

**LEARNING
HOW
TO**



SEE

with

**Brian
McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 4
Purification Stories**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Brian: There's a scary tendency you find in human societies. You find it across nations, across cultures, religions, centuries, social classes. It may have its roots in our primate ancestors. Something we see today in chimpanzees called coalitionary aggression. Anthropologist, René Girard explored it in something called mimetic theory or the scapegoating mechanism. It's this tendency of human beings who form groups to then divide their in-group to find some minority within their ingroup, that the majority then begins to bully or pester or pick on or insult or marginalize. What tends to happen is the majority calls itself clean and this minority they call unclean. The majority is acceptable, the minority is unacceptable. The majority is normal, and the minority is queer or odd or different or some other epithet. The majority eventually creates a kind of coalition aggression against the minority.

And in so doing, they make themselves feel good. They make themselves feel superior. They make themselves feel clean and righteous. And they unite themselves because now they've created a common enemy close at hand. Two quick examples from American history. While white Americans were maintaining the segregated south and maintaining a segregated north too, they were not preoccupied with facing their own racial problems. Instead, they were engaging in prohibition where alcohol was seen as the great enemy, and alcoholics were the big problem, and they were engaged in a long struggle against evolution. This, by the way, is not only the period of maintaining the Jim Crow South, but it was a period during which horrible atrocities were being done to Native Americans. And it's as if it's almost a method of distraction to distract ourselves and others from these terrible things we're doing. We'll find something we can call dirty so we in the majority will feel clean.

I suppose I feel this intensely because I live in Florida and something very similar is going on here today. Florida has an ugly racial history, the highest per capita number of lynchings from the era of lynchings in the early 20th century still, we have an incredibly problematic law called Stand Your Ground Law that is in some ways a carte blanche for people in the racial majority, the white majority, to inflict violence upon minorities. Here we have this ugly history, but what are we doing now? We're requiring our school teachers to not talk about that ugly history. And instead, our political leaders are focusing their attention on transgender children and on drag queens as if they're the big moral problem facing our state. Now, look, this goes to extreme levels in cases we all know about, by creating a clean majority and a dirty minority, by just using that binary language of clean and dirty, we create the conditions for ethnic cleansing.

So in Rwanda, the majority Hutu tribe called the minority Tutsi, tribe who had possessed the majority of political power, so there was deep resentment against them. They called them cockroaches, so that the act of attempted genocide was really portrayed as pest control. Those are extreme examples. But closer to home, we see stories of purification going on in our politics, in our church politics, in our business, power dynamics, in our families, even in our own psyches. When we're feeling guilty about something, when we're feeling tense about something, it really helps to find someone else to project our anxieties upon and to make ourselves feel innocent, pure, and clean.

Welcome, everyone, to this fifth season of Learning How To See. We've been going through a series of common stories that we're trying to learn to see in our lives and in our cultures, and today we're talking about the third of these six common stories, the purification story. Gareth, what are your thoughts on this story as we get started?

Gareth: Well, the first thing is a memory of a Bible study that a friend of mine told me about when we were teenagers. It was a study of that, the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee. I think you'll correct me if my biblical memory is flawed, which it's very flawed where I think there's this thing where the Pharisee goes and makes this big show of his goodness before God, and the tax collector throw... It is a tax collector, right?

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: He throws himself on the mercy of God. And the Pharisees says, "I thank you God that I'm not like that tax collector." And the parable is about when you externalize your own brokenness, the shadows in you unto other people, you're moving away from what it is to be a full human. You're moving away from the image of God. And my friend told me that he'd been to this wonderful Bible study that had been all about this story, and then at the end of the Bible study, the person leading it asked everybody to bow their heads in prayer and began their prayer. "Almighty God, we thank you that we're not like that Pharisee."

Brian: It's perfect. It's perfect.

