

Hope for Relationships

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name's James. It's nice to see you this morning. The hashtag MeToo movement began in 2017 to give voice to women bringing to light issues of sexual harassment and abuse.

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter marches rose to give voice to those who had been harassed and abused because of their ethnicity. More recently, there has been a campaign to stop anti-Asian hate and abuse.

Even in the last week in Sydney, someone had carved into a footpath, Asians go home. And so this sentiment is happening even here in Sydney.

In the last couple of weeks in Australia, tens of thousands of people marched against the abuse of women. Those who don't have power and freedom, those who have been abused in their lives, have been responding.

They are calling for social issues to change. Whilst the coronavirus pandemic hit many people very hard, hit people's... They lost houses, people have lost jobs, people have been hit financially, let alone those who have had their health damaged and lost their lives.

[1 : 20] Yet, the richest in our society have also gotten richer. The three richest men in the United States, Mark Zuckerberg, who owns Facebook, Elon Musk, who owns Tesla and, you know, spaceships, and the third is Jeff Bezos, who owns most things, and Amazon.

All three of those in the last year have more than doubled their wealth. We see social abuses. We see racial inequality.

And we want to see a society that is changed. I want to see a society that is changed. In the Western culture that we live in, there is unrest and dissatisfaction about relationships.

There is conflict between people at the workplace, conflict at home, conflict between friends and marriages. There is tension in the social fabric of who we are as people.

Each of us trying to get ahead, trying to earn more money, trying to have shinier things. There is tension economically between classes, between those who would be considered working class and middle class and upper class.

[2 : 27] There is tension and unrest and dissatisfaction between different ethnicities and nationalities. And for me, personally, I can feel the pull to become a Twitter warrior and to have arguments with people online.

I can feel the pull to go to marches. And yet, I can feel another pull, which is just to be totally passive. Because these social issues seem so large that they are just impossible to change. So how are we to view these issues that are not only around us, but we are also part of? What does God have to say to this?

And how does a Christian respond to these issues? Last week was Easter. And we were reminded at Easter of God's goodness to us. His love, His grace.

Not only that Jesus would die, but that He would be raised so that our death has been paid for and we are promised new life. The resurrection is such a wonderful, world-changing event that it not only changes our vertical relationship with God.

[3 : 34] Not only do we have a relationship with God that is restored, redeemed, now we can know Him and we can be made more like Him, but it also impacts our horizontal relationships.

The resurrection changes how we relate to God, but it also changes how we relate to other people. And so only in the death and resurrection of Jesus do we have the resources to see the transformation of relationships, the transformation of our society, of the church being a powerful sign to the world, of the people that God is making us to be.

And so today, over the next 20, 30 minutes, I'm going to be touching on some large issues. Racism, economic inequality. Unfortunately, I can't preach for an hour and a half to go into all of these very deeply, but please come and speak with me after if you'd like to talk more about these.

So we're going to speak about the resurrection hope we have for relationships before we look at the resurrection hope for racism and different classes.

And as we do this, we should be praying and asking God for help. So let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, Lord, I thank you so much for our last weekend and for the reminder of Easter, of your goodness to us at the cross and in the resurrection.

[4 : 59] Father, as we consider the implications for us across our lives, give us much understanding of ourself and love of other people, Lord. Amen.

Please have your Bibles open. We're going to be spending time in those three parts of the Bible that Anne read. And we're going to start in 1 Corinthians. In this letter, Paul is writing this letter rebuking a church for many issues.

Most of their issues come down to how they are relating between people. You know, they might have the vertical relationship with God sorted, but their horizontal relationships with other people are in a dire state.

So as he writes in chapter 6, verse 1, if any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of being the Lord's people?

It seems that the social relationships between people of the church have broken down. Those people who should be loving, who should be forgiving each other because they know how much they've been forgiven by Jesus, they are not forgiving each other.

[6 : 06] And so instead of dealing with this conflict, they've been taking each other to court.

They've been suing each other and they're being judged not by somebody else in the church, not by a wise Christian brother, but somebody that's totally unrelated.

And so chapter 6, verse 2, do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?

