

2021
GOD FIRST
STEWARDSHIP REVIVAL WEEK

John 4:34

My food is to do the will of my father.

Plan

THEME	TITLE	TEXT
God First by taking time to worship	My Father's Business	Luke 2:41-49
God First by putting others first	The Walls Must Fall	Luke 19:1-9
God First by caring for oneself	Bought with A Price	Luke 9:10, 28
God First by ministering to others	Facilitators of a New Vision	Luke 18:35-43
God First by keeping the Sabbath	The God First Day	Luke 6:6-10
God First by acknowledging God as Lord	The Deal of a Lifetime	Luke 20:9-19
God First through sacrificial offerings	Generous ... Even When it Hurts	Luke 21:1-4

DAY 1

Theme: God First by taking time to worship

Title: My Father's Business

Bible Text: Luke 2:41-49

My Father's Business

It was common in ancient times for a son to learn and follow his father's trade. If your dad was a fisherman, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a farmer, or a priest, then it was most likely that you would become one. Things have changed greatly today. My dad was a chef and I'm not proud to say that I only know how to fry eggs, prepare instant noodles, and put together a mixed salad. Thank God, this was not so with Jesus; He was committed to His Father's business. We read in Luke 2: 49, "And He said to them, 'Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?'" (NKJV). In His view, doing His Father's business was not optional; it was a duty which He desired to fulfill. Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem for three days to do His Father's business. What can we learn from the twelve-year-old Jesus about doing our Father's business?

My Father's Business

It is interesting to note that the word "business" is not present in the original text. It was added by translators to bring a clearer meaning to the words of Jesus. Otherwise, the literal translation would read "in the of My father." Basing themselves on the context, translators have found it fit to add the word "things": "in the (things) of My Father." This addition leads to two possible translations: "In My Father's business" or "In My Father's house." Translations which use "In My Father's business," focus on the *actions* in which Jesus was involved. Translations which use "In My Father's house," focus on the *place* where Jesus spent those three days. For a complete understanding of "My Father's business," we will retain both meanings: Jesus was in His Father's house and doing His Father's work.

Sitting, Listening, Asking

When we think of young Jesus doing His Father's business, we usually think of Him answering questions and sharing His knowledge with the priests and listeners. However, this episode of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple provides a more comprehensive description of Jesus doing His Father's business. We read in Luke 2: 46-47: "*Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.*" (NKJV)

Verse 47 speaks about Jesus' actions: He was sharing His knowledge and answering questions. However, the description of Jesus doing his Father's business starts with verse 46. Luke employs another group of verbs: sitting,

listening, and asking, not teaching and answering. Was he sitting more than acting? Listening more than talking? Asking more than answering? We don't know. But all this was part of doing His Father's business. It was a full package. Doing the Father's business has two components: acting on behalf of the Father and being in the presence of the Father.

Usually, when we talk about acting on the Father's behalf, we refer to teaching, preaching, healing, and giving. However, I invite us to focus for a moment on being in the presence of the Father through sitting, listening, and asking.

Sitting

This word, sitting, conveys the idea of Jesus observing, contemplating, and meditating on what was happening around him. Ellen White comments on the posture of Jesus: "Silent and absorbed, He seemed to be studying out a great problem. The mystery of His mission was opening to the Saviour...He sought to be alone" (*Desire of Ages*, 55). Such a posture is not popular in the bustling world of our contemporary culture. Today, we compliment busy doers, eloquent speakers, and those surrounded or followed by crowds. Our values are so different from Jesus'! He sat down in silence, absorbed in meditation, alone with his Father. He did His Father's business by not being hurried, but by first sitting down.

Sitting still, or being still in His presence, is an essential element of doing our Father's business. The prophet Habakuk invites us to join Jesus in this experience: "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab. 2:20, NIV). We read in Psalms 46:10, "He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' "

Listening

Jesus also did His Father's business by spending time listening to the teachings of the scribes and doctors of the law. The verb "listening" implies the intention to comprehend and learn, not just to hear what was said. In those days, a chamber of the temple was set apart for public learning. Some students would sit on a low bench, with the youngest on the ground, literally "at the feet" of their instructor. As a twelve-year-old boy, that was probably where Jesus was. Ellen White describes His attitude in these words: "Jesus presented Himself as one thirsting for a knowledge of God" (*Desire of Ages*, 55).

Jesus as the Word of life and as the incarnated Wisdom was setting an example for all His followers: "thirsting for a knowledge of God." Are we listening and craving for a deeper knowledge of God or are we satisfied with a shallow and superficial knowledge acquired years ago?

Luke 11:28 tells us about the main point Jesus was making in telling the parable of the two builders, where one built on the sand and the other one built on the rock: “He replied, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’ ” Hearing the word of God, and then doing it, were the criteria used by Jesus to distinguish between the wise and the foolish. The book of Revelation opens by telling the importance of listening to God’s word as we near the end of time: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (Revelation 1:3).

Asking

The one who asks questions is usually seeking for deeper knowledge and looking for clarification or understanding. Asking is a quest to learn more. Ellen White shares the nature of Jesus’ questions: “As one seeking for wisdom, He questioned these teachers in regard to the prophecies, and to events then taking place that pointed to the advent of the Messiah” (*Desire of Ages*, 55).

God is inviting us to engage with Him for deeper knowledge. We read in Jeremiah 33:3, “This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it—the Lord is his name: ‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.’”

The experience of the prophet Daniel, chosen right after Jeremiah, tells us how God is committed to answer our questions when we dare ask. Daniel said, “While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, ‘Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding’ ” (Daniel 9:21-22). Ask, says God, and I will reveal My mysteries to you.

Today, we need clarity about the time in which we are living, as did Daniel. How do we make sense of all the events happening around us? Ask God and He will provide insight and understanding.

At twelve years old, in the temple of Jerusalem, Jesus first chose to sit, listen and ask. This is how He went about His Father’s business.

