

# Jesus *and the Social Outcasts*



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 21:28–32, John 8:1–11, Mark 5:1–20, John 4:5–32, Matt. 9:9–13.*

**Memory Text:** “The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, ‘Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ ” (*John 4:28–30, NKJV*).

A young woman—having come from an unbelievably sad and horrible background (which included two out-of-wedlock children by the time she was fifteen years old)—sat in prison, awaiting trial for having murdered a social worker who had come to take away her baby, the only person from whom she ever felt any love.

Without a mother, father, husband, any relative, or even a friend, she faced the forbidding future alone. Through the visits of a pastor, however, this hopeless young woman learned that—despite all the mistakes, despite the desperateness of the situation, and despite whatever loomed on the horizon—Christ loved and forgave her. No matter how society viewed this young girl, she knew, for herself, God’s eternal love. This social outcast discovered meaning and purpose in her Lord, whose love and acceptance transcended all societal norms and mores, even the “good” ones.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 15.

## Bottom Dwellers

Societies establish hierarchies. Wealthy or well-educated people usually acquire the highest positions.

Good moral citizens, the “ordinary” people, normally occupy the middle rungs on the social ladder. That leaves the bottom dwellers, those such as prostitutes, substance abusers, criminals, the homeless, and others. During Christ’s time, that list also included lepers and tax collectors.

**Read** Matthew 21:28–32 and Luke 15:1–10. What do these passages teach regarding Christ’s attitude toward social outcasts?

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What happened that propelled the social outcasts ahead of the self-righteous? What did the bottom dwellers discover that the social elite often missed? Why was Jesus apparently more effective in reaching the bottom strata than He was with the upper echelons?

Although hardened by sinful pleasures, and sometimes encased in self-constructed tough exteriors, the social outcasts were, and still are, easier to reach than the prideful, haughty, and self-righteous elite. Often, beneath the outcasts’ bravado lies emotional emptiness characterized by poor self-worth. Frequently, especially during the teenage years, such people openly rebel, frantically trying to establish a personal identity to compensate for the insecurities felt within. That identity is, purposefully, established in opposition to the wishes of whoever serves as the authority figure (often parents) for that person.

Jesus wasted no effort damaging the outcasts’ already diminished sense of self-worth. Instead, He created a renewed sense of personal value. He established that foundation by consistently loving and accepting the outcasts, whose hearts were often melted by the warm and loving receptions that they had received from Christ.

**What is your own attitude toward those whom your society deems to be social outcasts? Be honest: in a lot of cases, don’t you feel a certain sense of superiority? If so, dwell on the implications of those feelings.**

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## “In the Very Act”

**Read** John 8:1–11. What does this text teach us about Jesus and social outcasts?

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Having refreshed Himself spiritually at His Mount of Olives retreat, Jesus returned to the temple. Crowds gathered. While Christ taught, the Pharisees dragged an adulterous woman before Him. They questioned Jesus regarding Moses’ legislation concerning adultery, which prescribed execution. Jesus recognized that this questioning was insincere. The purpose was entrapment, not truth-seeking. Capital (death penalty) jurisdiction had been withdrawn from Jewish courts. Jewish leadership reasoned that Christ’s patriotic Jewish following might be compromised should He publicly reject stoning the woman. Conversely, should He endorse execution, their accusation would be that Christ had violated Roman authority.

Caught amid the leaders’ political intrigue was this helpless and guilty woman. Unfamiliar with Jesus’ ministry, she could not have known His merciful nature. Ironically, He appears to pronounce her death sentence; however, He prefaced His statement with those unforgettable words, “He that is without sin . . .”

Those words leveled the playing field. Sinless people might be authorized to mercilessly execute punishment. Yet, sinful people were, in a sense, obligated to be merciful. But, with the exception of Jesus, there were no sinless people present. Gradually the religious leaders dispersed, and this social outcast, guilty as she may have been, received grace.

“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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 462.

