

# How do you respond to "I don't want to get blacker, Daddy!"

Commentary by Bishop T.D. Jakes



I am delighted to see a continued rational discussion about race relations in this country. I know many find it painful and some would rather not discuss it at all. But like a good marriage, sometimes communication is the only way to create unification. Therefore, I applaud CNN for having the foresight to lead a discussion that hopefully will produce more love and a shared concern for people you see every day but might not know what they see when they live in the same world and breathe the same air that you do.

Often I pen words as a pastor, sometimes as an entrepreneur, and occasionally as a citizen with an opinion. But today, I have been asked to share a story as a father, and a person of color, who knows firsthand the challenges of raising children of color. I love this country and I am very proud to be an American. In spite of its many challenges and disappointments, I fervently believe that the benefits of living in the United States ultimately outweigh the liabilities. But in the interest of sharing a "what is it like to be you" story, I will add this one to the discussion. To be sure, we are not all monolithic. Many, many, blacks have raised their children surrounded by masses of blacks and have faced a different challenge than mine.

I have twin boys who are almost 30 years old now. But when they were very young, I was sitting with both of them in the predominantly white environment of my home in West Virginia talking about things fathers discuss with their sons. I shared with one of my sons, that when I was his age my skin tone was very much like his, very light. In a matter of fact way, I mentioned that as I got older, my skin darkened and changed to become much more like his brother's skin, which was darker.

My son, whose skin tone was lighter, began to cry profusely. I was befuddled by his reaction, but when your 7-year-old is crying without a reason and you love him, you investigate it immediately! So I asked him why he was crying. He blurted out, "I don't want to get blacker, Daddy!" He looked at me in total anguish and said something that left me astounded. He said, "Because if you are black they hate you more." He cried so hard that I took him in my arms so that he couldn't see that I too was shedding a tear or two, myself. I was

hurt for both of my sons, and I was hurt with them.

I was stunned. How could I have let myself be so busy trying to provide for my family, that I didn't realize how I had not equipped them for the harsh realities of a world that can at times be both cold and unwelcoming to those who are outside of our "norm?" Do not misunderstand me, I know all too well from my own experiences, how things can be when you are a minority in a majority world. But what I didn't know, was that this 7-year-old had encountered this level of anguish at such an early age, and that he had resolved in his own way that if he could avoid getting any blacker he might not have to feel the painful consequences of looking different. I doubt that it was overt racism, no sheets draped over the heads of the KKK, or Rodney King style beat downs in the back of the school. No, these were tears running down the face of a child who had been victimized by subtle covert racist distinctions right in front of my face and I didn't even know it was happening in his world.

I sat on the floor holding two weeping children as my wife and I began to explain what a gift it is to be yourself, and to love who you are and how you are made. I told them how wonderfully God has created them in the skin they were in! It led to one of the richest, most rewarding discussions of my children's lives and they still refer to it to this day!

It was then that it became crystal clear the importance of teaching our children the value of being African American and the value of their own self-worth. Sadly when one speaks of this teaching - African Americans to love themselves, their community or accomplishments, many outside of the realities of our life relegate such pride inappropriately as prejudice. I dare say that no race is exempt from prejudice and blacks like all people can have their biases. But pride and prejudice are not the same thing at all. In fact without the conscious effort to give black children the supplement of self esteem to replace the steady diet sent through media and other methods of communication that subtly suggest inferences of inferiority, they live with a disadvantage that is difficult to overcome in their early ages.

Our children desperately need to see people who look like them, who have done well and have been accepted by mainstream America so they will know that it is possible. Today we are seeing more black, brown, and female faces slipping through the glass ceiling to positions of prominence and finding there a new breed of more accepting people. We all need a conscious concerted effort to help showcase these persons to whom young Blacks, Latinos and girls can aspire. Still, we who are in the village that cares for children of all

racess must be careful to insure that we do not innocently or consciously malign innocent minds with insensitivity to the unique nuances of their needs.

Looking back at that moment with my sons, my regret at that moment was that I had not started sooner. My tears resulted from outrage and shame. I was outraged because the children who I loved were dealing with such hideous experiences so early; and I was ashamed that I was so busy struggling to feed them that I didn't think to equip them sooner for the harsh realities to which I naively thought they hadn't experienced. I was wrong!

This lack of "self-love" and the negative self-image that accompanies it is not limited to those children raised in the inner city. Though my wife and I were struggling financially at the time, my older children were never raised in the inner city and grew up in what would be ordinary neighborhoods of moderate- to middle-class income. No sagging pants, no boom boxes, and no gangs were prevalent at the time. Instead they attended what I thought were good schools, we had low crime, well manicured lawns, active PTA's, youth programs - the true American dream. Believe it or not, it is easy to become almost invisible in even these otherwise wholesome environments. Their classrooms were predominantly white, the teachers, principals and staff were generally white, their sports and, cheer-leading teams were primarily white, as were the dances and birthday parties they attended. Without a strong injection of self-worth and appreciation for their differences, these types of experiences can leave many children of color losing themselves, trying to fit in with others.

If one takes a look at many of the social ills that haunt the African-American community - the proliferation of gangs, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, high school drop out rates, lower test scores - much of it can be tied back into a lack of self appreciation of who they are. To be sure, many of our families have been self-destructive, and some have been admittedly extremely dysfunctional. There is no question that we are not without some blame for many of the challenges we face today. The self-esteem issues are exasperated by absentee fathers, substance abuse, and many other circumstances that add to the conundrum of the lagging behind of our people. Yet, I shared my story to say that even when a black family overcomes those hurdles, and the father is at home, the family is stable, and the parents are involved with the school, etc., there is still an added invisible weight that saddles down the mind and cripples the soul of our children at incredibly early ages.

The baggage of being different is only

crippling when the child is left to carry it without an intentional awareness of cultural diversity, sensitivity training and supervision in private and public schools to ensure that what they learn at school is education and not the devaluation that comes when those who make decisions do not look like the ones they decide about.

I am reminded of the young mainstream girls that we have seen and read about because of their struggle with bulimia and anorexia. They are bombarded with images, everywhere you turn, of rail thin women and are told, this is beautiful. Similarly, my children were bombarded with images of blonde, straight hair, blue-eyed children and were told this is beautiful. Their perception of normal was skewed based on their surroundings. The take away message is that if you are going to integrate the class, the staff, the pictures, the books, then all involved must reflect that commitment to ensure a healthy environment for those we seek to serve.

If all else fails, it must be the responsibility of the parents to instill the worth and value into our children as early and as often as possible. We must not shirk that responsibility. But if we can gain help from all people to make sure that no person is left dreading the skin they are in, we will really be the people that God meant for us to be. If people in general, and children in particular, are not exposed to their own culture, music, dance and food, all of us have to work to make sure that they experience that exposure. They must see images on the wall and around them that reflect their characteristics, and teach them to enjoy their unique appearance, language, skin tone or whatever it may be that sets them at risk of being a part.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words still ring soundly today, "Judge me on the content of my character and not the color of my skin." Can a brother get a good Amen?

**"I detest racialism, because I regard it as a barbaric thing, whether it comes from a black man or a white man."**

Nelson Mandela