

A CURRICULUM ON THE BIBLE AND RACE

This is a curriculum that attempts to put together several Biblical passages with various facts, questions and situations dealing with racial issues. It is becoming very clear to more people that issues of race in the United States need serious consideration, discussion and action; and for Christians, the Bible should be the foundation for our thinking about social, moral and political issues.

There is a question, of course, about the authority that an individual Biblical passage should have, and about the way passages should be interpreted. Virtually no one takes Jesus literally when he says that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off; and if our eye causes us to sin, we should pluck it out. Likewise, we do not take Paul literally when he imposes different demands on women than on men. One of the issues of this study should be to discuss how seriously, literally and extensively we should take the passages which are presented.

The producers of this curriculum hope that using it may facilitate good discussions and maybe even actions based on those discussions. We also hope users of this curriculum will consider attending Jennifer Harvey's lectures in Madison and Milwaukee on February 9-11, 2018. We also see the curriculum as one way to discuss racial issues in preparation for the 2019 General Synod of the UCC being held in Milwaukee.

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SESSION 1 – Race, and Loving Our Neighbors

In Waking Up White, Debby Irving says: “In our racialized social scheme, white people have been given not only better access to America’s goods and services but also disproportionate amounts of comfort, safety and choice, including the ultimate choice – whether or not to deal with racism.” (p. 177)

In the same book, she compares racism with childhood bullying. She says:

Today’s anti-bullying pedagogy describes three roles: 1-bullies, 2-victims, and 3-bystanders. Traditionally the approach has been to reprimand the bully and console the victim while ignoring the bystanders.... More recently, educators and psychologists recognized that the real power rests in empowering bystanders to become allies in the fight to eliminate childhood bullying....

If Racism were a person, it would definitely be a bully. Opportunities abound for white people to move out of the bystander role and into the ally role in an effort to prevent racism from getting fueled and refueled every day....

White people are often the ones to be in the position to see the problem in action – policies being developed, hiring strategies being planned, or even racist jokes being tossed around. All these are moments when we have a choice: Do I remain a bystander and stay silent? Or do I become an ally and ask the hard questions about how this might affect the range of people in our community or organization? (pp. 219-220)

In Matthew 7:12, Jesus shares the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In Matthew 16:21-26, Jesus tells us followers that they must undertake hard tasks: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In the 5th chapter of Galatians, Paul says the following: “For freedom Christ has set us free.... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.”

Luke 10:25-37. Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan in a culture in which Jews and Samaritans hated each other. In making a Samaritan a good person, indeed someone who loves a neighbor, Jesus went against hundreds of years of teaching in both traditions. “There are countless modern parallels to the Jewish-Samaritan enmity – indeed, wherever people are divided by racial and ethnic barriers... It’s not the person from the radically different culture on the other side of the world that is hardest to love, but the nearby neighbor whose skin color, language, rituals, values, ancestry, history, and customs are different from one’s own.” (Bible.org)

How hard is it for you to love the neighbors in our city, state and country who are different from you – people of color, refugees and immigrants, people on welfare, unwed teenage mothers, etc.?

Do these Biblical passages encourage you to love all people? How do you practice that love now?

Have you ever felt called, as a Christian, to do something or act in a certain way that was really hard for you? How did that go?

If you were in the position that Black people in America are in (as described in this curriculum), how would you want society in general, and white people in particular, to treat you? (This question could be considered in each session.)

SESSION 2 – Money, Race, and Christian Teaching

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, African-Americans owned 0.5 percent of the total wealth of the United States. In 1990, African-Americans owned only 1 percent of the total wealth of the U.S. (Dear White Christians, p. 196). The Pew Research Center says that in 2013, the median white household had 12.9 times as much wealth as the median black household. The median white household was worth \$141,900; the median black household was worth \$11,000. (UCC curriculum “White Privilege: Let’s Talk,” p. 80)

In Luke 3:10, John the Baptist was asked how people should respond to his teaching. His reply was as follows: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

In Luke 19:1-10, Zacchaeus says that he will give half of his possessions to the poor; and if he has defrauded any one of anything, he will pay them back 4 times what he took from them. It is important to remember that Zacchaeus accumulated his money unjustly, through a Roman-controlled oppressive taxation system. So the giving and the 4-fold paying back was not charity, it was simply justice – repairing the harm he and the taxation system had done to people.

In a story in Matthew 19:16-26. Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

I Timothy 6:9-10 says “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

After you have read these Biblical stories, think about this: what does Jesus’ and the Bible’s attitude toward money and wealth seem to be?

Why or how do money and wealth get in the way of Christian discipleship?

How are Christians supposed to use their money?

Do the statistics about black and white wealth in the U.S. give you any ideas about how Christians and churches might respond to that situation? For every example of charity you think of, please also try to think of the same work in terms of justice – repairing the harm that has been done to people of color.

SESSION 3 – Race and Imprisonment

In The New Jim Crow, the author Michelle Alexander says the following:

Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color. This is not what one would guess, however, when entering our nation's prisons and jails, which are overflowing with black and brown drug offenders. In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates 20 to 50 times greater than those of white men. And in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 % of young African-American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives.