Do you not know that we will judge angels? And how much more the things of this life? Paul is saying that at the resurrection, there will be a final judgment and Christians will have a role to judge the world.

And yet these Christians couldn't even judge trivial cases amongst themselves. You know, there's like a case of a hole between two neighbors and a donkey fell down it.

And so instead of forgiving and reconciling their relationship, they're taking each other to court. You know, someone hasn't paid the right amount. They've got unequal weights on their scales.

[7 : 14] And so instead of talking amongst themselves, they're taking each other to court. And so many of these issues that they worried about are trivial in comparison to the coming resurrection.

Now, Paul's not saying that there is no place for lawsuits. There is a place for lawyers and lawsuits. Seeking justice is important.

But it's the attitude of the vengeful, you know, he said, she said, you owe me more. You know, you owe me, you know, \$13, \$28. It's the quickness to sue and litigate.

It's part of an unhealthy heart attitude. It's the spirit of the age of the church in Corinth where people wanted to get what they were owed.

And I also think it's the spirit of our age here in Sydney. If the Christians in the church who were supposed to know forgiveness and love from God at the cost of Jesus himself, if these people couldn't even forgive each other, what hope is there for people that aren't part of our church?

[8 : 18] What hope is there for people in the rest of society to deal with their relationships, to have any hope of seeing reconciliation? The call of the gospel is to lay down our desire to get what we are owed.

The beauty of the gospel can be seen when Christians forgive each other. You know, think, you know, last week we saw Jesus on the cross. He prays to God, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do.

The Abdullah family who had a person drive into their car and saw four of their children of the family be killed seeing that family forgive the driver.

The beauty of the gospel can be seen when Christians forgive. And the resurrection is the key to healing our relationships with each other in two different ways.

Firstly, when we know how much we have been forgiven, it helps us to lay down our judgment of others. When we know how much we've been forgiven, it helps us to lay down our judgment of others.

[9 : 23] And secondly, knowing that God is a good judge helps us not to feel that we need to judge. Knowing that God has got the judgment. It's not in the kind of way that it's like, oh, I'm not going to judge because God's going to get you.

I'm going to leave it to him because he'll take care of you. Don't worry. You know, big brother, you know, my God, he's going to get you. Lightning bolts are coming for you. No, when there's conflict, it's, well, I know God is a good judge and he will take care of this.

So I don't need to judge in his place. Instead, I can forgive. But I know personally that when I seek to forgive, there's often two other things that can get in the way.

Two other things that my heart wants to default to. Imagine that I've been wronged. Does anybody want to suggest a way that I could have been wronged? Nobody's, you know, let's just say it's a car. Let's just say James, dear James, dear brother James, I'll pick on him. He's leading. Thank you, James. Thanks for putting your hand up there. Let's say he's driven into my car. Okay, let's say he's driven into my car. Now, you know, when that happens, I'm pumped up full of adrenaline and I might want to respond firstly by striking back.

[10 : 39] I might be very angry and I might want to go and put my dear brother in a headlock. Or maybe I won't respond physically. I'll respond with words and I will, you know, shout him.

What are you doing? What are you looking? You're looking at your phone. What are you doing, James? I might respond quickly by trying to strike back. Or in the case of the Corinthian church, they were suing each other.

James, I'll tell you what, I'm going straight to your insurance. You are paying for every, Dom, you're seeing my car fixed. Or I might hold a grudge. I might say to James' face, don't worry, brother, it's fine.

I forgive you. But I might actually hold onto a grudge. Because what a grudge does, it gives me power over someone else. You owe me for hurting me, for damaging my car.

And I'm going to bring this up every now and then. Oh, James, you know, you remember that time you smashed into my car? It's okay, I forgive you. But you know what, I'd love a coffee right now. And I'm going to remind other people, Ash, you remember that time James smashed into my car, you know?

[11 : 47] And I could use that as a tool to belittle you. Maybe I'll actually just hold onto this grudge for many years, and then one day I'll just cut you off and have nothing to do with you.

Neither of these options are influenced by the resurrection of Jesus. They're influenced by selfishness and pride. They're the things that my heart quickly responds to.

I'm sure that your heart does the same. Years of responding in conflict in our relationships can leave us with destroyed families, split churches, damaged marriages, and hurt friendships.

