

RACISM

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This past week we saw one of the most despicable illustrations of racism I can remember. A 21-year-old white man walked into a Bible study in a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, sat there for an hour, pulled out a gun, and killed nine people for no other reason than the color of their skin. On Thursday morning, I sat in front of my television in disbelief. I cried and I prayed. I prayed for the people of that church, the people in that city, and that the shooter would get caught before he hurt somebody else. With all that was within me, I felt like getting on the next airplane flying to Charleston and hugging everybody I could find. I'm not sure why, but this one hit me like none that I have ever experienced.

I couldn't shake it. The more I thought about it, the more I got angry. I started asking, "What does the Bible say about racism?" Then I decided to speak on the subject of racism. I'm not doing this because I think there is racism in our church. I don't think there is. The very opposite is true. At the same time, I think discussing the subject can teach us some things; it can affect all of our relationships.

Let's start by defining the word. According to the dictionary, there are several different definitions, as there are with all words. One is the belief that one race is superior to another and, therefore, has the right to dominate that race. A second dictionary definition is discrimination. A third is hatred or intolerance of another race. I will use the first definition. Racism is the idea one race is somehow superior to another. Does the Bible address that?

Before I turn to the Scripture, let me just remind you that the Scripture has a number of ways of teaching a spiritual truth. It does that by plain statements, by giving us a principle embedded in statements, and very often teaches us truth by example. There are many passages I could turn to discuss racism. It's all through the Bible, but there is one passage above all others that I think about when I think of this subject and that is the passage I want us to consider.

James says, "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality" (Jas. 2:1). Among other things, this passage talks about partiality. The Greek word translated "partiality" means "to receive by face." The idea is that you are judging people based on an outward appearance or standard. This passage discusses more than just racism, but racism is included. Besides judging somebody by face, the color of their face, their outward appearance, or some external standard certainly fits the definition of this passage.

James goes on to give an illustration. "For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place,' and say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit here at my footstool,' have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (Jas. 2:2-4). I call this the case of the nearsighted usher. Two visitors come to church. One is dressed in fine apparel. He has gold rings (plural) on his fingers. In the ancient world, people often wore rings (plural) on each finger, except the middle finger. If it was an important occasion and they didn't have enough rings, they would rent them. So, this was a certain sign of affluence, fine cloths and lots of rings on eight of his ten fingers. This might be like saying somebody comes to church in a \$2000 tailor-made suit with a \$500 pair of shoes and a huge diamond ring that blinded your eyes to look at it. The second visitor was a poor man. His clothes were threadbare with holes in them and they were dirty. The

nearsighted usher gave the man in fine apparel the best seat in the house and told the poor man to stand or sit at his stool. Notice, the usher could have given the poor his seat, but instead of doing that, he told the poor man to sit on the floor. James says such an attitude is partiality, prejudice, and being guilty of evil thoughts. This is about “thoughts,” an internal attitude.

Admittedly, this is talking about the external appearance of the man in fine apparel and not about race. It is talking about the cost of clothes and not the color of the skin, but there is a principle embedded in this passage and that principle is do not hold to the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ and judge people by an external standard.

Last week I walked into my office to discover that someone had left some books for me. Now that is always a delightful surprise. So, I started going through them, wondering who got into my office and who would leave me a pile of books. It didn't take me long to figure out that the guilty culprit was Pastor Mercado. He knew what subject I was studying and he brought me some of his own books. How do you judge a book? These were radically different. Three were on one subject and three were on another. The cover of some of these books were designed by an artist. One was a large hardback. It was obviously the most expensive. Most were paperback. I thought to myself, “How should I judge which one I'm going to read first?” Should I do it solely based on the cover? You would say that is idiotic and you would be right. It is no more life to judge a person by the color of his or her skin than it is to judge a book by its cover. But isn't that what racism is? It is judging a book by its cover without considering what's inside.

