

Created *for* Community



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 20:2-17, Isa. 1:10-17, 1 Corinthians 13.*

Memory Text: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (*1 John 4:7, NIV*).

In today's world, many people are utterly lonely; they live without meaningful relationships, without a sense of being needed or loved, without a sense of true belonging. Some are married, even have children; yet, in their deepest self, they feel alone. Others appear to have an intense social life but would, nonetheless, in a moment of honest self-assessment, admit to desperate loneliness. Many who share their apartment block with dozens of others and mingle every day with thousands in the metro or the commuter train are incapable of reaching out to those around them.

And, yet, amid all this loneliness is the biblical ideal, which is that we live in community with others—with family, friends, colleagues, authorities, fellow church members, et cetera. The question is, How does God want us to do it?

This week we begin our look at the answers.

The Week at a Glance: What does the Creation account teach us about community? What principles should guide our interaction with others? What does the Bible teach us about love? What did Jesus mean when He talked about us hating our parents? What role does the Cross play in our relationship with others?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 3.*

“ ‘It Is Not Good for the Man to Be Alone’ ” (*Gen. 2:18, NIV*).

The first two chapters of the book of Genesis give us a glimpse of what happened when God created our world. Though much about Creation remains a mystery, all the essential elements we need in order to build a Christian worldview are, nevertheless, revealed there, including the truth that God created humans to be social beings, destined to live in a community.

How does the Creation account emphasize that full human life is experienced in relating to other human beings? *Gen. 1:28; 2:18-25; 4:1, 2.*

It clearly was part of God’s original purpose that human beings would exist in relationship with others. The idea of family—of a partnership between a man and a woman and of a bond between parents and children—was part of the original fabric of Creation. Belonging together in a marriage relationship, and as family, is not one option among many but reflects the original and unchanging design for human happiness. This is not to say a single person cannot live a happy and fulfilling life, but it underlines that, from a biblical perspective, the family is the fundamental building block of a healthy society.

“A family is not a spill-over from our romantic passions, nor a product of society’s requirements that parents provide their offspring with bed and board, nor a little circle of people deriving emotional support from living together. . . . Family is rooted in the Creator’s design for the ongoing nurture of children who bring faith and moral value into the next generation. To undermine, neglect, or replace it is to wreck the core community that makes all other community possible.”—Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality: What God Expects From Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983), p. 81.

One of the most famous lines in all English literature reads, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” The point being that we are all involved with one another, to one degree or another. What does this tell us about how careful we need to be regarding the influence we exert? Make no mistake about it: We all exert an influence on others, either for good or for bad.

Religion Has Social Dimensions *(Exod.*

20:2-17, Matt. 7:12).

However much our faith rests upon our relationship to God, it cannot be separated from our relationship to others. We live in this world with other people, and our religion very clearly dictates how we are to relate to these other people.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we tend to divide the Ten Commandments into two parts, the first four dealing with our relationship to God, the last six with our relationship to others. Read the first four commandments again (*Exod. 20:2-11*). How does our obedience, or disobedience, to even these specific commandments impact others?

At times, Christians have so emphasized the social aspects of their religion that they have reduced the gospel of Christ to a *horizontal* “social gospel,” which leaves little or no place for the *vertical* aspect of religion: the relationship between us and our heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. When that happens, our religion has ceased to be Christian. But, at the same time, our faith in God must impact also our relationships with other human beings; otherwise, our religion, likewise, cannot be characterized as truly Christian.

Look up the following texts. What do they tell us about the social aspects of our faith?

Lev. 19:18

Isa. 1:10-17

Hos. 6:6

Matt. 7:12

James 1:27

Summarize in a paragraph the essence of what those texts above are saying; then ask yourself, How well am I doing in that area? What changes might you need to make in order to live out the social dimensions of our faith better?

Building Relationships Takes Effort

(*Matt. 5:9*).

Faith in God and reliance on His grace presuppose a commitment to focus on Him and His will for our lives; they demand an intentional turning away from what is evil and negative. They also demand a determination to bring our lives into harmony with God's will for us. Likewise, harmonious relationships do not happen by accident. We must be intentional about building relationships. As sinners living on a planet filled with other sinners, we are naturally prone toward selfishness, greed, and jealousy, attributes that, if left unchecked, would destroy any fruitful, loving relationships we would seek to have.

How do harmonious relationships come about? *1 Pet. 3:11*. What are we supposed to pursue actively? *Rom. 12:18*.

The peace we are to pursue in our interaction with others is not a mere absence of strife or disagreement. The biblical ideal of peace is rooted in the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, which stretches far beyond mere tolerance and includes a deep interest in others, expressed in support and affirmation for those around us. Again, we must remember that these things don't come naturally to us; what comes natural is greed, envy, and the desire for self-supremacy. No wonder we need the Lord working in our lives.

What basic rule should govern our relationship with others? *1 Cor. 10:24*. What is that text saying to us? Why is it so opposite of what we, in our essential nature, are?

To look after others purely for their own good, with no selfish motives, is to reveal Christ, whose love for suffering humanity was premised on nothing selfish. He loved for love's sake. No selfish motive led Him to do good. On the contrary, Jesus did good, because He loved others and wanted the best for them. What a model, what an ideal for us to seek to follow!

Contemplate the different ways Jesus revealed unselfish love toward others in contrast to how you relate to others. End your contemplation at the Cross, where Christ died to save those who have fallen so short of His example.

The Basis: Agape Love (1 Cor. 13:1-13).

