

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 462

Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will be about Booker T. Washington. He was born April 5, 1856 and died November 14, 1915. As the principal developer of a school known as Tuskegee University he became the most influential spokesman for Black Americans between 1895 and 1915.

Booker was born a slave and at the age of 9 began working in a salt furnace, and later in a coal mine. Determined to get an education he enrolled in an agricultural school now known as Hamton University. He worked as a janitor to pay expenses and graduated in 1875. After graduation he returned to his family's home in Malden, W. Virginia and began teaching children in a day school, and adults at night.

In 1881 he was selected to head a newly established school for African Americans at Tuskegee, Alabama. The school had only two small buildings, no equipment, and very little money. Tuskegee Institute became a monument to his life's work. At his death from a heart attack 34 years later, it had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, some 1,500 students, a faculty of nearly 200 teaching 38 trades and professions, and an endowment of approximately \$2 million.

Washington believed that the best interests of Black people could be realized through education and the cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift. He urged his fellow Blacks, most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm laborers, to temporarily abandon their efforts to win full civil rights and political power by cultivating their industrial and farming skills to attain economic security. This would require temporarily accepting segregation and discrimination but would gradually win for them the respect and acceptance of the white community. He became famous for saying: *"In all things that are purely social we can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."*

His passive approach to discrimination caused him to be vilified by many and his invitation to the White House in 1901 was criticized as a "breach of social etiquette". Most blacks, however, understood his wisdom and his Christlike approach made him a peacemaker between the races. He wrote a dozen books, received honorary degrees from Harvard and Dartmouth, and personally met with presidents William McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt, and Howard Taft.

It is important to remember that Booker T. Washington was a devout Christian and vowed never to speak publicly unless he had first sought "the blessing of God upon what he was about to say". He said: *"No man can read the Bible and be lazy. Christianity increases a man's... capacity for labor."* It was the Bible that taught him truth. *"If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else."* He once said *"you never read in history of any great man whose influence has been lasting, who has not been a reader of the Bible."* While Tuskegee Institute was completely non-denomination, it was thoroughly Christian. He said: *"In my efforts to get money I have often been surprised at the patience and deep interest of the ministers, who are besieged on every hand and at all hours of the day for help. If no other consideration had convinced me of the value of the Christian life, the Christlike work which the Church of all denominations in America has done during the last thirty-five years for the elevation of the black man would have made me a Christian."*

Regarding his critics he said: *"It is now long ago that I . . . resolved that I would permit no man, no matter what his color might be, to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him. With*

God's help, I believe that I have completely rid myself of any ill feeling toward the Southern white man for any wrong that he may have inflicted upon my race. . . . I pity from the bottom of my heart any individual who is so unfortunate as to get into the habit of holding race prejudice”.

He explained his arrival at Tuskegee with these words: *“When I first came to Tuskegee, I determined that I would make it my home, that I would take as much pride in the right actions of the people of the town as any white man could do, and that I would, at the same time, deplore the wrongdoing of the people as much as any white man. I determined never to say anything in a public address in the North that I would not be willing to say in the South. I early learned that it is a hard matter to convert an individual by abusing him, and that this is more often accomplished by giving credit for all the praiseworthy actions performed than by calling attention alone to all the evil done.”*

After his passing Dr. John Paul Jehle wrote: *“At his funeral in 1915, hundreds of teachers, trustees, graduates, students and visitors silently paid tribute to this great man. Distinguished white leaders from business and politics also stood in honor of the one who, through faith, character and courage, lifted his race by blessing the race that held him captive! These lessons from this African-American hero we must teach to our children and grandchildren!”*

The late Mike Pratt said: *“Be careful who your heroes are”*. He was right! The Apostle Paul concurred and wrote: **“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)** Booker T. Washing was a great and godly man, do not be afraid to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ.”

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce