

“Sin Distorts Our Identity”

Healing the Racial Divide – Study #1

Introduction

You will not find your true identity in the words that are expressed in today's culture. At best, you will find a distorted view of identity. Our true identity is found only in God, revealed through the new life in Christ. "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

A Matter of Perspective

The racial divide between black America and white America is frustratingly complex and deeply emotional. Each side approaches cultural events from a vastly different perspective and experience, and our differences often divide us. The purpose of this study is to help us begin to recognize what is dividing us, better understand the issues that are involved on both sides, and search the Holy Scriptures for a new perspective that only God can give.

A black man is shot by the police. A white man makes the comment that we have to trust the information from the police. In these two simple sentences, we see the heart of the problem between blacks and whites in America.

There is a white America and a black America, with a huge racial divide between the two. White America starts with the viewpoint that all cops are honest, telling us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There certainly may be one or two bad cops out there, but by and large we can trust the police. That is white America's reality, its starting point. Everyone should believe the police; no one has a reason not to. That makes sense if most of your encounters with police have been fair and reasonable. That is your reality.

But what if your experiences with the police had not turned out so positively? What if you know someone whose experience ended with horrifying results? One black high school boy was taught from childhood to be cautious, even afraid of the police. So when a law enforcement officer pulls him over, his heart races and he is on edge not knowing how this whole thing will turn out. Both parties feel this uneasiness, and it is a recipe for disaster. Two people, both on edge, both afraid of each other. One has a deadly weapon, one is defenseless.

In this Bible Study on racism in America we will, as always, center our conversation on God's Word. Today we want to begin with a discussion about our identity: what it is, where it comes from, and how it makes a difference in our daily lives, relationships, and conversations.



1. Where do you find your identity?
2. What are some of the characteristics you have heard to describe black people?
3. What are the characteristics you have heard used to describe white people?
4. How do “group characterizations” fail to accurately describe the identity of individuals?
5. Some people identify themselves as Irish, English, or German. Others identify themselves by their vocation or profession. How would you identify yourself?
6. How would you identify yourself if you found out you were adopted and had no idea who your parents and ancestors were? Or if you lost your vocation or profession? In other words, if you stripped away all the factors that would identify you – your skin color, heritage, location, profession – at your very core, who are you?

The Loss of Identity in the Black Community

Loss of identity has manifested itself in a breakdown in the foundation of some black families. It is not the only factor: joblessness, failing schools in urban areas, economic hardship, and an institutional system that has not figured out the most effective way to care for the poor are all factors. But this loss of identity could be an underlying factor.

Some people point to the breakdown of the black family. I have heard some blame the lack of a strong male role model in the home. While it is true in some cases, many in the black community who had a strong father still have a feeling of hopelessness. Joblessness, poverty, and poor education systems are all part of the breakdown of the institution. We need to understand and acknowledge that there are genuine struggles in the black community. That is the very first step in an effort to find lasting solutions. To many black people, we live in a country where the American dream has left them behind.

There are some deep-seated problems connected to the tensions running through the veins of our nation. On one side of the racial divide, white Americans see progress; on the other side, black Americans often feel frustrated by the lack of progress. So, when those two opposing ideologies and views of America collide, you get Ferguson, Missouri. You get rioting in Baltimore and Seattle and Portland, because the people who feel “left behind” feel no one is paying attention.

7. As you look at this stark picture of two different Americas, what comes as a surprise to you?
8. Does any of this help you better understand the situations you are seeing in the news?

Keep in mind that we are NOT...I repeat....NOT condoning the looting and burning in these protests by any means. There are certainly better ways to handle our problems. But white Americans need to realize the perception among black Americans is that the institution is stacked against them. So, if the institution is against you, any emotions and feelings you have that may be racist are justified because you are the oppressed racial group. Again, do we agree with that? No. Should we begin to understand the frustration? Yes. Have we figured out all the answers? No. What we hope to gain from our study of God’s Word is a Biblical blueprint to begin the healing process. We will certainly not solve all the issues facing our nation, but we are called to be salt and light in the world. The world needs us to be salt and light!

9. In the context of the racial division in our country, how can the thoughtful words and kind deeds of the Christian community help provide some light and healing?

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. (12) We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. (13) For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. (14) For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; (15) and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (16) From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. (17) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (18) All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (19) that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (20) Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (21) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The apostle Paul begins this section of 2 Corinthians by explaining to the believers that we need to live our life with a higher sense of vocation. We don't live our life for ourselves, but as a faith response to the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul points out that our job is to proclaim the reconciliation between God and humanity Christ accomplished by His death and resurrection. And we, through faith, are the recipients of this divine reconciliation. Believers now have the privilege to be heralds to minister God's message throughout the world.

