

THE GOSPEL AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Ephesians 2:11-3:11

Well, we are in the middle of a series called *CounterCulture: God's Alternative Gospel-Community*. We're looking at the realities and trends in the culture around us, and we're reminding ourselves that God has called us, his church, to be a glorious counterculture. To think and speak and live in a way that offers an attractive alternative to the predominant narrative and mindset in our culture today. Now we've seen how that plays out in regard to issues like worldview, tolerance, science and naturalism, and sexuality, and I'd encourage you if you haven't been here for those - go onto our website and watch or listen to those because they are worth it, but today we come to the issue of racial reconciliation.

And for some of you that wording right away is a turnoff.

Not much more than a year ago, just before noon on August 9th, 2014, 18-year-old Mike Brown walked out of a convenience store with a stolen pack of Swisher cigars. Officer Darren Wilson had been dispatched to the scene only minutes earlier and he arrived to find Mike Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson ambling down the middle of Canfield Drive.

Officer Wilson ordered the two African-American teenagers off the street, but an altercation ensued in which Brown reached through the window of the police SUV, resulting in two shots fired from Wilson's gun. Mike Brown and Dorian Johnson quickly fled on foot and Wilson pursued them. After that accounts differ on exactly what played out. But the end result was 18-year old Mike Brown shot and fatally wounded on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri.

Within a day, peaceful protests of the Mike Brown shooting in Ferguson's African-American community turned violent. Businesses were looted, vehicles vandalized, and stores set on fire. The unrest continued for the next week until on August 16th Missouri Governor Jay Nixon declared a state of emergency and implemented nightly curfews. In the weeks that followed, and then again in November when the grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, the scenes from Ferguson played out on every type of media were unlike anything our country has seen since the Watts riots in 1965. Long before I was even born.

But over the last couple of years, Ferguson has simply this visible inferno in the center of smoldering racial frustrations and racial tensions across America. We know the names and stories. Trayvon Martin in Miami Gardens, FL. Eric Garner in New York City. Walter Scott in North

Charleston, SC. Freddy Gray in Baltimore, MD. In February of this year, a Mexican man shot dead by police on the streets of our own Pasco, Washington threatened to tear apart a community that is now 50% hispanic. And then, only a few months ago, the unthinkable - nine of our African-American brothers and sisters in Christ gunned down by a young white supremacist during a prayer service in Charleston, South Carolina.

These events are all different, and regardless of what you think of each individual event, and the court rulings that followed several of them, the events themselves and the diverse reaction to them has reminded us of something. And for us to even start to have a conversation about racial reconciliation this morning you are going need to agree with, or at least understand an initial assumption I'm making, that this issue of racial division or racial tension, isn't just an issue that we've had in the past, but an issue that we have in the present.

That even 52 years after Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, fifty years after the Selma march and the voting rights act, even though we're 35 years out from the last lynching in America, and though we've elected a black president, and may have as our next president the son of Cuban immigrants, even after all of that, racism and division and alienation and hostility over race and language and ethnicity remain gigantic fault lines in American culture today. There's still an underlying current of racial disunity not just between African-Americans and Anglo-Americans, but between majority whites and minority Latinos, Asians, Arabs. OK, and I don't have time to fully convince you of that this morning, but the problem becomes obvious to me when I see the disconnect in the response and discussion surrounding these events that have occurred the last couple of years.

There's a disconnect when many very conservative African-American pastors and leaders mourn the death of an Eric Garner on social media with the hashtag BlackLivesMatter, and white Christians utterly miss the point by responding don't *all* lives matter. There's a disconnect when grieving minority communities call for dialogue about racial injustice, and I get emails from white Christian friends that say, "If you break the law, then you better be ready that something like this happen." There's a disconnect when certain unnamed politicians insinuate that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are rapists and criminals and a huge number of white Americans remain silent or even join the chorus to "take back America."

And if we turn our eyes beyond America to the rest of the world the real problem of racial strife, prejudice, and ethnic persecution is as obvious as it is overwhelming. The last hundred years have been marked by racial genocide on every continent of the world, except North America. And it's almost easy to think - we don't have genocide so we don't have a

problem. But the same sinful hearts that perpetrated the killing fields of Cambodia and the slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda, are inside of Americans, and so our problem isn't different in kind, but only in degree.

