

“Justice is...” - Series

Privilege

Message by Ian Fraser to King of Kings Church, 30th August 2020.

Reading: Philippians 2:1-7

“1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.** 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. **4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.** 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: **6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,** 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Introduction

This is the third in a series called, “Justice is...”

The subject is a very **sensitive** one, not only in South Africa, but also in many parts of the West. Privilege in this context is called by the fuller term, “white privilege.” It is not an issue in the Middle East or Asia, which is 2/3rds of the world’s population; but it certainly is here.

Let’s start with a definition. Then I’ll take us on a journey that will eventually return to our text.

Jennifer R. Holladay , a senior advisor of the Southern Poverty Law Centre describes white privilege in the following way: **“White skin privilege is not something that white people necessarily do, create or enjoy on purpose. White skin privilege is a transparent preference for whiteness that saturates our society.”** It provides white people with unearned “perks” and advantages **that people of colour do not enjoy**, and is an influence in society which shapes the way that we navigate and interact with one another and with the world. (Excerpted from *White Anti-Racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap* by Jennifer R. Holladay, M.S. (Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc., 2000).

How are we to understand this subject in a way in which Jesus would say, “That’s how I see it” – and where our actions in response to it would get from Jesus, “That’s the way to sort this matter out.”

This message is to help us find a common area in which to talk together in a way that we will achieve what Paul urged the Philippians to do: “Be of the same mind” and “Be one in spirit and purpose”, as we read in our text.

Why tackle such a difficult and emotionally charged subject? Can’t we just sing happy songs about Jesus, hear an uplifting word and get on with our lives?

Jesus was not scared to tackle difficult subjects. In the Gospels Jesus not only tackled difficult subjects, but He was also deliberately cornered with controversies of the day in order for Him to be trapped. Then there would be reason to accuse and have Him condemned. But he kept His cool. And so should we. He always answered with grace and assertiveness. Should we not be the same in such circumstances?

Here’s why we should tackle tough questions in church: D. A. Carson warned that if we do not talk about these issues then we and our young

people will adopt the persuasions of their peers, or the most persuasively held arguments that society is putting forward.

Dave Rubin is an American political commentator and talk show host. In a conversation with John Lennox, he commended the Christian Church for being more open than most, in his experience, to listen to and discuss touchy subjects of today. He felt that there seems to be a ground on which Christians stand which enable them to handle controversial topics without feeling that they have lost their foothold.

Remember the Apostle Peter, in his first letter, urging that we keep our foothold, with a stand that is firm and secure: **“15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience”** (1 Peter 3:15, 16a).

I hope that by now you are quite settled in the solid hope that we can work on coming to the same mind in Christ, for the purpose of being one in spirit and purpose as His people.

Understanding Privilege

Now let’s get into how we might approach the topic of privilege.

What can we be of the same mind about, right off the bat?

I want to show you two things, to get us together on, right from the start:

- (1) What “white privilege” is not; and
- (2) a fact of life that we are all familiar with.

(1) What “white privilege” is not. A lot of heat comes from the insinuation that if you are privileged you are an oxygen thief, breathing God’s air and doing nothing to justify it. The retort might go like this: “I’ll have you know that I sweat my way through everything I give myself to. And I’m far less appreciated for what I do than I deserve; so much so that

I'm not sure I can see all these so-called privileges I'm supposed to be enjoying." Or, it might go like this: "Sure, I grew up in a wealthy home; and I've held it with appreciation and responsibility, as any accountable person would. What wrong with that?"

The short answer to those remarks is this: "That's well and good. But that is not what people have in mind when they talk about 'white privilege'." What you have said is actually not the point. Many who have a case against "white privilege" would agree with you, that what you have defended is not the problem. So what is the matter about "white privilege"? Here's an angle on it that is quite accessible to all of us.

(2) An example of privilege. A fact of life that we are all familiar with is that not all of us are right-handed. About 10% are lefties. I am left-handed, and go about life having to live in a right-benefited world:

- Try using a pair of scissors with your left hand;
- Write in a ring-bound planner over the rings!
- The credit card machine is swiped on the right hand side!
- The office telephone has the keypad on the right;
- Your normal keyboard has the numeric pad on the right;
- Try opening a tin can as a lefty;
- And what about those conference rooms, where the seats have a writing board on the right-hand; and you look in vain for a lefty-seat.

