

Jesus' Teachings *and the* Great Controversy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 11:29; Rom. 4:1–6; Matt. 13:3–8, 18–23; Matt. 7:21–27; James 2:17; Matt. 7:1–5.*

Memory Text: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (*Matthew 11:28, NIV*).

When we think of the great controversy theme, we tend to think of it in grand, overarching terms. That is, it's a big-picture view. It can be called a “meta-narrative,” a story that covers and explains a large portion of reality, as opposed to a local narrative or story that explains something much more limited in scope. For instance, Paul Revere's famous ride is a local narrative, in contrast to the much grander and larger one of the American Revolution itself.

And yet, however grand and all-encompassing the great controversy theme is, and however immense the issues, it is played out daily, here on earth, in our own lives, in how we relate to God, to temptation, and to others. Just as people's daily existence is impacted, sometimes to a great degree by the grander and bigger events of politics and economics, each of us faces the same from the great controversy, as well.

In this week's lesson, we will look at some of Jesus' teachings on very down-to-earth and practical matters as we all struggle to know and do God's will amid the great controversy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 13.

Many Kinds of Rest

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (*Matt. 11:29, NKJV*).

How does taking His “yoke” bring rest to our souls?

This offer points to a personal dimension amid the much larger one of Jesus’ mission to free people from the enemy. His words are actually adapted from Jeremiah, who promises people rest for their souls if they return to the religion of their fathers, instead of the paganism of the surrounding nations (*Jer. 6:16*).

The concept of rest is very rich in Scripture. It starts with God Himself. He rested when He finished His work of Creation (*Gen. 2:2*). His rest ushered in a Sabbath rest that was celebrated weekly. Rest was also celebrated through the year during the annual feasts (*for example, Lev. 16:31*), every seven years in the “Sabbath of the land” (*Exod. 23:11*), and every 50 years in the jubilee, when slaves were freed and debts forgiven (*Lev. 25:10*).

Rest could be appreciated when God was present with His people (*Exod. 33:14*), where there was neither “‘adversary nor evil occurrence’” (*1 Kings 5:4, NKJV*), nor an enemy (*Deut. 25:19*). Rest was enjoyed in the land that God gave His people (*Josh. 1:13*), especially when the people returned from captivity and exile (*Jer. 30:10*). Rest was also shared in hospitality with strangers (*Gen. 18:4*) and in enjoying stable family life (*Ruth 1:9, Prov. 29:17*).

However, rest is absent for God’s people in captivity (*Exod. 5:4, 5, Lam. 1:3*). Rest escapes the wicked, who like the troubled sea, cannot rest (*Isa. 57:20*). The only rest that such people can look forward to is death and the grave (*Job 3:11, 13, 16, 17, 18*). Revelation 14:11 also has a powerful warning about rest for those on the wrong side of the great controversy in the last days.

The rest Jesus offers is a very generous package. It includes the gift of the Sabbath, allowing us time out with the Creator. Christ’s offer of rest recognizes our lost condition and restores us in every way. And when we slip up (as we do), we still have the assurance of a place of rest at our Savior’s side.

What are ways, besides the Sabbath, that we can learn to enjoy the rest that God offers us? How do we find rest for our souls in Jesus? See also Rom. 4:1–6.

Planting and Harvesting

The great controversy theme is implicit in Jesus' parable of the sower. The listing of four types of responses to the gospel message indicates that there are more than just "good" and "bad" people in the world. Life is more complex than that, and so we need to be careful how we approach those who don't seem to respond to the gospel as we think they should.

Read Matthew 13:3–8 and then Matthew 13:18–23. In what ways can we so clearly see the reality of the great controversy revealed in this story?

The battle for souls is real, and the enemy uses whatever means he can to turn people away from salvation. For instance, in the context of the seed falling by the wayside, Ellen G. White wrote: "Satan and his angels are in the assemblies where the gospel is preached. While angels of heaven endeavor to impress hearts with the word of God, the enemy is on the alert to make the word of no effect. With an earnestness equaled only by his malice, he tries to thwart the work of the Spirit of God. While Christ is drawing the soul by His love, Satan tries to turn away the attention of the one who is moved to seek the Saviour."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 44.

One could ask, *Why couldn't the farmer be more careful and not waste seed by throwing it on the path? Why couldn't he be more diligent in digging out the rocks? Why didn't he pull more weeds?*

When sowing gospel seed, human effort is always limited. We must sow everywhere. We are not the judge of what is good and bad soil. The appearance of weeds simply indicates that we are just unable to prevent evil from springing up in the least expected places. It is the Lord of the harvest working in the background who ensures that all who can be saved will be saved. We do our job and must learn to trust Him to do His.