The reality is that in all of history there has never been a greater force for war, and oppression, and division across planet Earth than racism. The gravitational pull of racial division in the human heart seems almost insurmountable. And so the massive question we have to ask ourselves this morning is - is there anything more powerful that can overcome this? Is there anything that can free human beings from the destructive grip of racism?

Well, the passage we read this morning in Ephesians really answers that question. So why don't you grab your Bibles and open them back up to Ephesians chapter 2 and let's dive in.

And as you're turning there I just want to say a couple of things. I'm going to probably say some things this morning, and maybe I have already said some, that are going to make you uncomfortable. That you're going to have to go home and chew on a bit. Especially for those of you who like me, are white, middle-class conservatives, I'm going to push hard at a couple of things, and you might even be offended, but my hope and prayer is this morning that your offense isn't because of Ben, but because of the Bible. Because the question facing us this morning brothers and sisters as we talk about issues of race and racial reconciliation is, are we going to allow our thinking and our acting on these issues to be informed by our favorite political commentator, or by our Facebook friends, or by the prevailing notions of our culture, or are we going to have our views shaped by the Word of God? Amen?

Alright, with that disclaimer, let's dive in.

Let's start by reminding ourselves a little about the book of Ephesians. Paul is writing to a multi-ethnic group of Christians in the city of Ephesus. Paul, who is this great missionary, church planter, has gone out into the Greek-speaking world of his time, and he's been proclaiming the gospel to Gentiles, to pagans, to those who both racially and religiously have been viewed as outsiders to the promises of God and the people of God.

And as these non-Jews, these racial outsiders, are trusting in Jesus, they are joining the church, but Paul doesn't have them go form their own Gentile church, they are brought into the church alongside these Jews who have believed in Jesus as the Messiah. But it isn't long before

the gravitational pull of ethnic superiority, prejudice, and division begin to put pressure on the seams of unity among God's new covenant people. And so Paul writes to the Ephesians to begin to address this issue of racial division.

And he addresses it in a surprising way. He does it by building a case for what the gospel is and what the gospel does.

For most of his first two chapters Paul unpacks the glorious reality of God's redemption. That before the foundation of the world, God the Father, in his great love, through Jesus Christ, set apart a people for his own glory. And out of the riches of his grace he has done everything needed in history, in real time to counter our disobedience with his mercy, to meet our rebellion with his lavish grace, to step down into our death and give us life.

And then we get to chapter 2 and verse 11. And Paul starts out with this one word, "Therefore..." And in this single word he's tying together all that he's about to say with all that he has said. He's looking back on all that's been said in chapters 1 & 2, the incredible, boundless, immeasurable love of God demonstrated in the gospel, and he's saying, "what I'm about to tell you about how God reconciles people to each other isn't a new topic, it's not a separate issue, it's not it's own thing, what I'm about to say is rooted and grounded in, and flows out of the gospel I've just unpacked."

And so church, the first thing that we need to understand about racial reconciliation is that racial reconciliation is not just a social issue, it is a gospel issue. (repeat) Racial reconciliation is not something reserved for politicians and social activists, but according to Paul, reconciliation across diverse racial lines is actually something integrally linked to the gospel.

We have to get that church, because we need to see that underneath and over top and beside and surrounding Paul's understanding of reconciliation is gospel. And in our thinking, if we separate racial reconciliation from what Jesus has done through his life, death and resurrection we'll do one of two things. We will either stumble into a social gospel that preaches restoration to one another without proclaiming that that ultimately begins with restoration toward God, or (which is much more risky for us) we'll see the the gospel proclamation and gospel theology of Ephesians chapter 1, and we'll miss the gospel implications for radical social transformation that come out of Ephesians 2 and 3. With this one word, "therefore," Paul is saying that the power that overcomes the gravitational pull of racial division is the gospel.

Well, how does the gospel do that? This text gives us four things the gospel does to overcome racism. The first is this:

1. The gospel undoes our pride.

Let's keep reading from verse 11, here's what Paul says. *"Therefore remember (and pick up on that because Paul's going to repeat that word) 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."*

So church, the first way that the gospel moves us toward reconciliation is that it utterly changes how we see ourselves. You see at the very root of racism is pride. Theologian Michael Horton calls racism, "collective narcissism." It's the fact that "I love my tribe, my group above all others because I love myself." And just like the story of Narcissus, pride actually blinds us because all we see is our own reflection.

