

“What Can I Do?”

Healing the Racial Divide – Study #5

Introduction

Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa once said, “Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice. Some would say that black America is crying out right now through protests and movements, but these efforts have only widened the gulf between both sides. What does Jesus say about the way we Christians can bring light and salt to begin healing this division?”

The Beginnings of the Tension and Why it Continues

In 2012, after the death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, the “Black Lives Matter” movement began. They claimed that after his death, Trayvon Martin was tried for his own murder, and his shooter, George Zimmerman, was not called to account for his crime. They claimed black lives are being targeted for destruction. These claims reflect the distrust many African Americans feel toward this country. But they go even deeper—making the bold claim that white America is intentionally targeting black lives for destruction.

This is simply Satan’s slander, because ALL people who just happen to have light-colored skin are certainly not “targeting” black lives for destruction. This statement is, however, another example of black Americans wrongly believing that they cannot be prejudiced, and it explains why they don’t see anything wrong with lumping all whites together and prejudging the intention of every white person.

White America hears this harsh accusation and is baffled – if not aggravated by it. It will admit that there may be a small minority of whites who wish for the destruction of black lives, maybe even a handful of police officers, but the vast majority of whites, politicians, and police officers are repulsed by the idea. And the racial divide grows yet again. We need to remember there are two sides of this racial divide—and both sides have real and valid concerns alongside grave misunderstandings and distrust of those on the other side.

Again, this is serving no one but Satan. More police officers hit the streets every day with the sense of fear and dread that there is a target on their backs. More blacks are afraid at a simple traffic stop. Nelson Mandela was correct. If our goal is reconciliation, both sides of the divide should come together and stop the divisive talk. We should abide by the rule of law, listen to those who feel unjustly treated, give police officers the honor and respect they deserve, and find lasting and meaningful solutions to the racial problems that we face.

1. Describe a moment in history when a public stand or truly peaceful protest got peoples’ attention and made a positive difference.

The High Priestly Prayer

Only God can truly heal this problem, because it is truly beyond human problem-solving abilities. That healing comes to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer from John 17, Jesus first prays for Himself. Then He prays for His twelve apostles. Finally, He prays for all Christians. This touches the racial division in our culture in the sense that the Church is God’s instrument to touch lives. So, the Church can make a vital impact on race relations in America, one person at a time.

John 17:1-19 When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, (2) since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. (3) And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (4) I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. (5) And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. (6) “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. (7) Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. (8) For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and

have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (9) I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. (10) All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. (11) And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. (12) While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. (13) But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. (14) I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (15) I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. (16) They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (17) Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (18) As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (19) And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Notice the three key relationships in this text. As a result of these three relationships, Christians can make an impact in the world.

1. The relationship of God the Father to His Son, Jesus Christ (vv. 1–5)
2. The relationship of Jesus to the twelve apostles (vv. 6–12)
3. Our Lord's relationship through the apostles to other Christians (vv. 13-19)

Let's Dig a Little Deeper

Jesus' prayer in John 17 begins His agonizing road to Golgotha. He sees the suffering that is coming closer by the minute. This prayer is bathed in the confidence that His Father will provide the strength He needs to complete the task of redeeming the world. The image is compelling of the Suffering Servant Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is about to lay down His life for the sheep, as He commends His disciples into His Father's protecting hand.

In contrast to the Garden of Eden, where sin sneaked into the world through Satan's temptation, Jesus boldly approaches the Garden of Gethsemane. By His obedience here, mankind will be redeemed from the sin, death, and hell we inherited because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Here, Jesus prays for those He has chosen and connected to His mission. This, His mission work, will soon pass on to them. Without His apostles' continuing work in the world, that mission will be in jeopardy. Today, the Church still brings reconciliation and peace as it carries out Jesus' mission in the world. This is the role the universal Church plays in healing the racial divide.

Jesus begins this section of the prayer by expressing the reality of joy in the lives of believers and in His life too. "But now I am coming to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves" (John 17:13). Jesus is reminding the disciples of the joy He already expressed at the Last Supper in John 15: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (v. 11). Jesus had already pointed out to His followers that joy comes by an expectant faith in the resurrection. "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20–22)

This joy and expectation of the resurrection are important because the very next section of this prayer will lay out for believers the steep road ahead. You will not be popular in this world. Your life, your values, your beliefs, and even your very existence will irk and annoy the world that would rather live in darkness.

The Solution Begins with Me

There are three key things that each of us can personally do to help begin the process of reconciliation. Notice I did not say three easy steps. Or three simple things. None of this is simple. It is not easy. The truth be told, anything worth accomplishing in life always comes with effort and, at times, great difficulty. This problem did not develop overnight, and it will not be solved with just a piece of legislation or some

very great sermons. It will require the believers in Christ to live out their calling and not just be in the world, but to be light and salt in the world. So, here we go:

— *We need to admit when WE have been part of the problem.*

In this issue of race relations, it seems that no one wants to come out and admit any culpability. Neither side wants to budge. Neither side wants to admit it bears some level of responsibility. The rhetoric and divisive attitudes continue to make matters more toxic and volatile. Until both sides are willing to admit they are part of the problem, no real healing is possible. It all begins with our own personal repentance.

We Americans have a choice. When it comes to the racial divide in our country, we can either keep focusing on what's tearing us apart or we can choose to find strength in those things that hold us together. My issue with the talk so far is that the focus is on all the things that are ripping us apart. Little to no attention is paid to those universal values we all share.