What are ways we see the reality of this parable? Why do we sometimes see people, just newly baptized, walk out the door? Or others who simply show no interest at all? Or those who become firmly grounded in the faith?

Building on Rock

The issue of where we stand in the cosmic struggle that unfolds around us is made very personal in the parable of the man building a house on the rock.

Read Matthew 7:21–27. What is so frightening about this parable?

What comes to mind when you imagine this story? Where is the rock and where is the sand? For some people, sand is found only at the beach, but this story is probably not about a seaside residence. The more likely place is among the gentle rolling hills upon which most villages were located, at the side of a valley somewhere.

Jesus describes two houses; one built just on the surface while the other has foundations going down to bedrock (*Luke 6:48*). There is no way to tell the difference between the two completed houses until it rains up in the hills, and a flash flood roars down the valley. For one of the home builders that is not a problem, for the house is firmly anchored; but for the other there is a problem. Without a secure foundation, the house just built on the surface is easy prey to the swirling floodwaters.

Jesus shared this parable because He knew how much we fool ourselves. There is a serious struggle going on, and unaided, we have no possibility of surviving it. Jesus has prevailed against evil, and that is why He is called the Rock.

This personal battle against evil can be won, but only if we build our lives firmly upon Him, and we can build upon Him only through obedience to Him. “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock” (*Matt. 7:24*). It’s that simple. However much faith is a crucial component—faith without works, the Bible says, is “dead” (*see James 2:17, 20, 26*), and in this parable we see just how dead it really is.

Read Matthew 7:22, 23. Casting out demons in Jesus’ name or making prophecies in His name all reveal some kind of “faith” held by these people. And yet, what was their fate? Ask yourself, upon what foundation is your house built, and how do you know the answer?

Do Not Judge

Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount in the early days of His ministry. It was revolutionary. For starters, He told ordinary people that they were valued and blessed in the eyes of God (*Matt. 5:3–12*) and that they were salt (*Matt. 5:13*) and light (*Matt. 5:14–16*)—two highly prized commodities. He spoke of the importance of God’s law (*Matt. 5:17–19*) yet warned of trying to impress others with their own good behavior (*Matt. 5:20*). Jesus further pointed out that morality is determined by what a person thinks, not just by his or her actions (*Matt. 5:21–28*), although actions must be guarded, as well (*Matt. 5:29, 30*). As one reads through the entire sermon, it can be seen that He covered the whole gamut of human existence and relationships (*see Matt. 5–7:27*).

Read Matthew 7:1–5. In what ways is the reality of the great controversy revealed in these texts? That is, how is the interplay between good and evil manifested here?

“ ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’ Do not think yourself better than other men, and set yourself up as their judge. Since you cannot discern motive, you are incapable of judging another. In criticizing him, you are passing sentence upon yourself; for you show that you are a participant with Satan, the accuser of the brethren. The Lord says, ‘Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.’ This is our work.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 314.

When Jesus told His audience not to judge, He made two important points. The first is that the reason we judge others is because we do the very same thing we are condemning (*Matt. 7:1, 2*). We take the attention off ourselves and ensure that everyone around us is looking at the person we condemn rather than at us.

The other point Jesus makes is that often the problem we see in our brother or sister is only a fraction of the size of our own problem—a problem that we may not even be aware of. It is so easy for us to see a piece of sawdust in their eye, but we are unable to see the great wooden beam in our own.

What’s the difference between judging a person and judging the rightness or wrongness of their actions, and why is that a very important distinction to make?

“I Am With You Always”

Matthew ends his Gospel account with some of the most reassuring words Jesus spoke: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (*Matt. 28:20*). What should that mean to us, in practical terms, in our own lives, in our own struggles, failures, and disappointments, and even when we feel that God has let us down?

It is interesting that Matthew commences his Gospel with similar words. After listing all the forebearers, and the account of an angel visiting first Mary then Joseph, Matthew explains that the baby to be born would be Emmanuel, God with us (*Matt. 1:23*).

God made the promise, “I will be with you,” a number of times in Scripture. He promised to be with Isaac (*Gen. 26:24*), with Jacob (*Gen. 28:15*), with Jeremiah (*Jer. 1:8, 19*), and with the children of Israel (*Isa. 41:10, 43:5*). The context of many of these references is during times of hardship and duress, when God’s words would be most relevant.

A parallel verse uses similar words: “ ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’ ” (*Heb. 13:5, NKJV*). Just a few verses later it adds, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (*Heb. 13:8, NKJV*). This promise, too, is repeated a number of times. It actually comes from the occasion when Moses hands leadership over to Joshua (*Deut. 31:6, 8*), and God repeats the phrase to Joshua after the death of Moses, “ ‘I will not leave you nor forsake you’ ” (*Josh. 1:5, NKJV*). When David passes on the kingdom to Solomon, he likewise tells Solomon that God will not leave nor forsake Solomon (*1 Chron. 28:20*).

