

Race

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[0 : 0 0] asking what God wants us to learn from COVID-19, but also as individuals asking ourselves at an altogether more fundamental level, are we racists? Are we racists?

When someone else asks us that question, it's natural that we instantly become defensive. Well, of course not. I'm not a racist. But this evening, it's not someone else asking us that question. It's God asking us that question. It's the God who made every human being and made us all equal in his sight. And so once again, we ask ourselves the serious question, are we racists?

Do we measure a person's worth or character by the color of their skin and their ethnic origin? I'm not speaking this evening about the Black Lives Matter movement. Please don't construe me as such. I'm not about to take the knee. I'm taking us on a deeper exploration of what the Bible, not our particular culture, has to say about race. You might think I would take you straight to the Gospels or to the teaching of the Apostle Paul on the subject of how in Galatians 3.28, the Apostle says, in Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, you are all one. However, my heart was drawn at this time to another verse, this time in Jeremiah 13.23, where God asks the question, can the Ethiopian change his skin?

And as I thought through and prayed through this question in the context of both the immediate passage and the whole Bible, I've been challenged deeply concerning my own attitude to race relations.

[2 : 0 2] I am not a racist, but I have to confess it's taken me many years to get to this point, because I had unwittingly adopted many of the paternalistic attitudes of former generations, which although well-meaning at the time, I now consider to be altogether theologically deficient.

It's challenged me. It's brought me to a place of repentance and hopefully deeper usefulness in the kingdom of God. Well, from this verse, Jeremiah 13.23, its immediate context and the whole book of Jeremiah allow me to make three statements about race. First, Jeremiah recognizes race, but doesn't emphasize race. Second, Jeremiah distinguishes between people, but not on the basis of race.

And third, Jeremiah holds up people of race as examples of faith. It's a pity, really, it's taken me so long to address this subject with you. Let me encourage you to reflect deeply upon it. And if you're going to take offense at anyone, take offense at yourself.

And not me. First of all, then, Jeremiah recognizes race, but does not emphasize race. He asks the question, can the Ethiopian change his skin? I'm not even sure in our politically correct world that we'd be allowed to ask such a question, but Jeremiah does. The Ethiopians to which he refers probably don't refer to today's nation state of Ethiopia. Rather, it refers to the inhabitants of the Upper Nile region, what would once have been known as Nubia. These were black people who were very black indeed. If you remember that wonderful time we had with Patrick Jock from the South Sudanese Reformed Church. You'll remember just how dark he was. So the skin color to which Jeremiah is referring is not colored as we would understand it. It's black. You don't get much blacker than this kind of Ethiopian, the Nubians of today's Upper Nile, South Sudan. Now, as I see it, Jeremiah is not asking this question out of any sense of prejudice or discrimination. He's just asking the question.

He recognizes that there are some human beings who have different colored skin. There's no point in minimizing the distinction and saying of them, well, we're all the same, because the truth is that we're not all the same. Some of us are white. Some of us are colored. Some of us are black. To deny the reality of differences in skin color is to live in some kind of woke fantasy land of make-believe. To deny that one person's white and another person is black is to deny that a circle is a circle and a square is a square. Minimizing the facts of the case doesn't change the fundamental problem of racism. It's what we do with those facts which determines our racism or otherwise. It is

whether we use the reality of a person's color to determine our attitude toward them, which renders our attitude sinful or not. But then perhaps you take offense to Jeremiah's question, can an Ethiopian change his skin? I think that's a racist question.

[5 : 57] Let me say to you with all humility, you have no right to take offense. No right at all. Everyone wants to take offense at everything these days. Even from a politically correct perspective, strictly speaking, there are no white people in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was not white like I am, and no doubt he had far less problems in the sun than I do.

But at an even more fundamental level, look at the text with me. Does Jeremiah expand on what he means? Does he emphasize the darkness of the Ethiopian skin? Does he make fun of the Ethiopian's black hands?

Does he judge the Ethiopian's character on the basis of the color of his skin? Jeremiah and the rest of the Bible recognizes race, but does not emphasize race.