Seeking His Presence

What could have motivated Jesus, a twelve-year teenage boy to remain behind while His parents and friends proceeded back to Nazareth? He missed the fun and camaraderie of the journey so that He could be in the temple. Unlike Jesus, we so easily complain about missing some fun because we have to spend some few hours in church or being in God’s presence. I better understand the choice Jesus made when I read the words of the psalmist:

“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Psalms 84:10). According to this psalm, the temple was the place of choice, not because of the fine marbles and precious stones, but because it was “your dwelling place Lord Almighty” (v.1). Jesus longed for the presence of God, for intimacy with His Father. This is why He remained behind.

Psalm 84 uses another image, a geographical image, to justify the choice of being in God’s temple: “As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools” (v. 6). Baca was actually a valley near Jerusalem—and Baca also means the place of weeping. Those who have the temple experience are empowered to transform realities, even harsh realities, in both their personal lives and in the lives of others. Their actions are compared to refreshing springs and autumn rains that bring new life. Are people weeping over challenging life circumstances, losses, and sickness? Those who sit, listen, and ask are a source of comfort, encouragement, hope and inspiration. This was Jesus’ mission, and it is our mission too.

Conclusion

Jesus was involved in doing His Father’s business through teaching, preaching, serving, and offering Himself. This is a good description of His public life, but it is not a full picture of Him doing His Father’s business. He also sat, listened, and asked. This was the foundation for his ministry and self-sacrificing service. Jesus shows us that to accomplish our Father’s business we must first sit, listen, and commune with the Father. The more we contemplate, listen, and pray, the more we are transformed into the image of the Father. May this be our experience throughout the “God First” Stewardship Emphasis Week.

Going Deeper

- What is your own experience with sitting, listening, and asking during your life’s journey?
- What obstacles could be preventing us from engaging in the sitting, listening, and asking experience? How could we overcome those obstacles?

My Promise Today:

DAY 2

Theme: God First by putting others first

Title: The Walls Must Fall

Bible Passage: Luke 19:1-9

The Walls Must Fall

The story of Zacchaeus of Jericho is a story of fallen walls. Luke 19:1-8 talks about how the walls of separations in the life of Zacchaeus were broken down, and how relationships between himself and God and between himself and others were restored. His story is full of instruction for anyone aspiring for better relationships.

Zacchaeus and the Fortified City

Zacchaeus was living in an ancient city, the very first city conquered after Joshua and the Israelites had crossed the Jordan river. It was a historical place. The city was once again popular during the time of Zacchaeus. Herod the Great established a winter residence at Jericho, and he died there in 4 BCE. The city was a regional, economic hub due to the production of dates, wine, spices, and perfumes. The strategic location of the city, in the midst of ancient Palestine's network of roads, was responsible for much of its popularity. Merchants, soldiers, and pilgrims would pass by through Jericho, and Zacchaeus, a tax collector, took advantage of this situation.

This is how the Gospel of Luke introduces Zacchaeus: "A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy" (Lk 19:2). His name reveals that he was of Jewish origin, but by profession he was a Roman official. This put him in an ambiguous and difficult position. Jews considered him a traitor and hated him. He wasn't allowed to participate in the community life of the local synagogue. He was excluded both socially and religiously. Why would a person want to endure such rejection? The answer could be found in the last description of Zacchaeus: he was a "wealthy" man. He sacrificed his social relationships for the sake of money and material possessions.

Apparently, Zacchaeus was successful in his career and in his objective of getting rich. He rose to the rank of chief tax collector. He was achiever Zacchaeus. With all that wealth and success, we would expect Zacchaeus to be happy. Yet, it seems that something was missing in his life. He wanted to fill an emptiness he felt inside. We read in verses 3 and 4 "*He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*"

Ellen G. White explains the desire of Zacchaeus to see Jesus in these words: "Yet the wealthy customs officer was not altogether the hardened man of the world that he seemed. Beneath the appearance of worldliness and pride was a heart susceptible to divine influences ... The chief publican longed to look upon the face of Him whose words had brought hope to his heart" (*Desire of Ages*, 477-478). His money and riches could not take away his hopelessness. Zacchaeus was aspiring for some relationship other than the one he had with material things.

According to the text above, Zacchaeus had to overcome two obstacles to establish this new relationship: his short height and the thick and hostile crowd. Quality relationships always come at a cost. For Zacchaeus, it was running and climbing the tree in his robe.

Jesus the Wall Puller

The walls of Jericho fell centuries ago when Joshua and his army walked around them for seven days. We can assume Zacchaeus had pulled down some walls in his own life, walls such as illiteracy and poverty. However, the relational wall was still thick and high, with no hope of it falling down. He did not enjoy quality relationship nor with people around him and neither with God. Being in the sycamore tree was a good starting point, but it was not sufficient to pull down the wall that separated Zacchaeus from others. The visit of Jesus to Jericho would mark a turning point.

Zacchaeus was aiming at establishing a distant and impersonal relationship with Jesus from the top of his tree. But Jesus had a better offer for him in verse 5: “When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today’ ” (Luke 19:5). Jesus offered him a close and personal relationship. That was Zacchaeus’ real but unexpressed aspiration, and he came down from his tree. The Spirit of prophecy comments on the response of Zacchaeus: “The multitude give way, and Zacchaeus, walking as in a dream, leads the way toward his own home” (*Desire of Ages*, 478). Jesus knew the road to Zacchaeus’ house, but he wanted Zacchaeus to lead the way and, as a gentleman, He didn’t force His way in. Zacchaeus had to open the door.

Later in the day, Jesus talked about the reason for His visit to Zacchaeus house. We read in v.9, “Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’ ” There are two essential pieces of information in this passage. Jesus speaks about the identity of Zacchaeus as being “a son of Abraham.” In Jesus’ perspective, Zacchaeus existed through his affiliation with the family of Abraham and, by extension, to the human family. Zacchaeus was created in relationship and for relationship. Denying this characteristic, through being driven by his quest for material things, had led him away from his identity. He now lived a dissatisfactory and unaccomplished life, to say the least. Our natural need for relationship can never be met through material possessions or through achievement. It was essential for Zacchaeus to reconnect with his identity as a relational being.

The second piece of information in these final comments was about the mission of Jesus. Jesus describes it in relational terms: “to seek” and “to save.” He not only saves us from sin but also from sin’s consequences, namely, walls of separation erected between God and people and between people and people. The apostle Paul highlighted this aspect of Jesus’ ministry when he wrote, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself

through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). God’s salvation restores us as social beings.

