

The Harvest *and the* Harvesters



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 1:40–46, 4:28–30, Luke 24:47–53, Acts 1:6–8, Matt. 9:36–38, Luke 15.*

Memory Text: “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples” (*John 15:8*).

In many respects this week's study is a continuation of the previous lesson. Christ established spiritual leaders for the distinct purpose of proclaiming the kingdom of God. The principles and methodology that Jesus employed must remain the spiritual foundation for the Christian's preparation today.

In other words, modern leadership development theories must never supplant the foundation that Christ Himself laid. Whenever hype and publicity take precedence over spiritual growth, the results are shallowness and spiritual sterility. Whenever proselytizing displaces repentance, conversion, and spiritual transformation, the mission falters. Training leaders to conduct membership drives, media blitzes, and public relations campaigns instead of preparing them for spiritual warfare is courting disaster. True evangelism and disciple-making are centered around (1) the acknowledgment of our sinfulness, (2) genuine heartfelt contrition, (3) our unreserved spiritual surrender, and (4) the irrepresible compulsion to disseminate God's divine message to others.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 22.

Beggars' Bread

Nearing His earthly departure, Christ's concern focused upon His disciples, whom He had selflessly served and deeply loved. They would not be abandoned. Although Jesus Himself had to return to heaven, the Holy Spirit was commissioned to supply the spiritual intimacy that the disciples had enjoyed in His presence. Christ's instruction regarding the Spirit's work was so valuable that John devotes several chapters to its preservation. One defining element was the Spirit's testimony concerning Christ, even though the Spirit would not testify unaided. Accompanied by the Spirit, Christ's disciples would likewise testify concerning Jesus' ministry. God could have commissioned angels, unassisted by human beings, to broadcast the gospel. Instead, He elected to appoint sinful, erring, unpredictable humans for this sacred calling.

Read John 1:40–46; 4:28–30; 15:26, 27; 19:35, 36. What do these texts teach us about the ways in which the human and divine work together in the winning of souls?

Evangelism has been defined as “beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.” Andrew certainly excelled here. The writings of his brother Peter were to be included in Scripture one day, Peter's ministry was chronicled in Acts, and Christ included Peter among His three closest associates. Those honors never attended Andrew. Nevertheless, he received special recognition for following Christ's simple instruction to lead people to Jesus.

How many of God's chosen vessels—prolific leaders in evangelism, administration, and leadership—have been introduced to Christ by faithful disciples whose identities, humanly speaking, have long been forgotten? Although these people were not prominent themselves, think how crippled God's work might have been had they not faithfully witnessed about Jesus. Christ prepared His disciples for greater tasks by first offering simple assignments well within their reach. The Samaritan woman, Philip, and Andrew demonstrate the power of simple testimonies and heartfelt invitations. We all are called to do likewise.

When Jesus Urged Patience

Read Luke 24:47–53, Acts 1:6–8, 16:6–10. Why was waiting for the Spirit necessary? What was the Spirit’s role in the evangelistic outreach of the primitive church? What encouragement might modern believers draw from Paul’s experience when facing frustration? What lessons regarding patience and waiting for God’s timing are suggested within these passages?

Through discourse and example, Jesus taught His disciples patience. Facing bigotry, ignorance, misunderstanding, and outright conspiracy, Christ nonetheless patiently persevered. Such perseverance was anchored by Christ’s complete dependence upon God’s divine Spirit. Jesus understood that unless these disciples should likewise experience this dependence, the kingdom’s advancement was seriously jeopardized. Conversely, should they learn this lesson at the outset, their future ministry would be destined for heavenly attainments. Therefore, His departing command was “Wait.”

Christ desires that modern believers master that lesson also. Well-intentioned but self-confident Christians, when unwilling to patiently await the Spirit’s guidance, can embarrass themselves and God’s kingdom.

The apostle Paul drafted ambitious plans for entering Bithynia; but even headstrong Paul was sensitive to God’s leading and accepted rather than resisted the Spirit’s interference. The apostle willingly received the Spirit’s directive that sent him to Macedonia instead. Numerous miracles attended his efforts there. Had Paul rushed headlong with his designs, the European mission might have stalled indefinitely.

How can our anxious spirits be calmed to await patiently for the Spirit’s leading? What practical things should modern believers do in their attempts to cultivate such patience? What does patient, prayerful trust indicate regarding our relationship with God?

Exercising Authority

Compare the following passages: Mark 6:7–13, Matthew 16:14–19, 18:17–20, 28:18–20, John 20:21–23. What do these verses tell us about the kind of authority that Jesus’ disciples had? What does this mean for us today?

