

“Teaching Morality Is Not Enough”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Several years ago, when the Black Lives Matter movement was first getting started, I attended a Covenant Association meeting. There, a well-meaning lay person asked why we needed to be focusing on race and racism at all. ‘Couldn’t we just teach morality to our children,’ he asked. “Racism is immoral, so if we teach our people to love equality and seek morality, they will automatically avoid racism.” His was a really good question and it’s one that I’ve heard many times. It should be true that if we just teach and preach that we all should be just, equitable, and loving, then we will all strive to be that way. However, it turns out that teaching morality isn’t enough.

Our morality is formed of a system of explicitly held values. For example, we heard some of the values that Christians hold in our scripture from Isaiah this morning:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

In other words, we value justice, love, extravagant welcome, humility. We value action and serving others. We call these explicit values because they are conscious. We think about them, hear sermons about them, actively try to live them out, and teach them to our children.

However, every human being also holds implicit biases. An implicit bias is one that is unconscious and often unintended. They are “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” and, importantly, are “activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional control.”¹ Implicit biases are often formed over years and are usually embedded deep within us through a mixture of personal experiences, social factors, and media portrayals. Imagery and music are particularly powerful ways of creating implicit bias, as are any powerful emotional experiences. For example, my children grew up attending East Lansing schools. The love of MSU runs deep in East Lansing. It is truly part of the culture there. Wherever my kids looked, they saw MSU Spartan paraphernalia—green and white--everywhere. They were taught to sing the fight song in preschool, and they knew that game days were important; other things couldn’t be scheduled on those days. My older kids went to a few basketball games with me and my husband, which they found fun and exciting. They also experienced several fun school and family trips to MSU’s campus—to the Children’s Garden, to the Small Animal Expo, to just

¹ Cheryl Staats, “The State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review,” The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, The Ohio State University, 2017.

walking around the grounds and seeing baby ducks. This mix of social factors and positive experiences caused a positive implicit bias for Michigan State to grow in them.

This is an odd bias because I went to U of M for grad school, and I also don't feel strongly about sports teams. I did follow MSU basketball when my older kids were young, but I'm not what you'd call a fan. So, for the most part, my kids weren't actively taught to like the Spartans. We didn't say to them, "the Spartans are the best and you need to love them!" Even their teachers didn't say that when they sang the fight song with them. The kids learned unconsciously, through being immersed in a Spartan-loving society, that green and white is good. Whether they wanted to or not, whether they explicitly believed that Michigan State was a better team or a better school, they *implicitly* believed that MSU is good because their society surrounded them with this positive bias.

The same is true of negative bias. If society surrounds us with negative images, stereotypes, and philosophies about a people or a culture, we will grow up with negative implicit biases against those peoples or cultures. That is what has happened in the United States towards people of color. For the rest of this sermon, I will discuss our negative bias against people of African descent, but we have implicit biases against most people of color.

In her "Implicit Bias Review," Cheryl Staats reports that most Americans hold an implicit bias against African Americans and people who we think look African American. We might believe, without knowing it, that African Americans are more likely to be dangerous or lazy or loud. We might unconsciously think that African Americans are more likely to be criminals or more likely to use drugs. These unconscious attitudes are embedded within us through the society that we live in. Statistics show, for example, that when the media is reporting on crime, they are more likely to show images of black criminals than white ones or to report when black people commit crimes. The media will also use different language to describe white and black criminals. For example, they will take the time to report that a white male criminal was generally a good person, an upstanding citizen or a beloved father, and avoid using words like "criminal" and "violent," despite the violence of his behavior. But when they report a black male criminal, they will use language like "criminal" or "violent," and ignore that that man had also been an upstanding citizen and beloved father.

For those of us over 30, our television shows and movies that we grew up with more often portrayed black people as the bad ones or white people as good, though I'm sure we can all name a few exceptions to that rule. And for many of us, our parents or grandparents were brought up to believe that African Americans were worse people than white and so they used racist language or would actively teach us to be afraid of African Americans. That certainly happened to me. All of these parts of society affected us deep down, causing us to have attitudes we may not know that we have.

These unconscious attitudes then come out in our feelings and behavior when we don't want them to. For example, we might feel a twinge of fear when a black man in a hoodie walks into the gas station behind us and so we watch him more closely and wait to leave until he's driven away, or we might even say something to him about standing too close. If we work in a shop, we might watch or follow African American customers, thinking unconsciously that they might be there to shoplift. If we do these things when we see a black man in particular, and not when we see a white man or a white woman, it is likely that we are being guided by implicit bias.

I'll share with you one example that I know. An African American professor at MSU shared a story with me. He's about 60 years old and has been teaching there for about 35 years. He rides his bike to campus and in-between classes. One day, he was stopped by the MSU police and

questioned about his whereabouts at a certain time and place. He told them who he was, that he was on his way to teach his class, but they insisted on questioning him. So, he had to go through the humiliation of that experience until they finally let him go. Of course, he followed up with the campus police later to find out why he, particularly, was questioned. It turned out that, earlier that day, a crime had been committed on campus. The suspect was a young black man on foot. A young black man, but the police stopped a grey-haired black man on a bike.

My guess is that the police weren't actively wanting to harass this man. They heard "black male suspect" and so questioned every black man they could find. But probably because of implicit bias, their brains didn't register that the suspect was young and on foot. This is because implicit bias affects us before logic or reasoning and in defiance of our desire to be just.

