

EMBRACE

a repentance and study on race, society, and culture

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

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I: TALKING ABOUT RACE

It's difficult to talk about race in America; there seem to be landmines everywhere! We live in a nation that was built upon slavery and oppression. This legacy touches every aspect of our society and culture; it is so pervasive that many of us are unable to see it nor acknowledge the full scope of its effects today. Our nation has largely ignored our nation's sin. We have not recognized nor properly addressed our complicity in perpetuating the systems of racism and injustice in our society.

Our country is in the midst of a social and moral awakening, and we, as followers of Jesus, must respond. As we are confronted with the calls for justice in the cries of the Black¹ community, the prophet Isaiah's response is instructive:

"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"²

Whether or not we grew up in America,³ none of us will come out of these discussions unscathed. The gospel calls us to repent — both individually and corporately. Some of these discussions will leave us uncomfortable, undeniably guilty, appalled, and in grief. They will not always end on a happy note — and we may learn that there is good in the practice of lament. All the same, we are called to love one another despite our differences — even if we've experienced violence or pain.

BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE

Paul writes from prison to the church in Ephesus saying,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.⁴

Christians are not Republican or Democrat; conservative or liberal, right or left. As the church, we are called to bear with one another because we have one God. Sometimes our attempts to engage merely result in argument — getting someone to adopt *our* perspective — and we don't rest until we have "won." But this "victory" is rarely achieved and often results in a posture where we demonize people who don't see the world as we do. Internally we ask, "How can they say those things?! Can't they see how absurd they're being?" and we set our hearts against them, solidifying the prejudices we already hold and widening our divisions. Paul pleads with us to pursue a different end.

¹ At the time of this writing, the United States is reckoning with the video of George Floyd's death and the growing Black Lives Matter movement. While the Black community is explicitly mentioned, the Bible's calls for justice apply to other marginalized groups as well.

² Isaiah 6:5.

³ or were raised in a culture that espoused anti-Blackness

⁴ Ephesians 4:1-6.

It is easy to polarize, demonize, and retreat to the comfort of our echo chambers; Christians are called to strive for peace. Peace is not a state that comes naturally; we cannot wait for it to “just happen.” Peace takes care, intentionality, and a gospel-driven commitment to love one another deeply. Paul exhorts the church in Rome:

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.⁵

Just as Christ, in his great love and compassion, entered the world taking the form of humanity, we are called to enter into the world of others with love and compassion. As Paul exhorts the church, live in harmony with one another, bearing with one another in love.

COMPASSION + THE ART OF LISTENING

In order to have and show compassion, we must be able and willing to listen to one another. But many of us struggle to listen well. The following is a list of helps to guide us as we seek to listen and dialogue with one another.

1. **Be fully present when someone is speaking.** Put away and minimize distractions: texts, newsfeeds, smartwatches, anything with interrupting notifications. And do not try to formulate a response before someone has finished speaking.
2. **Seek deep understanding.** Listen with curiosity, patience, and humility. Do not assume you already know or understand what the speaker is going to say. Even if you believe you've “heard this before,” ask questions seeking clarity. One common practice is called *reflecting back* what you hear: “Are you saying that _____”, “What I heard you say was _____”, “Did you mean that _____”. Allow them to confirm or clarify what you reflect back to them.
3. **Give positive nonverbal feedback.** Let the speaker know you are listening; this may take the form of nods, “mhm”s, eye contact, etc. Nonverbal forms of communication can help build trust, especially to those who often feel ignored and marginalized. However, let this feedback be *genuine*; people can often spot false and empty feedback; they often can tell if you're not giving them your full attention.
4. **Listen before you relate.** Sometimes in conversation and discussion we make the mistake of relating too quickly. We are too eager to relate or show understanding and rush to insert ourselves into conversation. Unfortunately, this often results in a change from 1 person sharing and 1 person listening, to 2 people sharing and 0 persons listening. Sometimes you can ask, “Is there more you'd like to share?” or even encourage them with, “Tell me more about that” before jumping in.
5. **It is not about being right.** If a conversation gets heated over what is “right” or “wrong,” consider (or even better, ask!) *why* one holds the positions they do. Sometimes we may need to articulate why something even matters to us! What is at stake? What do we fear? What are we protecting? What vulnerabilities are revealed (in them or in us)?

⁵ Romans 12:16-18.

This list is by no means exhaustive. We can grow in the art of listening by practice and learning from others. In a community that bears with one another in love and seeks to live in harmony, we must be committed to building relationships and trust. Yet, there will doubtless be times when we will make mistakes — and that's okay.

SAYING THE WRONG THING

One of our biggest fears is saying the wrong thing when discussing race. This fear often paralyzes us from engaging in the conversation; our desire to not be branded as the enemy, nor perceived as uninformed, ignorant, or racist keeps us from seeking God's righteousness. We hope that the discussion will continue without us as we hide and blend with the background, hoping to reemerge when all is settled. But attempting to ignore or stand on the sidelines with regard to racism is akin to hiding behind the curtains of a burning house. Ignoring the discussion or acting as if it is not a problem only solidifies the status quo and normalizes the pain that many experience.

