

Jesus' Teachings *and the* Great Controversy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 11:29; Rom. 4:1–6; Matt. 13:3–8, 18–23; Matt. 7:21–27; James 2:17; Matt. 7:1–5.*

Memory Text: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (*Matthew 11:28, NIV*).

When we think of the great controversy theme, we tend to think of it in grand, overarching terms. That is, it's a big-picture view. It can be called a “meta-narrative,” a story that covers and explains a large portion of reality, as opposed to a local narrative or story that explains something much more limited in scope. For instance, Paul Revere's famous ride is a local narrative, in contrast to the much grander and larger one of the American Revolution itself.

And yet, however grand and all-encompassing the great controversy theme is, and however immense the issues, it is played out daily, here on earth, in our own lives, in how we relate to God, to temptation, and to others. Just as people's daily existence is impacted, sometimes to a great degree by the grander and bigger events of politics and economics, each of us faces the same from the great controversy as well.

In this week's lesson, we will look at some of Jesus' teachings on very down-to-earth and practical matters as we all struggle to know and do God's will amid the great controversy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 13.

Many Kinds of Rest

“ ‘Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’ ” (*Matt. 11:29, NKJV*).

How does taking His “yoke” bring rest to our souls?

This offer points to a personal dimension amid the much larger one of Jesus’ mission to free people from the enemy. His words are actually adapted from Jeremiah, who promises people rest for their souls if they return to the religion of their fathers, instead of the paganism of the surrounding nations (*Jer. 6:16*).

The concept of rest is very rich in Scripture. It starts with God Himself. He rested when He finished His work of Creation (*Gen. 2:2*). His rest ushered in a Sabbath rest that was celebrated weekly. Rest was also celebrated through the year during the annual feasts (*for example, Lev. 16:31*), every seven years in the “Sabbath of the land” (*Exod. 23:11*), and every 50 years in the jubilee, when slaves were freed and debts forgiven (*Lev. 25:10*).

Rest could be appreciated when God was present with His people (*Exod. 33:14*), where there was neither “ ‘adversary nor evil occurrence’ ” (*1 Kings 5:4, NKJV*), nor an enemy (*Deut. 25:19*). Rest was enjoyed in the land that God gave His people (*Josh. 1:13*), especially when the people returned from captivity and exile (*Jer. 30:10*). Rest was also shared in hospitality with strangers (*Gen. 18:4*) and in enjoying stable family life (*Ruth 1:9, Prov. 29:17*).

However, rest is absent for God’s people in captivity (*Exod. 5:4, 5; Lam. 1:3*). Rest escapes the wicked, who like the troubled sea, cannot rest (*Isa. 57:20*). The only rest that such people can look forward to is death and the grave (*Job 3:11, 13, 16, 17, 18*). Revelation 14:11 also has a powerful warning about rest for those on the wrong side of the great controversy in the last days.

The rest Jesus offers is a very generous package. It includes the gift of the Sabbath, allowing us time out with the Creator. Christ’s offer of rest recognizes our lost condition and restores us in every way. And when we slip up (as we do), we still have the assurance of a place of rest at our Savior’s side.

What are ways, besides the Sabbath, that we can learn to enjoy the rest that God offers us? How do we find rest for our souls in Jesus? See also Rom. 4:1–6.

Planting and Harvesting

The great controversy theme is implicit in Jesus' parable of the sower. The listing of four types of responses to the gospel message indicates that there are more than just "good" and "bad" people in the world. Life is more complex than that, and so we need to be careful how we approach those who don't seem to respond to the gospel as we think they should.

Read Matthew 13:3–8 and then Matthew 13:18–23. In what ways can we so clearly see the reality of the great controversy revealed in this story?

The battle for souls is real, and the enemy uses whatever means he can to turn people away from salvation. For instance, in the context of the seed falling by the wayside, Ellen G. White wrote: "Satan and his angels are in the assemblies where the gospel is preached. While angels of heaven endeavor to impress hearts with the word of God, the enemy is on the alert to make the word of no effect. With an earnestness equaled only by his malice, he tries to thwart the work of the Spirit of God. While Christ is drawing the soul by His love, Satan tries to turn away the attention of the one who is moved to seek the Saviour."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 44.

