevertheless, God continues to look on human failings with compassion and tender mercy. Yet, these practices remain failings that can be overcome through the grace of Christ. Therefore, redemptive efforts must aim high in order to attain God's ideals—as opposed to seeking to justify and excuse sin through a host of excuses and cultural qualifications.

Christian Behavior

Beyond the family, the Christian has other social and professional involvements—a clear recognition of the biblical view that Christians are in the world but not of the world (*John 17:14–18*).

Consider the following three areas of daily life and discuss the Christian’s responsibilities in regard to lifestyle and behavior:

1. Employer/Employee Relations (*James 5:4–6, Eph. 6:5–9*). Apart from regarding employees as equals in Christ, the Christian employer must be guided by the principle that adequate work requires adequate compensation. On the other hand, Christian workers ought to resist the temptation to be slothful at work.

“Parents cannot commit a greater sin than to allow their children to have nothing to do. The children soon learn to love idleness, and they grow up shiftless, useless men and women. When they are old enough to earn their living, and find employment, they work in a lazy, droning way, yet expect to be paid as much as if they were faithful.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 345.

2. Civic Duties (*Rom. 13:1–7*). The Christian places God first in all things and evaluates all actions and responsibilities from this perspective. For this reason the Christian will, for example, oppose discrimination in any form, even if it is officially sanctioned. At the same time, “loyalty to God first does not entitle anyone to become autonomous and create social disharmony or chaos. Christians pay taxes, participate in civic duties, respect traffic laws and property regulations, and cooperate with civil authorities in curbing or controlling crime and violence.”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), p. 701.

3. Social Responsibility (*Isa. 61:1–3, Matt. 25:31–46*). Discuss the following statement in the light of the passages above: “The Christian can exercise his calling to seek the kingdom of God if, motivated by love of neighbor, he carries on his work in the moral communities of family and economic, national, and political life. . . . Only by engaging in civic work for the sake of the common good, by faithfulness in one’s social calling, is it possible to be true to the example of Christ.”—H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 97.

In your work and social interactions, are people able to detect your Christian values? Be honest with yourself (no matter how painful that might be!). Which aspects of your life, if any, draw people to your faith? What does your answer tell you about the way in which you live?

Further Study: Read chapters 22, 23, pp. 311–346, in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, 2nd ed. (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005); Miroslav M. Kis, “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior,” pp. 675–723, in Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.

“Acts of generosity and benevolence were designed by God to keep the hearts of the children of men tender and sympathetic, and to encourage in them an interest and affection for one another in imitation of the Master, who for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich. The law of tithing was founded upon an enduring principle and was designed to be a blessing to man.

“The system of benevolence was arranged to prevent that great evil, covetousness. Christ saw that in the prosecution of business the love of riches would be the greatest cause of rooting true godliness out of the heart. He saw that the love of money would freeze deep and hard into men’s souls, stopping the flow of generous impulses and closing their senses to the wants of the suffering and the afflicted.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 547.

“If one has health and strength, that is his capital, and he must make a right use of it. If he spends hours in idleness and needless visiting and talking, he is slothful in business, which God’s word forbids. Such have a work to do to provide for their own families, and then lay by them in store for charitable purposes as God has prospered them.

“We are not placed in this world merely to care for ourselves, but we are required to aid in the great work of salvation, thus imitating the self-denying, self-sacrificing, useful life of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 325.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The issue of marriage and divorce is of great concern, as it ought to be, in view of the fact that divorce is so rampant in certain countries. How do we apply the clear teaching of the Bible when addressing this topic? If we applied the teachings of Jesus more strictly, would people be less inclined to divorce? Discuss this difficult issue.
- ❷ Dwell more on the whole question of tithing. Some argue that they should be able to give tithe to whom they choose, instead of through the channels of the organized church body of which they are members. What’s the great danger of that attitude?
- ❸ As a church, we cannot ignore all the biblical admonitions regarding the caretaking of the poor and the needy among us. No one who calls himself or herself Christian can ignore this mandate. At the same time, what are the pitfalls of our calling if caretaking becomes our primary focus or the end point as opposed to the means to a greater end? Discuss.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 John 3:16*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the Christian's responsibilities regarding time, talents, and other personal and material resources, as well as his or her responsibilities toward family and community.

Feel: Sense the generosity and benevolence that Christ's example of self-sacrifice calls forth.

Do: Give to others as generously as God has given to him or her.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Interested, Sympathetic, and Supportive

A What riches has God given to Christians, and how are they owed back to Him?

B What principles of stewardship guide the Christian's responsibility regarding gifts of possessions and relationships?

II. Feel: Source of Every Good Thing

A What examples has Christ provided of self-sacrificing generosity?

B What response does Christ's benevolence call from His followers, and how can these emotions and resulting actions guard against selfishness and covetousness?

III. Do: Giving

A How do Christians give back to God, family, community, and the world at large in ways that complete the circle of benevolence?

B How does the cultivation of the beauty and sanctity of marriage reflect a Christian's relationship with God?

C What are the civil responsibilities of Christians in their neighborhoods, nation, and in the global community?

► **Summary:** God has given gifts to His children and has demonstrated in the life of Christ the unselfishness that characterizes His nature. His children are called to reflect His benevolence in their use of His gifts of personal and material resources, family, and society.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Practical Christianity encompasses living and managing our everyday lives in a manner that reflects our love for God and those around us.

Just for Teachers: In this first section, our goal is to assist the class members in reflecting on what encompasses practical Christian living.

