

Bible Studies for Adventists



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March 28–April 3, 2009

Commentary on “Love”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, March 28, 2009

Saturday’s lesson gives Isaiah 53, Matthew 22:37-39, 1 Corinthians 13, and 1 John 3 and 4 as the background texts for this week’s lesson on Love. The memory text is, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13, NIV).

The lesson introduces the idea from 1 Corinthians 13 that without love, we are nothing. It continues by quoting Sophocles who said, “One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life. That word is love.” It concludes by saying that this statement does capture the “depth of love that was to be proclaimed and modeled by our Savior,” and it enlarges on this idea by saying everything God does is a manifestation of His love which is both comforting and difficult to comprehend.

God’s love, the lesson states, “far exceeds what human beings usually label as love, which is sometimes a mere shallow feeling or temporary infatuation that’s often mixed with selfishness and greed. God does not just have love or show love. He is love.”

Problems

The introduction to this week’s lesson is notable for what it does not say. The “Week At A Glance” at the bottom of the first lesson summarizes thus: “God’s love for humanity has been revealed in numerous ways, the greatest being the Cross. As followers of Jesus, we respond to His love by loving others as Christ loves us.”

The emphasis here is on our loving others as Christ loved us. The method for reaching this goal, however, is never explained. The emphasis here seems to be that God demonstrated love in many ways, and we, by following His example, are to emulate Him.

The Bible is quite specific about how we come to love as God loves. It is not through emulation. First, God’s love is demonstrated through the cross, but the cross is more than a revelation of God’s love. God didn’t merely show us how far He would go to reach us and thus allow Jesus to be crucified by wicked men.

On the contrary, the issue worked out on the cross was the payment of the blood-penalty God demanded for our sin. Romans 5:7-9 (ESV) says this:

“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.”

The cross was not a demonstration; the cross was a payment; God publicly displayed Jesus “as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25). This propitiation was to show God’s righteousness because He has “passed over former sins”, and by Jesus’ death, He demonstrated that He was both “just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25-26).

Moreover, we do not demonstrate love by following His example or by “responding to His love”. In any case, how does one “respond to His love”? The lesson never makes that notion clear.

Romans 4 and 5 explain in detail how we are justified when we have faith in Jesus’ death. It is when we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly that our faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:5). When we have been justified by believing God and trusting Jesus’ blood to cover our sin, we then have “peace with God” (Romans 5:1). Now, having

been justified and having peace with God, we finally experience God's love—not merely toward us, but literally in our hearts. We get the love of God in our hearts this way:

Romans 5:5, ESV: “and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

We do not love others by “responding to” or by emulating Christ. Rather, we become able to love others when, having believed Him who justifies the ungodly and thus receiving peace with God, He literally pours out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom He gives us.

Only as we are born again—born of the spirit (see John 3:3-6), can we love others. Our human emotion is a shadow of real love. We cannot love as Jesus loves or even begin to care for others without imposing our own subtle demands on them unless we have placed our faith in the Lord Jesus, accepted His blood-payment for our sin, and been sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14) who fills us, literally, with God's own love.

Summary

1. The cross is not merely a revelation or demonstration of God's love. It is the place where Jesus paid the blood-payment that God's own law demanded for sin.
2. We cannot merely respond to God's love by loving others. We are incapable of emulating God's love. Rather, we must be born of the Spirit—born again—and then God pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us. True love for others is not a mere “response” or emulation; it is literally a divine miracle that occurs in us as the Holy Spirit gives us new hearts of flesh in exchange for our natural hearts of stone.

Day 2: Sunday, March 29, 2009

In Sunday's lesson the author opens by making the point that we all need love from family, friends, and community—“But let's be clear: True love does not begin with us. The capacity for love is created in us by our Creator. (See Genesis 1:26 and John 3:16).

He continues by saying God's love always precedes our love and quotes from *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 551: True “love is not an impulse, but a divine principle, a permanent power. The unconsecrated heart cannot originate or produce it. Only in the heart where Jesus reigns is it found. We love Him, because He first loved us’ [1 John 4:19]. In the heart renewed by divine grace, love is the ruling principle of action.”

Then the author quotes C.S Lewis' *The Four Loves*: “We [must] begin at the real beginning, with love as the Divine energy. This primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give.”

The lesson ends with these questions: “From your own experience, what is the difference between human love and God's love? What kind of human love best exemplifies God's love? How can we better manifest God's love in our own lives?”

