

10. Loving Our Enemies

Texts: Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 5:44; 6:12; Luke 6:27-36; 23:1-34.

Quotes:

- I see little divinity about them or you. You talk to me of Christianity when you are in the act of hanging your enemies. Was there ever such blasphemous nonsense! *George Bernard Shaw*
- I have only made but one prayer in my life: "O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous." And God granted it. *Voltaire*
- The nearest I can make it out, "Love your Enemies" means, "Hate your Friends." *Benjamin Franklin*
- Christianity teaches such destructive advice as "love your enemies", "sell all thou hast and give it to the poor", "resist not evil", "judge not", "turn the other cheek." Anybody that followed such suicidal advice would soon destroy themselves, their family, their race and their country. *Ben Klassen*

Introductory questions

How do we truly love enemies? Is this something fallen human beings are capable of? Was Jesus trying to say something even deeper when he proposed this "command"? Do we try to love our enemies because of the reward we want to receive? Are we following Jesus' command for selfish reasons? Is it true that to love enemies is "a hard commandment"? (Monday's lesson).

Discussion ideas

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:17-22.

This key passage is much misunderstood. Paul is quoting from Deuteronomy (32:35) and Proverbs (15:21-22) to establish his argument of not repaying evil with evil. But some have taken this text to suggest exactly that. Is it winsome to think of trying to inflict pain (burning coals!) by being kind to an enemy? Is not this hate and vengeance clothed in "pretentious piety"?

Pertinent questions from Friday's lesson: "Should the idea that in the end God will bring justice and punishments to evildoers play a role in helping us learn to love our enemies? Is it really love if we want God ultimately to punish them?" Is it really the concept that God will act punitively that brings us comfort? Do we endorse the comment of one Adventist believer who stated that the punishment of the wicked brought him satisfaction and confidence in God?

Thursday's lesson answers the question, "Why should we love our enemies?" in this way: "If you answered the above question, *Because God tells us to*, you have given probably the best answer a Christian can give." Do you agree or not, and why?

Surely the best approach is to relate all this to the issues in the Great Controversy and the reasons why Jesus came. His "command" to love enemies is far more than good advice or a Christian requirement; it is the basis of God's whole system of government, a universal principle.

Ellen White Comments

He bids us to be like Him. “Bless them that curse you,” said Jesus; “do good to them that hate you, . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.” These are the principles of the law, and they are the wellsprings of life. {DA 311}

Such was the spirit of the law which the rabbis had misinterpreted as a cold and rigid code of exactions. They regarded themselves as better than other men, and as entitled to the special favor of God by virtue of their birth as Israelites; but Jesus pointed to the spirit of forgiving love as that which would give evidence that they were actuated by any higher motives than even the publicans and sinners, whom they despised.

He pointed His hearers to the Ruler of the universe, under the new name, “Our Father.” He would have them understand how tenderly the heart of God yearned over them. He teaches that God cares for every lost soul; that “like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him.” Psalm 103:13. Such a conception of God was never given to the world by any religion but that of the Bible. Heathenism teaches men to look upon the Supreme Being as an object of fear rather than of love--a malign deity to be appeased by sacrifices, rather than a Father pouring upon His children the gift of His love. Even the people of Israel had become so blinded to the precious teaching of the prophets concerning God that this revelation of His paternal love was as an original subject, a new gift to the world.

The Jews held that God loved those who served Him,--according to their view, those who fulfilled the requirements of the rabbis,--and that all the rest of the world lay under His frown and curse. Not so, said Jesus; the whole world, the evil and the good, lies in the sunshine of His love. {MB 73-4}

Do not retaliate. So far as you can do so, remove all cause for misapprehension. Avoid the appearance of evil. Do all that lies in your power, without the sacrifice of principle, to conciliate others... If impatient words are spoken to you, never reply in the same spirit. Remember that “a soft answer turneth away wrath.” Proverbs 15:1. And there is wonderful power in silence. Words spoken in reply to one who is angry sometimes serve only to exasperate. But anger met with silence, in a tender, forbearing spirit, quickly dies away.

