

## **Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson**

### *Week 2 – Part Two (Chapters 4-9)*

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion. The text appearing in bold will be included in the February 19<sup>th</sup> Friday Update.

#### **1) On page 40, we read:**

**As an actor, you are to move the way you are directed to move, speak the way your character is expected to speak. You are not yourself. You are not to be yourself. Stick to the script and to the part you are cast to play, and you will be rewarded. Veer from the script, and you will face the consequences. Veer from the script and other cast members will step in to remind you where you went off script. Do it often enough or at a critical moment and you may be fired, demoted, cast out, your character conveniently killed off in the plot.**

Reflect on this passage and how it might apply to you at various times in your life.

- **Are there times you have been the actor who was not to be yourself? The one who veered from the script? The cast member who stepped in to remind someone else they are off-script? The one who was rewarded for staying on script? The one who was punished for going off-script?**
- **What factors determined the role you were cast to play and which of these factors are readily apparent to someone who just met you?**
- **Where did the script come from and how did you learn it?**
- **Have laws ever been used to keep you in the role you were cast to play?**
- **Over the next week pay attention to ways the script and casting of characters is reinforced or disrupted in things you read, hear, or see. Is it easier to notice the times of reinforcement or the times of disruption?**

#### **2) For each of the following passages taken from Chapter 4 see if any current-day equivalents come to mind:**

- a) **"Few Africans were seen as significant enough to be listed in the census by name, ..." (p 41)**
- b) **"At first, religion, not race as we now know it, defined the status of people..." (p 41)**
- c) **"With little further use for the original inhabitants, the colonists began to exile them from their ancestral lands..." (p 43)**
- d) **"... the victims, not the enslavers, were punished, subject to whatever atrocities the enslaver could devise as a lesson to others." (p 45)**
- e) **"But the federal government withdrew for political expediency in 1877, and left those in the subordinate caste in the hands of the very people who had enslaved them. (p 48)**
- f) **"They might have arrived as neutral innocents but would have been forced to choose sides if they were to survive..." (p. 50)**

For the current-day equivalents that came to mind, notice if you framed them as things “other people” did – for example, “that political party” or “that corporation” or “that religion”.

- Sit with this for a while and be open to considering whether your own words, actions, or inactions might ever have indicated you valued some people more than others.
- Have you ever been forced to choose sides? Have you ever forced others to choose sides? What were the consequences of your choice? Of theirs?
- How would each of the above passages read differently if we truly had a diverse multicultural Beloved Community?

3) On page 49 we read:

“No one was white before he/she came to America,” James Baldwin once said.

and on page 53:

“Africans are not black,” she said. “They are Igbo and Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, Ndebele. They are not black. They are just themselves. They are humans on the land. That is how they see themselves, and that is who they are.”

- Is this book making you think of the labels “white” and “black” in new ways?
- Why is it important to acknowledge that the labels “white” and “black” are an integral part of the caste system in America, even if we want to see people as “just themselves – humans on the land?”

4) On page 56, we hear Miss Hale telling us “how her father’s dreams have brushed up against caste as she moves around the world.” She says:

“I find that white people are fine with me, as long as I stay in my place. As long as I stay in ‘the container we have built for you.’ ... As soon as I get out of the container it’s a problem.”

- In 2021, what are some of the containers that black people are expected to stay in?
- Who benefits from maintaining these containers? Who loses?
- What are some ways that these containers are maintained?

5) On page 67 we read:

... Color is a fact. Race is a social construct.

“We think we ‘see’ race when we encounter certain physical difference among people such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture,” the Smedleys wrote. “What we actually ‘see’... are the learned social meanings, the stereotypes, that have been linked to those physical features by the ideology of race and the historical legacy it has left us.”

- How do these statements about color and race align with – or stand in contrast to – the understandings you had growing up?
- 6) On page 67, we read “The human impulse to create hierarchies runs across societies and cultures, predates the idea of race, and thus is farther reaching, deeper, and older than raw racism and the comparatively new division of humans by skin color.”
- Consider this statement in light of the 8<sup>th</sup> principle that calls us to “accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” What thoughts and feelings does this raise for you? How might those thoughts and feelings change if you held a different position in the hierarchy?

- 7) In the section “The R Word”, which begins on page 68, Wilkerson talks about racism in the current day, saying:

... Resistance to the word often derails any discussion of the underlying behavior it is meant to describe, thus eroding it of meaning.

Social scientists often describe racism as the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism... as primarily the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power...

... It has come to mean overt and declared hatred of a person or group because of the race ascribed to them...

...

(p 69) ... Rather than deploying *racism* as an either/or accusation against an individual, it may be more constructive to focus on derogatory actions that harm a less powerful group rather than on what is commonly seen as an easily deniable, impossible-to-measure attribute.

- Has your notion of *racism* changed over time? If yes, what has contributed to that change?
- Do you feel comfortable talking about racism? If not, do you know why not?
- Contrasting racism as “overt and declared hatred of a person or group” with racism as “the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power”:
  - Which is easier to distance yourself from?
  - Which has the biggest impact on your day-to-day life?

- 8) On page 70-71. We read:

Caste *is* structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like. Caste is a living, breathing entity. It is like a corporation that seeks to sustain itself at all costs. ...

Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy. ... Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things.

...

Casteism is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, or to elevate yourself above others or keep others beneath you ...

...

... many people—including those we might see as good and kind people—could be casteist, meaning invested in keeping the hierarchy as it is or content to do nothing to change it, but not racist in the classical sense, not active and openly hateful of this or that group. ...

... No ethnic or racial category is immune to the messaging we all receive about the hierarchy, and thus no one escapes its consequences.

- As you read this section did you feel like were gaining any new insights or frameworks for understanding events that you have experienced or witnessed?
- What feelings arise when you read “patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things”?
- How do you feel about continuing this Congregational Read of Caste after this section?
- At this point, do you have any new ideas about what it will take to “accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions”?

9) On page 81, we read about Hitler’s view of America:

... He was pleased that the United States had “shot down the millions of redskins to a few hundred thousand.” He saw the U.S. Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 as “a model for his program of racial purification” ... The Nazis were impressed by the American custom of lynching its subordinate caste of African-Americans, having become aware of the ritual torture and mutilations that typically accompanied them. Hitler especially marveled at the American “knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death.”

- Did your history classes teach you that the Nazis looked to the United States as a model for the human classification system they were building?
- As an American, how did Chapter 8 leave you feeling?

10) In Chapter 9, The Evil of Silence, we read:

*They were covered in evil, and some were good parents and capable spouses, and yet they did nothing to stop the evil, which had now grown too big for one person to stop, and thus no one person was complicit, and yet everyone was complicit. (pg 89)*

- How do our “scripts”, our “containers”, the “worn grooves of comforting routines” work to keep us silent?
- Who benefits from our silence?