Gareth: We all do it. We all do it. We all do it. So scapegoating has this enormous and I think extraordinarily damaging history in Christendom that derives from a story about the crucifixion that portrays God as like a cosmic Ebenezer scrooge, who has a book with numbers in it and the numbers don't match. And the only way to make the numbers matches to kill his son so that human beings will somehow be brought to their senses. And the story, let's just say it's unfortunately lacking nuance, but it's worse than that. It has enshrined the idea that scapegoating is a good thing and that scapegoating should continue. When it seems to me the only legitimate form of scapegoating is if you or I, if I choose to allow myself to be scapegoated in order to achieve some better end, particularly if it protects or helps vulnerable people.

There are occasions when some people have to step out and take the suffering that might be being directed at somebody else. If there is no other option to protect that vulnerable person. But it's not supposed to be the way we think about life on an ordinary day-to-day basis, and it has created entire political cultures. It has created scenarios where the use of violent language in elected politics is now an everyday thing. And we know that beyond the fact that it's unpleasant and distasteful and along with the fact that it sometimes does actually contribute to real actual physical harm in the world, but more than that, it just doesn't work. It doesn't actually create peace and security. Scapegoating others, the purification story does not actually create peace and security.

Brian: In fact, it almost creates an addiction, doesn't it? Every so often we need a new victim to pour out our accumulated guilt or shame or fear or anxiety or hostility. It really becomes a cyclical, habitual story.

Gareth: It does. And if you don't have stories of restorative justice in your culture, it's very easy to go to the scapegoat mechanism. Because well, nobody else has funded your culture's imagination to think about different things. There's a mythic story about the people who would be referred to as pre-Colombian Indians, the indigenous people on Turtle Island who could not see... This is a story, it's not a factual story. It's a myth. Who could not see the

Pinta and the Santa Maria Columbus's ships as they were coming over the horizon, because they'd never seen ships before. What they saw was these kind of sort of invisible spaces coming over the horizon, right? And that story illustrates what we call a paradigm shift. That there's a time when something's unthinkable and then there's a time when it's outrageous, and then there's a time when people start to go, well, maybe, and then it becomes normalized.

So in storytelling, when we tell stories in which something other than the scapegoat mechanism is used against a bad guy, people still feel like their brains are exploding. I remember the first time I noticed this was in a philosophy tutorial. I was good enough to quit philosophy after one semester because we were not intended to have a lifelong relationship, philosophy and me. We had a tutorial where we discussed the lifeboat dilemma, which is an age-old philosophical dilemma. You get six seats in a lifeboat and there's seven people on board, who do you throw overboard? And then they tell you that the six people on board are Mussolini, your grandmother, a newborn baby, Elmo from Sesame Street, your best friend, your worst enemy, and you. And I just instinctively had a response, not because I'm courageous, not because I'm courageous, just because I thought about this from listening to other people, that the only person you could throw over is yourself and then you maybe tread water for a while.

And people respond to courage by being courageous themselves actually. So somebody else might've agreed to tag team 15 minutes each in the water. But I remember when I said that in the philosophy tutorial, people laughed at me. And it wasn't because they were not courageous or not kind, it was because it interfered with their paradigm. And when you see in some of the recent comic book superhero movies, some of those movies don't actually kill the villain. And sometimes they want the villain to survive for a sequel so he can be killed in a more spectacular way the next time. But on a few occasions, actually the villain is allowed to survive because the ethical framework of the film is trying to move beyond scapegoating. And it's not saying the villain hasn't done anything wrong, and I haven't yet seen a comic book spectacle version of a restorative justice process.

That movie hasn't been made yet. But, I see some signs of the needle moving in the way we talk about enemies, the way we try to understand why people do what they do. And that we could, if I was to refer back to our last episode on revolution story, it's not the choice between total destruction of the enemy. We're doing nothing about injustice. There's steps here that you can discuss and describe and advocate for even if they're not always going to happen, and I think it's like we to rehearse the story of restorative justice loudly and often. More loudly and more often than the story of scapegoating and revenge. Because the story of scapegoating and revenge is the one that is so deeply embedded in our culture that people take it for granted. The paradigm shift I'd want to rehearse would be the first thing you do about the actions of someone who's oppressing are you tell them or you ask them to stop, and sometimes they will.

