

Systemic Racism, Social Holiness and the Powers and Principalities of Our Time

Ephesians 6:10–17

Introduction

Wesleyan theology, our Methodist heritage, teaches that both sin and holiness exist not only within the individual person but also within larger systems and institutions. Just as a person can be afflicted with sin, a social system can be afflicted with sin too. Just as we pursue personal holiness through spiritual disciplines, we must pursue social holiness through mission, service, advocacy and action.

God calls us to nurture holiness not only within our personal lives but also within our public life, in the systems and institutions that we build and sustain collectively, if sometimes less consciously. Within an individual person, holiness might show itself as piety, charity or personal righteousness. Within a system or institution, holiness might appear as justice, equity or accessibility.

This study concerns itself with ways we can equip ourselves to bring about greater social holiness.

Our text in Ephesians makes a distinction between individuals in abusive systems and the systems themselves. Ephesians tells us, counterintuitively, that our fight is not with “enemies of blood and flesh.” Rather, we are fighting “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.” Understanding the role of sin in our public institutions frees us to take a bigger and clearer view of social problems, moving beyond political chatter to recognize the depth of the problems at hand and seek transformative solutions.

“In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.... We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” – Excerpt from *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander

In this study, we focus specifically on confronting the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of communities of color. However, you might apply a similar frame to address other disparities in your community as well.

We believe that our criminal justice system, generally, and our juvenile justice system, more particularly, are sick with the sin of racism. We do not believe that the racial disparities in the criminal justice system are simply an accident or error. The criminalization of communities of color — the misperception that people of color are



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somehow more criminal than white people — is, at its root, an expression of a long-lasting, deep, structural sin: racism. Institutional racism is baked into the very fabric of our society. This is not merely a political or policy problem; it is a spiritual, soul-deep problem. We must understand the depth and scope of the problem to find adequately expansive and serious solutions.

In challenging the school-to-prison pipeline, we know that we are not taking on a few bad apples in an otherwise healthy system. Cycling different faces into the same roles will not necessarily produce a different result. We should not demonize individuals. Our fight is not with any single person. School resource officers, politicians, police, guards, executives, teachers, school board members, principals, judges, lawyers — all of these individuals may be good, bad or a mixture of both. But they are all operating inside broader systems, norms and institutions that have patterned racist outcomes so deeply that even well-intentioned and loving people are caught in the trap of perpetuating sin. It is these systems, norms and institutions that we must confront and transform.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, we are beholden to the powers and principalities but long to be free. Help us, God! We find ourselves bound by sinful structures and systems. Heal us! We want to do your will, but we don't know how. Teach us, God! Even when we win small victories, we don't yet see the larger change that is our hearts' desire. Transform us, God! Join us to your Holy Spirit in this freedom journey. Dress us in your full armor, God, and strengthen us for what's to come. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Bible Study

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:10–17)

Discuss

Why does Ephesians make a distinction between “enemies of blood and flesh” and “rulers...authorities...cosmic powers of this present darkness...[and] spiritual forces of evil”? What might this distinction have meant for Christians living in the 1st century CE?

Does this distinction between individuals and systems still seem meaningful today? What are examples of these two kinds of opposition: the “blood and flesh” and the deeper systems/powers and principalities?

Ephesians teaches us to take on deeper systems rather than individual enemies. What do you think of this advice, when applied to engaging our contemporary world and the struggle against mass incarceration? Should we take on individuals, systems or both? Why?

In our secular society, we rarely use the language of “sin.” Instead, we speak about problems in the language of social science, law, health, etc. Many theologians and biblical scholars believe that this is a significant loss. Why might we want to reclaim this biblical language of “sin” to understand our present realities?

This passage urges us to put on the “full armor of God,” including the “belt of truth,” “breastplate of righteousness,” “shield of faith,” “helmet of salvation,” “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” and shoes that “will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” Think about each of these examples. How does each connect? How, for example, does righteousness serve as a “breastplate” (chest/heart protection)? How does the word of God serve as a “sword” to cut through untruth? How is truth a “belt” we fasten? How is preparing to proclaim the gospel of peace like putting on shoes? Consider the metaphors of the text carefully.

Think about your own life. What is the “armor” you wear to confront injustice? How is this armor a necessary and helpful protection? Is this armor ever a burden, unhelpful to your work? How do you decide what armor to put on or take off in a given situation?

How do we prepare ourselves for advocacy on the school-to-prison pipeline by putting on that “whole armor of God”? What spiritual preparation is necessary? What research? What relationships? What organizing and power-building? What disciplines of the heart (prayer, fasting, etc.)?

Going Deeper

There is an irony in this beautiful Scripture. This text immediately follows Ephesians 6:1–9, a biblical passage that has given theological cover to some of the worst abuse in human history with its call to “obey your masters.” This “proof-text” was used by white people in the United States and elsewhere to justify slavery in the name of God. It appears just a few verses before the stirring call to transformation found in Ephesians 6:10–17.

While it's easy now to accurately look back on this as blasphemy and sin, this serves as a warning to us all to be careful in our reading of the Bible even now. When we bring our own prejudices to our reading of the Scripture, we find those prejudices mirrored back to us in our view of the texts. When we read Scripture seeking justifications for our own sin, we may well find the prooftext verse we want, but we may also miss the larger Gospel message and lose the God we need entirely.

Invite your group to go back and read Ephesians 6:1–9 *through the lens of Ephesians 6:10–17*. In what ways do we see the “rulers...authorities...cosmic powers of this present darkness...spiritual forces of evil” at work in the historical reading and interpretation of Ephesians 6:1–9 as a justification for slavery and abuse?

Creative Thinking

Break into small groups or pairs to draw a “suit of armor” for the contemporary Christian struggling against the criminalization of communities of color and the school-to-prison pipeline. What are the “tools” needed? Think about spiritual resources, material resources, knowledge, strategies, practices and more. Compare your suits of armor.

Reflecting Back

Scripture reminds us of the temptation to focus on the speck in a neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in our own. Think carefully and prayerfully: (how) are we bound by the power and principalities, complicit in racist systems and institutions in ways we might not yet fully recognize or understand?

Life Application/Mission Focus

Racism remains an incredibly harmful and pervasive social sin. What organizations in your community are working to uncover, challenge and transform racism in local systems and institutions? Can you be a partner and supporter in this work? How might you do so?

Future Small Group Study Recommendation

We take as resource in this understanding the work of Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*. In this transformative book, she carefully explains the rise of mass incarceration in the latter part of the twentieth century as a system of racialized control and violence. We highly recommend this book and its companion study guide, available through the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference.