

During May and June, I am preaching through a sermon series called “How Long, O Lord?” about suffering, loss, lament, and trust. Suffering is inevitable in life, and there are many ways you can respond to suffering and loss, but the way that the Bible gives us is lament. Lament is “a prayer in pain that leads to trust,” as Mark Vroegop defines it in his book “Dark clouds, deep mercy.” It consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. In these movements, we resist the temptation to turn away from God in anger or to turn to other people or even addictions or substances to deal with our hurt. We refuse to stuff down our emotions, on the one hand, or to be overcome by them, on the other hand. We do not simply resign ourselves to what has happened to us as our fate, but we ask boldly for what it is we need. And in the end, we choose to trust in God, that whether or not He gives us what we ask for, he is still good, and still loves us, and can be trusted.

This morning I will be preaching on “Lamenting the sin of racism.” I recognize that by broaching this topic I am wading into perilous waters, as many who are listening may have either strong opinions on the subject or tangible experiences with racism that will affect how you hear what I have to say. For those of you who watched George Floyd murdered, many of you were sickened as you watched that happened and are crying out for justice and reform. And many of you undoubtedly identified with George Floyd, scared for your life, afraid that your life or the life of your children or someone you love may one day be taken like that. My goal this morning is not to deal comprehensively with the subject of racism but simply to look at what the Bible has to say about racism and why we need to reclaim the power of the gospel as the solution to the problem.

Racism is treating someone with prejudice or antagonism because of the racial or ethnic group they belong to. It’s treating someone as morally inferior or as less than human because of the color of their skin. Its close cousins are bigotry, discrimination, fear, and hatred. Most people these days would say that racism is wrong, but those who believe in God as the creator and the Bible as His Word have good reason to say it is wrong. Let me begin with two reasons:

1) All humans are made in God’s image

Genesis 1:26-27 - Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This is what is known as the (slide) **Imago Dei**. The Imago Dei doesn't mean that God looks like an old man with a white beard. The Imago Dei means that we are to image or represent God on earth in our moral, intellectual, spiritual, and governmental functions. It also means that we are all of immeasurable worth because we are not an accident but are created by God. This is critical to any discussion of racism as a Christian.

As Soong-Chan Rah wrote in his book "Prophetic Lament,"

In recent years, there have been a number of cases where black youth were killed and the gunmen were acquitted of murder charges. An appropriate and deep sense of distress emerged from many in the African American community, raising questions about the "worth" of young black men in American society.

Many of us from the majority culture don't know what that feels like. But if God has created us all in His image, then we all have immeasurable worth. Listen to the reasons God prohibits murder and even cursing out another human being:

Genesis 9:6 - *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*

James 3:9-10 - *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*

There would be no concept of human rights without Christianity, without this understanding of the image of God. The idea of human rights developed in Christian Europe in the late middle ages. This is surprising to many 21st century people who just take for granted that human rights is a given. But think back to Aristotle, who taught that some were fit to be slaves, and the more rational people were fit to be leaders. Think back to scientists of the 19th century who taught that the races had evolved differently, and that some were more highly evolved, while others were still very much like their ape ancestors. Human history apart from God is the record of one civilization after another oppressing other civilizations. Take away the Christian God, and you will have a hard time defending human rights and having grounds from which to argue against racism.

Racism is completely anti-Biblical because we are all made in the image of God.

2) All humans belongs to one family

This will blow many of your minds as well: race is a cultural construct. It is not a Biblical concept. Biblically, we are all one family, tracing our roots back to the same parents.

Malachi 2:10 - Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

Acts 17:26 - From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Now, this one family has many shades of skin color, many cultural expressions. The Biblical word “every nation” is ethnos, from which we get the term “ethnicity,” referring to nationality, language, culture, and sometimes religion. Biblically, we are all descendants of the same ancestors, members of one family, one race – the human race.

The concept of race, of categorizing people on the basis of their skin color, is a cultural construct, not a Biblical category. It is a made-up human term, created to divide and oppress.

3) The modern conception of race is a consequence of human sin, and was created to divide and oppress

Race and racism are products of the fall, not creations of God. Mankind rebelled against God, and as a result sin entered the world, expressing itself through division, hatred, greed, fear, and yes, racism. As Christians, we should not be surprised at racism. We should not be shocked when someone discriminates against another human being because of their appearance. It is just another expression of sinful humanity’s pride, hatred, and self-centeredness.

