

Billy Graham on Race Relations: 'Much Remains to Be Done'

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a time when many people reflect on the Civil Rights Movement and the progress of social justice in America.

Billy Graham, who considered King a close friend, has answered many questions on race and prejudice. Here are some that still apply today:

Q: Can our nation overcome racism? I don't think a week goes by without something happening that tells me I'm still a second-class citizen.

A: I know our society has made great progress in race relations during my lifetime—but you're right: Much remains to be done.

Racism, I've found, is almost universal—but that doesn't make it right. In fact, in God's eyes racism is a serious sin. The reason is because God created every human being, and God made every one of us in His image. Yes, sin has marred and defaced that image, but no matter what our ethnic or racial or cultural background may be, we are all God's creatures, and God has implanted within each of us a soul. The Bible says, "From one man he made every nation of men" (Acts 17:26).

Furthermore, Christ died not just for one race or one ethnic group; He died to save people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). When we come to Christ, we become part of a new family—the family of God. Now we are brothers and sisters with all who share our faith in Christ.

Will racism ever be completely eliminated? Perhaps not; racism has its roots in human pride and sin, and these will never be

completely erased until Christ comes again. But that shouldn't keep us from reaching out and trying to eliminate the barriers that divide us. Yes, laws have a place—but most of all, our hearts need to be changed, and only God can do that. And He will, as we open our hearts and lives to Christ's transforming love.

Q: How can someone be prejudiced and still claim to be Christian?

A: Racial or ethnic prejudice is a sin in the eyes of God, and no Christian should allow his or her heart to be filled with prejudice. Prejudice and hate go hand-in-hand, and hate is the opposite of Christ's love.

Why is prejudice wrong? One reason is because God created the whole human race, and every human being bears something of His image. The Bible says, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26). When we hate someone or dismiss them as unworthy of our concern, we are refusing to see them the way God sees them.

But prejudice is also wrong because Christ died for people from all races and all backgrounds—and He did so because He loves them all. How can we do any less? The Bible tells us that Christ will be praised in heaven, "for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

Only God knows your acquaintance's heart, and whether or not he has truly given his life to Christ. But don't let his inconsistency keep you from giving your own life to Jesus. God loves you; He loves you so much that Christ was willing to die for you. Don't turn your back on His love, but by faith open your heart to Christ and yield your life to Him today.

Q: What do you think is the greatest social problem in the world today?

A: I've often said that in my view racism is the biggest

social problem we face in the world today, and I believe it still is. Not only do we have continuing problems with racism in our own country, but racism is a worldwide problem that leads to countless wars and conflicts. It also is at the root of much of the world's injustice and poverty.

Governments have their part to play in solving society's ills, of course—not just racism, but other social problems as well. We need fair laws that will fight corruption and injustice, and we need wise policies that will encourage a better world.

But we also have a responsibility as believers to work for a better world. The Bible tells us to pray for our leaders, so that “we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). God told Jeremiah to “seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace” (Jer. 29:7). Are you doing this?

The problem, however, is that even the wisest leaders and the finest laws can't deal with the most basic problem our world faces—and that is the problem of the human heart. Society is evil because our hearts are evil—and only God can change our hearts. And He will, as we turn in faith to Christ and ask Him to change us from within. Is this happening in your life?

Q: Is it too late for someone who grew up prejudiced to change?

A: No, it's never too late for someone to change—although the older we get the harder it becomes. But God still can change someone's attitude if the person is willing, regardless of their age. Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

I have often pointed out in this column that racism is a sin—and the first step your aunt needs to take is to face this truth. God made us all, regardless of our ethnic background or race, and He loves us all equally. Should those of us who

claim to follow Christ love others any less than He does? Remember, by His death on the cross Jesus “purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

But racism is also wrong because it has its roots in pride—believing we are better than other people are. But pride is a very serious and dangerous sin in the eyes of God. The Bible warns, “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not be unpunished” (Prov. 16:5).

Pray for your aunt, and ask God also to give you an opportunity to confront her with your concerns. She may not even be aware how deep her prejudice is; if she grew up this way, she may never have examined it. Above all, encourage her to open her heart afresh to Christ and His transforming love.

Q: Where did all the races come from? I have a hard time believing God meant for there to be so much strife because of race.

A: No, the devil did not create the various races. Instead, God created them and gave them their unique identity. The Bible says, “From one man (Adam) he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26).

But God did not create the strife between races, nor did He intend for it to be that way. Strife between races and ethnic groups comes from sin—and sin resides in the human heart. The Bible says, “Where do wars and fights among you come from? Do they not come from your lusts that war in your body?” (James 4:1). When one group or one race claims it is superior to another, pride has taken control—and pride is a sin.

Instead, God wants us to learn to accept each other and love each other—and this becomes possible as we turn our lives over

to Christ and allow Him to change us from within. When we allow sin to rule us, we easily give in to hate and anger. But Christ's Spirit gives us love, even for those we once despised. The Bible says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love" (Gal. 5:22).

It has often been said that the ground at the foot of the cross is level—and it is true. No matter who we are, we need Christ's forgiveness and grace. Have you come to Him for the forgiveness and new life He offers?

There is only one answer to the problem behind racism.

Find peace with God.