

Why the Bible Doesn't Talk about "Racism" (and What It has to Say to Us About It Anyway)
Sermon Series: The Bible and Racial Justice
Wednesday Meditation | August 19, 2020
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Hello, and welcome to the first meditation in our series: The Bible and Racial Justice. Today's topic is "Why the Bible Doesn't Talk about Racism (and What It has to Say to Us Anyway)."

If you go to your favorite Bible website and run a search for the word "racism," you won't find it anywhere in our scriptures. Why? Because the idea of "race" – what we today mean by that word when we talk about "racism" – that idea didn't exist when the books of the Bible were being written.

The idea of "race" that we use today developed alongside the Atlantic Slave Trade. Here's how many historians say it happened:

First: it's very possible that modern racism began *not* the way we usually think about it: Europeans meeting people with darker skin, having weird feelings and judgments about them, and then those "racist feelings" eventually led to a system of race-based slavery. Some say it's way more likely that Europeans were already participating in a slave trade which eventually morphed into a race-based system.¹

And though I'm not an expert, the facts seem to be back that up. Here's a brief rundown of what we know:

When the Atlantic Slave Trade first began, in the 1400s, the big, official explanation for why enslaving African people and selling them all over the world was morally OK – or even morally good – was that these "heathen" Africans would be made Christian through their enslavement. So, at least officially, it was all about religion – not about skin color or race. (But remember: really, this is all about building up wealth – the whole conversion thing was a way to make it seem ok.)

Later, when – by a miracle I cannot comprehend -- many slaves did become Christian, the rationale shifted. Now, they deserved to be enslaved because their ancestors had been "heathen." From there, the reasons for enslaving people with dark skin or for treating them as less-than-human became less and less about where they were from or their religion – and more about the category we call "race." Some Europeans and Americans even believed that people with dark skin had been cursed by God, in the curse that God placed on Noah's son, Ham, and his descendents (Gen. 9:20-27).²

Eventually, we start seeing laws and institutions that treat people differently based on skin color, like laws banning a black person from marrying a white person. In the 1680s the government of the Colony of Virginia passed a law saying that only Europeans could be citizens of the colony. In 1691 that same group were the first to – in official, legal writing -- use the word "white" to refer to those European citizens.³

1 "How Race Was Made," ep. 2 of *Seeing White* from the podcast *Scene on Radio* (1 March 2017).
<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-32-how-race-was-made-seeing-white-part-2/> Accessed 19 Aug 2020.

2 George M. Fredrickson, "Thehttp://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-01.htm Historical Origins and Development of Racism," from PBS's *RACE: The Power of an Illusion*." (2003). Accessed 19 Aug 2020.

So somewhere between the 1400s and the late 1600s, the concept of “race” that we have today was formed.

And my point with that all of that history is: that whole process of creating our modern idea of “race” – it started almost 1,400 years after the books of the Bible had all been written. So, very unfortunately, we can’t just look up “racism” in our Bible concordance for a quick word of God on how we Christians should be responding to all the conversations and movements going on around racism right now.

But I think that God does still use our scriptures to speak to us on issues of racism – we just have to think a little more deeply and listen a little more closely for that word.

We can start by taking a step back and asking: “What *do* we mean when we talk about “racism”? What are the ideas and beliefs and images that swirl around in our brains when we use that word?

For many of us, the first thing we think about when we hear the word “racism” is a personal prejudice that leads to rude, oppressive, or violent actions. But we also know that that’s only one affect that racism has in our society, right? Racism affects our world in a whole bunch of other ways, too. In ways that are not just individual actions or even patterns of actions – but also ways that are built into our laws and our city planning and our entertainment industry and our healthcare system and on and on. (We plan to offer another meditation all about that.)

So, when we talk about racism, we are, yes, talking about individual feelings and actions that are driven by prejudice. And we are also talking about the divisions that we build and officially establish between groups of people. And we are talking about the norms and the laws and “the way things are” that treat one group of people differently than another. And we are talking about the ways that laws and rules and patterns put in place but people in the past – even the ones that have since been overturned – the way that those old institutions still have affects on the lives of people of color and white people today.

And all those kinds of things have been going on in the world throughout history -- just for reasons that weren’t based in black and white races. And our scriptures can give us guidance about all those things – all those things about how we treat one another, what social norms we participate in, the types of laws and customs we set in place – how we as Christians analyze and respond to the “ways of the world.”

