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Love AND Justice

BY JOHN
PECKHAM

COMBATING THE TWO GREATEST SINS

“We can’t make decisions based on compassion,” a church member once told me after we’d voted to allow the adult child of two of our members (who was no longer a practicing Adventist) to be married in our church.

I thought to myself, “*What is this person’s understanding of God that would lead them to think that we can’t make decisions based on compassion?*” Compassion involves feeling the feelings of others, particularly the suffering of others. Compassion is part and parcel of love, and Romans 13:8 tells us to love one’s neighbor *is* to fulfill the law.

Indeed, Jesus proclaimed, the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for others (see Matt 23: 37-40). What, then, are the two greatest sins? Put simply, failure to love God and failure to love others. Accordingly, the two great sins continually emphasized by the Old Testament prophets are: (1) idolatry and (2) social injustice. Social justice is a politically charged phrase in America today. Yet, we must move beyond partisan echo chambers and recognize that Scripture teaches the principle that we should treat others in a just and loving way, and we should be opposed to any and all injustice perpetrated against others (see Leviticus 19:15; Isaiah 1:17, 10:1-3, 58:6; Jeremiah 22:13, 16).

Thus has the LORD of hosts said, “Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” How could we read this text (and many others like it) and think that God does not care about justice for people, particularly the oppressed and downtrodden? In Christ, God Himself became one of the oppressed, was crucified for His troubles, rose from the dead and is coming again, bringing with Him the final eradication of evil and the ultimate liberation of the oppressed. Given our eschatology, should not Adventists of all people advocate a theology of God’s presence with the oppressed? You may not belong to an oppressed group now but if you live to see the end of days, you will. Should we not seek justice for the oppressed now?

If love is the fulfillment of the law, you cannot keep God’s law simply by refraining from doing wrong things. The law commands us to actions of love — indeed, not just occasional actions but to a lifestyle of love.

According to 1 John 4:20, if we claim to love God but we do not love our brothers and sisters, we are liars. Of course, the social justice that God commands of us may not be the social justice that some politicians call for. In many ways, the social justice called for in Scripture is more radical than most politicians would dare to espouse. In my view, we should align ourselves with moral issues without party loyalty or allegiance. We should not be afraid to speak the truth in love and reach across explicit and implicit boundaries in our society.

Consider Christ’s encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Jesus, a Jew who according to custom was to have no dealings with Samaritans (v. 9), asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. He offers her living water and recounts her personal history. She attempts to redirect to a question about the worship wars of her day. Undeterred, Jesus calls her to worship in spirit and in truth and reveals that He is the Messiah. The Samaritan woman went and evangelized her town. Christ’s disciples, however, *were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman* (v. 27). The Samaritan woman was thought to be the wrong gender and the wrong ethnicity, yet she persisted to serve anyway; she ministered to her community, with amazing results.

These days, many are arguing over questions like: Who can be in charge of the church? I think this question exhibits the wrong way to think of ministry. I think the question should be, instead: Who can serve? To minister means to serve. I’m convicted, via the studies of Darius Jankiewicz and others, that biblical leadership is servant leadership. I fear we’ve invested far too much energy in discussing status and power. If we focused more on service, perhaps we’d all be better off. While some are concerned about position and seats of honor, Jesus told us to take the lesser seat and let others elevate us, if they will. Don’t elevate yourself; DO ELEVATE OTHERS, particularly those who have been oppressed and who have not had the benefit of special privileges. While many men who claim to follow Jesus grasp for power, Jesus Himself (Phil. 2:5-11) did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped. While the devil attempted to elevate himself and usurp God’s throne, Christ voluntarily lowered himself.

