

TOPIC: RACISM

Few issues impact government and discussion in the public square like racism. Undoubtedly, racist views have been used to justify horrendous acts of oppression, not the least of which is the institution of slavery. The Bible addresses the issue in a very simple and straightforward way. Oppressing or exploiting others is sin. Treating people prejudicially is sin. John 3:16 notes that God loves *the world*—as He loves *all*, we should too. Romans 2:11 states that “God does not show favoritism,” and we should not either. Jesus said we should “love our neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31), therefore, we should treat all with dignity and respect. Following these simple precepts is the pathway to addressing racism.

The Bible on racism

Elements of racism are referenced in the Old and New Testaments but are never condoned by God. Scripture notes that the Egyptians pressed the Hebrews into service in the years leading up to the birth of Moses (Exodus 1). Historians note that in ancient Egypt, people groups that had a very dark or light skin pigment were considered of lesser value.

The principle of *different than* equating to *lesser than* was widespread in many parts of the ancient world. Greek, Babylonian, Persian, and Roman armies each subjugated the Hebrew people at different times in the 600 years leading up to the birth of Christ, justifying their actions via an ethos that viewed other people groups as lesser and thus, not deserving of equal rights or treatment. Though skin color is the most common way to prompt and target racist behavior, there are also many subtle ways to express racism.

For example, in Jesus’ day, the Galilean dialect (having a slight Greek tone) made the religious elite in Jerusalem look down on those living in the northern district of Galilee. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans—though visually identical to the Hebrews living just miles away, the Samaritans were repudiated by the Hebrews on religious grounds. These historical realities were not pleasing to God. Genesis 1:27 notes that God created humanity in His image.

In the eyes of God, there is no distinction or special value in one race over the others. God considers the condition of the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7 says that “the Lord does not see as man sees;

man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” We are “not to show favoritism” (1 Timothy 5:21) and, as John wrote, we are to “...love one another for love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

Racism in the modern era

Unfortunately, racism did not die out with the United Kingdom and America’s abolition of slavery in the 19th century. Hitler’s move to eradicate the Jews was both genocide and an expression of racism. Russia’s Stalin, China’s Mao Zedong, Cambodia’s Pol Pot, and Uganda’s Idi Amine were responsible for racist edicts and orders resulting in the deaths of millions in the 20th century.

Today, racism takes less overt forms. Racism is present if, on matters associated with race or culture, one is subjected to higher interest rates on loans, tiered qualification criteria for applications, missed business opportunities, or excluded from clubs or communities. This is contrary to the will of God—the Apostle John referred to it as a form of hate, blindness, and darkness. 1 John 2:11 states: *“Anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”*

Interestingly, the door to racism swings both ways. It is also wrong to overly compensate and extend preferential treatment on criteria other than competence, character, and experience. In recent years, equity-based (rather than merit-based) decisions regarding hiring policies, promotions, raises, grants, and scholarships have unfairly advantaged some—this, too, is contrary to God’s will. Proverbs 24:23 notes: *“...To show partiality...is not good.”*

Jesus’ example

Jesus did much to break down barriers and stereotypes regarding treating various people groups with malice or prejudice. A few examples follow:

- Jesus ministered in Galilee, a region viewed as inferior by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Matt. 4:13-16 states: *“Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, to Galilee of the Gentiles—”*

- Jesus ministered in Samaria, to a people considered by most Jews as inferior (John 4:4; Mark 1:14). *Also, Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan commends a person most Jews would have been quick to curse (Luke 10:25-37),*
- Jesus ministered to women, whom many religious leaders considered as having second-class status (John 4:7-26, Luke 7:12-13, Luke 11:27-28).
- Jesus ministered to the Romans (he healed the centurion's servant in Matt. 8:5-13).
- Jesus ministered to Zaccheaus, a tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) and in Mark 2:13-14, called Levi (also a tax collector) to be his disciple. Most Jews viewed tax collectors as unclean, and unworthy.

