

Discipling¹ the Powerful



SABBATH—FEBRUARY 22

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Romans 13:1–7; Mark 2:23–28; Matthew 8:5–13; Matthew 26:57–68; Matthew 27:11–14; Acts 4:1–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “So God’s word spread. The number of believers in Jerusalem grew quickly. Also, a large number of priests began to obey Jesus’ teachings” (Acts 6:7, NlrV).

“THE DISCIPLES WERE NOT GIFTED WITH THE COURAGE TO FACE DEATH UNTIL GOD GAVE IT TO THEM. Then the Savior’s promise was fulfilled [completed]. When Peter and John spoke before the Sanhedrin council,² ‘this surprised the leaders. They realized that these men [Peter and John] had been with Jesus.’ Acts 4:13 [NlrV]. About Stephen the Bible says that ‘all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked right at Stephen. They saw that his face was like [the same as] the face of an angel.’ Acts 6:15 [NlrV]. Men ‘all began to argue with Stephen. But he was too wise for them. They couldn’t [could not] stand up against the Holy Spirit who spoke through him’ [Acts 6:9, 10, NlrV]. And Paul, writing about his own trial at the court of the Caesars, says, ‘The first time I was put on trial, no one came to help me. Everyone deserted [left] me. . . . But the Lord stood at my side. He gave me the strength to preach the whole message. Then all those who weren’t [were not] Jews heard it. I was saved from the lion’s mouth.’ 2 Timothy 4:16, 17 [NlrV].”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 354, 355.

1. discipling—leading others to Christ.

2. Sanhedrin council—the governing group of Israel during Jesus’ time.

SUNDAY—FEBRUARY 23**RESPECTING AUTHORITY
(Romans 13:1–7)**

For many hundreds of years, people have struggled to understand how government works and how citizens should obey it. What gives rulers the right to rule? What is the best kind of government? Should people always obey their government? If not, why not? These are just a few of the many questions that we still wrestle with to this day.

Read Romans 13:1–7. What important message is in there for us? But how can these verses and the message they teach be abused? What examples do we have of that happening in history? How can we as a church learn from these mistakes, even in our own history, from the mistakes of the Christian church?

During Christ's time, the Roman Empire was well known for being cruel to other nations. Roman armies terrorized and controlled civilized (more advanced) nations. They forced them into the empire. Hundreds of thousands of people lost property, were imprisoned, and murdered. Puppet governments permitted by Rome were probably worse than Rome itself. But Jesus never supported any kind of rebellion (war) against this government. And He did not support

the withholding of taxes from it (read Luke 20:25). Jesus' only act of civil disobedience was when He overturned the moneychangers' tables at the temple. This showed the disgust He felt toward *priestly* abuses. It was not against the Romans.

"The people of God will recognize human government as a blessing of God. And they will teach obedience to it as honorable within limits. When its claims do not agree with the claims of God, the Word of God must be recognized as being above all human laws. 'Thus says the Lord' should not be put aside for 'Thus says the church or the state.' The crown of Christ is to be uplifted above all the crowns of earthly kings."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*³ for the Church, volume 6, page 402.



Puppet governments permitted by Rome were probably worse than Rome itself.

3. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

MONDAY—FEBRUARY 24**“HAVE YOU NOT READ . . . ?”****(Mark 2:23–28)**

Unfortunately, some of the most influential (powerful) people with whom Jesus dealt were the religious leaders of His time. Many of them hated Him.

Yet, even in His meetings with them, Jesus always tried to save them. He was not looking for arguments. He was working for the salvation of all people, even of those powerful and influential leaders who would sentence Him to death later.

Read Mark 2:23–28; Mark 3:1–6; and Matthew 12:1–16. How is it clear in these meetings that Jesus is trying to reach these men? What does He say and do that should have touched their hearts if they had not been so closed-minded?

In dealing with these people, Jesus points to the Bible verses and Bible history that should soften the hearts of the religious leaders. Jesus is appealing to what should be common ground between them. For example, Jesus quotes the Bible when He talks about the importance of mercy over ritual (religious rule). By doing this, He tries to help the leaders understand a deeper meaning of the law that they claim to follow very strictly.

