

The Christian Life



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 8:11–17; Phil. 2:3, 4; 1 Cor. 15:51, 52; Rev. 22:1–5; Matt. 22:39; Gen. 2:21–25.*

Memory Text: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (*1 John 3:16, NKJV*).

Key Thought: Anyone can call himself or herself a Christian. What, though, does that mean in practical terms?

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?” (*James 2:14, NLT*).

The Bible emphasizes “sound doctrine,” but this emphasis is in the context of holy living (*1 Tim. 1:10, Titus 2:1–5*) in order to point out that the true goal of biblical teaching is an ethical life, one that is manifested in obligations to others. In fact, if you look carefully at those texts in Timothy and Titus, they link sound doctrine with correct living *as if correct living itself is sound doctrine!*

The Christian is saved in order to be God's agent for the salvation and good of others amidst the great controversy between good and evil. To be “so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good,” however much a cliché, does represent a reality that Christians need to avoid. Certainly, heaven is our ultimate home, but for now we're still on earth, and we need to know how to live while here.

This week we'll look at how some practical, “hands-on” Christianity should be manifest in our lives.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 15.*

Stewardship

When we think about salvation translating into service to others, we cannot avoid the Christian concept of stewardship. *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* defines *stewardship* as “the responsibility of God’s people for, and use of, everything entrusted to them by God—life, physical being, time, talents and abilities, material possessions, opportunities to be of service to others, and their knowledge of truth.”

Look at the following passages. With each one ask yourself, given my particular circumstances, how can I manifest in my own life the wonderful principles taught in these texts? How should these truths impact the way I live and how I relate to others, to God, and to the gifts that He has given me?

Deut. 8:11–17 _____

Ps. 24:1 _____

Phil. 2:3, 4 _____

1 John 3:16 _____

The Bible teaches that the fundamental purpose for all of God’s creation is to glorify Him. Sin derailed this reality in a very big way, but God directed His saving action toward us in order to bring us back to participate with all creation in glorifying Him. Christ purchased us for the sake of God’s glory (*Eph. 1:11–14*). It is as we acknowledge in both word and deed the complete lordship of Christ over our lives that we bring glory to God. The complete expression of Christ’s lordship over our lives will involve our service to others through the use of our time, talents, abilities, and material possessions.

Read again the texts for today. Which ones touch you the most, and why? What motivates you to try to live a life that involves seeking the good of others, as well as your own good? Why is it so important for you, spiritually, to live for others?

Tithe: A Mere Pittance

“And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house. For the children of Israel and the children”
(*Neh. 10:38, 39*).

Think about your life; think about the brevity of it; think about the utter inevitability of your death (unless Christ returns in your lifetime). Think what it would mean if, as many believe, the grave is the ultimate end. You’re here, a spasm of cellular metabolism that does its thing (often in pain, hardship, fear), and then ends; one way or another, when all those cells die, nothing’s left but a carcass on which bugs and bacteria feed until they also expire.

Such would be the fate of all of us in a universe so large that our planet, much less our individual lives, could appear to be so meaningless as to be nothing but a cruel joke that most of us don’t find funny.

In contrast to that scenario, look at what we have been given in Christ. Look at what has been offered to us through Jesus. Look at what the plan of salvation tells us about our worth and about what was done for us so that we don’t have to meet the fate pictured above.

What have we been given in Christ? *1 Cor. 15:51, 52; Rev. 21:4; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:6, 7; Rev. 22:1–5. What should these things mean to us? How should these promises impact every aspect of our existence?*

“I speak of the tithing system, yet how meager it looks to my mind! How small the estimate! How vain the endeavor to measure with mathematical rules, time, money, and love against a love and sacrifice that is measureless and incomputable! Tithes for Christ! Oh, meager pittance, shameful recompense for that which cost so much! From the cross of Calvary, Christ calls for an unconditional surrender.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, pp. 119, 120.

After all that Christ has done for you, can you not exercise enough faith and give back to Him a mere pittance of what you’ve been given?

The Responsibility to One's Self

Jesus tells us very clearly that “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (*Matt. 22:39*). This is a very interesting text in light of the idea that we often look at love for self as the height of all that is opposed both to Christianity and to the idea of disinterested selflessness. What did Jesus mean by this text? How do we interpret and apply it in a way that reflects what true Christianity should be about?

