

Overcome the Power of Prejudice

Prejudice is sin. It is a form of sin that has kept God's people in bondage for generations and has created an unnatural separation among them. But I believe it is time for change. God is looking for a generation courageous enough to climb over every dividing wall.

Isaiah 61:1-3 tells us that the Messiah's ministry involves delivering people from prisons of various kinds. He was anointed to "preach good news to the poor," "bind up the brokenhearted," "proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners," "comfort all who mourn" and to "bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (NIV). Those He delivers, or rescues, will "rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated. They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations" (v. 4).

We as believers are among those Jesus has "rescued," and I believe we have a responsibility to cooperate with God in His healing process by rebuilding ruins in our family and cultural heritage that have been devastated for generations. We can be part of creating a new heritage for our descendants.

One of the ruins we need to rebuild is unconditional love and acceptance of others, even those who are different from ourselves—whether the difference is based on race, ethnic background, education, denominational affiliation or any other factor. Generational prejudice—prejudice that has been passed down from generation to generation—has come out of this ruin, and it is the worst form of bondage. It occurs when we not only accept but also propagate the unscriptural, prejudicial ways of thinking that our ancestors espoused.

Let me give you an example from my own family. My grandmother was a godly woman in many ways, and I loved her—but she was also very prejudiced. I want to pass down her godly traits to the next generation, but not her prejudice! So I have made a conscious choice to reject her way of thinking and refuse to propagate it in our family line.

The Bible gives us an early example of prejudice in the book of Exodus. God had delivered the family of Jacob through his son Joseph, who became second in command of all Egypt. But after Joseph's generation died, a new pharaoh came to power. Because the Israelites were prospering and multiplying, the Egyptians became afraid, "so they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor" (Ex. 1:11).

What was the origin of the prejudice? The more numerous and strong the Israelites became, the more frightened the Egyptians became of them. Prejudice almost always stems from fear and ignorance.

Another contributing factor is low self-esteem. A study done by the Anti-Defamation League determined that people who feel good about themselves and have strong self-esteem are less likely to be prejudiced than those who don't.

Those with stronger self-esteem, those who know their own identity—especially those who know their identity in Christ—do not need to put others down so that they can feel lifted up. We can be comfortable getting down on our knees in front of one another and—figuratively, if not literally—washing one another's feet.

Why Prejudice Has a Hold On Us

Generational prejudice has a strong hold on our society for two reasons. First, it is too rarely acknowledged. We aren't able to discern it in ourselves—or are too proud to admit it.

When was the last time you heard someone say, "I have a

problem with prejudice"? How often do you hear a believer admit to having the problem? Even though it is one of the biggest problems we have, if we asked, in a large group, how many people deal with this issue, very few hands would go up.

If I had ever said to my dear grandmother, "Nanny, you are prejudiced," she would have vehemently denied it. In fact, she might have told me to go cut myself a switch for accusing her of such a thing. She would have been unable to acknowledge it because she didn't see it in herself.

What I know as prejudice, she saw as simply "the way she was." We all use this excuse. "This is just the way my people are." "This is the way my grandmother was, this is the way my mother was, this is the way all my brothers and sisters are, and this is the way I am."

And God says to us by His Holy Spirit: "And it is sin."

There are Christian homes all over the United States in which believers use slang and slurs in their home for other races, never thinking for one minute that their behavior in this regard is incongruent with the rest of the way they live their lives. They don't acknowledge that prejudice is a problem, but it has a big cost.

Because God despises prejudice, I believe that where it is present, it quenches the activity of the Holy Spirit. If people remain prejudiced, they will not experience the abundant life that comes to those who choose to be free.

The second reason prejudice has such a strong hold is that it is too widely accepted—even in the church. In fact, I believe prejudice is more prevalent in the church than outside it! We're so exclusive in our denominations that we continue to remain separate.

Prejudice is acceptable in the workplace too. You can't be in

a workplace long before it comes up in one way or another, particularly in casual conversations and often through stories or jokes. But we need to face the fact that prejudice is not funny.

