

Ready to Share
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1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹ But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." ²⁷He said, "Then,

father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”²⁹ Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”³⁰ He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”³¹ He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ’

My heart is heavy with the names of Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott this morning. Their black bodies have joined so, so, so many others in my heart and on my mind. Refugees, especially from Syria, have also joined this crowded space. Today, I'm going to ask you to follow along with me as I shift our readings from the language of rich and poor to the language of advantaged and disadvantaged. But before I do that, I want to share with you something that helped me greatly in figuring out what advantage, or in other words “privilege,” looks like. I mentioned a few weeks ago that I am reading *Waking up White*, by Debby Irving. These are just two of the stories with which she has taught me.

The first account is the history of the GI Bill. The GI Bill was the “federal program (which) allowed men...to pursue higher education [at the government's expense] and buy homes with low-rate, government-backed mortgages.”¹ I learned there is more to it. Irving writes,

“...while the American dream fell into the laps of millions of Americans, making the GI Bill the great equalizer for the range of white ethnicities in the melting pot, Americans of color, including the one million black GIs who'd risked their lives in the war, were largely excluded...Though black GIs were technically eligible for the bill's benefits, in reality our higher education, finance, and housing systems made it difficult if not impossible for African American GIs to access them. On the education front, most colleges and universities used a quota system, limiting the number of black students accepted each year. There were not enough 'black seats' available to allow in the one million returning black GIs. In addition, many black families, already caught in a cycle of poverty from earlier discriminatory laws and policies, needed their men to produce income, not go off to school. In the end, a mere 4 percent of black GIs were able to access the bill's offer of free education.”²

She continues:

¹ Debby Irving, *Waking up White (and Finding Myself in the Story of Race)* (Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014) p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

“On the housing front, it got worse. A set of policies created by the FHA, and implemented by lenders and realtors, mapped out neighborhoods according to the skin color of residents. This national housing appraisal system, commonly referred to as ‘redlining,’ deemed skin color as much a valuation indicator as a building’s condition. Neighborhoods inhabited by blacks or other people of color were outlined in red, the color in the legend next to the word ‘Hazardous’ (investment).”³

The most desirable communities were outlined in green, areas considered “still desirable” in blue, and declining neighborhoods in yellow. Irving explains:

“Bluelined and yellowlined areas attracted realtors eager to fill their pockets by leveraging the notion of ‘marginal’ neighborhoods. Going door to door, these fear-inciting salesmen promoted the idea of black residents as dangerous for neighborhood values. In a practice known as blockbusting, the strategy was to scare white homeowners into selling their homes quickly at fire-sale prices before black folks moved in and dragged down property values. Then realtors would turn around and sell that same home at an inflated value to a black customer, who had effectively just bought a home in a neighborhood about to lose its value because of their purchase.”⁴

Schools and homes and loans went to people with the advantage of having white skin, which helped propel them to successes. The disadvantaged could not further their education or live in “good neighborhoods.” Irving concludes this section with this fact: “Between 1934 and 1962 the federal government underwrote \$120 billion in new housing, less than 2 percent of which went to people of color.”⁵ Without decent equity in a home, those “good neighborhoods” became more and more inaccessible as they increased in value. Without further education, people worked in jobs that did not provide salaries to allow them to pay for further education for their children. This disadvantage rides, out-of-control, on a downward spiral.

Irving’s second story is actually one she made up to help herself better envision her advantage, her privilege. Here is that story. She writes:

“I started thinking, *What if, instead of categorizing people by skin color, hair color was the guiding physical attribute?* To compare it to the way race works in America, I loaded up categories with narrowly defined assumptions. I imagined a world where redheads were perceived as smart and powerful, black-haired people as

³ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

artistic, brunettes as able to work long grueling hours, and blonds as lazy. Also, to hold the analogy constant, I imagined entire families sporting a single hair color.

“Then I imagined myself in this scheme, born to a brunette family. How would this shape my identity and life? Wouldn’t my destiny be somewhat set?...Family members would be laborers. Those would be the people I hung out with. That would be the world I knew, and the one to which society told me I belonged.