1. What attitudes did the members of your family and your friends in school have toward people with a different nationality?
2. Take a minute to discuss what role, if any, you are playing in widening the racial divide in America. Are you passing along generalities and stereotypes that further this division? Are you judging a whole group of people based on the words or actions of a few? Have you remained silent when you could have spoken up to stop divisive talk?

— *We need to come to a truce.*

Here is the ultimate evil of racism—the Gospel is ignored and the world does not come to believe in Jesus. But the reality is this: Satan, the enemy, has already been defeated. When Jesus rose on Easter Sunday, the message was clear: “Satan, you are finished! Christ is victorious.” But with our racial division and disagreements, we keep the world from seeing and hearing the Gospel in action. We should be giving unbelievers the sweet taste of Christ’s victory. Certainly, disagreement is a part of any relationship; but what is not normal is the inability to forgive and move forward. When there are issues that need correcting, people need to have honest discussions. Imagine a world where instead of rioting and holding picket signs, we could have a cup of coffee and a croissant and talk about our disagreements. One pivotal role believers play in healing racial division is our ability to teach the truth of God’s Word and to model the heart of Jesus, but only if we are united in our love for Christ and for one another.

In this racial division, we need to call for a truce and find a way to work together in unity and harmony. Keep in mind that unity is not the absence of opinions nor the need to be one homogeneous people. Opinions and diversity are healthy. But unity means the lack of angry and destructive divisions. Our racial relations are suffering the greatest damage due to disunity and the inability to come to a place of peace. The past tensions caused the most significant damage. The current conflict has created an environment and culture allows disagreement and disunity to grow in the body like an open sore. If that open wound continues to go unchecked, it only festers, swells, and spreads – until it kills the body.

At some point, for the racial divide to heal, we need to call for an end to the fighting. All of us! Each side needs to stop seeing the other as the evil villain they are bent on defeating. The only way that will happen is to realize that SIN is what is keeping us apart. SIN is causing the bitterness and hatred. The effects of SIN are growing and breeding between blacks and whites. And, the only thing that can defeat SIN is God’s love in Jesus Christ. This nation desperately needs God’s hand of restoration, so it’s time for us to lay down the call for retribution, the hateful speech that only breeds more fear and distrust. We need to come together and ask for God for His grace and mercy, because only God can turn weeping and mourning into rejoicing and dancing.

3. In what ways did Jesus work with people of a different mind-set or nationality? Give examples.
4. Discuss some things that Christians can do to be light and salt in this broken relationship between black and white Americans.

— *We need to be willing to fight for the relationship!*

Building relationships, especially difficult ones, can feel like climbing Mount Everest. But if you are struggling and can't ever seem to reach the summit, maybe that means the systems you're using aren't working.

It's okay to fall. It's okay to make mistakes and even be dead wrong. You will get mad. Relationships will cause you frustration. After all, we are sinful human beings, and we struggle with maintaining healthy relationships. But does that mean that we should never be in a relationship? Or does it say we keep fighting for relationships because we would die without them? The racial divide needs the chance to heal. It's not an option. What we see around us in our country and in the media is painful, exhausting, and humbling, but we should work together as citizens of this nation to solve this. It is too important not to.

There are several things you could try to help close the racial divide. Here are just some suggestions to get the conversation started.

1. Make the relationship a priority. What steps can you personally take to make improving racial relations a priority in your life?
2. Be willing to accept that there will be disappointments and setbacks in the building of that relationship.
3. Don't play the blame game with the group you are trying to connect with.
4. Let go of the desire to fix or change the other person and be willing to forgive.

There may be other things to try, but this at least gives you a starting point. The issue of repairing a broken relationship seems overwhelming. These are small steps that anyone can try. And never forget—with God, all things are possible!

What Does This Mean?

Identify one person of a different ethnicity, national background, or skin color with whom you can begin building or improving an existing relationship. Add the person to your daily prayer list, and ask God to open your eyes to opportunities and give you the wisdom to build a relationship with that person. Make a list of ways you can reach out to this neighbor. Look for areas of common interest, ground on which you can stand with this neighbor.

Wrapping Things Up

It is my heartfelt belief that many people have good intentions, that they care about the racial divisions in our country. I also believe many have no idea how to help and where to start. And deep down, many believe the racial division has reached a point that it is too far gone to save. I hope that is not true. If we give up, the outcomes are bleak. The alternative is to leave things the way they are today and just hope for the best. But can our nation handle the possible results of future deterioration? Are we prepared to see more riots, more funerals, more caskets until one or both groups are extinct? When one group feels the bus of progress has not only left them but backed up over them, we shouldn't be surprised if they stand and fight. America, hear the voices of those who feel left behind. They are crying out for justice. They are crying out for our attention.

The only hope is the light of Christ that shines brightly in the lives of God's people. But the forces speaking against unity and reconciliation resist the light of Christianity because it is a threat to their way of life. It is a threat to the darkness of sin. So, the world will hate Christians just as it hated Jesus. But remember who rose victoriously from the grave. The expectant joy of the resurrection is a source of comfort for Christians. Jesus is saying, "Look to the clouds; your Savior will return." Keep your ears open to the voice of the Bridegroom and drown out the voices in the world. "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete" (John 3:29).