The truth is that all of us will say the wrong thing at some point. A wrong word or even an insensitive tone may lead to passionate disagreements and painful conflict. These encounters can be traumatic, and we may want to label them as "that time I messed up" or "that time someone blew up at me." But it is *how we respond* to our errors that reveal the shape of our hearts.

Does the tarnishing of our image paralyze us from pursuing justice or do we recognize that Christ has freed us to grow from our mistakes in pursuit of justice and peace? Do we hear the voice of condemnation saying, "You've failed at being and doing good." or do we hear the voice of Christ who says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."?⁶

GRACE TO LOVE

There is grace for us — grace that frees us from ourselves to pursue righteousness and justice. Grace enables us to repent from being people overly concerned with ourselves to people who are more concerned for others and work for their good. Christ called his disciples to love; it is this selfless, giving, and sacrificial love that marks us to the world as his own.⁷

This is a worthy calling and work. A work that calls us to deeply and honestly examine ourselves, our community, and our world, and pray for the Spirit to give us strength and courage to do the hard and painful work we have before us.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:9.

⁷ John 13:34-35

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Paul calls the church to bear with one another in love, but this is much easier to say than to do. What opinions and views do you have a hard time bearing with in others? How does Paul's words from prison in Ephesians 4 challenge you to a deeper and more robust love?
2. Are you a good listener? Do other people think you're a good listener (ask for others' honest opinion... but be prepared!)? What are some areas that you can work on in order to better listen and understand the experiences and pains of others?
3. How can we learn to make room for others to share their perspective on race, culture, and society? Does it matter who is *right*? Why or why not?
4. Share with one another the fears and/or anxieties you may have when talking about race. Listen to one another and ask questions in order to better articulate our concerns. What do we need to preach to ourselves as we endeavor in this difficult work? Where can we regularly look to see grace at work in our weakness?

Loving Father, give us the courage to be honest about ourselves. Give us strength to enter into this good and challenging work to bring righteousness and justice on earth as it is in heaven. We ask for the fellowship of your Holy Spirit to give us boldness to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. Open our hearts and our hands to receive the grace you give us through your Son. We ask this in his name. Amen.

2: A VISION FOR DIVERSITY

ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN SCRIPTURE

While the Bible does not specify an ethnicity in the creation narrative, it does acknowledge the different ethnicities and cultures in the descendants of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 10, we find the reference to “their clans, their language, their lands, and their nations.”⁸ We see that this diversification was a gift — a result of God’s grace upon them recorded in the account of Babel.⁹

In the account of the Tower of Babel, the peoples of the earth said to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, *lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*” This was in direct rebellion against God’s *repeated* instruction to “multiply and fill the earth.”¹⁰ At Babel, the people rejected God’s good purposes to fill the earth and pursued their own sense of good. Thus God, in an act of grace, “confused their language”¹¹ so they would not destroy themselves nor limit their reflection of God’s manifold/diverse glory in filling the earth.

Unfortunately, our sinful nature took these differences, which saved us from alienating ourselves from God, and used them to alienate ourselves from one another. The witness of history and scripture speaks of nation rising against nation and. The same desire present at Babel to “make a name for ourselves as one people” persisted in each people group wanting to be “great” by looking down on others. Israel marked others as *Gentiles*; the Gospels highlight the culturally marginalized and despised *Samaritans*. Jesus often challenged these assumptions about Gentiles and Samaritans in his teachings.

RACISM AND JESUS

In John 4, we find Jesus meeting with a Samaritan woman (who would have had an extremely low position on the social ladder). She was also morally compromised through her relationships with men, yet Jesus did not consider his own social or moral standing to be a barrier to engaging her with love and dignity. In their ethnic and socially charged conversation,¹² Jesus tells her that a time is coming when divisions will cease and the world will recognize his disciples by their love for one another; God’s people would be united in the love that Christ would share with his people. The legacy of division that started at Babel would be undone bringing worshippers together in spirit and in truth.

⁸ Genesis 10:5, 20, 31

⁹ Though the account of Babel is recorded in chapter 11 after the table of nations previously quoted in chapter 10, it does not mean that it happened chronologically after chapter 10. Genesis frequently records introductory accounts to summarize the end results of a period of time before getting into the details of how the results came to be; chapter 10 is an example of such a summary.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:28, 6:1, 8:17, 9:1,7.

¹¹ Genesis 11:7. The word rendered “confused” in our translation of this passage is more frequently rendered “mixed” or “mingled”; it is used in reference to the act of “mixing” oil to bread or flour to enhance its flavor. It is also used to “anoint” someone with oil; the verb often conveys something *positive* being done in contrast to the negative connotations of “confuse”

¹² John 4:21-24. It is charged because it was a cultural taboo for men to speak with women alone, let alone a Samaritan woman (see verses 8, 9, and 27)!

In Jesus, the curse of our divisions begins to unravel. At Pentecost the gospel was proclaimed in every language to a multitude coming from the nations.¹³ After hearing the message, they were “cut to the heart”¹⁴ and joined the church. This radical inclusion across ethnic and cultural lines was a mark of the early church. While the church continues to experience *some* of this unity today, she is still a long way off from being the church that Christ will ultimately perfect through the power of his Spirit.