“Peter had expressed the truth which is the foundation of the church’s faith, and Jesus now honored him as the representative of the whole body of believers. He said, ‘I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’

“ ‘The keys of the kingdom of heaven’ are the words of Christ. All the words of Holy Scripture are His, and are here included. These words have power to open and to shut heaven. They declare the conditions upon which men are received or rejected. Thus the work of those who preach God’s word is a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. Theirs is a mission weighted with eternal results.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 413, 414.

As the Father commissioned Jesus, so Christ commissions His disciples. Through the Spirit, the Father invested Christ with divine power. Through the Spirit, Jesus likewise invests His disciples with divine power commensurate with their earthly assignments. No follower should fear that Christ has shortchanged them. Every necessary skill, talent, capability, and strength has been supplied.

Sometimes human leadership fails to recognize the principles involved. Whenever leaders assign tasks without extending commensurate power, failure is predictable. Often leaders’ insecurities surface through controlling behaviors that subjugate the thoughts, God-ordained creativity, and individuality of others. Thus emasculated, the subjugated disciple fails to be effective. Such behavior would look like a conductor attempting to play every instrument simultaneously instead of conducting a symphony.

Jesus’ example speaks volumes here. If anyone ever possessed the right to withhold authority and dictate behavior, Christ certainly did. Instead, He invested others with authority, commissioned them to labor outside of His presence where His only influence would be His instruction and examples and sent them to minister and witness.

Laborers for the Harvest

“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. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:36–38). What important message can we take from these verses for ourselves, today, and for the task ahead of us?

The spiritual harvest overflowed, but harvesters were scarce. The heart soil had been prepared, the spiritual seed had been planted; germination, plentiful moisture, and abundant sunshine spurred unbelievable growth. Ripened souls awaited harvesting, but where were the harvesters? Utilizing simple, easily understood word-pictures, Jesus sought to inspire contagious zeal.

Sometimes Christians covet their fellowship with other believers and cluster together, blindly bypassing worldly seekers who are ripened for harvest. Perhaps not realizing their divine accountability for perishing souls, they busy themselves with church engagements, civic responsibilities, building maintenance, and other worthwhile projects dedicated to preserving the status quo. These are doubtless good things. Well-intentioned members sometimes question the value of evangelism or express this sentiment: “Pastor, this evangelism stuff is all right, but don’t we need programs for people who are already in church?”

This is a fair enough question, though one must also ask, “When did Jesus ever lament the shortage of grain preservers?” Instead, “more harvesters” was His prayerful plea.

How can we find the right balance between ministering to the needs of those in the church and at the same time not neglecting outreach?

Lost and Found

Through teaching and personal example, Jesus taught His disciples to associate with sinners, even notorious ones such as prostitutes and tax collectors. How else would they disciple the whole world? His teaching often focused on these sinners. His characterization of them as “lost” demonstrates how merciful Christ was. He might have characterized them as “rebellious” (they certainly were) or “depraved.” Instead, He chose “lost.”

Lost doesn’t carry the same negative connotations that are contained in those other words. Rather than castigating fallen souls, we should follow Christ’s example. *Lost* is a generous description, because the responsibility is placed upon the finders. Disparaging remarks drive lost people away. Neutral language conveys acceptance and the possibility for relationship. We therefore must be careful not only about the language we speak, but even about the words we think, because our thoughts will greatly impact our attitudes toward others.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus encourages believers to become finders. He wants us to love and to reach out to the lost, regardless of the kind of people they are or the kind of lives they live.

“This is the service that God has chosen—‘to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke, . . . and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh.’ Isa. 58:6, 7. When you see yourselves as sinners saved only by the love of your heavenly Father, you will have tender pity for others who are suffering in sin. You will no longer meet misery and repentance with jealousy and censure. When the ice of selfishness is melted from your hearts, you will be in sympathy with God, and will share His joy in the saving of the lost.”
—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 210, 211.

