

lesson eight

AUGUST 17–23

The Least of **These**

“And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” ’ ”

(Matt. 25:40, NKJV).



This shows a person in tattered clothing taking shelter under a threadbare blanket. Jesus taught that if we are to follow Him properly, we must be willing to help those who society deems unworthy.

Introduction

A Walk of Shame

| Matt. 9:36

On vacation in Italy, as we were trekking Florence, a man on the street reached out, offering us something. I waved my hand, brushing him off, not even looking his way. There were so many of them. Everywhere!

“Let’s buy something from him,” my wife said.

We barely had time to see David, and the gardens were closing soon. My thoughts nagged at me while my feet unwillingly turned to take me the few yards back to a homeless-looking guy selling some thrifts on a cardboard box.

“OK, what do you want?” I asked my wife while pulling out my wallet, not trying to hide annoyance in my voice.

She replied, “I don’t know. But, take something.”

And now, this man faced the same frowning look—in my eyes.

All this time I was avoiding looking at this guy who was wasting my valuable vacation time and money. And then, inadvertently, our eyes met. And I saw it. Not just an urge to survive, not a desire to take a few euros from me, but a desperate cry to be acknowledged.

At that moment I saw my own, long forgotten, eyes.

Long ago, while stuck in a vertigo of endless immigration limbo, I faced those looks. Frowning looks that just saw me as something in their way. And now, this man faced the same frowning look—in my eyes.

Tables turn—and we forget.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36, NIV).

Jesus presents something almost extinct in our society: compassion. We are so smothered with demands for attention that that silent stranger on the corner stands absolutely no chance.

But . . . if only . . . if we would only stop and ask ourselves if the compassion of our Savior lives in us; really lives—oh, my!

So we got some bracelets from him, spent a few minutes talking, and gave him a few euros extra. The bracelets will wear out, but I’ll keep a memory of a smile as he waved at us, yelling, “*Ciao amici!*”

But I walked away ashamed.

“Why didn’t we just give him some money?” I asked.

“Charity with dignity, my dear,” my wife said.

Charity with dignity.

As Mahatma Gandhi has been purported to have said, “Compassion is a muscle that gets stronger with use.” May God find us working out diligently!

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Prov. 25:21, 22;
Rom. 12:20

Evidence *Hot Coals, Warm Hearts*

By and large, the Bible gives us clear counsel in regard to vengeance (cf. Matt. 5:39; 1 Cor. 6:7; 1 Pet. 2:20).

The difficult truth for Christians is that, in the face of great evil, we must keep our Spirit-led composure. We must never stoop to the level of the oppressor.

But what does it mean to “heap burning coals” on an enemy’s head (Rom. 12:20, NIV)? Are we to do good in order to hurt our enemies? Can our motives for well doing be to ultimately destroy our enemies? Well, no!

These coals were the outward symbol of repentance.

Romans 12:20 quotes Proverbs 25:21, 22, a section of the book that is attributed to King Solomon, though compiled at a later date by King Hezekiah’s men (Prov. 25:1). Many of these proverbs have parallels to Egyptian writings of the time. No wonder, since Solomon made political alliances with Egypt, even marrying a daughter of the pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1). Apparently Egyptian culture was influential and may help explain the meaning of our particular proverb.

There is a story of an Egyptian thief who stole a book from a gravesite.¹ After being caught, the thief returned the book to the gravesite—this time while carrying a basin of fiery coals on his head. These coals were an outward symbol of repentance and regret for his unrighteous act. It signified recognition of wrongs and a willingness to endure the shame and guilt in order to change.

This old story gives a fresh understanding of the intent of both the proverb and Paul’s quote in Romans 12. A Christian is compassionate toward his or her enemy in hopes of redeeming a friend. In doing so, we are simply modeling to others what God has done for us, for “God’s kindness is intended to lead [us] to repentance” (Rom. 2:4, NIV).