One could ask, *Why couldn't the farmer be more careful and not waste seed by throwing it on the path? Why couldn't he be more diligent in digging out the rocks? Why didn't he pull more weeds?*

When sowing gospel seed, human effort is always limited. We must sow everywhere. We are not the judge of what is good and bad soil. The appearance of weeds simply indicates that we are just unable to prevent evil from springing up in the least expected places. It is the Lord of the harvest working in the background who ensures that all who can be saved will be saved. We do our job and must learn to trust Him to do His.

What are ways we see the reality of this parable? Why do we sometimes see people, just newly baptized, walk out the door? Or others who simply show no interest at all? Or those who become firmly grounded in the faith?

Building on Rock

The issue of where we stand in the cosmic struggle that unfolds around us is made very personal in the parable of the man building a house on the rock.

Read Matthew 7:21–27. What is so frightening about this parable?

What comes to mind when you imagine this story? Where is the rock and where is the sand? For some people, sand is found only at the beach, but this story is probably not about a seaside residence. The more likely place is among the gentle rolling hills upon which most villages were located, at the side of a valley somewhere.

Jesus describes two houses; one built just on the surface while the other has foundations going down to bedrock (*Luke 6:48*). There is no way to tell the difference between the two completed houses until it rains up in the hills, and a flash flood roars down the valley. For one of the home builders that is not a problem, for the house is firmly anchored; but for the other there is a problem. Without a secure foundation, the house just built on the surface is easy prey to the swirling floodwaters.

Jesus shared this parable because He knew how much we fool ourselves. There is a serious struggle going on, and unaided, we have no possibility of surviving it. Jesus has prevailed against evil, and that is why He is called the Rock.

This personal battle against evil can be won, but only if we build our lives firmly upon Him, and we can build upon Him only through obedience to Him. “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock” (*Matt. 7:24*). It’s that simple. However much faith is a crucial component—faith without works, the Bible says, is “dead” (*see James 2:17, 20, 26*), and in this parable we see just how dead it really is.

Read Matthew 7:22, 23. Casting out demons in Jesus’ name or making prophecies in His name all reveal some kind of “faith” held by these people. And yet, what was their fate? Ask yourself, upon what foundation is your house built, and how do you know the answer?

Do Not Judge

Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount in the early days of His ministry. It was revolutionary. For starters, He told ordinary people that they were valued and blessed in the eyes of God (*Matt. 5:3–12*) and that they were salt (*Matt. 5:13*) and light (*Matt. 5:14–16*)—two highly prized commodities. He spoke of the importance of God’s law (*Matt. 5:17–19*) yet warned of trying to impress others with their own good behavior (*Matt. 5:20*). Jesus further pointed out that morality is determined by what a person thinks, not just by his or her actions (*Matt. 5:21–28*), although actions must be guarded, as well (*Matt. 5:29, 30*). As one reads through the entire sermon, it can be seen that He covered the whole gamut of human existence and relationships (*see Matt. 5–7:27*).

Read Matthew 7:1–5. In what ways is the reality of the great controversy revealed in these texts? That is, how is the interplay between good and evil manifested here?

“ ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’ Do not think yourself better than other men, and set yourself up as their judge. Since you cannot discern motive, you are incapable of judging another. In criticizing him, you are passing sentence upon yourself; for you show that you are a participant with Satan, the accuser of the brethren. The Lord says, ‘Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.’ This is our work.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 314.

When Jesus told His audience not to judge, He made two important points. The first is that the reason we judge others is because we do the very same thing we are condemning (*Matt. 7:1, 2*). We take the attention off ourselves and ensure that everyone around us is looking at the person we condemn rather than at us.

The other point Jesus makes is that often the problem we see in our brother or sister is only a fraction of the size of our own problem—a problem that we may not even be aware of. It is so easy for us to see a piece of sawdust in their eye, but we are unable to see the great wooden beam in our own.

What’s the difference between judging a person and judging the rightness or wrongness of their actions, and why is that a very important distinction to make?

“I Am With You Always”

Matthew ends his Gospel account with some of the most reassuring words Jesus spoke: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (*Matt. 28:20*). What should that mean to us, in practical terms, in our own lives, in our own struggles, failures, and disappointments, and even when we feel that God has let us down?

It is interesting that Matthew commences his Gospel with similar words. After listing all the forebearers, and the account of an angel visiting first Mary then Joseph, Matthew explains that the baby to be born would be Emmanuel, God with us (*Matt. 1:23*).