And so the resurrection calls us to forgive. And this is really hard. It actually means that we need to bear the cost.

Instead of recouping the cost, I actually need to bear this cost. And that's what God has done with our sin. He has borne the cost in Jesus' death.

[12 : 45] Now this might sound good in principle. It might sound fine. But it can be very difficult. It's very difficult. Because do you know what? I like to hold onto a grudge.

Because I gain something out of that. I've been wronged. And if I need to let go of that, it feels like I'm letting part of me die. And it is.

But the beauty of the gospel is that when we let our anger and our grudges die, we see life. We see the resurrection life in us, the Holy Spirit working in us so that we can forgive and we can show God's love and life to other people.

So to have hope for relationships, even before we get to more difficult relationships like ones across ethnicities and classes, we need to be people who practice forgiveness.

forgiveness. So to have hope for relationships, our forgiveness has to come from the resurrection.

We come now to a more complicated issue, one of race and ethnicity.

[13 : 58] Please turn with me to Galatians chapter 2 as we see the resurrection hope for racism. In Galatians chapter 2, verse 11, when Cephas came to Antioch, Paul said that he, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belong to the circumcision group.

So Paul corrects Peter, Paul rebukes Peter because he has separated himself from the Gentiles.

Verse 15, we who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

So we too have put our faith in Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul had to go and remind Peter of where salvation came from. It did not come from the law but it came from God's grace. And what Paul does is something really interesting here.

[15:12] He connects God's love and his grace and his justification to cultural identity. And he actually says that one is stronger than the other.

The identity that we have as Christians is far stronger than our family heritage, our cultural identity. Now Paul himself was a proud Hebrew.

He continues to refer to himself as a Hebrew. He doesn't say I'm a Christian now so everything that came before doesn't matter. He follows Jesus and he also says he's a Hebrew.

He's proud of his heritage. And Paul is talking to Peter. Peter is the guy who had seen a vision from God that all people were considered to be clean.

This is the guy who had had a vision from God that all people are clean that there is no division between Jew and Gentile. And yet the racial division between Jews and Gentiles ran deep.

[16:13] It was full of mistrust, disrespect and suspicion. His fear of the Jews separated himself from others. It was just racism in practice.

So Peter stopped eating food with the Gentiles and food is such a clear sign of relationship. It's such a wonderful thing when we get to eat food together. I'm looking forward to eating food with a whole bunch of people coming over to my house today.

But here Peter's racial identity became more important than his spiritual identity. And in effect he may have said one thing with these words God's love is for all people.

God offers forgiveness to all people but in practice he denied the gospel of grace because he was just spending time with the Jews. Jesus didn't die for just one ethnicity.

There is no one group of people that are more special. He was the God he is the God of the Israelites and a specific country but he is also the God of the whole world. At the end of Galatians in chapter 6 Paul says neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything.

[17:25] What counts is the new creation. Paul says that because of the resurrection the ethnic and cultural differences are no longer important.

In the new creation cultural and ethnic differences don't create tension but they are made pure.

They are just one aspect of who we are. And I love Revelation chapter 7.

Revelation chapter 7 has this beautiful picture of the new creation where there will be people from every tribe nation people and language praising God together.

Ethnic and cultural differences are a good part of creation and they are purified and they endure past the resurrection. In the ancient world religion was just one aspect of a culture's identity.

If you were from Athens you worshipped the god Athena Athena Athena thank you thank you

Narlene. If you were a Delphian your god was Apollo if you were from Olympus your god was Zeus if you were from Corinth a city by the sea your god was Poseidon.

[18:39] Christianity fundamentally changed all of that. Everyone of every city every ethnic group every nation all people were called to worship the same god.

The implication then is that this god relationship with this god unites us far deeper far stronger than any cultural bond any place that we've come from.

And yet following Jesus putting off the old self and old way of doing things doesn't mean that I can actually put off my cultural identity. There is no way to be culturally neutral.

I will forever be someone who is influenced by being an Aussie male growing up in Wollongong in the 1990s. I'm a 90s child that's just that's who I am and I can't actually change that.

It's impossible to change that. But what I can seek to do is to have my cultural way of doing things changed and made pure. No longer can I blame culture.

[19:49] No longer can I just say that's just what people from Sydney do. That's just what Aussies do. I can actually choose to stand apart to put off idolatrous ways and be a Christian with a culture

shaped by God.

What if I as a white 36 year old male was listening to a younger Asian Christian sister speak of the casual and deliberate racism she's received just because of her ethnicity?

How would I respond to that? I think my instinct would be to defend my culture to defend the way I grew up and the people I grew up with. I probably want to default to saying something like oh look it's not real racism it's just jokes.

That's just what Aussies do. They're just boys being boys it's one of those type of excuses and just dismiss her concerns. Maybe I'd even push it back to victim blaming oh look you're actually not able to take a joke.

It's actually your fault. I might even say look racism now isn't as bad as it was 20 30 years ago when I was growing up. It's so much better now so don't worry about it.

[21 : 03] or I can remember that my old self because of my pride in ethnicity is an idol and what it does is it actually blinds me to actual racism and I need to remember that I'm a Christian first and a white male second and I must treat this sister as an equal child of God and who God is using to speak to me in that moment to work on my idolatry.

Each of us needs to be aware of our own cultural blindness and not believe that our way of being a Christian just because it's the way we've grown up is necessarily the right way.

Now what I would love to do at this point is I would love to encourage you to go on a holiday to another country. A little bit difficult I don't have money to give you to fly anywhere we might be able to go to New Zealand in a week.

What I'd love for you to do is to go to another culture spend a significant amount of time there because what that does is it actually makes you realise these Christians do things differently to those Christians back home.

I wonder why. When we get out of our own culture it helps us to ask questions of our own way of doing things. We are a multi-ethnic church here and we are seeking to have a culture shaped not by racism not by ethnic preference not by the culture that I've grown up in but shaped by Jesus and his resurrection.

[22 : 39] We can be a voice of love to hurt and broken people in our polarised neighbourhood as we hold out God's love. Let me encourage you call out racism when you see it.

Call out racism in the workplace even if it means you don't get the next promotion. Call out racism within friendship groups even if it means you lose friends. Don't keep quiet in fear like Peter. Show active love to people of all nations and I think most importantly we actually need to seek to listen to people who are different to us. In the next couple of weeks I'm hoping to read a book called Reading While Black.

It's written by an African American called Esau Macaulay and he writes about what it means to be a Christian growing up in the South of America and I'm looking forward to reading that because it is such a different cultural perspective on what it means to be a Christian and he has a whole different voice on what it means to be an African and insight into the Africans in the Bible so I'm really looking forward to that.

Let me encourage you seek out different voices to understand people from different places. I think SBS is a wonderful channel because it is so multi-ethnic.

[24 : 01] Watch documentaries, learn about people from other places. So let me encourage you, as we seek to be influenced by the resurrection, to love people who are different, let me encourage you to listen.

Listen to people's stories. We've looked at relationships between each other, how we need to forgive, across ethnicities, how important it is to listen, and now we come to the resurrection hope we have for the classes, for different social groups.

Have a look with me at Luke chapter 14. Jesus is at a banquet. I actually wonder if this is the first type of banquet like this Jesus has gone to. Growing up as a tradie, I wonder if this is the first time he's gone to a meal like this.

In chapter 14 it says, when he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable. When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

Jesus is at this banquet and he is watching the social interactions around him. He's watching how the class based system functions. Those who were closer to the top of the table, they were

considered to be more important.

[25 : 22] They sat with the more important people and they would have conversations to advance themselves. It was a form of ancient networking before LinkedIn or however people do it these days.

The purpose of this dinner was to grow social relationships so that you could climb the ladder. You know, you wanted to sit next to a person who could help you to open doors, to invest in you and you would invest in them and you would buy products.

So, you know, you'd sit next to the property developer and you'd ask, you know, where's the next land sale going to be? Where's the next boom suburb? You tell me where that is and I'll buy in there and you'll get more money.

And then if you need me, you do a favour for you, I'll do that. You know, I'm going to sit next to the person who works for the government so I can get my DA through quicker and when it does that I will give your political party an extra kickback.