We know that “race” and “racism” are “ways of the world” and not from God. We know that just based on human reasoning, since the idea of race didn’t come about till fairly recently and we can study how humans made it up. But we also know this because of what God has revealed to us about God’s will and God’s vision for Creation.

When we read the books of the Old Testament, we hear beautiful prophetic visions of God’s kingdom, where people of all nations will be brought into God’s fold, and God’s house “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is. 56:6-8).

In the Gospels we see Jesus ministering to people of different cultures and religions. He healed a centurion’s servant (Luke 7) – and that centurion would have been from a different country, culture, religion – and seen as the enemy. His servant probably was also. He spoke with the Samaritan woman

3 “Made in America,” ep. 3 of *Seeing White* from the podcast *Scene on Radio* (16 March 2017). <http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-33-made-in-america-seeing-white-part-3/> Accessed 19 Aug 2020.

at the well – another longtime enemy of the Jewish people (John 4). He even held up a Samaritan as a good example in that famous parable (Luke 10:25-37). Not to mention the other social boundaries Jesus crossed: hanging out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other public sinners. Calling fisherman – not priests – to be the leaders of God’s coming kingdom. Jesus was all about trampling those human-made divisions so that God’s will could be done, so that God’s kingdom would come.

And remember the Day of Pentecost, when people from many nations heard the Gospel news in their own language, by the desire and power of God (Acts 2).

So it should be no surprise that when Christianity got started, and the people of this new sect gathered by God into a new way of living, and they were trying to figure out what it meant to be part of the “Kingdom of God” that Jesus preached about, and these books and letters were being written to help guide them in the will of God – it should be no surprise that during that time God’s vision of a world where all peoples came together was challenging a lot of things going on in the world, and a lot of things they were used to, even traditions that they thought had come from God.

The biggest example of this in the New Testament is the debate about the long-standing division between Jews and non-Jews (or “Gentiles”). Now for us today, this is not something we even really think about. I’m not Jewish, neither of my parents are Jewish – but there’s no question about whether not I can be a Christian. That thought doesn’t even cross our minds.

But the question of the division or relationship between Jews and Gentiles – that comes up in the New Testament over and over and over again. It was *the* hot topic issue of the early church. The thing you wouldn’t bring up during family dinner because you were worried about offending Grandma or about Uncle Jimmy going off on one of his rants again. The Church called conferences to deal with that Jew-Gentile issue (see Acts 15, Gal. 2:1-10).

There were a lot of everyday issues could be impacted by the response to that issue. Like, could Jews eat with Gentiles? For some Jewish communities, refusing to eat with Gentiles was an act of devotion to God, which meant that eating with Gentiles showed a lack of devotion and was frowned upon (see Gal. 2:11-14).⁴ At the time, sharing a meal with someone was a sign of acceptance of that person – that’s why it held so much importance.

So imagine a new Church community, where the Jewish Christians would refuse to eat with the Gentile Christians for religious reasons. Would that turn the Gentiles into second-class citizens within the Church? How would they handle the fact that Communion – a shared meal – was an essential part of worship?

But the big question was: could Gentiles even become Christians and become part of the Chosen People of God *as Gentiles*? Or did they first have to convert to Judaism? First of all, whether a foreigner could convert to Judaism at all was a hotly-debated question: for many people, being Jewish was a matter of ethnicity.⁵

4 Sheila Briggs, commentary on Galatians in *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 313.

5 Daniel R. Schwartz, “Jewish Movements of the New Testament Period,” *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 540-544.

But OK, if foreigners could become Jews – then they would have to follow Jewish laws? Would the men have to be circumcised, since that was the sign of a person joining God’s covenant with the Jews, and that original covenant was the basis for the the new covenant in Jesus? (And if you think that sounds crazy – remember it is the main topic of the book of Galatians.)

After years of debate, the Church finally arrived at an answer to these questions. God did fully welcome in Gentiles *as Gentiles*⁶ – and so should everyone else. As St. Paul wrote:

Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith [not by the work of converting to Judaism], and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, [saying]: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal. 3:8-9).

Or, in his much catchier line: “There is no longer Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

And so Christians were called on to live together in radical, mutually supportive, accepting community, knowing that all were equal in the sight of God.