“How would I interpret those who had power? Wouldn’t I wonder what special quality redheads had that made them extra smart? Mightn’t I fear I’d come up short if I stepped out of my box and tried to be like a redhead? Wouldn’t redheads scrutinize my every move to see if I were some kind of exception? Or would I be labeled just a typical brunette who’d gotten a little too ambitious, a little too uppity? What if I had brunette friends and family counting on my success to pave the way for other brunettes to break out of their assigned role? Would I crumble under that kind of pressure? If I couldn’t hide my hair color, everyone would see I wasn’t a redhead and wonder why I thought I could do a redhead’s work. I’d be under constant scrutiny. If I tried and failed, maybe I’d fight to maintain my status by bad-mouthing those lazy blonds.”⁶

Irving concludes:

“Whether the whole hair-color ruse had begun as an earnest belief or not, the fact is, by the time I came along, years after its initiation, the scheme would have taken a life of its own, and my place in it would seem natural, not engineered. Unless someone told me that the hair-color scheme was based on some antiquated theory [which the classification of races is], I’d believe it, wouldn’t I?...My brunette identity would be something that had been created for me, shaping my understanding of myself and my ranking among others.”⁷

These two stories opened my eyes to see the advantages laid out for me at the outset of this country. White skin color is the best. White skin color is the most powerful. White skin color is dominant. White skin color is privileged. I am not evil because I have white skin color, just as the advantaged man in Luke 16 was never indicated to be evil. He simply didn’t see the troubles of Lazarus, the disadvantaged. But that “not seeing” was his downfall. Not seeing the people who lack the advantages we have, if we are white, is our downfall. In 1 Timothy 6, Professor Stephanie Mar Smith points out that, when Paul writes “...those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires

⁶ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

that plunge people into ruin and destruction,” “the word for ‘people’ is *tous anthropous*, [literally meaning ‘all people’] which suggests that Paul is referring not only to the damage to those who pursue riches, but also the damage to those whose lives are destroyed in their pursuit.”⁸ In the language of advantage and disadvantage, Paul’s writing might read:

“...those who want to hold onto their advantages fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”

Those who want to justify the killing of another person because he has a less-than-squeaky-clean history – to them, Jesus says “Let anyone who is without sin be the first to shoot.”⁹ No one’s story is this simple – you are either good or you are bad, you are either white or you are black, you are either already an American or you are a refugee. Over centuries this nation has placed peoples in the “other” category – indigenous peoples, Irish, Italian, Japanese, black. Over centuries some of this otherness has remained. And it remains when we don’t see those who are disadvantaged. It remains especially when we do not see that our advantages have been built on the foundation of the disadvantages of others.

Both Paul in his letter to Timothy and Jesus in the parable in Luke cry out to us to share. Don’t fall into the temptation to keep it all for yourself. Don’t become trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge all people into ruin and destruction. Don’t leave others to have their wounds licked by dogs. There has been some language associating “others” to candy recently. In response, podcaster Eli Bosnick wrote this imagined dialogue:

“If I gave you a bowl of skittles and three of them were poison would you still eat them?”

“Are the other skittles human lives?”

“What?”

“Like. Is there a good chance. A really good chance. I would be saving someone from a war zone and probably their life if I ate a skittle?”

“Well sure. But the point-”

“I would eat the skittles.”

“Ok-well the point is-”

“I would GORGE myself on skittles. I would eat every single...skittle I could find. I would STUFF myself with skittles. And when I found the poison skittle and died I would make sure to leave behind a legacy of children and of friends

⁸ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 112.

⁹ John 8:7, my modern interpretation.

who also ate skittle after skittle until there were no skittles to be eaten. And each person who found the poison skittle we would weep for. We would weep for their loss, for their sacrifice, and for the fact that they did not let themselves succumb to fear but made the world a better place by eating skittles.

Because your REAL question...is, IS MY LIFE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF MEN, WOMEN, AND TERRIFIED CHILDREN...”¹⁰

This is what it looks like to look and see; this is what it looks like to share; this is what it looks like to give up advantage for the sake of the disadvantaged. This is what it looks like to answer God’s call.

Let us pray: God, help us to be part of your work and your will for your children that all be safe and protected and equal, we pray. Amen.

¹⁰ <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Cs2Ryb7VMAAO2KT.jpg> NOTE: original post includes language. NOTE: Eli Bosnick is the cohost of a show called The Scathing Atheist, which is exactly what it sounds like.