

LifeWay Family Bible Series for Jan. 23: It is important to reach beyond racial barriers_12405

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It is important to reach beyond racial barriers

Luke 10:25-37

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Racial, ethnic prejudice is alive and well in our society. Poised to begin this lesson, the daily news, dateline Jan. 8, 2005, reported that a Baptist preacher in Mississippi, apparently a former Ku Klux Klan leader, is being charged in the 1964 deaths of three civil rights workers in Neshoba County, Miss., a case never resolved. A movie, "Mississippi Burning," was made about this brutal crime.

In the same paper, there was a report of an FBI investigation of "hate-filled threatening" letters that had been mailed to 80 high-profile couples who have interracial marriages. Also, there was an article about a former black city councilman who was accused of racism for comparing a high profile female city mayor with Hitler.

A recent movie of African-American, Jewish-American and Anglo-American families trying to deal with their respective prejudices in their community, highlighted by the teenage friendship of a Jewish boy and a black girl, revealed a sign at a white swimming pool that read, "No Jews, dogs or colored allowed."



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Regularly, there are stories of charges of racial profiling. During my formative years in Mississippi, I saw first hand the racial rage of whites against blacks and the inequities of a racially prejudiced society. I grew up hearing the platitude, "I love colored people just as long as they stay in their place." As the social structure of the United States changes due to the increasing numbers of ethnic peoples, our culture will continue to face the spiritual challenge of emotionally charged prejudicial racial attitudes. The real issue for today is the continuing patterns of discrimination various groups and races impose on the others.

Prejudice is an irrational, unwarranted and sometimes hostile opinion or attitude of arrogance toward an individual, group or race. Christians, at times, openly and honestly, will express and admit attitudes of prejudice. Others struggle with guilt over unrevealed feelings toward people of different ethnic and racial heritage. Sometimes a believer's expectation of

himself will exceed honest prejudicial reality.

Scripture instructs and demands that believers move beyond racial and ethnic barriers in relationships and ministry. Let us return again to the familiar and powerful parable of the Good Samaritan to understand again the teachings of Jesus who leads us beyond racial barriers.

Love people unconditionally (Luke 10:25-28)

Having a moral society is difficult without individuals who are willing to act on behalf of its victims. Secular psychologists, philosophers and sociologists have been intrigued with the question of why anyone would want to be a Good Samaritan, to take the dangerous risk, be inconvenienced in time and schedule, and then be responsible for expensive care. Good Samaritans tend to be risk takers, have some familiarity or experience with violence, express anger at the criminal and have a strong sense of law and order. They also tend to have feelings of sympathy and compassion for the victim.

There is much to learn from this passage, for it is the key to living the Christian life. Love is the crowning virtue of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:13) and our acts of kindness count only when faith expresses itself through love (Galatians 5:6). In this exemplary account, love is clearly the ultimate and indispensable motivation that encourages a Christian to act unconditionally on behalf of a victim in need, regardless of race, color or creed.

A religious scholar, a legal expert on Old Testament law, asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Defending his faith from corruption, he intended to show Jesus was mistaken in his understanding of God and religion. Jesus turned the question back to him, "What is written in the Law?" and "How do you read it?" (v. 26). Knowing the laws of God well, this lawyer answered on an abstract intellectual level, "Love the Lord your

God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (v. 27).

Jesus challenged him on the practical and concrete level with his answer, "Do this and you will live" (v. 28). Jesus knew no one is capable of obeying the law of love so perfectly and obediently enough to personally achieve life everlasting. Salvation does not result from anything you "do." The man's response indicated he was intellectually aware of this dilemma.

There was a black man named Jess who was a member of my last church. He was a delightful and faithful member and friend. Before he died, near the age of 100, he told me his black friends had chided and mocked him saying, "Why do you go down to that white man's church?" He chuckled when he told me he answered, "I go down there because they love me."