God made the promise, “I will be with you,” a number of times in Scripture. He promised to be with Isaac (*Gen. 26:24*), with Jacob (*Gen. 28:15*), with Jeremiah (*Jer. 1:8, 19*), and with the children of Israel (*Isa. 41:10, 43:5*). The context of many of these references is during times of hardship and duress, when God’s words would be most relevant.

A parallel verse uses similar words: “ ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’ ” (*Heb. 13:5, NKJV*). Just a few verses later it adds, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (*Heb. 13:8, NKJV*). This promise, too, is repeated a number of times. It actually comes from the occasion when Moses hands leadership over to Joshua (*Deut. 31:6, 8*), and God repeats the phrase to Joshua after the death of Moses, “ ‘I will not leave you nor forsake you’ ” (*Josh. 1:5, NKJV*). When David passes on the kingdom to Solomon, he likewise tells Solomon that God will not leave nor forsake Solomon (*1 Chron. 28:20*).

Jesus, who never changes, who is always with us, gave strong assurance to our forefathers of the faith. They faced hardship and trial or were about to embark on the greatest challenge of their life; yet, they were assured of God’s continued presence.

To the church of Christ at the end of time, these assurances are significant. Jesus’ promise of being with us to the very end is in the context of making disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching. So, that is where the focus is—on the joy of rescuing people from ending up on the losing side in the great controversy.

Further Thought: Author Leon Wieseltier wrote about what he said was “one of the saddest stories in the world.” He told of an Englishman, named “S.B.,” who had been blind from birth. However, the good news was that, at 52 years old, S.B. had a corneal transplant that gave him sight. For the first time in his life, S.B. was able to see! It must have been incredibly exciting for him to finally see the world that had unfolded all around him his whole life but was, literally, out of sight. However, Wieseltier then quotes the source in which he first read the story. S.B., said the author, “found the world drab, and was upset by flaking paint and blemishes. . . . He noted more and more the imperfections in things, and would examine small irregularities and marks in paintwork or wood, which he found upsetting, evidently expecting a more perfect world. He liked bright colours, but became depressed when the light faded. His depression became marked and general. He gradually gave up active living, and three years later he died.”—www.newrepublic.com/article/113312. Wow! Though hard to understand on one level, on another it’s not. Our world is a damaged place. The great controversy has been raging here for about six thousand years. A 6,000-year war is going to leave a lot of wreckage in its wake. And despite all our attempts to make this world better, the trajectory doesn’t seem to be heading in the right direction. In fact, it’s going to get only worse. That’s why we need the promise of Redemption, which comes to us only from Christ’s victory in the great controversy, a victory secured at the cross and offered freely to us all.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What lessons can you take away for yourself from the story of S.B.?
- 2 As we saw in Tuesday’s study, those who said, “Lord, Lord, have we not” done this and that in your name were, as we said, believers in Jesus. At the same time, notice the emphasis of their response. Who were they focusing on? What were they focusing on? How does the answer here reveal why they were so self-deceived?
- 3 If you have a friend or family member doing something obviously wrong, how do you deal with this problem in a way that, first, isn’t judgmental and, second, doesn’t *appear* judgmental?

The Great Controversy in the Drug Dealer's Home

Luis belonged to a rock band in the Brazilian city of Jequié. He and his friends often indulged in harmful drugs in their search for pleasure.

One day, while in the home of a drug dealer, Luis found a copy of *The Great Controversy*. After leafing hurriedly through the book, he asked permission to borrow it. Luis found the subject intriguing. While he and his friends smoked marijuana, they took turns reading the book aloud to each other. Some of the guys liked what they read, others did not. Florisvaldo, a spiritualist, especially enjoyed the book.

One day, three of the friends climbed a hill then sat down to smoke and read the Bible together with *The Great Controversy*. Suddenly, Florisvaldo began to shout, "I don't want the Bible!" Recognizing that Florisvaldo was possessed by an evil spirit, the other friend ran away in fright. But Luis kept on reading. He paused only long enough to ask his friend to think on the name of Jesus. Soon the evil spirit left him.

Realizing that his friend needed help, Luis persuaded Florisvaldo to go with him to a Seventh-day Adventist church. While there, both young men enjoyed a sermon preached by a lay member. Later they attended an Adventist youth camp, where they studied the Bible with other young people and gave themselves completely to Jesus.

Unable to keep his new joy to himself, Luis sent a copy of *The Great Controversy* to his cousin Thomas, a journalism student studying in the coastal city of Salvador. Being an avid reader, Thomas sped through the book with mounting interest. About halfway through, he felt condemned because of his sinful life. But he couldn't put down the book until he found out how the story ended. His conviction only intensified as he read the final chapters.