Watching a black man more closely in a gas station or stopping and questioning a professor on a bike might seem like pretty innocuous things. However, the man in the gas station probably notices what we're doing and knows that we're afraid of him only because he is black. The professor's situation was worse, as he was shamed and made to be late for an engagement. Both men then feel demonized and ostracized, which means that I—in that gas station—or the police with the professor have caused them harm and made their day worse. If this sort of thing were only to happen once in a lifetime, it could be forgotten or brushed aside. But these kinds of things happen to African Americans in the United States all the time. I mean literally every week, if not every day.

But there are more serious repercussions to implicit bias. Multiple studies have shown, for example, that there are biases within our criminal justice system, health system, education system—really, they are embedded within our social system. For example, if a white person and a black person from the same social class commit the same crime, they are treated differently at every step of the judicial process. Attorneys are more often willing to make plea bargains for white people, juries are more likely to acquit white people, judges are more likely to provide lighter sentences to white people and to grant them parole. The result is that we have a disproportionate number of black people in jail in the United States, even though statistics show that they don't commit crimes at a higher rate than white people.

I imagine that you know the studies done on shooter and weapons bias. These studies put people in situations where they are given a fake weapon and are told to fire it every time they see someone with a gun and to not fire it every time they see someone holding an innocuous object, like a camera or a wallet. They are given very little time to decide, just like you would be if you were a police officer or if you owned a gun and found someone in your yard or home. The results demonstrate that people more often shot unarmed African Americans—people who posed no threat. Moreover, they more often shot armed African Americans, than armed white people. In other words, we tend to immediately assume that Africans Americans are a threat, while white people are not. These studies have been replicated over and over by multiple researchers and demonstrate that there are life and death consequences of implicit racial bias, consequences that we see in the news all the time.

Our police, juries and judges don't usually do these things on purpose. Many of them are not thinking that they want to make sure that African Americans get a worse deal than white people. In fact, most of the people working in our judicial system believe strongly in justice and want very much to be impartial. Interestingly, studies also show that people who think that they are impartial are more likely NOT to be impartial. Why? Because their belief in their impartiality prevents them from being willing to examine themselves to find out where their implicit biases lie. But in the United States, our knee-jerk, unthinking reaction is generally to be harsher on African

Americans than on white people. We don't usually even realize that we're doing it. It's unconscious.

So, teaching morality isn't enough. Despite the fact that we try to be good people, despite the fact that we teach and believe in justice, these biases have wormed their way into our unconsciousness. This is an important topic because we think that racism is a conscious choice and that we're evil if we're racist. We've been raised to hate racism, as well we should. But one of the results of that is that many of us think that we couldn't possibly act in a racist manner unless we intend to do so. But this research on implicit bias demonstrates that most of us probably are acting in a racist manner, despite our best intentions. But hope is not lost. This does not mean that we're stuck and will just act with racist bias for the rest of our lives. Implicit bias can be unlearned through careful counter-stereotype training.

Recognizing and countering implicit bias is hard. It's painful to realize that we might not be who we want to be. For many of us, it's natural, then, to hide from our biases, to deny them, or to try to justify our behaviors. But if we want to be the salt of the earth or the light of the world that Jesus calls us to be, it's important that we confront and unlearn our implicit biases.

There are multiple counter-stereotype techniques we can try. I've included several of them in the handout I've provided in the Narthex, but I'll go over a couple now. The first step is a willingness to learn what our implicit biases are. A good way to find these is to take an implicit attitude test, like the one that Harvard conducts. You'll find a link to it in the insert in your bulletin. This test is meant to help us learn what our implicit biases are so that we can start to figure out how to counter them.

Another useful step is to read about counter-stereotype techniques and take anti-racism classes. Educate yourself more on the ways that racism is still affecting our society. Doing Our Own Work: Anti-Racism for White People is a great seminar that I took last year.

Another option is to try exposure to counter-stereotype individuals. This means that we could spend some time learning about African Americans that you admire and who directly counter the stereotypes that African Americans are dangerous or lazy, such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr, or Colin Powell. At the same time, it can be helpful to learn about white Americans who are dangerous, like Jeffrey Dahmer and Timothy McVeigh, to help our brains recognize that white people can be dangerous, too. Importantly, this kind of thing can't be done just once. Repetition of counter-stereotype exposure proves to be very important. So, telling yourself that you'll learn about one influential or admirable African American a month and one less admirable white person a month could be weirdly helpful!

Finally, it's important that you grant yourself grace. I know that when I learned about implicit bias, I was horrified. It caused me to look back at my behaviors and words and to realize that I had acted with racial bias, despite my best intentions. I felt guilty and angry. But the love of God guided me through those moments. Remember the good news of our gospel, which is that Jesus was sent to us to show us God's abundant, extravagant grace. God loves us for who we are and forgives us. We are especially forgiven for situations like this, where we are pulled into having implicit biases, despite our intentions. So, if you feel angry or frustrated or guilty when you learn about implicit bias, know that having those feelings is normal, and grant yourself that same grace and love that God grants you. Allow yourself to sit with that anger or guilt or frustration. And see if it can galvanize you into action.

You are the light of the world, oh people! As that light, we are called to seek justice for the oppressed and to help heal the broken systems of our world. One way to be a light to the world is to be willing to be leaders in self-reflection and anti-racist training. Amen.