



Lessons from Huck Finn

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

One of the most influential novels ever written is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Sometimes mistaken for a children's story, the narrative offers profound challenges to young and old alike who are struggling to find their way in the moral thicket of everyday life.

At a key point in the book, while Huck and Jim are making their way down river, Huck realizes that they have been double-crossed by "friends" they've made along the way.

Jim is about to be sold back into slavery. Huck finds himself in a moral dilemma and there seems to be no way out. It is at this point in the story when Huck's biblical training (scanty and deficient as it was) rushes back to him.

"When it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven.... It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of boy I was.... But the words wouldn't come.... I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was hold'n on to the biggest one of all."

So Huck writes a letter to Mrs. Watson informing her where her slave, Jim, can be retrieved.

Having written it, he was able to breathe a sigh of relief: "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now."

He set the letter aside without immediately acting on it, while thinking "how near I come to being lost and going to hell." He had been saved.

He was now for the first time doing the right thing.

But despite the sense of relief, images of Jim kept invading his mind: "I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating alone, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind."

With these thoughts Huck glances at the letter again.

"I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up."

We know the rest of the story—Huck rescued Jim and they continued their journey. What turned Huck around was not lofty arguments about human rights. Rather, tender mercies.

Before he tore up the letter more images of Jim flooded Huck's mind:

"I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog," Huck recalls. And he "would always call me honey, and pet me" and say "I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world."

Although Mark Twain has been accused in recent times of being a racist (for, among other things, his use of the "n-word"), his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century knew better—particularly those who were fighting to keep African Americans enslaved as second-class citizens.

When one of their own—Huck Finn—recognizes the profound humanity that crosses racial lines, the power of racism is diminished.

Such humanity is illustrated best in ordinary acts of kindness—in the routine tender mercies of our everyday lives. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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