

Discipling *the* “Ordinary”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Luke 2:21–28; Matt. 15:32–39; 16:13–17; Luke 12:6, 7; 13:1–5; James 2:1–9.*

Memory Text: “Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him” (*Mark 1:16–18*).

Christ’s death was the great equalizer: it showed that we all are sinners in need of God’s grace. In light of the Cross, ethnic, political, economic, and social barriers crumble. Sometimes, though, in our soul winning, we forget that crucial truth, and we especially seek to win those who might be deemed “honorable” or “great” in the eyes of the world.

Not so with Jesus, who saw the meaninglessness and emptiness of worldly greatness and honor. In fact, in many cases, it was the most “successful” people—the favorably positioned Pharisees, the wealthy Sadducees, and the Roman aristocracy—who troubled Him the most. In contrast, the “ordinary” people—carpenters, fishermen, farmers, housewives, shepherds, soldiers, and servants—generally thronged and embraced Him.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 8.

Humble Beginnings

Read Luke 2:21–28, Mark 6:2–4, Leviticus 12:8. What do these verses tell us about the economic class into which Jesus was born? How would that class have influenced His ministry?

Joseph and Mary’s purification offering clearly indicated their economically poor background. This tradition sprang from the Mosaic legislation recorded in Leviticus 12:8, and it required that a lamb be brought for this offering. However, a compassionate exemption had been provided for impoverished people. Turtledoves or pigeons could be substituted because of humble circumstances. Thus, right from the start—from His birth in a stable to the offerings given by His parents—Jesus is portrayed as having assumed His humanity in the home of poor and “ordinary” people. In fact, archaeological evidence also seems to indicate that the town of Nazareth, where Jesus spent His childhood, was a relatively impoverished and unimportant town, as well. And though carpentry is an honorable trade, it certainly didn’t place Him among the “elite.”

“The parents of Jesus were poor, and dependent upon their daily toil. He was familiar with poverty, self-denial, and privation. This experience was a safeguard to Him. In His industrious life there were no idle moments to invite temptation. No aimless hours opened the way for corrupting associations. So far as possible, He closed the door to the tempter. Neither gain nor pleasure, applause nor censure, could induce Him to consent to a wrong act. He was wise to discern evil, and strong to resist it.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 72.

The Creator of all that was made (see John 1:1–3) entered humanity, not just as a human being, an infant, which would have been astonishing enough, but by way of the home of a relatively impoverished family! How are we to respond to something so incredible? What is the only way to respond?

Transforming the “Common”

Read John 2:1–11 and Matthew 15:32–39. How did Jesus use simple, everyday desires and needs to make disciples and transform lives?

“Ordinary” people share natural physical, emotional, and social desires. They want physical nourishment, personal significance, and friendship. Jesus understood these characteristics, placing Himself in social situations that provided opportunities to reach people through these universal desires.

Whether Jesus was changing water into unfermented wine from the fruit of the vine, or turning fishermen into preachers (*Mark 1:16–18*), He specialized in transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Onlookers frequently questioned Jesus’ personal credentials (*Mark 6:3*). They questioned the absence of ostentation. Because they longed for the extraordinary, they overlooked that which they considered to be ordinary and did so at what was potentially an eternal loss.

So often Jesus sought people who were considered to be ordinary because, lacking self-sufficiency, they were prepared to trust God completely for their success. People who are enamored by their talents, abilities, and accomplishments cannot often sense their need of something greater than themselves. What a horrible deception! Many among Christ’s contemporaries possessed superior academic training, social position, or personal wealth. Nevertheless, their names have long been forgotten. Remembered, however, are ordinary people—farmers, fishermen, carpenters, shepherds, potters, housewives, domestic servants—who were transformed into extraordinary witnesses for Christ.

We all tend to be a little enamored by the very successful and the very rich, don’t we? How much of that attitude do you see in yourself? How can you learn to keep before yourself the value of all people, regardless of their status, fame, or wealth?

A Flawed Fisherman’s Calling

In the New Testament, Peter stands out as one of the most influential of all the disciples. In fact, he ended up being one of the most influential people in all human history. Talk about changing the “ordinary” into the extraordinary!

Read the following texts. How do they help us to understand how Peter was so radically changed, despite tremendous faults?