On page 7 of the teacher's edition, under the heading “Learning outline:” No. 1, sub-head A, says this: The Message Bible translates this text as “let us make human beings . . . reflecting our nature.” Because we reflect God's nature, and because God is love, we should reflect this love through our actions. How can we do this in our lives?

The second heading, “Experiencing Love”, subhead A, states, “God's extraordinary love is highlighted throughout Scripture. Creation, the gift of the Sabbath, the plan of salvation, and the Spirit of prophecy all affirm God's loving nature. Share specific ways you have experienced God's unfathomable love.”

Under the third subhead, “Reflecting Love”, is this question: “our reaction to the love of God should be love for one another. This can be hard to do in a world full of sin. How can you better reflect His love?”

Problems

Again, this lesson is idealistic and confusing without being helpful because it completely ignores the fact that love is only possible when we are born again of the Spirit and the love of God has been poured out within our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The question and assumption in the teacher's edition about being created in God's image, thus reflecting His nature, and since He is love, we should reflect this love, refuses to address the most basic statement of Genesis 1:26. The text says: “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

This image of God in which we were created is not “love” per se. Love, rather, is an attribute of God. We were made

to love, to be sure, but “love” is not the “image” of God. Love, on the contrary, is what God characterizes God’s invisible attributes: His eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20).

John 4:24 tells us what God “is” and what we, therefore, are: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Part of the image of God in which we have been made is His very essence: spirit. God does not have a physical body per se. While Jesus does forever share our humanity, the Father and the Spirit do not. They ARE “spirit”.

We are to worship Him “in spirit and truth”. This statement of Jesus’ reveals that we also have “spirits” that can and must worship God. Whatever this immaterial part of humanity is, it is related to God’s spirit. It is a significant part of being made in God’s image.

The lesson ignores that we are made in God’s image by being made with spirits that can know and worship God.

Since we are born dead in sin, by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3), we are not able to love with real love as natural humans. While we may be drawn to others and need others affection, natural human love is always self-centered. We can only love when we are born of the Spirit and made spiritually alive, when the Holy Spirit pours out God’s own love within our hearts. This is the only way to love.

Moreover, the Bible itself states how God’s love is affirmed. God sent His Son to save the world and give eternal life to all who believe in Him (John 3:16-1). “God demonstrated His own love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”(Romans 5:8).

Creation, “the gift of Sabbath, the plan of salvation, and the Spirit of prophecy” are never cited as evidences of God’s love. While God’s creation and salvation of us, His oracles and gifts all do affirm His love, these things listed in the teacher’s edition are not speaking of the biblical record of these events. The quarterly is specifically referring to Adventist distinctive doctrines.

The Adventist beliefs about creation, Sabbath, “the plan of salvation”, and the Spirit of prophecy are all non-biblical and do nothing to affirm God’s loving nature.

We cannot conclude anything beyond what the Bible actually states. The Bible clearly repeats that the evidence of God’s love is the fact that He sent Jesus to die as a ransom for sinners. If we deviate from this biblical fact and embrace doctrinal distinctives as evidence of the divine attribute of Love, we distort God’s love and embrace a falsehood.

The lesson summary on page 7 of the teacher’s edition again backs us into a corner: “God is love. When we allow Christ to abide within us, this love will be revealed in our hearts.”

How does one “allow” Christ’s love to abide in Him? This central question remains unaddressed.

The fact is that God calls us to admit our deep sin and repent before God, humbling ourselves before the Lord Jesus and allowing His blood to cover us and wash us clean. When we do that, God Himself pours His love into our hearts when the Holy Spirit seals us (Ephesians 1:13-14, Romans 5:8). Christ Himself abides in us, and nothing can take us out of His hand.(John 10:27-30).

We are not left to try and figure out how to “allow” Christ to abide in us. Rather, God Himself completes what He begins in us (Philippians 1:6).

The question about differentiating between God’s love and human love is a moot point. Human love is as filthy rags; it is part of the domain of darkness. God’s love is eternal; it is what God gives us when He transfers us to the kingdom of His beloved Son from the domain of darkness (Colossians 1:13).

We don’t “try” to “better manifest God’s love”. We can NEVER manifest God’s love. Instead, God pours His love into us, and because we are made alive by His Spirit, God Himself loves others through us. It is never us emulating God’s love. Always, when we love like God loves, that miracle is the result of God Himself making our spirits alive with His own life and manifesting Himself through us.

