

Mission to the Powerful



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 4, 2 Kings 5:1–19, John 3:1–12, John 7:43–52, Matt. 19:16–22, John 19:38–42.*

Memory Text: “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (*Matthew 16:26, NKJV*).

Though written many years ago, the Bible, the Word of God, is the revelation of God's truth for our world. And among the many truths it reveals is that of human nature, and that—whether in seventh-century Judea or twenty-first-century Brazil—people are basically the same: sinners in need of divine grace.

This includes the rich and powerful. The rich and powerful of Bible times were no different from the rich and powerful in modern times, especially in their pursuit of wealth and fame and power, often (but not always) at the expense of the vulnerable. Yet, God is as concerned about the salvation of the rich and the powerful as He is for that of the weak and the needy. Scripture provides some gripping examples of Bible characters who were powerful, or rich, or both, and how God used them to be a blessing to the nations: Abraham, Isaac, Job, Solomon, and Joseph, to name a few examples.

This week we will explore God's mission to the rich and powerful. Journey with us as we see how God reached some of these people and how He is calling and preparing Seventh-day Adventists to be a witness to them today, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 2.

Nebuchadnezzar

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe in what is known as “unlimited atonement.” This means that, in contrast to some Christians, we believe that Christ’s death was for all humanity, not just a special group of those predestined by God for salvation. Because God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*1 Tim. 2:4, NKJV*), Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice “for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (*1 John 2:2, NKJV*). That’s why everyone was chosen “in Him before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4, NKJV*), even if not everyone chooses Him in return. That’s why, too, we find accounts in the Bible of all sorts of people being reached for God.

Read Daniel 4. What happened to the king here, and what does this tell us about salvation coming to one of the world’s most powerful men?

A striking example in the Bible of how God reaches powerful unbelievers is the story of King Nebuchadnezzar. God’s judgment was executed on him in a way similar to some Israelite kings (*see, for example, 2 Chron. 32:25, 26; 1 Kings 14:21–31; 1 Samuel 28*). The biblical account of Nebuchadnezzar, who came to his senses and acknowledged the Creator God, shows that God cares about the wealthy and powerful, as well as the weak and needy. In verse 37, the most powerful man on the earth declared, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (*Dan. 4:37, NKJV*). If only all the rich and powerful and haughty among us mortal beings understood this truth!

What can we learn from this story? First, God uses committed believers, such as Daniel, as a bridge to reach powerful unbelievers. Second, God can directly intervene in the witnessing process in order to reach powerful unbelievers. Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by God for his pride and arrogance. And though this was a very dramatic story, there are many other ways in which the rich and powerful and haughty can be brought low.

Even if we are not rich and powerful by the world’s standards, why must we be careful to avoid the kind of arrogance that this king had manifested? Why might that attitude be easier to have than we might think?

Naaman

Christ died for all, regardless of their background, wealth, ethnicity, or status. God ceaselessly draws all humanity to Himself, including those individuals classed among the powerful non-Christians of the world (see Ellen G. White, *The Acts of Apostles*, p. 416).

Read 2 Kings 5:1–19. What can we take from this story about reaching people for the Lord?

In 2 Kings 5:17–19, Naaman made two unusual requests after God healed him of leprosy. First, he asked to take two mule-loads of earth from Israel back to Syria for the purpose of worshiping the living God. He states, “For your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to the other gods, but to the LORD” (2 Kings 5:17, NKJV). Though Naaman is clearly now a believer in the only true God, his first request shows that pagan influences still held sway over his thinking to a degree. The Syrian commander regarded the God of Israel as a divinity who must be venerated on soil native to that land. Although Naaman acknowledged the reality that there was no God aside from the Lord of Israel, he had not wholly dispossessed himself of the notion that God was, by some particular means, connected to the land of Israel. Thus, in his own country he desired to worship God on Israelite soil.

Naaman’s second petition shows the sincerity of his faith. While he resolved to serve only the God of heaven, he realized carrying out such a resolution in his own idolatrous country wouldn’t be easy. Moverover, the king of Syria still worshiped the god Rimmon, and in this occupation Naaman would serve as the king’s escort. While Naaman had no intention of forsaking his duties to his earthly king, he did not wish to be deemed as bowing in worship to Rimmon. Having surrendered his heart to Jehovah, Naaman desired not to make any concessions to idolatry by worshiping the heathen god. Nor did he want word to get back to Elisha that he was doing so.