THE BIBLE SEES COLOR

We get a glimpse of this perfection in the book of Revelation, where the text describes a diverse worshipping community: “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”¹⁵ The consummation of all history depicts a scene where cultures, nations, and languages are explicitly mentioned. The grand narrative of history does *not* erase our cultural distinctions. Instead, these descriptors in the text glorify God by illustrating the expansive honor, glory, and power that are due to him. It celebrates our cultural differences because they are *good*, not characteristics to be erased or ignored. In the “Pastoral Letter on Racism”¹⁶ adopted by the 32nd General Assembly of the PCA, we find that these distinctives “are not irrelevant... and are not defining categories that prohibit unity in the worship, fellowship and mission of the Body of Christ... and [are] included in the distinctive and eternal celebration of God’s work through the ages.” Scripture calls us to celebrate our differences, not erase them.

NOT AN END IN ITSELF

While scripture affirms the goodness and beauty of diversity, it does not seek it as an end in itself. Recently, Shai Linne, an American east coast rapper and poet, expressed this truth, saying: “Ethnic diversity is not virtuous in and of itself. Hell is a very diverse place. The most glorious expression of ethnic diversity is a redeemed humanity united around the beauty of Jesus Christ, whose blood ransomed people for God from every tribe, language, people & nation.”¹⁷ The goodness and wholeness of creation, marred by sin, is only restored when all is ordered in worship to the creator. Worship is the aim of all things — all of creation under the perfect rule of Christ.

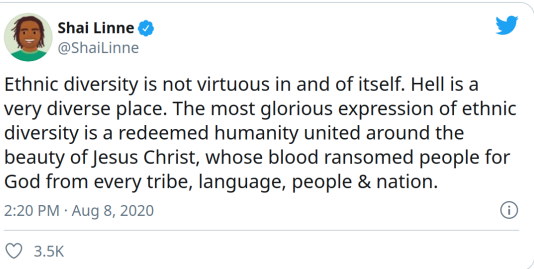
¹³ Acts 2:5-6.

¹⁴ Acts 2:37.

¹⁵ Revelation 5:9, 7:9.

¹⁶ <https://pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/racism.pdf>. This letter is cited here to show that the PCA has had a very checkered history with racism and only in recent years has come to a posture of repentance.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/ShaiLinne/status/1292163796161777665>



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who are the Samaritans in our society — the “others” to us? How can we celebrate and embrace diversity and curb our sinful tendency to fear those who are different from us?
2. Knowing that the Bible affirms and celebrates our cultural and ethnic differences, how can we better pursue unity in *diversity* rather than unity in *uniformity*? How can we proclaim this gospel to a world that wants to minimize our differences?
3. How does the goal of *worship* rather than the goal of *diversity* challenge you to enter today’s conversation on race? How does the necessity of diversity transform the way we imagine worship? What are the challenges we face in such worship?
4. In what ways can our church be an agent for change in our community? How can each of us work toward unity in diversity? What steps can we take today, both corporately and individually, to live into that role?

Loving Father, help us to grow into the image of your Son who loved with a love that drew others in rather than keeping them out. Give us boldness and courage by your Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel not only to others, but also ourselves. May the gospel of Jesus Christ move us not merely to diversity, but to worship. Let it be on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

3: OUR SIN GOES DEEP

A SHALLOW SURVEY

This particular study will take us on a broad yet shallow survey into the many structural and racial issues in our society. To truly go deep into our societal sin would be well beyond the scope of this study. We'll take a fairly cursory look at some of the foundations of our society; it won't be a pretty picture. These issues are not highlighted to spur us to create solutions. The aim of this study is for us to engage in lament and direct our hearts to hope in the only one who can heal the sinful human heart. Lament is not resignation to the situation, but is an exercise to deeply acknowledge the true scope of sin. May our lament point us to Christ.

WHAT IS WHITE SUPREMACY?

When some of us picture white supremacy, we imagine the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, swastikas, black face, etc. And when we consider these *overt* forms of white supremacy, we start to think that white supremacy exists outside ourselves. But white supremacy is much more pervasive; it has more subtle forms, and has a much broader reach than we realize.¹⁸ The chart on the right also lists some *covert* forms of white supremacy: tokenism, fearing people of color, mass incarceration, statements like "you're so articulate" directed at people of color or immigrants, discriminatory lending, tone policing, cultural appropriation, etc.¹⁹

Overt White Supremacy (Socially Unacceptable)

- Ku Klux Klan
- Lynchings
- Swastikas
- Blackface
- The N-word
- Racial Slurs
- Racist Jokes
- Hate crimes

Covert White Supremacy (Socially Acceptable)

- Weaponizing the police
- White Silence
- Self-appointed white-ally
- Colorblindness
- Parents Self-segregating neighborhoods & schools
- Education funding from property taxes
- Eurocentric curriculum
- Spiritual Bypassing
- White Savior Complex (e.g. missions)
- Tone Policing
- Racial Profiling
- Fetishizing BIPOC
- Racist Mascots
- "Make America Great Again"
- "All Lives Matter"
- Denial of White Privilege
- Eurocentric beauty standards
- Tokenism
- "You're so articulate"
- "You don't sound Black"
- Paternalism
- Hiring Discrimination
- Discriminatory Lending
- Broken Windows Policing
- Fearing People of Color

We grow up living and breathing these narratives of white normativity, elevating whiteness as an ideal of goodness. It shows up in our language. We call White theology, plain *Theology* and label all other theologies as *Black/Hispanic/Asian/Feminist Theology*; our school curriculums are altogether Eurocentric and often hide or downplay the sins of the majority. Our ideas of beauty, goodness, and success are wrapped up in white ideals displayed in our television shows, music, and movies. In our society, white supremacy is all around us and inescapable; we have grown accustomed to this sin and we need to actively and consciously repent.²⁰

¹⁸ Recent article in NYTimes helps illustrate its pervasiveness. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/us/white-supremacy.html>.

