

Caste – The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

Week 5 - Part Four (second half) Chapters 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion.

On Page 221, the author states, “When you are raised and born to a subordinated caste ...and African-American...you are keenly aware of the burden you carry and you know that working twice as hard is a given. But most important, you know there will be no latitude for a misstep, so you must try to be virtually perfect at all times”

Question 1: How did this statement sound to you? Can you think of times when you have made assumptions about other human beings based upon what they look like? What happened as a result of your assumptions?

On Page 234 “...the requirements of a hierarchy is that the lowest caste must remain the scapegoat, on the bottom, the culture works to keep it that way by playing up the stereotypes that affirm their lowliness and minimizing indications to the contrary.”

Question 2: How has your perception of America’s inner cities been formed and in what ways can you see how the news media is portraying African-Americans today who live in the inner cities? Cite some examples.

On page 243 “...Caught in a system that grants them little true power or authority, they may bend to the will of caste and put down their own if they wish to rise or to be accepted or merely survive in the hierarchy. ...few officers who have been prosecuted for police brutality in high profile cases a number of them were men of color.”

Question 3: What type of understanding, if any, have you gained from the concepts that the author is conveying in this chapter as it pertains to individuals who are caught in the caste system?

On Page 251 “...Davis and Gardners determined that caste was ‘the fundamental division’ in the Jim Crow Town they studied, built on economic interdependence, in which ‘caste system and the economic system reinforce each other.’”

Question 4: What ways today do the caste system and economic system reinforce each other? What is the role that our political system plays in this?

On Page 260 the author states, “Under the spell of caste, the majors, like society itself, were willing to forgo their own advancement and glory, and resulting profits, if these came at the hands of someone seen as subordinate.”

Question 5: When you read this statement what meaning do you gain from it? What other examples can you name where the caste system has not permitted advancement?