Luke 5:1–11. What did Peter say here that showed that he was open to his need of Jesus? Why is this trait so crucial to cultivate in our own lives?

Matthew 16:13–17. What do these verses tell us about Peter and his openness to the Holy Spirit?

Matthew 26:75. What do we also see here that gives us insight into Peter and how God was able to use him?

Jesus, no doubt, spent a great deal of time with Peter, and Peter had many powerful experiences with Him. Though only an “ordinary” fisherman with plenty of faults, through his time with Jesus, Peter was radically converted—even after making some grievous errors, including denying Jesus three times, just as Jesus told him he would.

Though many points emerge from the story of Peter, the moment he first caught a glimpse of who Jesus was, he was aware of his own faults and admitted them. Hence, through patience and forbearance, Jesus was able to turn Peter’s flawed character into someone who helped to change history.

Why must we be so careful about making judgments about those whom we might not deem as “savable”? Why is that so easy to do?

Heavenly Evaluation

An evangelist once celebrated (perhaps bragged about) the attendance of quality upper-class people at his seminars. (One would hope he equally celebrated the attendance of the more “ordinary” types, as well.)

With Christ, however, no class distinctions existed; no one was “ordinary”; everyone was an exception. Not surprisingly, Jesus reached the masses with commonplace illustrations and straightforward speech. Nothing about His manner suggested that anyone was excluded from His concern. Modern disciple-makers must likewise carefully guard against giving the impression that they regard some more highly than they do others in terms of outreach.

Read Luke 12:6, 7; 13:1–5; Matthew 6:25–30. What do these texts teach us about the worth of every person? Of course, it is easy for us to say that we believe this, but in what ways might we be guilty of harboring the kind of distinctions that the universality of the Cross has eradicated forever?

The cheapest birds in the temple marketplace were sparrows. Pairs could be purchased for an *assarion*, the smallest, least valuable copper coin. Nonetheless, commonplace, insignificant sparrows were not forgotten in heaven.

How much more is this the case with human beings, the ones for whom Christ died? Christ died for us, not for birds. The Cross proves, in ways that we cannot begin to fathom, the “infinite worth” (to borrow from a phrase that Ellen G. White used a lot) of every human being, regardless of his or her status in life—a status that is often nothing more than a human concoction based on concepts and attributes that are meaningless in heaven, or even contrary to the very principles of heaven itself.

Ellen G. White wrote that “Christ would have died for one soul in order that that one might live through the eternal ages.” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 73. One soul! Dwell on the implications of this incredible concept. How should this influence the ways in which we view not only others but ourselves, as well?

A Classless Society

Perhaps the most socially attractive feature of primitive Christianity was the absence of class distinctions. Dividing walls had crumbled beneath the gospel's weight. The common person triumphed through Christ. Christ transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary. Carpenters, tax collectors, stonecutters, queens, domestic servants, priests, Greeks, Romans, men, women, the wealthy, and the destitute all became equals within Christ's kingdom of grace. In reality, the Christian community was to be a "classless society."

What do each of the following texts teach about our common humanity? Considering the cultural background of the time, and of the Bible writers themselves, why might it not have been so easy for them to grasp this crucial concept?

Gal. 3:28, 29 _____

James 2:1-9 _____

1 Pet. 1:17, 2:9 _____

1 John 3:16-19 _____

Read Acts 2:43-47, 4:32-37. In what ways did early Christians apply, in practice, the principle of universal acceptance? How did the notion that God loves ordinary, everyday people enable the explosive expansion of primitive Christianity? At the same time, we need to ask ourselves, How well do we, individually and collectively, apply these principles to the ways in which we minister to the world? What kinds of things hold us back from doing better in this important area?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Lifework,” pp. 269, 270, in *Education*; and “Laboring for the Middle Class,” pp. 564–566, in *Evangelism*.