¹⁹ This is a small sampling of a triangle diagram posted by @theconsciouskid (https://www.instagram.com/p/CAq9_0uJary/). The extent of all "acceptable forms of white supremacy" are beyond the scope of this study. If you are unfamiliar with any in this list, it may be a good starting point to learn and understand the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

²⁰ A more detailed and comprehensive list of white supremacy in culture and "antidote" to its perpetuation can be found here: <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>

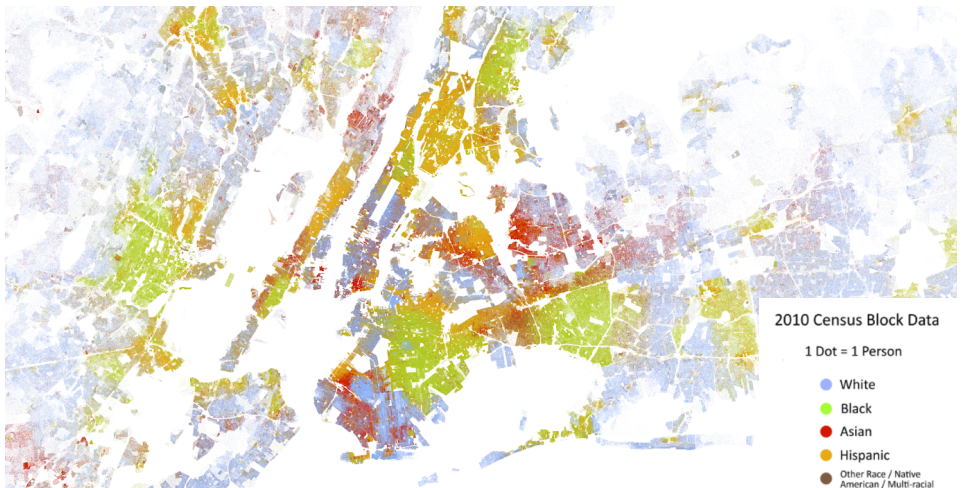
A RACIALLY DIVIDED NATION

"In the post-Civil Rights United States, the racialized society is one in which intermarriage rates are low, residential separation and socioeconomic inequality are the norm, our definitions of personal identity and our choices of intimate associations reveal racial distinctiveness, and where we are never unaware of the race of a person with whom we interact. *In short, and this is its unchanging essence, a racialized society is a society where race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships.*"²¹

These profound differences and their effects persist today.

Housing

The 2010 US Census shows us how racially divided our cities and neighborhoods are throughout the country. Dustin Cable at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service released a racial dot map²² based on data from this census.



The map shows us the distinct living areas of the four major races: White, Latino, Black and Asian.²³ The most affluent areas are predominantly White. There are clear distinctions based on race in various parts of our city. These divisions are not merely based on socio-economic stratification, but deeply rooted in historic and racist policies regarding housing.²⁴ Richard Rothstein highlights the role of the Federal Government in perpetuating racially distinct neighborhoods in his recent book *The Color of Law*.²⁵ He recounts how the federal government enforced segregation through explicitly

²¹ Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith*. (Oxford University Press, 2001). Emphasis mine.

²² <http://racialdotmap.demographics.coopercenter.org/>

²³ While Native Americans, people of mixed race, and smaller minorities are all lumped together in this chart, we must recognize that erasure from the public space is an ongoing issue. We ought to be vigilant that we do not overlook even the "least of these" as we seek to recognize and honor the human dignity of all.

²⁴ See the UNIS Human Rights Project for more details: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/024a559c38a647eab362843f14380e12> and <https://www.unishumanrightsproject.org/> regarding NYC.

²⁵ Rothstein, Richard, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America* (New York: Norton & Co., 2017).

segregated public housing. In the late twentieth century, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) intentionally enforced segregation by creating lending practices that explicitly prohibited African Americans from buying homes in white neighborhoods. Banks would create “red lines” which prevented them from lending to African Americans in those specific areas. The FHA refused to insure mortgages for African Americans who wanted to move into designated white neighborhoods. Home owners were also allowed to put a clause in their home deeds forbidding their property to be sold to non-whites. Though these racist practices have been overturned by various court rulings, the effects of these laws persist to this day.

