

Wil Owens

The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation; Ephesians 2:11-22

GPBC

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Introduction – With tomorrow being Martin Luther King Jr Day, today is a good opportunity for us to look to Scripture for guidance and help concerning the issue of racial reconciliation. Our history as America, often called the American experience, has been forever marked as an especially difficult scene of racial injustice and tension due to our early endorsement for the practice of institutional slavery. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, enslaved Africans were the primary workforce for our agricultural economy. Viewed as 3/5ths of a person, African slaves endured the harshest and most demeaning of treatment. The cruelty was at times barbaric as fellow human beings were considered property.

After the Civil War ended, the 13th Amendment was adopted on Dec 18, 1865, officially abolishing slavery. The 14th amendment would follow guaranteeing equal protection and citizenship as well as the 15th amendment granting the right to vote. Despite these constitutional guarantees, life and equality for black americans would continue to be a struggle, which gave rise to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Here we are 156 years from the abolition of slavery in America and the struggle with racial reconciliation continues. 2020 managed to bring the issue of racial tension in America back to center stage. A number of confrontations between police officers and African Americans have tragically resulted in death. We've seen riots in our streets, the rise of the BLM movement as well as white supremacy, the culprit identified as "whiteness" or "white privilege", institutional and systemic racism are now buzz words which blanket entire groups and organizations rather than guilty individuals, and whenever it is politically expedient, the race card is drawn even when race is not the issue at all. Division and tension remain. The struggle for harmony and unity among fellow citizens of different color continues.

Martin Luther King, said in his famous "I have a dream" speech, "I have a dream that my four little 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." As we

look to Scripture today, I suggest to you that dream will not be realized by political demand or revolutionary movements. That dream will only be realized through the right preaching and application of the gospel, which produces a radical transformation of the heart.

- I. Racism is Nothing New or Isolated to America (v11)
 - a. The great racial tension and divide of the NT was between Jew and Gentile. Much of the NT is a gospel-driven labor to overcome the racial divide between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles didn't like Jews. Jews didn't like Gentiles. Jesus was born a Jew, but came as Savior of the world. So for those early Jewish believers, you either have to hold on to your Jewish spiritual superiority complex or follow the gospel.
 - i. Yes the Jews held a special place in God's plan of redemption. He formed the Jews from Abraham. He entrusted His Word to the Jewish people. He made His dwelling among them. He sent His Son through them. But from the very beginning, it had always been God's plan to begin with His ethnic people, the Jews, and bring unto Himself an eternal people from every people of the world.
 - ii. As Paul says in Rom 1:16 – the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
 - b. Racism is nothing new though. It's root is found in the human condition not the American experience. Way back in Genesis in the story of Joseph the Bible says it was an abomination for Egyptians to eat with Hebrews – racism. The rub between Jew and Gentile in the NT – racism. But even racism is a small example of a much larger issue with our fallen, sinful state.
 - c. Sin, down deep in our hearts, causes us to look down upon anyone who is different than us. To build ourselves up while tearing others down who are not just like us. That goes beyond skin tone. Tribes even today often war with one another because they are of different tribes. Bullying arises from difference in social standing. Geo-political boundaries often lead to conflict and war. Think of the Cold War – It was Russia vs USA. Who will be the supreme power?
 - d. Sinners have this thirst to identify a difference in others as a weakness and our own qualities as strengths. This is why the BLM

movement and white groups will not bring unity as long as “whiteness” is labeled the issue. It’s another form of judgment based on the color of skin rather than the content of character. It’s just repackaged racism.

