

## The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation

### Ephesians 2:11-16

Tomorrow is the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor and activist who led the civil rights movement in the 1960's, fighting against racial injustice, segregation, and discrimination in America. Tomorrow is also the day that Americans have set aside for the last 32 years as a federal holiday to remember King and his cause. And this year, 2018, marks 50 years since Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. He was murdered because the idea that “all men were created equal [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”—the idea that our Declaration of Independence applied equally to black men and women as it did to white, was too radical, too threatening to society—by which they meant *white society*. So much that even the FBI wrote a letter to King in 1964, attempting to blackmail him into committing suicide.<sup>1</sup>

But King had a dream—his famous speech, given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. King said that day:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . .

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’<sup>2</sup>

And King’s dream was radical because it wasn’t reality. Even as he gave his speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—Abraham Lincoln, who had signed the Emancipation Proclamation 100 years earlier, freeing slaves across the U.S.—King declared:

But 100 years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still badly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land.

And for us, this was just over fifty years ago. In 1963, in the American south, it was illegal for a black man to have lunch at the same counter as a white man. It was illegal for black men and

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Gage, “[What an Uncensored Letter to M.L.K. Reveals](#),” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream . . .”, speech at the March on Washington, 1963.

women to sit in the “white’s only” section of the city bus, or to drink from the same water fountain as whites, to go to the same schools. To put it into further perspective, before 1967, some of the marriages in this room would have been illegal in some states—marrying someone of another race.

And as we stand here today, 50 years after King’s assassination, racism continues to cripple the lives of countless men and women in our country. The Civil Rights movement was effective in abolishing many forms of “legalized” racism in America, but the indisputable fact is that not only have we seen a spike in racial tension in recent years—protests over police brutality against minorities, the white-supremacist march in Charlottesville, debates over Confederate monuments, racist graffiti in our local high schools<sup>3</sup>—but many of our institutions and systems continue to be structured in such a way as to prioritize or marginalize people relative to their ethnic heritage—the color of their skin. Documented disparities in education, economics, criminal justice, even medical treatment.<sup>4</sup>

And the question I want to ask this morning is, *What does the gospel of Jesus Christ have to say about this?* About racism and racial reconciliation? We’ve asked that question about other major social issues in our day: what does the gospel say about abortion?<sup>5</sup> About sexuality?<sup>6</sup> About Hollywood or politics or social justice?<sup>7</sup> But we need to ask it about race as well. Because this is the world we live in. This is what so many in this world continue to face—friends and family, neighbors, brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the world into which Christ sends us to be witness to his kingdom. And while there’s a temptation for a suburban, majority-white congregation like Westgate to not feel the urgency of this issue, God’s church should always be bothered by and burdened for issues of injustice. And I’ll tell you right now, many of our brothers and sisters of color have long felt abandoned by the white church in this cause. We will show up to protest abortion, we will sign petitions on marriage and sexuality and religious liberty, but when it comes to racial injustice, there is too often a deafening silence.

That should not be the case. Because the gospel has something to say about racism and racial reconciliation. That’s not the message of the gospel—the gospel is the good news of who Jesus is and what he’s done to deal with our sin and establish God’s kingdom through his life, death, and resurrection for us, which we receive by faith. But that good news has implications for how we view each other, how we treat each other, how we love each other, how we stand up for each other according to the value and dignity of all humanity made in God’s image, but especially according to the unity we have in Christ as members of the one, multiethnic family of God, whom he has reconciled to himself and to each other in one body through the cross.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Wyner, “[Racist Snapchat images bring concern to Weston High](#),” *Wicked Local, Weston*, Nov. 3, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Jeff Nesbit, “[Institutional Racism Is Our Way of Life](#),” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 6, 2015; Jared Bernstein, “[What racial injustice looks like in America’s economy](#),” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2016; Lauren Camera, “[More Than 60 Years After Brown v. Board of Education, School Segregation Still Exists](#),” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 17, 2016; Carl Bialik, “[Why Are So Many Black Americans Killed By Police?](#)” *Five Thirty Eight*, July 21, 2016; Kia Makarechi, “[What the Data Really Says about Police and Racial Bias](#),” *Vanity Fair*, July 14, 2016; “[UVA Study Links Disparities In Pain Management To Racial Bias](#),” Audie Cornish interview with and Kelly Hoffman, *NPR*, April 5, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Brandon Levering, “[The Gospel and Abortion](#),” Nov. 8, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Brandon Levering, “[The Gospel and Homosexuality](#),” Nov. 15, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Bauer, “[The Gospel and Hollywood](#),” Oct. 4, 2015; Brandon Levering, “[The Gospel and Politics](#),” Oct. 11, 2015; Bruce Daggett, “[The Gospel and Social Justice](#),” Nov. 1, 2015.

