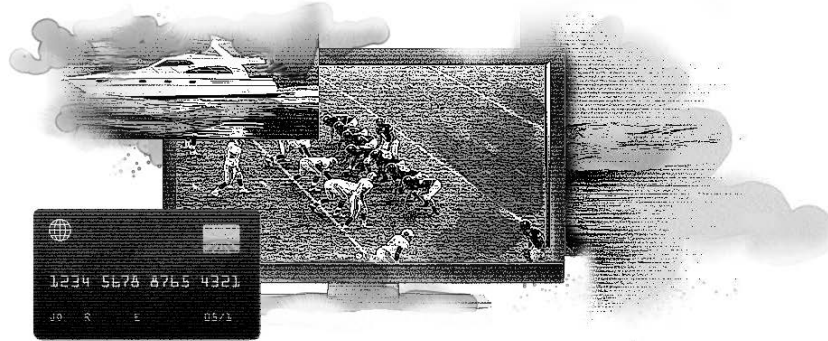


Idols of the Soul (and Other Lessons From Jesus)



SABBATH—MAY 21

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Ecclesiastes 9:10; Matthew 18:1–4; Matthew 18:21–35; Matthew 19:16–30; Galatians 3:21, 22; Matthew 19:27.

MEMORY VERSE: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ” (Matthew 18:1, NIV).

AS HUMANS, WE ARE PART OF OUR ENVIRONMENT,¹ AND OF OUR CULTURE. These greatly influence our values, beliefs, and attitudes (thoughts and feelings). The culture and the environment that you grew up in has greatly made you what you are. Suppose you are able to go to a new environment. Even then, the one you have been raised in will leave its mark on you until the grave.

Sadly, most of our environments and cultures work against the principles (important rules) of God’s kingdom. This world is a fallen world. Its values, laws, and customs often show that fallen condition. What else could they show? It is just hard for us to see the principles of God’s kingdom at work because we are so involved in our culture and environment.

The work of God in our hearts is meant to point us to the values, laws, and requirements of God’s kingdom. As we will see this week, those values, rules, and requirements are often different from what we have been born into and brought up in. The disciples had to learn these lessons. And we do, too.

DEFINITIONS

1. environment—the conditions that surround someone or something; the conditions and influences that affect the growth, health, and progress of someone or something.

TO BE HUMBLE IS TO BE GREAT (Matthew 18:1–4)

Who does not want to be great? Who does not want to do great things? This desire does not always come from selfishness. Being great could simply be doing the very best that you can at whatever you do. In this way we hope perhaps that what we do could even bring blessings upon others. (Read also Ecclesiastes 9:10.)

But the problem comes when we try to explain what “greatness” means. How easy it is for our fallen human minds to understand greatness in a way that is very different from God’s view.

Read Matthew 18:1–4. According to Jesus, what is true greatness? How are we to understand it in a way that we can use in our own lives?

To explain true greatness, Jesus called a child to stand before Him and said, “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4, NKJV). Jesus did not talk about being a great preacher or a great businessman or even a great philanthropist.² In God’s sight, greatness is what we are inside, not what we do outside. No doubt what is inside will influence what we do outside.

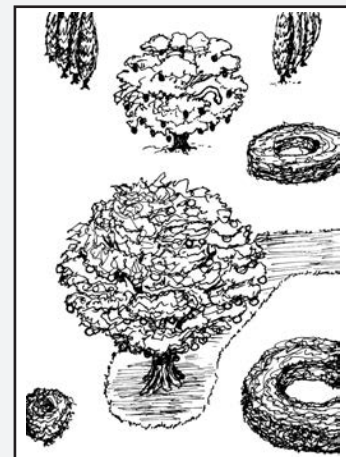
Notice, Jesus explains greatness in a way that most people in the world do not. After all, who wakes up one day and decides that the greatness he or she wants in life is to be as humble as a little child? It seems strange to us to be ambitious about something like that. But this is only because we are so influenced by the world’s rules, principles, ideas, and thoughts.

What does it mean to be humble like a little child? One of the signs of a humble person is obedience. This is to put the truth of God’s Word (the Bible) ahead of our own will (desires). If you are on the wrong path in your life, then that is because you are on your own path. The answer is simple: humble yourself and get back on God’s path by obeying His Word. If Adam and Eve had stayed humble, they would not have sinned. It is interesting to think about how the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil were both located in the middle of the Garden. Often life and destruction are not far apart. Being humble makes all the difference as to which tree we choose.

What are some other attitudes and ideas we hold only because of our connection with the world—attitudes and ideas that do not agree with the Word of God (the Bible)?



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It is interesting to think about how the tree of life and the tree of knowledge were both located in the middle of the garden. Often life and destruction are not far apart.

