

**Children's Moment** *What is racism?*

Good morning, boys and girls, we're going to talk about racism today and the rest of this month. It's important for you to know it's wrong. We don't support racism and want to make sure we do the right thing.

Today, I'm sharing another story told by Christena Cleveland. She wrote an article titled, "Everything I Know About Racism I Learned in the Church." Christena says,

"Every summer, my mom would sign us up for vacation bible school (VBS) programs at local churches so we could experience God in diverse settings. The summer I turned six, we attended VBS at an all-white church in a neighboring city. During recess, my brother and I were so engrossed in our tetherball game that we didn't hear the teacher calling us to return to the classroom. Exasperated, she yelled at the top of her lungs, "Get in here, [followed by a really bad word]!!" Being six and all, I had no idea what the word meant. I just knew that it referred to me and that it was negative. I ducked my head in shame and ran toward the classroom. The teacher's words violently contradicted the VBS theme: 'God loves all the children in the world' and made me question whether God's love was meant for me too.

*The church taught me God's love is only for the white kids."*<sup>1</sup>

That's not true! God's love is for ALL kids, no matter what.

If you hear bad words by people at church, I want you to tell your parents and your teachers. If they don't say anything, please tell me.

If you've had people at church say bad words to you at church or make you feel uncomfortable because of who you are or how you talk or what you wear, please tell me. I'm sorry if that happened. I'm not trying to make you a tattletale, but I want to know if it happens so we can make things right.

Jesus wants everyone to come and be welcome, just the way you are.

*Let's pray ...*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.missionalliance.org/everything-i-know-about-racism-i-learned-in-the-church/>

## Message: "Privilege and Identity"

### Lori Hutcherson shares this story:

"On my very first date with my now husband, Warren, I climbed into his car and saw baby wipes on the passenger-side floor. He said he didn't have kids, they were just there to clean up messes in the car. I twisted to secure my seatbelt and saw a stuffed animal in the rear window. I gave him a look. He said, "I promise, I don't have kids. That's only there so I don't get stopped by the police."

He then told me that when he drove home from work late at night, he was getting stopped by cops constantly because he was a black man in a luxury car and they assumed that either it was stolen or he was a drug dealer.

When he told a cop friend about this, Warren was told to put a stuffed animal in the rear window because it would change 'his profile' to that of a family man and he was much less likely to be stopped.

The point here is, if you've never had to mask the fruits of your success with a floppy-eared, stuffed bunny rabbit so you won't get harassed by the cops on the way home from your gainful employment (or never had a first date start this way), you have white privilege."<sup>2</sup>

**Like it or not, life in America as a white person means you have a life of privilege.** It's not easy to hear. When I first heard it, years ago, it struck me in the same way I'm sure it's striking many of you. We think "My life hasn't been easy. I've worked hard for what I have." And that's true. What we don't realize is that there's been an invisible and visible network of support helping us along the way. That's privilege.

**There's some language we need to learn before we can listen to others well.** Here are some terms you may know:

- Bias is from French 'biais'. It means to angle or slant.<sup>3</sup> We show bias when we unduly favor a person, group or race.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/my-white-friend-asked-me-to-explain-white-privilege-so-i-decide/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://literarydevices.net/bias/>

- Prejudice is a preconceived opinion formed without reason or actual experience.
- Discrimination is unjust treatment of someone based on race, age or sex.

Let's examine these terms in a bit more detail.

**The first is bias.** Bias can be innate or learned. For example, you can be right- or left-handed or even ambidextrous. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's a good illustration. Let me show you how.

**Are you left-handed?** Congratulations, only 1 in 10 people are blessed to be left-handed. **If you're left-handed, did anyone try to teach you how to be right-handed so you could fit in?** It may have been well intended by someone who didn't know. Or it could have been more harsh, done by someone who wanted you to conform, to fit in. That's a problem. It's when we cross the line from bias to prejudice.

**Prejudice is when we act on our bias.** We develop an attitude that unduly favors and leans toward person, group or race. In the illustration I used, right-handed people are favored over left-handed people. We develop attitudes, habits and patterns that are unhealthy.

**Our actions follow our attitude.** We become hardened when we lose the ability to understand others' perspectives. When our actions lead us to think and act against those who aren't like us, that's when prejudice becomes discrimination.

**Make no mistake.** Treating someone differently because of their skin tone is much worse than telling a left-handed person they should use their right hand. But, in both cases, we're acting with prejudice, based on false assumptions or a desire to fit in, to identify with a group.

**That leads to the key concept for today: white privilege.**

Put simply, white privilege *"is the unearned, mostly unacknowledged social advantage white people have over other racial groups simply because they are white."*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/white-privilege/>

**We all want the same thing: the privilege to feel like we're normal.**

But the sad truth is that's not the case. We all don't get to feel that way. People with different skin tone are more likely to be identified and grouped by that feature than are white people. Truth be told, I shouldn't be the one who is teaching you about white privilege. It's like asking a fish to describe what it means to fly like a bird.

**White privilege is more than you think it is.** White privilege is more than turning on your TV and seeing mostly white people in programs designed for white households. It's more than walking into the store and seeing makeup, hose and accessories that aren't made for you.

**White privilege is never being asked to speak for your race.**

White privilege is having a good relationship with the police, school authorities, media and at church. It's knowing you can escape violence and live in ignorance of the way others are forced to live.

**Cory Collins writes, "Both racism and bias rely on what sociologists call racialization.** This is the grouping of people based on perceived physical differences, such as skin tone. This arbitrary grouping of people, historically, fueled biases and became a tool for justifying the cruel treatment and discrimination of non-white people.

Colonialism, slavery and Jim Crow laws were all sold with junk science and propaganda that claimed people of a certain 'race' were fundamentally different from those of another - and they should be treated accordingly. And while not all white people participated directly in this mistreatment, their learned biases and their safety from such treatment led many to commit one of those most powerful actions: silence.

And just like that, the trauma, displacement, cruel treatment and discrimination of people of color, inevitably, gave birth to white privilege.

**White privilege is *not* the suggestion that white people have never struggled.** Many white people do not enjoy the privileges that come with relative affluence, such as food security. Many do not experience the privileges that come with access, such as nearby hospitals.

**White privilege is *not* the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned.** Most white people who have reached a high level of success worked extremely hard to get there. Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort.

**Francis Kendall, author of *Diversity in the Classroom and Understanding White Privilege***, comes close to giving us an encompassing definition: white privilege is 'having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do.'<sup>5</sup>

**Jacob Bennett, a researcher, tracked the history of the term.**

Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 'white privilege' was less commonly used but generally referred to legal and systemic advantages given to white people by the United States, such as citizenship, the right to vote or the right to buy a house in the neighborhood of their choice.

**It was only after discrimination persisted for years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964** that people began to view white privilege as being more psychological - a subconscious prejudice perpetuated by white people's lack of awareness that they held this power. White privilege can be found in day-to-day transactions and in white people's ability to move through the professional and personal worlds with relative ease.

**Some people of color insist that an element of white privilege includes the aftereffects of conscious choices.** For example, if white business leaders don't hire many people of color, white people have more economic opportunities. Having the ability to maintain that power dynamic is a white privilege, and it endures. Legislative bodies, corporate leaders and educators are still disproportionately white and often make conscious choices (laws, hiring practices, discipline procedures) that keep repeating this cycle.

**The more complicated truth:** White privilege is both unconsciously enjoyed and consciously perpetuated. It's both on the surface and deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Francis E. Kendal, *Diversity in the Classroom and Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*, Taylor & Francis, 2013

embedded into American life. It's a weightless knapsack and a weapon. It all depends on who's carrying it."<sup>6</sup>

### **What does this mean to you and me?**

#### **I believe we're in the middle of an identity crisis.**

It's a crisis that spans our personal, professional, social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual lives. It affects who we are as persons who are part of a household, community and nation. Individually and collectively, we're asking: "**Who are we?**"

**We aren't separate, isolated beings.** We aren't made to be alone. God made us to be in relationship with God and other people. We're made to have families and live in a household with others. We're made in the very image of God, given gifts to help us. That's good. It's true the opinions and actions of others affect us. Those experiences – good and bad, are a big part of what shapes and forms who we become.

**You are wonderfully made!** You are a complex person. And, like a cut diamond, your identity shines in multiple ways. Each of us is a wonderful blend of gender, age, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion/spirituality. That makes up our identity.

#### **Without knowing who we are, we wander or drift through life.**

We're aimless. It can be a very unsatisfying feeling. It leads to a sense of meaninglessness or nihilism, "all is for nothing." When we find purpose and meaning to life, it's like finding a lifeline. Our identity is a vital part of the way we live. Without a clear identity, we're lost.

**Do you know the meaning and purpose of your life?** Let me phrase the question another way, "**Do you know your identity?**"

**Jesus tells us who we are.** He said, "*Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really>

*house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God"* (Matthew 5:14-16, MSG).

**Jesus verifies our identity.** Our identity isn't based on skin tone, gender, age or orientation. Our identity is rooted and founded in a relationship. It's a relationship based on belief, trust and faith. It's a spiritual relationship that touches every part of who we are. It's a relationship that gives us hope in every circumstance.

**Our identity is in Christ.** Now that's a churchy thing to say, but it brings a lot of truth to the table. When your identity is based on Jesus, you're free from the limitations and rules of this world. Paul's letter to the church in Galatia makes that radical claim.

**Paul teaches us the law won't set us free.** Legislation, while helpful, won't solve the problems. The law never saved anyone. And Paul knows that, first-hand. It's only when he had an encounter with love incarnate that Paul's life changed. When Jesus entered Paul's life, he saw the light. He found the power, the means to turn away from a life of privilege, oppression and persecution. Paul turned toward God and found a life filled with love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. His mission, and ours, is to take that love to the world!

**When you identify completely with Jesus, your life becomes better.** Your ego is no longer at the center. You won't care about appearances and the opinions of others. You won't feel like you have to impress God. Christ living in you does the work. The life you live isn't yours. It's lived by faith in the Son of God, who loves you and gave himself for you. You are free to become who God has made you to be.

**Who wants a rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion, abandoning everything personal and free in your relationship with God?** I don't. I refuse because it means turning away from God's grace. I know you don't, either.

**In Christ's family there can be no division.** All are equal. We're all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. We're all part of Christ's family, Abraham's spiritual descendants. That's God's covenant promise in truth and action. May it ever be so!

**Galatians 2:19b-21; 3:28-29 (MSG)**

I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be *God's* man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises.

**Romans 5:1-5 (MSG)**

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us - set us right with him, make us fit for him - we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand - out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary - we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!