When someone is confronted with, do you realize you're hurting that person? Sometimes someone actually will stop if you ask them. So then you try to use all the

nonviolent means at your disposal to stop them and you might have to physically restrain them to stop them for doing this. The second thing is you need to make sure that the vulnerable people who they've targeted are currently protected as best as they can be. The third thing is you want to make sure that you are preventing further harm coming to other people. The fourth thing you want to do is ask the people who've suffered, what do you need to help you repair? Even if full repair is not possible, what do you need? The fifth thing you need to do is accountability for the person who was doing the oppressing or creating the harm. And accountability is not the same thing as vengeance. And accountability includes making amends, and the amends need to be satisfying to the person who was harmed.

And then rinse and repeat. Do the same thing again. And all the while look at yourself and ask, where am I maybe doing some of the same things? Or I'm not currently actively engaged in genocide. I think we're both pretty sure that's true of me. I'm not actively engaged in genocide, but I can character assassinate with the best of them. I can be on that continuum. And I need to look at that and ask myself, how can I move away from the continuum of character assassination to a continuum of dignity and love, even for people I maybe don't like, even for people that might be hurting me.

Brian: In a certain sense, what we're inviting people to do is not to make their lives simpler, but to give them some clarity on the complexity of life. And to see that there are these domination stories out there at work, and then to see there are these revolution or retaliation or revenge stories out there at work. And then to see there are these purification stories out there at work. It doesn't make life simpler, but maybe it gives us enough clarity to try to be a more moral agent, a more peaceful agent in this world, when we understand the stories that we find ourselves in. And this purification story, it strikes me as especially dangerous to people who want to be good. For people who want to be good people, that desire to be good can then create in us this need, especially when we feel we're failing at being good to find somebody who looks bad or somebody we can portray as bad and lift ourselves up.

Also, it seems to me it's a story that can happen among the people who are doing dominating or among the people who are being oppressed. When you have an ingroup and us, and the us of this ingroup is feeling some negative emotions, we're feeling defeated or we're feeling threatened or we're feeling divided, internal tensions are tearing us apart, that's when we like to reach for some victim, for some minority group to create coalitionary aggression against to strengthen the larger us. So ironically, there's a way we can look at this that doesn't have to fill us with a kind of hatred and judgment and disdain. These terrible people living by a purification so we can say, oh no, this is a very deep temptation. And people who want to be good are in some ways especially vulnerable to it. And the terrible thing about it is you engage in purification and it makes you feel better when you're actually becoming so much worse.

Gareth: Well, I want to ask you in light of that, there's this astonishing statement that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident writer, said that the line between good and evil does not run between this group and that group, but down the center of

every person. And I'd like to ask you to comment on that idea, but also how does that relate to if I am literally about to become the victim of genocide or if I am literally being targeted because of prejudice against me on the grounds of some identity categories or my minority status. How do you wrestle with the truth of the line between good and evil does not run between one group and another? But sometimes one group really does do bad things and sometimes one person really does do bad things, and sometimes one group really does do good things, and sometimes one person really does do good courageous and self-sacrificing things.

Brian: First of all, I loved your story about what happened in that philosophy class, and I can imagine people laughing at you. But what a creative response you had. I'll volunteer to spend 15 minutes in the water in hopes that will create a creative new possibility. Somebody else will volunteer to take their turn and we can maybe keep taking turns in a way that meets the requirements of the test, right? And it seems to me that Solzhenitsyn quote becomes really important here because almost nobody does evil saying, "Oh, I really love doing evil and I excel so much in doing evil. Evil is my specialty." Almost everybody who does evil has convinced themselves at least that they're doing good, or that their evil is at least justified because of the even greater evil somebody else is doing.