And so the list goes on...

The first point is this. Being right-handed has nothing to do with how hard you work, or how wealthy you are, it's just a world that has simplified life from a right-handed perspective. We lefties say that you are are **"right-privileged"**.

The second point is this: It is the easiest thing for a right-hander to agree with the difficulties that a left-hander faces, provided they take a little time to think through or try out what a lefty goes through. **It is when you get inside a lefty's world that you understand what they mean when they say it's a "right-privileged" world.**

Now that way of coming to agreement is what Paul is getting at when he calls for Philippians as a church to “look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:4) and to “mind the same thing, being one in spirit and purpose” (2:2). It also applies to his appeal in chapter four to Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. How do you live and work together when you see and experience the world in different ways – and when one side calls that side “normal” or “justified”?

Now let’s drill down into the “white privilege” space, so that we can come to a place as a church where we all see it from Christ’s perspective.

Trying to learn both sides of the experience of Privilege

My own experience in coming to understand “white privilege”

My own experience of coming to this understanding took place in a few awkward events, when I was a student at a residential college, and later on in business.

1. I was a part of a student trip to Eswatini (then called Swaziland) where we stayed for a week or so, in the shared accommodation of a college near Mbabane. After stepping out of one of the showers I noticed some of the Swazi students pointing in my direction as they talked among themselves. I learned later that what they had said was something like, “Look at that whitey leaving the shower without wiping it down. He’s obviously waiting for someone to clean up after him.” Wow, that was a new experience; and being a guest there, I made sure that in the following days I did my bit.

2. Back at our college, I shared many good times with a black student who grew up in the Free State. I learned that due to the influx control

laws of the time, he was not allowed to stay as a residential student at the college, in Johannesburg. The only way that he was permitted to do so was if he was classified as a domestic worker or gardener. Over the years, we occasionally met, and I enjoyed that he had moved on, among many accomplishments, to be on the board of an international evangelical organization, and had also run a South African office for an international Christian organization. I phoned him up this last week to catch up with him. When I asked him how white privilege had affected him, he said that **it was mainly about having to battle through hoops and obstacles just to get to the same starting line that the whites had by default.** Life for the whites was largely in what they would call “normal life”, with all its challenges; but for those who are not white, what is “normal” is often a marathon of ordeals.

Here is another experience that had an impact on me.

3. When we moved to Pietermaritzburg, I was arranging a new office space one evening. I accidentally broke a pane of glass, which cut my hand. I rushed off to the nearest hospital to have it stitched. There I found a line of about twelve Zulu folk, waiting to be attended to. An Indian doctor stepped out and asked, “Are you on medical aid?” I said, that I was. “Well in that case I can attend to you immediately,” he said. And for a split second I thought of the ethical implications, and went in favour of the privilege! But I can tell you now, the faces of those in the queue are still in my mind. Why? **Because though none of them said anything, I knew that their silence did not mean that they had nothing to say.**

That event is so often what this kind of privilege does: It deepens a festering of unspoken issues. When this kind of event happens often, in countless different ways, resentment starts to build up, and a pain of heart sits there with very little opportunity for the healing balm of some justice, understanding, and reconciliation. And that is why the term “white privilege” has developed to what it is today (by those who are on the other side of it), and is now included in this series as a **justice issue.**

Unresolved disadvantage can easily be seen, over time, as justice denied.

4. The stories of my own experience are many, and if there was time, I'd tell you more. For example, I began to notice that you were treated differently depending on where you were. In East London, a few of our neighbours had dogs. Xhosa people would walk from Mdantsane village past our houses, to and from work. A number of people were bitten because our next-door neighbour would not take control of his dog. It was only when the surrounding neighbours joined us, to protest that another lady had been bitten, that our next-door neighbour attended to the injured.

Back to the present: Because I grew up as a child thinking that dogs only bark at Black people, I had to endure a few embarrassing moments when I worked in Soweto, learning quickly that I was wrong. **Two months ago, in Masi,** I was delivering food to a household. There was a pack of dogs in an enclosure of dwellings, which were quite complacent with the those coming and going around them. But when they saw me, a whitey, I had to make a hasty retreat if I was to get out of there without medical issues.