In Luke’s Gospel (ch. 10), just after Jesus declares the two greatest commandments of love for God and for

neighbor, a lawyer, *wishing to justify himself*, asked Jesus, *Who is my neighbor?* In response to this, Jesus tells the now-familiar, but then shocking, parable of a man who was beaten “half dead” by robbers. A priest passes by him on the other side of the road. Then, a Levite does the same. Vs. 33: *But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion. Who, Jesus asks, proved to be a neighbor to the man? The man replied, The one who showed mercy toward him. Then Jesus said to him, Go and do the same.*

Who is my neighbor? How often do some of us just pass by on the other side when we see injustice, abuse, racism, oppression? As white and male, I am sorry to say that I am a person of privilege in this society, twice over. White privilege. Male privilege. If you do not think white privilege is real, it may be because you are a beneficiary and you do not realize it. It may not be your fault that there is such a thing but if we remain silent and just collect the dividends, as it were, we are complicit. For those who may struggle with the very concepts of male and white privilege, the claim is not that all males and all whites are more privileged than all others in every single case. The concept simply means, rather, that — “all other things being equal” — in this society a male person tends to receive privileges that females don’t; a white person tends to receive privileges that others don’t. For instance, I don’t have to worry about getting paid less for the same work because of my gender or about walking down the street in a hoodie.

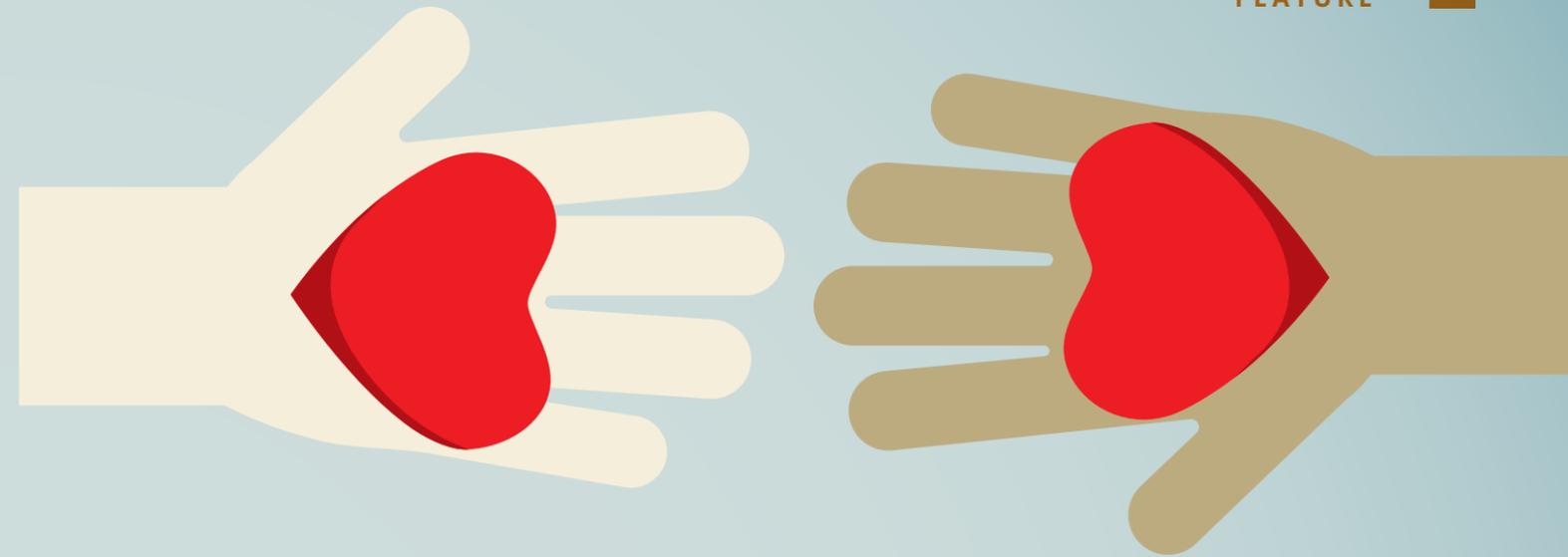
On this point, I recently listened to a deeply moving TED Talk titled “How to Resolve Racially Stressful Situations.” In it, the speaker, Dr. Howard C. Stevenson spoke about racial literacy, among other things, and he said, about his two sons, “I worry every day that the world will misjudge them,” simply because of the color of their skin. “When police and teachers see my

children, I want them to imagine their own, because I believe if you see our children as your children, you won’t shoot them.” Love your neighbor as yourself. Think of and treat others the way you want them to treat your own son, your own daughter, your own mother, your own father, your own grandparents.