Study Luke 15. What essential message comes through in all these parables? What should this message say to us about the way in which God views the lost and what our responsibility to them is?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Last Journey From Galilee,” pp. 488–496; “Who Is the Greatest?” pp. 436–440, in *The Desire of Ages*; “The Training of the Twelve,” pp. 17–24; “The Great Commission,” pp. 25–34; “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46; “The Gift of the Spirit,” pp. 47–56, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 37.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What principles from Christ’s training methodology should modern teachers of disciple-making utilize? Imagine what such training would look like in your church.
- 2 In Thursday’s study, we looked at the question of language and the way in which language is used. Think through the kind of words that we, as Seventh-day Adventists, often use. Though we might view the words in a certain way, think about how others who are not familiar with our terms might understand those words. In what ways might we need to be more careful about our choice of words, especially with those whom we are seeking to reach?
- 3 Dwell more on the image we saw earlier about “beggars telling other beggars” where to get bread. How does this so accurately depict that which witnessing and outreach are all about? Why is it important that we do not forget that image and what it means?
- 4 What about your local church? Is it more focused on itself and its own needs or on outreach? How can a focus on outreach help the church? Or, to express it another way, if your church were more focused on witnessing and outreach, might it be less concerned about its own needs? How might outreach itself solve those needs?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 15:8*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that success in being a disciple doesn't depend on titles or lines of authority.

Feel: Desire a life of service.

Do: Allow the Holy Spirit to guide him or her to people and places where he or she can do the most good.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus' Standard of Usefulness Was Often Different From the Norm.

A What kind of people did Jesus seem to gravitate toward?

B Why does it seem as though we are captivated by titles and authority, even in church?

II. Feel: Humility and Patience Are More Prized Than Earthly Power or Influence.

A Try to remember some recent evangelistic initiative. What evidence indicates that it was guided by the Holy Spirit?

B Why is patience considered a virtue?

III. Do: Allowing the Holy Spirit to Work Through God's People Is Not as Easy as It Sounds.

A How open is your congregation to trying new methods of reaching your community? Discuss ways in which it could be more open.

B How willing is your congregation to let your members use their spiritual gifts, and what could be done to encourage your members to use them more fully?

C Can we receive the Holy Spirit by just praying for Him? If not, what else should we be doing?

▶ **Summary:** We don't use the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit uses us. But often we're so bound by our traditions that opportunities to use our spiritual gifts pass unrecognized. How can we prevent that from happening?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 15:8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Disciples demonstrate the authenticity of their experience by how closely their experience reflects that of their Master.

Just for Teachers: Everyone who accepts Christ as his or her Savior and is baptized by the Holy Spirit receives spiritual gifts. The gifts vary from person to person, but they are given for both nurture and outreach. The question is not, Do I have a spiritual gift? It is, rather, What are my gifts, and how am I using them?

Opening Activity/Discussion:

List the following spiritual gifts on a white board or flip chart* (where supplies are not available, simply read the list of gifts as follows):

Prophecy	Teaching	Miracles
Healing	Help/Service	Administration
Tongues	Evangelism	Pastoring
Encouragement	Mercy	

You're going to do two things with this list:

First, go around the circle and ask class members what they think their spiritual gifts are.

Second, for each class member, ask the other members of the class to say what they think that person's spiritual gifts are.

**Note: Don't allow your class to confuse "gifts of the Spirit" with "the fruit of the Spirit" (love, joy, peace, patience, et cetera).*

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: We sometimes tend to give the impression that some spiritual gifts are more important than others, which is the equivalent of assigning more importance to certain parts of the body than other parts when, in fact, all are essential to the whole. This week's lesson offers an opportunity to affirm each person in your class, along with the spiritual gift he or she has been given.

Bible Commentary

I. Abiding (Review John 15:1–8 with your class.)

The setting of this passage is the Last Supper. Jesus knew that within hours of making these statements He would be arrested, tried, and condemned. His disciples would be scattered, confused, and terrified. Therefore, this was Jesus' last chance to communicate important concepts that His disciples would find useful in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Jesus is unequivocal. Our success as disciples revolves around one thing: abiding in Him. In other words, a connection with Christ brings fruit. Sadly, a lot of instruction consists of encouraging people to be successful, bear fruit, and obey God. The problem we have today is that many are not taught how to stay connected.

We stay connected with Christ by cultivating the spiritual disciplines that have served Christians for centuries: Bible study, prayer, witnessing, and service. A Christian life that encompasses these disciplines can't help but show results.

Not only will we have results, we will glorify God in the process. Jesus said, “ ‘This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples’ ” (vs. 8, *NIV*).

Consider This: Branches that are attached to the vine can't help but bear fruit. It's a natural consequence of their connection to the vine. So, instead of “trying” to bear fruit, we should encourage one another to stay connected. But how, exactly, would one go about that? How is it done in your local church?

II. Harvesting (Review Matthew 9:35–38 with your class.)

Here's something you may or may not have considered: harvesting comes at the conclusion of a process that includes preparing the soil, planting the seed, watering, cultivating, and then harvesting.