Elisha responded to Naaman’s entreaty by saying “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:19, NKJV). “These words must not be thought of as either expressing approval or disapproval of Naaman’s parting request. He was to depart in peace, not in doubt or restless uncertainty. God had been kind to him, and he was to find happiness and peace in his knowledge and worship of God. Naaman was a new convert, a man with conscientious scruples, who would grow in strength and wisdom if he clung to his new-found faith. God leads new converts on step by step, and knows the appropriate moment in which to call for a reform in a certain matter. This principle ought always to be borne in mind by those who labor for the salvation of souls.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 878.

What lessons should we learn from this story about not pushing people too quickly, especially those who come from a non-Christian background?

Witnessing to the Learned: Nicodemus

Nicodemus was a learned man. The Bible describes him as a ruler of the Jews (*John 3:1*). Jesus referred to him as a teacher of Israel (*John 3:10, NKJV*). He had a good understanding of the Bible and had a spiritual hunger for the Lord. From a human perspective, he may have looked as though he were a follower of God. He kept all the commandments, and he was a respected leader among the Jews. He was powerful and wealthy. Many looked at these as signs that God had blessed him. Nevertheless, it turns out that the surface appearances were only that—surface appearances.

Read John 3:1–12. What does this story reveal about Nicodemus’s spiritual needs and how Jesus addressed them right away?

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he tried to maintain the façade, the status quo. But God knew his heart. Similarly, God knows the hearts and needs of all the rich and powerful, whatever their background. Nicodemus came to Jesus because Jesus’ teachings had convicted him. His pride kept him from openly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, but that night changed him forever. Even after his conviction that Jesus was sent of God, he still did not openly acknowledge that he was a follower of Jesus Christ.

Read John 7:43–52 and John 19:39. What do these texts tell us about Nicodemus and Jesus?

We can see here in these verses that Nicodemus had, obviously, been greatly impacted by Jesus. He sought to protect Him when Jesus was alive and then to honor Jesus after Jesus was dead. No question, Jesus had reached Nicodemus, who, even in his vaunted knowledge and wisdom, had a great need of the Savior, as we all do.

Why must we be careful of the trap of thinking that because “we have the truth” (which we do), then the knowledge of this truth alone is enough to save us? How many souls will be lost who had more than enough knowledge, even of the three angels’ messages, to be saved?

Mission to the Rich

Read Matthew 19:16–22. What lessons can we learn from this story, in which, in contrast to Nicodemus, a person did not accept Jesus?

Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler shows just how dangerous a trap wealth can be. Look at these words: "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (*Matt. 19:24, NKJV*). This, of course, does not mean the rich cannot be saved, but only that, if these people are not careful, their riches can truly be an impediment to salvation.

In the end, the rich and the poor face the same fate: the grave. This means that the rich are in as desperate need of salvation as is anyone else. Whatever else money can buy, it cannot buy an exemption from death. That exemption comes only as a gift, offered freely by Jesus to whoever will claim it by faith. " 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live' " (*John 11:25, NKJV*).

Read Luke 19:1–10. What made the difference in this story, in contrast to the one about the rich young ruler?

Zacchaeus responded to Jesus in a way that, unfortunately, the rich young ruler didn't. Notice, Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus to sell what he had and give to the poor, as He did to the rich young ruler. Jesus must have known just how tied to his money the rich ruler was, which was why Jesus said what He did to him. In contrast, though we don't know all that was spoken when Jesus was in his house, Zacchaeus obviously was convicted by Jesus and knew that he had to make some changes in his life, especially as it related to his wealth.

“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (*Matt. 16:26, NKJV*). What should these words say to us all?

Mission to the Powerful

Jesus knew how to make friends with the powerful. He was admired and respected by many of these people and, at the same time, was also despised by many. The powerful people in the Bible who came to Jesus for help surely sensed that He cared for them. Also, many of the rich and powerful did not openly come to Jesus right away; they waited until they were certain that Jesus was truly the Son of God. Such was the case both with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

Read Matthew 27:57–60 (see also *Mark 15:43–47, Luke 23:50–53, and John 19:38–42*). **What does this account tell us about how the Lord used a rich man who clearly had been impacted by Jesus?**

Until this time we have heard nothing of Joseph of Arimathea. Suddenly this rich man appears, almost out of nowhere, and is used to help fulfill prophecy. God has used and will continue to use the rich for His purposes. Hence, we must have a mission to them, as well.