The Bible is remarkably consistent from beginning to end. When it comes to social justice, Christians are expected to be the first to stand in the way of injustice. We must always fight for the good of the oppressed. But we are called to do so in a way that is honorable and redemptive even to the oppressor. May our conduct be so filled with the character of Christ that those who are in the wrong willingly bear the heated coals of repentance on their heads.

REACT

1. How can we balance God’s call for social justice with His command to be peaceful?
2. How should Adventists be involved in political and social movements?

1. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 33.

Recovered Connection

Fellowship Is Imperative (1 Thess. 4:17; Heb. 10:24, 25)

Being part of any community takes a lot of work. The temptation is to stay away from the community to avoid the drama. But, especially as the second coming of Christ approaches, it is imperative that we come together in fellowship. “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:24, 25). According to this passage, Paul understands the necessity of banding together here on earth as a prerequisite to being “caught up together . . . to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Being part of any community takes a lot of work.

This necessity for humanity to connect can be found throughout the Bible, as part of God’s original design. It is sin that has caused separation from God and division from each other. As God brings spiritual healing into our lives, we will draw closer together in relationship with one another. We might rightly ask, if we are not drawing closer to one another, are we truly being transformed by God?

Fellowship Is Inevitable (John 13:34, 35; 15:9, 12)

Drawing closer to others as we draw closer to God is not just a function of obedience to God’s injunction to assemble together. Rather, it is a natural outflow of the love that God places in our hearts. As we experience God’s unfathomable love and forgiveness, it inspires love and forgiveness in our hearts toward others. Beholding the love of Jesus, we are transformed into His likeness, and we become loving Christians ourselves (2 Cor. 3:18).

Moreover, we were originally designed to live in community. When God created humanity, He created two beings who could relate to each other but were altogether different from each other. Together, Adam and Eve were the image of God, who Himself exists as the Godhead, three Beings yet one God.

Made from the image of God, three and one, it is unnatural for humans to live divided. At the foundation of this division can be found the deteriorating influence of fear. Examining the lives of Adam and Eve, we can see that through indulged disobedience, they ran from the sound of God’s voice and, sadly, from each other. Instead of taking responsibility for their actions, they

looked to cast blame elsewhere, abandoning the foundation of their relationship—cleaving to become one. However, their fears are relieved by the promised defeat of the serpent, the very source that instigated their separation.

Jesus being the fulfillment of this promise, crushing the head of the serpent, comforts His followers, “Let not your heart be troubled. . . . Where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1–3). This brings hope to the hearts of those who follow Him and opens the doors for proper connection to exist among one another.

Hope is the single most powerful weapon against fear!

Fellowship Is Intuitive (Acts 2:1)

After Christ’s ascension, the disciples gathered in the upper room to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. As they focused their minds on Christ’s teachings, the walls of jealousy and evil surmising began to break down, and they joined together in unity. Being in the same room together, they had the opportunity to resolve their differences right there and then. While they may very well have realized their need for reconciliation even if they were praying in separate locations, being in the same location gave them the opportunity to act on their conviction immediately.

Banding together is essential to facilitate proper relationships among one another. We need to come together physically to see the needs of others and meet those needs right away. Even if we are individually convicted on the importance of ministering to the downtrodden, we may not act on that conviction unless we come into physical contact with said people. For anyone who wants to minister as Christ ministered, physically coming into contact with other people is intuitive.

The disciples, in Acts 2, are together in one place, in one accord, ready to receive the power that will enable them to preach the gospel to the world. They understood that connection with each other and God was key in fulfilling the command Jesus gave in Matthew 28:19: go to all the world.

Going back to Hebrews 10:24, 25, Paul exhorts the people of God not to forsake the assembling of themselves as they see the day approaching. What day? The second coming of Christ! The blessed hope is that one day you and I, together, will be able to enjoy the presence of the Lord for all eternity. Nonetheless, before that day comes, we must enjoy the sweet fellowship that comes with banding together. As we grow in wisdom and stature, let us never forget to grow in favor with both God and those whom we come in contact with every day!

