



2019 Q3 The Least of These: Lesson 8 The Least of These

by Lori Atkins

SABBATH

our memory verse is obviously this quarterly's namesake text from Matthew 25:40 –

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me.’ ”

Jesus had a lot to say about how to treat and care for others - particularly those who were hurting and lost. In case you haven't noticed, there has been some overlap in some of this quarter's lessons...and this week is no exception. So even though we've already talked a bit about Christ's focus on the poor and the oppressed/marginalized, and the sermon on the mount...we'll dig into both a little more this week.

What is God's goal for human beings? salvation, complete healing from our sinsick condition, and eternal life in close intimate relationship with God.

Is this is God's goal for *ALL* humans? Or is this His goal only for the humble, downtrodden and poor?

Then, why does God seem to have a particular regard for the humble, downtrodden and poor?

What law lens do you see it through? If you see it through human law, which is Satan's worldview—then the rich and powerful exploit the poor and their actions are abusive to the poor, so God is in the business paying people back with retributive justice. So people teach God is coming to inflict punishment on people. He is more concerned with righting the wrongs perpetrated upon the poor and downtrodden and therefore God spends more energy and time on the poor than on the rich, because the rich are not as deserving.

But, if you understand design law, how reality actually works, you realize God cannot heal any person's heart/mind without the freewill consent and active participation of that person. Why? Because to do so would destroy the individuality of anyone who doesn't choose to embrace truth for themselves. Thus, the humble, poor, and marginalized are often more willing to reach out to God, to acknowledge their own helplessness, to open their hearts, to surrender self, to accept God's methods and principles, whereas the rich and powerful are often deceived into thinking they are fine the way



they are. So perhaps God has particular regard for the downtrodden because they are more open to being saved by Him, while the rich and powerful may not be as aware of their need of Him.

And how do you think this plays into His instructions to us - to take care of the poor, the needy, the widows, and the orphans?

Could it be because they are likely the most receptive?

Could it also be about the change and growth that happens in us when we care for others...that *needs* to happen in us?

Many times when we minister to “one of the least of these”, *we* are likely the ones who are the more “rich and in need of nothing” – particularly in material terms - not always, but many times. How many of you have experienced this...maybe on a mission trip, feeding the homeless, or visiting a nursing home, or whatever situation...but it never fails to break this heart of stone and softens it up, humbles me, makes me much more aware of and more grateful for how truly blessed I am, teaches me to hold on loosely and to give freely - all these things grow us and move us back closer to God’s original design. These are the heart attitudes He wants to instill in us, so that it will be as easy and reflexive and involuntary for us to love others as it is for us to breathe.

SUNDAY

Introducing the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus also talked a lot about the Kingdom of Heaven - specifically during His sermon on the mount and in the Beatitudes...this is the subject of Sunday’s Lesson.

Again, we talked a bit about this last week so let’s review and see how much we learned...and retained.

Christ goes down a whole list of qualities, attributes, and attitudes...and how do those sound?

Are they typically things we would strive for?

They sound not so appealing - unpleasant, even - but then He elevates these folks and describes them as “blessed” and “inheriting the kingdom”.

These are people who are poor in spirit, who are meek and lowly, or hungry and thirsty, or in mourning - how could any of those things be considered a blessing, and how could anyone with those traits be considered blessed?



Do you have any inkling of how revolutionary and exactly counter to that culture these teachings must have been?

Even more so than today, the health/wellness gospel was in full swing - folks believed that health, and wealth, and status, and position were outward signs or proof that one was blessed by or in favor with God - particularly those with the wealth, status, and position. The characteristics described by Christ were just the opposite, and were taken to mean that someone was out of favor or cursed by God for some hidden unconfessed sin. But as it's often described, the Kingdom of Heaven is an upside down kingdom or a backwards kingdom - do you remember some of the upside down elements of Christ's kingdom that we discussed previously? What makes it different...polar opposite, in fact, from other earthly kingdoms?

How do human governments function?

What methods do they use? Why?

What law construct are all human governments built upon?

But Jesus said His kingdom is not of this world...it doesn't operate upon the *principles* (or laws) of this sinful world, so what kind of law is Jesus' kingdom built upon? Design law - and the big ones are love, truth, and freedom.