Where to begin can be one of the most difficult phases in making friends with powerful people. In general, it is better not to pursue them; let them come to you. Jesus did this; they became a witness to His message, healing, and power from God. They were convinced behind the scenes that He is truly the Son of God.

Powerful people will seek to partner with genuine ministry for a number of reasons. They want to be part of something good that is changing the lives of people. This is one way they know that it can also change their lives. It provides a subtle way for the rich and powerful to get the help they need without publicly disclosing their needs.

The second phase is to begin a genuine ministry as an avenue for the rich and powerful to be part of God's ministry. Take some time to invest in the lives of the rich and powerful in your society.

Challenge: Add someone to your daily prayer list who is in a position of power, is not a believer, and is someone you could come in contact with from time to time.

Challenge Up: Address a letter or email to someone in a position of power—even if it is someone you may never have met—and tell that person that you are praying for him or her.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Ministry to the Rich,” *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 209–216; “Captive Maid Shows Concern for Naaman,” *Reflecting Christ*, p. 337.

Jesus’ love is the same for the poor as it is for the rich and powerful people in the world. He died for princes as well as for paupers. Jesus knew the most effective way of reaching their hearts. He warned us that “ ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’ ” (*Mark 10:25, NIV*). We are challenged this week to reach powerful and wealthy individuals with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are as much in need of salvation as is anyone else, even if, unfortunately, they might not realize it because of the “security” that they believe their wealth offers.

“Much is said concerning our duty to the neglected poor; should not some attention be given to the neglected rich? Many look upon this class as hopeless. . . . Thousands of wealthy men have gone to their graves unwarned. But indifferent as they may appear, many among the rich are soul-burdened.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 210.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus broke down caste and class barriers when ministering to the rich and the poor during His earthly ministry. How do we as Adventists address this issue, that of the gap between the rich and the poor, that is so ingrained in all our societies?
- 2 Jesus said the following: “ ‘Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful’ ” (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*). What do you think Jesus meant by “the deceitfulness of riches”? Why do we not necessarily have to be rich to be deceived by riches?
- 3 In class, go over the question asked at the end of Tuesday’s study about the fact that knowing the truth is not the same thing as being saved by it. Why is this such a crucial distinction for us to make? If knowing the truth alone is not what saves us, what does save us?
- 4 What other reasons can you think of for why the rich young ruler rejected Jesus while Zacchaeus accepted Him?

Mission Path to Spain: Part 3

By ANDREW McCHESENEY

Pastor Luis Paiva miraculously received US\$1,000 to pay off a debt, leading him to believe that God’s will was for him, his wife, and their three children to leave Venezuela. But they didn’t have any savings.

“Lord, how do I leave with no savings?” he prayed.

At home, his wife said a pastor in the United States had called, wanting to speak with him. The pastor was looking for a volunteer missionary to work for a year in an area of Mexico without a Seventh-day Adventist presence. Luis went to Mexico, and his wife and children joined him two months later.

Over the next eight months, 35 people were baptized through Luis’s efforts. One new member donated a building, and a new church was opened.

But the authorities denied Luis a visa to stay in Mexico. He seemed to only have two options: move to the United States illegally or stay in Mexico illegally. He didn’t want to live anywhere illegally. Luis had become acquainted with a regional immigration official. When the official heard about Luis’ situation, he promised not to deport him. Luis believed him. But he believed God even more when God said, “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save” (*Psalms 146:3, NIV*).

Worried, Luis prayed. He also made phone calls to the United States and Canada, seeking legal advice on leaving Mexico. Only two churches replied—an Adventist church and another church, both in Canada—but Luis remained in Mexico. Then a church member visited his home.

“What’s your biggest fear?” the man asked.

“I don’t want to live illegally in Mexico, and I don’t want to travel illegally to the United States,” Luis replied. “I also don’t want to return to my country.”

“If you had the money, what would you do right now?” the man asked.

“I would buy a plane ticket to fly to Spain,” Luis said.

Luis had a same-age aunt who had immigrated to Spain 20 years earlier. If he moved, he would have a family member nearby. Also, he had visited Spain three years earlier and felt comfortable there.



After listening to Luis, the church member said, “So, let’s buy the tickets and have you fly to Spain.”

After buying plane tickets for Luis and his family, he told Luis not to worry. “God is with you and is leading you,” he said.

Today, Luis and his wife are missionaries in Spain.

Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that helps support missionaries around the world. Read next week about how Luis left a fruit stand to become a missionary.

Part I: Overview

This week's memory text is part of Jesus' discourse on the cost of being His disciple. In His teaching on discipleship, Jesus regularly mentioned the need to count the cost of following Him, which could be high. Matthew 16:24–28 and Luke 14:25–33 are two of the key texts in understanding Jesus' teaching on what it means for a person to follow Him (*see also Mark 8:34–37, Luke 9:23–25*). It is important to note that in His teachings on discipleship, Jesus does not speak about the evilness of money or the damnation of those who are rich. He simply warns us against letting our possessions stand in the way of our pursuit of eternity with Him. None of the things that money can afford us—pleasures, power, renown—will do us any ultimate good if, because of them, we forfeit eternity.

While the Bible does not condemn riches, it does warn about the potential danger. According to Paul, the love of money, not money itself, is evil (*1 Tim. 6:10*). Rich and powerful people, as well as poor and weak people, are *equally* welcome into God's kingdom. As Peter realized in Cornelius's house, "God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (*Acts 10:34, 35, NKJV*). God is as concerned about the salvation of the rich and the powerful as He is for the poor and the weak.

Part II: Commentary

The Cost of Being a Disciple of Jesus

In Matthew 16:24, Jesus uses extreme language to highlight the non-negotiable nature of the cost of following Him: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (*NIV; see also Luke 14:26, 27*). Jesus did not want a followership driven only by the desire to benefit from the various miracles He performed. Following Him for the gratification of our desires would amount to an opportunistic relationship with Him. Instead, Jesus wants His followers to die daily to self-interest, selfish desires, and any ambitions that would hinder their relationship with Him. His call to count the cost of following Him was His invitation to His hearers to, first and foremost, understand and consent to the terms of following Him.

Jesus also demands of His followers a devotion that surpasses their instinct to preserve their own lives. Disciples must prioritize their devotion to Jesus over life itself. As a symbol of an unavoidable and most excruciating death, taking one's cross to follow Jesus epitomizes a commitment to the highest possible cost of being His disciple. Just as

carrying a literal cross was an act of submitting to the Romans, taking one's cross to follow Jesus refers to Jesus' call for His disciples' total submission to Him. Discipleship is not having Jesus at our beck and call. Rather, discipleship is about transferring to Jesus the ownership of everything pertaining to us. Jesus is up front because He does not want anyone to sign up for discipleship with Him and then later be surprised by the high cost for doing so. Jesus does not want His disciples to be possessed by anything or any person but Him.

In Luke 14, two absolutes are mentioned in connection with the cost of being Jesus' disciple. The first absolute is "anyone," in verse 26, and "whoever," in verse 27. Rather than pertaining to a select few, the pronouns "anyone" and "whoever" mean that the cost of being Jesus' disciple applies to every individual desiring to follow Him, no matter their social standing. The second absolute is "renouncing all" that one has (*Luke 14:33*). Renouncing all for the sake of following Jesus means not only physically giving something up but also letting go emotionally of what has been physically given up so that an individual is in no way possessed by that thing. Jesus was basically challenging those who contemplated following Him to set aside their own agenda and embrace His agenda. This absolute emphasizes the fact that a disciple must not allow anything to stand in the way of his or her total surrender to Christ. Jesus' expectation is that every person who desires to follow Him must be absolutely willing, at any time, to give up all relationships, all possessions, and even life itself. Jesus requires from every individual desiring to follow Him a change of attitude, leading to a daily commitment to be His at any cost. This divine expectation is a warning to every person desiring to be His disciple to refrain from trying to make Him a means to his or her own ends. Jesus expects His disciples to exchange their will for His will and to fully surrender the control of their destiny to Him.

God Has a Heart for the Rich and Powerful.

God is as concerned about the salvation of the rich and the powerful as He is about the weak and the needy. Christ died for all people, regardless of their background, ethnicity, gender, or social status. His blood has sufficient merit for the redemption of every human being from the perdition of their sin. Consequently, every person has access to His free offer of forgiveness and acceptance with God. Simply stated, the scope of Christ's atonement is unlimited; it is universally accessible to the poor, just as it is to the rich (*John 3:16, 2 Cor. 5:15, 1 Tim. 2:3-6*). Although an online search for "God's heart for the rich and powerful" generates a negligible number of hits compared to a search for "God's heart for the poor," it should be emphasized that God has a heart for every single human being on the account of their creation in His image and Christ's substitutionary

death for them. While everyone will not be saved, every person who ever lived, or is now living, had or has access to God, either through general revelation (nature), particular revelation (God's providential work among the unconverted), or special revelation (Jesus Christ and Scripture). Acts 14:17 says that God has not left Himself without witnesses among humans. In heaven, there will be people who were billionaires in their earthly life, as well as people who lived in utter poverty. Among the redeemed there also will be people who were considered great minds on earth, as well as people who never learned to read or write.