Summary

1. “Love” is not the image of God in which we were created. Love is the central attribute of God. Rather, our spirits are an essential part of our being made in God’s image.
2. Understanding that we have human spirits is the core of understanding how we love as God loves. Until our spirits are brought to life by the Holy Spirit, we are totally unable to love as God loves. We cannot emulate or improve our ability to love as God loves. We can only receive this ability by being born again and having God pour out His love in our hearts.
3. Adventist doctrines do not affirm God’s loving nature. The Bible states that the proof of God’s love is His sending Jesus to die as an offering for human sin. It is this sacrifice, not the Adventist doctrines of Sabbath, Creation, the “plan of salvation”, or the “spirit of prophecy” (more specifically, the writings of Ellen G. White), that confirm God’s love.
4. Christ’s abiding in us is not the result of our “allowing” Him to be there. God makes us alive with Christ while we are still dead in our sins and seats us with Him in heavenly place (Ephesians 2:1-6). God completes what He begins in us. (Phil 1:6). Christ’s love in our lives is totally a gift of His grace to us, not something we “develop” by trying harder.

Day 3: Monday, March 30, 2009

Monday's lesson addresses the questions of whether or not God's love is manifested more clearly in the New Testament and His justice and wrath are shown more clearly in the Old Testament. It concludes that there is no discrepancy between the two Testaments, that the New and the Old both demonstrate God's love.

The lesson then lists four things that show evidence of God's love in the Old Testament: God's love in creation, Providing a solution for the sin problem, the gift of the Sabbath, and the continuous gift of prophecy.

Moreover, on page 9 of the teacher's helps, Step 1—Motivate ends with this paragraph: "God wants something from us in return for the wonderful and mystifying gift of love He showers on us: to let Him show this love to others through us. What can we do to make it easier for Him to do this work in our lives?"

Problems

Again, it is misusing Scripture to say that Adventist core beliefs are demonstrations of God's love. Scripture never uses creation as an evidence of God's love. To be sure, all of the creation reflects God's sovereignty over it. The story of creation itself, however, does not overtly confirm God's love. The texts the lesson uses, Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:21-28 do not connect the creation with God's demonstration of love.

Moreover, God's providing a solution to the sin problem was not an "afterthought" which God devised after man sinned. While the lesson does not explicitly say the "plan of salvation" was an afterthought, the implication is there. Moreover, Ellen White depicts Jesus going into the Father's presence three times pleading for the right to be sent as payment for sin.

The Bible, however, never suggests that God devised the plan of Jesus' sacrifice AFTER sin arose. Revelation 13:8 says, "and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."

God knew before the world was created who would be saved and who would not. God didn't plan to send Jesus as a "fix" for the sin problem. Names have been written in God's book since before creation.

Furthermore, Ephesians 1 explains that God chose us in Him "before the foundation of the world" (v. 4)

To be sure, God's love is powerfully demonstrated in the cross. But God did not plan redemption after sin arose.

The gift of the Sabbath is also not a universal demonstration of God's love. It was a sign between God and Israel, but never was it stated as a requirement for all people.

Finally, the prophetess Ellen White is not an example of a "continuous gift of prophecy". Hebrews 1:1-3 is very clear that God spoke to us through prophets in times past, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His son. While prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit, this gift is for the building up of the body, not the revelation of new information about God or salvation.

To argue that the core essential of Adventism, notable the Sabbath and the prophet, are evidences of God's love is to completely ignore what the Bible actually says. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah quote God saying He has loved Israel with an everlasting love. From Genesis to the end of the Old Testament God's love is declared to be "steadfast".

To arbitrarily pick creation, the "solution for the sin problem", the Sabbath, and the continuous gift of prophecy is to completely ignore what the Bible actually says. The Bible is very clear that God loved His people deeply and unceasingly. As God, He cannot change or go back on His promises.

Moreover, We do not "make it easier for [God] to do [His] work in our lives. God is God, and He is sovereign over us. He completes what He begins (Phil 1:6). We do not "let" Him show His love to others through us. We submit to Him, repenting and allowing His blood to cleanse us. When we repent and submit to Him, He makes us alive in Jesus by putting His Spirit in us and pouring His love into our hearts—literally (Ephesians 1:13-14, Romans 5:8).

The question of whether or not God was loving in the Old Testament or not is a question of misunderstanding (or not carefully reading) the Bible. The Old Testament is full of statements declaring the unfailing love of God. It is not the Sabbath and prophecy that affirm God's love; it is God's own word and His own faithfulness.