In His speech about pulling an animal out of a pit on the Sabbath day,

Jesus also appeals to the leaders' sense of mercy and kindness. This is something that these men all should have been aware of. But the problem is that their bitterness and hatred toward Jesus makes them blind to these things.

Finally, the miracles themselves should have spoken loudly to these influential leaders about the wonderful Worker (Jesus) among them.

It is easy to look back in wonder at the blindness and hardness of these men. But how can we make sure that we do not close ourselves off to more light from God? Why is closing ourselves off easier to do than we might think?



Jesus appealed to the leaders' sense of mercy.

TUESDAY—FEBRUARY 25**THE CENTURION⁴ (Matthew 8:5–13)**

Several of Christ's meetings with powerful people ended negatively. But

4. centurion—a Roman officer in charge of 100 soldiers.

there were well-known exceptions, such as Nicodemus. Another positive meeting was with a Roman centurion.

Read Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10. What can we learn from these stories about witnessing to people in power?

The centurion learns that Jesus is coming. So, he sends several friends to stop Christ from coming. He deeply respects Jewish worship and Jesus' spiritual life. So, he feels that he does not deserve Christ's personal attention. However, just before Jesus arrives, he tries to meet Him. He explains the situation. He wants to show faith that Christ can restore (heal) the servant on the spot. Additionally, because of his military experience, he understands authority. For example, he obeys his commanding officer, and his men obey him. How amazing that this man of power and influence (and a Roman, too!) can show such deep faith when many of the Jews will not accept Jesus at all.

Honest self-examination⁵ is important. We need to ask ourselves if we have become spiritually lazy and are just preaching correct doctrines (teachings) instead of experiencing living faith as we should. Have newer believers shown deeper faith than those of us who have been Christians since we were little? Have our spiritual advantages become self-centered? Have spiritual opportunities escaped unnoticed? Whenever we say "Yes" to any of these questions,

then Christ is the answer. Anyone can enjoy the centurion's experience. This story should encourage those who are witnessing to people in powerful positions. How many twenty-first-century (modern) centurions are there? May their faith strengthen ours.

There is a power to an unselfish and humble ministry (work done for God) that can touch anyone of any rank or class. How many of these practices do we show in our own lives and witness?



How may we, like the centurion, strengthen the faith of others?

WEDNESDAY—FEBRUARY 26

JUDGMENT DAY (Matthew 26:57–68)

Read Matthew 26:57–68; Matthew 27:11–14; Luke 23:1–12; John 18:1–23, 31–40; and John 19:8–12. What can we learn from Jesus' witness to these powerful men?

5. self-examination—the ability to examine one's spiritual life.

Within these final scenes of Jesus' earthly journey, Christ's followers realize the painful price of faithfulness. From His arrest until His crucifixion, Christ gives witness to the most powerful people in the land: kings, governors, and priests. Person by person, He studies those who are drunk with worldly power. They seem to control Him. Soldiers take Jesus to and from their courtrooms, their councils, their palaces, and their judgment halls. They do not realize, however, that this is His world. Whatever judgment they make against Christ is the judgment they make against themselves.

Christ witnessed to make disciples. But sometimes the results were very different than He Himself would have wished. Jesus would have been very happy if Pilate, Caiaphas, Herod, and others had surrendered their hearts and repented (turned from sin). Stubbornly they refused His pleas. Hard-heartedly they ignored their final invitation to salvation.

The twenty-first-century followers of Christ should know that they must witness to make disciples. But their results often appear to be very different from what they may wish and pray for. Success may not always follow their efforts. But this should not discourage them nor should it discourage further witnessing. The true disciple is, like Christ Himself, faithful until death. He or she is not faithful until disappointed. Calling listeners to the point of decision separates the wheat from the chaff. The wheat is celebrated, the chaff is mourned, and the harvest continues.

Christ's witness before these powerful men seemed to be not successful. But something marvelous happened. According to Acts 6:7, the number of disciples multiplied and "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (NKJV). God alone knows how many of those priests were there, listening and watching Jesus in those final hours.