I tried to do some research on the origins of race, and this is what I learned. My understanding is that the modern understanding of race became more common in the 18th century, particularly with reference to Africans, Indians, and Europeans. By focusing on the physical differences between humans, Europeans created a new kind of social identity, with a natural hierarchy of all living things, wherein different racial groups were unequal, with innate and unalterable traits. And not surprisingly, Europeans declared that they were at the top of the natural hierarchy,

and that blacks and Indians belonged by nature at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

One of the most prominent scientists was **Samuel Morton**, who was known for a kind of science called craniometry in the 1830's. He measured the insides of crania collected from many populations and concluded that the difference in the size of the brain casing corresponded to their place in a divinely determined hierarchy. Caucasians, or whites, who had the largest brain casings, were the most intelligent race, following by East Asians (who he called Mongolians), then Southeast Asians (who he called Malay), then Native Americans, and finally, blacks or "Ethiopians." These ideas were adopted by the defenders of slavery as scientific proof for their sinful institution. As the Charleston Medical Journal stated after Dr. Morton's death, "We can only say that we of the South should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race"

Morton's ideas also influenced Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution taught that different groups or "races" of people evolved at different times and rates, so that some groups were more like their apelike ancestors than others. Leading evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould claimed, "*Biological arguments for racism may have been common before 1859, but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory.*" For example, the Australian Aborigines were considered the missing links between the apelike ancestor and the rest of mankind, which resulted in terrible prejudices and injustices towards the Australian Aborigines. Science may have its place, but in the hands of sinful men and women, it can be a dangerous and evil thing.

Reporting on research conducted on the concept of race, ABC News stated, "More and more scientists find that the differences that set us apart are cultural, not racial. Some even say that the word *race* should be abandoned because it's meaningless." The article went on to say that "we accept the idea of race because it's a convenient way of putting people into broad categories, frequently to suppress them—the most hideous example was provided by Hitler's Germany. And racial prejudice remains common throughout the world."

And more recently, those working on mapping the human genome announced that they had put together a draft of the entire sequence of the human genome, and the researchers had unanimously declared, there is only one race—the human race.

Racism exists because of our sinful, self-centered nature. Racial thinking, hatred, and bigotry are a product of the fall, created by fallen individuals looking to divide and oppress. It is not a Biblical construct.

So what are we to do about it? If you look at the answers provided by the world, it seems to come down to education, legislation – changing unjust laws - and doing good works like raising money or helping those in need. All three of those are important, but they are insufficient to actually change our society or eradicate racism. Law, education, and good works are important, but here is the thing: racism is an attitude of the heart, and even systemic racism arises out of the hearts of people who create the system. And law, education, and good works are powerless to change hearts.

Let me give two examples from our nation’s history:

In 1865, American slaves were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. But the next year, nine southern states passed vagrancy laws, making it illegal to not have a job, and they applied this law to black people, sending many freed slaves to prison. Eight of those states then made it legal for prisoners to be hired by plantation owners. And so, many slaves who had been freed found themselves imprisoned, and then sent to work on plantations, not as slaves, but as prisoners, treated even worse than before. Slavery may have been abolished, but the slave owners just found a way around the law.

Second example: in 1954 Jim Crow laws and the idea of “separate but equal” was struck down by the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. But in 1956, the Southern Manifesto was signed by the southern states, and 5 states passed 50 new Jim Crow Laws after 1954, ensuring that black people would continue to be second-class citizens in their states. (slide)

What is the point? Just laws are important, and education on racism is good, and good works are needed. But changing the laws does not change a person’s heart. You can change the law, making it harder for a racist to do racially motivated things, but you have not succeeded in eradicating racism. Any movement that attempts to change a society by the outside in will not succeed.

There is a better answer. And that answer is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Go back to that scene of George Floyd. Many of you, as you watched, identified with the witnesses, crying out for mercy, for justice. Others of you identified with

George Floyd, the victim, the oppressed. But the gospel dares to tell us that we all must also identify with the officer with his knee on the neck of George Floyd. Not that all white people need to see themselves as oppressors, but that all people are sinner, all are guilty before a holy God, and all deserve eternal punishment. Listen to what Jesus said:

Matthew 5:21-22 - "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Or how about this one:

1 John 3:15 - Anyone who hates his brother is a **murderer**, and you know that no **murderer** has eternal life in him.

The gospel dares to confront us with the reality that our hands are not clean. We are neither an innocent victim or a righteous bystander. We are sinners, with hatred and arrogance in our hearts that makes us just as capable of murder as that police officer. Let me say that again: the gospel holds up a mirror to us and shows us that we are sinners, with hatred and arrogance in our hearts that makes us just as capable of murder as that police officer. You see, **the problem with demanding justice is that if God were to give us the justice we deserved, we would be cast into Hell for all eternity.**

The gospel begins with the bad news that we are sinners, just as wicked as that police officer was. But the good news is that Jesus Christ took the punishment that we deserved and died in our place to make us right with God:

Romans 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul knew this from personal experience:

1 Timothy 1:13-16 - Even though I was once a **blasphemer** and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The

grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Everyone is in the same boat before God, no matter our ethnicity or any other factor. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. But God has provided us with that Savior in Jesus Christ:

Romans 3:22-24 - *There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

4) The gospel creates one united family, adopted by God

And now, as Christ has brought us peace with God, He has also brought us together across all barriers into one family, adopted by our heavenly Father. Paul writes to Jews and Gentiles, different ethnicities in Ephesians to tell them what this gospel means:

Ephesians 2:13-18 - *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

In other words, you are now one family in Christ, regardless of your ethnicity. You have peace with God, and now you belong to each other.