So I think this becomes a reminder to us that when people or societies and cultures go to depths of depravity and wrong, they never thought they would, they got there by succumbing to some very subtle temptations again and again along the way. It recalls that famous statement from Jesus, "Don't try to take the splinter out of your brother's eye when you have a board in your own." That this need that you mentioned earlier for self-examination becomes so important. It's another value, I think, for developing this kind of depth perception to see the stories at work or X-ray vision to see the story that's going on beneath this or that behavior or statement.

Gareth: How do we hold judgment in a sane way when sometimes one group of people really is perpetuating harm on another, or sometimes one individual really is holding more of the power and using it to oppress?

Brian: That's to me another value of these kinds of stories. It helps me see something that may be going on that I wouldn't have seen otherwise. So if I understand this purification story and I see transgender children and their parents being vilified, it will then motivate me to say, "Oh, this story is going on. I know how this plays itself out." If I attack the person who is attacking transgender children and I start calling them names and tell them they're evil and immoral and wicked, I'm in a certain sense inviting them to defend themselves and I'm giving them an even greater need to prove how innocent and pure they are, which may end up having the opposite effect that I want to have.

So at that point, I have to be creative. I have to share that same creativity you did in that philosophy class, and I have to say, I need to say or do something. I can't just stand idly by while people are being harmed. How can I stand up and make my voice heard in a way that will make a difference? In harm reduction training, there's a kind of intervention that a person has to make knowing that it's dangerous, but where they might say, for example, there's a story, not long ago, of a person in a religious minority who is on a subway train and somebody else who maybe was having a mental health crisis started attacking that person

and venting on them. Another person stood up and intervened and engaged the person in conversation and ultimately in argument, and he did it on purpose to deflect the anger away from this vulnerable person. So there might be times where I decide, I think I'll make myself the issue here. I think I'll intervene and just try to disrupt this mechanism that's working.

Gareth: There's a wonderful book, I believe it's called *Non-Violence, The History of a Dangerous Idea*. I think that's what it's called by Mark Kurlansky. And my memory of reading that book was like the last line of that book is basically, here's all these great things that people have done, and if you find that it seems overwhelming or the what about this situation, you need to recognize that in all these cases, somebody needed to be the first. Somebody always needs to be the first to do the imaginative thing. And maybe 9 times out of 10, the imaginative thing doesn't work or you have to recalibrate it for the next time. Good example in my life was in 2005, a friend of mine went out with some other friends and at several different key spots around Belfast, the main train station, the Parliament buildings, couple of other places, they stenciled on the ground the word, "Sorry."

And I believe they did it in two different ways. One was in the colors of the British flag and one was in the colors of the Irish flag, and it was a piece of performance art. And the idea was to get the word sorry into public consciousness because it's the least used word in politics. And so they did it at the main shopping mall. So people were literally, for several weeks, the paint stayed there. You had to walk across the word sorry to get into the shopping mall. And that was a great idea. I remember being struck by it. And then a few weeks later, Pope John Paul II died overnight, the Saturday after Easter 2005, and some anti-Catholic graffiti went up in Belfast as a very offensive response to John Paul II's death. And some of us went out that night and wrote the word, "Sorry" on top of some of the anti-Catholic graffiti.

We would not have done that had it not been for my other friend doing this thing a few weeks previously. And it was in my subconscious, the use of this word, sorry. We might've done something, but I don't think we would've written the word sorry, on top of this graffiti. And then hopefully people hear that story and they do something else. And it may sound obvious, but when you live in a culture where the stories that are repeated most often are the domination stories and the vengeance stories, the revolution stories and the scapegoating stories, you have to start somewhere and someone has to be the one to begin it. Even if all you have is, well, maybe I'll jump overboard for 15 minutes and hopefully a shark won't get me in those first 15 minutes. You don't actually have to know what the next stage is going to be.

