

LEADERSHIP COURSE

Jesus and the **INCLUSION MODEL**

Practical suggestions for the inclusion of all children and teenagers in the church

MODULE 1



BOOK DETAILS

Producer: South American Division | Children's and Adolescent's Ministries | Mrs. Glauca Korkischko

Partnership: South American Division | Adventist Possibility Ministries | Pr. Alacy Barbosa

English Version produced by the General Conference | Children's Ministries | Dr. Orathai Chureson

Adventist Possibility Ministries: Pr. Doug Venn

Translation: Mrs. Juliana Santos

Main author: Mrs. Juliana Santos

Technical Coordination: Dr. Suzete Araújo Águas Maia

Graphic Design: EWIG Studios

Photos: Shutterstock and Freepik 2024

About the Author: Juliana Santos is married to Pastor Michael Isaac Ruiz Figueroa and is the mother of Emanuel, Hugo, and Pedro. She holds a postgraduate degree in Special Education with an emphasis on visual impairment, deafness, and deafblindness, and she has undergraduate degrees in Music, Education, and Social Communication.

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INTRODUCTION

We must learn to care for the well-being of people with disabilities. Understanding their challenges and offering help are ways to integrate them into society and appreciate their value. However, the participation of people with disabilities is still limited. Regrettably, churches often lack clarity and information on this matter, leading to indifference. We need to listen to the voices of those with disabilities to truly understand their lives and the desires of their hearts.

The definition of disability needs clearer clarity. We must understand that disability refers to one or more characteristics that prevent a person from performing common activities. For instance, being unable to run faster than 100 km/h is not a disability since no one else can; but not being able to walk, a common activity, is a disability.

The rights of People with Disabilities are relatively respected and protected on both international and national levels.

However, in practice, these rights are not always considered, leading to unequal treatment, prejudice, and even discrimination in the lives of individuals with disabilities compared to their peers. When we shift this discussion to the church context, despite it being unfortunate, we must acknowledge that a significant reason for discrimination is a completely misguided theological interpretation of how the Bible addresses the issue of disabilities.



1. DISABILITY IN THE BIBLE

The Bible presents a lofty view of divine creation, where both men and women were created in the image and likeness of God:

"And 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 fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." (Genesis 1:26-27, KJV)

However, now separated from God after the fall and susceptible to the evil and suffering that became part of the human race, not exempt from its devastations.

"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so, death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Romans 5:12)



The Word of God shows that we are created in the image and likeness of God. This demonstrates that everyone is equal before Him, and this love is exemplified by Jesus reaching out to all kinds of people. The Bible reveals God’s special concern for those who are disadvantaged and excluded. Therefore, from a biblical standpoint, it can be affirmed that there is no direct connection between disabilities and sinful practices, as such limitations are inherent in a world marked by the presence of sin. Disabilities are not a direct result of a life of sin, lack of faith, or even divine punishment.

1.1 DISABILITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

When discussing disability, the Old Testament emphasizes a total respect for the dignity of anyone with a DISABILITY, linking this with the idea of fearing God. It starts from the principle that the weaker ones do not inspire fear or dread in others, regardless of their limitations. Thus, one should fear God, who stands alongside and protects them.

“Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:14 KJV)

In the final portion of the passage, the Hebrew text literally states, “But it is God whom you will fear.” While in the eyes of the world, people with disabilities may not demand respect





or honor for themselves, it is the LORD, the historical defender of the weak and the one who hears the cry of the oppressed, who advocates for them and demands respect for the dignity of individuals with disabilities.

In various other precepts, we find provisions aimed at protecting individuals with disabilities. For instance, in Deuteronomy 27:18, there is a curse upon those who lead the blind astray, and in Job 29:5, it is stated that Job is a friend of God for being the eyes of the blind and the support for the limping. Throughout many other passages in the Old Testament, there are implications that demonstrate the tolerance and respect with which people with disabilities were treated in biblical Israel. This reveals that individuals with disabilities were seen in Israel as vulnerable persons who, at a certain point in history, should have had their situations redeemed.

1.2 DISABILITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, there are instances of individuals with disabilities depicted positively, and God using those disabilities for good in people's lives. Zacheus is portrayed as having a noticeably short

stature, to the extent that he had to climb a tree to see Jesus above the heads of the crowd. Paul became blind after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. This blindness led to a partial visual impairment, to the point where, for instance, he could not recognize the high priest and required an assistant to write his epistles. This condition persisted even after Ananias was sent to restore his vision.

"Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me." (Galatians 4:13-15)

These are just a few of the many examples of individuals vital to God's purposes who had disabilities. This perspective brings to disability something not found in any other religion, namely, the certainty that a disability is not a divine punishment.



2. THE INCLUSIVE MINISTRY OF JESUS

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are filled with episodes of restoration of individuals with disabilities. Just like the healing of people with illnesses, the restoration of those with disabilities symbolizes the compassion of Jesus and His disciples for the suffering people and the arrival of a new world, the kingdom of God. In turn, the Gospel narratives, especially those of Mark and John, are laden with symbolism and reveal something deeper, extending far beyond mere restoration of a physical limitation. This limitation can be overcome with suitable means, and once surpassed, it can even transform into a greater moral strength for the one who appeared weaker.

The messages and actions of Jesus bring forth the exact perspective of how God sees the issue of people with disabilities. This is where we find the restoration of individuals who are blind, physically disabled, deaf, afflicted with leprosy, and those with various mental disorders. Even with millennia in between, it can be stated that this perspective remains highly relevant today, where a significant amount of prejudice and concealed rejection still exist under a guise of



compassion. The theme is often treated as a matter of public charity rather than a socially significant issue. Various Bible passages, especially in the Gospels, illustrate this, with instances such as the Pharisees sounding trumpets in public squares when giving alms to the needy population, they themselves contributed to excluding.

Jesus has an inclusive ministry, taking upon Himself all that is human, including disabilities. The scars on Jesus' hands, feet, and sides remain even on His resurrected body. Christ bears the scars of His human life.

"When we see the accounts in the Gospels, we encounter stories of the individuals whom Jesus healed: the blind, the deaf, the physically disabled, and others. The context of that era revealed that people differing from the so-called societal norms were marginalized and excluded from society. Yet, Jesus cared for them and addressed their needs, demonstrating that they too were worthy of being touched by Him." - Eduardo Leimann Balaniuk



Our Savior chose to demonstrate His credentials as the Messiah through a ministry focused on people with disabilities. Jesus is the one who can call upon His Father to destroy His enemies, but instead, He chooses the path of apparent weakness. In doing so, He identifies with all those whom the world considers weak, and who did not choose their condition. Jesus is also a Master who serves by giving His example. For the body of Christ to function fully, we must have an attitude and practice of serving one another, but we must also allow our brothers and sisters with disabilities to serve us, and be prepared to learn from them and let them guide us. He is also entirely inclusive; in fact, for His time, what He did was absolutely revolutionary in welcoming people with contagious diseases, disabilities, adulterers, social outcasts, foreigners, and women. His life was reinforced by His teachings; in the Sermon on the Mount, He turned the world's values upside down and declared those blessed whom society considered cursed.

It is curious to notice how much we feel sorry for people with disabilities, but we do not want to go much beyond that. However, we know that people with disabilities are not victims and do not seek our pity, but our support and genuine friendship. There is a big difference between pity and compassion. The truth is that pity does not help anyone, while compassion, like the one Christ showed in His ministry, has tremendous potential to provide opportunities for personal growth.





"And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." (John 9:1-3, KJV)

"And they came to Jericho: and as he went out of Jericho with his disciples and a great number of people, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the highway side begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, and say, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called. And they call the blind man, saying unto him, be of good comfort, rise; he calleth thee. And he, casting away his garment, rose, and came to Jesus. And Jesus answered and said unto him, what wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said unto him, Lord, that I might receive my sight. And Jesus said unto

him, go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way.”(Mark 10:46-52, KJV)

Disability is presented in the Word of God as something that catches His attention. The stories of the blind man from birth, the beggar, and blind Bartimaeus exemplify this truth. Both men, considered bothersome to society, were noticed, loved, attended to, and restored by Jesus. This point is also explicitly mentioned in Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, where he states that God gives greater honor to those who lack it the most. Thus, it can be affirmed that Jesus’ restoration ministry for many people with limitations is filled with individuals whose limitations were not a barrier for them, playing a vital role in the history of God’s people.



3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

To be before children to instruct them in the ways of the Lord is a great responsibility. In the churches of the South American Division, there is a variety of children, with their own characteristics, challenges, and talents. And there is also a wide variety of teachers! But something that most share is the challenge of giving equal attention to everyone, respecting the individual conditions of each child. When we address the issue of inclusion, it is important to consider that:

There are no “normal and abnormal” or “common and special” children.

