

LOOSING LAZZARUS

LESSON 4

JESUS TAUGHT,
SO I MUST TEACH!

SEVEN WAYS TO DECONSTRUCT PERSONAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM FROM JOHN 11

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Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" John 11:39 - 40

The late Zig Ziglar once said, "If you are not willing to learn, no one can help you. If you are determined to learn, no one can stop you." In Lesson 3: Jesus Led, So I Must Lead, we talked about leaders needing to learn how to follow (and who to follow) in order to effectively lead others. The same principle exists with teaching. In order to be a successful teacher, a person must first be a committed student, and sometimes this will mean coming to the realization of how much you don't know on a given subject. And when it comes to the multifaceted spectrum of race, if you are not willing to learn, you are not ready to be someone's teacher.

Even though Martha had shown that she had some working knowledge about a future resurrection, Jesus still needed to teach her what she did not know. Martha needed to learn about the unexpected possibility of a present day resurrection. In this moment of tremendous loss and grief, Jesus, the consummate teacher, took the time to instruct Martha about a new theological concept. Jesus took the time to enlighten her while the two of them were alone. He declared to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though He may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (*John 11:25*)

When it comes to matters of race in this country, all of us are on a continuous learning curve if we are honest, and this is especially true for white people. For whites in America, race is not an inside-out personal experience; it is an outside-in theoretical and cognitive experience. A white person can walk into places associated with the pressures of race, and just as easily walk away from them by choice when things get uncomfortable and inconvenient. A black person can do no such thing. We cannot turn race off and neither do we have the privilege of walking away from it. We are reminded of our race and the reality of racism every single day.

As a black man, no one had to tell me about race in order for me to be cognizant of it. At eleven years old, my Pop Warner football team traveled out of state to Florida for a tournament. I stayed overnight at a white person's house for the first time with two of my white teammates. I was the only black person in the house. Thankfully, nothing negative occurred but I was keenly aware that I was "different." Since that day, I cannot stop thinking about race especially when I find myself as the only minority in the midst of the majority. I live with race every day and I know I can die because of it on any given day. Unfortunately, black people are accustomed to experiencing the stigma, trauma, and discomfort associated with race.

This is why almost every black person is often recognized by white people as a racial scholar or a spokesperson for all black people. Blacks are seen as experts on this topic by virtue of our natural identity and life experiences attributed to race. However, the irony is that the "experts" are often criticized as "race baiters" when we answer questions and say things about race that white people don't understand, agree with, or want to hear. Therefore, to properly teach others about race, white people must first be learners about race, and the best teachers are the people who have degrees from "the school of hard knocks" and doctorates from "street university." All jokes aside, some Black Americans actually have degrees on African American studies and Social Sciences from reputable institutions and have written dissertations and books on the subject of race in America.

The tragedy is that white people usually want to tap this wealth of knowledge from black people in times of a personal or national crisis, but not in times of peace. Nevertheless, we find ourselves in a period of American history where white people are being forced to find a black tutor or mentor and take a crash course on race. On the other hand, there are some white people who have not treated race as an elective but as an essential life requirement. These same white people are also discovering they need to improve on their knowledge of race by doing some post graduate work in the lab and on the field. To put it plainly, white people must be constant learners of race and they must gain this insight from qualified Black, Latino, Native, Asian and other non-white people. Therefore, I ask, "Who is your teacher in regards to race? Who can you take your questions to? What black person do you submit to and learn from, either from afar or in person? Who is teaching you about how race functions in America within a historical and biblical framework?" If you can't quickly name a teacher, you need to ask yourself, "Why is that?" White brothers and sisters, you need a black person to disciple you as your teacher and to sharpen you like iron as your peer.

The best discipleship happens through the church house and in your house at the kitchen table. Discipleship happens from a book and in real life moments. It is informational and practical. What Jesus taught Martha while they were alone would need to be applied by her at the grave. This is why Jesus spoke to her about her belief system in private (*John 11:26*) and now in public (*John 11:40*). When He asked Martha if she believed, He was asking her if she trusted her Teacher and the things He taught.