When vacation time came, Thomas went to Jequié to visit his cousin. Luis told Thomas much about his new faith and took him to church. Gladly Thomas accepted Jesus and His promise of forgiveness. But he now faced another conflict—his girlfriend was against his interest in religion.

One night, while staying in the home of an aunt, Thomas dreamed he saw Jesus veiled in brilliant light. The next morning, Thomas gave his life completely to Christ. His habits changed. He broke up with his girlfriend and began preparing for baptism. Luis rejoiced to see his cousin and several members of his rock band baptized. Ten people were baptized as a result of the working of the Holy Spirit through a copy of *The Great Controversy* found in the home of a drug dealer.

Today, Florisvaldo, the former spiritualist, serves God as a literature evangelist, and Thomas became a Seventh-day Adventist minister.

NEVIL GORSKI, *former director of education, South American Division.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 11:28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine how Jesus’ teachings reveal the great controversy theme in personal, day-to-day experiences.

Feel: Experience the assurance of salvation that Jesus offers to everyone who believes in Him.

Do: Practice the principles of Christ’s teachings through a life of faith.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Building on the Rock

A One important key to understanding “rest” in Christ’s teaching is by studying Paul’s discussion on how Abraham was justified by faith (*Rom. 4:1–8*). Why is this so?

B What does it mean to build on the rock?

C What does it mean to “not judge others”?

II. Feel: Finding Rest (Assurance of Salvation) in Jesus

A How can we characterize the experience of one who finds rest in Christ?

B How does the experience of rest in Christ inform, for example, the methods we choose to employ in the delicate work of pointing out the sins of others?

III. Do: Faith Without Works Is Dead.

A The group rejected by Jesus in Matthew 7:21–23 had prophesied and cast out demons in Jesus’ name. What must you (and I) do in order not to receive this startling declaration: “ ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers’ ” (*Matt. 7:23, NRSV*)?

B What does the parable about the sower tell us about individual choices when it comes to what kind of soil one is?

► **Summary:** The great controversy is fought out on the battleground of the day-to-day choices that we make. However, we do not have to face our struggles and disappointments alone; we can find rest in Jesus.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 11:28*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Finding rest in Christ has to do with having faith in His goodness alone rather than looking to our own spiritual achievements.

Just for Teachers: Christ invites us to find rest in Him; that is, to rely on His goodness and righteousness alone by which we are justified by faith. That is also what it means to build our spiritual houses on the solid rock.

Opening Activity: Ask the class to share what it would mean for them to be told by Christ that He never knew them.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The emphasis in this study is to lead the students to understand the day-to-day struggles in the great controversy. In what ways are Jesus' teachings focused on individual choices that determine whether one is the good soil, or whether one builds his or her spiritual house on a solid rock?

Bible Commentary

I. Finding Rest in Christ (Review *Matthew 11:28* with your class.)

Christ's invitation, in *Matthew 11:28–30*, is recorded only by *Matthew*. While emphasis is often placed on the theme of “rest,” it is even more important to emphasize the “Me” in the invitation: “ ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened’ ” (*Matt. 11:28, NIV*). Here is the reason for doing so: in the preceding scripture (*Matt. 11:27*) Jesus has just declared, “ ‘All things have been handed over to me by my Father’ ” (*ESV*) and that no one can truly know God except through the Son. Sounds very much like the theme so common in *John* (see *John 14:9, 10*). Therefore, we come to Him because He has everything we will ever need. Every legitimate human quest is fulfilled in Him. To find Him is to find rest for the rest of life; that is, the whole being (*Matt. 11:29*).

The Greek noun *anapausis*, “rest” (and its verbal form, in *Matthew 11:28*, “ ‘I will give you rest’ ”), is used in the Old Testament in connection with the Sabbath day, as a day of *anapausis*, “solemn rest” (*Exod.*

16:23, 23:12, 31:15). We can expect that Jesus' listeners, most of whom were Jews, did not miss this connection with the Sabbath. Matthew 11:28–30 sets the stage for Jesus' assertion in the next chapter that the Son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:1–8*). The connection we are making between the rest that Jesus gives according to our passage and the Sabbath rest is not strained reading after all. Therefore, Matthew is teaching us that faith in Jesus is the true meaning of the Sabbath rest.