James says such an attitude is not just wrong; it is evil. He says to have such an attitude is to have “evil” thoughts. Why is racism evil? From a biblical point of view, there are three reasons racism is evil.

Contrary to Common Sense

James says, “But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?” Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? (Jas. 2:6-7). We don't know a lot about what James is talking about here. All we know is what is recorded in these verses, but obviously, there's something going on where we rich people were oppressing them. He says that in verse 6, where he uses that very word and part of the oppression, persecution, and pressure was having them taken to court. Perhaps they were being sued for an unjust reason. On top of that, these rich people were oppressing them are *at the same time* blaspheming the very name by which they were called. Undoubtedly the name was Christian. Some have connected this with what is going on in chapter 5, which is probably a good guess. In chapter 5, we are told that these laborers were being cheated out of their wages by wealthy people. Anyway, James's point is this, you saw this rich man come and you gave him the best seat and he is part and parcel of the people persecuting you. That just does not make good sense. So, I say based on these verses, racism is contrary to common sense.

Racism has never made sense to me. I think it's because of my experience as a child. I grew up in Pensacola, Florida, prior to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. I remember the segregated South. At that time, there were two high schools in Pensacola, one black and one white. There were no black kids in the white high school. Also, as in many other southern cities, there was a dividing line in Pensacola. On one side of that line, whites lived and on the other side of that line, blacks lived. I lived *on the line*. Consequently, I grew up playing the black kids across the street. So, it never occurred to me that there was anything wrong or different other than the color of their skin. When I got to the white high school of 2700 kids, I think I was the only integrationist among the students.

Discrimination based on the color of a person's skin has never made sense to me. Judging people by the color of their skin doesn't make any more sense to me than judging people by the color of their eyes. Imagine saying people with a certain color eyes are inferior. Or imagine saying people with a certain color hair are inferior. Imagine deciding that blondes and brunettes are superior to the minority, who are redheads. Absolutely crazy! It just does not make sense.

My brother and I grew up together. In preparation for this message, I asked him, "Do you remember growing up on Gadsden Street in Pensacola? "Do you remember us playing with the black kids? He said his best friends lived across the street. We played Cowboys and Indians together. He remembered the first time he saw two sets of restrooms, one colored and one white. He said, "It was so confusing to me. I couldn't figure it out." That is the way we grew up. It just didn't make sense to either my brother or me that there should be something called segregation. Racism is contrary to common sense

Contrary to Creation

"With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so" (Jas. 3:9-10). In this passage, James is talking about the tongue. In the process, he says that we bless and curse people who have been made in the similitude of God. In other words, the problem with cursing another human being is that person is made in the image of God. So, racism is contrary to creation; God made human beings. They are all equal in His sight. Therefore, racism is totally out of the question.

Given the fact that God created all of us with differences, starting with male and female, we should respect one another. If creation teaches us anything, it teaches us that human beings deserve respect because God creates all of us in His image. But how often do we treat each other by some other standard, such as, "What have you done for me lately? Or I don't like your performance." Even if people step out of line, we should still treat them with respect.

Clark Clifford tells of the time when his former boss, Harry S. Truman, did something he fondly remembers. Every morning at 8:30, the president had a staff meeting. One day the mail clerk brought an envelope with a legal wax seal on it and flowing purple ribbons. When Truman opened it, the president found a letter from the King of Saudia Arabia. The salutation began, "Your Magnificence, Your Magnificence." Truman repeated those words, laughing, and said, "I like that. I don't know what you guys call me when I'm not here, but it's okay if you refer to me from now on as 'his magnificence.'" Truman subsequently sent a message to the United Nations, supporting the mission of 100,000 Jews to Palestine. Afterward, he received the second letter from the King of Saudi Arabia and it began, "Dear Mr. President, I don't like what you are doing and it is going to lower my respect for you."

