

Gospel and Race

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[0 : 00] Many of you know already that the United States is going through a major change right now.

The United States is becoming increasingly what is known as a majority-minority country, meaning that minorities make up over 50% of the population.

So the United States is becoming extraordinarily diverse. And in fact, Andy Crouch, who studies and writes about culture, says that there may never have been a society in history with more diversity than the United States, with more cultural diversity, religious diversity, political diversity, and of course racial diversity.

The United States is perhaps the most diverse country ever. More importantly, he goes on to say that there are very few models out there for how such a diverse society can sustain itself.

But if you look at history, there are plenty of examples of failure. The only society in history that comes close in terms of diversity to the United States is the Roman Empire.

[1 : 14] And in the Roman Empire, we see something very unique in history. It was in the Roman Empire that the world first caught a glimpse of the power of the Christian gospel to unite people.

So even as the Roman Empire was crumbling and collapsing, a community emerged with a kind of diversity that the world had never seen before.

And so Paul's letter to the Galatians, which we started looking at back in the fall, shows us how such a thing is possible. It's all about the power of the gospel to transform the way we see ourselves and the way we see other people.

It's a total transformation. So Paul spends the first three chapters of Galatians, which we looked at in the fall, clarifying exactly what the gospel is, and then he tells us what it means in chapter 3, verses 27 and 28.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female, for you're all one in Christ Jesus.

[2 : 29] You know, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the great luminaries fighting for racial reconciliation and equality and justice in our country.

We, of course, celebrating his memory this weekend. And this verse was part of his inspiration. This was one of the references he made to Scripture in his most famous speech a half century ago in this very city.

In fact, three of the four lessons we just read were referenced in that same speech. This fueled and kindled his imagination. And so today we're going to ask what the gospel has to say to us about racial division and reconciliation as things currently stand in our culture.

And we obviously can't say everything. There's infinitely more to say than we're going to have time for this morning. But we can look at first what this means, this verse that we just read.

What is it actually saying? And then we're going to draw out a few implications that God willing will speak to us where we are this morning. So let's pray and then we'll open God's word. Lord, I acknowledge that I'm a white man talking about race on MLK weekend.

[3 : 46] Praise God you're not limited by human limitations. But you can speak through our weakness. And so Lord, I want to do what Paul did and I want you to glorify yourself through and in my weakness.

So that we're not putting the wisdom of human beings on display. But the foolishness of the cross would magnify your glory. And that we would know whatever fruit comes of us opening your word, that it comes from the power of your spirit.

And it's in the hope of that power and in the name of your son Jesus Christ that we ask you to speak to us this morning. Amen. So we're looking at Galatians 3, particularly verse 28.

But I want to bring you up to date because this is the culmination of something that Paul has been laying out for several chapters. And I want us all to have that fresh in mind. The context is simply this.

In Galatia, certain Jewish Christians, not all of them, but certain Jewish Christians were pushing a policy of racial segregation. The idea was this.

[4 : 54] That even though you had Jewish converts to Christianity and Gentile, non-Jewish, ethnically non-Jewish converts to Christianity. That because some of those Gentile converts had not also become Jewish, there was a chance that they were still unclean.

Unclean. And so the fear from the Jewish Christians was that if they were to associate with and eat with and be in community with unclean people, they would also become unclean.

They would be tainted. And so they were pushing a policy of segregation. We need to keep them separate until they become ritually clean by being circumcised and by coming under the Mosaic law.

So this is the issue at stake. It's a kind of religious racial segregation policy. And Paul gets wind of this and it infuriates him, a kind of righteous indignation because he realizes that this is a violation of the gospel itself.

And so he writes this explosive response which we call Galatians. And so just to summarize the major points he makes, in chapter 1, verses 3 and 4, he says, Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present age.

[6 : 05] That's the gospel. Jesus Christ has delivered us from our sins and from this present evil age into a new way of being and a new way of living. And as a result, in chapter 2, verse 20, he says, I myself, Paul, through my faith in Jesus Christ, have been crucified with Christ.

And then he makes this staggering claim. It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.