By choice, Zacchaeus was a wall-builder; by grace and love, Jesus became the Wall-breaker in his life.

A Life Without Walls

The encounter between Zacchaeus and the Wall-breaker wasn’t without restoration. We read in verse 8, “Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.’ ” This was a solemn and significant statement that Zacchaeus chose not to remain sitting or reclining. The wall-builder had finally decided to live a honest life, one without walls.

One of the first walls he decided to pull down was the wall of separation between the poor and the rich. Zacchaeus, the wealthy, decided to reconnect with the poor. He was not only making a commitment to befriend, to speak, to play, and to pray with the poor but to participate in changing the conditions of their lives. There are four types of relationship that we can entertain with those who are different from us: no relationship, a relationship on good terms, a self-interested relationship, or an empowering relationship. Zacchaeus engaged himself in an empowering relationship. In so doing, Zacchaeus implemented the instructions of the One who reached out to him, found in Leviticus 25:35-37 “If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury nor lend him your food at a profit.”

The formerly greedy and selfish Zacchaeus engaged in something unimaginable. This quality of relationship with others was possible because of the intimate encounter with the Savior. When we connect with God, our selfish inclinations are overcome, and we are transformed into His image.

Besides sharing with the poor, Zacchaeus committed himself to return what he had stolen. Some relationships can never be restored without proper restitution. A basic principle is to take responsibility for the severed relationship, recognize that we have wronged the other, and do everything possible to right the wrong. Ellen White makes this comment about the restitution of Zacchaeus: “No repentance is genuine that does not work reformation” (*Desire of Ages*, 480). When a relationship has been bruised, it is not wise to try to quickly move on without addressing the causes behind the past conflict. In the absence of adequate closure, wounds will reopen, and the establishment of a deep and sincere relationship will be prevented!

Conclusion

Zacchaeus had lived within the walls of materialism for years and he was neither happy nor satisfied. After his encounter with Jesus, a relationship with God and others took precedence over the acquisition of wealth. He

was freed from his golden prison, and he became an instrument of freedom for others. Why don't we invite Jesus to act as a wall-breaker in our lives?

Going Deeper

- If you are comfortable, share how a broken relationship was restored.
- How did you feel about this experience?
- Is someone currently struggling to mend and improve some relationships? Would you like to ask for God's help?

My Promise:

DAY 3

HED: Bought With a Price
God First by caring for others
Peter N. Landless

Early in my medical practice, I had just delivered a healthy girl by Caesarean section at the local hospital. That done, I was back in my office busily seeing patients when the phone rang, and the voice on the other end shattered my peace.

“The patient is bleeding,” the nurse said. “Come immediately.”

Various causes and case scenarios raced through my mind almost as rapidly as the speed I was driving back to the hospital. Our mission office was situated in a rural setting, and there was no blood bank. What were we going to do?

As I entered the hospital, I remembered that my blood type and that of my dying patient were the same. Though they were reluctant to do it, I made the staff take a unit of my blood, which we infused into the pale and shocked body. The bleeding subsided, and soon the patient was fine. In fact, a few days later she was back in the office, hale and hearty with a beautiful baby and unending gratitude for the gift of my blood.

The situation presented me with an opening to share the wonderful story of our Savior, who gave His blood to save us all! As I looked into those big brown eyes glistening with tears of gratitude, I understood more clearly than ever before that we are twice over Christ’s possession: first, by creation; and second, by redemption—redemption through His blood.

Or as Paul writes: “You are not your own, you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19, 20, NIV).ⁱ

Yes, Paul exhorts us to do all to the glory of God. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31, NIV). But not only what we eat or drink. On at least three occasions Paul refers to the human body as the temple of God and that His Spirit dwells in that temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). All our behaviors and attitudes, including our health habits, should pay homage to God because we are bought at a price, His blood.

Principles of Health

God has demonstrated His interest in the health of His people from Creation. He created a magnificent environment to sustain the well-being of His creatures. He provided a nutritious diet, fresh air, pure water, and opportunity for exercise as our parents tended the garden. He cared for Adam and Eve’s spiritual health and walked and talked with them in the cool of the evening.

From the beginning, spirituality and health have been intertwined. The earth came forth from the Creator's hand, ready to be the home of the creatures of His design. Even after the Fall, the flood, and the captivity, God demonstrated His concern for His people by giving them specific directives regarding health.

Indeed, early in the Old Testament God saw fit to give His people instructions on healthful living, including diet, cleansing, and sexual behavior. These instructions were to be preventive and distinctive, and they protected them from many of the diseases that plagued the Egyptians.

While Jesus was on Earth, He healed physical and mental diseases, linking forgiveness of sin with well-being and abundant life, with a definite emphasis on emotional and mental health as well.

And, too, God has given amplified instruction through the counsel of Ellen G. White. Throughout her life, she was the channel of information that fashioned the Adventist Church's philosophy of health and spirituality.

“In teaching health principles, keep before the mind the great object of reform—that its purpose is to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul. Show that the laws of nature, being the laws of God, are designed for our good; that obedience to them promotes happiness in this life, and aids in the preparation for the life to come.”ⁱⁱ

“Our first duty toward God and our fellow beings is that of self-development. Every faculty with which the Creator has endowed us should be cultivated to the highest degree of perfection, that we may be able to do the greatest amount of good of which we are capable. Hence that time is spent to good account which is used in the establishment and preservation of physical and mental health.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Stewardship and Health

The vision given in June 1863 to Ellen White revealed that it is a spiritual duty to care for the body temple and confirmed the wholistic integration of body, mind, and spirit. Rest, sunshine, balanced nutrition, trust in God, exercise, temperance, drinking water, and breathing fresh air maintain balanced wholeness. The primary purpose of taking care of our health is to enable us to serve God and our fellow beings! We will enjoy better health, but we are saved to serve.

The point is clear: stewardship includes taking care of our health!