Moreover, the text the lesson gives—Amos 3:7—does not legitimize or foretell Ellen White. Ellen White never correctly presented Jesus as eternal God, possess of His God-qualities even as a human. Her writings repeatedly contradict not only the Bible but her own "testimonies". To attempt to use an Old Testament text to justify and make claims for Ellen White is an egregious misuse of Scripture.

The bloodshed in the Old Testament was all for the glory of God. He required that evil be eradicated from the land of His people so they would be kept pure and untainted by idolatry.

Summary

1. The Old Testament itself declares and explains God's unceasing love.
2. Adventist core beliefs are not demonstrations of God's love in the Old Testament. The Adventist use of these beliefs is connected to the Old Testament with proof texts, but they are not taught in the Bible the way Adventists claim they are.

3. Ellen White does not meet the biblical tests of a prophet. The Bible cannot be used to foreshadow her or to justify her legacy.
4. The Old Testament itself witnesses to God's love. To appeal to Adventism's unique doctrines to defend God's love is heretical. God defines Himself in His own word. He does not reveal Himself in the doctrines of an organization that has an unbiblical modern prophet.

Day 4: Tuesday, March 31, 2009

Today's lesson explores the author's understanding of the New Testament's revelation of God's love. He asks why Jesus Christ came into the world, why He suffered, and why He died. Moreover, he asks why the "sin problem" has not yet been fully dealt with, and he concludes that "we are in no position to answer these questions."

"Being a holy God," he writes, "He could not overlook the rebellion against His perfect law; being love, He could not stand back and let His creatures perish without doing His utmost to save them."

Following the opening questions, the author states, "In His infinite wisdom God devised a plan to deal with the predicament of sin in the best possible way."

There follows a quotation ending with these words by Donald G. Bloesch: "God's wrath is provision whereas His love is eternal."

Then the lesson asks what these six things tell us about the New Testament message of God's love: God's gift of His Son, the Son's giving of Himself; the gift of the Holy Spirit, the availability of spiritual gifts, the certainty of salvation, and an eternal future in an environment of love." It ends with the thought questions, "How do the three angels' messages of Revelation 14: 6-12 fit in this overall New Testament theme of divine love? Ellen White speaks about the message of the third angel as the good news of justification by faith "in verity". How does that all fit in with the theme of God's love for humanity?"

Problems

First, the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 9, overtly states that "the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Verse 12 says, "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption."

Moreover, John 3:16 explains why Jesus came into the world: He came so that all who believe in Him will have eternal life.

The Bible is explicit that there was no other way for sin to be atoned. The author's statement that we cannot answer these questions contradicts the Bible's clear statements.

Furthermore, the assertion that "God devised a plan to deal with the predicament of sin in the best possible way" creates the impression that God scrambled to find a fix for sin after Adam and Eve fell. God found Himself and His creation in a predicament, and He came up with the best solution for an overwhelming problem.

Yet Revelation 13:8 is clear that all those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain were we there since "before the foundation of the world". God knew BEFORE He created the world who would be in the book of life, and that book belonged, before the foundation of the world, to the Lamb who was slain.

God sending His Son was not an afterthought; it was a premeditated and decided plan that was in place even before God created the world.

Moreover, the issue of sin was not "rebellion against His perfect law". Adam and Eve did not sin against the law; they sinned against God Himself. The only "law" they had was the law commanding them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). They deliberately broke that command by refusing to trust God when confronted with a rational-sounding argument. Instead of trusting that God told them the truth and honoring His word, they chose instead to analyze and discuss His word, and they betrayed God by analyzing instead of obeying His word.

Their sin was not rebellion against God's law. There is no biblical indication that they rebelled against God's law. What the story does tell, however, is that they chose to listen to deception and to give credence to a voice other than God's.

Their sin was far more serious than rebellion against God's law. Adam and Eve chose deliberately to sin against God, acting outside of faith and trusting a creature rather than their Creator. The law was not an issue in this first sin. The creatures' faith and trust in their Creator was the issue.

Additionally, the Bloesch quotation that God's wrath is provisional whereas His love is eternal, while quoted out of context, again suggests a concept not stated in the Bible. Jesus Himself said that those the Lord Jesus "never knew" would be sent into eternal punishment (Matt 7:23; Matt 25:41).

Finally, the reference to the “three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-7” is presumptuous. Adventists claim that the third angels’ message is a call to properly worship God by Sabbath-keeping. The actual text in Revelation says no such thing. The Adventist interpretation of Revelation 14:6-12 leaves people in bondage to a false doctrine. Sabbath-keeping has no place as a test in believers’ lives. Never does the Bible suggest such a thing; only by twisting Scriptures to fit that assumption can one come up with justification for the argument.