And it may well be that the other people in the boat say, "Nice one, thank you." And nobody joins you. But actually what's interesting with that, if you were in a lifeboat and you jumped overboard, what would happen over time to at least one other person in the boat is preemptive guilt for how they're going to feel about themselves for the rest of their lives because they once threw somebody out of a lifeboat. And so you have to sometimes dramatize these realities and use kind of almost absurd examples. The main point is that somebody always has to be first. And maybe today it's you that gets to be first. And maybe all you have to do is you just move the needle one inch. You do something one degree different than what has been done before. And if you do that, boy, you will be joining a deeply honorable tradition of creative nonviolence, and of people moving away from the human tendency to scapegoating. You will be changing the world for the better.

Brian: This interruption of a purification narrative and process, this creative interruption seems to me to be so powerful. I'm wondering if you have some films that you think depict either the purification process or its disruption.

Gareth: Yeah. Well, I'm going to limit myself to five movies, which as you and regular listeners now know it's extremely difficult for me. But for the sake of the common good, I'll only mention five. The first is Wonder Woman, 1984. It's the second of the recent Wonder Woman films. The reason I mention it is because it above any other comic book, big spectacle blockbuster. It takes the psychology of the villain seriously. Seriously enough to not turn him into a monster and to explain his motivation for his cruel and selfish behavior. Not only that, it gives him an opportunity to confront the consequences of his actions, not just the pain that he's caused to others, but what he's lost within himself. And Diana Wonder Woman defeats him not through physical force, but through moral spiritual authority and simply the power of a story. So that's Wonder Woman, 1984.

And then four others, an amazing Taiwan, China, Hong Kong co-production called The Assassin. About a young woman who is trained to be an assassin and ultimately refuses to play by the terms of her trainer, and refuses to play the game of scapegoating. An extraordinary film. The first film, I believe, produced, directed and made fully by Inuit people indigenous in the land that is formerly known as Canada, a film called Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. Which is a film that shows there do need to be consequences if someone is posing a threat. And that doesn't have to be revenge, but sometimes you do need to exclude someone for the sake of safety.

And when you do that, it's also a source of grief. It does come with lament. Sometimes there is not a perfect solution here. Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. And the two last films, a French film called Jean de Florette, which is about what happens when you define the goodness in your world to your family alone and everybody else's, a threat, an enemy or a competition, and what that does to you when you enact that kind of purification onto others.

And finally, a film of great heart and passion. It's a Swedish film called Together. About what it's like to live in a commune. And there's two little pieces of conflict in that one where someone who really just isn't playing by the rules and needs to be told to leave, which is not the same as killing them. And it's not the same as saying you have no home to go to. It's just you can't be here right now. And another character who repairs his life and offers amends for the pain that he's caused to others and a film that gives a real grounded hope of what this could look like in our everyday lives. So that's a Swedish film called Together. What about some biblical stories that connect to the story of scapegoating?

Brian: Of course, when you have this story in mind, as I said to you years ago, it seems like the gospels get re-carbonated. So many things become highly significant for new reasons, and one is all of the people that Jesus hangs out with and eats with. The people who are being scapegoated, the people who are being used for somebody else's purification narrative are the people that Jesus humanizes. The story of Zacchaeus, the story of Matthew and his text collector friends, story after story. A leper, a person who we would say has severe psychiatric disorder. The term they used for it then was demon possessed. In case after case Jesus humanizes them, approaches them. And one story stands out. It's an interesting story because most scholars agree it probably wasn't in the original version of the Gospel of John,

but was later added. It's in John chapter eight in today's Bibles, and it's the story of the woman caught in adultery.