Under a storm of stinging, faultfinding words, keep the mind stayed upon the word of God. Let mind and heart be stored with God’s promises. If you are ill-treated or wrongfully accused, instead of returning an angry answer, repeat to yourself the precious promises: “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:21. {MH 485-6}

Extra material

So what of our picture of God? Is this just another vain human perception? What kind of God do we believe in, and how do we know we are right? The answer must be that it is the result of examining evidence and experience. From the Bible and personal experience we can say that God is not the kind of God described by many! Not the kind of God described by his enemies, or even by some of his friends.

We know: A God who is intimately concerned with each of us, you and me. A God who does care about every one of his created children. A God who is all-powerful, yet a God who gives freedom to all of us. A God who only wants a relationship based on our choice of him as our ever-loving Father. A God who is totally deserving of our undivided trust.

A picture of a God who has been trying to win his case by persuasion and demonstration in the face of so many lies and deceptions from Satan, one of God’s former friends.

11. Brothers and Sisters in the Faith

Texts: Matt. 26:21-25; John 10:16; 17:11; Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:3, 13; Phil. 2:2.

Quotes:

- It is clear that the individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster. *Voltaire*
- Fundamentalists are like the fir trees in German forests: they cannot stand alone, and are only stable when crowded together, branches locked with those of their brothers. That is why we must always fear them, because they will always hate us for our individualism. *Brent Yaciw*
- I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine. *Charles Darwin*

Introductory questions

What makes us “brothers and sisters in the faith?” Does it help to try to make ourselves more brotherly and sisterly? What happens when our brothers and sisters act in ways we don’t appreciate? What of the larger “family of God”? Are there dangers in identifying too closely with our human identity? What does “who we are” say about God?

Discussion ideas

The lesson (Sunday) makes the point that the Adventist church is now operating in very different countries and cultures. These different backgrounds clearly have an impact on mutual perceptions we have of one another within the church. The question then is: do we still see each other as brothers and sisters in the church?

Monday’s lesson raises the question of “McDonaldization,” and asks if this is the way we should be thinking? But this then leads to questions over what how much diversity can be appreciated and the church still find commonality as “family.”

The fundamental issue is what exactly makes us “brothers and sisters.” It is surely more than using such titles by which we might address one another. Nor is it simply a modern manifestation of current political correctness that supposedly proclaims universal respect of diversity. Rather, it is an issue of basic beliefs, and those are what make us a family. The stress on unity can be misplaced, since unity itself can be seen as the most important principle. But unity comes from who we are and what we believe. And the most significant belief is how we see and understand God.

“[If I were the devil,] I would get as many Adventists as possible to think tribally, nationally, and racially,” the lesson (Tuesday) quotes George Knight. Tribal, national, and racial aspects are surely a great challenge in today’s world. All of us have our own preconceived ideas, especially ones that come close to who we understand ourselves to be. It is also true that much evil has been carried out in the name of patriotism, and opponents have been demonized. Understanding that we are all children of a God who loves us and who urges love for one another is fundamental; however it is essential then that we agree on the nature and character of the God we worship. If God were exclusive, antagonistic, punitive and the rest, then it would not surprising if his followers should act in the same way, and be intolerant and unaccepting of others from different tribes, nationality, or race.

Ellen White Comments

In many families there is a great lack in expressing affection one for another. While there is no need of sentimentalism, there is need of expressing love and tenderness in a chaste, pure, dignified way. Many absolutely cultivate hardness of heart and in word and action reveal the satanic side of the character. Tender affection should ever be cherished between husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters. Every hasty word should be checked, and there should not be even the appearance of the lack of love one for another. It is the duty of everyone in the family to be pleasant, to speak kindly. {AH 198}

Believers are to associate together in Christian fellowship, regarding one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord. They are to love one another as Christ loved them. They are to be lights for God, shining in the church and in the world, receiving grace for grace as they impart to others. Thus they are constantly kept in spiritual nearness to God. They reflect the image of Christ. {MM 316}