“In this closing work of the gospel there is a vast field to be occupied; and, more than ever before, the work is to enlist helpers from the common people. Both the youth and those older in years will be called from the field, from the vineyard, and from the workshop, and sent forth by the Master to give His message. Many of these have had little opportunity for education; but Christ sees in them qualifications that will enable them to fulfill His purpose. If they put their hearts into the work, and continue to be learners, He will fit them to labor for Him.”
—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 269, 270.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why was Jesus so effective in making disciples among the common people? Why was His message not as readily received among the wealthy and socially elite? How might Jesus’ humble upbringing have contributed to His effectiveness in reaching the hearts and minds of ordinary people? How effective in reaching the average person might Jesus have been if He had come as a royal prince or a wealthy landowner?
- 2 Read 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 in class together. What are the key points? Read carefully where Paul wrote that God chose “the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty” (*NKJV*). What does that mean? How, in the context of being a Christian, are we to understand this fascinating idea? In what ways do these verses show just how twisted and perverted the ways of the world are? How can we make sure that we ourselves don’t get caught up in these corrupted ways?
- 3 What can our Bible study groups do to become more user-friendly for ordinary people? How might that affect our choice of Bible translations? Why should disciple-makers concentrate on practical subjects rather than theoretical ones, especially when first reaching out to people who are hurting and in need of help?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Mark 1:16–18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Accept that everyone is important to God. Theoretically, His followers are blind to class distinctions.

Feel: Embrace the feeling that even in his or her ordinariness, God sees something valuable in each one of us.

Do: Live as God’s children in a society that prizes artificial distinctions such as ethnicity, nationality, economics, and education.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Discipleship Is Not Determined by Human Standards.

A What are some of the categories we use to divide ourselves into groups and subgroups? List at least five.

B What are some characteristics that God looks for when grooming someone as a disciple?

C What characteristics unite us as Seventh-day Adventists?

II. Feel: God Wants Us to Know That in His Kingdom We All Have Something to Offer.

A As you think about yourself, what unique qualities do you contribute to the life of your congregation? What about your community?

B What special qualities do others in your congregation bring to the larger experience? Be specific; name names.

III. Do: Discipleship Is the Laboratory Where God Does His Experiments.

A How will people in your church and community recognize Heaven’s principles in your life this week?

B In God’s kingdom, how is being “ordinary” a badge of honor? What Bible characters at first glance seemed ordinary?

► **Summary:** Christianity’s greatness is that it swept the world by the testimony of people who were mostly uneducated and unsophisticated. There’s doubtless a message there for us. While there’s nothing wrong with education, people who know their limitations and trust God for guidance can certainly accomplish extraordinary things for Him.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Mark 1:16–18*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The kingdom of God is blind to human categories such as rich, poor, old, young, educated, and uneducated.

Just for Teachers: While this lesson is all about the sameness, or ordinariness, of the people Christ came to save, we can't help but categorize one another based on our similarities and differences. Admit it; when somebody walks into a room we, at some point, ask ourselves two questions: (1) How are we the same? (2) How are we different?

To be fair, to “discriminate” is something we're taught from childhood. It's how we understand where we fit into the scheme of society, who our friends are, and of whom we should be afraid.

But Jesus' ministry was all about showing that we are all God's children by virtue of Creation—some of whom have accepted salvation and others who haven't yet. Before the Cross, we are all the same, sinners in need of God's grace.

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Just for Teachers: While we may be ordinary according to the definition used in today's lesson, that doesn't mean that we're all the same. In actuality, we're all unique, and the fact that we've been called to be disciples of Christ suggests that He sees something in us that we can use to contribute uniquely to His kingdom.

Bible Commentary

I. A Man Like Us (*Review Luke 2:21–40 with your class.*)

Even though Jesus' birth was foretold by angels, and celebrated both by wise men who had traveled a great distance and by shepherds who had received the news from an angel choir, Jesus and His parents didn't receive any more attention when He appeared in the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised than the other dozens of people who were there that day. For all practical purposes, He was ordinary.

His presence in the temple was celebrated only by Simeon, a righteous and devout man, and the elderly prophetess Anna—and that was just

because they were hoping for and expecting the Messiah.

The sum total of Jesus' childhood is summarized in the words, "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (*Luke 2:40, NIV*).

Consider This: For most of His life, Jesus lived in obscurity. Yet, from what we know about His public ministry, His private life could hardly have been ordinary. In your imagination, how do you visualize the way in which Jesus lived an extraordinary life? How do you suppose that prepared Him for His public ministry?

II. The Miracle at Cana (*Review John 2:1–11 and Matthew 15:32–39 with your class.*)

Jesus, whose birth was foretold centuries before it happened and whose ministry was divinely appointed, chose as His first public miracle the turning of water into new wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Even though He was there as a guest, Jesus assumed the role of host. He told the servants to fill six stone jars (the kind that typically held water for footwashing) with water. Each jar held between 20 and 30 gallons of water. Then, suddenly, the water turned to new wine—that's a total of 120–180 gallons of it!