Public schools

Segregated housing has led to segregated schools. Public schools in minority communities have less financial resources to serve their students than more affluent communities because minority communities tend to have lower median incomes.²⁶ One of the major contributing factors of this disparity (other than the housing segregation previously discussed) is the continued migration of middle class families away from schools in lower income neighborhoods, further exacerbating (even if unintentionally) segregation under the guise of “better education for our children.” *Nice White Parents*, a podcast that documents education disparities within a Brooklyn school district over several decades presents this in detail.²⁷ This podcast illustrates how even well intentioned parents fail to live up to their ideals of integrated education for all. Racial and socio-economic segregation in the NYC public school system is well documented and continues to be one of the most segregated in the country.²⁸

Church

The church in America is far from innocent with regard to racism. More often than not, the church has promoted policies that maintained and enforced white supremacy in society.²⁹ Although our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), began after the Civil Rights Movement in 1973, the members who helped form the denomination repeatedly resisted taking a stand against the racial injustices of their day and undermined movements focused on poverty and racial injustice in the 1960s. They also sought to prevent the influence of Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. Joel Alvis in his history of Presbyterianism and race writes:

Race was not the only issue motivating these conservatives to form this new denomination, but it was part of the larger debate over the scope of authority in the denomination as well as the impact of a larger social conscience. Defenders of the new denomination are quick to claim that

²⁶ Mervosh, Sarah. (Feb. 27, 2019) “How Much Wealthier Are White School Districts Than Nonwhite Ones? \$23 Billion, Report Says” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/education/school-districts-funding-white-minorities.html>.

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>

²⁸ Listing just some articles here for reference: UCLA Civil Rights Project report: *New York Schools Most Segregated in the Nation* (2014) [<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/news/press-releases/2014-press-releases/new-york-schools-most-segregated-in-the-nation>]. Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years (2019) [<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/nyregion/school-segregation-new-york.html>]. Report: NYC schools remain segregated even within diverse districts (2020) [<https://www.educationdive.com/news/report-nyc-schools-remain-segregated-even-within-diverse-districts/569928/>].

²⁹ This is well documented despite often “swept under the rug.” For more, see *The Color of Compromise* by Jemar Tisby available both as a book and as a docu-series on Amazon Prime Video.

racial ideology had nothing to do with the events of 1973, but their case is unconvincing, as they ignore a substantial body of evidence.³⁰

Reverend Jim Baird, one of the founding members of the PCA, took the floor at the 2015 General Assembly saying, “I confess, that in 1973, the only thing I understood was that we were starting a new denomination, which we did. And I confess that I did not raise a finger for civil rights... and so I confess my sin.”³¹ This recognition of our complicity and failure is only the beginning. “Mourning calls on all of us to recognize our complicity in the sufferings of others.”³² How have we lived — even if unintentionally — within the systems that cause others harm? Before we point the finger at others we must reflect and posture our hearts to mourn the brokenness of our world.

WEEP WITH THOSE WHO WEEP

When confronted with the enormity and pervasiveness of racism in our nation, community, churches, and within ourselves, we have a desire to “fix” these problems or *do* something to make it better. We are quick to offer words of grace and hope — we want every sermon or bible study to end on a happy note — but we are uncomfortable sitting and dwelling in suffering. We often associate suffering with sin; we are like the disciples who asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” when confronted with suffering. But the experience of pain and suffering do not point to a lack of spirituality. Suffering is altogether spiritual, and scripture calls us to *lament*, a lost spiritual practice in the modern church.

Lament calls us to go *deep* into sadness and grief. It calls us to explore the contours of suffering so that we may cultivate a deeper longing for God’s justice and righteousness. The late Mary Oliver, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and one of the most celebrated American poets, once wrote, “Attention without feeling... is only a report. An openness — an empathy — was necessary if the attention was to matter.”³³ Do we *feel* when confronted with the enormity of sin in our world? We must put down our guards and be generous from our hearts in order to lament with others. Our efforts to pursue justice prematurely fizzle out because we have not done the hard work to enter deeply into pain; we understand it in our heads — we give *attention* — but have not connected it to our hearts. Paul writes to the early church:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.³⁴

Scripture calls us to weep with those who weep — not merely pity others from a distance. It calls us to empathy: to experience others’ pain (and joys) as *our own*. Empathy helps us to recognize and experience that we belong to one another. We are not to think ourselves too highly such that we the

³⁰ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 77.

³¹ The PCA General Assembly is an annual meeting of elders and teachers to address the business of the PCA at large. You can find the full transcript of his speech at <https://pastortimlecroy.com/2015/06/16/transcript-of-rev-jim-bairds-speech/>. For more context, read an essay by the daughter of a PCA pastor and her critique of the denomination’s lack of response to racism, “Running the Reconciliation Race” at <https://medium.com/the-loose-brick/running-the-reconciliation-race-dd3db2f29a21>.

³² McCauley, Esau. *Reading While Black*. (IVP Academic, 2020), p65.

³³ Molly Malone Cook and Mary Oliver, *Our World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009).

³⁴ Romans 12:15-16.

experience of the poor is beneath us. We are called to respond to injustice done to others as if it were done to ourselves — we imagine the depth and breadth of others’ pain until it becomes our pain.

#PrayMarchAct, a movement that was formed in New York City to bring the church’s voice to the national conversation on racism and injustice posted an example of lament to Instagram for Rayshard Brooks.³⁵ The example is not exhaustive by any means, but for many of us who are not practiced in lament, it may be an instructive starting point on how to lament. Each statement in the post warrants deep sadness for the state of the world; it does not attempt to resolve these problems but invites us to pause and consider the depths of each pain.