If we would live a Christian life, we must constantly cooperate with God, losing self in dependence upon Jesus Christ. Every day we should work as for eternity... All that your brothers and sisters need, all that any of us need is to live a humble, Christian life, revealing in character the strength received from Jesus Christ through union with Him. {TDG 255}

What are you doing, my Christian brothers and sisters? Can you say that as far as it was in your power, you have declared, or represented, Christ and his love for fallen humanity to those who know him not? If you have confined your efforts mostly to those who are of the same faith as yourself, what about seeking those who are lost. If the curtain could be rolled back, you would see souls perishing in their sins, and the church idle, indolent, unsympathetic, absorbed in selfish interests, and caring not whether souls are saved or lost, so long as they themselves can have an easy time, and be secure in the hope of salvation. But no one will ever enter heaven who is not a laborer together with God. {RH, February 19, 1895}

Extra Material

A LITTLE BOY LOST

“And Father, how can I love you/
Or any of my brothers more?/
I love you like the little bird/
That picks up crumbs around the door.”

The Priest sat by and heard the child,
In trembling zeal he seiz'd his hair:/
He led him by his little coat,
And all admir'd the priestly care.

And standing on the altar high,
“Lo! what a fiend is here!” said he,
“One who sets reason up for judge/
Of our most holy Mystery.”

The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents were in vain;/
They strip'd him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain;

And burn'd him in a holy place,
Where many had been burn'd before:/
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albion's shore?
William Blake, from “Songs of Experience”

12. Supporting Our Leaders

Texts: Ps. 51:3, 4, 10; 1 Pet. 2:9; Eph. 1:22, 23; Col 1:18.

Quotes:

- Spiritual leadership should remain spiritual leadership and the temporal power should not become too important in any church. *Eleanor Roosevelt*
- History I believe furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government. This marks the lowest grade of ignorance, of which their political as well as religious leaders will always avail themselves for their own purpose. *Thomas Jefferson, to Baron von Humboldt, 1813*
- The politicians and the religious leaders and the weapons scientists have been at it for a long time and they've made a thorough mess of it. I mean, we're in deep trouble. *Carl Sagan, A&E Biography interview*

Introductory questions

How are we to relate to church leaders? Is it a question of “my church, right or wrong”? How do we judge correct leadership? What are the dangers of over-relying on individual views? What is the true basis of “church”? If we are all equal, how do we give responsibility to others? How do we relate to God as leader? What of Satan’s stress on individualism?

Discussion ideas

Sunday’s lesson proclaims that “All are equal.” If this is true, how does this apply to leaders? Alternatively, is it right to accept beliefs as determined by leaders? In today’s world that values individualism and personal responsibility above all else, it is all too common to see diversity as positive. But is this valid in terms of belief, especially beliefs about God?

Or is the question nothing to do with defining beliefs, but rather with practical direction of the church’s work? These are sensitive points, since as the lesson points out, leadership is frequently disparaged today. We are encouraged to support leaders and be positive towards leadership functions. But as the Ellen White quotes below make clear, this is not without consideration. Leaders who seek their own glory, who want position in the church for its own sake, who do not provide spiritual “food” are to be rejected. Most of all church leaders must rightly represent “the voice of God” after “the order of God.” In other words the right view of God is to be that of the church leadership. How is this to be examined?

Ultimately there cannot be support for leaders who do not believe and act in accordance with the truth. Many examples from the Old Testament make it clear that God does not endorse leaders who do not rightly represent Him and the truth.

However nor is it true that there cannot be repentance and transformation, as the lesson makes clear by quoting Psalm 51 and the experience of Israel’s leader and king David.

Citing 1 Peter 2:9 also reveals that in the New Testament there is a direct relation to God, not through priest or any other human representative. Jesus is head of the church (Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18). However church leaders are still important in directing for the best the work of the church, while members are clearly responsible for their own relationship with God.