Scripture makes mention of rich and powerful individuals who loved and feared God. Old Testament examples include Abraham, Isaac, Job, and David. New Testament examples include Matthew (*Matt. 9:9*), Zacchaeus the chief tax collector (*Luke 19:1, 2*), the apostle Paul (*Acts 9*), the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts 8:26-40*), and Cornelius the Roman centurion (*Acts 10*). What made these individuals distinctive was not so much what they possessed but their committed relationship with God, in spite of their wealth.

Besides the above examples of rich and powerful individuals who did not let wealth and power hinder their relationship with God, there also is the example of those who let their riches keep them from surrendering their lives to Jesus. A well-known example is the rich young man who rejected Jesus' invitation to follow Him after he inquired about what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Despite the rich young ruler's rejection of Jesus' invitation, Mark 10:21 says that Jesus still loved him. Just because Jesus asked him to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor before following Him does not mean that rich people cannot be His disciples. In this particular case, the problem was that this wealthy young man's riches were an obstacle to the surrender of his heart to God. The young man's heart was so captivated by his great wealth that it became the object of his fundamental allegiance.

The Timing of Our Message Matters

After his healing from leprosy, Naaman made two requests that would completely sound out of place today: (1) he requested to take two mule-loads of earth from Israel back to Syria as a sign of his commitment to worship no other god but the living God, the one Israel worshiped (*2 Kings 5:17*); and (2) he asked for permission to bow down with his king in Rimmon's shrine, not as an act of worship but as part of his job description. He was, after all, the king's right-hand man and needed to be at his side wherever he went (*2 Kings 5:18*).

If these two requests were not strange enough, Elisha's response to Naaman's request will be troubling in many missionary circles today:

“Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:19). Elisha’s astonishing response was not an encouragement for Naaman to continue idolatrous practices. Elisha most probably trusted that God would continue to work in Naaman’s life. By his confession, Naaman had made a huge step forward in his spiritual journey. God Himself had orchestrated his encounter with Elisha. Elisha saluted that progress and probably thought it wise not to proceed too quickly to other faith matters that Naaman was not yet ready to accept.

The same teaching principle is found in John 16:12, where, after three and a half years of mentoring His disciples, Jesus tells them that He still has many things to reveal to them but that He is not going to do so because they are not yet ready to grasp them. Jesus knew their capacity for understanding new truth. He chose to reveal to them only what He thought was essential for them at the moment, leaving the rest to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Ellen G. White advises, “While the teacher of truth should be faithful in presenting the gospel, let him never pour out a mass of matter which the people cannot comprehend because it is new to them and hard to understand.”—*Evangelism*, p. 202.

Part III: Life Application

A significant portion of human existence revolves around money: earning it, spending it, saving part of our earnings, and giving some, first and foremost, as tithes and offerings. Money, and especially how we relate to it, should not be taken lightly. Rich people are not the only ones faced with the danger of becoming mesmerized by earthly possessions. Poor people also can become slaves to the little they have or to the desire to acquire more to the point where they may be in danger of losing sight of eternity.

As Christians, it is important that the way we relate to money and all that it can afford does not hinder our relationship with God. Here are two things we need to keep in mind in relation to money: (1) the fragility of earthly investments: all the acquisition the world has to offer (pleasure, security, power, etc.) is fleeting; and (2) on the day we appear before God and render an account of our lives, we will be evaluated by the health of our souls rather than by the wealth of our estates.

Because God is no respecter of persons, He still longs for rich and powerful people to become Christ’s disciples. What God cares about most is not what is in a person’s hand but what is in his or her heart. Bible examples of rich and powerful people teach us that this category of people also can be receptive to the gospel. It is the responsibility of committed believers both to pray that God will directly intervene in the witnessing process in order to reach powerful unbelievers and also to avail themselves to the Holy Spirit to become bridges to reach them.

Notes
