

What about Racism?

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We're in a series where we are asking cultural questions of the Bible. Today, Racism. Like many of the issues in this series, a single sermon can't adequately address all the related questions. For this reason we address these topics in other messages, public faith forums, blog posts, and CG discussions. And, our staff and elders are available to discuss any questions you may have. Today we'll look at: Terms, Slavery in the Bible, 3 Essentials for Racial Reconciliation.

The Problem of Racism

I recently saw a movie called *Just Mercy*, based on the book by Bryan Stephenson, a defense attorney who has dedicated his career to exonerating unfair sentencing and innocent death row prisoners. In the opening scene, Stephenson visits a prison to meet with potential clients but is subjected to a humiliating strip search because he is black. His client, African-American Walter McMillian, is framed for the murder of an 18 year old white girl so a white man can go free. This is not a one-off. Social science research has demonstrated a consistent stereotype of African-Americans as violent and criminal. The research has held up over seven decades. *To put it bluntly, if you are black you are more likely to be presumed guilty, falsely arrested, and face death row.* If you are white or Asian, you are less likely. In fact, black men are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men, and Latino men nearly three times as likely. In 2010, a Cornell student was arrested for possession of 50K of heroin. Sentencing can be up to 10 years. She got 21 months. After she got out she graduated from Cornell and landed a journalism career. A book deal is on the way. If she'd been African-American she would have likely gotten maximum sentencing with little hope of a college degree and career in journalism. After the movie ended, I turned an African-American woman sitting next to me and said, "I'm so sorry for what our people have done to your people." She wiped a tear from her eye replied, "We just need to keep doing better." She did not say, That's so thoughtful. She said, *We need to keep doing better.* This is what the racial justice movement at its best is trying to achieve—improved justice for persons of color. If *you've* experienced racism at the hands of the church, in so far as I can apologize on its behalf, I'm sorry. Forgive us.

Defining Terms

Now we aren't the only country with racial injustice. Recently 100s of thousands of Rohingya, an ethnic minority in Myanmar, were raped and murdered and displaced from their country. In Rwanda, Hutus slew Tutsis; in Germany, Nazis slaughtered Jews. In Austin when I-35 was put in it divided the city. As a majority minority city with the Latino population at 35% and African-American around 8% we're incredibly divided by race. What is race? The term *race* was created in the 15-16th century to divide up society based on physical features. These features are selective, not foot size or hair length, but the color of one's skin. One of the problems with this construction is that color is assigned a social meaning. As we've seen, Caucasians are perceived as more innocent than African-Americans. White: middle class, black or Hispanic: lower class. These are unfair, unjust prejudices. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "[Race is the son, not father, of racism.](#)" In other words, the word is loaded with prejudice. *Ethnicity*, however, is how people choose to

identify *themselves* culturally, Irish-Catholic. African-American. Latino. It's a mix of country of origin, language, and culture. While race is socially constructed and often assigned unfair judgments, ethnicity can be more benign. In the Bible, people who are not Jewish are referred to as *ethne*, from which we get the term *ethnic*. *Ethne* is not loaded with prejudice. In fact, God loves the ethnic groups of the world and sent his son to die to redeem people from every *ethne*, “*for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (ethne)*” (Re 5:9). So the Scriptures value ethnicity, but what do they have to say about racism?

Slavery in the Bible

Well, before seeing color God sees his image and likeness (Gen 1:26; Ps 8). He is not color blind; he is image-focused, seeing people not as fundamentally ethnic but as essentially in his image. God's divine image is stamped into every human regardless of color, creed, gender, orientation. Even your worst enemy is made in the image of God. This creates a radical, divine basis for human rights *for everyone*. Secularism has no real basis for human rights. What evidence supports it? If human rights is an post-Enlightenment value people created, then it can just as easily be uncreated (TK). What is the foundation for human rights? The Bible offers a universal basis for human dignity and worth for all ethnicities. This means there is no room for white supremacy, Burmese supremacy, Nazi supremacy. Jesus alone is supreme—head to a multiethnic body. In fact, white supremacy just doesn't hold up to global Christianity, which is incredibly diverse. The typical global Xn is a woman *of color*. Why then doesn't Scripture condemn slavery? Colossians: *Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven*” (4:1). Why didn't Paul write, Masters free your servants? Revolt against the Romans. Establish a free society. Three reasons from scholar Murray Harris. *Historical*: there was a process for emancipation. Half a million slaves were freed under it 81-49 B.C. Emancipation was possible. But also we should be wary of chronological snobbery: *to say knowing what I know now I would do better back then. But they didn't know then what you know now. Sociological*: The early Christian church did not have the status and influence to effect such change, and even if they did, their religion would have been interpreted as a front for social revolution. Such revolts often ended in the execution and persecution of slaves. *Theological*: Christianity is not primarily a social movement but a religious movement within societies. Its primary focus is upon the person and work of Christ, how he transforms individuals, who in turn transform their communities. Christianity is not a non-profit; it is a multiethnic, multi-cause, eternal body of which Jesus is the head. It works for systemic change from the inside-out by dealing with the source of evil—the human heart. Social and political movements do the opposite: work outside on policies, law, cultural perception (all good) but can't get on inside. They can't solve the systemic problem of anything, including racism because these movements don't know how to get to the source of corruption. The gospel does something utterly unique: it transforms individuals and communities, personal and systemic sin, but it does from the inside-out. So, the NT does not endorse slavery, and it actually does much more.

3 Biblical Essentials for Racial Reconciliation

Paul's letter to Philemon is about a runaway slave. In it he **redefines the categories** of slave/master. The letter opens with Paul spending a disproportionate amount of space

praising Philemon’s affectionate faith and hospitality. *Then* he appeals to Philemon’s character to do something radical—overturn social, economic, cultural norms by *welcoming his slave back not with punishment but with reward*. Here’s how. He describes the slave Onesimus in the same, lofty, affectionate terms of his master Philemon!

Philemon	Onesimus
“beloved” (1)	“beloved” (16)
“my brother” (7)	“my child/brother” (10, 16)
“refresh my heart” (20)	“my heart” (12)

Paul subverts Onesimus’ slavery status by elevating him from slave to beloved son, bondservant to brother. Here we see the inside-out effect of the gospel. Not only has Onesimus been reconciled with God, changing his eternal status from eternally condemned to eternally accepted, *but as a result*, his social status is changed. He is to be no longer seen as a slave but received as a brother, treated not only as an equal but as family. In the words of African Bible commentator Soro Soungalo: “*instead of condemning slavery directly, Paul laid out the principle that would undermine slavery... What the apostle asks Philemon to do is absolutely revolutionary for his time. His request goes far beyond mere legal freeing of a slave.*” He goes beyond freeing a slave to escalating him to son of God. **Implications for the Church.** So while the letter doesn’t address racism per se, its teaching has implications for race. It calls us to see one another, not as society does prone to crime or alcoholism, *but as God does—brother and sister in Christ*. Why then is Christianity most divided at the 11 o’clock hour on Sunday morning? Sociologists have observed it is natural for homogenous units to gather to forge their unique cultural forms. Some have built church philosophies around this HUP. But this is not why African-American churches and white churches gather separately. St. Luke Missionary Baptist church on the Eastside did not form because they hated white churches; it formed because African-Americans could not sit side by side a white brother or sister and worship their common Savior. Segregation disallowed it. This gives today’s church an *opportunity* to demonstrate the inside-out power of the gospel. By worshipping together, and living as family, we reflect the racial-transcending gospel that reconciles our differences. Now there are some challenges to this as a downtown church, which draws from parts of the city that are not heavily populated with African-Americans or Latinos. Principle: A church should be at least or more diverse than its neighborhood. How do you do this? 1) Majority going out of their way to welcome the minority. 2) Asking our those who are in the minority about their experience of racism. 3) Look to connect and learn from minorities in our mercy ministries/city. The gospel redefines our categories compelling us to treat one another, not with social norms but familial love. **2. Respectful Language:** Now, it’s important to observe *how* Paul goes about trying to convince Philemon that is totally countercultural. He does not berate, mock, or demean Philemon for having a slave. But neither does he say, I’m sending your slave back. Do with him what you will. Paul uses his apostolic privilege to compel Philemon’s conscience while respecting him at the same time. His appeal is strong but tender, firm yet affectionate. Very different from racial tones today. He appeals to his conscience: *for love’s sake I appeal to you 9, I prefer to do nothing without your consent 14, of your own accord 14.* He is *respectful*. And yet, his *appeal is firm: I could command you to do what is proper (8), moved by goodness not by compulsion, confident of your obedience 21.* The conclusion: Receiving and elevating Philemon from

slave to brother isn't just a matter of conscience; it's a matter of obedience to Lord of all!

You're accountable for this, and in case you're not getting the idea remember: I'm a wise man and a prisoner for Christ! Paul strikes an incredible balance: tender yet firm, respectful yet compulsory. **Opportunity for the Church.** How might we apply this? Be distinctly *charitable* in conversations about race, tender and affectionate. Don't interpret motives. Interpret people in the best possible light. An African-American pastor and friend reviewed this sermon and then we discussed it. On this point he said, If I think you're being racist, should I give you the benefit of the doubt? Absolutely. But what you have to realize is that I'm used to deferring to white people. White people, because they are in the majority, aren't used to giving us the benefit of the doubt, hearing us out. But for that reason, it's all the more important to do it. I think of another African-American pastor whose son came home and said, Dad, my nose is too big. My hair isn't blonde. African-Americans are used to comparing themselves to whites because we are the dominant ethnicity, so it's important for majority culture to reach across the aisle, work a little harder to be respectful and charitable. Principle: Give the benefit of the doubt. John Perkins as a great modern example of this (book table). **3. Redemptive Motivation.** Notice how Paul is compelled, "*If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account*" (18). He says if Onesimus has wronged you, charge it to my account. We don't know what the wrong was. Some speculate theft. Whatever the wrong, Paul says charge it to me. He's saying receive Onesimus back at any cost, even at my cost. The word charge means to impute, to put the debt in Paul's books not Onesimus', a debt absorbed by Paul in place of Onesimus. Where would he get such an idea? From Jesus Christ: our debts are absorbed by Jesus, and he pays for them at the cross to set us free. Paul seeks just treatment of Onesimus not because he is on the right side of history (self-righteousness), but because sheer grace has put him on the right side of God (Christ's righteousness). He learned from a Savior who carries debts to set others free. Should not we do the same? Because Christ has served us so well, we are freed to serve, love, and forgive one another. **Implication:** If you have been racist or dismissive of racism, your wrongs have been charged to Jesus' account. Repent and turn to him for forgiveness. If you are angry and frustrated with those who "don't get it" remember how many years you didn't "get it." God showed you mercy. Show mercy to one another because God has shown mercy to you. Let's keep doing better because Christ has done us infinitely better than we deserve. *In fact, this is what unites us all: though we wronged Christ, and owed him our lives, he absorbed our debts and he gave us his life. All glory be to Christ.*