The point of these personal experiences is this. Each feels comfortable among their own. But just cross into some place where you are not the same as everyone else, and you start to feel that you are being treated differently; and your difficulties start to mount up wherever you feel that you are not part of the privileged. It starts to get painful when the other side is made out to be "normal".

Sizing up its accumulated impact

The point about white privilege here and in the West, is that it is being defined as a **normal** thing. Just by looking at you – and I'm representing what I'm picking up from those who do not see themselves as coming from a privileged context: If you do not have privilege on your side, you feel the following is going on people's attitudes towards you:

(1) when you walk into a place of privileged normality, the level of suspicion goes up: People are making judgements about you: How much you can be trusted or not; whether your presence is making people feel ok, or uneasy, just by you being there – you don't get the impression of being among the "normal";

(2) in a working situation, you are assessed immediately about your competence: Just by looking at you, you realize that a first impression has already been made about you that either enables you to begin presenting yourself from a good starting line, or whether you have to jump through some hoops before you can get there;

You are judged whether you are a risk as to whether you can get to work every day on time or not; whether you are quick to learn or will need extra investment to get to where you need to be;

(3) Just by looking at you, in a place of difference, you feel the sense of having to prove yourself, simply to join with your fellow human beings.

These feelings of having to hurdle your way into normality raise the anxiety levels; often set you back; limit your possibilities; increase the financial worries. You unconsciously bring tensions back into the home; you battle with a short fuse; sometimes your sleep is affected; there's never enough food; the electricity always finishes before you've done what needs to be done; and you've a lower ability to fight for good health; you worry about your kids playing in the overflowing sewerage, and what the gangs will do to your teens. The potholes in the roads don't get fixed properly. It's too far to work; and you're overtired. This is the experience of many, many people whose lives have been aggravated by the spin-offs of "white privilege".

Hopefully you can begin to see that when we get off our separate positions into a common space with each other, we start to hurt for each other.

The privileged need to face the guilt of an unintended consequence – not

of being wealthy or of working hard for a good reward, but of the product of a million decisions of doing what is right in our own eyes – where each action is given its justification. It is the piercing experience of the proverb, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is death” (Proverbs 14:12). It is indeed a painful thing to move to the line that divides, to take in the brokenness of being in something bigger than a quick fix can sort out - the wounding to our souls deepened by using privilege for personal gain and advantage (cf. 1 Timothy 6:9, 10), and the draining and constant fight to hold up the justifying of history, attitudes, and behaviour.

In order to come to “one mind” with you, I need to ask something like, “Do I understand what it is for you to live with pain in your heart, on a day-to-day basis, as a consequence of living on your side of privilege?”

Until we come to a common pain, the pain that is Godward first, that says, “Oh, God, what have we become?” - the pain of the reason Jesus had to come – until then, we will be farther apart than we should be, to really be the “one mind” that Paul urges of us in this Scripture text. But if we can work on that oneness of mind, we will find our common space at the foot of the Cross. In that very space we may be granted cleansing of soul; and there we may receive the fullness of the encouragement of Christ, the comfort of the Father’s love, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that Paul talks about in verse 1 of our text (Philippians 2:1) – that Triune work which forgives our Sin, heals our pain, works His forgiveness in our hearts in order that we may forgive; and gives us a new way with each other, and brings about something new, and strengthens our courage (cf. 1:28), and restores our joy, and accomplishes through us His good pleasure (2:12, 13).

The Word of God speaks to both sides

Let’s now reverse our way back through Philippians, as we learn how Paul handles and addresses privilege, from both sides, in order that we come to one mind, being one in spirit and purpose:

1. Philippians 4: Firstly, as with the right-handed person coming to appreciate what a lefty goes through, **Try and understand what a person goes through on the other side of “privilege” (2 Corinthians 8:2, 3)**. Paul did this when he benefited from the Philippians’ gifts. **He understood the sacrifices they made for him, and boasted to the privileged Corinthians** that the Philippians had given as much as they could, and even more than they could afford (2 Cor. 8:2, 3). In Philippians 4, he thanks them for their gift. The Philippians would have been greatly encouraged by his letter, because they knew how much he understood where they were coming from. He had been among them; and had suffered among them (cf. Acts 16).
2. Philippians 3: Secondly, **Let your privilege of belonging to Christ reduce all others (3:7-9a)**, as Paul did.