Testimony

All That He Has

James 1:27

It's all too easy to sit around talking about how broken the rest of the world is; how they don't understand the truth; how they're bound in sin and addiction; and if they would just pull themselves up by their bootstraps, they'd be all right. If they could think more logically, or be in less pain and confusion, they'd stop sinning. We talk about it as though it is their job to save themselves from sin, addiction, or poor lifestyle choices.

Imagine a church full of “ministers” sharing their gifts fully with the world.

Perhaps we keep the ball in their court because we prefer that over the truth—the truth that puts the responsibility in the hands of Christ, which includes His body, the church. Have you ever felt that the church wasn't what you'd hoped for—lacking any life-changing power? Consider this: “The real character of the church is measured, not by the high profession she makes, not by the names enrolled upon the church book, but by what she is actually doing for the Master, by the number of her persevering, faithful workers. Personal interest and vigilant, individual effort will accomplish more for the cause of Christ than can be wrought by sermons or creeds.”¹

Could it be that we've relied on sermons to get the message out and to keep the church healthy, forgetting that we all have gifts to return to God? Imagine a church full of “ministers” sharing their gifts fully with the world. We are given the desire to help sinners out of Satan's power by the truth and power of God, which we will have flowing through us as much as our hearts are fully His.

“The Christian has no desire to live for self. He delights to consecrate all that he has and is to the Master's service. He is moved by an inexpressible desire to win souls to Christ. Those who have nothing of this desire might better be concerned for their own salvation. Let them pray for the spirit of service.

“How can I best glorify Him whose I am by creation and by redemption? This is to be the question that we are to ask ourselves. With anxious solicitude the one who is truly converted seeks to rescue those who are still in Satan's power. He refuses to do anything that would hinder him in his work.”²

REACT

1. Do you have a heart to serve the lost?
2. Do you know someone struggling with sin, and how might you help them?

1. Ellen G. White, “Scattered Churches,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Sept. 6, 1881.
2. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 10.

Matt. 12:34, 35

How-to *Experience First. Service Next.*

It can be difficult and even overwhelming to put into practice what we are discussing in this quarterly. How do you figure out where God is calling you to help? What if you feel uncomfortable helping in certain popular ways or don't feel like helping? How do you awaken in yourself the desire to serve if it isn't there or if it is covered by fear? Jesus asks the same question of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34: "How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (ESV).

To be effective servants of God, we must know Him.

We cannot give what we do not have and have not experienced. Jesus confirms this as He continues in verse 35, "The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (ESV). If we have a heart filled with good, we can give to others. So how do we have a heart that is filled enough to serve others?

Spend time reading the Bible and listening to God. The only way we can recognize Jesus in the least of these is by spending time with Him and letting Him speak to us through His Word. Our relationship with God will change our hearts so that we want to serve others.

Ask God to show you the least of these around you. We must also look for God in our daily life. He may be asking you to give time at a homeless shelter, talk to the person at work or school whom people avoid, pay for someone's meal or fuel, or just speak an encouraging word. If He calls us, however, we must be ready to answer.

Make knowing God your priority. Knowing Him will transform you so that you can serve the least of these.

When we have a relationship with Jesus, reaching out to those around us will come naturally to us. When Jesus commends the sheep for their service to Him in Matthew 25, they are baffled. They don't remember doing any of the things that Jesus claims they did. It seems that these righteous people didn't even notice they were serving; they simply served because it was who they were. Before we can give the treasures of God's love and grace to others, we must first be filled to overflowing ourselves.

REACT

1. Why do you find it hard to serve others?
2. How has knowing God changed you from who you used to be?
3. Have you noticed a correlation between your relationship with Jesus and how you relate to others?

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Hitler's Health Message

Rom. 5:8

Speaking on behalf of many German and Austrian Adventist churches of the day, Wilhelm Mueller wrote in 1933 that Hitler “has his office from the hand of God, and . . . knows himself to be responsible to Him. As an anti-alcoholic, non-smoker, and vegetarian, he is closer to our own view of health reform than anybody else.”¹

Love, just because. That's how He loves.