He does not deny what his eyes are telling him. In the Great Commission, Jesus says to his disciples, go into all the nations of the world and make disciples.

In so saying, Jesus recognizes that there are many different nations, but he does not emphasize one nation over against another.

[7 : 08] If we deny what our eyes are telling us, out of some kind of woke political correctness, our evangelism will be hindered. Because evangelism does not merely concern the propositional proclamation of the gospel, it is contextualized according to those whom the gospel is to be proclaimed.

So Paul recognized that to a Jew, he became like a Jew. The Gentiles, he became like a Gentile. If we whitewash every nation and we ignore our differences, our gospel contextualization will suffer, and therefore the effectiveness of our gospel proclamation will be compromised.

So for example, back in the 1850s, the Western missionaries of his day looked askance at Hudson Taylor for dressing like the Chinese, for eating like the Chinese, for growing his hair like the Chinese grew their hair, and for speaking like the Chinese.

But it was in precisely this contextualization that Taylor was passionate and demonstrated his love for both the gospel and for the Chinese.

The truth of it is, we're not all the same. Some of us, like me, are chalky white. Some of us are olive skinned. Some of us are colored.

[8 : 37] Some of us are black. Some of us are Africans. Some of us are Polynesians. Some of us are Oriental. Some of us are Latino. Jeremiah recognizes race, but he does not emphasize race.

If we should adopt a faulty towers mentality, where at all costs we do not mention color, we are not following the teaching of the Bible, nor are we doing justice to Jesus' great commission.

The Bible tells us it is not racist to recognize race, that one person is white and another person is black.

The Bible does tell us that it's racist to emphasize race, or to make race the deciding factor in our judgment of another person.

Because as we'll see in a moment, God is less interested in the color of a man's skin as he is in the color of his heart. Jeremiah recognizes race, but does not emphasize race.

[9 : 41] Second, Jeremiah distinguishes between people, but not on the basis of their race. He distinguishes between people, but not on the basis of their race.

Let's go back to this text in Jeremiah 13, 23. Context is one of judgment. The nation of Israel has been, the nation of Judah rather, has been unfaithful to God, and as such is threatened with judgment.

They're going to be invaded by a foreign northern power. Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, and they'll be taken into captivity. It's in this context, Jeremiah asks the question, can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard change his spots?

Then you also can do good, you who are accustomed to do evil. The point is, the people of Judah, the people of God, have become so accustomed to being unfaithful to him, to being morally corrupt, and spiritually dead, that they've gone beyond the point of redemption.

They may not have spotted fur like a leopard, they may not have dark skin like an Ethiopian, but they have so set their hearts on walking away from God, it is now impossible for them to change.

[11 : 02] The point is obvious. In the first instance, there is no doubt that Jeremiah is distinguishing between people.

There is no doubt that Jeremiah is distinguishing between people. There are some who are open to the rebuke of God under the basis of God's invitation to repent will change.

The so-called remnant, which plays such a large part in the theology of the prophets. But there are others in Judah, perhaps the vast majority, whose hearts are closed to God and will not, under any circumstances, change their minds and their hearts and their actions.

Jeremiah is only one out of 66 books in the Bible where distinctions are drawn between people.

Some accept the good news of Jesus Christ and are saved. Others reject the good news of Jesus Christ and are condemned.

Some are wise. Some are foolish. Some are righteous. Some are unrighteous. Jesus himself is the prime example of someone who drew distinctions between people.

[12:14] Those who believed in him. Those who did not. Yes, of course, on one level, it is absolutely true to say that all people are the same. But on another level, it's not true.

Because the Bible itself, unsanctified common sense, distinguishes between people. The question is not whether the Bible distinguishes between people.

God makes a distinction between the sheep and the goats, between those who invest five talents and make five more, and those who dig their one talent into the ground and leave it there to rot.

If there were no distinctions, there would be no gospel. So the question is not whether the Bible distinguishes between people. The question is upon what basis the Bible distinguishes between people.