There's been a kind of death and resurrection in my life. And then finally, this culminates in chapter 3, verses 27 and 28.

And then he says, so that's what happened to me. Now what about you? And he says, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. So he says, you too have put on Christ if you've been baptized.

There's neither Jew nor Greek. There's neither slave nor free. There's no male and female for you're all one in Christ Jesus. So what's he saying in the first three chapters? He's saying that God is building this great worldwide family where racial differences remain as a testimony to God's beautiful, limitless creativity.

And yet the penalties and the privileges associated with racial identity are eradicated. Now that's a massive thing to say in any age, especially in Paul's day.

[7 : 35] He says the reason that we can believe this is because now, regardless of cultural ethnic identity, regardless of skin color, we have all been granted the same status and the same privileges as the Son of God Himself.

And he says this, we cannot overestimate how significant this is because he's describing the emergence of a society that has absolute unity and diversity.

It has absolute equality and individuality. You know, this is the kind of society that Martin Luther King dreamed of.

It's the kind of society I think that we all long for. And more importantly, it's the kind of society that we're called as the church to build. It's the calling of the church to build this kind of society.

And so how does the gospel enable us to build this kind of society here and now? And I want to talk about that for the rest of our time together. I think that we can draw a few implications out of this.

[8 : 44] I think the gospel shows us the true source of racism. Shows us the true source of racism. I think the gospel gives us a way to respond to racism.

And I think finally the gospel calls us to the ministry of reconciliation. It shows us the true source of racism. It gives us a way to respond to racism. And then it calls us to the ministry of reconciliation.

And by us, I mean followers of Jesus Christ. The first thing it does is it shows us the true source of racism. You know, I think part of, and this is just me, my own thoughts here.

But I think that part of our society's inability to really deal with racial division, to really have the conversations we need to be having, even though there's a lot of talk out there.

Part of our inability to really deal with it is that we have a very rose-colored view of human nature. You know, most people today don't believe in the concept of sin.

[9 : 40] A lot of Christians today don't really believe in the concept of sin. Or if we do, it's those people, but not me, right? The idea of original sin, being born into sin, born guilty, is very alien to most people today.

So the widely accepted approach to racism, you know, when you look at a social ill like racism, the widely accepted approach is that it is, of course, an outside-in problem. Because I know that I'm inherently good.

And so something like racism can only be explained as an outside-in problem. I was born good, but then I was influenced in problematic ways. And, of course, the belief is that it needs an outside-in solution.

Last year, or maybe about a year and a half ago, the Washington Post had an article, title of the article, Why Are People Still Racist? What Science Says About America's Race Problem?

And they trot out the Ivy League experts who kind of weigh in and give us the kind of definitive answer to this question. And luckily for us, they say, in some ways, it's super simple.

[10 : 39] Well, that's good. People learn. Here's why. People learn to be whatever their society and culture teaches them. This is not the product of some deep-seated evil heart.

It comes from the environment, the air all around us. So it's an outside-in problem. Which is interesting because if racism were simply a product of culture and environment, then you would think that as we have worked for decades upon decades upon decades to change the culture and to educate people and to change the environment, that younger generations would be markedly less racist than older generations.

That's what you would think, right? Because this is the solution that we've been employing. But in fact, research has found that young white subjects, you take a bunch of young white people who are markedly more progressive on a variety of issues, it turns out those people are still every bit as negatively biased when it comes to race as older white people.

In other words, there's no measurable difference between the generations when it comes to this specific issue. And in fact, human beings actually seem to be hardwired for bias.

I don't know if you've seen this research. It's very interesting that researchers can take a bunch of people who look alike and, you know, same class, same race. You can take a bunch of people who look exactly the same, and you can just arbitrarily divide them into two groups, you know, odd numbers and even numbers, whatever.

[12 : 13] And within hours of doing that, people will start to exhibit significant negative bias toward people in the other group.

I mean, that's crazy, right? We're the even numbers, you're the odd numbers, but all of a sudden you start assuming they must have lower intelligence, they must stink, they must be, you know, I don't... And you begin to make all of these assumptions, and it's the in-group, out-group bias.