As we reflect on all the social ills in our world, we are called to practice lament.

lament

Rayshard Brooks is dead for falling asleep in his car and blocking a fast-food driveway.

Rayshard Brooks is dead for resisting arrest of a DUI.

Rayshard Brooks is dead because of a pattern of forceful and deadly tactics utilized by police.

With two shots to the back his daughters were robbed of future celebrated birthdays.

His stepson, his fatherly guidance.

His wife, one last kiss.

@PRAYMARCHACT

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the magnitude and pervasiveness of racism in America make you feel? Are you angry? grieving? overwhelmed? disillusioned? Numb? Share with one another.
2. What are some ways you have knowingly or unknowingly espoused white supremacy in your life? Were you at fault? Why or why not?
3. Are you comfortable with lament? How can we better empathize with others in pain?
4. Lament together in prayer. Express to God the things that cause you pain and grief. Engage your imagination; ask for greater empathy and compassion that we grow more in Christlikeness.

Holy Spirit, help us to be more like Jesus, who entered into the brokenness of our world instead of fleeing to comfort. Give us the courage and patience to overcome our discomfort and enter into the pain and suffering around us. Take our hearts of stone and give us hearts that beat like Christ’s. It is in his name we pray. Amen.

³⁵ Posted here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBdwRI8nTIs/>. You can find out more about #PrayMarchAct at Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/praymarchact> and Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/praymarchact/>.

4: JUSTICE + RIGHTEOUSNESS

Share with one another: How would you characterize *justice* today? What related words or images come to mind? How would you describe *righteousness* or a righteous person?

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS

When we think about *justice*, many of us imagine our legal system: the law, the courts, prosecutors, and defendants. The court is where we consider retribution (e.g. punishing someone for theft), and determining what's "fair." And while the Bible acknowledges this kind of retributive justice, more often than not, biblical justice — *mishpat*³⁶ — refers, not to the negative act of punishment, but the positive work of creation. It's plain meaning is to make straight that which has been bent — it is restoration. The work of *mishpat* restores what was broken by sin; it creates wholeness and goodness — *shalom* — as God intended. Biblical justice is not based on an abstract idea of fairness, but upon God's very heart and character. Psalm 99:4 tells of how this character of God flows to his people:

The King in his might loves *justice*.
You have established equity;
you have executed *justice*
and *righteousness* in Jacob.

When scripture tells us that God "executed *righteousness* in Jacob," it is telling us that God has given his people, Jacob/Israel, the call and means to establish *mishpat*. In the Bible, righteousness is *enacting justice*. He gave them laws and statutes to uphold justice, and their conduct in relating with one another was to be a light to the nations. The call to biblical righteousness is not merely a call to develop an abstract internal character trait.³⁷ Living into the call of justice and righteousness finds its source in the God of Justice and Righteousness and must manifest in concrete action. It is a call that has tangible implications in our living and relating. Biblical righteousness is inherently relational. We cannot say we know and love God if we do not pursue biblical justice in loving others. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar... whoever loves God must also love his brother."³⁸

THE WIDOW, THE ORPHAN, THE FOREIGNER, + YOURSELF

The Bible tells us that God shows a special regard for the poor, characterized by the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner; these groups were disadvantaged in every way. Yet, this special regard should not be mistaken for favoritism. God's regard for the poor is an expression of *mishpat* that honors the dignity of every human being. God upheld justice for the poor, knowing that in an imperfect world, *anyone* could fall unexpectedly onto hard times at no fault of their own, and no one should have

³⁶ Hebrew: *mishpat*. In some translations it is also rendered as "righteousness." Both of our English terms "justice" and "righteousness" in conjunction with "mercy" help us get a better understanding of *mishpat* — biblical justice.

³⁷ Sometimes the thought of "righteousness" brings to mind someone who is "self-righteous," but the biblical concept of righteousness is almost the exact opposite! Righteousness in the Bible is inherently relational.

³⁸ 1 John 4:20-21

to fear for their livelihood nor be treated below their dignity as image bearers of God. This heart for justice was reflected in the laws God gave to Israel. Read Leviticus 19:9-10:

⁹ “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. ¹⁰ And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

This law forbids the rich from stripping the land bare to maximize profits such that the poor are unable to feed themselves.³⁹ Similar laws of justice state that, within the community, anyone in debt would be forgiven every seven years.⁴⁰ Furthermore, every seven cycles of seven years would be known as the Year of Jubilee, where all inhabitants of the land who were in debt or in servitude were freed and released from those obligations. Property would be restored to their rightful owners and the community experiences a social and economic reset — a collective Sabbath for the community!⁴¹

But how can this be right? Is this *fair*? Is this socialism? The Bible *does* acknowledge individual wealth and ownership; there *are* laws that protect private property from abuse,⁴² but the foundational difference for the community of God is a recognition that *everything* belongs to the LORD. The modern models of “socialism and libertarianism keep the obligation to share with the needy on the ‘horizontal’ level. On the Left, money is the State’s and the distribution to the needy will be involuntary. On the Right, money is yours alone and any giving is voluntary and optional. The biblical teaching makes the primary dimension the ‘vertical’—the relationship to God.”⁴³ The reason and closing statement for all of these laws, as reflected in the passage above from Leviticus, was not an appeal to an abstract ideal or virtue, but quite simply and boldly, “I am the LORD your God.” This proclamation brings to mind the covenant,⁴⁴ reminding us that we are people who have received mercy and grace from the LORD. We were once foreigners living in a foreign land, yet God saved us. We were once among the poor apart from Christ. The New Testament echoes this truth that we are merely stewards of all that God has given us; again, everything belongs to the LORD. This is a radical perspective on our wealth, privilege, and possessions.