But it goes even deeper. Christ's redemption has transformed the way we look at other people. Paul says, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh" (2 Corinthia. ns 5:16). Paul is not referring to their flesh—their outward appearance—skin color, ethnicity, or any of the features that make us different from one another. He is talking about our flesh; that is, our sinful human nature. In other words, in Christ, we no longer look at others through the lenses of our sinful perspective; rather, we see our neighbor as God sees him or her. Regardless of the color of his or her skin, every person we behold is precious to God and dearly loved for Jesus' sake. Is this a way Christ heals the racial division?

"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died." (2 Corinthians 5:14). The phrase "the love of Christ" has two possible meanings. It could mean either (1) Christ's love for us or (2) our love for Christ. However, looking at it in connection with the last portion of the verse would lead us to believe that what Paul has in mind is Christ's love for us. "Died for all" refers to the redemptive work of Christ. The death of Christ redeemed a lost world, all the children of Adam and Eve throughout the world. "All" in this lost world includes every black or white person separated by our racial division. Jesus reaches out to both sides of the division by redeeming every one of us—and that is the heart of the healing He wants to work. See John 3:16, Christ's death for all the world.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) But how does the demonstration of God's love two thousand years ago on the cross impact our racial division today?

Romans 6:1-14

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (2) By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? (3) Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (4) We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (5) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (6) We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (7) For one who has died has been set free from sin. (8) Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (9) We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (10) For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. (11) So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (12) Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. (13) Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (14) For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Our Baptism has united us with Jesus Christ. In Him, we have died to sin and now "walk in newness of life" (v. 4). As Paul says, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions" (v. 12). In the context of this study, we especially include the sin of judging people by the color of their skin and acting out of our preconceived notions based on that judgment.

To heal this divide in America, we who have been united with Christ must stop evaluating people according to their flesh. We need to recognize how we have made assumptions based on the color of people's skin. And no matter whether we are white or black, we all have preconceived notions about one another; notions we hold deep inside, perhaps without even realizing it. But we need to recognize the sinful origins of those notions and repent of them. Only through confession, repentance, and God's free forgiveness or absolution will we be able to follow Paul's apostolic expectation. We will stop regarding people according to the notions of our sinful flesh, and regard them according to the way God does.

So, What Does This Mean?

Living in repentant faith, and empowered by our Lord's Word and Supper, we can begin living up to Paul's expectation that Christians will see people not "according to the flesh," as he says in 2 Corinthians 5:16. We now see each other as people dearly loved by God. We might even consider filling our lives with more people of more diverse backgrounds. Horrors! You mean Germans may have to actually mingle with Norwegians??!

- +++ Consider striking up a conversation with families of diverse backgrounds when attending school, sports, social functions, or even if you're going for a walk in your neighborhood.
- +++ Read a book that may help you gain insights into the life and culture of persons of different backgrounds and ethnicities.
- +++ Have small group Bible studies host and celebrate cultural events with friends of different cultures, or have members of your small groups share their cultural experiences.

Although God created mankind as one human race, our sinful, selfish natures have created false lines of color dividing that race. Over the years, these false perceptions about different races have been cooked into the recipe of our culture. We have seen them played out in the media, on television sitcoms, and in books. The challenge now is, how do we get around what we believe to be true and start seeing people as individuals? The apostle Paul gives us a pathway forward—start seeing as God does, not "according to the flesh." To bring about real healing, we have to find our identity in the new life we have in Christ. Paul paints this beautiful picture of that new life: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Paul presents the benefits of Christ's death for the believer (vs. 14). Because we believers are united with Jesus both in His death and resurrection, we are connected to Jesus and one another in this new creation. Our new identity as God's children strives against the identity of our sinful flesh. Christ gives us an altogether different perspective from what we had before conversion, and we must resist the urge to return to that former, sinful perspective.

Instead, we ask our Lord to help us better understand different perspectives that people may have, based on their upbringing and their life experiences. We pray for wisdom to perceive how Jesus can bridge the differences between people. In our conversations with people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and skin colors, we want to listen closely to how they perceive the world around them, and even ask them to help us understand more clearly the origins of their view of the world.

Wrapping Things Up

Our only hope to change is to look for identity in Christ! The apostle Paul describes this new identity that Jesus gives. All things have become new in Christ. A believer's life and identity change because he or she is being transformed into the likeness of Christ. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18). Instead of living for oneself, a believer lives for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Instead of evaluating others with the values of the world, a believer looks at this world through the eyes of faith (2 Corinthians 5:16).

So what is the solution to healing the racial divide? Try this as a start: You will not find true love in the words that are expressed in today's culture. You will find at best a distorted view of love. True love is found only in God, revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.