

A Holy Discontent

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[0 : 0 0] on the Lord's Prayer, and the plan was to finish that series this morning. However, Friday night, as I was aware of the riots that were breaking out in our city and in other cities around our country over the killing of George Floyd, as I prayed and was grieving with my wife, my heart kept going back to Romans chapter 8. And as much as I love the series on the Lord's Prayer, I woke up Saturday feeling that we really needed to spend time in this chapter to try to make sense of what has happened over this past week, and to know how to grieve and to know how to respond.

And so the plan is that we will finish the series actually next week, and we're just going to take a pause just to talk a little bit about what has happened. And at first glance, I know it doesn't seem like Romans 8 is directly applicable to issues of race and injustice and things like that. And yet, I hope what we see together is that this chapter in particular gives us a kind of framework. It helps us understand and make sense of the kind of world that we live in, a world where viruses kill people and cripple economies, a world where there is deep racial division and pain and systemic injustice. It helps us make sense of this world. And then it also shows us why Christians should be on the front lines fighting for a better world. So we're going to look at Romans 8 verses 15 through 25, and we're going to see three things. We're going to see why the world is the way it is, what God is doing about it, and what that means for us as Christians in the world.

So let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word. Lord, we thank you for your Word. And on this day in particular, Pentecost Sunday, we recognize that our hope does not lie in human wisdom or ideas, but in the power of your Spirit and in the power of your Word to do your work in our lives.

And so we pray that your Spirit would empower your Word and that through this time we would come to see the living Word, Jesus Christ, face to face. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.

[2 : 2 3] So the first thing we want to ask is, why is the world the way it is? And in this passage, Paul gives us two pretty hard truths that we need to wrestle with. These are hard pills to swallow, but in order to make progress, we need to understand what Paul is talking about here.

The first word that Paul uses to describe our world is the word futility. Futility, that shows up in verse 20. And futility essentially means that this world is not the way that it was supposed to be.

It means that no matter how hard we try, no matter how hard we work, no matter how intelligent we are, or how advanced our technology might become, things never work the way they're supposed to.

It means that our work, our relationships, our institutions, our governments, they will always fall short. They will never be what we hope they will be. It also means that sin pervades everything. So everything that we touch, everything that we build, all of the systems and institutions that we establish, all of it is pervaded by sin. That's what futility means. And then along with that, Paul uses the word corruption. And that shows up in verse 21. And corruption essentially means that everything in the world breaks down. Everything decays. It means that everything that exists is expending more energy than it can replenish. And so over time, everything is breaking down.

[4 : 0 2] And this is true cosmically. It's true socially. It's true politically. It's true psychologically. It's of course true physically and our own bodies. In all of these ways, everything is breaking down.

It means that nothing lasts forever. It means that one day the United States is simply going to be a chapter in somebody's history textbook. So life is extremely difficult. That's what futility means. Nothing works like it should. And nothing lasts. That's what corruption means. And these are incredibly hard truths to wrestle with. And we have to ask, why is this the case? Why do we live in a world like this of futility and corruption? And if we go back earlier in the letter to the Romans, you see this word futility show up for the first time in chapter one. And there Paul says that God created everything originally. Everything was created good and beautiful and perfect. And God created all of

this for his glory and created us so that we could worship him and glorify him. And then Paul says in that same chapter that human beings made the decision to exchange the worship and the glory of God for the worship and the glorification of the things that God made. And so instead of worshiping God, we worship the things of this world, things like money and sex and power and individualism and romantic love and success and influence and celebrity and all of the things that captivate our hearts.

Those are the things that we worship instead. And the result is futility. The result is corruption. The result is that the entire world is broken because of that. Now, this is extremely relevant for how we think about the events of this past week, because I think the Christian understanding of evil and sin, as we've just been talking about, transcends the typical political categories that people operate out of. So most of the time when I talk to people who tend toward the right, they tend to focus on personal sin, and yet they tend to downplay or altogether disregard the reality of systemic structural sin. And likewise, when I talk to people who lean toward the left, what I tend to experience is that those people tend to do the exact opposite. They emphasize systemic structural sin, all of the evils of society, but they minimize or altogether ignore personal sin and the call to personal holiness. And what we see in places like Romans 8, and in many other places, by the way, in Scripture, is that when Christians talk about sin and evil, we should be talking about both. That we're talking both about personal sin and we're talking about systemic structural sin. And when we see something like what happened to George Floyd, what we see is both playing out. That was the result of the personal sin of the officers involved, but it's also a reflection of systemic and structural sin that exists at many levels in our society. It's just more confirmation.

