

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND RACE"

INTRODUCTION Today is Race Relations Sunday, and I think it is well for us to have a sermon from time to time on what many consider to be America's most serious domestic problem.

When you say that you have put something down in black and white, it means that you have made it as clear as you possibly can. There it is on paper, in black and white, absolutely clear, no uncertainty about it. But when you begin to talk about black and white people, there is no clarity whatsoever, nothing but confusion and around the subject gather clouds of either prejudice or sentimentality. The principle may be clear enough in your mind, but when you begin to practice the principle, you begin to encounter confusion.

THE PRINCIPLE We talk of a principle. What is the principle? The principle, as it was once magnificently stated, is that all men are created equal. What does that mean? For one thing, it does not mean that all men are alike, because they are not. Everyone is different. Nor does it mean that all men are equally good or equally gifted, because they are not. Some are saints, some are sinners; some are morons, some are geniuses. It means, if it means anything at all (and we certainly believe that it does) - it means that all human beings are human, made by the same God, in His image, of the same essential stuff and raw material, all are a strange mixture of body, mind and soul; all are potentially devilish and all are potentially divine. It means that if all human beings are human, then all human beings must be treated as human. It means that no human being is given the right by God to treat any other human being as less than human; no human being has the right to treat another human as an animal, with no soul or imagination, no unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of his own happiness.

WHERE DOES ONE FIND THE PRINCIPLE Where do you find this principle written down. You do not find it spelled out in so many words in the Bible that all men are equal. It is implicit in the Bible, as the flower is implicit in the seed, though not visible, not yet in existence. It is implicit in the idea that there is one God and that he has made all men in his image, and when the Jews first grasped that tremendous idea about God, they had the seed of the principle that we are talking about. But most of the time, with a few outstanding exceptions, they did not know it, nor did they make any pretense of practicing its full implications. They did not treat the Gentile as an equal, nor did the Gentile treat the Jew as an equal. There was a wall between them that separated them at their meals, in their families, and often in their business.

We find that this principle of equality is even more implicit in the Christian experience recorded on the pages of the New Testament, for in that experience we find the conviction set forth that Christ died for all men, not only for the people of his own country, not only for the people who were living at the same time he lived, but that this "Son of Man, this "Son of God" died for all men in all ages, everywhere. Therefore when Paul was writing his letter to the Romans, the most shocking thing that he said in that letter (and we read it

with so little excitement today) - was that there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek. Mind you, it was incredible that anyone should say such a thing, especially a Jew. No difference? Why they didn't eat with each other, they didn't marry each other, and yet Paul was able to say that because Christ died for both Jew and Gentile, he was therefore Lord of both, and that this common life that they both had in him wiped out the distinction between them.

Paul didn't go much further than that. And this was quite a step for one man to take. He didn't go on from there and say that therefore slavery was wrong. He apparently accepted it as a part of the society of his day, and made no protest against it. He had nevertheless taken on great step when he declared "there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male or female; for all are one in Christ".

Where then do you actually find this principle set down in black and white. You find it, of course, in the Declaration of Independence. But most unmistakably you find it written down in the history of our own time, on every page of every day's newspaper, and if anyone takes seriously at all the historical experience of the last fifty years, one thing is extremely self-evident, and that is this: there can be no master race, and whenever one race presumes to assume supremacy over another race, there is nothing ahead but disaster.

And furthermore, it is written supremely, less legibly perhaps, on our conscience. It is the conclusion to which the Christian conscience has slowly and laboriously and painfully come as a result of what happened in Palestine two thousand years ago. Paul himself did not see it in its fullness, and people at various times who have been leading lights in Christian thought have not seen it, but now, today, in the historical context of our time, we can see it and most of us, I think, do see it. For me, at any rate, the principle is as clear as day. I know that it is not that clear for everyone, not even for some sincere Christians, but for me as a follower of Christ, the principle is as plain as though it were written in the sky.

WHEN WE APPLY IT

The principle is clear, but when we begin to apply it, then we encounter difficulties. We might as well be specific and as honest as we can be and come right to the point. There's no use focussing our attention on South Africa or other places on the face of the earth where the problem exists. We would do well to give our attention to our own country first, and to consider the issue as it presents itself to us. The question in which we face the principle is this: should we separate the black and the white races in the United States? Should we send children to separate schools. Should we force them to attend separate churches, ride on separate buses and trains (or at least in separate parts of those vehicles), eat in separate restaurants, stay in separate hotels, live in separate parts of the city, trade in separate stores? Or should we mix the two races, not try to separate them, treat them as though there were no basic differences between them, that though the color of the skin may be different, in their humanity they are the same?

WHAT DO YOU THINK? What do you think? How do you honestly feel about this matter? Do you think about it at all? Do you feel strongly about it one way or another? If you do think about it, you may be puzzled and torn by various considerations that pull you in opposite directions. This is the case with many of us. On the one hand, you feel the power and truth of the principle. It's clear and inescapable. On the other hand, you see the enormous difficulties that ensue when you try to apply the principle.