DEFINITIONS

2. philanthropist—a wealthy person who gives money and time to help make life better for other people.

THE GREATNESS OF FORGIVENESS (Matthew 18:15–35)



It is easier to go behind someone's back to complain about him or her than to go directly to the person and deal with the problem.

One of the worst results of the Fall is seen in our personal relationships with one another. From Adam blaming Eve for his sin (Genesis 3:12) to this moment on earth today, our race has been damaged and harmed by quarrels between people. Sadly, quarreling does not just happen in the world but in the church, too.

Read Matthew 18:15–35. What does Jesus tell us here? So, why do we often not follow His words to us?

Let us face it: it is easier to go behind someone's back to complain about him or her than to go directly to the person and deal with the problem. That is why we do not want to do it, even if we are told to do it by the Lord. Yet, Jesus teaches us to go directly to someone who has hurt us in order to solve the problem.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is present when a small group works together to restore (bring back) a believer to God. This is the beautiful work of salvation. And it begins with humbly doing the right thing and talking directly with someone who has hurt you. This, too, would be another example of greatness in those who do it.

Read Matthew 18:21–35 again. What very important point is Jesus making?

Jesus says to “forgive seventy times seven.” What He is really saying is that we must never stop forgiving someone. Jesus is serious about how necessary forgiveness is. It is not only for others' benefit but for our own. Look at how strong the parable³ is that Jesus told in order to make His point. We can be forgiven a lot of things. That is what the gospel is all about. It is all about forgiveness (read Exodus 32:32; Acts 5:31; Colossians 1:14). But if we do not forgive others the way we have been forgiven by God, we can face serious results.

Why is it so important to think about the Cross and about the forgiveness that we have been given because of it? God died on the cross for you. This is what it took to forgive you. So, how can you learn to forgive others, no matter how impossible that forgiveness might seem to be?

DEFINITIONS

3. parable—a short story that teaches a moral (having to do with the differences between right and wrong) or a spiritual lesson.

IDOLS OF THE SOUL (Matthew 19:16–30)

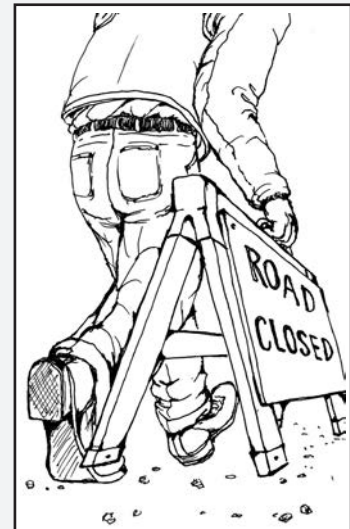
Read Matthew 19:16–30. As New Testament Christians, how are we to view this story today? What lessons can we learn from it?

We are not told much about this man. But we can pick up a few important points. The man was rich, a ruler (read Luke 18:18). He seemed to be a very strict follower of God’s law. We can see, too, that he sensed something was missing from his life. It reminds us a bit of the story of Martin Luther. He was a religious priest, but inside he was not satisfied with his spiritual life. And he struggled with the promise of salvation. In both cases, the men sensed that the great separation between themselves and God was not going to be filled by their “good” works.

“This ruler thought highly of his own righteousness [thoughts; words; actions]. He did not really think that he was defective [flawed; having a fault or weakness] in anything. But he was not altogether satisfied with his life. He felt the lack of something that he did not have. Could not Jesus bless him as He blessed the little children, and satisfy the lack of his soul?” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 518.

Some people might argue that, in this story, Jesus is teaching that we receive eternal life based on our good works. After all, in Matthew 19:17, Jesus says, “‘If you want to enter life, keep the commandments’ ” (NIV). If this were the only verse on that subject, one could make an argument here. But too many other verses, especially in Paul’s writings, teach that the law does not save but rather points to our need of salvation (read Romans 3:28; Galatians 3:21, 22; Romans 7:7). Instead, Jesus must have been guiding this man to see his own great need of more than what he was doing. Suppose keeping the law alone could save a person. Then the man would already have salvation, because he was very careful about keeping it. The gospel needs to strike the heart and go directly to the idols of the soul. Whatever we are holding on to that blocks our relationship with God needs to be removed. In this case, it was the rich man’s money. Jesus notes how hard it is for a rich man to be saved. But shortly after this story, Luke tells a beautiful story that really turns out this way. (Read Luke 19:1–10.)

Suppose you were in the position of the rich man. If you asked Jesus the same question, what do you think He would say to you? What does your answer suggest?



Whatever is blocking our relationship to God needs to be removed.

WHAT IS IN IT FOR US? (Matthew 19:27)

Right after the event with the rich ruler, what happens?

Then “Peter answered him [Jesus], ‘We have left everything to follow you! What reward will be given to us?’ ” (Matthew 19:27, NIV).