That brings us to our second point. But from Jeremiah 13, 23, he does not distinguish between people on the basis of their race. He does not distinguish between people on the basis of their race.

[13:20] He does not say, Judah, good. Ethiopia, bad. Ethiopia, bad. Because of the color of their skin. Jeremiah does not distinguish between people on the basis of their race, but on the basis of their relationship to God.

not on the basis of the color of their skin, but the color of their hearts. A man's skin might be as black as night, but his heart is white as snow.

A man's skin may be as white as snow, but his heart is black as night. It's on the basis of the heart's relationship to him God makes his judgment, not on the basis of skin.

You can see this from the text, right? God is not condemning the Ethiopian because of his dark skin. God is not condemning the leopard because he happens to have spots on his fur.

It is the people of Judah God is condemning because they've forgotten how to do good. They only know how to do evil. Just because a man is white doesn't mean he's right.

[14:30] And just because he's black doesn't mean he's wrong. Just because a man is black doesn't mean he's right. And just because he's white doesn't mean he's wrong. Black or white and every shade between, we are not to distinguish or make judgments about one another based upon the color of our skin, but rather on the state of our hearts before God.

God tells us that all of us by nature are born with sinful hearts and darkened understandings. That's true whether we were born of Caucasian parentage like me or of African parentage.

God tells us that all of us need the gospel of Jesus Christ. A Jesus whose color is not known but who probably was neither chalky white like me or dark black like Patrick Jock.

The Jesus Christ colored like a Palestinian Jew. Olive skin. Accustomed to life in the hot sun. Jesus' color is not defined in scripture but we in the West of course have taken our views of it from Renaissance paintings depicting him as white.

A Jesus made in our image rather than we in his. The Jesus who you will see when you get to heaven will not be white.

[15:54] God tells us that our growth in holiness does not equate to a change in skin color but to a change in the Christ-likeness of our hearts. There isn't one measure of judgment prescribed by God in scripture based on the color of a person's skin.

There ain't one heaven for white people and one heaven for black people but one heaven for all who by faith have trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the same way therefore there isn't to be one church for white people and one church for black people but one church for all who by faith have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ and are living as his disciples.

In 1 Corinthians where we were reading in our morning devotions we learned that the whole book concerns the ordering of the early church. There isn't one mention of color being a distinguishing factor in that book.

In fact the one which is mentioned wealth is roundly condemned. In other words the Christian church which insists upon distinctions based on color is not acting as a Christian church.

I'm very nervous of today's fascination with ethnic churches churches with Chinese churches with African churches with Scottish churches or any other kind of church.

[17 : 23] There is only one church and it's distinguished by its faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else. This is not a matter of paternalism it is a matter of theological and gospel truth where each of us aware of our own inner sinfulness and need of Christ's forgiveness rejoice in his sacrifice on our behalf.

What then does this mean? Simply this if we should prejudge another person based on the color of their skin then we are acting in a racist fashion and we need to repent and return to the message of the gospel.

We need to get to know that person white, black, brown or red. It's our faith in Jesus Christ expressed in practical love which merits our judgment.

Nothing else. It's a person's character not their color which is the measure of the man. The third standard I want to impress upon you is that Jeremiah holds up people of race as examples of faith. He holds up people of race as examples of faith. Now I know that with such a contentious issue as race I'm going to offend virtually everyone. I've even offended myself tonight.

[18 : 56] Some are going to accuse me of going too far others are going to accuse me of not going far enough. I neither believe pardon me I don't believe in tokenism I don't believe in paternalism but I trust I believe only in the plain teaching of the Bible.

And I hold as my final argument for the equality of races the hero of the book of Jeremiah. A very dark skinned Ethiopian man whom Jeremiah may well have had in the back of his mind when he asked that question can the Ethiopian change his skin?

The man's name was Ebed Melech. We meet him later on in the book of Jeremiah. The name Ebed Melech is the Hebrew expression servant of the king Ebed servant Melech king so we don't even know if this was the man's real name.

