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Challenge Prejudice

By Elise L. Moore

It was an interesting start to an interfaith ministerial meeting. The minister of the host African American church was late, so the meeting proceeded without him. When he arrived later, he explained that he'd been at court. One of his members, a professional gentleman in his fifties, was leaving a shopping area in an up-scale neighborhood. His vehicle was surrounded by three cars driven by young white males, and he was threatened. The police were called and arrested him! The minister had been summoned as a character witness to assure the court that the man wasn't a drug dealer. The man's only offense was being black and driving a new BMW in a white neighborhood. Murmurs of sympathy rose from the integrated audience. All the African American ministers concurred that this kind of thing happened too frequently.

Broadly defined, prejudice is any adverse opinion formed beforehand. It is a bias based on looking at only one side of an issue, and as such it would prevent clear-sighted perception of a situation. Under this definition, many people may feel limited by some form of prejudice. The experience of being stereotyped and misjudged before the facts are considered is frustrating and often intimidating. But when human laws established by a majority result in penalizing and restricting the rights of a minority, such laws would legitimize prejudice by institutionalizing it.

Examples of institutionalized prejudice are not limited to history books. Debate continues, for example, about current laws in the United States that would exclude legal residents from government services because they were born outside of the country, and about laws that would prevent government-sponsored universities from adjusting requirements to include more African American, Native American, or other minority students. To the majority, certain laws may appear necessary and logical. But what seems logical from one perspective is onerous and unjust from another.

The life of Moses illustrates this point. Apparently, from an Egyptian point of view, there were entirely too many Israelite males. The Bible reports that "the land was filled with them." ¹ In fact, one Pharaoh worried that "the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we." ² Did this imply that the Egyptian government feared foreign domination from within? Were advisors warning Pharaoh that Hebrews were taking good jobs from Egyptians, not learning the language or assimilating into the culture? Whatever the rationale, Pharaoh used his power to make it illegal, in effect, to be born a male Israelite. He ordered the Hebrew midwives and later all Egyptians to kill male Hebrew babies ³ What to the Egyptians seemed a social and political necessity was to the Hebrews the epitome of racial, religious, and gender prejudice. The irony of the story is that Moses, the one male baby we know was saved alive, was raised by Pharaoh's daughter and later saved the Israelites from the Egyptians.

Some years afterward, Moses encountered prejudice of another sort. When he married an Ethiopian woman, Miriam and Aaron (his sister and brother) strongly disapproved, and decided this action made Moses unfit for his leadership role.⁴ They planned to replace him. Their prejudice probably mirrored the opinion of the majority of Hebrews. However God rejected prejudice, rebuked Miriam and Aaron, and Moses continued both as leader and husband. In both instances, prejudice was annulled and superseded by God.

Christ Jesus abhorred prejudice and rebuked it, calling it hypocrisy. While the Pharisees or religious elite refused to sit with those who were considered sinners, Jesus ate with them openly. When Jewish tradition prohibited even speaking to Samaritans, Jesus revealed himself as the Christ to a Samaritan woman and proceeded to preach and teach to the people of her village. He chose Matthew, a tax collector, as one of his closest disciples, and included women among his students. Jesus was condemned for healing the sick on the Sabbath, for allowing his disciples to pick corn when they were hungry on the Sabbath, and for transforming the life of a prostitute.⁵

According to Jewish law, Jesus was guilty. But Jesus was illustrating through his life and works that God's law is higher than human laws. Jesus rejected the injustice of human opinion labeled law. Yet he affirmed the importance of obedience to the "weightier matters of the law" ⁶ when he said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. " ⁷

What is this law that Jesus came to fulfill? God's law, governing the universe. God's law is the breath of impartial and universal righteousness come to earth. From God comes the absolute concept of law, which is perfect in conception and execution. God's law governs all equally. It never changes with circumstance or errs in judgment. God's law declares absolute Truth. It is the law of infinite good, demonstrating harmony on earth.

