

Children's Moment *What is racism?*

Good morning, boys and girls, we're on our fourth lesson about racism. Racism happens in lots of different ways.

Christena Cleveland shares another story with us titled, "WHEN I LEARNED THAT RACISM IS HILARIOUS"

She says this, "During college, I volunteered for the youth ministry at a church. Every year at the volunteer Christmas party, two white guys who worked for the ministry dressed up as 'black guys from the hood' and performed an entirely unoriginal and unfunny skit that exploited negative black male stereotypes for laughs.

I remember looking around the room full of volunteers, seeing the delight in their eyes as they laughed loudly at the racist jokes. I also remember feeling discouraged that a predominantly-white group of Christians (who were supposedly my friends) were laughing at white guys impersonating black guys in extremely unflattering ways.

When I asked the pastor (the staff guys' boss) about the skit, he agreed that it was offensive. But he failed to confront the issue. The skit was performed every year for the multiple years I served as a volunteer.

*The church taught me racism is acceptable as long as it's carried out in pursuit of laughs."*¹

We enjoy laughing and having fun. Church is a place where we can relax, rest and have fun. But when we make fun of other people, even when they aren't present, we're making God's house a place that isn't safe or relaxing or fun for everyone. That's not good. It's doing harm.

So let's treat everyone well and work to help other people have the same benefits and opportunities we do. Let's laugh together, not at each other. Then we can all enjoy being here together.

Let's pray ...

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

Message: "True Freedom"

"Jason, a friend of Lori Hutcherson, posted this on Facebook:
To all of my Black or mixed race FB friends, I must profess a blissful ignorance of this 'White Privilege' of which I'm apparently guilty of possessing. By not being able to fully put myself in the shoes of someone from a background/race/religion/gender/nationality/body type that differs from my own makes me part of the problem, according to what I'm now hearing. Despite my treating everyone with respect and humor my entire life (as far as I know), I'm somehow complicit in the misfortune of others. I'm not saying I'm colorblind, but whatever racism/sexism/other -ism my life experience has instilled in me stays within me, and is not manifested in the way I treat others (which is not the case with far too many, I know).

So that I may be enlightened, can you please share with me some examples of institutional racism that have made an indelible mark upon you? If I am to understand this, I need people I know personally to show me how I'm missing what's going on. Personal examples only. I'm not trying to be insensitive, I only want to understand (but not from the media). I apologize if this comes off as crass or offends anyone.

Lori is a film & TV writer/producer and the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Good Black News, which publishes positive stories about black lives and the lives of those who support them. She posted this response: 'Hi Jason. First off, I hope you don't mind that I've quoted your post and made it part of mine. I think the heart of what you've asked of your friends of color is extremely important and I think my response needs much more space than as a reply on your feed. I truly thank you for wanting to understand what you are having a hard time understanding. Coincidentally, over the last few days I have been thinking about sharing some of the incidents of prejudice/racism I've experienced in my lifetime - in fact I just spoke with my sister Lesa about how to best do this yesterday - because I realized many of my friends - especially the white ones - have no idea what I've experienced/dealt with unless they were present (and aware) when it happened.'

There are two reasons for this: first, because not only as a human being do I suppress the painful and uncomfortable in an effort to make it go away, I was also taught within my community (I was raised in the '70s and '80s - it's shifted somewhat now) and by society at large NOT to make a fuss, speak out, or rock the boat. To just 'deal with it,' lest more trouble follow (which, sadly, it often does); second, fear of being questioned or dismissed with 'Are you sure that's what you heard?' or 'Are you sure that's what they meant?' and being angered and upset all over again by well-meaning-but-hurtful and essentially unsupportive responses.

So, again, I'm glad you asked, because I really want to answer. But as I do, please know a few things: This is not even close to the whole list. I'm cherry-picking because none of us have all day. I've been really lucky. Most of what I share below is mild compared to what others in my family and community have endured. I'm going to go in chronological order so you might begin to glimpse the tonnage and why what many white folks might feel is a 'where did all of this come from?' moment in society has been festering individually and collectively for the LIFETIME of pretty much every black or brown person living in America today, regardless of wealth or opportunity. Finally, some of what I share covers sexism, too - intersectionality is another term I'm sure you've heard and want to put quotes around, but it's a real thing too, just like white privilege."² Lori goes on to provide a list of things that happened to her.

I'm sharing Lori's story and picture because she's a real person who is showing us what courage looks like. She's willing to share her experiences publicly, knowing there are those who will respond negatively, even violently. It's important to listen to her voice and the voices of people of color. That's the only way we can learn, become aware and change. Most of us are in Jason's shoes. We don't know what we don't know. We have a lot to learn. It may be shocking to hear this, but it's NOT the black community's responsibility to teach us this! It's the responsibility of white people to learn and change the status quo.

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

If my Sunday messages come across as political or tone deaf in some way, I apologize. It's not my intent to insult, demean or shame anyone. I try not to preach a message of guilt and shame and do not intend to. I am careful about political speech, but I will speak to social justice issues. I believe I am called to do so by faith. The politicizing of humanitarian language is sad, but I can't control it. I also know we each have triggers. I'm not trying to press them, but I do invite us to examine the reasons we have them.

I believe it's important to use real world narratives, because our faith is central to the way we live. It'd be easy to treat scripture from a philosophical or theoretical view. I think it happens often because it's hard to bear the burden of really living the way Jesus calls us to. Wrestling with current, real challenges together is a way to discover uncommon grace. But it comes with a cost. Jesus died so we might know there's another way to live. We have to die to ourselves to live.

I'm preaching on difficult topics and raising questions to help all of us to learn the language and get a glimpse of the problem of racism. Only then can we begin to really hear our brothers and sisters of color. Only then can we begin to take the actions needed, which is to change ourselves and the structures giving whites advantage. The work of change will place burdens on our soul. It will take courage to walk this path together, but we will be made stronger when we do.

We are on our current path because racism is like an iceberg. What we're consciously aware of is only the part that's visible. The majority of our racial bias lies hidden, unseen, a great threat to our well-being, the well-being of people of color and the health of our community. Robin De'Angelo wrote, "Racial bias is largely unconscious, and that's where the deepest challenge lies – the defensiveness that ensues upon any suggestion of racial bias."³ There is much more to racism than we know. Following the path of justice calls us to go this way, even when it's uncomfortable.

³ D'Angelo, p. 42

I know some of you are tired. Your body, mind and will are worn out. You are suffering from "soul fatigue."⁴ We are fragile. The stresses of the pandemic and changes to our patterns of life affect our body. Our minds are bombarded by information all day long, struggling to find a balance, swimming in online environments that seem increasingly toxic. Our will is weary with constant changes going on due to the turmoil in the world. Increasingly, we're making decisions when we're not sure of the outcome. Any of these are enough to tire us. When combined, they make us feel separated from God, separated from ourselves and distanced from what we love most about life and creation.

Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11:29-30). John Ortberg says, 'Easy is a soul word, not a circumstance word.' "The soul was not made for an easy life. The soul was made for an easy yoke. Yet our souls seem to suffer fatigue.

One of the challenges of soul-fatigue is that it doesn't have the same obvious signs as physical fatigue. When you run a marathon, your body lets you know it's finished. But the soul doesn't come with a gauge. Our souls weren't made to run on empty. The indicators of soul-fatigue are more subtle:

- Things seem to bother you more than they should.
- It's hard to make your mind up about even simple decisions.
- Impulses to eat or drink or spend or crave will be harder to resist than they otherwise would.
- You're more likely to favor short-term gains in ways that will leave you with long-term costs.
- Your judgment suffers.
- You have less courage.

Jesus engaged in practices which allowed God's grace to keep replenishing his spirit. Jesus prayed, participated in community activities with his disciples and engaged in corporate worship. Jesus meditated on scripture and enjoyed God's creation. These spiritual practices rested his soul.

⁴ <http://www.johnortberg.com/fighting-soul-fatigue/>

A common problem today is people think of spiritual practices as obligations that will actually drain them. Sometimes I may need to engage in a practice like giving generously, or serving humbly, or listening to someone who is hurt, which my sinful side resists. But generally I need to engage in practices that connect me to God's grace and energy and joy.

The soul craves rest. Our wills sometimes rejoice in striving. Our bodies were made to know the exhilaration of tremendous challenge. Our minds get stretched when they must focus even when tired. But the soul craves rest. The soul knows only borrowed strength. The soul was made to rest in God the way a tree rests in soil.

Pastor Ortberg concludes with this, 'When you give your soul rest, you open it to the peace Jesus intends for you. A rested soul is an easy yoke.'⁵

Our souls can find rest even in a season of turmoil and change. We may be stretched and pulled in new directions, but when we turn to Jesus for direction first and foremost, we're following the lifeline Jesus offers to everyone.

Rest will look different for different people. Rest for your soul may not mean rest for your body, mind or will. If you need to disengage, do so, but continue your spiritual practices. Come back ready to serve the Lord. If you need to connect to find energy and rest, do so, but don't forget to spend time alone with God, listening and waiting.

It takes courage to enter into conversations when we know up front we may be starting from places of disagreement. However, if we can be brave and enter those conversations, we often discover we have similar goals, just very different plans to achieve those goals.

Jesus prayed his followers would be known for how they loved. May we all treat one another in such a way that Jesus' prayer is fulfilled.

Let us pray silently together ...

⁵ *Ibid*

Philippians 3:18-21 (MSG)

Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.

But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

Romans 6:15-23 (MSG)

So, since we're out from under the old tyranny, does that mean we can live any old way we want? Since we're free in the freedom of God, can we do anything that comes to mind? Hardly. You know well enough from your own experience that there are some acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom. Offer yourselves to sin, for instance, and it's your last free act. But offer yourselves to the ways of God and the freedom never quits. All your lives you've let sin tell you what to do. But thank God you've started listening to a new master, one whose commands set you free to live openly in *his* freedom!

I'm using this freedom language because it's easy to picture. You can readily recall, can't you, how at one time the more you did just what you felt like doing - not caring about others, not caring about God—the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God's freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?

As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn't have to bother with right thinking or right living, or right *anything* for that matter. But do you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you're proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end.

But now that you’ve found you don’t have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God’s gift is *real life*, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.