And so when it comes to race, especially for those in the racial and cultural majority of a society, we can easily look at our experiences, and our histories, and the way that life has played out for us and we assume those realities are universal for everyone. We see life only in our own shoes and refuse to put ourselves in the shoes of others.

Peggy McIntosh, who's actually an American feminist that I'm sure I'd disagree with on most things, wrote an incredibly insightful essay about this entitled "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." In it she says that her own privilege as an educated, middle-class, white woman, is like an invisible package of benefits that she can count on cashing in each day, but that are easy for her to be oblivious to.

Even though I'm an immigrant, I go through my days never worrying for a second that someone is going to assume I came into the country illegally, because I'm white.

It doesn't even cross my mind when I buy my daughters a baby doll for their birthday that I might not be able to find one of the same skin color as theirs.

I don't worry that I'll get pulled over for having a headlight out and my white wife will have to be asked if she's being held against her will.

I just don't have to even think about these things.

And so here's what happens when we're pridefully blind to the invisible benefits we carry around. You easily look at your financial status, your career stability, your success in life is due solely to your own hard work, ambition, and smarts. You can look over your life as Nebuchadnezzar looked over his kingdom and say, "look what I have built with my own hands and by my own power for my own glory." You can smugly look around at others and say, "Now if they just..." "You know, they need to..."

But the gospel undoes that pride, because it calls us to remember. Remember, Paul says, that you didn't make yourself who you are. He's saying, "would you get a clue as to the grace of God?" You were an outsider, separated from all the benefits and privileges of citizenship in God's kingdom, but something happened. Jesus put himself in your shoes. He stooped not just to understand what life was like for you, but he became like you in every way. And now, through his grace alone, you who were excluded have been included.

And church, we desperately need this gospel to undo our pride. The Bible warns over and over again about those who pridefully hold the power and privilege in society and the tendency for them to abuse or oppress those without it. Their tendency to ignore or lack empathy for the circumstances and situations of the weak, and the poor and the downtrodden. Just go read the minor prophets. And so we need to get this.

And this isn't Marxism. Marxism would say the solution to all of this strife is simply for those without the power and privilege to overthrow those with the power and privilege. That's not what the gospel says. But neither is the gospel like American conservatism that says that those with power and privilege got there with their own hard work and wits and so they should go ahead and get while the gettings good.

No, the gospel is this third way that says that the stratification of society is not the problem. Jesus says the poor will always be with you. But reconciliation begins to happen as those with power and privilege don't pridefully shut their ears and cover their eyes, but in gospel-powered humility, just like Jesus, out of their power and privilege step into the shoes of others to listen and to help. The gospel is the power for reconciliation because it undoes our pride.

2. The gospel (is the power for reconciliation because it) breaks down divisions.

Let's read from v. 14. vv. 14-19.

I'm not going to exegetically unpack every verse here, but I want us to see that the gospel not only undoes our pride, it breaks down every other racial divider by redefining belonging.

Look what Paul is saying here. He's evening the playing field. He's saying that these two races, Jew and Gentile are both equally in need of God's grace, and now through Christ, God has brought these two radically different races and cultures and traditions together and united them. The gospel is all about reconciliation. Through sin humanity is broken, and our relationships are broken. Primarily our relationship with God, but out of that our relationship with others, and with ourselves, and with creation itself. But through the gospel God is reconciling what was broken. And he's doing it by creating a new people.

Listen to the language again. this is language of belonging that creates a new identity. v. 19 - *"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."* If you're a Christian here this morning, you've been give a new family, a new identity.

In our society the primary definer of identity is what? Race and gender. And we've talked about the confusion of some of that discussion right now, but these are the primary ways people define themselves. And maybe job or occupation might be in there as well. So these are the top level of personal definition/personal identity.

But here's what the gospel does. It takes every primary category of identity that we have - African-American, Anglo-American, Asian-American, male, female, teacher, welder, pastor - and it doesn't scrap it, but it makes it secondary or even tertiary to a new primary identity - in Christ.

This is what Gal. 3:27- 28 are saying when it says, *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek (race), there is neither slave nor free (vocation), there is no male and female (gender), for you are all one in Christ."* Paul's not saying that Christians turn off their ethnicity or their gender in Christ, but that these things become subservient to a new all-encompassing identity.