Summary

1. We do know, contrary to the authors statement, why Jesus had to die. God required that blood be shed for the remission of sin. No one but God, the Creator, could have assumed the responsibility for the sin of the world.
2. God did not “devise” a plan to deal with sin in the best possible way. On the contrary, God had Jesus’ death in place from eternity, and the names of those who would be saved were already written in the Lamb’s book of life before creation.
3. Adam and Eve did not rebel against “God’s perfect law”. Rather, they sinned against God, choosing to analyze and question His word and to engage in intellectual sparring with a deceiver instead of acting in trust and obedience to God their Creator.
4. The “third angels’ message” as Adventists teach it is not supported by Revelation 14:6-12. Never is Sabbath mentioned as a test of belief for those who love God.

Day 5: Wednesday, April 1, 2009

This lesson discusses what sorts of responses will come from love. The second paragraph of the lesson states, **“If we truly have been converted and become disciples of the Lord, the principle of love will reign in our lives. Whatever our weaknesses, we will steadily grow in our love for God and for our fellow human beings. In a very real sense conversion is reorientation—a shift away from the love of self to the love for God and to the love of others.”**

The lesson also cites Deuteronomy 6:5, 6 and Matthew 22:37-40 and then states, **“Though we may not like some people, we are called to love everyone, even our greatest enemy. This not only will benefit the people we associate with but will also prove an enormous blessing for ourselves. Give love and unconditional acceptance to those you encounter and notice what happens.”**

The lesson closes with this quotation from Ellen White as printed in *The SDA Bible Commentary*: **“If church members will put away all self-worship, and will receive in their hearts the love for God and for one another that filled Christ’s heart, our heavenly Father will constantly manifest His power through them. Let His people be drawn together with the cords of divine love. Then the world will recognize the miracle-working power of God, and will acknowledge that He is the Strength and the Helper of His commandment-keeping people.”**

The final challenge is this: “Are you naturally loving or naturally selfish and self-centered? What practical steps can you take to move away from self and manifest love toward others?”

Problems

The underlying problem with this lesson is, again, the lack of understanding of the new birth and of love as part of the fruit of the Spirit.

The lesson’s statement that, if we’ve been “truly converted and become disciples of the Lord”, the “principle of love will reign in our lives,” completely misses the point.

Being “converted”, to an Adventist, does not carry the same meaning as being “born again” (John 3:3-5) carries. In an Adventist paradigm, conversion is turning away from sin or evil or wrong belief and getting into alignment with “the truth”—meaning ultimately that a person gets “on board” with Sabbath-keeping and Adventist perspectives.

Being born again, however, means literally submitting to the blood of Jesus to cover one’s sins and being filled with the Holy Spirit who brings one’s naturally dead spirit to life with the actual life of Jesus. Being converted, as Adventists understand it, means a decision. Being born again, as the Bible teaches is, means passing from death to life.

Conversion in an Adventist framework does not presuppose being born again. In fact, many people are “converted” to Adventism and do not experience the new birth at all.

One cannot “shift away from the love of self to the love for God and to the love of others.” We are “by nature objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3); the dead are not able to shift toward God or toward others. Only by an act of God, bringing us

to life in Christ while we are still sinners, can we experience a turn toward God. We cannot possibly grow in “love for God” if we are spiritually dead.

In the same way, we are incapable of loving our enemies or of giving love and unconditional acceptance to anyone without having the life of Jesus literally imputed to us as we stand in submission to Him. True love in a human is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Apart from being born of the Spirit, we do not have real love.

Analyzing the differences between God’s love and human love is to miss the point. Before a person is born again, he is a resident of the “domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13). None of his “good works” is pleasing to God because each emanates from a dead spirit. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a “practical step” any of us can take to move away from self to manifest love for others apart from being born of the Spirit. The only way we can begin to love others, truly, is to repent before the Lord Jesus and accept His blood as the payment for our sin. Then we will be sealed with the Holy Spirit and made alive. Then our living spirits will be able to mediate Jesus’ own love—which has brought us from death to life—to those around us.

Finally, the Bible never describes the church as “God’s commandment-keeping people”. This phrase from Ellen White is Adventist “shorthand” for describing those who observe the fourth commandment and who accept Ellen White as God’s fulfillment of His promise to give the church the “spirit of prophecy”.

Rather, the New Testament describes God’s people as those who do “not work but trust him who justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5); who are “justified by faith” and having “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1); who were reconciled to God while still enemies (Romans 5:10).