What's fascinating is that Ellen White spoke on many issues with prophetic insight that medical science has now shown to be correct. *Time* magazine, in its October 28, 1966, issue,^{iv} reported the positive outcome of the first Adventist Health Study and described the results as the “Adventists' Advantage,” which included a reduction in most cancers and in cirrhosis of the liver. Subsequent studies have shown a significant increase in longevity in those living the Adventist lifestyle. The results of follow-up studies and statistical analyses have been so compelling that the United States National Institutes of Health allocated almost \$20 million for the conducting of Adventist Health Study-2.

In short, the scientific literature is replete with the benefits that accrue from a healthful lifestyle based on the laws on nature, the kind of lifestyle that Ellen White had so passionately promoted.^v

Included in those laws of nature is not only diet but exercise and rest, all of which she promoted as part of our stewardship of health. For instance, exercise has been proven to reduce high blood pressure and to help prevent coronary artery disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and osteoporosis. Even moderate exercise (we don't need to run marathons) can control the level of blood fats, delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease, help diminish recurrence of some cancers, and alleviate depression.

As important as exercise is rest. How do we do as far as rest is concerned? Do we take time to recover, to sharpen the axe, as it were? If we lived with a greater consciousness of the stewardship of health, we would be more effective tools in the Master's hands. *The Message* by Eugene Petersen summarizes the point so well: "Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life for God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever" (1 Tim. 4:8, MSG).^{vi}

House Sitters

Max Lucado uses a striking illustration in his book *It's Not About Me*.^{vii} He describes two nightmare scenarios of house sitters who may take care of your house in your absence. The first redecorates it totally differently from your tastes, using the reason that the house needed to express the house sitter accurately. Your immediate response: "It's not yours!" The second situation is one where redecoration is not the situation, but neglect. No dishes were ever washed, no trash removed, and the beds were never made. The reason: it was a temporary arrangement.

Both house sitters made the same mistake: they acted as if the dwelling was their own to do with as they pleased. How could they? How can we—we who have been bought with a price—so often act as if we belong to ourselves alone? God owns the temple of our bodies; and so we, as house sitters, need to be faithful and caring stewards of what we have been given as a gift.

As the apostle Peter told us: "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18, 19, NKJV).^{viii}

Yes, you were bought at a price—not with silver, not with gold, but with the blood of Christ. It's time to live like it. And being good stewards of our health is a powerful way to do just that.

Peter N. Landless, M.B.,B.Ch., M.Fam.Med., MFGP(SA),FCP(SA), FACC, FASNC, is director of Adventist Health Ministries for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

DAY 4

Theme: God First by ministering to others

Title: Facilitators of a New Vision

Text: Luke 18:35-43

Facilitators of a New Vision

Many people are suffering and dying without true hope. They are confused and in despair about what they are witnessing around them and inside their own lives. How can their eyes be open to the reality of God's love and salvation? As redeemed sons and daughters, how do we restore the vision of our blindfolded world? Through the story of Bartimaeus, the blind man of Jericho, we can reflect on our actual participation in God's final mission. We read in Luke 18:35 (NKJV), "Then it happened, as He was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat by the road begging." -This is the last miracle of Jesus reported in the Gospel of Luke.

Whenever we read this passage, we focus on the faith and perseverance of Bartimaeus, the blind man, and how Jesus restored his vision. When Jesus is around, the blind can see again! In this reflection, we'll concentrate on the role played by the crowd, and by the followers and disciples of Jesus. In the followers of Jesus, we can identify four modes of operation: Passing-by Mode, Silencing Mode, Facilitating Mode, and Praising Mode. Which mode am I in right now?

The Passing-by Mode

Luke 18:36-37 tells us, "And hearing a multitude *passing by*, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by." Jesus was not alone on this journey to and through Jericho. The disciples were with him, and the text tells us that many others were also part of His entourage. This inner circle was enjoying his teachings, receiving His blessings, and participating in the fame of the rabbi of Nazareth who was now at the peak of His popularity.

The blind man could only "*hear a multitude passing by*." He could probably hear the sound of feet, the sound of the crowd talking, and, from time to time, some halleluiahs and amens. Something unusual was happening; but no clear message was heard by those outside the group of followers. Bartimaeus, as a bystander, could sense the passage of this procession, but could hardly guess the real purpose. He took the initiative of asking. Not many have the same audacity.

The Adventist church has established a presence in more than 200 countries, and in most major cities and regions of the world. However, let us ask ourselves: are we giving a clear message about the purpose of our existence? Are people clearly understanding our mission?

The answer given by Jesus' followers reveals an interesting mindset: "*Jesus of Nazareth was passing by.*" They were accurate and factual in sharing about the historical Jesus without revealing His purpose and mission. It was a missed opportunity to invite Bartimaeus to be part of the multitude. What could be the reason? They saw in Bartimaeus a blind beggar. What he probably needed was a coin, a dollar, a piece of bread, or other charity. They could not sense the craving of Bartimaeus for something deeper.

However, the response of Bartimaeus indicates his true need: "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" For him, Jesus was the Son of David. The title Son of David was a messianic salutation. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that in Judaism, the Son of David was believed to have great power to heal. Bartimaeus was not looking for information *about* Jesus, but for an intervention in his life *from* Jesus.

Those in the passing-by mode miss the mark about the real need of people around them. It would be unfortunate if we are only telling people, "Who are the Adventists and what do they believe?" and attending some basic needs, when people are seeking for a Savior and a new vision.

The Silencing Mode

In reaction to the S.O.S. cry of Bartimaeus, some of the followers of Jesus adopted another mode. We read in verse 39, "Then those who went before *warned him* that he should be quiet." This is the silencing mode. Some versions even use the word "rebuke" to describe the intervention of these front runners. They engaged in this silencing mode because they misunderstood their responsibility and the role of Jesus.

Those who went out in front believed that their responsibility was to clear the way, as motorcades would do before the passage of some dignitaries—to remove any obstruction for the seamless passage of Jesus. Bartimaeus was perceived as an obstruction, so he had to be silenced and chased away. This attitude contrasts with the true role given to the forerunners of Jesus. John the Baptist was a forerunner of Jesus, and his role is described in Luke 1:16,17: "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." John was to act as a bridge between the people and Jesus—not to chase them away but to prepare people to meet Jesus.