Nothing in the verse says what causes Peter to ask this question. But it could easily have come as a direct result of the rich man’s refusal to accept Jesus’ advice. Peter seems to be suggesting that this man and others had either refused to accept Jesus or stayed with Him a while and then left. But he (Peter) and the other disciples had left all for Him. They were remaining faithful to Him, even at great personal cost. So, the question is, *What reward will You (Jesus) give us?*

From our viewpoint today, we might see this question as another example of how hard-hearted and spiritually dead the disciples were (and, in some way, that is true). But why not ask a question like Peter’s? Why should he not wonder what he would get by following Jesus?

Life here on earth is hard. It is even hard for those who have all the best this world has to offer. We all experience the disappointments and the pain of our sinful lives. In the 1800s, an Italian thinker named Giacomo Leopardi wrote about the great unhappiness of humans. He said, “As long as man feels life, he also feels displeasure and pain.”

Life is often a struggle. The good in this world does not always even out with the bad. So, Peter’s question makes perfect sense. *Because life is hard, what advantage comes to us from following Jesus? What should we expect from living the life that Jesus asks of us?*

How did Jesus answer the question? (Read Matthew 19:28–20:16.)

Notice that Jesus did not rebuke (scold) Peter for selfishness. He first gave him a very straightforward answer. Then He shared a parable about workers and their wages. Over many hundreds of years, a great deal of discussion has taken place over the meaning of the parable. But the basic point is clear: we will get from Jesus what He has promised us.

If someone were to ask you, “What will I get by serving Jesus?” what would you answer?

“WE ARE ABLE” (Matthew 20:20–27)

To fully understand today’s story about James and John (and their mother) in Matthew 20:20–27, first read Luke 9:51–56. This event happened when Jesus and His disciples set out for Jerusalem, just days before James and John asked if they could sit on Jesus’ left and right in the kingdom.

Read Matthew 20:20–27. What does Luke 9:51–56 tell us about how ready James and John were to sit on the left and right of Jesus in the kingdom?

James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were still more worried about their own future than about the salvation of those around them. This happened even after they had been sent out to evangelize (spread the gospel to) the neighboring areas.

Look carefully at Jesus’ answer here. “ ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ ” (Matthew 20:22, NKJV). In other words, Jesus’ future glory (praise and honor) means, first, His suffering and death. It is something that the disciples had not expected and were not ready for. The fact that they immediately answered, “ ‘We are able’ ” (Matthew 20:22) shows that they did not know what He was warning them about. They would learn later.

As we saw in yesterday’s study, we have been promised wonderful things, even “eternal life” (Matthew 19:29, NKJV), if we follow Jesus. At the same time, too, the Bible makes it clear that in this world we follow Jesus at a cost, sometimes a very big one. Jesus Himself later tells Peter that he would be killed for following Him (read John 21:18, 19). Many believers throughout history, and even today, have paid a great price for following Jesus. It might even be wise to ask ourselves if there might be something wrong with our walk if we have not paid a high price for following the Lord. Whatever the cost to us, our sacrifice is cheap enough.

What has following Christ cost you? Think hard on what your answer may be.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Through the centuries some people have argued for what is sometimes called “natural law.” It comes in many shapes and forms. But the idea is that we can receive spiritual principles from the natural world that can help to guide our actions. Many Christians believe that nature is God’s “Second Book.” And we can accept that there is some truth to this. For example, read Paul’s speech in Romans 1:18–32 about what people should have learned about God from the natural world.

At the same time, too, we cannot forget that this is a sinful world. And we see it with sinful minds. So, it should be no surprise that we could come away with wrong spiritual lessons from nature. For example, a famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle, argued for slavery based on his understanding of nature. For him, nature showed two classes of people, one of which was “low like a beast is to a man.” So for this class, the “life of a slave is an advantage.” This is just one of many twisted examples we can find of how worldly principles, values, and ideas do not agree with those of God’s kingdom. This is why we need to study God’s Word no matter where we were born and brought up. From God’s Word we receive spiritual ideas, values, and principles to govern our lives. No other source of knowledge is dependable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Jesus calls us to forgive all who hurt us. This includes our own families. Think about someone close to you who has hurt you. Your scars might always be there, but how do you reach a point where you can forgive?
- ② In class, discuss your answer to Sunday’s questions about the differences between your society’s ideas and values and those of the Bible. How are we as Christians to work through these differences?
- ③ Think more deeply about receiving greatness by being humble as a child. What does this mean to us as Christians?
- ④ As Seventh-day Adventists we believe in obeying God’s law, the Ten Commandments. But what should the story of the rich ruler tell us about why outward obedience to God’s law is not enough? And why should true Christianity (which includes obedience to the law of God) include more?