And this seems to be deeply wired into human nature. And so the problem that confronts us is that the reality of racism completely blasts apart the myth of progress.

And it completely blasts apart this rose-colored sense that we have of human nature. It sort of confronts us with the fact that we're not the good, morally upstanding people that we pretend to be, that we actually have deeply ingrained tendencies that are very harmful to us and other people.

And, you know, these deep, ingrained, harmful tendencies, the word for that in the Bible is sin. Sin, the word, we don't like to talk about that. But the problem is, sin cannot simply be re-educated out of us.

[13 : 25] Sin, we can't just be re-encultured to be less sinful. The only answer to sin is full spiritual renewal. It's the only thing that gives us any hope in the battle against sin.

So racism is not merely an outside-in problem. There are outside-in factors. That does happen, but that's way too simplistic. It's also an inside-out problem.

And, you know, people say, well, no, it's all the culture. Well, where did that culture come from? If we're all born inherently good, somebody out there had to create the evil culture. Right?

So it's like a chicken and egg kind of thing, right? So where did it come from, right? It comes from the human heart. So the gospel reveals to us the true source of racism. It's kind of a confrontation. But the good news is it also gives us a way to deal with racism. Gives us a way to deal with racism. Now, before we dive into that, I want to make this clear. When we're talking about racism, and many of you know this, but just for the sake of clarity.

[14 : 23] When we're talking about racism, we're not just talking about isolated acts of prejudice or discrimination. We're talking about something that is systemic.

We're talking about realities that are built into our institutions. Now, I know there are lots of opinions about that in this room. But listen, there are just numbers that we have to wrestle with.

Right? When we're talking about racism, we're talking about systemic issues. We're talking about the fact, this is just a number, that if you apply for a job with a white-sounding name, you're 50% more likely to get a callback than if you apply with a black-sounding name.

Like, same resume. That's just a number. That's not like a liberal thing or a conservative thing, progressive. It's just a number. And we've got to wrestle with that. You've got to wrestle with the fact that black people are 12 times more likely to be wrongly convicted of drug-related crimes than white people.

Like, you put the same person with the same charge in front of a judge, 12 times more likely to be wrongfully convicted. Right? We're talking about discriminatory mortgage lending practices that happened way back in the 30s that continue to shape communities today and lock them in cycles of poverty.

[15 : 39] You know, we're talking about the fact that white families in our country hold 90% of the wealth. And that black and Latino families hold, combined, less than 5%.

I mean, these are just numbers. You know, and you begin to look at numbers like this. And, you know, there's lots of different narratives and we can quibble about statistics and all of that. But at the end of the day, that's deeply troubling.

But here's the thing. What happens when you tell an educated, progressive, culturally savvy white person, like many of us in this room, what happens when you tell an educated, progressive white person who believes that they are essentially good?

Somebody who has no concept of sin. What happens when you tell a person like that, that they have been born into racist systems and that they have benefited from those systems their entire life?

Because here's the rub. You can be ideologically opposed to racism and yet tacitly supportive of racism at the same time.

[16 : 48] So people say, well, I'm totally against it. I've never said or done anything racist in my life. I stand against it. I'm an activist. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. But every day of your life, you also benefit from systems that are skewed in your favor.

And so you can be ideologically opposed and yet tacitly supportive. And so when you tell somebody who has this concept of themselves as being a good person, as being a socially aware person, that induces a deep moral panic.

I mean, moral panic. And if you don't have the gospel to go to, you really only have two ways, two options open to you to deal with that moral panic.

You know, some people deal with that moral panic by simply denying that racism exists. It's an issue, but it's other people's issue. Certain pockets of the country, it's an issue, but it's certainly not me or any of my friends.

And, you know, I saw one book where the subtitle of the book says, black people need to stop blaming all their problems on racism and take full responsibility.

[17 : 48] Right? So that's somebody saying, you know, this is not my problem. This is your problem. And you need to take responsibility and stop blaming me for it. So that's kind of denial and blame shifting. But there are a lot of other people who do acknowledge that racism is a problem.