- e. We make much of our differences to the neglect of the things that unify us, and the things that unify us are far more fundamental. We are all created by one Creator. We all descend from one set of parents. We are all of the same race. We all have only one mediator, one path of salvation, one God and Father over all, one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We will all stand in one judgment. We will all enter into eternity. There is only heaven to gain and hell to shun for us all. We are all fundamentally in the same condition, sinners in need of a Savior.
 - f. Racism is nothing new.
- II. The Gospel as the Great Unifier (vv12-16)
- a. V12 - As unbelievers, Jew and Gentile, white and black, male and female, rich and poor, we all stand together in the same condition – having no hope and without God in the world. As long as we are separate from Christ, we don’t know God, we don’t know grace, we don’t know forgiveness. We walk in darkness. We don’t evolve, we devolve. We lie, murder, cheat, steal, slander, abuse, take advantage, belittle, bully, we gravitate to what divides us and cling to our differences rather than rally around what unites us.
 - b. V13 – It is Christ who makes the difference because it is Christ who has made the payment with his death to conquer our sin and make us alive to righteousness. The cross opened up the floodgates of heaven’s grace, and that grace is for all sinners – Jew and Gentile.
 - c. V14 – the dividing wall of hostility. There is a wall that divides us. A wall of hostility, a wall of hatred and bigotry. It is built brick by brick by the sin that dwells within us. It is built higher and higher. It surrounds us. It is of a material not of this world, so that no power of man can cause its collapse. But there is One who can break it down.
 - i. He took the sin, which is the impenetrable material of this wall, upon Himself, and the breaking of His flesh, broke the power of sin in our hearts.

- ii. So in Christ, we trade hostility for peace and we make little of what divides us and much of what unites us!
 - d. V15 – What divided Jew and Gentile were these ordinances like circumcision. The Jew would not accept you as a follower of God apart from embracing all these ordinances. But the gospel of Christ is a work in the heart, not the flesh. In fact, circumcision of the flesh was meant to point to circumcision of the heart. When the gospel transforms the heart, there is no need for external ordinances of the flesh. There is no longer any need for the sign once you have the substance. So the gospel does away with what divides us.
 - i. That applies in any situation of racism. The gospel destroys and tears down all the external, temporary, fleshly means of division and unites us as one people under God. Which is the only sure way for peace.
 - ii. Many attribute the end of the Cold War to President Reagan’s famous Berlin speech in 1987. Personally, I think it can be traced two years prior when Rocky fought the Russian in Rocky IV.
 - iii. Reagan famously said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”
 - iv. In a very similar fashion, the Father sent His Son into this world with this charge before Him – Son, tear down this wall.
 - e. V16 – is how the Son accomplished the mission. You see, the atonement of Christ accomplished far more than we realized, for not only did it rescue us from eternal condemnation, it also removed every ounce and reason of hostility between the people of God.
 - i. Christ not only tears down the hostility; He kills it. It is through the gospel of Christ that we conquer the power of sin, including racism.
- III. The Necessity to Herald the Message (v17)
- a. The work of the atonement is not applied until it is embraced. And its not embraced until it is believed. And its not believed until it is heard. And its not heard until someone preaches it. That’s Rom 10 isn’t it?
 - b. If we want to put an end to racism and racial tension and injustice and inequality, the answer is not in government or revolution – the answer is to spread the gospel. Preach the gospel. Tell others the gospel. Live like gospel people. Demonstrate the gospel.

- IV. The Centrality of Christ to the Gospel and Therefore to the Work of Racial Reconciliation (vv18-22)
- a. What you were in v12, you are no longer in v19 – what happens between v12 and v19, what took away the hostile division and replaced it with radical unifying peace? Christ and His work on the cross. And when the Jews hear and respond to the gospel and Gentiles hear and respond to the gospel, there remains no longer any hostility or division.
 - b. In fact, there is so much unifying peace, centered around Christ, that both Jew and Gentile are now part of the same household of faith. Racism isn't cured when we go to school together or work together or play on the same team or serve in the same ranks – racism is cured when we worship the same God together, saved by the same Savior, united by the same Spirit.

Conclusion – Philemon 10-17 – the theology of Eph 2 being lived out in real life in Philemon. The gospel and racial reconciliation.