We do not have to agree with everybody, but we should disagree respectfully. If there is any message this country needs right now, it is a way beyond racism. I have never seen the likes of this in my entire life. We cannot even talk to each other civilly anymore. The kinds of things we say are simply absurd and downright fabrications and lies. We need to at least sit-down and talk to each other and that goes for the race issue. Because human beings are creatures of God made in His image, we should respect them. Einstein said, "I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbageman or the president of the University." The garbageman is made in the image of God and the president of the University is made in the image of God.

When I was in high school, my favorite baseball team was the Brooklyn Dodgers. I was the only Dodger fan in my high school. I remember well; they were the first team to admit a black

player whose name was Jackie Robinson. He said, "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me. All I ask is that you respect me as a human being."

Contrary to the Cross

James 2 "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality" (Jas. 2:1). James declares that the faith of Jesus Christ is contrary to partiality, prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Those two don't mix; they are like oil and water.

James says, "My brethren, do not hold *the* faith of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the article. James is not talking about personal faith. It is *the* faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. If you understand who He is, you would not be a racist. In one sense, James is talking simply about Jesus Christ, but notice that this begins a long discussion. At the end of the discussion, James says, "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas. 2:12-13). He ends the discussion by talking about the law of liberty, which is the law of love. How did God show His love toward us? How did God show His mercy toward us? The answer is, "God demonstrated His love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). In other words, racism is contrary to Christianity.

More specifically, it is contrary to the cross for the simple reason that when Jesus Christ hung on the cross, He paid for the sin of every individual in the world. How could anyone possibly understand that and be prejudice toward other human beings simply because of the color of their skin? Human beings are people for whom Christ died. That alone gives every individual value.

Ephesians 2 "Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh — who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands — that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:11-12). There is no greater divide among races than between the Jew and the Gentile in Palestine right now.

Now notice that Paul says, "But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made one, and is broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in the ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the indemnity" (Eph. 2:13-16). The cross destroys the enmity and separation of the races and brings them all together because Christ died for every single person.

Galatians 3 "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 neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 2:26-28). Obviously, this is talking about being in Christ, not about the population in general. However, the point is that Christianity brings the races together. In Christ, there is no distinction between male and female. There is no difference between slave and free. There is no division between a Jew and Gentile. At the foot of the cross, the ground is level.

So how can we, who know about grace, operate on the basis of race.

Summary: Racism is contrary to common sense, the creation of God, and the cross of Jesus Christ.

Personally, I feel deeply about this subject. I have felt deeply about it for a long time. Years ago, as I was driving home from preaching in another state, I came upon an accident. No sooner had I stop than the paramedics arrived. As I recall, a black man under the influence plowed into

the back of another car. He was injured, lying on the side of the road. The paramedics tried to put him on a stretcher, but being intoxicated and out of it, he struggled with them. The paramedics uttered some racial slurs and walked away. I was furious. I thought to myself, "All right, he is drunk, but he's a man. All right, he's not of your race, but he's a man for whom Christ died." Another man and I put the injured man on a stretcher and loaded him in the ambulance. This subject ought to stir us because it is so contrary to everything that is in the Scripture.

Do you think the black race is inferior? How are they inferior? Athletically? If you think that, you need to go to a ballgame. Intellectually? That issue was settled for me when I was 12 years old and read the biography of George Washington Carver. Today, all you have to do is remember Ben Carson, a neurosurgeon. You may not agree with all of the policies and politics of Barack Obama, but he is a graduate of Harvard. Spiritually? When I was an adjunct professor at Dallas Seminary, I was buddies with a student named Tony Evans. I called him my soul brother. He had more spiritual discernment than many white people I know. If you think black people are spiritually inferior, you need to listen to the testimonies coming out of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Charlotte, where they are saying, "We forgive him."

Are there differences between the races? Yes. There are cultural differences. Some are smarter than others, but that's true within every race. Differences do not mean racial inferiority.

I want to close with a question. Has God blessed you? Has God been merciful to you? My brother, who is a licensed therapist in Texas, says when he counsels married Christian couples who are not getting along or who are mistreating each other, he tells them, "You ought to treat each other like God treats you."