The true disciple is, like Christ, faithful until death, not faithful until disappointed.

THURSDAY—FEBRUARY 27

THE EARLY EXPLOSION (Acts 13:5–12, 50)

Christ's earliest disciples were hard at work spreading the gospel throughout the civilized world. Houses, synagogues (Jewish places of worship), public stadiums, judgment halls, and royal palaces all became places where they preached the kingdom of God. But Jesus prophesied (fore-told) arrests, trials, and hard-hearted royal audiences for those disciples (Matthew 10:16–20). Unfortunately,

those filled with earthly power were the slowest to receive Christ.

Read through as much of Acts 4:1–12; Acts 13:5–12, 50; Acts 23:1–6; and Acts 25:23–26:28 as you can. As you read, you might get the idea that lots of people were quickly converted (changed) out of nowhere. But that is not what happened. Sometimes wonderful results came from the hard work of preaching and witnessing. After all, seedtime comes before harvest. Christ had faithfully preached the gospel. Missionaries had witnessed throughout Judea. Early converts (believers) no doubt helped to carry the message. And Christ personally conquered death, giving proof of His message. So, thousands of fence-sitters (the undecided) leaped into the kingdom. They had secretly followed Him. Their hearts had accepted His invitations. But cultural reasons, job security, and family pressure had slowed their open response. It was Christ's resurrection (return to life) that destroyed the fence, forcing a decision.

Then the apostle (teacher and leader) Paul entered the picture. But his witness was not accepted by all people. Sometimes important men and women attacked and drove him out. He was stoned, flogged (whipped), imprisoned, and mistreated by powerful people. Politics were often the reason for their anti-Christian feelings.

Governor Felix imprisoned Paul in order to keep peace with religious leaders who were against Paul. His successor, Festus, was more fair-minded. But he lacked the political will-

power to release Paul. During an official visit, even King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice (from Herod's family), asked for a hearing with Paul. Unfortunately, just as their relatives before them, they refused to accept Paul's invitation to salvation. The twenty-first-century disciples of Christ, therefore, must expect to carry on the work faithfully, even when there are great hardships.

How can disciple-makers working among worldly and religious authorities avoid becoming discouraged when these authorities do not accept Christ? When Christ's followers labor for powerful people, who else might be influenced by their witnessing?

FRIDAY—FEBRUARY 28

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, "The Centurion," pages 315–318; "Before Annas and the Court of Caiaphas," pages 698–715; "In Pilate's Judgment Hall," pages 723–740, in *The Desire of Ages*; "Ministry to the Rich," pages 209–216, in *The Ministry of Healing*; "Almost Thou Persuadest Me," pages 433–438, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

"It is by no accident or luck that wealthy, world-loving, world-worshiping souls can be led to accept Christ. These persons are often the most difficult to reach. Personal effort must be put forth for these souls by men and women filled with the missionary⁶ spirit. These men and women will not

6. missionary—having to do with the special duty or work that a church sends a person or group out to do.

fail or be discouraged.

“Some are better fitted than others to work for the higher classes.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, page 213.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Whenever Jesus witnessed to powerful people, others noticed. Some were in powerful positions, others were not. Like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, many people among the educated priestly class came to faith slowly. Some watchers who witnessed Christ’s meetings with religious leaders also believed. We must remember that the power of volcanoes usually lies hidden under the mountain’s crust. In other words, it is not possible to measure action that remains hidden. Correctly measuring such activity requires special tools. In the same way, the explosive

growth of Jesus’ movement remained hidden during His earthly ministry. Following His resurrection (return to life), however, the kingdom “erupted.” This was the result of many conversions, even among those in important positions. The faithful planting was finally yielding its abundant harvest. What should these facts tell us about how important it is that we not get discouraged when our witness does not appear to work as fast as we would like it to work? This is especially true among the powerful and the rich.

② Ellen G. White wrote in the statement you have just read in Friday’s “Additional Study” that some were “better fitted” for the work of reaching the powerful. What traits⁷ do you think might qualify these people for such work? At the same time, why must we be careful not to limit those who we might think are not qualified?

7. traits—the things, or qualities, that make you who you are.