So, are they all the same? They are all children, and to all of them, Jesus extends His friendship and the desire to have them in His kingdom. “But Jesus said, suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14, KJV)

3.1 INCLUSIVE TEACHERS

As previously addressed, a church does not become inclusive just by having a wheelchair ramp, a sign language interpreter, or providing Braille bulletins. While these are necessary, they are not the only aspects to be worked on. People attending the church need to



reflect on their attitudes. There are necessary attitudes that a teacher must develop to become inclusive. Some may find it easier than others, and that is normal. Through prayer and training, the teacher can develop the commitment to be inclusive.

There are values that cannot be missing, such as respect, sensitivity, and empathy. Below are some ideas about the necessary profile:

Love, love, and love. From the love received from God arises the desire to love children and recognize in each one of them the value that must be reached with the salvation that only Jesus can offer.

Show genuine interest in the child, seeking to get to know them through conversations with their parents or guardians, visiting the family at their home etc.

Seek help whenever necessary! If the child needs a trusted adult to be by their side in the classroom to provide support, seek help!

When you learn about the child's disability or condition, seek information about the most efficient way to teach them. If

you know a trusted professional in the field, you can ask for specific advice to implement in your classroom.

Use creativity to discover how the child can engage in Sabbath School, considering their limitations and possibilities.

Encourage the church to be inclusive by sharing concerns and ideas with the Children's Ministry leader, seeking support from the family, and also from the church community at large.





3.2 AVOID DOING THIS!

Those who do not live with the reality of a disability hardly know what it means. There are phrases and attitudes to be avoided. Some of them are:

Do not speak or act as if everything is okay, it may not be!

Do not say that God chose (these parents) to take care of this child because they are strong enough.

Do not judge the family based on the child's behavior, especially when that behavior is a consequence of their disability.

Do not say, "It could be worse."

Do not treat the child with pity or consider them a hero just because they have a disability.



4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In light of all that we have discussed, we also need to recognize that providing inclusion for people with disabilities in the church is not as simple a task as some may think. Inclusion is not just about building ramps with handrails, adapting bathrooms, installing directional tactile paving, or using Braille communication signs. It involves educating, raising awareness, and empowering individuals to learn how to interact with this audience, as it can often be entirely unfamiliar to our members and leaders.

However, as Christians, leaders, and members, we cannot give ourselves the right to find excuses for not being inclusive in our congregational reality. The message from the Lord Jesus to us is very straightforward: “You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world.” What is the purpose of salt, even if it is inside the most beautiful container made of the most expensive crystal? What is the use of a lamp hidden under a basket, even if it is meticulously crafted by the finest artisans, using the noblest of fibers as raw material? The answer for both cases is the same: it serves no purpose!

The church, as the body of Christ, is a community that values everyone, even those who may appear weaker, such as people with



disabilities. Therefore, a healthy church is one where everyone belongs and everyone serves. Inclusion needs to happen in all areas of church life: pastoral care, discovery and use of spiritual gifts, church education programs, evangelistic programs, and worship services.

"I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. This is God's test of our character. If we have the true religion of the Bible, we shall feel that a debt of love, kindness, and interest is due to Christ in behalf of His brethren; and we can do no less than to show our gratitude for His immeasurable love to us while we were sinners unworthy of His grace, by having a deep interest and unselfish love for those who are our brethren and who are less fortunate than ourselves". (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, p 511)

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of the church as a body. Despite being different, we all have value to God. There is no one without merit and value in the kingdom of God. We were all created for a purpose, with something valuable to offer. The church is called to be an inclusive community that offers love, value, and respect to all people. We are called not to



have prejudices and to give everyone the opportunity to play a role in the church and thus develop their gifts and talents. We realize that churches (we are the church) still make excuses when it comes to providing accessibility to those in need. The fact that a blind person cannot navigate within the church, that a deaf person lacks interpretation, or that a wheelchair user cannot access places with steps, among other factors, may discourage these individuals from attending church. Accessibility should be part of the everyday life of churches. The church may not know what to do, but there is a need! And the first need to be met is love. Through love, the barriers that prevent access for this group of people will begin to be broken down.

In the next modules, specific strategies for working with children with disabilities will be addressed. Stay with us!

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