God’s people are those who have faith in God, trusting Him to have forgiven their sin when they believe in Him.

Summary

1. Conversion, as Adventists understand it, is not the same as being “born again”. Conversion is deciding to change one’s mind and adopt “the truth”. Being born again means a person has repented before God and accepted Jesus blood as payment for his or her sin and thus has been sealed by the Holy Spirit, made spiritually alive by the very resurrection life of Jesus.
2. We cannot love anyone with true love apart from being born again. All our best intentions stem from our naturally dead spirits which are captive in the domain of darkness until the Lord Jesus makes us alive in Him.
3. We are only able to love when the Holy Spirit indwells us and gives us God’s own love. We do not love from our own impulses and emotions; we love from the power of God who changes our impulses and emotions as we respond to Him in trust.
4. The Bible never describes the church as God’s “commandment-keeping people”. Rather, it describes them as those who are saved by faith, justified by His blood, made alive by the Spirit. The commandment the church “keeps” is Jesus “new commandment” to love one another as He love us.

Day 6: Thursday, April 2, 2009

Today’s lesson is “Love Personified”. It begins with a paragraph explaining how Jesus was our “ultimate Role Model” even though he “had every reason to dislike or even hate a lot of people.” It points out that spiritual leaders, family, and disciples often were unsupportive, hostile, or internally bickering.

Moreover, the second paragraph explains, Jesus showed His love particularly to the marginalized: prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, Romans, and tax collectors. It then gives three texts of examples of Jesus showing His love. The first is the story of the leper who returned to thank Jesus for healing Him. The second is when He washed the disciples feet, and the third is Jesus giving John the responsibility for His mother from the cross.

The lesson ends with admonitions to show love to the unlovable. The last paragraph contains this statement: “When we grasp something of the magnitude of Christ’s love, it will create a loving response, and this will give us the intense desire to share that love with others.” It then asks how we show our love for those on the fringes of society.

Problems

As has been the case throughout this week, today’s lesson looks at Jesus from a “natural man” perspective and does not deal with the reality that He was not primarily our role model but our Substitute. Jesus did not come to show us how to live; He came to save us from our sin. He came to be our Substitute. He came to call sinners to repentance. The fact that he had “every reason to dislike or even hate a lot of people” is irrelevant to the way Jesus lived His life. He had one goal: to obey His Father to the point of death on the cross.

Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

Jesus did not come to demonstrate good living. He came to destroy the power of the devil and to deliver us from the fear of death by His own death and resurrection.

Unless we are born again of the Spirit we have no hope of loving the unlovable. Jesus' life was not lived as an example. He lived to become "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). He lived to be the propitiation by His blood "so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26).

Moreover, Jesus did not show love to the marginalized because they were marginalized and needed attention. The lesson points out that Jesus gave love to those who didn't get positive attention from the religious leaders of the day. Jesus did not "hang out" with the unsavory because they needed love; He spent time with them because they had hearts hungry for truth. The Jewish religious leaders chose to refuse to believe. In Matthew 12, when they accused Him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, Jesus identified the unpardonable sin as attributing to Satan the work of God. From that time on He spoke to them in parables instead of straight, open talk.

Jesus showed love to people because they came to Him for mercy and hope, not because they were needy or deserving of love. They were all sinners, enemies of God (Romans 5:8, 10)—but Jesus was calling them to His kingdom and revealing to them their deep need. He didn't show love because it was "the right thing to do". He showed love because He came to save sinners, and when sinners hardened their hearts against Him, He no longer gave them the pearls of the kingdom directly.

Three Examples

The three examples in the lesson of Jesus showing love were likewise not examples of proper Christian behavior. They were demonstrations of His identity and His faithfulness. The story of the leper was not primarily a demonstration of Jesus' love. Rather, it was a sign of His identity as the Messiah and a demonstration of the fact that the chosen people were not necessarily the ones who would recognize Him. In healing the lepers, Jesus demonstrated God's own power to heal the un-healable. Moreover, the lone Samaritan who returned to give thanks foreshadowed the Gentiles being called into God's church. It would not primarily be the Jews who would receive Jesus and become His bride, but it would be Gentiles who would burgeon the church and carry the living Christ into the world. The leper incident was a sign to the Jews of who Jesus was: the promised Messiah who would heal their diseases.