It's just more confirmation to black Americans everywhere that the very people and the very institutions that are supposed to keep them safe can't be trusted to do that. And in fact, they do harm instead. That's systemic sin at work. And so what Scripture shows us is that we can be brutally honest about our own personal sin, and we should also be unflinchingly and brutally honest about systemic sin. Because what we see is that our personal sin is what causes the systemic sin. [8 : 00] It is our personal sin that gives rise to the systemic sin and the corruption at a societal level. And this is why years ago, when the Times asked G.K. Chesterton the question, what do you think is wrong with the world? Chesterton responded with only two words, I am. That is the Christian response to evil and suffering, personal and systemic.

So this is why the world is the way it is, and this is why life can be so unbelievably challenging. But now we have to ask, what is God doing about all of this? What is God doing in the world? And that's where this passage is really amazing because it shows us the scope of God's work in the world and where all of this is going. And particularly, I want to draw your attention to two things.

First of all, God right now is building a new family in the world. He's building a new family in the world. It says in verse 15, You've received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Now, I know that it's using the language of sons there, and it sounds like it's a masculine focus, but I want you to understand what Paul is actually saying here and how radical this is.

Now, I said this a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating. In Rome, adoption was very common. And in Rome, adoption often happened among the upper classes.

[9 : 36] If you did not have a male heir to pass everything down to, that was a big deal. And so an easy way to remedy that problem was to go out and to find a worthy young man, adopt him, make him your heir, and then pass your land and estate and title, all of that down to him. So it was a common thing, but it really only happened in the upper classes and among men. I don't know that we have any instances of women being adopted for this reason. And yet what Paul is talking about is radically different. What Paul is saying is that God's adoption, God's desire to adopt us is not based on gender, and it's not based on race, and it's not based on class, and it's not based on your worth or how impressive you are. Every single person that God adopts receives the full rights and privileges of a firstborn son in the Greco-Roman world, which is everything. Every single person whom God adopts receives all of those rights and privileges.

And what the gospel tells us is that God did this not because we were worthy or impressive, but sheerly as an act of his love. That Jesus Christ, who was the son, who was the heir, who had all of the rights and privileges, that he was willing to give all of that up to empty himself, to humble himself, to become a servant and even a slave for humanity. That he was willing to endure

humiliation and torture and ultimately be executed as a criminal so that God might invite you and I and people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to be adopted and become sons and daughters of God.

This is the truth of the gospel. And so through Jesus Christ and through the cross, God is building a worldwide family. He's building a family in which racial differences and cultural differences and ethnic differences, that those differences remain as a kind of beautiful tapestry of God's creativity. And yet in the kingdom and in the world that God is building, there are no longer any penalties or privileges associated with race or class because God has given every single one of his children the same status, the same privileges as a firstborn son. So it's a radical idea, this vision of a society that has at the same time absolute unity and diversity. It has absolute equality and individuality. This is what the gospel is doing in the world. So this is one of the things that we see God doing. He's building a new family, people made up of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

God is also building a new world. And one day God will establish a completely renewed world. You see this in verses 21 and 22. One day God is going to set the world free from futility and corruption. As Paul says, it's bondage to decay. And one day he's going to renew it. And one day the heavens and the earth will be won. And all of the pain and all of the suffering and all of the grief that we experience now, all of that will be like the pains of childbirth. It will one day give way to a joy that is so complete and so all-encompassing that it blots out all of the pain that we've experienced. Every tear will be wiped away.

[13:19] So God is building a new family and he will one day build a new world. And that new world will be the eternal home of this family that God is building. So that's what God is doing in the world.

Now, what does this mean for us? Our third and final question, what does this mean for us here and now, especially in a week like this one? I think the challenge that we need to wrestle with, I think the challenge that we need to wrestle with is that even though God is building this great multi-ethnic family where everyone has the same status and privilege as the firstborn son, that that is not true of the world that we live in now.

That is simply not true. It is not the case. The thing that we have to wrestle with is that right now, no matter if you're Christian or not, there is a vast difference in our society between what it means to be white and what it means to be a person of color. And the way I experience this most often is the fact that I can be strongly tempted to avert my eyes from issues of race, to opt out because it's too painful and too complicated and too hard. And I can have that temptation to want to opt out. And the mere fact that I have the option to opt out is an indication of the difference.

Because for people of color in our country, that is simply not an option that they have. So the question that we have to ask ourselves, if we're Christians in this country right now, when we look at our churches, when we look at our communities, do our churches reflect the reality of the kingdom that God is building? Or do they reflect the reality of this society that we live in, the society that is in bondage to futility and decay and corruption at a systemic level?

And this is a very hard question for us to wrestle with because it's painful. And these realities are painful. Verse 23 says, we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly. And I've wondered for years, what does it mean that we as Christians who have the spirit grown inwardly? What does it mean that the spirit would cause us to groan? And here's what the New Testament scholar Doug Moo says. And for me, this kind of a light bulb came on when I read this for the first time, he says essentially that once the Holy Spirit enters your life, once the Holy Spirit enters you and begins to inhabit you, you begin to sense as never before, you begin to see clearly what God wants us to be and what God wants this world to be. And once you see that and sense it and know it in your heart because the spirit is pressing it into your heart, once you see that, you can't unsee it. And so here's what

[16:26] Moo says. He says, the spirit increases our frustration at not meeting God's standard and our yearning to be what he wants us to be. And this is not motivated by a spirit of fear or a fear of punishment. This is motivated by love. It's motivated by our delight in God and our desire to be everything that God wants us to be and to see this world become everything that God created it to be.