You scratch my back, I scratch your back. Jesus says into this context, don't try and take the places of honour and power for yourselves.

[26 : 28] But that's a crazy thought into this context. That was the whole point of going to this event. You wanted the place of honour because you want to talk to those people around you so that you can climb so you can get ahead.

I didn't come to this feast to talk to poor people. They are not going to help me at all. I came to get an advantage. The whole social system was designed to meet people to do favours for each other, to try and get control and power and influence and money.

Jesus says something radical. Instead of focusing on yourself, focus on others. You don't need to gain power and control and money because you have a God who richly blesses you and he is in control of all things.

And so Jesus breaks free of this system in verse 12. Jesus said to his host, when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or your sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.

[27 : 45] Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. So the resurrection influences how we view people in different social situations.

Now what Jesus is talking to, he's talking to a culture of reciprocity. A culture where if I do something for you, you have to reciprocate. You do something for me.

It's true of other cultures today, some Asian cultures are still very reciprocal. Gifts were never free. There was always strings attached.

And so you would never invite a poor person to a feast. First of all, it says something about the host. Other people would feel that their time was wasted. Why is this poor person here?

I get nothing out of them. I'm not going to talk to them. And then the poor person themselves would be embarrassed because they can't offer anything else back to the host. They can't invite the host back next week for a feast because they can't do that.

[28 : 47] And so the poor would just be excluded for their sake and for everybody else's sake. And so what would happen is the poor would get poorer and the rich would get richer.

Jesus is critical of this system. And so he says, you know what, let's just start a new one. Let's start a new system, not based on giving each other gifts, one based on the resurrection where God values us all equally and has given us the gift of his son.

All richly blessed. Instead of seeking people to actively gain a benefit from them, I'm going to use this person to get ahead. I'm going to befriend them to open doors.

No, choosing to love other people just to love them. The resurrection, salvation itself is our advantage and not what we gain from each other.

Christians are called to be in relationships with people from other social circles and cultures as an expression of God's love, of God's generosity to us. It's a whole new world view of how people are viewed not as tools to get ahead, but as people loved by God to be loved.

[29 : 58] Jesus has blessed us, he's brought us out of poverty and given us life, so we're called to imitate him in generosity. Belief in the resurrection should change our relationships.

It should change how we calculate the value of people. It should end the constant thoughts in the back of my mind, I'll pick on James again, is this person actually worth my time?

Should I spend time with him? Is he just going to drag me down? He's going to need a lot of work. Do I really have time? Is he actually worth it?

And if I spend time with him, does he appreciate it enough? Does he thank me enough? What do I actually get out of this relationship? The resurrection should actually end our stinginess with our time and our wealth and our lives, because the resurrection calls us to generosity?

Today we've spoken about big social change, of relationships, of racism, of resources, and I want to encourage you, instead of just seeing the national and international conversations and thinking, oh, I need to engage with that, I need to talk about these big things, just to engage with the most recent Black Lives Matter march or these kinds of things, instead of just engaging with those things, start with the people around you.

[31 : 37] It is much easier to forgive, to show generosity, and to listen to the people that are in front of you. So look out for opportunities of social inequality people around you.

My community group, we got together a whole heap of food for the asylum seeker center in the city to serve people who are in need. Look out for opportunities in your community around you to show the influence of the resurrection and not just see the big national debates and think it is too hard.

The resurrection calls us to forgive each other and to see relationships restored. The resurrection calls us to listen so that we see the gospel that binds us together and not cultural differences.

The resurrection calls us to be generous because we have a generous God. And so let's be a church, let's be a people that do these things, that forgive, that listen and are generous.

Let me pray. Dear Heavenly Father, Lord I thank you for all of your goodness to us. Lord it is easy for us to forget how much we have been forgiven, how generous you have been and how you know our condition because Jesus became one of us.

[33 : 12] Heavenly Father we ask that you would remind us of the impact of the resurrection on our daily lives. Lord give us much patience when we are faced with conflict that we would be quick to forgive.

That when we see cultural differences we would not be quick to see the differences between us and others but be quick to see the gospel that binds us. And Father help us to be generous to other people Lord knowing your love for us.

We ask this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.