Overcome self-centeredness (Luke 10:29-32)

Jesus tells a parable, a special story with common imagery easily understood by the most simple, to drive home his lesson on love and answer the question of the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor" (v. 29). This parable started out being about a man who had been robbed, beaten and left for dead, but it dramatically turned to indict the self-centered legal expert who asked the question, including all people who have prejudicial, selfish and unloving attitudes.

Three different people from three different walks of life—a brilliant lawyer, a saintly priest and an administrative Levite—all of them very religious, acted out their selfishness. The legal expert, continuing to intellectualize the debate, wanted to "justify himself," by asking another question, "Who is my neighbor?" The priest and the Levite would not be bothered or inconvenienced from their godly work and more important tasks. Let someone else do this dangerous, bloody, thankless job. Their self-centeredness would leave the man, one of their own race and nationality, to

bleed to death along the roadside, his fate unaltered by their power and presence.

All three of them are to be contrasted with the Samaritan who “took pity on him” (v. 33). Jesus suddenly had turned the rhetoric from question to questioner, from excuses to action, from neglect to responsibility and from prejudice to love. Each person had a certain amount of power to make a difference in this situation but failed by passing “by on the other side” (vv. 31-32). Jesus insists that being a good neighbor means to have a love that acts on behalf of anyone, even the most hated, undeserving and despised in our culture.

There are many would-be Good Samaritans today. Most people would not leave a wounded man on the roadside to die from his ill-gotten abuse, but our innocence cannot be dissolved so easily. The parable has a much wider application. Our selfishness, more often than not, avoids involvement with the lower socio-economic groups, is stingy in offering financial help to the beaten down, relegates most indigent to the government agencies or benevolent care institutions, avoids contact with ethnic minorities and acts out of fear rather than love.

Most church members, out of fear, avoid the needs of others, drive around the slums and rarely come into contact with the ethnic down and out. Passing by on the other side is as common as seeing the sun come up and a common response of the comfortable Christian. The easiest thing to do is to give, and the hardest thing to do is to get involved. The tsunami disaster brought billions of dollars of aid because of the horror, but millions of children die every year from starvation and genocide with hardly an act of Christian compassion.

Reach beyond barriers (Luke 10:33-37)

Jesus startled the legal expert by dramatically making the hero of the

parable a hated Samaritan. Samaritans were the half-breeds in the social strata of Israel, the mulattoes, a racial mixture of Jew and Gentile. There was hostility between the Jews and Samaritans (John 4:9, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans").

The Pharisee in his prayer would say, "I thank God that I am not a woman, Gentile or Samaritan" and would pray that the Samaritans not be included in the resurrection. A Samaritan could not become a Jewish proselyte.

Being unacceptable, the Samaritans established their own temple, their own priesthood and their own religious festivals. The listening lawyer could not bring himself to love a Samaritan and certainly not live in his neighborhood.

The Samaritan, whom the lawyer would never accept as his neighbor, becomes the perfect moral example of love, compassion and neighborliness. No barrier of attitude, history or feud, racial, ethnic nor religious, would keep this Samaritan from giving aid to a human brother in need.

The Samaritan dared. He gave aid regardless of the danger to himself. He cared. He had pity, sympathy and compassion, his primary motivation for cleansing the wounds, binding them to stop the bleeding, and placing him on his donkey to transport him to a place of safety and healing (v. 34). Then, he shared. He took out "two silver coins" to pay for his care and promised to pay more if needed. The Samaritan made a difference using his resources to take care of the unknown Jewish man, near death.

The parable ends with a powerful message of love in action. Jesus asked, "which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

To the lawyer and to all who read and hear the parable, Jesus said, "Go and

do likewise.” First, break down your own ethnic barriers. Then, Christ can use you to break down church and community prejudicial barriers. More than likely, it will cost you in time, resources and suffering. It is worth your love.

Discussion questions

- ◆ Does racial or ethnic prejudice play a part in your life?
- ◆ What are you doing to try to stem the tide of prejudice in others?
- ◆ Is this a topic that is appropriate for discussion in Sunday school?

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