**Though Ellen G. White does give more details about the intrigue regarding this woman, the woman, nevertheless, was an adulteress, caught “in the very act.” The scheming of the leaders didn’t change that fact. And yet, she was still forgiven. How do we learn to show grace, even to the guilty, while still not “palliating” sin?**

## The Lowest of the Low

**Read** Mark 5:1–20. Compare this man’s situation with the plight of modern homeless people. Compare his description with that of mentally ill patients. What similarities and differences exist? How does modern society treat people who suffer from mental illness? What explains Christ’s admonition to publicize the event, though He consistently counsels others to maintain secrecy?

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From the perspective of many of us today, it’s hard to imagine someone in such a horrific state, living in a cemetery even. Though some argue that this man was merely insane, the text teaches otherwise. (Besides, how does that idea fit with what happened to the pigs?)

A crucial point for us in this story is that no one, no matter how deranged—whether from demon possession, mental illness, drug use, whatever—is to be ignored. In some cases, professional help is needed and should be given when possible.

As Christians, we must remember that Christ died for everyone, and even those whom we might deem to be beyond our help still deserve as much mercy and respect and kindness as possible. Besides, who are we to judge anyone to be a hopeless case, to be beyond the power of God? From our perspective, things can look bad, but from God’s perspective every human being is of infinite worth. Were it not for the Cross, all our cases would be hopeless, a point worth remembering as we confront every disturbed and damaged people.

**Dwell on some of the people you know who are truly in bad shape, whether mentally, spiritually, or physically, and for whatever reason. Try to view them in the way that you think our unconditionally loving God views them. Besides praying for them, what can you do, in any way, to minister to their needs and show them something of the love of God?**

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## The Woman at the Well

**Study** John 4:5–32, and then answer the following questions:

1. What social conventions did Jesus break, and why? What should this tell us about social conventions and the way in which they should be regarded when they interfere with witnessing? What social conventions might be hindering your witness to others?

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2. In what way did Jesus confront the woman about her sinful life? What lessons could we take from His approach?

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3. What does this story reveal about the prejudices of Jesus' disciples? Again we have to ask ourselves, in what ways are we guilty of the same thing?

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4. Though obviously impressed by the fact that Jesus knew she had been sexually promiscuous, what did the woman say in her witness that showed she still had some questions about who Jesus was? What lessons can we draw from this about our own need for patience when it comes to the making of disciples?

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## Publicans and Sinners

It's hard to imagine what our world would have been like had not sin intruded. The beauty of nature, even after millennia, still testifies to the majesty and power and goodness of God. Our sin-darkened minds can barely grasp what humanity and human relations would have been like had our world not fallen. One thing we can be sure of is that the class distinctions, prejudices, and cultural and ethnic boundaries that impact every society and culture would not exist.

Sad to say, too, it's hardly feasible that before Christ returns these boundaries are going to vanish. On the contrary, as our world gets worse, there is no doubt that these barriers will, as well. As Christians, however, we must do what we can in every way possible to seek to transcend these barriers that have caused so much heartache and suffering and pain in our world, especially to those whom society rejects as the greatest outcasts.

**Read** Matthew 9:9–13. In what way is the essence of true Christianity revealed here, not just in what Jesus said but in that which He did? Focus especially on His words, taken from the Old Testament: “ ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ ” (*Hosea 6:6, NKJV*). Especially given the context, why must we be so careful that we do not become guilty of possessing the attitude that Jesus is so powerfully condemning here—especially when we are all to some degree creatures of our particular societies, and thus influenced by the prejudices and social barriers that are inherent in every society?