WHAT IS GOOD?

Though God gave us the law of justice and called us to live in righteousness, we have failed to live into that calling and chose our own good rather than God’s good. The prophet Micah called God’s people to account for their continuous and repeated failure to live according to *mishpat*. Greed and inequality had taken over; oppression of the poor was unchecked. Injustice defined culture and society more than God’s heart for justice. So God calls his people to repentance in Micah 6:8:

³⁹ The language of the law actually states that this part of the harvest does not belong to the landowner, but to the poor; it is not the surplus of the rich that is voluntarily given out so the landowner should not treat it as his own.

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 15

⁴¹ Leviticus 25:8-17

⁴² e.g. Deuteronomy 23:24-25

⁴³ Keller, Timothy. “Justice in the Bible.” September 2020. <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>

⁴⁴ The foundational story of justice for Israel is found in Exodus where God adopts them as his people and declares himself their God.

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The means for justice, kindness, and humility have been given to God's people. These are the patient demands that our loving God desires in our lives. We are to *walk with God*, loving the things he loves, doing the things he wills instead of walking with the other false "goods" in our world.

When Jesus began his ministry, he embodied this good call to justice. Luke 4:18-19 records how Jesus entered into the synagogue and read from the prophets:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This was his mission, and we are brought into his mission first as *recipients* of the freedom he gives us. And he has sent us to continue the mission in proclaiming and embodying the good news that God's kingdom of justice and righteousness has come.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the Bible challenge our ideas of justice and righteousness? Why is it necessary that justice and righteousness manifest in our lives beyond our individual faith and piety?
2. What do you think about the laws God gave his people that would provide for the poor and prevent the rich from living into luxury at the expense of others in need? Is it *fair*? Is it *just*?
3. The Bible pushes us to see the use of our wealth and possessions “vertically” — that we are merely stewards of what we have. Is this true of you? How does this orientation challenge our relationship with our wealth and possessions?
4. Identify some areas in our society that cry out for justice — for a wrong to be made right. How does biblical justice speak to these complex issues?
5. Pause for a moment and consider how all of this (God’s heart for justice, his call on our lives to justice, and the state of our world in injustice) makes you *feel*. How can we cultivate a heart that feels with God’s heart?⁴⁵

God of Justice, forgive us for living for our own sense of justice and being self-righteous apart from your true righteousness. Help us by your Holy Spirit to live righteously before you and with our neighbors. May we take on the call of your Son, to proclaim good news to the poor, that we may grow more and more in his image. It is in his name we pray. Amen.

⁴⁵ This final question comes acknowledging that much of this study focused on our *understanding* of justice — it engaged primarily our minds but God also desires to engage our hearts and emotions. Some of us may be uncomfortable with our feelings, but this may be an opportunity for us to grow together in discipling our hearts and emotions as well as our minds.

5: ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

The image of the glorious city is one that pervades all of scripture. This glorious city is the center of art, beauty, commerce — all human flourishing. Every human heart was created to long for this manifestation of glory, but because of sin, repeatedly tries to attain it apart from God.⁴⁶ Despite humanity's continuous rebellion, God did not abandon his plans to create this glorious city of *shalom* nor did he give up on fallen humanity. The scriptures remind us that the fulfillment of God's purposes cannot be thwarted by our rebellion and sin.

In pursuing this good, God called a people, Israel, to himself and desired to show the world what true wholeness and peace could look like. The LORD set Israel apart as a nation of justice (*mishpat*). He gave them laws and statutes that they would live in a way to be a light to the nations; to show the peoples of the earth the beauty of life under God's good and proper rule where every nation and people would receive the blessings of God.⁴⁷ This was God's fatherly care for his own people overflowing to the world, yet God's people continued to rebel.

DIGGING OUR HEELS IN REBELLION

Read Isaiah 1:2-3, 12-17:

² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:

"Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand."

¹² "When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

⁴⁶ e.g. The Tower/City of Babel in Genesis 11; see study 2. God showed his people that his image could not be reflected in a singular culture, but "anointed their lips" to better reflect the manifold wisdom of God in their diversity.

⁴⁷ Genesis 12:3.

¹⁵ When you spread out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;
 even though you make many prayers,
 I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 correct oppression;
 bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow's cause.

Despite all the warnings and proclamations from the prophets, Israel would not listen. Injustice was so pervasive and normalized among God's people that they failed to recognize the gravity of their situation and continued going "worshipping" in courts, but their manner of living and worship was, and is, abhorrent to God. The word of the LORD came through his prophets to awaken the hearts of his people – to help them see where they erred in being a light to the nations. God wanted his people to know *who* they were and *what* they were created for because anything else would lead to their undoing. The same words that the prophets spoke to Israel still speak to the church today.