As God is the Father and Mother of all, He/She embraces each one equally, requiring obedience to divine law, to goodness and honesty, without favoritism. No one is above divine law. Neither is anyone outside of its universal order. God, divine Love, blesses its creation through law, and this law reflects Love's nature. The law of Love makes hatred, resentment, and revenge inadmissible. The law of Truth rebukes selfishness and sin with mercy and justice. The law of Life sustains man and woman in their demonstration of eternal life. The law of Soul supports universal freedom and the individual's expression of distinct identity. It is the law of God that protects one from chance and ignorance. God's law uplifts and purifies rather than limits or degrades. Mary Baker Eddy summarizes this absolute concept of divine law: "God's law is in three words, I am All; and this perfect law is ever present to rebuke any claim of another law." ⁸

Human law is based on the custom or practice of a community, and is enforced by governmental or judicial authority. Human law proceeds from the minds of mortals, while divine law is a force of divine Mind. Human law changes as society changes. There is nothing permanent or perfect about it. When human law patterns the divine, however, it promotes obedience to the moral and spiritual law. The wisdom of mortals must yield to the all-knowing and comprehending Mind that is God. As it does, a higher expression of human law will emerge, rejecting selfishness and aggression while protecting all that is good.

What is our role in this? How do we overcome injustice and prejudice when it is approved by society or protected by state statutes? By yielding to the Christ and conforming to divine Principle. God is Principle, the power of absolute right. Principle is not remote or lifeless. It is Love, the origin of justice and mercy, expressed in loving thoughts and loving actions. It is through our expression of divine Love that the higher law Jesus taught is fulfilled. As Paul said, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." ⁹

Christ communicates God's message of love to human consciousness. Christ shows us the oneness of God's creation, that each of God's ideas has its own purpose, never inhibiting or interfering with another idea. Right where prejudice and self-righteousness seem to be, the Christ shines the light of heavenly harmony. While the human consciousness may resist the healing Christ, it cannot prevent the power of Christ from destroying injustice and overcoming sin.

Prejudice is sin. It is a mistaken view of man, which must be replaced by the divine concept of man and woman created and established by God. Hidden prejudice, like hidden sin, is uncovered by Christ, Truth. The higher view of God's creation necessarily transforms society's limited human opinions. It prompts in us active recognition and appreciation of the goodness expressed by others, and destroys criticism and blind hatred.

Mrs. Eddy, a religious freedom-fighter of the nineteenth century, learned to combat the prejudice she faced through reliance on divine Principle and its law. In her autobiography, she recalls, "At one time I was called to speak before the Lyceum Club, at Westerly, Rhode Island. On my arrival my hostess told me that her next-door neighbor was dying. I asked permission to see her. It was granted, and with my hostess I went to the invalid's house. "The physicians had given up the case and retired. I had stood by her side about fifteen minutes when the sick woman rose from her bed, dressed herself, and was well...."

"This scientific demonstration so stirred the doctors and clergy that they had my notices for a second lecture pulled down, and refused me a hearing in their halls and churches. This circumstance is cited simply to show the opposition which Christian Science encountered a quarter-century ago, as contrasted with its present welcome into the sick-room." ¹⁰

Perhaps a later statement in the same book illustrates the foundation from which she addressed such prejudice. It certainly points to a crucial component in the fight for freedom from all prejudice—including racial bias. "Let us follow the example of Jesus, the master Metaphysician, and gain sufficient knowledge of error to destroy it with Truth. Evil is not mastered by evil; it can only be overcome with good. This brings out the nothingness of evil and the eternal somethingness, vindicates the divine Principle, and improves the race of Adam." ¹¹

As individuals recognize the higher law of Principle as taught by Christ Jesus, they will discover their oneness with God, Love, and demonstrate the divine law that one with God is a majority. The injustice of human opinions and selfish motives can be overcome through the power of Principle, Love. As Paul wrote to Christians struggling against the institutionalized anti-Christian prejudice of the Roman empire, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"¹² The law of God will bless those challenging injustice, and God's promise will be fulfilled: "The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide."¹³

¹ Ex. 1:7.; ² Ex. 1:9.; ³ See Ex. 1:15, 16.; ⁴ See Num., chap. 12; ⁵ See Matt. 9:10; John, 4:5-26; Luke 13:14, Matt. 12:1-8; Luke, 7:37-50.; ⁶ Matt. 23:23.; ⁷ Matt. 5:17.; ⁸ No *and* Yes, p. 30.; ⁹ Rom. 13:10.; ¹⁰ Retrospection *and*, *Introspection*, p. 40; ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.; ¹² Rom. 8:31.; ¹³ Ps. 37:31.