Here is a group of powerful religious men who have evil in their hearts. They're staging this whole thing to get rid of a competitor, Jesus. They're creating coalitionary aggression against Jesus to protect their own religious interests. And they do it by, in a certain sense, sacrificing a young woman who they say was caught in the act of adultery. So many interesting dimensions to the story. We won't do anything close to a full exploration of the story. But if you read that story in John eight, notice Jesus' physical posture. It's as if he's using his body to draw attention away from the woman and becomes an interruption to a purification narrative that was heading toward a deadly end. And he intervenes. Gareth, I wonder, do you have an exercise or a practice that might help us reflect on this story?

Gareth: So this is heavy stuff to be working with, heavy material. To talk about ancient at some level, prehistoric motivations within human beings. Basically, if you don't get out of my way, I'll kill you. And we have evolved and we have more evolving to do. And we got to guard against, on the one hand, the mechanism that externalizes blame and leads to perpetuating harm unto others. And then on the other side of the road, there's the risk that we can take all the blame onto ourselves or be the ones that say, it's all my fault, or I deserve things that I'm not worthy of that wouldn't help. These are mythic stories as well. When you invoke the Bible, when you invoke Wonder Woman, when you talk about people like René Girard and lifeboat dilemmas, you're dealing with the realm of the mythic. So I think our response to this can actually be helped if we have a mythic practice.

And so this is a practice I learned from some others, and it's kind of a modification of a practice called the crossroads process. And I'll share it with you now who are listening, and then do this in your own time. You can do it in 15, 20 minutes. You can devote substantial time to it. You can do it alone or ask someone to help you with it. And the idea is to think about the person that you know of, they're probably not someone that you actually know. They may be a historical figure, they may be a fictional figure who you believe deals with this question of scapegoating in the wisest way. This question of the purification story in the wisest way. The way that you might want to deal with this yourself, a way that you feel drawn to deal with it, but you're not there yet.

Like me, you're not there yet. And you can use this for other questions of wisdom too. But we're addressing it to purification. Exercise is really simple. Sit on a chair on one side of a room, having put another chair directly opposite you on the other side of the room. Put three objects on the floor between the two chairs that create a little pathway or little stopping points along the way. And in a meditative practice with just some slow breathing and your eyes closed, imagine this wisdom figure sitting opposite you. Maybe it's Harriet Tubman, maybe it's Gandalf, whoever it is that calls to you from a place of wisdom who you believe sought to transcend the purification story or the scapegoating story, imagine them sitting opposite you, and get a really good picture of them in your mind.

And then imagine yourself sitting in that chair with them as if that wisdom figure was a suit of clothing that you could wear. That they were like a cloak you could put on. The wisdom cloak. And I say this with all respect. The Desmond Tutu cloak. And imagine that mingling with you, the Brian McLaren soul. And imagine that for a moment. And then ask yourself,

what are three obstacles that stand between me and becoming this person that I want to be? Or three questions I would need to answer, or three steps I would need to take? Or maybe it's one obstacle, one step of one question. And visualize the little objects that you've put between you and the chair as being that question, that obstacle, that challenge.

And when you're ready, get up out of your chair and move toward the other chair and stop by each object. Pick it up and decide what you will do. It may well be what you will do is that you're going to tell somebody else about this obstacle and ask for their witnessing of that. Or it may be that there's a simple step you can actually take tomorrow, or it may be for the next 72 years, I'm going to devote myself to prayer that this thorn in my side will be healed.

It's all of these things. It's straightforward and it's impossible. And then of course, as you move through those three stages, you finally end up sitting in the chair and you try on the clothing, try on the cloak of this wisdom that helps you know what to do instead of scapegoating on the one hand or blaming yourself on the other. And it's a beautiful exercise if you try it. I've done it a few times. It helps with all kinds of things, and I invite you to take time to do it in your own time, and see where that takes you.

Brian: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Learning How To See. If you're interested in learning more, we encourage you to go to theseventhstory.com where you'll learn about a book that goes more deeply into the Seven Stories, a book for adults, and also a new illustrated children's book that we hope adults like you can use and give to children to help them learn about these important stories too. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in Learning How To See. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.