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“The Pharisees beheld Christ sitting and eating with publicans and sinners. He was calm and self-possessed, kind, courteous, and friendly; and while they could not but admire the picture presented, it was so unlike their own course of action, they could not endure the sight. The haughty Pharisees exalted themselves, and disparaged those who had not been blessed with such privileges and light as they themselves had had. They hated and despised the publicans and sinners. Yet in the sight of God their guilt was the greater. Heaven's light was flashing across their pathway, saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it’; but they had spurned the gift.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1088.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “At Jacob’s Well,” pp. 183–195; “Peace, Be Still,” pp. 333–341; “Among Snares,” pp. 460–462, in *The Desire of Ages*; and “Helping the Tempted,” pp. 164–169; “Working for the Intemperate,” pp. 171–182; “Help for the Unemployed and the Homeless,” pp. 183–200, in *The Ministry of Healing*.

“The one class that He would never countenance was those who stood apart in their self-esteem and looked down upon others. . . .

“The fallen must be led to feel that it is not too late for them to be men. Christ honored man with His confidence and thus placed him on his honor. Even those who had fallen the lowest He treated with respect. It was a continual pain to Christ to be brought into contact with enmity, depravity, and impurity; but never did He utter one expression to show that His sensibilities were shocked or His refined tastes offended. Whatever the evil habits, the strong prejudices, or the overbearing passions of human beings, He met them all with pitying tenderness. As we partake of His Spirit, we shall regard all men as brethren, with similar temptations and trials, often falling and struggling to rise again, battling with discouragements and difficulties, craving sympathy and help. Then we shall meet them in such a way as not to discourage or repel them, but to awaken hope in their hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 164, 165.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 What personal attitudes might need to be changed in order for you to become an effective witness to social outcasts? What congregational practices should be altered to make your church more effective? How should modern Christians establish reasonable expectations when working for those who are deemed to be the hardest and most difficult cases?
- 2 How did Jesus avoid both excusing sins and condemning sinners? In what ways did Christ utilize trust, encouragement, and confidence in reversing the downward spiral of social outcasts? Since social outcasts were generally suspicious of religious leaders, how did Christ make these potential disciples comfortable with Himself?
- 3 What barriers stand between social outcasts and your church? How can those barriers be overturned?

## The Godfather's Son

Mitia [*MEE-tyah*] was the son of a crime syndicate godfather. His father was rich and powerful, and Mitia admired him. Mitia quit school and started his own criminal business with his father's guidance. Soon Mitia was enjoying the riches of crime, just as his father did.

Then two of Mitia's employees were arrested. They named Mitia, and police went to arrest him. But someone warned Mitia, and he fled before the police arrived. He hid in a neighboring country to wait until it was safe to return home.

While in hiding, someone gave Mitia some Christian literature. It spoke of a life based on love, forgiveness, and obedience. Mitia wondered if such a life could be possible.

The literature referred to the Bible, and Mitia searched for one. He found one in a pile of old books in a market. Once he began reading, he couldn't put the Bible down. Who was this Jesus, whose life had changed so many people—people like him? As he read, his former life no longer appealed to him. He yearned for the peace, the hope, and the love he saw in Jesus.

Mitia wanted to tell his family what he had discovered. But as soon as he arrived home, he was arrested. His two former employees had been sentenced to death, and Mitia knew that he faced the same fate.

In prison, Mitia found comfort in reading his Bible and sharing God's message of forgiveness with the other prisoners. To his surprise, he was released from prison.

Mitia remembered a Christian neighbor and went to ask her questions about God that puzzled him. She recognized Mitia and had reason to fear him, but she invited him into her home. Soon they were reading Bible verses that answered Mitia's questions. She invited him to join a small group of Christians who worshiped in a house on Sabbath. Mitia went and was amazed to realize that the Seventh-day Adventists taught everything he had read in the Bible.

When Mitia's former friends invited him to party or take drugs, Mitia responded, "I'm done with those things. I have a new life now centered in God." Indeed, God's love so transformed Mitia's life that many who knew him listened as he told them that Jesus wants to be their Lord, as well.

Today, Mitia spends his time leading others to Jesus. One piece of literature changed his life. Our mission offerings help provide literature that can lead thousands like Mitia to God. Thank you for helping to tell the world that God loves them.

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MITIA ISMAILOV *lives in Kazakhstan.*