Opening Discussion: What does the term *practical Christianity* convey to you? This week’s lesson highlights topics ranging from employer/employee relations, civic duties, and Christian marriage, to self-worth, tithing, and stewardship, and relates them to practical Christianity. Reflecting on the various topics taken together, the lesson poses the question, How do we practice our Christian and spiritual experience in our everyday life and dealings?

Discussion Question: How would you define a Christian lifestyle and what makes it Christian?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: It is essential to delve more deeply into the relationship between God and our possessions and the implications that this relationship poses for our faith and giving within the context of our daily experience.

I. Don’t Forget! (Read Deuteronomy 8:11–20 with your class.)

Scholar J. A. Thompson states, “Deuteronomy is one of the greatest books of the Old Testament. Its influence on the domestic and personal religion of all ages has not been surpassed by any other book in the Bible. It is quoted over eighty times in the New Testament and thus it belongs to a small group of four Old Testament books to which the early Christians made frequent reference.”—*Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 11. In Deuteronomy, the speeches of Moses encompass the background history of Israel, followed by attention to the ceremonial law in regard to matters of worship, clean and unclean foods, and

tithes. Furthermore, civil ordinances, as well as various laws on marriage, parents, and disobedient children, are addressed.

It is also in Deuteronomy 8 that Moses reminds the children of Israel of God's past mercies toward them: "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, . . . a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees . . . , a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. . . . You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you" (*vss. 7-10, NRSV*).

Note carefully the strong admonition that follows: "Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . . Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today" (*vss. 11-18, NRSV*).

The value of these words is not only a reminder to the children of Israel of their indebtedness to God for everything, but the far-reaching import of the words is significant to our historical time and life experiences as well.

Jesus echoes Moses' words about possessions. In fact, He talks about wealth, money, and possessions more than any other topic. He does so in connection to everyday life, addressing the money spent in the marketplace and by the family.

Why? It seems that Moses' admonition had been forgotten. This same danger is posed when, today, in our forgetfulness of God as Provider, we instead attribute to money a godlike power that makes us think that we are in control and autonomous.

Consider This: Money exists in the realm of things that can be worshiped. But according to Moses, why did God give His people the power to acquire wealth? What is the connection between a failure to keep the commandments and a worship of money? How is obedience to the law a safeguard against the worship of mammon?

II. Faith and Trust

Today in many countries, cultural myths abound in regard to wealth and possessions. These myths communicate that things bring happiness and that having a little more money is the answer. However, biblical truth states that the goodness of life is not reflected in the abundance of one's

possessions, and the one who loves money will never have enough.

This truth takes us to the core of practical Christian living in regard to faith and trust. In what do people typically have faith when making decisions about how they will earn, give, and spend their money? The cultural response to this question is that they have faith in their own ability, job, home, insurance, investments, pensions, children, education, and possessions.

In whom does the Bible say to place our trust? The reply is GOD.

Therefore, a Christian lifestyle will be one lived with values other than consumerism. It will be faith-based and also generous in giving.

Consider This: What are the biblical principles that should shape our attitudes and practices toward our use of money? What does the Bible say is the true source of happiness? Why can't the source of true joy be found in material things?

III. Tithes and Offerings

Returning tithe and giving offerings is a powerful antidote to the danger of forgetting God and succumbing to the pull of culture and its myths about possessions and money. When we faithfully and regularly tithe, we participate in the act of worship that positions God in His rightful place, which is first in our lives and in all of our everyday dealings.

Consider This: How does tithing provide us with a tool to worship God? In what way does it help us to place Him first in our lives in every way? How is tithing a tangible recognition of our incredible relationship with Him?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Please divide your class members into small groups (of three to five each, if possible) and have them discuss the following questions. Then reassemble and invite them to share their answers.

Activity: As Creator of all things, God has never transferred the ownership of His creation to people. When we acknowledge this truth, then every spending decision also becomes a spiritual decision. The pertinent question then becomes not, “Lord, what do You want me to do with my money?” but rather, “Lord, what do you want me to do with Your money?”

Discuss:

1. How can we consistently remember and become aware of God's ownership?

2. How can we move beyond intellectual recognition of God's ownership and transfer this information to our hearts and everyday actions?

3. In addition to returning tithes and giving offerings, where else and what else, in terms of God's gifts to you, might you be able to give?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Provide paper or 3 x 5 cards and writing utensils, if supplies are available. Alternately, this exercise can be performed without the supplies by simply discussing the answer to the activity question. Divide your class into small groups (of three to five each, if possible). Have the group members work together on this activity and, when finished, invite each small group to share with the class at large.

Activity: Within your small group, create and write out the epitaph of a faithful steward. How might it read?

Epitaphs often are guilty of praising too much or saying too little. Part of the problem with epitaphs is their brevity—they are short by necessity. After all, a headstone has limited real estate on which to inscribe much more than the name and birth and death dates of the deceased. The other problem is the tendency to sentimentalize the qualities of the dead—to gild the worst sinner with saintly qualities never legitimately possessed, perhaps, in an effort to erase painful memories or disappointments that he or she caused when alive.

Whatever the case, an epitaph doesn't always provide the most accurate insight into the deceased's character. In light of these thoughts, consider the epitaph you have written. How can you endeavor to ensure that it is neither exaggeration nor understatement? Or, put another way, how can the principles that you've learned this week help this truth to be lived out in your life now—and not to be mere bloated inscription on granite when you are six feet under?