The problem we face relative to racism, however, is not limited to discrete acts of hatred and violence against others. In addition to overt racism is the insidiously systemic, everyday racism. If you don’t know what everyday racism is, one explanation goes like this: “Racism is easily recognized in its extreme forms, or in its overt forms. Everyday racism can be more coded (a white teacher saying to an African-American student: “How come you write so well?”); ingrained in institutional practice . . . and not consciously intended (when lunch tables in a cafeteria are informally racially segregated) . . . Everyday racism may cause ethnic minorities to anticipate racism in their contacts with members of the [privileged] group regardless of whether they are actually discriminated against on each occasion. [Yet] counter to the . . . belief that people of color are overly sensitive to discrimination, research has indicated that most people of color are reluctant to label a given situation as racism before carefully considering all other possible explanations to account for unfair treatment. On the contrary, the . . . belief that racism is a problem of the past makes members of the [privileged] group insensitive in recognizing when and how racism permeates everyday life.”

Racism is not a problem with an easy, simple solution and, tragically, racism is NOT a thing of the past. Even if it were, we would still have the effects of past racism on current generations. In a brilliant article entitled “Am I My Brother’s Keeper,” published in 1896, Ellen G. White wrote:

“The law of God contained in the Ten Commandments reveals to man his duty to love God supremely and his neighbor as himself. The American nation owes a debt of love to the colored race, and God has ordained that they should make restitution for the wrong they have done them in the past. Those who have taken no active part in enforcing slavery upon the colored people are not relieved from the responsibility of making special efforts to remove, as far as possible, the sure result of their enslavement.”



THERE IS NO PLACE FOR RACISM
IN GENUINE CHRISTIANITY AND
WE SHOULD STAND AGAINST IT
AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY.

Even if we have taken no active, intentional, part in racism, that does not give us license to “wash our hands of it.” I am deeply sorry for the oppression and injustice of which people of color have been the victims. I am deeply sorry that I have benefited, albeit unwillingly and unintentionally, from white privilege and everyday racism.

There is no place for racism in genuine Christianity and we should stand against it at every opportunity. We need to stand against evil in all its forms but do so in such a way that does not repay evil for evil. Only love can conquer evil and, one day soon, the God who is love will bring justice fully and finally. In the meantime, I do not have at my disposal some simplistic, easy, trivial solution that will bring about relational holiness and radical reconciliation overnight, but I do know a few things that give me hope and call me to action:

- **I know** that love crosses barriers that otherwise might not be crossed.
- **I know** that if we claim to love God, we are liars unless we love one another (1 John 4:20).
- **I know** that the golden rule has never been more relevant or significant – *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* (Matt 7:12).

- **I know** that God has told us “*what is good*” and “*to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with*” our “*God*” (Micah 6:8).

- **I know** the One who has already won the victory over the enemy’s dominion and who will bring deliverance from oppression of every kind.

- **I know** that if we are in Christ by faith then we are all part of Christ’s body, which makes us not only family as having been created by God from one blood (Acts 17:26, NKJV) but, also, family knit together by the blood of Christ. If one part of the body suffers, all of the body suffers and one part of the body cannot say to the other, I have no need of you (see 1 Cor. 12:21).

As we await the ultimate triumph of God’s love over injustice, oppression and evil of every kind, let us not shirk our duty to actively stand against injustice and love one another, even as Christ has loved us. *By this, Jesus said, all . . . will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another* (John 13:35). ■

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No to racism