Consider This: How is the idea of rest related to the notion of justification by faith? Discuss this in light of Romans 4:1–8.

II. On Becoming the Good or the Bad Soil (*Review Matthew 13:18–23 with your class.*)

In the parable of the sower, the seed that fell on the path represents those who fail to understand the gospel. In this state, the devil can easily confuse them, and before they know it, they have abandoned the faith. This knowledge places a responsibility on both the readers of the Bible and on those who teach it to assist students to understand the Word of God.

The second group of believers is represented by the seed that fell on the rocky soil, where the root cannot grow. These are believers who are not rooted in the truth of God's words, partly because they have not spent time in the study of the Word for themselves. For them it is not a lack of understanding but a failure to be grounded in the Word. It takes just a little trial or tribulation or anything that makes the Word inconvenient, and they quit the faith.

The third group is represented by the seed that fell on the thorns. These may have understood the Word. They may also have accepted the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. However, for this group, there is external pressure that is shaking their faith in God. These have to do with the pursuit of wealth (they want to live comfortably in retirement) or the pursuit of earthly knowledge in the sciences and the humanities or the desire for political power and influence. The pressure may also come from struggles with family relationships, such as children or a spouse, or it may be struggles at the workplace. These absorb all their energies until there is little left to seek a vital relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth group is represented by the seed that fell on good soil. These not only understand their calling to discipleship, they also spend time cultivating their true identity in Christ and are rooted in His Word. This fourth group also places the pursuit of wealth in its right place. By relying on the Lord (by finding rest in Christ as we saw above) they learn to adjust to the pressures of life, be it from family or friends. They understand the true purpose for their lives. They bear much fruit, the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (*Gal. 5:22, 23, NRSV*).

Consider This: What or who determines what kind of soil a person is?

III. Doing the Will of God (*Review Matthew 7:21–27 with your class.*)

When we emphasize righteousness by faith alone, as opposed to righteousness that one seeks by attempting to keep the law, we are not saying that what Christians do, and how they live, has nothing to do with their eternal salvation. Paul had to contend with this potential misconception when he posited: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (*Rom. 3:31, NRSV*). “Faith without works is dead,” declared James (*James 2:20*). Genuine faith works by love, and when a person’s faith works by love, then he or she is the wise builder who builds his or her spiritual house on the solid rock of Christ Himself.

Consider This: Why is it important to understand Jesus’ teaching on good works in close connection with the Pauline teaching on righteousness by faith?

IV. Being Nonjudgmental Toward Others (*Review Matthew 7:1–5 with your class.*)

In Matthew 7:1–5, Jesus warns against judging others. Here is an invitation to conduct a relentless self-examination of our actions and motives. Rarely do we look at ourselves squarely, critically, and honestly. We let ourselves pass as the standard for everyone. The problem with this is that there is so much we do not know or understand about other people. It is all too easy for us to see the mistakes in them. As a consequence of our tendency to sit in judgment of others, many people have been misrepresented. Aspersion has been cast on their characters unfairly. Unfortunately, in some cases, these individuals have left the church. Considering the spiritual damage that judging others can cost, Christ’s teaching is urgent. On the other hand, there are those of us who tend to be too hard and unforgiving on ourselves.

Consider This: What does it mean to “not judge others”?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: This study should lead every member of the class to rest in Christ. This means accepting His righteousness as his or her own by faith. This is what it means to build on the rock, to find rest, and to do the will of God. The will of God is that you “ ‘believe in Him whom He sent’ ” (*John 6:29, NKJV*).

Thought/Application Questions:

① Think of individuals who have been judged harshly and unfairly by others who corrected what they considered to be errant behavior. What happened as a result?

② How does one have the confidence that he or she has accepted the righteousness of Christ personally?

③ What is the place of good works in the life of a Christian?

Activity: Recall a story in which a person was judged unfairly by colleagues. Has anyone you know left the church because of false accusations and slander or unkind treatment, even if the accusations were true? What happened, and what might we learn from this about judging others and how we are to handle such cases?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Have members of the class draw pictures of Eden and the quiet, tranquil environment that it was. Let them re-create an impression of what it might look like to rest in Edenic quietude in which rest symbolizes confident trust in God. Think of “rest” as a surrender of control, an acknowledgment that on our own we cannot make it.

Activity: For the coming week, ask the class members to draw up a list of all former members of the church. Find their contact information. Then undertake to speak with each of them in order to determine what might have caused them to leave the church. Look for an opportunity to invite them back.