Jesus, who never changes, who is always with us, gave strong assurance to our forefathers of the faith. They faced hardship and trial or were about to embark on the greatest challenge of their life; yet, they were assured of God’s continued presence.

To the church of Christ at the end of time, these assurances are significant. Jesus’ promise of being with us to the very end is in the context of making disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching. So, that is where the focus is—on the joy of rescuing people from ending up on the losing side in the great controversy.

Further Thought: Author Leon Wieseltier wrote about what he said was “one of the saddest stories in the world.” He told of an Englishman, named “S.B.,” who had been blind from birth. However, the good news was that, at 52 years old, S.B. had a corneal transplant that gave him sight. For the first time in his life, S.B. was able to see! It must have been incredibly exciting for him to finally see the world that had unfolded all around him his whole life but was, literally, out of sight. However, Wieseltier then quotes the source in which he first read the story. S.B., said the author, “found the world drab, and was upset by flaking paint and blemishes. . . . He noted more and more the imperfections in things, and would examine small irregularities and marks in paintwork or wood, which he found upsetting, evidently expecting a more perfect world. He liked bright colours, but became depressed when the light faded. His depression became marked and general. He gradually gave up active living, and three years later he died.”—www.newrepublic.com/article/113312. Wow! Though hard to understand on one level, on another it’s not. Our world is a damaged place. The great controversy has been raging here for about six thousand years. A 6,000-year war is going to leave a lot of wreckage in its wake. And despite all our attempts to make this world better, the trajectory doesn’t seem to be heading in the right direction. In fact, it’s going to get only worse. That’s why we need the promise of Redemption, which comes to us only from Christ’s victory in the great controversy, a victory secured at the cross and offered freely to us all.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What lessons can you take away for yourself from the story of S.B.?
- 2 As we saw in Tuesday’s study, those who said, “Lord, Lord, have we not” done this and that in your name were, as we said, believers in Jesus. At the same time, notice the emphasis of their response. Who were they focusing on? What were they focusing on? How does the answer here reveal why they were so self-deceived?
- 3 If you have a friend or family member doing something obviously wrong, how do you deal with this problem in a way that, first, isn’t judgmental and, second, doesn’t *appear* judgmental?

The Great Controversy in the Drug Dealer's Home

Luis belonged to a rock band in the Brazilian city of Jequié. He and his friends often indulged in harmful drugs in their search for pleasure.

One day, while in the home of a drug dealer, Luis found a copy of *The Great Controversy*. After leafing hurriedly through the book, he asked permission to borrow it. Luis found the subject intriguing. While he and his friends smoked marijuana, they took turns reading the book aloud to each other. Some of the guys liked what they read, others did not. Florisvaldo, a spiritualist, especially enjoyed the book.

One day, three of the friends climbed a hill then sat down to smoke and read the Bible together with *The Great Controversy*. Suddenly, Florisvaldo began to shout, "I don't want the Bible!" Recognizing that Florisvaldo was possessed by an evil spirit, the other friend ran away in fright. But Luis kept on reading. He paused only long enough to ask his friend to think on the name of Jesus. Soon the evil spirit left him.

Realizing that his friend needed help, Luis persuaded Florisvaldo to go with him to a Seventh-day Adventist church. While there, both young men enjoyed a sermon preached by a lay member. Later they attended an Adventist youth camp, where they studied the Bible with other young people and gave themselves completely to Jesus.

Unable to keep his new joy to himself, Luis sent a copy of *The Great Controversy* to his cousin Thomas, a journalism student studying in the coastal city of Salvador. Being an avid reader, Thomas sped through the book with mounting interest. About halfway through, he felt condemned because of his sinful life. But he couldn't put down the book until he found out how the story ended. His conviction only intensified as he read the final chapters.

When vacation time came, Thomas went to Jequié to visit his cousin. Luis told Thomas much about his new faith and took him to church. Gladly Thomas accepted Jesus and His promise of forgiveness. But he now faced another conflict—his girlfriend was against his interest in religion.

One night, while staying in the home of an aunt, Thomas dreamed he saw Jesus veiled in brilliant light. The next morning, Thomas gave his life completely to Christ. His habits changed. He broke up with his girlfriend and began preparing for baptism. Luis rejoiced to see his cousin and several members of his rock band baptized. Ten people were baptized as a result of the working of the Holy Spirit through a copy of *The Great Controversy* found in the home of a drug dealer.

Today, Florisvaldo, the former spiritualist, serves God as a literature evangelist, and Thomas became a Seventh-day Adventist minister.

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