Jeremiah is proclaiming a very unpopular message on account of its unfaithfulness to God Judah will be invaded by the Babylonians Jerusalem will be destroyed and Judah's people are going to be taken into captivity.

It's a very unpopular message especially among the ruling classes in Jerusalem from the king and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. And so they throw Jeremiah into a pit Jeremiah's so-called cistern.

[20 : 30] They throw him in they leave him to die there because that's what they used to do to preachers they didn't agree with. But in the nick of time an Ethiopian eunuch in the service of the king this man Ebed Melech approaches the king and says my lord the king these men have done evil in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern and he will die there of hunger for there is no bread left in the city.

So here we have Ebed Melech he's a foreigner he has his life in his hands he's not an ethnic Jew but rather he appeals on behalf of God's Jewish prophet.

The king is sympathetic and allows Ebed Melech to rescue Jeremiah. Ebed Melech sews together the king's old clothes to make a rope and he draws Jeremiah out of the cistern.

He saves Jeremiah's life and Jeremiah lives safely in the court of the guard. So here we have Jeremiah saved from death by an Ethiopian by a dark-skinned foreigner not a light-skinned inhabitant of Jerusalem.

The hero of the book of Jeremiah is an Ethiopian Nubian. Sometime later when the Babylonian army arrives and begins the destruction of Jerusalem God has a particular message for Ebed Melech the Ethiopian.

[22 : 03] In Jeremiah 39 verse 18 we read the message. God says to him I will surely save you and you shall not fall by the sword but you shall have your life as a prize of war because you have put your trust in me.

He clears the Lord. Of no one else in the book of Jeremiah except Jeremiah himself is it said that he put his trust in the Lord of no one else.

Jeremiah and Ebed Melech these two men one. They both trusted God. You see Jeremiah holds up Ebed Melech this man of race as an example of faith someone who is to be imitated not patronized not canceled.

Luke the writer of Acts holds up another Ethiopian eunuch as an example of faith someone who came to believe and trust in Jesus Christ through the evangelism of Philip Jesus holds up the Syrophenician woman as an example of faith.

Did you know that Moses in Numbers 12 verse 1 married an Ethiopian woman? See the Bible doesn't know anything about the systemic racism which has historically been so ingrained in our society and culture.

[23 : 38] Jeremiah Jesus Paul Luke Moses whatever they are whoever they are if you go looking to them to uphold a racial shaped gospel you will leave very disappointed.

I think it's a real pity that in our church culture we didn't grow up with more people of color as heroes of the faith. We rightly held up men like Hudson Taylor and William Carey and women like Isabel Coon and Minnie Slessor but scarce a mention was ever given to the Chinese and Indian believers without whom Taylor's and Carey's gospel would not even have had a hearing.

It is a pity we did not grow up with more colored heroes of the faith. Great African and Asian believers who sacrificed more than we will ever know just so that their countrymen could hear the gospel and be saved.

This is no doubt something which must be remedied in today's literature. Because the truth is that we here in the West need the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the majority world church to come and help us deal with the rampant secularism in our society and the rampant apathy in our churches.

So we need more men like Patrick Jock from the South Sudanese Reformed Church. What a precious man. We need more men like Ajit Fernando, the president of Sri Lanka's Youth for Christ.

[25 : 23] What a wonderful theologian. We need more men like Tokinbu Adeyemo, one of Nigeria's foremost evangelical theologians who's led the search for, led the production of the Africa Bible commentary.

We need more Chinese believers to come to Scotland today to witness to our people. Let me close by challenging you once more using Jeremiah's question.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin? We live in one of Scotland's great cities, Scotland's greatest city in my opinion, a great cosmopolitan city.

We encounter people of color every day and we welcome it. These people cannot and should not change their color, but we can change our hearts.

faith and trust in Jesus Christ. You see, ultimately, the gospel is the only answer to the problem of racism, because it's only here, at the foot of the cross, that all men and women, boys and girls, are loved equally as dearly loved sons and daughters of the living God.

[26 : 49] So, have you believed in a non-white Jesus? And are you trusting in him?

Amen.