Ephesians 4:1-6 - *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were*

called to one hope when you were called-- ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. We are all one family:

Matthew 12:46-50 - *While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

What are the implications of the gospel? In Christ, a new family, a new humanity, a new race has been created. The dividing walls have fallen and we are one in the Lord.

Colossians 3:11 - *Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

The gospel works from the inside out. As the gospel transforms the hearts and minds of individuals, it has the power to eventually transform the culture as well. In the days of the early church, it was common to own slaves - not race-based slavery like in America, but to own those who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts. But as Peter H. Davids writes:

The church never adopted a rule that converts had to give up their slaves. Christians were not under law but under grace. Yet we read in the literature of the second century and later of many masters who upon their conversion freed their slaves. The reality stands that it is difficult to call a person a slave during the week and treat them like a brother or sister in the church. Sooner or later the implications of the kingdom they experienced in church seeped into the behavior of the masters during the week. Paul did in the end create a revolution, not one from without, but one from within, in which a changed heart produced changed behavior and through that in the end brought about social change. This change happened wherever the kingdom of God was expressed through the church, so the world could see that faith in Christ really was a transformation of the whole person.

This is a theme throughout the New Testament, as they strive for unity across all ethnicities in the early church. In fact, Paul confronts Peter for his racism in Galatians:

Galatians 2:11-12 - *When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹² Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

And this task must be continued today. As we come to faith in Jesus, we must lay aside anything that is contrary to what it means to be a human in the image of God.

Romans 12:2 - *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

If our worldly ideas of race contradict what the Bible tells us, then we lay aside those teachings and walk in the reality that we are united across anything that might divide as one family of God. Finding our primary identity in anything other than our status as a child of God and a member of His family, whether it be our ethnicity, our appearance, our net worth, our talents and abilities, or anything else, is idolatry.

5) As members of God's kingdom, we must oppose racism and injustice wherever we find it

The truth is that the church's hands are far from clean when it comes to racism. Throughout the church's history, and undoubtedly even in our own church, we have gotten Biblical teaching wrong and prioritized self-interest, pride, fear, comfort, or even economics over God's interests and love for neighbor.

Soong-Chan Rah, in his book *Prophetic Lament*, writes that:

The first European slave ship that arrived in Africa was under the command of Henry, the Christian prince of Portugal. When the slaves were brought to the shore to be taken into the hold of the ship, Prince Henry, following his deepest Christian instincts, ordered a tithe to be given to God through the church. This act of praise and thanksgiving to God served to justify the royal rhetoric by which Prince Henry claimed his motivation was the salvation of the soul of the heathen.

In more recent decades, there were Christian colleges and preachers who banned interracial marriages, using theological arguments based on God scattering people after the Tower of Babel to justify their position that God meant for the races to stay separate.

There were Christians who justified slavery by appealing to the Bible. But praise God, the most ardent abolitionists were Christians like John Wesley, William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Newton, who recognized that every human being was created in the image of God and that slavery was profoundly anti-Biblical and wrong.

We are to be a people passionate about God's justice:

***Micah 6:8** - He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

We would be wise to walk humbly: to listen, to have compassion, to comfort, and to understand. We would be wise to love mercy: to not to seek vengeance, but to be quick to love and forgive and leave the vengeance to God. And we would do right to also seek out justice where there is injustice, for our God loves justice. We know that society will not change from the outside in, but it is still right to seek to change unjust laws, to educate where there is ignorance, and to do good to those who are oppressed.

Consider UConn's own Maya Moore, inspired by her Christian faith to give up a year of playing basketball at the highest level to spend her time and money on behalf of a man named Jonathan Irons who was wrongfully convicted, so that justice might be done.

As Bruce Waltke said, *"The very definition of righteous people is that they disadvantage themselves to advantage others, while the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves."*

Who would be willing to give up their own advantages in order to advantage others? Only those who call themselves followers of Jesus:

***Philippians 2:3-8** - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Your attitude should be*

the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

6) In the end, there will be perfect justice and a diverse unity

Revelation 7:9-10 *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*

In the end, men and women from every ethnicity will be gathered as the redeemed family of God to worship Jesus. Until that day, let us love one another in a way that reflects that vision.