Jemar Tisby paints a dark picture of the church in its failure to be a light to the nations in his book, *The Color of Compromise*. He details how the Western Church was complicit in slavery and comfortable with the belief that some people were savages and of a lower class. The church produced "slave bibles" which stripped the testimony of freedom and liberation to serve their own need to maintain power and wealth. Even Jonathan Edwards, one of the most revered and celebrated theologians in the Reformed tradition was also a slave holder and was hesitant to urge his community to speak out against slavery. This twisting of the gospel was present across the entire Western Church: Methodists, Catholics, Pentacostals, Baptists, Presbyterians, etc.⁴⁸ and is still present with us today. This legacy of complicity has profoundly shaped our culture and the witness of the church to the world. The modern church is still like rebellious Israel and our complicit forbearers, holding onto sin while saying we are doing God's will. The word of the LORD through the prophet Isaiah is calling us *today* to wake up and live into our identity as God's people. God will not be fooled.

A CITY ON A HILL

When Jesus came, hundreds of years after Isaiah's message to Israel, inequality and injustice was still rampant. There was clearly a distinction between the powerful and the powerless; between the rich and the poor. At the scene of Jesus' first great teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, the lowly of society – the poor, mourning, meek, hungry, merciful, pure, peacemaking, persecuted – gathered to

⁴⁸ Read *The Color of Compromise* as a primer and historical survey of race in America and the church's complicity through explicit endorsement or passive silence. We touched upon this in our own denomination in study 3 where some of the PCA's founders "did not lift a finger for civil rights."

Jesus on a mountainside. Jesus then takes the prophetic imagery of the glorious city of God and proclaims it to the multitude, calling them blessed⁴⁹ and declaring:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."⁵⁰

Somehow through their weakness and lowly estate, God would display his strength and glory to the world. Jesus is expanding upon the image of hope that Isaiah put before God's people; the judgment from chapter one gives way to the promise of hope in the next chapter.

Read Isaiah 2:2-5:

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD.

The mountain of the LORD is Jerusalem.⁵¹ The citizens of God's city would be people who recognize their weakness and lean upon the power and wisdom of the Judge who would settle all disputes such that instruments of war would be transformed into instruments of peace. The glorious city would be a place where no one needed to lord over anyone else; God's people would not fight to dominate over another or discriminate against people who were different. This city would be at peace because all would recognize their mutual need for God. This would be the true Jerusalem, the city of peace.

⁴⁹ Matthew 5:1-12.

⁵⁰ Matthew 5:14-16.

⁵¹ Jerusalem and the Temple is literally built on top of a mountain. Aside from going there in person, you can find the foundations of the city in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 where King David buys the land from Araunah the Jebusite.

ONE IN CHRIST JESUS

Removing our sinful need to dominate and discriminate requires an enormous work of the Holy Spirit. The early church was not free of this sinful inclination. One of the main obstacles to the gospel that the Apostle Paul battled against was ethnic and cultural division.⁵² In Galatians, his most forceful and corrective letter to the early church, Paul recounts his confrontation of Peter:

¹¹ But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"⁵³

He was angry that one group was excluding another and not welcoming one another as Christ welcomed them. Today, many churches practically require others to conform to a law — a pattern of behavior or moral ethic — before that are fully received and treated as members. But the same declaration that Paul gave the church in Galatia should speak to us in the modern church: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁵⁴ Paul knew that while this oneness in Christ was difficult to realize, the Judge that the prophets speak of will surely bring peace and unity. It is because of Christ that we can be sure that this work of peace will ultimately succeed.

So just as Paul encouraged the early church, his words speak to us today to live into our calling as God people — citizens of the Kingdom — living under the King even as we live in our world. Because of Jesus this kind of peace is possible and we are called to pursue it today.

⁵² The early church was a meeting point for men and women, slave and free, Jews and Gentiles, etc. Knowing the kinds of conflicts, prejudices, and misunderstandings that arise when different people gather in one place, it is easy to see how *division* was one of the primary issues facing the early church in Paul's letters. These same issues continue today.

⁵³ Galatians 2:11-14.

⁵⁴ Galatians 3:28.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways has sin and injustice become so pervasive in our culture that it has become normative?
2. Consider our church community. Who is welcome in our church? Would the prospect of someone visiting our church give you pause? Are we more inclined to invite certain groups to our church than others? If so, why?
3. In what ways has our church neglected the call to be a city on a hill and a light to the nations? How can we move from identifying these areas to calling one another to repent?
4. Consider our neighborhood, community, and city. If there were three areas where you'd like to see our church grow in being a city on a hill, what would they be? What does our church need to learn or be more aware of? What habits should our church stop doing or start practicing in order to live into this identity we have in Christ?

Gracious Father, forgive us for desiring our own comfort at the expense of showing love and hospitality to others. We pray for one another and our community; would you help us, by your Holy Spirit, to be a place where all are welcomed. May the love that welcomes us as your children transform us daily to the image of your Son, Jesus Christ. May the life of Christ live through us that the world may know we are yours and give you praise and glory. Amen.