The New Testament uses several distinct words that all can be translated “love.” One refers in particular to love for friends, while another is mainly used in the context of sexual love. There is nothing inferior about these kinds of love. They are meant to be a vital and enriching part of human life in their proper time and place. But there is one specific term—*agape*—which refers to the kind of love that God has for us. And this is the love we also must cultivate in our lives as the foundation of all our dealings with others, a disinterested love that puts the good of others before ourselves, the kind of love revealed perfectly in the life of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, the word for “love” all the way through comes from *agape*. Read the chapter over as many times as you can and then write out what you believe the Lord is telling you with these words.

From what Paul writes here, what is he saying love is? How does it differ from much of the world’s concept of love?

Look at some of the attributes of love as expressed in 1 Corinthians 13. Which ones might you find the most difficult to reveal in your own life? Perhaps you tend toward impatience, toward pride, or toward evil surmising—or even all these things. How can you be changed? Look up John 15:5. What is Jesus saying here that offers us the hope that we, too, can reflect *agape* love in our own lives?

God Always Comes First (Luke 14:26).

Living as a Christian is a matter of getting our priorities right. A life in which we and our own interests come first is not a Christian life but a pagan existence. We will need to remember this constantly during the coming weeks as we study various interhuman relationships.

In what provocative way did Christ emphasize the need to prioritize our relationships? Matt. 10:37, Luke 14:26. What do you believe that Jesus was telling us with these words?

What does it mean that we are to *hate* our loved ones for the sake of Christ? “Scripture usage makes it clear that this is not ‘hate’ in the usual sense of the word. In the Bible, ‘to hate,’ often should be understood simply as a typical Oriental hyperbole meaning ‘to love less’ (see Deut. 21:15-17). . . . Whoever has personal interests that take precedence over loyalty to Christ and devotion to His service will find it impossible to meet the requirements Christ makes of him. At all times and under all circumstances the call of the kingdom must take precedence.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 811, 812.

In one sense, there seems to be almost a contradiction here: In a study on how we should relate to others, we bring in Jesus’ statements that, on the surface, seem to downplay interpersonal relationships. Yet, that’s only on the surface. The point is that in order for us truly to have the kind of relationship with others the Lord wants for us, we need to keep Him first and foremost in our lives. Only from our relationship with Him can we then act toward others as He would have us do. Because of what Jesus has done for us at the Cross—by reestablishing the bond between heaven and earth—can we have a relationship with Him.

A young woman, severely damaged by an abusive father, has found it all but impossible to develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships with anyone now. Why must she go to the Cross to begin the healing process? What would tell her she would find healing there?

Further Study: Read from Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, pp. 29–41.

“It is only by an unselfish interest in those in need of help that we can give a practical demonstration of the truths of the gospel. ‘If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.’ ‘And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.’”—*Welfare Ministry*, p. 32.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In today’s world ethnic diversity often appears to be a source of hatred and conflict or seems to lead to an unhealthy kind of nationalism and sense of superiority. Has ethnic bias ever influenced your thinking in a negative way? How can ethnic identity be a positive force, both in society and in the church? Or is it always negative?
- 2** As much as time allows, read through the Gospels and see how much emphasis Jesus placed on how we should relate to others. What do the Gospels tell us about how important this topic is for those who claim to be His followers?
- 3** Read Ephesians 2:11-18. How do these verses help us better understand the closeness we can now have with the Lord, a closeness that will impact how we relate to others?

Summary: Religion has social dimensions. It is important to recognize that people have been created for community and are destined to live in relationships with others. We must remember that serving God has both vertical and horizontal aspects. We do well to reflect regularly on whether we allow God to have priority in our life and whether all our interactions with others fit into the larger framework of our relationship with Him.

The Bus Ride: Part 1

by KRASIMIR KAREV

It was a bitterly cold evening. I pulled my scarf tighter around me as I hurried from vespers to the bus stop. I shivered against the cold and tried to shield myself from the wind and blowing snow. I arrived at the bus stop to find just one other person standing there, a man in his forties. He hunched down into his jacket and barely looked up to greet me. Then we stood silently, waiting for the bus.

I felt an almost overpowering urge to talk to this man. I asked the man what time it was, just to make conversation. After a few moments of chit-chat, this stranger told me that his name was Stefan and that he intended to commit suicide soon. I knew he was serious, for his entire body spoke of hopelessness and unrelieved burdens.

I asked him if he would tell me why he was so down on life. He told me he was an engineer and had been working in a factory in town. But recently he had lost his job when the factory laid off many workers. Although he had two university degrees, he could not find suitable work. To make matters worse, his wife, who was a doctor, seemed to enjoy rubbing it in that he was not working. Her attitude discouraged him more. He felt the sting of her reproach and knew that she did not appreciate him as a man or as a husband.

In the dim light of the street lamp, I could see that this man was visibly suffering as he shared his story. It was evident that he felt helpless to climb out of his depression. But how could I help him? Soon the bus would come, and we would part. I prayed silently that God would give me wisdom to say the right thing to this man.

Within a few minutes the bus came, and we climbed aboard. It was almost empty, and we found seats together in the back of the bus, where we could talk without interruption. Stefan's eyes begged for a thread of hope to hang on to.

My mind sifted through Bible stories to find one about a man who had undergone great difficulties. The prophet Elijah came to mind, and I began telling Stefan about Elijah. As I talked, I felt reassured that God had planted this prophet's story in my mind. It was as if the words came to me from nowhere, and I sensed that each word was doing its good work in this man's consciousness. I had no doubt that the Holy Spirit guided our conversation. We spoke animatedly, and he had lots of questions. It was as if we were alone on the bus, totally unaware of the other passengers or of the snow swirling outside.

(continued next week)

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