Before the stone was rolled away from the grave, Martha spoke out saying, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for He has been dead four days." In reply, Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Martha needed to trust her Teacher and realize that in order to get to the aroma of life, she had to first go through the stench of death. Yes, there will be a foul odor when we remove this stone of racism. Yes, there will be pungent smells coming up from the abyss of racial terror in America, but the suffocating smell can't keep us from the wonderful fragrance of new life and a new day. When we roll away the stone of white supremacy, a stench of four hundred years, not four days, will arise from the tomb.

Learning and eventually teaching about the stench of white supremacy is critical for white people who are serious about being ministers of justice and reconciliation. Before you can teach your children about why racism stinks, you have to learn of its sickly smell yourself. You can learn from history books and candid, contemporary conversations with people of color. You will also have to be honest with yourself and with your children about grandma and grandpa's contribution to the foul smell of racism in your family, and why they use that kind of language towards those kinds of people. This may lead you to reexamine how you see the dreadful institution of American slavery and interpret your great grandfather's lifestyle of segregation. You cannot dismiss their sins as "that's the way that it was back then. Everybody thought like that and spoke like that about blacks and other racial minorities."

You will have to read and learn from black people about the racist beliefs of the Confederacy and the true cause of the Civil War. You will have to learn and teach about the stench of racial terror, the complicity of the white church, and the public lynching of black men, women, and children by white mobs. You will have to read and learn about all of Dr. King's work and not just a sentence or two from "I Have A Dream." You will have to learn how this country has a history of hunting black slaves through the slave patrols of slavery, lynching free blacks during the black codes of segregation, profiling impoverished blacks during the era of the drug wars, arresting young blacks during the prison for profit era, and white police officers executing unarmed blacks on the streets at high rates with little to no legal recourse.

It wouldn't hurt to also learn about black people's values, culture, and accomplishments on the continent of Africa before slavery. It will also help to unlearn the wicked "Curse of Ham" doctrine and learn about the redemptive accomplishments of black people in the Bible and within the scope of Christendom. It would be beneficial to learn and teach about the early church fathers who were African. It would be beneficial to learn and teach about how the "black church" was birthed out of a racism from the "white church." This means you will have to read books and articles written by black scholars, black pastors, black thought leaders, and black theologians.

Before you can teach others, you will have to learn about the racist policies, practices, and jargon that have been espoused by past and current presidents of the United States. You will have to learn and teach your white peers about how to use their privileges to the advantage of non-whites, and to speak up for those whose voices are not invited or accepted at the table.

Like Jesus taught Martha, make a commitment to teach your own people in private and in public about why today's "Lazarus" keeps dying the way that he does and how we can prevent the next death from occurring. But please count the cost. Learning, believing, and teaching the truth about race and racism in America and in the church can get you persecuted and ostracized by your own people. While the truth sets people free, the teacher of truth often gets arrested, lied on, beheaded, stoned, burned, lynched, assassinated, or crucified.

This is why we must turn to the God of the cross to give us strength to carry our own cross. If teaching the truth gets us ousted from the establishment (*see John 9:34 - 38*), then so be it. The good news is that Jesus will find us, take us in, and affirm us to keep doing the kinds of things that He did.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01. What are some episodes in America's history with racism that stinks to you?
02. Are you in a close enough relationship with a black person to ask your race questions? Explain.
03. Do you understand the pressure that white people put black people under to represent and speak for their entire race? Why is this not typically the case for white people?
04. How did you learn black history? How would you describe your knowledge?
05. What is your understanding of the role that Hamites, that is, Africans, played in the scope of biblical history and church history?
06. Explain if you agree or disagree with this statement: The best people for white people to teach about race and racism in America are other white people?
07. Although there are exceptions, why shouldn't whites try to teach blacks about race, racism and racial justice?
08. Since you started learning about the subject of race and teaching others about it, what kinds of resistance have you encountered?