And so we might think of this as a kind of holy unrest, a kind of holy discontent that sets in. The spirit stirs us up, increases our frustration that things are not the way they could be. And I believe that this is the spirit's call to action. I believe the Holy Spirit right now is calling us as the church to

action because this is not some kind of let go and let God pietism where we sit back and say, oh, God will take care of it. That's simply not what's happening here. This is a call, I believe, to roll up our sleeves and to dive in and to do everything that we can in the power of the Holy Spirit to push back the darkness, both at a personal level and a systemic level. So my hope and my prayer is that not only do we grieve and lament this horrendous tragedy, not only do we cry out for justice to be done, but my hope and my prayer is that the killing of George Floyd and so many others like him, that this would shake white Christians awake, that this would galvanize us, that this would finally convince us that we cannot check out, that we cannot sit back, that we cannot avert our eyes, that we cannot look the other way, that this would be a call to action. Because listen, friends, the church, more than any other institution in history, is equipped to do the hard, long, painful work of seeking healing and reconciliation in our world. There is no other institution that comes close. And for all of the ways that the church has been complicit and all of the ways that the church has done harm throughout history, there are also innumerable examples of the ways that the church has done extraordinarily good and beautiful things for race relations and for equality and for human rights in our world. And so we have a choice to decide what kind of churches are we building?

What kind of society are we building together as Christians in the world? I think white Christians in particular need to recognize that we cannot sit back and remain silent.

We cannot remain silent in the face of injustice like this. All too often, I think white Christians, we are eager to skip to the forgiveness part and to the reconciliation part. And we are eager to quote that we are all one in Christ Jesus and that there is no longer any racial identity. I think many white Christians want to leap to that. But we need to recognize that when we do that, we are ignoring and minimizing and denying the fact that there is an open wound in our society, that there is an enormous amount of pain, and that there are real injustices that need to be corrected. And so we cannot be silent.

We cannot check out. We cannot minimize and ignore these things. And listen, friends, this is a long, hard road. This is not a solution that's going to come next year or even in a decade or even in decades.

[20 : 13] This is a lifelong commitment that we must make. And it means that we have to be willing to enter in and to listen and to humble ourselves and to let go of all presumption and to let go of the temptation to politicize this. And we need to be willing to stay in it no matter how hard it gets, no matter how awkward it gets, no matter how painful it gets. We need to commit for the long haul.

This is why we are doing our best to seek partnerships with other majority non-white churches in the DMV area. It's why I believe all Christians, especially white Christians, need to be intentionally seeking out relationships with people of color, relationships where we can sit and listen and learn and begin to understand the world that we live in from a non-white perspective.

I think it's been extraordinary for me. It's been an extraordinary blessing that over the last year, I've been able to develop a relationship with a mentor who is an older African-American pastor in the Baltimore area. He has a lot more wisdom and experience than I do. But I have learned, we talk almost every week as often as we can. And not only have I come to deeply love and respect this man and to feel his love for me, but I've realized how much I simply don't know. I've realized how much I have to learn. And it's been profoundly humbling. But it's been life. It's been life.

And you know, every so often, for the last several years, I'm a part of a multi-ethnic group of pastors who get together simply to have breakfast and to know one another better and to develop friendships.

And it's only had pastors. And I can tell you at the last breakfast before this whole pandemic hit, we had easily over 50 pastors there, which means there are at least 50 churches in the DMV area that care deeply about racial reconciliation and healing. So there is hope and God is at work and beautiful things are happening. But my prayer, my prayer is that right now we would grieve and we would stand in solidarity with our African-American brothers and sisters, and we would cry out for justice, and we would groan together in the spirit that we would cultivate and hold on to a holy discontent because we are compelled by the cross, because we are compelled by what Jesus Christ has done for us. And we are so compelled that we would not rest until this world is made whole again, so that we would go out in the power of the Holy Spirit and embrace the ministry of reconciliation that I believe sits at the very heart of the gospel.

[23 : 15] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you and we simply pray for your wisdom. Even as I pray, I know there is so much more that needs to be said, so much more that needs to be said.

And so I pray for your wisdom and I pray for you to be what we could never be. And I pray for you to do in our hearts what only you can do through your love and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And we pray that you would be building this new family, that our churches would reflect the glory of the kingdom as we see it in Revelation, this great multi-ethnic family. And we pray that you would give us the endurance and the courage to have the hard conversations and do what needs to be done, Lord.

We pray that you would give us the humility to keep going. And we pray this in your Son's holy name and for your glory. Amen.