Clearly, a power that transcended humans was at work here. (It's a wonder the Bible doesn't record even more of the weddings that Jesus and His disciples went to.) The point is that Jesus went to this wedding with the intention of ensuring everyone's enjoyment. And He knew what was important to making that joy happen.

In fact, Jesus protested the way people compared Him with John the Baptist by quoting the proverb: " ' "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn" ' " (*Matt. 11:17, NIV*). In other words, Jesus just couldn't satisfy His critics. Realizing that He would have critics no matter what He did, He just lived true to His principles.

Consider This: Jesus was at home in every situation. Rich and poor, young and old—all felt comfortable in His presence, perhaps because He never pretended to be something He wasn't. How is that different from our experience?

III. An Impossible Dream? (*Review Acts 2:42–47 with your class.*)

The early Christian church was remarkable for the fact that people from all walks of life, from all classes, worshiped and fellowshiped together.

That experience, however, was apparently short-lived. Fairly soon in

the early Christians' experience, "the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (*Acts 6:1, NIV*).

That developed further a system of formal organization in the church to establish leaders and followers. One could argue that organization is essential to the smooth operation of any corporation or entity. But with organization comes responsibility and lines of authority; before long people no longer see themselves as equals. As the pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* declare, everyone is equal, but "some . . . are more equal than others."

The history of Christianity is replete with examples of people who let power go to their heads. Yet, Jesus was clear: " 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant' " (*Matt. 20:26, NIV*). In other words, they lead best who serve best.

Consider This: As much as Christians like to think of themselves as immune to the artificial categories so prevalent in the world, the church still requires some people to exercise their gifts of leadership while others are called to support them in their leadership responsibilities.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What Christian leaders have balanced well the role of leader with that of fellow member? How did they do this?
- ② Is organization a by-product of sin? In other words, will there be directors, associate directors, and assistant directors in heaven? Give reasons for your answer.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The word *ordinary* often sounds so boring. But when our car breaks down, an ordinary mechanic can work miracles. When your plumbing is out of order, an ordinary plumber is a lifesaver. Likewise, there is nothing ordinary about the church members with whom we share our pews each Sabbath.

Life Application: Every once in a while it's useful to take inventory of the people who contribute to our church life. Not just the preachers, soloists, and deacons but the people who lead in children's Sabbath School, the people who cook for fellowship dinners (and clean up afterward), the ones who come in to turn on the furnace in winter and the air conditioning unit or fans in summer, and the ones who mow the lawn, fix the plumbing, and take out the trash.

Sometimes when we think of "church," we think "pastor" or "office staff."

But just as the human body is made up of lots of “ordinary” parts, so is Christ’s church made up of many “ordinary” members—who, it turns out, are essential to the continued success of the church in your community.

❶ Which people who serve your local church would you miss most if suddenly they stopped doing their jobs? How can you show them how much you appreciate them?

❷ A smile and a handshake go a long way. When’s the last time you thanked someone for the service that he or she provides your church? Write a Thank-you note to that person, sharing how much you value his or her work.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: It’s really quite remarkable that so many “ordinary” people contribute so much to the successful operation of the church and all its ministries. Shouldn’t something be done to recognize them?

Activity: As a group, plan some gesture or activity that shows appreciation to the many “ordinary” people whose service is often unnoticed by most of the members of your church. Below are some options. If none of these suggestions work for you, feel free to come up with your own ideas.

- Send a Thank-you card, signed by all the members of your class, with a short note: “We could just ‘kiss’ you for the way you _____ every Sabbath.” Attach a Hershey’s chocolate kiss with cellophane tape to the envelope.

- Take up a collection, buy a gift card, and give it to the treasurer with a note: “We want you to know that you really count around here!”

- Plan an after-church dinner for all those who lead the children’s Sabbath School. In addition to thanking them for their faithful service, send them away with a gift: small bottles of perfume or aftershave, small bags of cookies or candy, a pen or pencil, et cetera.

- Brainstorm other ways to appreciate “ordinary” people—not just once or twice a year—but as often as possible. After all, we may be ordinary, but we’re all unique!