Love of self, in the Christian sense, isn't selfishness; it isn't putting yourself first before everyone and anything else. On the contrary, love for self means that, upon realizing your own worth before God, you seek to live the best possible life, knowing that the results of such a life will be a benefit not just to yourself (which is fine) but also, and even more important, to those with whom you come in contact.

How would you relate Jesus' admonition above to the following texts?

Phil. 2:5, 8 _____

2 Cor. 5:14, 15 _____

1 Cor. 10:31–33 _____

1 Pet. 1:13–16 _____

The redemption that the sinner obtains in Christ brings about such unity with Him (*Gal. 2:20*) that the Christian desires to live a life that is ordered after Christ's impulses. The sinner desires to have Christ's mind, to live no longer for one's self but for Him, and to heed the call to holiness (separation from such things as our passions, the sinful trends in culture, and moral impurity). If you love yourself, you want what's best for you; and what's best for you is a life that is committed to God, a life that reflects the character and love of God, a life that is lived not for self but for the good of others. The surest way to guarantee yourself a miserable existence is to live only for self, never thinking of the good of others.

Dwell more on what it means to love yourself in the Christian sense. How easy is it for this kind of love to degenerate into a self-destructive self-centeredness? What's the only way to protect yourself from this trap?

Christian Marriage

Humans are social beings. At home and work and in public and civic places, people are involved in all kinds of relationships. Responsible Christian behavior ought to be evident at all these levels, and the Bible has relevant principles by which to guide these relationships.

Study the following Bible passages in order to come up with a biblical definition of marriage: *Gen. 2:21–25, Mal. 2:14, Eph. 5:28.*

To define something is to provide its meaning. Today it is said that marriage is difficult to define because the meaning of marriage differs for different people, times, and cultures. The Bible, however, has no such flexible idea of marriage. According to the Bible, marriage is an institution put in place by God, in which two adults of different gender covenant to share an intimate and lasting personal relationship. Biblical marriage is marked by an appreciation of the equality of the male and female, a deep bond of unity where goals are blended and a sense of permanence and faithfulness and trust. As with a relationship with God, the relationship between a husband and a wife should be sacredly guarded.

Of course, as we know all too well, marriage, even within the church, has become something that's often treated lightly. People enter into a union that they believe God has created, and then, when things get rough, they stand before a human judge who, through man-made laws and rules, separates what God has united. We all know that something is terribly wrong with this picture; yet, as a church, we struggle with what to do in these situations.

Together with issues of polygamy, cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, and the practice of homosexuality, what challenges of human sexuality can you identify in today's society? What biblically based counsel can you bring to bear on these issues?

Adultery, fornication, and pornography abound in society today, and these are hardly the worst of things that are out there. Nevertheless, God continues to look on human failings with compassion and tender mercy. Yet, these practices remain failings that can be overcome through the grace of Christ. Therefore, redemptive efforts must aim high in order to attain God's ideals—as opposed to seeking to justify and excuse sin through a host of excuses and cultural qualifications.

Christian Behavior

Beyond the family, the Christian has other social and professional involvements—a clear recognition of the biblical view that Christians are in the world but not of the world (*John 17:14–18*).

Consider the following three areas of daily life and discuss the Christian’s responsibilities in regard to lifestyle and behavior:

1. Employer/Employee Relations (*James 5:4–6, Eph. 6:5–9*). Apart from regarding employees as equals in Christ, the Christian employer must be guided by the principle that adequate work requires adequate compensation. On the other hand, Christian workers also ought to resist the temptation to be slothful at work.

“Parents cannot commit a greater sin than to allow their children to have nothing to do. The children soon learn to love idleness, and they grow up shiftless, useless men and women. When they are old enough to earn their living, and find employment, they work in a lazy, droning way, yet expect to be paid as much as if they were faithful.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ Object Lessons*, p. 345.

2. Civic Duties (*Rom. 13:1–7*). The Christian places God first in all things and evaluates all actions and responsibilities from this perspective. For this reason the Christian will, for example, oppose discrimination in any form, even if it is officially sanctioned. At the same time, “loyalty to God first does not entitle anyone to become autonomous and create social disharmony or chaos. Christians pay taxes, participate in civic duties, respect traffic laws and property regulations, and cooperate with civil authorities in curbing or controlling crime and violence.”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), p. 701.

