

“Red and Yellow, Black and White, They are Precious in His Sight...”



KEY
ISSUES

Part 2: Create in me a clean heart

by Dr. Lois Mitchell

Having recognized my unintentional, but nonetheless real, complicity in the problem of racism, I find myself in spiritual turmoil. I am not who I thought I was or want to be. My heart is not pure. My relationship with Jesus is strained. I feel small, unworthy, unclean. I'm reminded of King David's plea to God after being confronted by the prophet Nathan concerning his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. David cries out to God: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." Psalm 51:10-12 NIV

Racism is sin. Racism violates God's purpose in creation. Racism divides God's people. Racism is an abuse of power. Racism denies Jesus' declaration that in Him, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" Galatians 3:28 NIV. Racism diminishes both victim and perpetrator.

Racism is sin. It is both cultural sin and personal sin. It entangles us all and obscures the Kingdom of God. It is a power of this dark world. Scripture tells us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" Ephesians 6:12 NIV. Racism is evil.

My response to sin must be repentance – an intentional and determined turning away from the offensive behavior or attitude and a turning toward God for cleansing and renewal and forgiveness. It occurs to me that, despite David's human frailties, God could use him as a leader of His people because he submitted to God's authority. He was able to

subdue his natural pride and turn to God in humility. Leaders are not those who avoid sin, but who allow their sin to bring them to God in humility, to face the shame of their sin, and to move forward.

I've been thinking of the story recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. Basically, a righteous and wealthy young man questions Jesus about eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must keep the commandments and the rich young man replies - sincerely, it seems - that he has kept the commandments since he was a boy. It's interesting, isn't it, that he himself senses that this is not enough? We might think that Jesus would correct him (has he really kept all of the commandments?), but Jesus, not about to be sidetracked by legalism, gently (lovingly) confronts him with the observation: "one thing you lack" (see Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30).

What is Jesus telling him? What is it that he lacks? It's obviously not wealth or even righteousness. He lacks poverty and the perspective of poverty. And I don't think it's just about material poverty. It has more to do with spiritual poverty, with knowing that we are God's workmanship, that apart from Christ we can do nothing, that all of the material wealth, knowledge and righteousness in the world will not fit us for heaven – now or for eternity. Self-sufficiency and self-reliance may be cultural values but they are not kingdom values. They may earn us prestige and power in this world, but not at the King's table.

So, what if the dominant culture is standing in the shoes of the rich young ruler? What if it's me with my white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, middle class heritage and consciousness? What if my posture suggests entitlement and privilege - a sense

of self righteousness and pride - that comes from having more than I need? What must I do to inherit eternal life? What do I lack?

The response of the rich young ruler is heart-rending. "He went away sad, because he had great wealth" Mark 10:22b. Could it be any clearer? Jesus is not impressed with our material circumstances. And notice that Jesus doesn't tell the young man to hand over his wealth to Jesus and the disciples so that they might distribute it. No, he tells him to sell all that he has, give to the poor and then follow Jesus. Abraham was faced with the same decision as he strapped Isaac to the altar. Come to think of it, Jesus – King of kings, Lord of lords – faced the same decision too and chose to lay down his life for us so that we might know that the command to deny ourselves is not an easy path to walk. Whether we realize it or not, we choose every day, whether we will go our own way, or follow Jesus.

I don't want to romanticize racism in any way, but it occurs to me that I have much to learn from those who have experienced the pain of racism and the price of oppression in this world. And who among us knows the full meaning of Jesus' prophetic word in Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"?

O God – create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me. Help me, Lord, to see the ways in which racism has shaped and colored the structures of our society and our churches and teach me to stand boldly for justice. Forgive me, Father, for my attitude of pride and indifference in the face of evil. And teach me to walk humbly with you and with people of all nations and tongues, as you build your Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

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