

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.

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 13.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To understand that God created human beings to live in harmony with one another.
2. To show that, without God, successful, happy relationships are impossible.

Lesson Outline:

I. Relationships and Religion.

- A. A Christian's faith includes a relationship to God and to others.
- B. Living in a world of diversity requires Christians to cultivate sensitivity and skills in relating to others.

II. Building Relationships.

- A. Successful relationships are no accident but are the outgrowth of prayerful, committed effort.
- B. The biblical ideal of harmonious relationships develops from a deep, selfless, loving interest in others.
- C. We must love as Christ loved: selflessly.

III. Agape Love.

- A. God's love for us is *agape* love.
- B. Jesus gives us this *agape* love for others.

IV. Who or What Is Your Priority?

- A. Personal interests must be secondary to loyalty to Christ and devotion to His service.
- B. Putting Jesus first in our lives assures the right relationship with others.

Summary: "Righteousness has its root in Godliness. No man can steadily maintain before his fellow men a pure, forceful life unless his life is hid with Christ in God. The greater the activity among men, the closer must be the communion of the heart with heaven."—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 136.

COMMENTARY

I. Unity in the Community.

In many ways the Western world worships individualism. We talk about personal freedoms, individual rights, a person's *right to choose*. And a lone hero *taking on the system*—whether it's a faceless corporation, a corrupt law firm, or even a government bureaucracy—is the stuff of movies and popular novels.

Of course, it's also a biblical theme. Think of young David up against Goliath and the Philistines. Or Samson standing alone

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?

against the same enemy. (We can also see it in church history with people such as Martin Luther, an individual monk who stood up against the medieval church and set off the Protestant Reformation.)

However, the more dominant biblical theme is that of community—working together, promoting harmony, functioning as a united group. There’s little room for *going it alone* within the Christian family—unless it’s standing up against wrong. We work together as a family of believers. The apostle Paul likens the church to a body in which each part depends on the other, and all work together for the common good. In fact, he says that when one part of the body suffers, then all suffer (*1 Cor. 12:26*).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has considered unity so important that in the past few years it has identified and adopted it as one of the church’s three key strategic values (along with growth and quality of life). With more than 13 million baptized members, living in the vast majority of the countries of the world, speaking hundreds of languages and coming from vastly different cultural backgrounds, how do we remain a unified church? It’s certainly not something we can achieve in our own power.

“This unity is not essentially made possible by consensus statements, by agreed formulas, or by policies,” writes Jan Paulsen, General Conference president. “They may all express this unity and serve to keep it functioning, but the unity of the family of God is primarily a product of the creative presence of the Holy Spirit.”—*Let Your Life So Shine* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press®, 2003), p. 25.

But we must play our part. Paulsen says that unity is not something that cares for itself, and he quotes the apostle Paul: “‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit’ ” (*Eph. 4:3, NIV*). “We owe it to Christ,” Paulsen adds, “whose idea it was that has brought us to where we are today, to be very deliberate and careful in holding the family together.”—*Let Your Life So Shine*, p. 16.

II. Community Is Good for Us.

Over many decades psychologists and sociologists have studied the themes of loneliness and community. Thousands of books and articles have examined these issues from hundreds of different angles. The bottom line is that science supports the biblical idea that human beings were designed for community and provides evidence that loneliness can hurt us psychologically and even physically. Here are just a couple of studies worth discussing:

1. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University studied the impact of the Internet on 169 people. They found that using the Internet resulted in less communication with family and friends and was associated with more depression and loneliness.—*Monitor on Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 4 (April 2000).

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.

2. Dr. James J. Lynch, director of the Life Care Health Center in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., says that in the past three decades there has been an explosion of research into the physical effects of loneliness. He says that this “growth in knowledge” has led him to “one inescapable conclusion: *Dialogue is the elixir of life and chronic loneliness its lethal poison.*”—*A Cry Unheard: New Insights into the Medical Consequences of Loneliness* (Baltimore, Md.: Bancroft Press, 2000), p. 1.