For them, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was merely a nuisance for a kingly Messiah who was on His way to Jerusalem. They failed to realize that being blind and poor qualified Bartimaeus for some special attention from Jesus. They missed the meaning of Jesus' inaugural speech at the synagogue of Nazareth, "*The Spirit of the Lord*

is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18). Jesus came for the blind, the poor, the destitute, and the sinners.

The silencing mode is unfortunately very popular among Christians, even today. It happens whenever our words, actions, and attitudes are keeping people at a distance from Jesus and His church. Each time we mentally or concretely disqualify someone from salvation, we are functioning in the silencing mode. God forbid!

The Facilitating Mode

Conscious of the reactions of His followers, the Bible says, “So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him.” (v. 40). Jesus ordered a change of mode, from the passing-by and silencing modes to the facilitating mode. It was not a suggestion, but a command. In that command was an invitation to share the blessings with others.

Those in the facilitating mode were not the source of blessing. Their role was to be a conduit to the Source: Jesus. However, for their role to remain significant, they had to approach Bartimaeus, share the invitation of Jesus, hold him by the arm, guide his steps, clear the crowd in his way, and bring him to Jesus. This was a complex process! In the Spirit of Prophecy, we hear a similar instruction for His church in the last days:

Seventh-day Adventists have been chosen by God as a peculiar people, separate from the world ... He has made them His representatives and has called them to be ambassadors for Him in the last work of salvation. The greatest wealth of truth ever entrusted to mortals, the most solemn and fearful warnings ever sent by God to man, have been committed to them to be given to the world (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, 138).

COVID-19 has come our way. We are talking about the new normal, but our greatest and first responsibility, to lead people to Jesus and His Church, has not changed. It is even more relevant now than before. Are we confusing social distancing with withdrawal from the frontline of mission?

The Praising Together Mode

As a result of engaging in the facilitating mode, the followers of Jesus would shift into the “Praising Together Mode.” We read in verse 43, “And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.” The former blind and the rest of people bind together, as one, in worship.

God has established His last day church as a community called to praise Him (Rev 1:6). A church that does not praise is not functioning in harmony with God's design. The praising mode is triggered by what we see Jesus doing in our lives and in the lives of others. Authentic worship and praise result from witnessing God's power and love. The more we see, the more we praise. A missionary church is in a better condition to function in the praising together mode.

The current crisis has weakened the physical togetherness of the church. Closed church buildings have led many to settle for private expressions of spirituality, separated from other believers. We listen for a good sermon on one YouTube channel, enjoy a session of praise and singing on another channel, and read a blog from another website for daily inspiration. We move around on the web constantly in search of novelty. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the richness of God's church through these multiple productions and ministries, but it is dangerous when it is done at the expense of our attachment to a church community. These inspired words of Paul remain valid today: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:24-25). God has designed His children to be part of, be blessed by, and be a blessing to a local church community, either in person or online. The virus is not the end of God's church. Let us remember these words of Jesus: "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18).

Conclusion

As facilitators of God's grace, we are on our way to participate in the final praise: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (Rev 15:3, 4). Let us choose not to remain in the passing or silencing modes.

Going Deeper

- Share an experience of you helping someone to embrace a new vision for life.
- How can we function more in the "Facilitating Mode" during this season of social distancing?
- Who would you like to bring to Jesus? Share his or her name for intercession.

My Promise:

DAY 5

Theme: God First by keeping the Sabbath

Title: The God First Day

Bible Text: Luke 6:6-10

The God First Day

How is the Sabbath related to the God First principle? The prophet Ezekiel declares, “Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God” (Ezek 20:20). These words reveal that the observance of the Sabbath stands as a statement of God’s lordship over our lives. Likewise, Jesus’ attitude towards the Sabbath reminds us to put God first. In this reflection, we are revisiting the story reported in Luke 6:6-10 to learn more about keeping the Sabbath and putting God first.

Cultivating the God First Mindset

The report of this miracle starts with the words, “On another Sabbath.” The gospels make regular references to the actions of Jesus during the Sabbath day—from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. In this chapter, Luke, the historian, has coupled together two events related to the Sabbath. The first one relates to the disciples who pluck grains from the field to eat on the Sabbath. The Pharisees blamed them for breaking the law. In response, Jesus justified their actions and declared Himself as the Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:3, 4; Mark 2:27, 28; Matthew 12:5, 6). The second event is a report of one of the miracles of Jesus performed during the Sabbath. Why is the Sabbath given such prominence in the gospels?

In contrast to festivals such as the Passover, Tabernacles and Purim, the celebration of the Sabbath was not the commemoration of an important event in the history of Israel. It was and is the weekly memorial of the act of creation: God has created it all. Everything came into existence through the initial intervention of God in the universe. As such, this day is a constant reminder that God is First and Provider. No doubt, the weekly observance of the Sabbath helped Jesus maintain a clear understanding of His affiliation with the Father, as expressed in the words, “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands” (John 3:35). The Father is the Owner-Provider and the Son acts as His Manager.

Ellen White wrote these words about this foremost purpose of the Sabbath: “No other institution which was committed to the Jews tended so fully to distinguish them from surrounding nations as did the Sabbath. God designed that its observance should designate them as His worshipers. It was to be a token of their separation from idolatry, and their connection with the true God” (*Desire of Ages*, 283). The purpose of the Sabbath is for humanity to align their lives with the universe, God First, by acknowledging Him as Provider and Sustainer.

Human existence unfolds in two planes: time and space. Adam was created on the seventh day and placed in a garden. As living beings, we not only occupy space, but are constantly modifying the material world around us.

This is indeed God's design for humanity (Gen. 2:15). However, this endeavor poses the risk of forgetting that we are related to and are dependent on a Creator. Many have ended up functioning in a purely materialistic mindset. To prevent this outcome, God has set the first full day of existence not as a day of work, but as a day of rest. By keeping the Sabbath, Jesus exemplified the perspective we should adopt with regards to actions: "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30). The Sabbath helps us to remember that we are not the ones sustaining the world and our existence. Sabbath keeping is essential for us to grow a God First mindset.

