

LOOSING LAZZARUS INTRODUCTION

WHAT CAN I DO?



SEVEN WAYS TO DECONSTRUCT PERSONAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM FROM JOHN 11

LOOSING LAZARUS

INTRODUCTION: WHAT CAN I DO?

One summer evening, just before dark, my doorbell rang. My wife was still at work and I was resting upstairs from a long day of ministry. My oldest daughter answered the door while holding on tightly to our feisty dog. Much to her surprise, a white family in our neighborhood that we had never met before introduced themselves and delivered a pan of homemade peach cobbler, vanilla ice cream, and a personal note. Flooded with joy by such an unexpected and loving gesture, my daughter said good-bye to our neighbors and immediately called upstairs for me to come see how we had just been blessed.

I came downstairs and went into the kitchen to see the large pan of cobbler and the name brand of vanilla ice cream sitting on the counter. I was truly blown away, but it was the handwritten note, beautifully done in calligraphy, that touched my heart more than anything. The note read:

Dear Williamson family, We don't really know what to say, but our hearts are finally breaking over racism in our country - the way they should. And I guess we just want to say that YOU MATTER. We are asking God to search our hearts and continue to change them, and we ask His blessing and protection over your family as you serve others.

Also, we love your books, Miss Dorena!

*With love, your brothers and sisters in Christ,
The Harris Family*

When George Floyd died at the hands of, or should I say, at the knees of the Minneapolis police department on Monday evening May 25, 2020, a national uprising ensued. As a result, a racial awakening has been taking place among many of our white brothers and sisters inside and outside of the Christian faith in a way that I have never witnessed in my lifetime. Those who are beginning to rouse within the white community are asking their black friends and colleagues, "What can we do?"

As a black man who has pastored a multiracial church in the south for the past 25 years, I believe I can help to answer this question. From a biblical perspective, "What can we do?" is a common question for people who have been made aware of their need to repent. When John the Baptist began preaching he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2)." John prepared the way of the Lord by challenging the Jews to submit to his baptism and change their ways through repentance.

In Luke's account of John's ministry, we read three times in chapter 3 that the people, the tax collectors, and the soldiers all asked, "What shall we do?" after hearing John preach. This seems to be the question that broken and sinful people ask on their way to bearing the fruits of change. We even see this with Peter when he preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost. The Bible says the Jews who heard him were cut to the heart by the truth of God's word and asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter simply told them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:37 – 38).

John chapter 11 records several things people with repentant hearts can do to bear fruit consistent with repentance. John 11 tells the story of when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This particular miracle was paramount in the ministry of Jesus because it eventually led to His own death and subsequent resurrection. It is also significant that the name "Lazarus" has two meanings in the Hebrew language. Depending on the context, Lazarus can either mean "without help" or "God has helped me." In Lazarus' context, Jesus chose to help him after sickness took his life at what appeared to be an early age, leaving him bound head to foot in a cold, dark sepulcher.

There are many young, black men in our country who resemble Lazarus. They are dressed in the death clothes of a prison uniform. Others will find themselves lying lifeless under a white sheet on the street as another victim of police brutality. Based on their life context, many of these men don't feel like God or anyone else for that matter will help them. When their neighborhoods are over-policed, sentencing for their crimes is much harsher than whites, and encounters with law enforcement are frequent and often fatal, they feel like they are dead before actually dying.

I call each of these brothers "Lazarius." These black males are in need of a modern day, holistic resurrection because they are wrapped in the bandages of a system that greatly limits their personal progress and life expectancy. As we will see, racism is not just personal, it is also structural, residing in all of America's institutions.

Therefore, when well-intentioned white people ask, "What can we do?" the answer must go deeper than mere personal improvement. It behooves us to find ways that will help to loose Lazarius from the racist elements in our culture that bind and kill him. We will not truly overcome racism in our hearts if we fail to confront racism in our policies, structures, and Institutions.

There are seven things Jesus did in John chapter 11 that we can do to help loose Lazarius by deconstructing personal and structural racism, and they are as follows:

1. Jesus Went—So I must go!
2. Jesus Wept—So I must feel!
3. Jesus Led—So I must lead!
4. Jesus Taught—So I must teach!
5. Jesus Prayed—So I must pray!
6. Jesus Spoke—So I must speak!
7. Jesus Empowered—So I must empower!

“Loosing Lazarus” is a resource designed to help anyone who has and is daily repenting of racial blindness, racial bias, and racial ignorance. Personal and structural racism do not get defeated overnight. Both can be overcome, but it takes time and intentionality. If we stay in this fight long enough we will find that by “Loosing Lazarus,” we will loose ourselves in the process.



Dr. Chris Williamson
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REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01. Dr. Williamson described the family that came to his door with the dessert and handwritten note as being “white.” Did his use of that term offend you? Why or why not?
02. If you have ever asked the question, “What can I do?” in light of the current racial upheavals occurring in our country, what kind of answer did you receive? Who answered that question for you?
03. In terms of the history of race and the challenge of race relations in America, have you ever thought you needed to “repent” of something? Explain.
04. In a 2020 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, majorities of both black and white Americans say black people are treated less fairly than whites in dealing with the police and by the criminal justice system as a whole. Also, blacks adults are about five times as likely as whites to say they’ve been unfairly stopped by police because of their race or ethnicity.

In addition, a study conducted by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine entitled, “Deaths Due to Use of Lethal Force by Law Enforcement,” the fatality rate among blacks was **2.8 times higher** than whites even though the majority of the encounters were with white men. Also, the study revealed black victims were more likely to be unarmed than white or Hispanic victims.

Do you believe these two studies prove that structural racism or institutional bias based on race is a real thing or do you need more proof? Explain.