They acknowledge that systemic racism is a problem. They acknowledge that there are racist institutions. But then we scramble to prove that we're not racist. Yeah, it's out there and it's a huge problem. And a lot of white people aren't aware of it, but I'm aware of it.

I'm not like all those other white people. Right? And the best way to do that is to publicly shame and call out other white people. Right? So as David Brooks recently wrote in a satire piece, he says, when you are indignant or woke, you're showing that you have a superior moral awareness.

You don't actually have to do anything. Your indignation is itself a sign of your own goodness.

Right? And you're like, what does it have to do with Galatians?

This is exactly what was happening with the Pharisees. Right? What's the easiest way to prove that you're clean? It's to call out someone who is unclean. Right?

[18 : 56] By showing my indignation over Sabbath breaking. My indignation over the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors. I am, by contrast, holding out my moral excellence for everyone to recognize and affirm.

And see, this response, this kind of, yes, there's sin, but I'm righteous. Yes, there's uncleanness, but I'm clean. This is actually doing enormous damage when it comes to the race conversation. Robin DiAngelo wrote a great book about all of this called *White Fragility*. And she spent her entire career talking to white people about the realities of racism.

And this shocked me when I read this book. She says the most difficulty she encounters in talking to white people about race. She says, no, white people do not like to talk about race in general. It's her experience. Extremely difficult. But she says the biggest challenge that she runs into is not the kind of, you know, old southern white conservatives who kind of, you know, which is kind of what we all think of.

[19 : 59] It's the white progressives. Those are the most problematic people for her. And she says, I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color.

I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist or is less racist or already gets it. And she says the problem is they're pouring all of their energy into trying to prove their moral excellence.

And so they are unteachable. They are unreachable. And thus they remain blind to the ways that they perpetuate the problem. Put a finer point on it.

In Galatia, Paul recognized that the biggest obstacle to racial reconciliation was the self-righteousness of some of the Jewish Christians.

I believe in our society the greatest obstacle or one of the greatest obstacles to racial reconciliation is the self-righteousness of white people.

[21 : 05] It's because we won't shut up and listen. We're so intent on proving our excellence. And so we need to be able to admit that we're a part of the problem.

And so the question becomes how can anyone endure the moral panic that that brings with it? And that's where the gospel comes in. Isn't this what Jesus is for?

Right? So Paul says in Galatians 2.16, A person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, stop trying to convince the world of your righteousness.

We all know it's a sham. The only source of true righteousness is faith in Jesus Christ. That's the only way you're going to get it. So then the question becomes, Well, okay, well, how do we deal with racism?

Long buildup, right? Well, first we need to repent. We need to repent. And let me say a few things about repentance because this is often misunderstood. When it comes to racism and sin, what does repentance look like?

[22 : 07] Well, it looks like a few things. It's repentance needs to be a lifestyle. It's not just a one-off thing. I don't realize it. Read a couple of articles. Realize it's a problem.

Repent. Move on with my life. It's a lifestyle. And a lifestyle of repentance means that every day we respond to racism the way we respond to all sin in our life. We look at it.

We admit it. We confess it. And then we rely on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Not our own excellence. We allow his work on the cross to be the testimony of our righteousness.

And when we do that, we can stop being so defensive. And we can start actually listening to and building relationships with people of color in our lives. A lot less talking.

A lot more listening. I know it's ironic with me saying that, being the guy with the mic, but you get what I'm saying. Our repentance needs to be a lifestyle. Number two, our repentance needs to be color conscious.

[23 : 11] A lot of people read Galatians 3.28, and I have for years, and we think that this is meaning that we need to be colorblind. You know, there's no longer Jew. There's no longer Greek.

There's no longer black. There's no longer white. There's no longer Latino, right? We need to be blind to color. That's what the application would be. But in fact, if we understand what's actually being said here, this is not about the eradication of race.

This is not about us all becoming non-racial, right, or trans-racial. Or this is not about the eradication of physical differences. This is about the eradication of the penalties and the privileges, the status and the hierarchy that we associate with physical differences.

And so it doesn't mean we need to be colorblind. We actually need to become more conscious and aware of the meaning of surface differences in our culture.