What kind of kingdom operates upon truth?

Do any kingdoms of the world operate upon pure truth, never deceiving, never using falsehood?

Thus, there are no dictatorial methods in Christ's kingdom – compelling power is found *only* under Satan's government - there are no rules imposed and enforced with threat of punishment, rather there is truth, presented in love, and leaving others free. [How should the church practice this method - both within the institution and when dealing with those outside the denomination?]

God's kingdom is based on a “**power under**” rather than a “power over” approach - those with the most abilities, power, and resources are to serve those with the least...just as in John 13, when *all* power in heaven and on earth had been given to Christ, what did he do with it? He served His disciples by humbly kneeling down and washing their feet.



The more you give, the more you receive...worldly kingdoms operate on the premise of the more you make/take/accumulate, the more you receive. I mean, is this common core? This kingdom math doesn't compute.

The first will be last, and the last will be first/whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it —what does this mean? [How does this work in the church?]

We talked about this last week, and I love that the lesson emphasizes again this week that along with the deep spiritual truths of Christ's teachings come practical applications deeply relevant for our daily lives, right now, today - why is that?

Why are spiritual truths always practical truths? Because those truths are based on design laws—how reality is built and how reality actually operates!

Trusting God and cooperating in His healing transformation leads one to live their life in harmony with God's laws, and this is always practical and beneficial. Pursuing spiritual development through design law understanding always leads to practical applications, not just eternal-life benefits by claiming some legal payment in a book in heaven, but immediate benefits in this temporal life.

Do you think this might be why Jesus continually described the kingdom of heaven as a tangible reality that we can be part of, here and now?

Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts. – {DA 641.3}

MONDAY

Overcoming Evil With Good

Don't we need some of this right now here in our world and in our country?

Monday's lesson tries to really enlighten us to some of the context surrounding Christ's teachings, and the circumstances and conditions most of His followers found themselves in. He had begun to attract large crowds of people, made up mostly of common folk – there were a few Jewish rulers and religious leaders, but mostly lower to middle class. They lived under the imperial rule of the Roman empire, and they lived a rather difficult existence. Their life choices and options were very few, they were burdened by heavy taxation, and weighed down by endless religious rules and traditions. In



teaching these people, Jesus was obviously concerned with offering them a way to live well, to live with dignity and courage, regardless of their circumstances.

The instructions He gave in Matthew 5:38-48 - things like “turn the other cheek,” “give them the shirt off your back,” and “go the extra mile”—are so well-known to us that they are just common clichés. But our familiarity with the terms belies the radical actions and attitudes that Jesus is teaching here.

The scenarios Jesus described were not hypothetical clichés, they were literal *common experiences* for many of His listeners. They were often violently assaulted by their “superiors” or masters. They were often indebted and lost their property to the landlords and lenders. They were often pressed into labor by the occupying Roman soldiers.

Jesus taught the people to respond with integrity, to treat the oppressors better than they deserved, and, by so doing, to resist the loss of their humanity. While these oppressors tried to exert their power, the people always had the freedom to choose how they would respond, and by resisting nonviolently and responding generously, they exposed the evil of the oppression and injustice that was being done. You want to talk about some spiritual truths with practical application?

And notice that Jesus’ focus was NOT on behavior, His focus was on heart attitude. We are not blessed for doing the right thing; we are blessed for having the right heart! And such a heart we cannot create, we can only receive it in relationship with Jesus Christ!

We are also blessed when we endure the abuse of the world with a heart like Christ, when we love our enemies, when we turn the other cheek, when we pray for those who spitefully use us. Again, we are blessed when our hearts are divergent from the world, when our hearts are in harmony with the King of love from the kingdom of love.