And so this changes how we see others right? This is part of what Paul means when he says in 2 Cor. that we no longer regard others according to the flesh. Our primary way of seeing others isn't based in the race or gender or vocation, but whether they are in God's family. And for those who are in God's family, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ no matter what color their skin, and we love them. And for those who aren't in God's family, no matter their color of skin, we love and serve them because their defining identity is not their race but that they need to see and know Jesus.

So the gospel is the only power able to bring racial reconciliation because it breaks down these divisions.

3. The gospel reveals God's plan

Read 3:1-6

Paul is saying there is something in what God is doing in human history that previously was only hinted at, but now through the gospel has been made known.

Think about the story of God for a moment. We come back to this so often, but we do that because we need to understand that God's story frames life for us. And so God creates everything that is, rocks and trees and plants and bugs, and it's all good, but when God creates humans something different happens. God creates them in his own image, and he breathes into them his breath of life. And so we see right away that though through the rest of Scripture God is going to work through specific people, in specific times and specific places, he has endowed all of humanity with a dignity and value that comes from being created in his image.

But things go south right? Or east I suppose, because after Adam and Eve sin, humanity begins to go east, which is always a representation in Scripture of moving away from the presence of God. And right away we begin to see in Scripture that sin creates division. Cain kills Abel. The days of Noah are full of sin and strife. And at Babel sin results in division along the fault lines of language and culture.

But then in Genesis 12 God shows up. And he encounters Abraham, and Abraham is going to be the vessel through which God begins to work out his saving plan. And in God's promise to Abraham there was the sense that God's redemptive plan wasn't limited to one race or one ethnicity. Because God says to Abraham what? Gen. 12:3 - "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Right from God's call of Israel's great forefather, God's plans are global in scope.

God is making his glory and greatness known not just to Israel, but to the nations. This is why the Psalmist shouts - "declare his glory among the *nations*! His marvelous works among all peoples. Ascribe to the Lord O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness, tremble before him, all the earth!

God's plan is, through the gospel, to create for himself a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, diverse people for his glory. And so the whole story of the book of Acts is the progression of gospel proclamation and the formation of gospel churches starting from the Jewish center of

Jerusalem and extending out to more and more racially diverse areas. And so God's people come together as a mosaic of color and language and culture.

And that's the picture we get when we turn to the end of the story isn't it? Rev. 7:9 - "After this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And so let me tie something together. Even though we've just said that the gospel breaks down barriers by making all of these things, race, culture, language, secondary to an identity in Christ, There's a way that the gospel does that without blurring the beauty of the racial and cultural distinctives that God has created.

This is a glorious truth brothers and sisters. So we see that in the age to come, even though there will be no tears and no pain, and even though there won't even be such a wonderful things as marriage, there will be in some way that I can't fully comprehend race and language and culture for all of eternity - all testifying to the glory of Jesus.

So how is it that the gospel has the power to overcome the pull of racism and create racial reconciliation? It shows us that race and the redemption of people from every race are part of God's eternal plan of redemption.

4. The gospel creates the church.

Read 3:7-11 with particular emphases.

God's plan for all the ages is summed up right here among us in our life together. Through the church, of course in a universal and global sense, but also in the local body of believers, God is putting on display his wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Does that blow your boxes as to what church is all about?

And so the church is meant to be a picture of what his kingdom is like. So as we talk about racial reconciliation, that has to start with the church. And I want you to know how grateful I am for you here this morning that are not part of the racial majority of America. We need to you. In fact, as a church, we will not have a full picture of the beauty of Jesus if we are mono-cultural. The church is meant to be the most diverse group of people on the planet.

And it's all too easy for us to stick in those relationships where communication and understanding and interaction are comfortable and easy. And the plain reality is that that's most like the case with people who are of the same race and culture and socio-economic class as us.

But if we are going to experience the church as God meant her to be we need to reach outside of that comfort zone. And that happens first with each other. It happens on Sundays after the service and in our community groups. Where we lay aside our pride and we begin to step into other people shoes, asking questions and understanding. And then it begins to happen in our neighborhoods.

Latino, Cambodian, African-American communities in the neighborhoods around us. Schools.

The gospel has created the church - a beacon of the racial hope and healing. Let's not stay comfortable. God's blessed us to be a blessing.