And those who weren’t Christian? Well, they were still loved by God, right (Rom. 5:8)? And they were potential Christians (1 Cor. 7:12-16). And didn’t Jesus tell his followers to love our neighbors - of any nationality or religion (Luke 10:25-37)? Didn’t Jesus say to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48)?

So there’s wasn’t – and there isn’t – really any room for creating divisions, or hate, or oppression, or ignoring the suffering of our neighbors. Christians are called instead to actively work for the good of our neighbors of all kinds.⁷ That’s what “love your neighbor” means.

And in the early Church we see that this meant learning to see people in a new way; unlearning old prejudices and stereotypes about other groups of people; learning to behave in a new way; changing old traditions and customs and habits; making other people angry; being looked down upon.

God did not draw boundaries between those groups of people, and Christians were called to live in a way that made sure those human-made boundaries couldn’t exist among them.

The Church also strove to erase all that divided poor people and rich people (see Acts 4:32-35; 1 Cor. 11:17-33; James 2:1-7). In some ways it strove to take down boundaries between men and women, such as by having female leadership in the Church (see Acts 2:17-18; Rom. 16:1-16).⁸

Was the church perfect at all this? No. Divisions persisted. Women were eventually barred from leadership. The early Church didn’t challenge slavery itself (Col. 3:22-24; Eph. 6:5-8). Much of the

6 Brad R. Braxton in the introduction to his commentary on Galatians in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 333-334.

7 See Martin Luther’s teachings on the 10 Commandments in his *Small Catechism*.

8 For examples outside of Scripture, see the early Christian writings *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* or *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* or check out early Christian women like Macrina or Melania the Elder. More information and links to these sources can be found in Karen King, “Women in Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries,” from PBS Frontline’s *From Jesus to Christ* (April 1998).

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/women.html> Accessed 19 Aug 2020.

Church came to hate not Gentiles but Jewish people in various times throughout the centuries – including our very own Martin Luther.⁹ And the human Church has done its share of building up its own divisions, establishing its own systems of oppression.

But what our scriptures set before us is the will of God that we pray will “be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It shows us the way of living we should be striving for as Christians.

And what we see in our scriptures is that God’s community is without division based on class, race, gender, country of origin and even – we should remember – past sin. What our scriptures teach us is that as Christians we ought to be living like we’re in God’s community even when we are also living in the communities of this world (you know, we’re “in the world, but not of it”).

So is the “racism” we talk about today talked about in the Bible? No.

But should Christians care about racism and its related issues? Yes.

Christians, we should care; we must care; God calls us to care; God demands us to care in ways we as the Church throughout time have not lived up to.

Because while today’s issues are different than the issues of biblical times, God has still revealed to us something about how we Christians should be responding. And because of our faith, we ought to be empowered challengers of racism in all its forms and affects.

These divisions between people of different “races” are not from God; they are against God’s will.

All these forms of oppression and individual pain that flow from the divisions are not from God; they are against God’s will.

All the white Church’s apathy and “being polite” and staying quiet on issues of racism is not from God; it is against God’s will.

So, dear Church, we know what we have to do. But are we will willing to answer God’s call and do it?

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, in your mercy and kindness, no thought of ours is left unnoticed, no desire or concern ignored. You have proven that blessings abound when we fall on our knees in prayer, and so we turn to you in our hour of need.

Surrounded by violence and cries for justice, we hear your voice telling us what is required, “Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi 6:8). Fill us with your mercy so that we, in turn, may be merciful to others.

Strip away pride, suspicion, and racism so that we may seek peace and justice in our communities.

9 For instance, Martin Luther wrote a treatise called “On the Jews and their Lies.” The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has officially rejected Luther’s anitsemite writings (see the ELCA’s Jewish Relations page at <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Jewish-Relations>)

Strengthen our hearts so that they beat only to the rhythm of your holy will. Flood our path with your light as we walk humbly toward a future filled with encounter and unity.

Be with us, O Lord, in our efforts, for only by the prompting of your grace can we progress toward virtue. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁰

Recommended for Further Learning:

The podcast *Scene on Radio*'s series *Seeing White* (aired 2017). <http://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>

The book *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi (also available in versions for young adults and young children)

10 Prayer from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (<https://mosaic.shms.edu/prayer-for-peace-in-our-communities>)