Of course, the Bible said as much several thousand years ago. At the beginning of time, God said, “ ‘It is not good for the man to be

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 5:40; 25:40; John 3:35; Romans 7:5, 6; Hebrews 13:5, 6; Revelation 20:13.*

- 1 In the midst of all the busy social life that is available to most people today, many are still lonely. List and discuss reasons why a person might be lonely. How might we as Christians be able to address these reasons?
- 2 God created the human race to exist in relationships. How does even nature exist in relationship to its various parts? What does all this tell us about God and the way in which He exists?
- 3 It is common for individuals to believe that they are responsible only for themselves and that they are not accountable for their influence on others. In what ways is this true or false? Why can there not be such a thing as a *victimless crime*?
- 4 Discuss the following questions. Does doing good works for other human beings fulfill our duty to God? (After all, God sacrificed Himself for the good of humanity, and we are supposed to follow His example, right?) Or is our duty to God separate and distinct from our duty to our fellow humans?
- 5 If left to ourselves, we can destroy all of our positive relationships and nurture countless destructive ones. How can we fight the natural tendencies that lead us astray? How much of the work is ours, and how much of the work is God’s?
- 6 It is natural for the unsanctified person to be self-seeking and to think that being so is just plain common sense. From a Christian viewpoint, discuss whether it is ever acceptable to seek our own interests and whether or not Christ means for us to be *doormats*.

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?

alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' ” (*Gen. 2:18*).

And then there is the intriguing passage from the wise man: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (*Eccles. 4:9-12*).

Why would Solomon, after talking about the relationship between two people, suddenly conclude the passage by referring to a cord of three strands? Could it be that to make a relationship truly work, a third strand—God—is necessary?

The Kiddushin, the Jewish text that deals with marriage, supports this view: “There are three partners in a human being: The Holy One, praised be He, a father and a mother.”—Arthur Hertzberg, ed., *Judaism: The Key Spiritual Writings of the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1991), p. 138.

Witnessing

The Savior’s final commission for His disciples was to go “and teach all nations” (*Matt. 28:19*). In essence, He was telling them to be witnesses to all people. If you continue in His Word, then you also are His disciple (*John 8:31*), and this commission then is for you too.

The Creation story teaches us that God intends for us to be social beings. He expects us to interact with others.

Witnessing calls for interaction and communication. Communication is the *sending* and *receiving* of messages between two or more individuals. And the message in witnessing is that God loves us and wants to save us.

Because Christ is our example, we show others the way to salvation by loving them. Healing, helping, feeding, teaching, comforting, clothing, visiting, and showing kindness in simple ways are all manifestations of God’s love.

So, whom do we love? To whom do we witness? *Love your neighbor* (*Gal. 5:14*). And who is our neighbor? Luke 10:25-37 teaches us that our neighbor is anyone in need. It could be the man or woman who lives next door, the cashier at the check-out counter, or maybe the person driving the car that cut in front of you to steal the parking space for which you were waiting. Each day we cannot help but meet many of our neighbors, because we are a neighbor to whomever we meet. We are neighbors to one another. God wants us to love one another. He wants us to witness to one another. What does the parable of the good Samaritan teach us about how to witness?

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?

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Myrmecology, the study of ants, teaches us their value as positive work examples (*Prov. 6:6*). Alone, even a large ant can be snatched up for food by a swarm of smaller ants. Ant teams fight in order to monopolize a food source. Some ants will move away if defeated. This behavior suggests that they prefer to keep their nests apart in order to live peacefully.

What could these bits of myrmecology add to a discussion on community within families, neighborhoods, and churches? What does Romans 12 add to your position?

Thought Question:

A church worker, who travels through hills and mountains, marvels at the people who live in the houses randomly dotting the landscape amid the trees, mountain peaks, and deep valleys. She notes that even though the people who live in these houses are miles from their neighbors, they maintain a strong sense of community through their churches, social clubs, and family interactions. Generally, they have more frequent and more intimate interactions than do people who live in thickly populated areas, huge apartment complexes, and sprawling housing developments. Are the people living in isolated areas naturally more loving and friendly, or could their geographic isolation have led them to value social interactions more highly? What are the signs that people have taken community for granted? What reminds you to value community with family? With neighbors? With God?

Application Questions:

- ① How does this lesson broaden your understanding of Psalm 122:1?
- ② How does being *glad* in the house of the Lord transcend the pews, flooring, lighting, music, proper temperature, appropriate attire, etc.?
- ③ Are we to be “glad” despite of or because of the types of people in our worship community, including the stuffy ones, the loose and lax ones, and the difficult members and guests? What is the formula for being truly *glad* in the church community?

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.