3. Social Responsibility (*Isa. 61:1–3, Matt. 25:31–46*). Discuss the following statement in the light of the passages above: “The Christian can exercise his calling to seek the kingdom of God if, motivated by love of neighbor, he carries on his work in the moral communities of family and economic, national, and political life. . . . Only by engaging in civic work for the sake of the common good, by faithfulness in one’s social calling, is it possible to be true to the example of Christ.”—H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 97.

In your work and social interactions, are people able to detect your Christian values? Be honest with yourself (no matter how painful that might be!). Which aspects of your life, if any, draw people to your faith? What does your answer tell you about the way in which you live?

Further Study: Read Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, chapters 22, 23, in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*; Miroslav M. Kis, “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior,” pp. 675–723, in Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.

“Acts of generosity and benevolence were designed by God to keep the hearts of the children of men tender and sympathetic, and to encourage in them an interest and affection for one another in imitation of the Master, who for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich. The law of tithing was founded upon an enduring principle and was designed to be a blessing to man.

“The system of benevolence was arranged to prevent that great evil, covetousness. Christ saw that in the prosecution of business the love of riches would be the greatest cause of rooting true godliness out of the heart. He saw that the love of money would freeze deep and hard into men’s souls, stopping the flow of generous impulses and closing their senses to the wants of the suffering and the afflicted.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 547.

“If one has health and strength, that is his capital, and he must make a right use of it. If he spends hours in idleness and needless visiting and talking, he is slothful in business, which God’s word forbids. Such have a work to do to provide for their own families, and then lay by them in store for charitable purposes as God has prospered them.

“We are not placed in this world merely to care for ourselves, but we are required to aid in the great work of salvation, thus imitating the self-denying, self-sacrificing, useful life of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 325.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The issue of marriage and divorce is of great concern, as it ought to be, in view of the fact that divorce is so rampant in certain countries. How do we apply the clear teaching of the Bible when addressing this topic? If we applied the teachings of Jesus more strictly, would people be less inclined to divorce? Discuss this difficult issue.
- ❷ Dwell more on the whole question of tithing. Some argue that they should be able to give tithe to whom they choose, instead of through the channels of the organized church body of which they are members. What’s the great danger of that attitude?
- ❸ As a church, we cannot ignore all the biblical admonitions regarding the caretaking of the poor and the needy among us. No one who calls himself or herself Christian can ignore this mandate. At the same time, what are the pitfalls of our calling if caretaking becomes our primary focus or the end point as opposed to the means to a greater end? Discuss.

The Compelling Message

Maria grew up in Poland. As a teenager Maria searched for God, but she didn't find what she was looking for. Eventually she returned to her parents' church and immersed herself in its practices, hoping for spiritual fulfillment.

As she read the Bible, she discovered many texts that raised questions in her mind. The book of Revelation posed the greatest challenge, but her priest couldn't answer her questions.

Maria's husband wanted to leave Poland, which didn't have enough television stations to satisfy him. Maria wanted to stay near her grandchildren in Poland. So, she began searching for some television stations her husband might like.

As she flipped through the channels, a program caught her attention. The speaker was discussing the book of Revelation. She watched the program with great interest and tuned in again the next day to hear more. She heard sermons that challenged her long-held beliefs and sent her searching her Bible to verify what the speaker was saying. She realized that everything he said was supported by the Bible.

Maria realized that the church of her childhood, the church she loved so dearly, was not following the Bible. She stayed home from church that Sunday, but she didn't know what to do with herself. She turned on the radio and was surprised to hear a worship service broadcast from a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Warsaw, the capital city. She enjoyed the worship and felt spiritually refreshed. At the end of the broadcast, the announcer said that the pastor was waiting to take listeners' calls. Maria dialed the number and talked to the pastor.

She asked so many questions! When she asked why she should believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the true church, he said simply, "Base your faith on the Bible; follow it alone."

She continued watching the television program she had found and realized that it was a Seventh-day Adventist program. By the following Sabbath, Maria was convinced that God was leading her to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She found the church and recognized it as one she had visited as a teenager. "I hadn't been ready to accept the Sabbath as a teenager, but on the day I returned, I accepted all the Bible truths I had been hearing. I love this church and the truths that I have found here. It's such a precious message."

Your mission offerings help to support Adventist radio and television broadcasts that are reaching people around the world.

MARIA BARTOK *shares her newfound faith in her homeland, Poland.*