Romans 12:17-21

Don't repay evil with evil, for in so doing you only allow the infection of selfishness to be strengthened and thus damage your mind and character. Be sure to 'do what is right because it is right'—openly for all to see. Do all in your power to live at peace with others, but be aware that others may still perpetrate evil against you. And when this happens, my friends, do not take revenge—there is no need for it!—for every act of sin reacts upon the sinner, damaging and slowly destroying their God-given faculties. Be patient and permit God's wrath to work—God's wise method of letting one go to reap the consequences of one's choice—and hopefully it will bring your enemy to repentance; as it is written: "It is mine to discipline; I will settle any debts," says the Lord. Rather than taking revenge, "If your enemy is hungry, feed them; if they



are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing good to your enemy, you will bring guilt and mental anguish like burning coals down on their head." So don't let evil and selfishness consume you, but rather expel evil and selfishness from your heart by doing good and loving others.

TUESDAY

The Good Samaritan

Tuesday recounts the familiar parable about the Good Samaritan that we have studied several times in this class, so we don't have to spend a ton of time here...but I want to bring out just a couple of points.

In *Desire of Ages*, Ms. White says that in this story, Christ illustrated the nature of **true** religion. "He shows that it consists **not** in systems, creeds, or rites, but in the performance of loving deeds, in bringing the greatest good to others, in genuine goodness." Just as it was in Christ's day, this is not good news for leaders and officials of religious institutions who are responsible for developing those systems, creeds, rites, and such.

Question...did stopping and helping the man in need change the Good Samaritan's heart...or did he stop and help the man in need **because** his heart had already been changed?

This is such an important concept to grasp, because we are **NOT** saved by our works! Our works, and the change/transformation in our works is evidence of the heart change and the healing process taking place in our lives.

This is another place where the legal metaphor really breaks down and just causes confusion. Imagine someone is sick with a terminal disease, cancer is spread throughout their body, in its late stages – will any "work" on the part of the sick person heal them?

If for instance, people who are healthy eat well, can the cancer patient make the cancer go away by eating a full meal everyday?

If healthy people participate in physical activities, could the cancer patient make the cancer go away by playing basketball, baseball, running, biking, etc.?

What happens to a person's ability to eat well and participate in physical activities when the cancer progresses?



What happens to their ability to FUNCTION normally? It is impaired. Now, if a person with cancer receives a cure, a remedy which puts the cancer into remission, what changes might we see in their function?

How might we recognize that the person is now well, or on the road back to health?

Might they start eating regularly again, might they start engaging in more physical activity again?

Do such behaviors heal them...or do such behaviors occur *WHEN* they are healed?

How was mankind originally designed to function? In selfless love to others, and what did sin do to our functioning? Turned us fearful and selfish, is there any work we can do to change ourselves? No, but when Christ heals us will our functioning change? Absolutely!

But it is a healing *process*, in many ways the work of a lifetime as Paul points to in Romans 7 - "What a wretched man I am...I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

WEDNESDAY

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The first paragraph in the lesson summarizes this parable and then says about the two men,

"In life, their respective circumstances remained unchanged; but in death, as judged by God, their positions were dramatically reversed."

Any thoughts about that?

Was the dramatic reversal of positions caused by or a result of God's judgment?

Then what?

I want to contrast the view we just read from our quarterly with one of the founders of our church. In the book, *Christ Object Lessons*, there is an entire chapter - Chapter 21 - devoted to the meaning and interpretation of this parable...listen to just the first two paragraphs and see if you can detect any differences.



“In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Christ shows that in this life **men decide their eternal destiny**. During probationary time the grace of God is offered to every soul. But if men waste their opportunities in self-pleasing, **they cut themselves off from everlasting life**. No afterprobation will be granted them. **By their own choice** they have fixed an impassable gulf between them and their God. This parable draws a contrast between the rich who have not made God their dependence, and the poor who have made God their dependence. Christ shows that the time is coming when the position of the two classes will be reversed. Those who are poor in this world’s goods, yet who trust in God and are patient in suffering, will one day be exalted above those who now hold the highest positions the world can give but who have not surrendered their lives to God.” {COL 260.2}

In the great Judgment day, those who have not worked for Christ, who have drifted along thinking of themselves, caring for themselves, will be placed by the Judge of the whole earth with those who did evil. They receive the same condemnation. – {DA 641.4}

What condemnation? Why are they condemned?