God First Through Collective Worship

On this Sabbath, Jesus "*went into the synagogue,*" literally to the place of assembly, and he was involved in "*teaching.*" The synagogue played a major role in the earthly ministry of Jesus. The gospels associate the ministry of Jesus with the synagogue more than 10 times. The gathering of believers in small groups of prayer, with no sacrifice, can be traced back to the time of Solomon. However, synagogues were formally organized during the Babylonian exile, after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. These buildings were central to the social and religious life of a local Jewish community. They served as schools, community centers, meeting places, courtrooms, and as places of prayer and study. On the Sabbath, the space was restricted to worship and Scripture readings. Several prayers (benedictions and eulogies) were part of the Sabbath services. The instruction element is found in the readings from the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses), from the writings of the prophets, and a short sermon. On that day, Jesus was asked to either do one part of the readings or to deliver the sermon.

Worshipping and listening to God's Word are the two fundamental activities of those who put God First. When we worship, we acknowledge who God is and when we study His Word we subdue to His instructions. The Sabbath services provide the space for believers to go through this experience.

Jesus helps us to understand that the Sabbath rest is not equivalent to a day of inactivity. The Sabbath rest, besides cultivating in us the mindset of resting in the Lord, concretely provides time for worship and the study of God's work. We free ourselves from the busy activities of the week and get involved in more uplifting ones. The ultimate purpose of the Sabbath is neither to give to rest our tired muscles or to have a day during which we wander around, but to increase the possibility for us to worship God and hear his word. During the week, we can enjoy these spiritual exercises personally and with our family and on the Sabbath a corporate spiritual experience is accessible to us. When believers assemble as a family, together, they acknowledge their affiliation to One God and One Savior.

Two practices are unfortunately becoming trendy among God's people during this time of pandemic and social distancing. First, some are tempted to use the hours of the Sabbath for long nature trails instead of participating in corporate worship in person or online. Nature is indeed God's second book, but it is not God's design for a nature walk to replace collective worship, but rather to complement it. Another practice is the buffet church:

believers are hopping from one website to another searching for the Sabbath school teacher, the praise leader and the preacher that suits their taste. The worship experience is arranged to satisfy personal preferences at the expense of being part of an assembly of believers, as exemplified in the synagogue experiences of Jesus. According to the apostle Paul, ministries are established by Christ “that the body of Christ may be built up,” and not to encourage stand-alone Christians (Eph 4:11-12).

God First Through Ministry

Both at the pool of Bethesda and in this synagogue, Jesus used the hours of the Sabbath to minister to the needs of those who were vulnerable. In response to the attack of the Pharisees, He asked this rhetorical question: “*I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?*” (Luke :9). How do these acts of service, compassion, and healing demonstrate the God First principle?

During the working days of the week Sunday to Friday, we labor and enjoy the fruit of our labor. The nature of the work done on the Sabbath has two different characteristics. First, on the seventh day, we labor exclusively for the interest of others. Self is denied. Abraham Heschel in his book, *The Sabbath*, speaks about the altruistic nature of the activities for the Sabbath hours, “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.” Second, our service to the needy is equivalent to service to God. The wise man declares that “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,” (Prov. 19:17) and Jesus mentions that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). All acts of benevolence are ultimately addressed to God. The sabbath is the God First day per excellence because on this day we deny self and we serve God through others.

Sin and its consequences defaced and marred God’s image in humans. We are restoring the image of God in humanity each time we work to improve the life conditions for others . Ellen White conveys this idea in her writings: “Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs, sufferings, and rights. The gospel places a high value upon humanity as the purchase of the blood of Christ, and it teaches a tender regard for the wants and woes of man. (Desire of Ages, p. 287). Any form of restoration ministry helps the beneficiaries and observers to appreciate God’s love and power. This leads more people to put God First.

The way Jesus kept the Sabbath helps to cultivate the God First mindset, to practice the God First principles, and to influence others to embrace this life philosophy. When the Sabbath hours are invested in corporate worship, Bible study, and unselfish ministry, it becomes the most gratifying day of the week, a delight for sabbath keepers.

Going Deeper

- What is preventing you from experiencing the Sabbath as the God First day?

- In what ways would you like to enrich your Sabbath experience?

- Is there anyone who is facing some forms of challenges or persecutions to keep the Sabbath? Share his/her name for intercession.

My Promise:

DAY 6

Theme: God First through the practice of tithing

Title: The Deal of a Lifetime

Bible Text: Luke 20:9-19

The Deal of a Lifetime

The parable of the tenants, also known as the parable of the vineyard, is found in the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark with some slight variations. In Luke, the parable serves as an immediate response to an argument that Jesus had with the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and elders about the source of his authority: “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,” they said. “Who gave you this authority?” (Luke 20:2). Jesus uses the parable of the tenants to elaborate the source of his authority, the rejection of his authority and the unfortunate outcome. The story is about the great deal that God makes with humanity and His expectations of the beneficiaries of such a big deal. We are blessed. How are we supposed to respond to such a big blessing?

A Great Deal

The parable opens with a transaction between a rich owner and a group of farmers. After establishing his vineyard, he “*rented it to some farmers*” and moved out of the locality for a long time (Luke 20:9). This was a great deal because the tenants did not have to make any down payments and wouldn’t have to make any fixed payments. They went into business without any cash. Additionally, they were only supposed to give a portion of the harvest to the owner. In the event of no harvest or bad harvest, the owner also lost on his investment. He shared the risk with them. No one was forced into the deal, and the transaction was done out of trust. The deal of a lifetime!

The text helps us to understand the immediate result of this parable: “The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people” (Luke 20: 19). These leaders of the nation considered that Jesus was portraying them through the figures of these farmers who entered in a deal with the owner. God gracefully made a covenant with Israel and its leaders; through it they became the recipients of his abundant blessings. In return, he expected them to acknowledge his ownership by bearing fruits of gratitude and loyalty in proportion to the blessings received. The deal of a lifetime!

Ellen White expanded the application of this parable: “The parable of the vineyard applies not alone to the Jewish nation. It has a lesson for us. The church in this generation has been endowed by God with great privileges and blessings, and He expects corresponding returns.” (*Christ’s Object Lesson*, p. 296). The Lord has given us multiple blessings in many forms and as the owner of all, He expects us to recognize his ownership.