Jesus extended love to all and treated all with respect. On this subject, He said, *"Love one another as I have loved you"* (John 13:34).

Our calling as Christians

The book of Acts (and the Epistles) profile a tumultuous time in history—when Jews were told to cross ethnic and cultural lines and take God's message of grace to foreign lands (something not previously done in Hebrew history). For a Jew, the call to love a Samaritan or Roman as yourself was a huge ask. But the disciples of Christ were faithful, the Roman world was evangelized, and the Gentile world has been phenomenally blessed by God for the last 2000 years. Christians today are to follow the example of the first-century leaders of the Church. We are to love all, show favoritism to none, and welcome into the kingdom brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world. Christians should keep the following in mind:

- Know that all are equal and should treat people with equal respect. We are all one under the banner of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:13 states: *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."*
- We are not to make judgments based on culture or race. 1 Samuel 16:7 notes: *"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'"*

- We are to know that the different nations were established by God. Therefore, the people of those nations should not be judged as having lesser or greater value. Acts 17:26 notes: *“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”*
- Colossians 3:25 condemns wrongdoing, and lists “favoritism” as a sin to be avoided.
- Ephesians 4:32 notes that we are to be “kind and compassionate” to all, forgiving all as we have been forgiven.
- We are not to “mistreat or oppress a foreigner...” (Exod. 22:21).
- We are to remember that we are “all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28 notes: *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*
- In James we read that we “must not show favoritism” or discriminate. We read: *“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”* (James 2:1,4).
- We are to remember that in heaven, there will be people from “every nation, tribe, people, and language.” Revelation 7:9 notes: *“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 before the Lamb...”*

God will not bless racism

- Nations and systems built on racism may burn bright for a season, but never endure. Building a kingdom or enterprise by exploiting or treating people unfairly dishonors God and invites His judgment. In Scripture, those who exploit or harm the vulnerable are warned that God sees and will hold offenders to account. Scripture specifically mentions children (Luke 18:16-17) women (Lev. 20:9), widows and orphans (Isa. 1:17), the poor (Prov. 21:13), and foreigners (Zech. 7:10) as being under the watchful eye of God. Remember, God loves all and calls His people to love all as well. Scripture notes that God speaks to the heart and through His Word, prompts His people to lead with love and extend compassion to all. James warns that those who resist the prompting to do right are mired in sin. We read:

“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”

David wrote that refusing to confess sin weighs heavy on the body and spirit. Psalm 32:3-5 notes: *“When I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin.”*

If you have demonstrated racism in your dealings with others (or in your thoughts about others), confess your sin to Jesus, commit to repent and change, and set things right as appropriate and possible. Be the best witness for the Lord that you can be by letting the love and kindness of Christ shine bright (to all) through you.

Overcoming racism

The best way to overcome racism is to focus on two things: 1) how God loves you and 2) how God loves others. In contemplating how God loves you, consider:

- David, who was called “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) was amazed that God would love any human. He wrote: *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”* (Psalm 8:3-4). Why should God extend grace and mercy to a willful humanity? Scripture notes that “**all** have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and that “**all** of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” (Isa. 64:6). Of humanity Scripture notes that “none are worthy, no not one” (Rom. 3:10). Yet, God has “lavished His love on us” (1 John 3:1). All humans are unworthy of God’s favor and affection. As such, no human should consider himself better than another.

Of how God loves others, we should consider

- Jesus came for all and died for all. Paul wrote: *“And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again.”*
(2 Cor. 5:15)
- Jesus’ ministry was marked by intentional acts of kindness to those most Jews would have shunned and considered unworthy. This included showing mercy to the Gerasene demoniac

(Mark 5), the woman at the well (John 4), the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11), the chief tax collector perched up in a tree (Luke 19:1-10), and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-8) to name a few. Jesus' teachings on the evil of preferential treatment (Luke 14), and His example of ministering to those deemed unworthy by the masses, show us the importance of treating all with dignity and respect.