Most significantly, it is the right representation of God that is at the heart of the Great Controversy, and this is the same issue for church leaders. Position, influence, power—leaders cannot gain respect in such ways. Only as they tell the truth about God are they true leaders.

Ellen White Comments

May the Lord impress upon the minds and hearts of all connected with the sacred work of God, the importance of ascertaining whether those who are to minister as deacons and elders are suitable men to be entrusted with the flock of God. Jesus calls Himself the “Good Shepherd.” He does this in contrast with those who occupy positions of trust in connection with the church, but who have no right to these places, because they put a wrong mold upon the work. What is natural will appear. Compare the Good Shepherd, who gave His life for His sheep, with those who are filled with self-esteem, puffed up, dictatorial, loving to rule in the church. {7BC 914-5}

God is not glorified by leaders in the church who seek to drive the sheep. No, no. “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” There is a wide field for the elders and the helpers in every church. They are to feed the flock of God with pure provender, thoroughly winnowed from the chaff, the poisonous mixture of error. You who have any part to act in the church of God, be sure that you act wisely in feeding the flock of God; for its prosperity much depends upon the quality of this food. {7BC 942.6}

Many of the men who have acted as counselors in board and council meetings need to be weeded out. Other men should take their places, for their voice is not the voice of God. Their plans and devisings are not after the order of God. The same men have been kept in office as directors of boards until, under their own management and their own opinions, common fire is used in the place of sacred fire of God’s own kindling. These men are no more called “Israel” but “supplanters.” They have worked themselves so long, instead of being worked by the Holy Spirit, that they know not that spirit impels them to action. {13MR 289.2}

They [church leaders] are laying plans for the work of God, trying to make arrangements whereby they can advance the work of God, and there stands someone trying to trig [block] the wheels. As I said to one of our brethren not long since, “You have done more to set back the work of God than ten or twenty of our enemies, because you construe some point into something wonderful, and you have held the committee for hours over nothing, only to throw in a block to trig the wheel, and the time wasted and the good resolutions that should have been carried have been lost. You come in and they think you are a good man, a moral man, and what you say is all right, but every time you have a chunk to throw in, and they are worried out in their counsels and nothing is accomplished which should have been done, on account of this hindrance.” {1SAT 93}

Extra material

Leaders are expected to have higher values, to place a stress on trust and confidence and ethical ideals. Nineteenth-century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said it well: “I repeat...that all power is a trust; that we are all accountable for its exercise.” Leaders are placed in positions of trust, which is why their failings in this area are viewed with such horror. Power is given conditionally, and if that trust is broken, then leaders can expect no mercy. Acting responsibly, doing business with ethical principles, recognizing a higher authority—all this is the measure of a good leader.

This also means that leaders will not only be concerned with their primary responsibilities, but also recognize their commitments to other areas of need. Community service, the support of good causes, the identification with those who have not—as leaders demonstrate their practical involvement in such concerns they will be appreciated the more by those they seek to lead.

Says Walter Lippmann, “Leaders are the custodians of a nation’s ideals, of the beliefs it cherishes, of its permanent hopes, of the faith which makes a nation out of a mere aggregation of individuals.”

As both supporters and leaders, where are we, where are we going, and what do we want to achieve?

13. Embracing the World

Texts: Matt. 13:33; 25:31-46; John 17:15-17; 2 Cor. 5:19, 20; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 4:14.

Quotes:

- For god so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever would believe in him would believe in anything. *Anon*
- Surgeon General’s Warning: Quitting Religion Now Greatly Increases the Chances of World Peace. *Bumper sticker*
- Organized Christianity has probably done more to retard the ideals that were its founder’s than any other agency in the world. *Richard Le Gallienne*
- What the world needs is not dogma but an attitude of scientific inquiry combined with a belief that the torture of millions is not desirable, whether inflicted by Stalin or by a Deity imagined in the likeness of the believer. *Bertrand Russell*
- The world is in need of less religion and more common sense. *Llewelyn Powys*
- I turned to speak to God/About the world’s despair;/But to make bad matters worse/I found God wasn’t there. *Robert Frost*

Introductory questions

What does it really mean to be “in the world but not of the world”? Also, “embracing the world” sound rather ambiguous—in what way should we do this? What is our role in the world? How are we to relate to those around us? How can we get involved in speaking for truth and right and not compromise our perspective? Why are we ambassadors?