The foot-washing incident was also more than a demonstration of love. It was a commissioning of His disciples to become His witnesses as the leaders and builders of the church. Verse three gives the context that Jesus knew He had come from God and was going back to God, and in this knowledge, He washed the disciples feet. He even addressed the deeper meaning of this service by telling Peter that he didn't understand what He was doing then, but He would "afterward". In verse 14-16 Jesus told His disciples that they needed to wash one another's feet as He had washed theirs...but then He stated, "...a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."

Jesus was preparing and commissioning his disciples to become the apostles upon whom the church would be built. The church was founded on Jesus the cornerstone and upon the apostles and prophets who would carry the gospel into the unbelieving world and make new disciples (Ephesians 2:20-21). He was demonstrating to them that they would carry His name and His message, and they were never to think of themselves as any more important than Jesus thought of Himself. They would always be His messengers and servants, even when He was gone. They would never be important in their own rights. They would be His witnesses in a hostile world, and He wanted them to know that His blessing and commission was that of being His servant, never that of being the Master.

The incident of Jesus commissioning John to care for Mary was a glimpse into the commitment of the Son of Man. Although He was the Lord of lords and would return to heaven within days of His horrible death, He tangibly provided for His aging mother and also honored His disciple (who very likely was the son of Mary's sister Salome) with her care. His leaving would be a triumph, but for his mother who remained, His leaving would have been a life-threatening abandonment without His provision for her. He tangibly showed how God cares for His own family—of which we are members when we are born of the Spirit (Romans 8:14-17).

A loving Response

Finally, the lesson suggests that we can grasp "something of the magnitude of Christ's love". Again, this assumption fails to deal with the necessity of becoming spiritually alive by repenting before the Lord Jesus and being born of His Spirit with His own eternal, resurrection life. As natural humans we cannot grasp the love of Christ. In fact, 1 Corinthians 18-31 explains that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing". It is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.

Moreover, 1 Corinthians 2:14 states, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know [them], because they are spiritually discerned."

Grasping something of the magnitude of Christ's love is impossible for natural man. We cannot look at the life of Jesus, grasp His love, and find loving responses thus being created in us. Only if we have the Holy Spirit in us will Christ's love begin to be clear. And the only way we have the Holy Spirit in us is by the gifting of God Who seals us with the Spirit when we believe in the Lord Jesus (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Summary

1. Jesus is not our Role Model; He is our Substitute.
2. Jesus did not show love to the marginalized because they needed or deserved it. He showed love to people to show them mercy and to lead them to repentance and healing. He stopped overtly teaching the Pharisees when they accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, speaking to them in parables instead. Jesus always interacted with openness with those who wanted to know truth.
3. The three example of Jesus healing the ten lepers with one Samaritan returning, of Jesus washing the disciples feet, and of Jesus giving John the responsibility for Mary, are not inspiring examples of Jesus' love. They were demonstrations of His identity as God and as the Founder of the Christian Church.
4. We cannot grasp Christ's love apart from being made alive by the Holy Spirit. When we pass from death to life (John 4:24), we are sealed by the Spirit, and only then can we begin to experience Jesus' true love.

Day 7: Friday, April 3, 2009

Today's lesson focuses on a set of six discussion questions. The questions themselves stem from a typical Adventist world view and become the "wrong" questions as one begins to see from a Biblical perspective. The question, for example is this: "One cannot escape the question: If God is love, why is there so much suffering? It is not only the scale of suffering that causes people to question God's love but also the fact that so much appears to affect innocent people, and so much appears utterly senseless. How do we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, deal with this reality? How does our understanding of the great controversy help us understand this difficult topic?"

The second question addresses how one can love an abusive, unloving person, the third asks how one can love those who never love back, the third asks who the outcasts are and what ministries one's church has for them.

Question five states that true love demands a death to self and a willingness to put aside self for other's good. Then it asks, "What choices do we have to make in order to experience that death ourselves?"

Number six wraps with this final question: "Besides the Cross, what are other ways that we can see God's love for humanity?"

Problems

First, the problem of suffering is not one which God has actually answered for us. We struggle with this question of suffering and a "loving God" when we do not believe Him to be truly sovereign. This question becomes a conundrum when we see human significance and reason as the ultimate "values" in the universe which God must honor.

The book of Job redirects us to a proper orientation of humanity in relationship to God. During the last chapters of Job, God finally addresses Job's questions and asks him where he was when He created all things from the stars to Leviathan in the deep. God ends His redirect by saying, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it" (Job 40:2).

Job's response is sobering. After listening to God remind Job of the mysteries of creation, emphasizing that no human knows or understands the secrets of God's creative power, Job is reduced to silence: "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further" (Job 40:4-5).