And it's interesting, you know, Michelle Alexander wrote a book, *The New Jim Crow*. All these, I mean, you've got to read that book. *The New Jim Crow*. It says, here's what she says. Far from being a worthy goal, colorblindness has proved catastrophic for African Americans.

[24 : 23] It's not an overestimation to say that systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States would not have been possible in the post-civil rights era if the nation had not fallen under the spell of a callous colorblindness.

And that'll open your eyes. Right? Right? So for white people, I think that part of the application of this verse means we become more aware and thoughtful about color. If you're in the room and you're white, we need to think about what does it mean to have a black skin, brown skin in this culture.

You know, you think about some of those statistics earlier. What is the meaning of growing up as a young white man in our culture? And then we need to think about what does it mean to be white in this culture.

You know, one of the biggest challenges, I think, and obstacles for those of us in the room who are white is that we're not aware that there's such a thing as whiteness. Because we think in terms of whiteness as being normative for everybody.

And so becoming more aware simply of what it means to be white is a part of applying this verse because we need to understand the role that skin color plays in the old self before we can then put off the old self and then begin to put on the new self that we gain in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 43] If we remain ignorant to the meaning of color in our old identity, we'll have no idea of what it looks like to put that off. We'll be blind to it. And so this is a part of what it means to repent.

Lastly, I'd say our repentance needs to be corporate. It needs to be corporate. You know, I was shocked. We did a study of the book of Daniel not too long ago.

Some of you were here for that. But I was shocked studying through Daniel, which I had never really deeply done until that sermon series, to get to chapter 9. And in chapter 9 of the book of Daniel, Daniel falls to his knees and he repents on behalf of his race, on behalf of the nation of Israel.

He repents for sins committed by previous generations that he had nothing to do with. Sins that he wasn't even close to. And yet he repents on behalf of his entire race.

And this really challenged, well, it challenged me in a lot of ways, but it made me realize how individualistic I am when I think about sin. As though God only thinks of me in terms of the isolated incidents that I've committed.

[26 : 59] Rather than seeing that I stand on the shoulders of, inherit, benefit from, and in many ways represent the sins of generations. Right?

And so you and I, you know, we may not be actively racist in our thoughts or behaviors. We are very ideologically opposed to racism, but we do live within and benefit from racist systems.

And we've inherited wealth and privilege in a country that was built on the backs of slaves. And that's a reality that we can't ignore. It's a reality that we can't just kind of like close our eyes to. You know, another book, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, one of the lines that was most haunting to me from that book was this.

He says, the enslaved were people turned to fuel for the American machine. The enslaved were people turned to fuel for the American machine. And just recognizing that we are all part of the American machine, and it was fueled by people, ground up, burned up, so that we could sustain ourselves and flourish.

That's something that we may not feel or see in any way that we are complicit in, and yet we can't deny the legacy of it in our lives. Right? And so let me, you know, I'll just be more personal.

[28 : 12] You know, I need to repent. You know, I need to repent. Because for years, this has just not been on my radar. You know, for me, like Ferguson was a watershed.

You know, I remember one time, you know, I made this pot of stew, and I left, and I got distracted, and it started to burn and smoke, and so I took the pot out, and I set it out on the porch, and I put a lid on it, and I went back inside to the party, and I just kind of forgot about it for like a week.

Those of you who know me are like, of course you did. And I went back out like a week later, the pot looked fine, and it actually rained, so it looked even cleaner than before, but then I took the lid

off, and the stench, and the maggots.

It was rotten, and disgusting. In my experience, at least for me, and a lot of white people like me, Ferguson lifted the lid on our country.

You know, you sort of like from the outside, everything looks fine, looks clean, you know, and then it was like this, it lifted the lid. It wasn't the first time, and I'm not sure why it was Ferguson. You know, things like that have happened all the time, but something about that event, it catalyzed something in me.

[29 : 21] It made me realize that this is not an issue that's mostly in the past. You know, in fact, it's alive and well. It's here. It's in me. You know, and I look at the last 10 years of our church, and I just need to repent.