Being Part of the Solution

When we begin to see the prevalence of prejudice, we may feel as if we are so much in the minority that we hesitate to speak up. But if we're going to stand for Christ, we're going to have to start objecting when we observe prejudicial attitudes or behavior.

Ephesians 4:15 says that a sign of Christian maturity is to be able to speak the truth in love. As mature believers, we have to get more vocal about the wrong and the sin of prejudice.

The time is fast approaching when we can no longer remain silent. To remain silent is to remain part of the problem. I believe we can, through the Holy Spirit, come to a place of speaking the truth in love and exhibiting zero tolerance for prejudice.

What would happen in our homes and at work, in school lunchrooms, in break rooms—wherever we find ourselves—if we began to practice zero tolerance for prejudice? I don't think we would get fired if we said, "You know, I'm not comfortable with this conversation" or "I don't agree with that" or "I really don't want to hear that" when people are making prejudicial comments.

And we can let our children know we mean zero tolerance by modeling it ourselves and instructing them to do the same. We can teach them to say, when they are playing with other children who display prejudicial behavior, "This is a zero tolerance home. We do not tolerate prejudice in this home."

If we adopted the attitude of zero tolerance, can you imagine how things would begin to change? This is our opportunity.

We can stand back and resist some things and remain silent, but prejudice is not one of them. It's too big. It's going to take an aggressive attack, a proactive attack to make the enemy back off from pitting us against one another.

We've got to begin to open our mouths and speak the truth in love. We've got to break free. The reason we don't is that we don't know one another. When we begin to know one another, we'll know the stereotypes are not true.

Though prejudice may be natural, like other practices of our flesh nature, it is sin. In our lives it has absolutely no place. In the world it will be present until Christ comes because it is a spiritual problem, and the world lacks the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome it. But Jesus has overcome the world and given us the power to conquer all the works of the enemy.

The biggest obstacle in overcoming prejudice is our questioning who is to blame. We ask, "Where does fault lie in this whole situation?" Particularly if we ourselves are not prejudiced, we resist taking responsibility.

The Bible explains the dilemma. Jeremiah 32:18 says of the Lord, "'You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the fathers' sins into the laps of their children after them.'"

Prejudice may not have originated in our hands, but it's in our laps. We didn't initiate it; our parents passed it to us.

But we can be part of the undoing of prejudice. The Bible calls it "rebuilding the ancient ruins." God didn't say we'd move on to a new place; He said we can go back and rebuild what is in disrepair. Beloved, in our country and culture, prejudice is the outgrowth of ancient ruins.

What Can We Do?

After I came out of the closet as a victim of childhood abuse a number of years ago, people asked me what they can say to others who have experienced that kind of trauma. I told them, "When someone has gone through a terrible time, the most wonderful thing to hear is simply, 'I am so sorry that happened to you.'"

I believe we can begin the healing process related to prejudice by saying to one another, "I am so sorry this has happened." Though prejudice is rampant throughout our culture, we can say we're sorry for the hatred we have perpetuated.

For some of us, this may be difficult. We haven't been taught how to accept responsibility and apologize. We've learned that it's always somebody else's problem. We never would have been this way on our own; somebody else made us do it.

But God's Word says for us to take responsibility. It's sitting in our laps. We need to learn how to say we're sorry.

I'd like to suggest that we do two concrete things. First, acknowledge prejudice in every form, including passively doing nothing, as sin; and second, make some friends.

Let's be willing today to pray, "God, I acknowledge that prejudice is sin. And I know that in my own power I cannot change my thinking. So, Lord, I invite You to work on changing my heart and mind."

After we pray, we must begin to accept opportunities to study, worship and fellowship with people who are different from us. In fact, we must look for them. We must look for opportunities to be part of the multicolored church.

We can get together to worship. We can get together to do Bible studies. We can get together in many different ways! Let's open our church doors and embrace diversity.

I don't want to see God's family color-blind. I want to see us

color blessed.

The blessing will come when we recognize prejudice in all its forms as sin. It will happen when we ask God to change our hearts and minds. And it will happen when we get to know one another.

Let's do it! We have so much to gain and nothing but ancient ruins to lose.

Read a companion devotional.

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