And so to consider the implications of the gospel for racism and racial reconciliation, I want to spend our time in the book of Ephesians this morning, primarily ch. 2, but also looking at some of the application in ch. 4.

### **The Gospel for a Hostile World**

The book of Ephesians is one of the letters Paul wrote while in prison for preaching the gospel. And in this letter, he provides a sweeping portrait of the sovereignty and sufficiency of God's saving work in Christ—his plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (1:10). A plan that he accomplishes not by our works or anything we do, but as he puts it in ch. 2, by grace through faith. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved . . . through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:4-5, 8-9).

And this great plan of salvation was not just for God's covenant people Israel, it was a plan for all nations. Something Paul goes to great lengths to make clear in this book. Because what we don't often realize is that as the gospel broke into the lives of Jews and non-Jews in the first-century, it revealed a lot of historical and ethnic hostility among God's people. Some of it was simply out of confusion. For centuries Israel had been the covenant people of God, and that covenant had set them apart as holy. They lived differently from the nations around them, they ate differently, they wore different clothes because they were a different people. That God's promise of salvation was now on offer to Gentiles (or non-Jews)—that was a shock to the system. It took some time for Jewish Christians to sort out what that meant (think of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15).

But it wasn't always just a covenantal or historical distinction. Because Israel's covenant status had been so closely tied to their ethnic identity, a lot of ethnic and cultural distinctions, even racial distinctions, got in the way as well. As Paul notes in Ephesians 2:11, the Gentiles were called “the uncircumcision” by what is called “the circumcision.” Jews, whose identity was marked by the rite of circumcision, were using the label “uncircumcision” as a derogatory term for non-Jews. Similarly, Paul tells a story in his letter to the Galatians, how at one point he had to rebuke Peter to his face—Peter the apostle who was super close to Jesus—Paul had to rebuke him because his conduct was “out of step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). So what did Peter do? “For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party” (Gal. 2:12). Peter separated himself from brothers and sisters in Christ because they were a different ethnicity, and he cared more about what certain powerful people thought than how his actions would affect the marginalized Gentiles. Paul calls this what it is: it is “out of step with the truth of the gospel” (2:14).

So how does the gospel address hostility and racism? The kind that fuels insecurity and exclusion for one side—the minority or marginalized side, and pride and hypocrisy for the other—the majority or the power side? Paul walks us through the reconciling power of the gospel in Ephesians 2:11-16.

## The Reconciling Power of the Gospel

He begins by recognizing our need for the gospel, which is true for everyone, but which the Gentiles felt in a particularly strong way, as those who up to this point had been outside the covenant people of God. Again, v. 11: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:11-12).