Among the many things that we have received from God, Deuteronomy 8:18 mentions one that is universal: “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.” The nature and the amount of the wealth produced by one or another person may vary, but to all he gives “the ability to produce wealth.” In return, He is simply inviting us to remember Him as the Owner and Provider. According to Ellen White, “Christ hungers to receive from His vineyard the fruit of holiness and unselfishness” (*Christ’s Object Lesson*, p. 298).

One means of honoring our share of the deal is to return to God a portion of the blessings received through tithing: “Every tithe of the herd and flock—every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod—will be holy to the Lord” (Lev. 27:32). The messenger of the Lord wrote these words: “He asks us to acknowledge Him as the **GIVER** of all things; and for this reason He says, Of all your possessions I reserve a **TENTH** for Myself, besides **GIFTS** and **OFFERINGS**, which are to be brought into My storehouse.” (*Counsels on Stewardship*, pp. 80-81) She also draws a parallel between our responsibility and ancient Israel: “Under the Jewish economy, gifts and offerings formed an essential part of God’s worship. The Israelites were taught to devote a tithe of all their income to the service of the sanctuary. Besides this they were to bring sin offerings, free-will gifts, and offerings of gratitude. These were the means for supporting the ministry of the gospel for that time. God expects no less from us than He expected from His people anciently.” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p.300)

Another striking parallel exists between the parable of the tenants and the practice of tithing: God participates in the risk. If the tenth animal that passes under the rod is one that is lame and weak God does not ask for a replacement.

A Broken Deal

While lending his vineyard to the group of farmers, the Owner was making the implicit promise that the land would yield some good crop. This happened when the harvest season arrived. The farmers rejoiced over the bumper harvest until the day they received the visit of some servants from the Owner of the vineyard. Had they forgotten the deal? Or were they hoping that the Owner had forgotten the initial arrangement? Whichever, they chose not to honor the arrangement. Twice the servants came requesting that which was due to the owner; twice the farmers sent them away empty-handed (vv. 10-11). As if this was not enough, they got nervous about the reminder from the Owner and mistreated the servants. The situation escalated from beating the servants, to beating and treating shamefully, and to ejection with wounding. The deal was broken.

Interestingly, the Owner decided to exercise greater patience towards these ungrateful tenants. He sent one sequence of servants after the other, but with no result. He finally sent his beloved son: “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him’” (Luke 20: 13).

The owner identified the problem as one of absence of respect. Unfortunately, the fate of the son would be worse: “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Luke 20: 14,15). This final reaction is revealing the true intention of the tenants. It was not only about the issue of giving a portion of the harvest to the owner, but about replacing the real Owner. They didn’t want to be under the authority of the Owner. They wanted to be under their own authority, and not sharing the harvest was only an external expression of this inner motive.

The history of ancient Israel testifies to how they mistreated the different messengers sent by God over time. They denied God’s sovereignty over His vineyard, Israel. At the time that Jesus was telling the parable, they were already plotting to eliminate the beloved Son so they could remain in power. Can we Christians be in a situation of not upholding our part of the deal—the covenant?

A text from the prophet Malachi can help us to answer this question. We read in Malachi 1:6a, “ ‘A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?’ says the Lord Almighty.” God is here reproaching His children for not honoring Him and showing respect for who He is. The conversation between God and the leaders of Israel continues to indicate how the disrespect manifests itself:

“It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’ By offering defiled food on my altar. But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’ By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible. ⁸ When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.

The disrespect for God’s authority was apparent through what they were *not* giving back to God, as mentioned in Malachi 3:8-9: “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me.”

We can break the deal—the covenant, between us and God, the Provider of “*ability to produce wealth*”—by not tithing at all, not tithing on everything, not tithing an appropriate percentage, not sending the tithe to the appropriate place, and not using the tithe in an appropriate way.

A Terrible Outcome

Let’s go back to the parable to understand how serious is the offense of not upholding our part of the deal. Jesus ended the parable with these words: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others” (Luke 20:15-16). The owner would remove His trust from them, and they would suffer the ultimate penalty.

Would the outcome be the same if we do not return God's tithe on the increase of our income? After all, He made the following statement in Psalms 50:9-12:

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, ¹⁰for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. ¹²If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.

God does not need our resources, either small or big. But something bigger is at stake—that is, honoring and respecting his authority as Owner and Lord of all. This was at the core of these farmers' mistake. The words of the apostle Paul spell out the importance of acknowledging Jesus's lordship: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Ellen White establishes the relationship between tithing and acknowledging Jesus: "Tithes and offerings for God are an acknowledgement of His claim on us by CREATION, and they are also an acknowledgement of His claim of REDEMPTION. Because all our power is derived from Christ, these offerings are to flow from us to God. They are to keep ever before us the claim of redemption, the greatest of all claims, and the one that involves every other." (*Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 6, 479, emphasis supplied). Returning tithe is much more than a financial transaction, it is an expression of allegiance to the lordship of Jesus who has received everything from the Father.

The One who promised "*to give us the ability to produce wealth*" has not withdrawn His words. He is faithful. This is the deal of a lifetime. During this Stewardship Emphasis Week, He has patiently and lovingly reminded us of His claim. It is true that reminders about our financial responsibility can infuriate us, as it did for the tenants in the parable. Let us reflect on our reactions. Something much bigger than financial resources is involved—that is, do I choose to put God First?

Going Deeper

- Share about God's faithfulness, in your life, regarding His promise, "I give you the ability to produce wealth."
- What makes it hard for us to uphold our share of the deal?
- Would you like the group to intercede for you as you choose to respect Jesus as Owner, Provider, and Lord?

My Promise:

DAY 7

Theme: God First through sacrificial offerings

Title: Generous... Even When it Hurts

Text: Luke 21:1-4

Generous... Even When it Hurts

Someone reacted to a Facebook post encouraging giving: “Why should we keep inviting people to give when they are already suffering???” These words can put the most enthusiastic stewardship educator off balance. Are appeals for giving appropriate at this time of crisis? The comments of Jesus regarding the gifts of a poor widow, recorded in Luke 21:1-4, bring better understanding to the topic of religious giving when life’s circumstances are difficult.

Offerings During a Crisis

Luke writes about Jesus’ observations concerning the gifts of some worshippers at the temple of Jerusalem: “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on’ ” (Luke 21:1-4).