This same author describes it in these ways...at the end of COL Chapter 21, the last two sentences are:

“..**By their own neglect** they have formed a chasm which nothing can bridge. Between them and the righteous there is a great gulf fixed.”

And in the book, *The Great Controversy*, another familiar quote in this class:

“The destiny of the wicked is fixed **by their own choice**. Their exclusion from heaven is **voluntary with themselves**, and just and merciful on the part of God. Like the waters of the Flood the fires of the great day declare God’s verdict that the wicked are incurable.” {GC 542}

Again, this is not about works or behaviors...this is about a change in heart motive, to love others more than self. Could I start a charitable organization, under the guise of helping people, but with ulterior motives...financial gain, tax advantages, getting my child into a good college? And might that organization actually end up helping and blessing people in need? But is my heart converted and healed? Same with giving or volunteering.

Remember the folks at the end who will have prophesied, preached, performed miracles...in who’s name? They really thought they were doing the right things, they had the behaviors down pat...but their hearts were still stone, and they never really knew God.



THURSDAY

The Least of These

The only infinite resource we finite humans have on this earth is our capacity to love...even Christ as a human was subject to his limited, finite humanity. Jesus took time away from the masses to meditate and rejuvenate—and Jesus’ humanity was like ours. His humanity didn’t have infinite resources—it required him to rest and recover.

With that in mind, can we “help” too much?

Our finite resources must be spent in a controlled manner - and are subject to the “Law of Restoration”.

In the healthcare arena, whose health, well-being, and safety are the most important? Why? Because if the caregiver goes down, then no one is getting any care...not only that, and even worse, the caregiver then becomes a patient and taxes the system even more.

Same reason why in an airplane emergency they tell you to put your own mask on first before trying to assist others.

Think about this analogy...there has been a big, traumatic event downtown and main trauma hospital is desperately in need of blood donations in order to treat the injured. You know that your blood type is in high demand and you want to help, so you go down, you donate a pint of blood, and you’re able to save a couple of people’s lives. But you figure if you donate another pint, you could save even more lives...and 3 pints could save even more!

Is that a good idea? But why not? There are so many people injured and they really need more blood! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength...and your neighbor as yourself.

Should the church/Christians, use their energy to reform governments, get the right politicians elected, the right judges in office and seek to use the power of the state to enforce its beliefs on society?

In Christ’s day, what was society like?

Were there human rights abuses of all kinds?

Was there hedonism and perversions?



Did Christ or His disciples use their energies or that of the church to try and get the right senators or governors into office or change the laws of Rome?

What did Jesus and the disciples focus their energy on? Converting the hearts! To take the message of eternal salvation to people and change hearts and minds.

And when they converted the hearts, what happened to the empire of Rome? It transformed the world!

That is our mission - our mission is to change hearts - to convert people away from the worldly system to the Godly way of doing things - to convert them from self-centered, survival of the fittest methods to other-centered love. And when we do that, then we don't really have to worry about passing laws.

Do you understand why heaven is going to be heaven? Because every person there would rather die than ever hurt you...and you would rather die than hurt anybody there - everybody else loves you that much.

In a place like that, do we need arbitrarily imposed laws? On this Earth, we have to pass such laws, because people don't have love in their hearts.

Don't be fooled into investing in agendas that have laudable goals on the surface but use ungodly methods to achieve those goals, i.e. the position of protecting innocent life by the use of coercion, intimidation, force and imposition.

God's methods are the methods of truth, presented in love while leaving others free. We want to promote life and health in the context of freedom because love can only exist in an atmosphere of freedom.

Many feel that it would be a great privilege to visit the scenes of Christ's life on earth, to walk where He trod, to look upon the lake beside which He loved to teach, and the hills and valleys on which His eyes so often rested. But we need not go to Nazareth, to Capernaum, or to Bethany, in order to walk in the steps of Jesus. We shall find His footprints beside the sickbed, in the hovels of poverty, in the crowded alleys of the great city, and in every place where there are human hearts in need of consolation. In doing as Jesus did when on earth, we shall walk in His steps. – {DA 640.2}

What is truly helpful?

Read Dr. Jennings' blog on comeandreason.com, "Work or Handouts...how to help those in need."