Vegetarianism is a good thing. It has been linked to lower rates of heart disease, many cancers, and type 2 diabetes mellitus.² As a ministry vehicle, it has helped usher thousands to our churches for health seminars. And for the good stewards of the planet and its population, one study estimated that worldwide adoption of a vegetarian diet could save 7.3 million lives by the year 2050 due to the decreased environmental impact of vegetarian food growing practices.³

However, vegetarianism can engender unpleasant feelings. A well-meaning newcomer who brings a meat dish to an after-church potluck may feel ostracized when their dish is not served.

Pride should never motivate evangelism. Pride should never motivate our interactions with “the least of these.” But how often are we motivated by the kind of selfless love demonstrated in Jesus’ interactions with “the least of these”? Has it instead emerged from a desire to feel better about ourselves?

Jesus did not serve “the least of these” in order to feel better about Himself. His charity was motivated by a desire for each person’s wholeness. Followers of Jesus should do likewise and love every soul simply for its own sake. Love, just because. That’s how He loves.

REACT

1. Does Jesus want to interact with someone who is hopelessly lost?
2. Is it possible to do more harm than good when we endeavor to help the “least of these”?

1. R. Cooter, “The Nazi War on Cancer,” *British Medical Journal* 320 (March 11, 2000): 721; Wilhelm Mueller, “Berlin, Ende August 1933,” AEA, UI2, no. 0113. The German and Austrian churches have since publicly apologized, as noted in Mark A. Kellner, “Europe: German, Austrian Churches Apologize for Holocaust Actions,” Adventist New Network, August 15, 2005, <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2005-08-15/europe-german-austrian-churches-apologize-for-holocaust-actions/>.

2. Harvard Women’s Health Watch, “Becoming a Vegetarian,” Harvard Health Publishing, updated December 4, 2017, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/becoming-a-vegetarian>.

3. Marco Springmann et al., “Analysis and Valuation of the Health and Climate Change Co-benefits of Dietary Change,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 15 (April 12, 2016), <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/15/4146>.

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Eccles. 7:20;
Eph. 4:1, 2

Exploration

Same Storybook, Just a Different Page

CONCLUDE

“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Eccles. 7:20, ESV). All of us are in need of a savior. All of us need help at times. We are the body of Christ—created beautifully to support each other without pride or looking down on one another. And what an honor it is to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. “Walk . . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:1, 2, ESV). That “small” act of compassion could make all the difference in the world. So let’s actively look to see how we can make a positive difference.

CONSIDER

- Looking for a local chapter of Amnesty International. This organization is a great way to be behind the scenes for the cause of social justice and meet other people with similar interests. “Through petitions, letters and protests, campaigners worldwide press for action from the people and institutions who can make change happen.”¹
- Working together as a group to serve people in your community. There are plenty of traditional ways to be of service. But brainstorm creatively. For example, one church group went to a grocery store (in an area with lower incomes) and used the money they had raised to surprise customers by buying their groceries.
- Praying a special prayer every morning for the next week. Ask God for a giving and willing spirit to have your eyes and heart open to the people you come in contact with and how to make their day extra special.
- Serving the people closest to you. It’s easy to forget to show special attention to our own family and roommates. Surprise someone close to you with a special dinner or act of kindness that they would especially appreciate.
- Searching at a local bookstore or online for a good read that will help inspire you to action in the world around you.
- Getting people together for a movie night and watching an inspirational documentary about people making a difference in other countries, such as the 2013 documentary *Blood Brother*.

CONNECT

Proverbs 3:7; 29:23; 31:8, 9; Isaiah 1:17; Zechariah 7:9, 10; Matthew 25:31–46; Colossians 3:12.

Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, chap. 79, “It Is Finished.”

1. Amnesty International, “What We Do,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/>.