In this passage, the external appearances of the worshippers revealed their financial conditions. Some were rich and one was a poor widow. According to Ellen White, the financial condition of this widow could have prompted some observers to discourage her liberality: “Many would have advised her to keep her pittance for her own use; given into the hands of the well-fed priests, it would be lost sight of among the many costly gifts brought to the treasury” (*Desire of Ages*, 614). In contrast, Jesus did not question the relevancy or the worthiness of the poor widow’s gift. In His estimation, it was normal for both rich and poor worshippers to include giving in their worship. Participation in giving is neither exclusively for the rich nor for times of abundance. In ancient days, God sent His prophet Elijah to request food from another biblical widow, whose only resources were the oil and flour to prepare one last meal for herself and her son.

In several of his letters, the apostle Paul appeals for funds for the church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-28; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8, 9). The context was one of a global, Roman Empire-wide, famine (Acts 11:27-30). Two passages from the writings of Paul reveal that those invited to participate were themselves experiencing the “present crisis” (1 Cor. 7:26) and were “under severe trials” (2 Cor. 8:2). Apostle Paul would praise the Macedonians in the same way that Jesus praised the poor widow: “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as

they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." (2 Cor. 8:2-4). It is clear that God does not intend giving to be only for wealthy members, but for all believers.

Sacrificial Giving

Jesus made an interesting assessment of the widow's gift: "this poor widow has put in more than all the others." Jesus' evaluation was not based on the monetary value of the two copper coins. Jesus was looking at the spirit of sacrifice and trust manifested by the widow; she gave "all she had to live on." While comparing the gifts of the rich donors to the widow's mite, Ellen White wrote these words: "Their large donations had deprived them of no comfort, or even luxury; they had required no sacrifice and could not be compared in value with the widow's mite" (*Desire of Ages*, 615). She also wrote: "It was this unselfish spirit and childlike faith that won the Saviour's commendation" (*Desire of Ages*, 615). The real value of her offerings was seen not by the amount that she gave, but by what was left after she had given, and the degree of her faith.

It is inappropriate to think that the Bible encourages symbolic giving of whichever amount or quality as offerings. We read in Deuteronomy 15:21, "If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the Lord your God." Our offerings should represent the best we can afford. Besides that, the Bible provides a reference point for us to calculate our offerings. It was the custom of the Israelites to bring offerings to the temple in Jerusalem when they came for the three major festivals. God provided them with clear instructions about this practice: "Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut 1:17). The offering should not be calculated in comparison to what others were giving. It was not just an amount considered as good and acceptable, it was determined by the extent of the blessings received. Sacrificial offering implies stretching yourself to give the best possible proportion of income received to the Lord. God leaves it to each one of us to make this decision.

Ellen White presents sacrificial giving as God's design for His givers. "And the absence of self-denial, in His professed followers, God regards as a denial of the Christian name. Those who profess to be one with Christ, and indulge their selfish desires for rich and expensive clothing, furniture, and food, are Christians only in name. To be a Christian is to be Christlike" (*Review & Herald*, Oct. 13, 1896). Sacrificial giving is exemplified in the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus. We are called to take Jesus as our model and inspiration in giving. Believers grow as sacrificial givers when they choose to be wise and modest in all their expenses.

Giving Out of Love

Before telling the story of the widow's offering, Luke reports Jesus' disapproval of some Jewish leaders: "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets" (Luke 20: 46). Jesus disapproved of the search for recognition and honor that motivated the actions of these leaders. The widow was driven by a different motive. Ellen White tells us that "Her heart went with her gift; its value was estimated, not by the worth of the coin, but by the love to God and the interest in His work that had prompted the deed" (*Desire of Ages*, 615). Jesus, from whom nothing is hidden, knew the motive of this poor widow. She gave out of love for God and His work.

In several passages, God expresses His contempt for some forms of sacrificial offerings: "The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats" (Isa 1:11). We understand God's revulsion for some abundant offerings better when we consider the difference between giving sacrificially and giving out of love: "If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). Giving sacrificially does not always mean that we are acting out of love. Love is always expressed through giving, but not all giving is motivated by love. These offerings could be motivated by habit, compliance, the hope of reward, the fear of punishment, and many other factors unrelated to love. These acts of giving are of no value in the eyes of God. How do we ensure that our giving is prompted by love for God and love for others?

The apostle Paul explains how love became the driving force behind his actions: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Cor 5: 14). The assurance that Christ died so that he could live, was the fuel propelling Paul forward. The more we meditate on Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, and the more we reflect on God's mercies, grace, and forgiveness, the more our actions and our giving will be motivated by love. Ellen White describes the process of becoming a passionate disciple: "When Christ dwells in the heart, the soul will be so filled with His love, with the joy of communion with Him, that it will cleave to Him; and in the contemplation of Him, self will be forgotten. Love to Christ will be the spring of action" (*Steps to Christ*, 44). The words "dwell", "communion", "cleave", "contemplation" speak about the close relationship between God and humans and, as a result, "Love to Christ will be the spring of action." Those in whom God delights have their intimacy with Jesus forged in the crucible of giving.

The One who offers His life for us, so that we may have eternal life, invites us to be givers in all seasons. Our offerings should reciprocate the love that God has manifested on our behalf: He emptied heaven to bring salvation to us. Let us choose to be givers in whom God delights. Ellen White comments, "Those who feel the constraining love of God, do not ask how little may be given to meet the requirements of God" (*Steps to Christ*, 44). In our

partnership with God, we have sometimes settled for the least. Now, driven by love, we will settle for nothing but the best.

Going Deeper

- Have you ever been inspired by someone with a sacrificial spirit?
- What are some challenges that may confront us in our attempts to remain generous in our offerings during this current season of life?
- How would you like to grow as a giver in whom God delights?

My Promise:

ⁱ Texts credited to NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

ⁱⁱ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), p. 146.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 107.

^{iv} *Time* magazine, "Adventists' Advantage," October 28, 1966.

^v Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), p. 146.

^{vi} Texts credited to Message are from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

^{vii} Max Lucado, *It's Not About Me* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

^{viii} Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.