Discussion ideas

“We are also pictured as ambassadors. Ambassadors are a small but important class of people. They go wherever they are sent to represent their government. Often they must venture into a culture that differs greatly from their own. Their work demands tact and diplomacy, as well as frankness and courage.” (Sunday’s lesson).

If this is so, what are we to do, and what are we to say? While we are very much in this world, how are we not “of” it? Does this mean some kind of haughty disengagement? Then what of the practical application—for the theory may seem clear, but in practice...

Some criticize our involvement in human organizations. But are we not called to witness for God and the truth wherever? Most importantly, how will those outside our community come to know the God we love and admire? It is not just a question of traditional evangelism—it is how we live our lives before the onlooking universe.

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” 2 Cor. 5:19, 20 NIV. We are ambassadors for Christ because he has given us his message of reconciliation. So how do we explain what this message is, and how do we demonstrate it unless we become involved?

It is my sincere conviction that we have not so much a duty but an amazing opportunity to share with all people at all levels the wonderful good news of God as He truly is, to reveal He is not as the Enemy has described Him, and that He will save and heal—not just us—but the whole Universe as His character is understood and admired by all His admiring children.

Ellen White Comments

All will be judged according to the light that has been given. The Lord sends forth His ambassadors with a message of salvation, and those who hear He will hold responsible for the way in which they treat the words of His servants. Those who are sincerely seeking for truth will make a careful investigation, in the light of God's word, of the doctrines presented to them. {AA 232}

Christ's last act before leaving the earth was to commission His ambassadors to go to the world with His truth. His last words were spoken to impress the disciples with the thought that they held in trust the message of heaven for the world. . . . {HP 317}

If ever we needed to manifest kindness and true courtesy, it is now. We may have to plead most earnestly before legislative councils for the right to worship God according to the dictates of conscience. Thus in His providence God has designed that the claims of His law shall be brought before men in positions of highest authority. But as we stand before these men, we are to show no bitterness of feeling. *The Review and Herald*, Feb. 11, 1904. {2SM 375}

Today the truths of Scripture are to be brought before the great men of the world in order that they may choose between obedience to God's law and allegiance to the prince of evil. God sets everlasting truth before them—truth that will make them wise unto salvation, but He does not force them to accept it. If they turn from it, He leaves them to themselves, to be filled with the fruit of their own doings. {AA 241}

Extra material

Today I am in Strasburg in eastern France, home to the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights. Visiting these institutions, and meeting some of the people involved, I was struck again at the importance of “embracing the world” by participating actively at such venues. Only as we are present and speak up will the world pay us any attention at all. And what better way to present the glorious truth about God than by defending such noble principles as religious freedom and basic human rights?

Those who discover us to be winsome, thoughtful, honest people may indeed want to know more about the God we love and admire. While the lesson points to ourselves as ambassadors, what of those who are ambassadors representing countries here on earth? What of the diplomats and politicians and judges and prime ministers and presidents? Would they be interested in knowing the God we represent?

“Embracing the world” does not mean adopting the value system and practices of this world. But it does mean meeting people where they are, sharing the good news, and helping others understand the wonderful truth of God as he truly is. We can only do this if we are actively involved, participating at such significant venues. Sadly we have all too often neglected our responsibilities in this regard, seeing “witnessing” in a very narrow way. Yet Jesus proclaimed his kind of kingdom at the beginning of his ministry. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Luke 4:18, 19 NIV.

That's a very practical, active, and involved ministry that chooses to be right where people are, participating in matters of urgent concern for this life and eternity. Wouldn't that apply to us too, today?