For one thing, (and this is something that we all recognize) the two races have been separated for so long with the result that there is quite a gulf between them that cannot on every occasion be quickly and easily bridge - a cultural gulf, an educational gulf, a social gulf. Naturally it would be so. If you had an intimate friend and separated yourself from him, put the continent between yourselves for sixty years, you wouldn't expect to be on the most intimate terms of understanding when you next met him. The chances are you wouldn't have a great deal in common. And when you have two races separated for hundreds of years, never really given equal opportunities to mingle with each other, there is no reason to expect them to be on the most intimate terms or to be anything but shy or suspicious of each other. You recognize this and so you begin to think about it in terms of your own children, and you say that in theory you agree that they should all go to the same school. But then you think of your children going to a school in which are introduced great numbers of Negro children who have come from entirely different backgrounds, who have not had the same privileges and opportunities that your children have had. You don't know what to think...what to do...you're torn between the principle and its application.

You may go on from there and say to yourself that if you don't separate the two races, there is bound to be intermarriage. And of course there is. You may not have any anthropological theories about it, but you may have seen some of the havoc, the heartache, the headaches, and agony that intermarriages bring that both parents and off-spring encounter - finding the place where they will fit in, the place where they will be accepted. And so you say to yourself - in light of this, isn't it better to try to prevent intermarriages and the only way to prevent them is to keep the races apart. And so the conflict between the principle and its application continues.

I sympathize with you in your bewilderment. If you lived in the South, your bewilderment would be even greater than it is here in New York City, because the issue there is more intense, more emotionally as well as economically complicated. I shall always be grateful for the fact that I married a girl from the deep south because through family associations one begins to see some of the issues involved in this great question which people, like myself, who have lived all of their lives in the deep north cannot possibly know or feel. And so I sympathize with anyone who has questions in his mind, and I know it is difficult to apply the principle in any given situation.

LOOK AT IT THIS WAY

Suppose we approach this now from another angle. Let me ask you this question. If you happened to live in a country that was predominantly colored, like India, how would you feel if you were automatically excluded from all of the first class activities of the society of that land.

You want your children to go to the best schools and they are not accepted because they are white; you yourself want to go to the church of your choice, and you are not allowed to go because you are white. You want to join a club, and you are not welcome because you are not of the right color. How would you feel?

You might say, "But that's different". But why is it different. Because you're white. It isn't any different. It's only that you are on the different end of the line. You're on the short end instead of the long end, but there isn't any real difference in the issue.

You may say that, by and large, it was really better the way it was....better for them, better for everybody in the long run. It may not be right, but it's the best we can do with a bad situation. It protects them from a great many things that would make life difficult for them, and perhaps it would have been better to let things go along the way they were.

Whenever I hear people talking and thinking along those lines, I am always reminded of what Lincoln said in one of his addresses. In answer to some man's statement that slavery was good for some people, Lincoln responded with a sentence, after which there are three exclamation points in the manuscript. "Slavery is GOOD for some people. As a good thing slavery is strikingly peculiar in this, that it is the only good thing which man ever seeks the good of, for himself..." If segregation is a good thing, it is strikingly peculiar in this, that no man voluntarily, all things considered, ever seek it for himself.

Or, if you say, trying to be reasonable and understanding, but it will never work, it will just never work....I would say this - in a great many things we shall never achieve perfection, but this (as I understand our faith) in no way excuses us from the obligation to strive in that direction.

WORDS OF COUNSEL I have several words of counsel to offer as a conclusion (yes - the sermon is a little bit longer today, but my I remind you that it was quite brief last Sunday....I have to balance things off...) Several thoughts here at the end:

The first is this - ponder the principle. Think about it. try to see it clearly, now when there is no confusion, when the issue is not sharply raised - all men are created equal. Get it settled in your mind. See it and accept it. Canon Streeter once said this: "I define as a principle as that which I accept in cold blood to stand by when the blood is hot". I think you will be able to deal with specific situations much better if you have thought about the principle in cold blood, so that when the blood is hot, you will have something to stand by.

Second: apply it partially, even when you cannot apply it completely. Let no lesser one than Lincoln be your guide. He did not apply it completely, all at once, but here and there, when and where he could, as the time permitted....as the situation allowed it.

Third: when you cannot apply it completely (and you will not always be able to apply it completely) - when you cannot do this, be honest about it. Don't try to hide behind the Bible, behind some line or verse that seems to sanction your behavior, behind some theory that appeals to you but which is a distortion of truth and scientific fact. Be honest and say: "Lord, I have gone a few steps. I never thought I'd be able to go this far....help me to go a few more. And pardon the imperfection of my service"

And finally, never forget that people who are struggling for freedom and human dignity are seldom patient, although their leaders I feel, have a cultivated sense of patience that is remarkable. But the burden of patience lies not upon them, but upon us who now walk freely along our way enjoying the fruits of liberty and dignity. We, in the church, ought to carry a greater share of that burden. For in the area of race, the world has just about left the church behind. There has been more progress in race relations in the civic, social, occupational, judicial, recreational areas of our national life than there has been in religious areas and in the church. If we are sincere in our belief in one God who is Father of all, then instead of saying one thing and doing another, instead of reiterating glittering generalities, we should be charging the atmosphere where we work and live with far greater intensity than we now are with the belief and principle that all men are created equal.

PRAYER: Guide us, Our Father, in the right way as we think about this great issue, and help us to see in Jesus the clue to our behavior and our thinking in the future. May we always be honest with our selves, and in so far as it is humanly possible, apply to all men everywhere the principle that they are human, like ourselves. Amen.