Paul took his privileges (born a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, being admitted to the esteemed group called the Pharisees [3:4, 5]) and maximized their latency into being thoroughly educated in the law, advancing beyond his peers (cf. Galatians 1:14; Acts 22:3, 4), faultless in its outworking, and passionately defensive of its traditions, to the point of persecuting Christ-followers (3:5, 6).

Yet, he said that all that was to his benefit he now considered loss and dung, for the sake of Christ (3:7-9a): “7 But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. 8 Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ 9 and be completely united with him” (3:7-9a).

An acquaintance of mine shared that he was very proud of having studied at Cambridge. He enjoyed not only wearing the blazer of

his house, and also the admiration of many of his colleagues – Until he saw Philippians 3 in a new light. He realized that what he prided himself in was shifting his focus away from Christ being all that mattered in his life. He decided that he would never wear that jacket again.

3. Philippians 2: **Thirdly, Avoid using Privilege to leverage a personal advantage over others (2:6, 7).** Paul urges, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..., 7 who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philp. 2:4-7). Here Paul shows that since there is level ground at the foot of the Cross, we have to get down there with a servant heart towards others.

You might counter with something like this: Wait a minute, Paul was a Roman citizen. Didn't he use that privilege to his advantage? It is true that to be a Roman Citizen was a powerful privilege. On both occasions that we know of, when Paul called it into use, he did it for strategic purposes (cf. Acts 22:24-30; Acts 16:35-40). In the case, in Philippi, when he and Silas had been wrongfully punished and thrown into prison, they were released the next day after an astonishing turn of events. Paul's appeal to his Roman Citizenship in that case was clearly to set the matter straight that the church in Philippi had not been started by trouble-makers, so that the church's beginnings would be established on a sound and credible footing. His appeal was, accordingly, after his unjust treatment, not to prevent it!

This is the way that Jesus went. He refused to use the leverage of Heaven in the struggles of His ministry on earth. He was born in a stable, unacknowledged by his home town; and, as he said to someone who wanted to follow Him, “Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:57, 58). Why did Jesus hold the disciples back from putting their swords to use, in the Garden of Gethsemane,

when Judas was betraying Him to the murderous authorities? Why did He say, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53)? Was it to threaten those who had come to arrest Him? Was it not because He was turning down the willing privilege of Heaven’s defence? I can imagine the Father holding back the forces of Heaven from vaporizing this Blue Dot which is our planet Earth! Why did Jesus hold back, realizing the terrible and unjust agony which was about to be His? He did it for your sake and mine, becoming obedient to death, even death on a Cross (Philippians 2:8)! So, let Him receive the reward of His sufferings!

Who can handle such a lesson? Even now, as I deliver God’s Word to you, I find the Spirit of God piercing my own soul, as He heals and strengthens it. And Paul drives the point home with great strength and example when he urges, **“Let this mind that was in Christ Jesus be in you, towards one another...” (Philippians 2:5).**

4. Philippians 1: **Fourthly, Keep the hope that God can make your disadvantages a means for the advance the Gospel (1:12).** Paul, writing from prison in Rome, languished there not only as a result of an unjust handling of him and his calling, but also because people were taking advantage of his imprisonment, along with their privilege of freedom, to forward their own agenda and to add to personal affliction (cf. 1:15-17). Despite these painful realities, he had the firm persuasion that what had happened to him had only served to advance the Gospel (Philippians 1:12). In this way he sustained his sanity, and stoked his joy. This is the work of God for our own souls in these difficult days.

Application

1. **Learn to listen.** One of the love languages is quality time. In learning from one another across the privilege line, quality time is only taken up when quantity time is humbly invested;
2. **Read your situation with new eyes;** and start taking in both sides of the privilege line, and applying the justice of the kingdom of Heaven to what you see, in the specific events that Christ allows you to encounter;
3. **Intentionally correct** any bias that you see is leaning in favour of privilege. Be specific, by being Christ's hands and feet in ways that fit each situation. This will require prayerful study of what we are involved in, and how Christ touches it with His justice.