Paul’s frustrated with the hostility he sees between Jew and Gentile, the circumcision and the uncircumcision. But that doesn’t mean the Gentiles didn’t have a real problem. Apart from Christ, they were cut off, trapped in a world of idolatry and alienation. But the reason he draws attention to that problem is not to suggest that the Jews were somehow better, or that they didn’t need Jesus (we all do). The reason he reminds the Gentiles how far away they were is to emphasize how big God’s grace is for them. Verse 13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

The gospel of Jesus is for people of all nations, all ethnicities. And in being reconciled to Christ, we are at the same time reconciled to one another—across covenantal and racial lines. And the power for reconciliation lies not in what we do, but ultimately in what Christ has already done. Look at v. 14:

For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances [the covenantal stipulations that for so long marked the difference between Jews and Gentiles], that he might create in himself *one new man* in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us *both* to God in *one* body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (2:14-16)

Jesus is our peace, who reconciles us to God and to one another at the same time through the cross. In God’s divine wisdom his plan was not merely to redeem individuals to himself, or peoples to himself, but to take those individuals and those peoples—men and women from every tribe, language, people, and nation—and to bring them into one body, one family, and reconcile them to himself together as one new humanity in Christ. And in doing so, the hostility that once separated Jew and Gentile, the hostility that the early church experienced, the hostility among people who are not like each other that has plagued so much of the human story and that continues to plague us in the form of racism today—that hostility has been killed through the cross. It is dead for the Christian. Jesus took all of that sin and racism and wickedness that separates us from one another and from God, and he dealt decisively with it in a way that no one else could. Not by pretending it wasn’t as bad, explaining it away, sweeping it under the rug of revised history. He did it by taking all of our sin, including every prejudiced opinion, every racial slur given and received, every injustice, every discrimination, every whipping, every lynching, even every murder—he took it all in himself on the cross, bearing for us the full weight of God’s holy wrath against racism and all sin, so that God could deal justly with sin and mercifully with sinners. Christ is our peace, who reconciles us to God and to one another at the same time through the cross.

And if that's true, then not only does the gospel call us to care about racial reconciliation; it provides the ultimate solution. If that's true, then we actually have hope for reconciliation in a world of racial hostility. There is hope for forgiveness, and there is freedom to forgive. The sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

There are lots of weapons with which to fight racism, and there are lots of important advocates and activists working tirelessly for this important cause. But the ultimate weapon we've been given, the one that has the power to bring true and eternal change, is the gospel. Every other strategy for dealing with racism will in some way either leave sin unpunished or reconciliation incomplete. Only Jesus has the power to bring eternal healing and wholeness to one of the greatest wounds in our national story, our society, our experience. He has killed the hostility through the cross.

### **The Implications of the Gospel for Racial Reconciliation**

And so what do we do with that as a church? I'll be honest with you, I'm not 100% sure. I'll do that on occasion—raise an issue because I want to start a conversation, not because I've figured it out. That's what this is. I want to put this on the radar for Westgate. Because it's important. Because it's an implication of the gospel. Because it's the world we live in. Because our brothers and sisters of color should not have to stand alone in this fight. And because even though we are a majority-white church right now, by God's grace, as we've grown the last few years we are becoming more diverse than we were. That's a beautiful thing.

But I do want to share two specific applications as starting points for us, based on Paul's own applications of the gospel in Ephesians ch. 4. So if your Bible is still open, turn there.

The first application is *repentance and revitalization*. Chapter 4:17:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. <sup>19</sup> They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way you learned Christ!— <sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:17-24)

God wants us to live in accordance with who we truly are in Christ. And that means turning away from old mindsets, old passions and patterns—a darkened understanding, ignorance, and hardness of heart—and instead thinking and living according to our new identity as a new humanity in Christ, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

And so with respect to racial reconciliation, some of the questions we need to be willing to ask ourselves are:

- What darkened understandings of race and ethnicity am I holding onto? What stereotypes have I embraced (even unwittingly)? What myths have I bought into, about the scope of

the problem, about the history of our nation, about the complicity of our own ancestors, or the compromise of some of our theological heroes, or the nature of other people groups? Ask God to expose any darkened thoughts we have and root them out of our hearts and minds forever.