Although crime rates in the United States have not been markedly higher than those of other Western countries, the rate of incarceration has soared in the United States while it has remained stable or declined in other countries Today, due to recent declines, U. S. crime rates have dipped below the international norm. Nevertheless, the United States now boasts an incarceration rate that is 6 to 10 times greater than that of other industrialized nations – a development directly traceable to the drug war. The only country that even comes close to the American rate of incarceration is Russia, and no other country in the world incarcerates such an astonishing percentage of its racial or ethnic minorities. (pp. 7-8)

Isaiah 61 is part of what some scholars call “Third Isaiah.” It was written after the end of the Babylonian Exile , when Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon were allowed to return to Israel and Jerusalem, and begin rebuilding their city and their land. Isaiah 61:1-11 describes God’s mission to Zion through the sending of God’s prophet, and it describes what will become of God’s people. It includes these words:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

These are words of hope for the renewal of Israel after years of exile. Jesus read these words of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry, and then he told the people in the synagogue that that scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. Here is Luke 4:18-19, where he quotes the words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” After reading this, he rolls up the scroll of scripture, gives it back to the attendant and sits down. And then he says to them: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is taking upon himself the role of the fulfiller of God’s mission to Israel.

I would ask us to focus on God’s will of bringing liberty for the captives, release of the prisoners, letting the oppressed go free.

Do you think Jesus’ love extends as strongly and powerfully to people in jail or prison as it does to others?

Have you ever considered Jesus’ words as applying to captives and prisoners in today’s world?

If Michelle Alexander is right that the extremely higher rate of incarceration of black people in America is unjustified, do you think this unfair treatment of black people matters to Jesus? If so, how would Jesus have us proclaim “release to the prisoners, liberty to the captives”? How literally do you think we should understand and enact those words?

As you look at and relate to people of color, do you see Jesus in them? Please say how this happens for you.

As you think about people in prison, do you see Jesus in them?

SESSION 4 – Seeing Jesus in Other People

In an article in the New York Times in March of 2017, Jennifer Harvey (author of Dear White Christians) talks about her own daughter learning that George Washington owned slaves. Then she says the following:

For those of us raising children, the future couldn't be more on our minds. With the news full of reports about vandalized Jewish cemeteries and mosques on fire, police officers who terrorize and endanger black and Latino children, and engineers from India being shot while enjoying a meal after work, it's tempting to shut off the radio and turn off the TV.... But it's more critical than ever that we talk about difficult and morally complex issues with our children.

When we don't talk honestly with white children about racism, they become more likely to disbelieve or discount their peers when they report experiencing racism. "But we're all equal" becomes a rote response that actually blocks white children from recognizing or taking seriously racism when they see it or hear about it....

The consequences are akin to what happens when you breathe in polluted air. Not realizing the pollution is there doesn't mean it doesn't affect you. White children are exposed to racism daily. If we parents don't point it out,... over time our children are more likely to accept racist messages at face value. When they see racial inequality – when the only doctors or teachers they see are white, or fewer kids in accelerated classes are black, for example – they won't blame racism. Instead, they'll blame people of color for somehow falling short.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells a story about some people who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed a stranger, gave clothes to someone who had none, took care of someone who was sick, and visited someone who was in prison. Jesus then said that as the people did this for one of the least of these (or did not do it for one of them), they did it (or did not do it) to him. In other words, Jesus said that when we see people who seem to be in some kind of trouble or need, we are actually looking at him.

In these Biblical passages (and in other places in the Gospels), what is Jesus' attitude toward those who are on the bottom of the social or economic ladder?

What does it mean that Jesus seems to completely identify himself with those who are on the bottom?

If Jesus identifies himself with those on the bottom of the social and economic ladder, who would he be identified with today?

How do we respond to this idea that Jesus identifies himself with the last and the least?

How can we practice seeing Jesus in our poorest and neediest neighbors?

SESSION 5 – Standing with the Last and the Least

Voter restrictions, usually done under the guise of preventing alleged voter fraud, are in fact aimed at making it more difficult for poor people and minorities to vote. Methods to suppress voting rights include everything from cutbacks on early voting and restrictions on registration to requiring specific forms of voter ID. This summer (2016) a federal appeals court struck down a North Carolina voter ID law, provisions of which, the court ruled, “target African-Americans with almost surgical precision.” The court added, “With race data in hand, the legislature amended the bill to exclude many of the alternative photo IDs used by African-Americans” and “retained only the kinds of IDs that white North Carolinians were more likely to possess.” **“Sojourners” magazine, November, 2016**

In the Gospels (Matthew 21:12-17), shortly after Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he went to the temple and drove out everyone who was conducting financial business. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who profited by selling birds which people had to use for liturgical sacrifice in the temple. He said to them: “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” Once again, Jesus seems to be taking the side of those with no power or influence, and acting against those in power. In today’s world, where do you see people in power acting unjustly against people with little or no power or influence?

In Jesus’ Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12, please consider the people whom Jesus says are blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who are persecuted and reviled and spoken against. Do you think these are people in power in our world?

In what ways do you “hunger and thirst for righteousness”?

How could you help bring righteousness (justice) to people with little or no power in our world? How could you be an active ally for the poor, for people of color, for others who are disenfranchised?