Our passage begins with the verse, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (vs. 35, *NIV*).

Jesus was able to say, “ ‘the harvest is plentiful’ ” (vs. 37, *NIV*), because He had spent so much time and effort making it so. Today's disciples do themselves a disservice if they imagine that all that's necessary for a harvest is to have more harvesters. However, farming is hard, not because harvesting is hard but because so much time and energy is required to prepare for the harvest. Farmers look forward to the harvest because it means the end of hard, backbreaking work. That's what the psalmist is describing with the famous words, “He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow,

will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (*Ps. 126:6, NIV*).

Consider This: Looking at the harvest as an isolated event unrelated to other activities the church is involved in throughout the year is to set ourselves up for frustration. We can’t harvest what we haven’t planted and cultivated. In which activities do you find yourself called: preparing the soil, sowing, nurturing, or reaping? In what ways do you feel equipped to do those things?

III. Finding (*Review Luke 15:1–32 with your class.*)

These three parables—among the most well-known in all the Bible—have some important lessons to teach us.

The parable of the lost sheep (*vss. 3–7*) reminds us that tending sheep is hard work. It’s a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week job. This is because the shepherd’s job is not only to look after the sheep but to protect them from predators. When one of them goes missing, it’s his job to go find it.

According to Jesus’ story, the shepherd risks losing all his sheep by leaving them in the wilderness so that he can go after the sheep that is lost. But it’s worth the risk because when the sheep is found, the shepherd returns rejoicing.

The parable of the lost coin (*vss. 8–10*) is all about value. The lost coin, even though it’s lost, retains its value. That’s why the woman goes through so much time and effort to recover it. As long as it’s missing, it’s useless. The problem is that the coin, unlike the sheep, doesn’t know that it is lost. This awareness of the coin’s plight—its utter helplessness to reverse its lost state—puts an extra burden on the woman to search all the more diligently for it. When the woman finds it, she rejoices because its value is restored to her again.

The parable of the lost son (*vss. 11–32*) is about a parent’s unending love. The father gives his younger son his part of the inheritance, knowing full well that nothing good is going to come of it. Sure enough, the son disappears and so does his inheritance.

Months (years) later, the son returns to the embrace of an ecstatic father, who immediately throws a party to celebrate his son’s return. The celebration is marred, however, by the older son who refuses to join the party. His words to his father are instructive: “ ‘ “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you” ’ ” (*vs. 29, NIV*). Did you catch that? He thinks of himself as a slave, not a son. He doesn’t leave the farm as his younger brother does, but because of some perverted sense of obligation, he thinks of himself as a slave instead of a son. So while he may have stayed on the farm, he is just as lost as his brother. Hence, while the father celebrates, the older son refuses to join the party.

Consider This: These three parables were told in response to the accusation “ ‘This man [Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them’ ” (*vs. 2, NIV*). It may be that Jesus told the parables to illustrate that the worst thing about being lost is not having anyone look for you or celebrate your return. Or it

may be that Jesus' purpose in telling these stories is to say that unless we're involved in searching and finding the lost, we're not fully His disciples.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What activities that your local church is involved in could be considered “sowing” activities? What activities are “nurturing or cultivating” activities? What activities are “harvesting” activities?
- ❷ Is your local church open to welcoming sinners and eating with them? What specifically are you doing to demonstrate that?
- ❸ When have you found it difficult to “go to the party”? What did the Father have to do to make you change your mind?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: *It's one thing to say the reason there's not much of a harvest is because there aren't many harvesters. But what indicates that if you had more harvesters there would be a greater harvest?*

Life Application: Farmers know which fields are ready for harvest. They don't waste time in fields where the crops aren't yet mature. Which populations in your community are ready for harvest?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: *Think of an assembly line: cars (or washing machines or dishwashers or computers) don't assemble themselves. They go through a process. At each station another component is added until the finished product comes off the assembly line.*

Activity: Design an assembly line for Christians. Get a roll of butcher paper or put pages from a flip chart along a wall. List some “entry events” on your “assembly line,” then add different types of ministries or events to the right of them that will serve as nurturing, cultivating, or mentoring opportunities. Next, list some activities that will “harvest” the interests you've developed. (To do this activity without supplies, ask class members to list the different types of entry events, cultivating opportunities, and harvesting events that could be part of such an assembly line.)

Don't stop yet! How will you celebrate the people who respond to your harvest activities and make sure they're incorporated into the life of your local congregation?

Share your ideas for an assembly line with your pastor or church board. Or as a class you can operate your own “faith factory.”