- What is the condition of my heart toward those who are discriminated against and oppressed? Is my heart hard to their plight? Am I tempted to lay blame at the feet of the victims? Am I comfortable carrying on with life as normal, as though this just isn't my problem? Maybe that's where some of us are at; we're against racism but we haven't really thought of this as our problem. Ask God to soften your heart.
- A third question: am I guilty of racism? Have I said or done or even thought things that slander the dignity and humanity of others who are not like me? And the reality, that's not always a question we're able to answer ourselves. Understanding that often requires listening to others, and especially other communities who can often see things we can't see. (We'll talk more about that in a minute.) And as God convicts us, repentance means confessing and repudiating our sin, turning away from it, seeking forgiveness from those we've sinned against, and asking how we can repair the harm.

So we must repent—put off the old self and be renewed. But there's also revitalization—walking according to the new life that is in us through Christ. Putting on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Treating one another as family. Emphasizing our unity in Christ and celebrating the diversity we do have as a church. Cultivating that diversity in our relationships, our leadership, and our ministries. Not viewing our differences in culture or taste or approach to ministry as a threat, but as a gift. One of the most powerful statements a church can make against racism is loving one another as a genuinely multiethnic family of God. Repentance and renewal—that's the first application.

The second is to *speak the truth, and to listen to those who are trying to speak the truth to us*. Verse 25: “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”

Reconciliation requires truth. That's true in our personal relationships within the church, which is Paul's main application here. But it's also true with regard to race. Reconciliation requires truth. Truth about our history. Truth about our situation. Truth about sin and injustice. Truth about grace and mercy. If we're not willing to seek the truth about racism in our society today, we have no hope of seeing the reconciling power of the cross bear fruit in us and through us.

And seeking the truth begins by speaking the truth. Being willing to call sin what it really is. Giving voice to the marginalized. Validating their experience. Calling for justice on their behalf. Proverbs 31:8-9 puts it like this: “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

We need to speak the truth with our neighbor in the face of injustice. Even if it's unpopular. Even if people don't want to hear it. We need to be willing to say things like, what the President said last Thursday about Haitians, and Salvadorans, and Africans was vulgar and racist.<sup>8</sup> It's

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<sup>8</sup> Josh Dawsey, “[Trump derides protections for immigrants from ‘shithole’ countries](#),” *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 2018. See also Thabiti Anyabwile's powerful and pastoral response: “[My Immigrant Family](#),” *TGC*, Jan. 11, 2018.

“unacceptable. . . . It denigrates our citizens and our country. It does not make us great. It cannot be tolerated in our church and should not be tolerated in our society.”<sup>9</sup> This isn’t about politics or political parties. It’s about the dignity of people made in the image of God, and the reconciling power of Christ, who has killed this kind of hostility—if we keep in step with the gospel.

Because if we don’t speak the truth, what message do we communicate? What message do those who slander or exploit other races hear, and what message do their victims hear? We’re always communicating a message, even if our mouths don’t open. If we love our brothers and sisters, if we value the dignity of all humanity made in God’s image, if we believe in the reconciling power of the gospel, we must speak the truth with our neighbor—both to call out sin and point people to grace.

But in order to speak well on this issue, especially for those of us who are part of the majority culture here in America, it’s just as important, if not more important, that we first listen to those who are trying to speak truth to us. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which Martin Luther King wrote in response to a public statement of concern about his methods of nonviolent demonstration, published by eight white religious leaders in the south, King wrote this:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom . . .

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular.<sup>10</sup>

We need to listen to what our brothers and sisters of color are trying to say. And what King was saying in this letter is a message we’re hearing again today from many evangelical churches of color and pastors of color. Pleading with majority white churches and institutions to wake up to this crisis, to listen the plight of our brothers and sisters of color without presuming that we already get it or that we can relate, to encourage and empower them for leadership in churches and institutions, to not wait for minorities in the congregation to raise these issues, but to commit

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<sup>9</sup> Anyabwile, “My Immigrant Family.”

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” August 1963.

ourselves to this implication of the gospel, that Jesus Christ is our peace, who reconciles men and women from all races and nations to God and to one another at the same time through the cross.

“Here [in the church, among the people of God] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). This is the reconciling power of the gospel. May it bear increasing fruit among us, for the good of our souls, for the good of our neighbors, and ultimately for the glory of God.