This has just not been on my radar. You know, it hasn't. And I would love to say that all of that is past tense, but I feel like when it comes to, especially this conversation, I am still every day learning what it means to rely on the grace of Jesus so I can drop my defenses, so I can actually hear what I need to hear.

And praise God, he's being faithful in that. But for me, this is where, if you want to ask, like where's God working on your heart right now? Bullseye. That's where the work is happening right now. So this is the reality that I think that we are born into. This is the reality that we need to recognize as followers of Jesus. The good news is we have more work to do than just repenting.

Repenting is necessary before we can do anything else. But lastly, thirdly, at a very short point here, the gospel calls us to the ministry of reconciliation. These days, diversity is a prize.

[30 : 33] diversity is a way that institutions and churches can build our brand. And what we need to recognize is that in the early church, in places like Antioch, diversity was not a value that people cared about.

You know, diversity was not a thing. You know, nobody started a church in the Greco-Roman world and said, you know, one of our main vision goals is to be diverse and multi-ethnic. That just didn't happen anywhere.

Nobody cared about it, right? And in fact, they would have thought that was odd and weird. And so that's why it's so striking to see that the early church was incredibly diverse. It never would have occurred to the earliest Christians to build a multi-ethnic church.

The only reason that it became multi-ethnic is because God kept inconveniently converting the wrong people. I mean, isn't that crazy? You know, God converts Simeon, who's a black African. He converts Saul, who's one of the greatest persecutors of Christianity in existence. He converts Cornelius and his entire Gentile family. He converts all of the wrong people. And so all of these people start showing up to the apostles and saying, I believe in Jesus, I've been forgiven, and I have the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 40] And they're scratching their heads like, what do we do with all these people? You know, most of the epistles, when they're talking about race, they're talking about this issue. Christians kind of scratching their heads and saying, oh my gosh, we didn't care about diversity, but it's clear that God does.

So now we have to figure out what to do. So they're problem solving. I think that's absolutely beautiful. Right? So even though no one in the world cared about diversity, it was obvious that God did.

And quite frankly, the only reason anyone in society today cares about diversity is because the Enlightenment stole the clothes off Christianity. I will go to my grave making that claim.

So Paul drives this point home in several of his epistles. including Galatians. And the gospel not only removes the barrier of sin between us and God, but it removes all of the barriers between us and other people.

I mean, in Ephesians 3, Paul actually says that racial diversity in the church is what manifests the wisdom of God to the world. In other words, when you see a multi-ethnic church, especially in the Greco-Roman world, that is putting the manifold wisdom of God on display.

[32 : 51] That's what people look at and they say, that must be supernatural. And Christians are, by definition, ministers of reconciliation. So I believe that part of our calling here in D.C.

is to actively build a more multi-ethnic community that reflects the great and the beautiful diversity of D.C. Not because diversity is a badge to use to build our brand, but because God's vision for humanity is one worldwide multi-ethnic family in Christ.

And if we want to be aligned with his heart and his vision, that's got to be our vision too. And so this is going to require us to change and it's going to require that we all be willing to embrace a kind of holy discomfort.

It's not going to be easy. You know, praise God, I have a growing network of African-American pastors who are willing to be my friend, willing to put up with my stupid questions and my ignorance, willing to let me learn from them.

You know, praise God, we have this small group called Race in the Gospel that is focused on exploring these questions on behalf of our church. Praise God, we're going to be starting this three-year cohort with the Institute for Cross-Cultural Missions this summer.

[34 : 07] Some of us as representatives of the church, you know, these are not disconnected, disparate things. All of these things that we're doing now are part of our preparation to make some significant changes to the way we go about building gospel-centered communities in the city, which is our mission.

Because I believe that part of what it means to be gospel-centered is to be multi-ethnic. And you know, Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, he was assassinated because of this dream.

And yet, praise God, the dream is still alive and well. And the reason for that is because God is the one who dreamed it first. And only by His grace will any of this come to be so that there will be no question who gets the glory.

And it's in the name and the glory and the hope and the promise of Jesus Christ that we say all of these things. And it's in His power.

Amen.