After God reemphasizes His power and man's inability to control nature, Job admits that he spoke of things of which he had no knowledge.

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;" Job admits at last; "therefore I despise myself, and repent [fn] in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

Job, the righteous man, is brought to the deep awareness of his own sinfulness, and he repents. The point of the book of Job is not primarily that bad things happen to good people because God is proving things to Satan. The primary point of Job is that no one—not angel or human—can question God and expect to understand Him or to receive answers that make sense in a human perspective. Every person, no matter how "good", must bow the knee to God Almighty and repent, acknowledging His sovereign trustworthiness and gracious goodness. Every human must repent of his arrogance and pride and realize that God owes him nothing, not even an answer. What counts is not "answers". What counts is trusting God who is sovereign over all creation and over all circumstances, wasting nothing and redeeming everything for His glory.

The almighty God has given us grace through the gift of His Son and His death and resurrection. God's glory is the ultimate "value" in the universe, not human understanding or physical life. God gives us something much greater than "answers"; He saves our souls from the domain of darkness.

The "great controversy" does not reveal the biblical picture of how God works. God is not on trial, and believers are not on trial. The Bible never hints anywhere that Satan has accused God of making a Law that is impossible to keep. On

the contrary, Romans 4 and 5 reveal that the law was given in order to make it possible for sin to be charged to people's accounts. Original sin rendered everyone spiritually dead; individual sins, however, were not accounted to people before there was a law (Romans 5:12-14).

The great controversy attributes much more significance and power to Satan than the Bible attributes to him. There is no ongoing battle between Christ and Satan. Jesus defeated Satan at the cross and publicly humiliated him (Colossians 2:14-15). We do not help prove God is just. God Himself proved His own justice by publicly displaying Jesus as a propitiation in His blood (Romans 3:25-26), and the question He settled was NEVER "Why does God punish people for not being able to keep the law?"

Rather, the question He settled was the question of why He did not destroy sinners. Jesus' death showed that God was actually just in having left sinners unpunished, because Jesus paid the necessary price for sin. He allowed people to continue to exist because from all eternity, Jesus is the Lamb slain.

Death to ourselves?

The question, "What choices do we have to make in order to experience that death ourselves?" betrays Adventism's utter lack of understanding the new birth. We are incapable of "making choices" that will enable us to experience death to ourselves. We are born into the domain of darkness, and only God can transfer us into the kingdom of His beloved Son (Co 1:13).

The only way—and there is no other—to experience death to self is by bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus and repenting of our intractable sin. Only by accepting the blood of Jesus as payment for our sin can we be born of the Spirit (John 3:3-5) and enter the kingdom of heaven.

Unless we are born of the Spirit by believing in the Lord Jesus and accepting His blood as our justification, no choices we ever make will result in true love or a death to self. We die when our spirits are made alive by the Holy Spirit in Christ.

The question we must ask is not, "what choices do we have to make". Rather, the only question that matters is, "Have you accepted Jesus as your Savior and bowed your knee to His authority and lordship?"

When we have accepted the Lord Jesus and repented at His cross, we have crossed from death to life (John 5:24). That moment is our death to ourselves.

Moreover, asking what ways besides the cross reveal God's love betrays another deep misapprehension of God and salvation. The cross literally is the central revelation of God's love.

No other revelations of God's love carry significant meaning apart from the sacrificial love of God for His creation made in His image. Nature, family, the Bible...nothing carries the power to give us significance and hope apart from the cross. Without this revelation of God's love, all His other gifts are limited in their ability to demonstrate God's love.

Romans 1:18-20 explain that the invisible attributes of God have been clearly revealed through creation so that all are without excuse, but these things do not reveal God's commitment to redeem us. His redemption at the cross is the one thing that gives meaning to all others.

The Christian who will respond to God's love is the one who has been made alive by God's Spirit, and without the miracle of new birth, no self-denial will yield any sort of real love. We can only love when God literally places His love in us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Summary

1. God has not explained the reality of suffering. The great controversy does not reveal God's truth. Rather, the Bible reveals God's sovereign justice, mercy, and power. Our only proper response before Him is to shut our mouths and repent.
2. No choice we make can yield selfless love in us. Rather, our only response to God is to repent and believe, receiving the washing of His blood and of His word.
3. Nothing in all creation reveals God's love with the depth and meaning of the cross. All other avenues of God's love being revealed confirm His existence and divine nature, but only the cross reveals salvation. Only the cross reveals God's love.