

Race and Gospel Harmony

Romans 12

June 14, 2020
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This week we are continuing to apply God's Word and our study in Romans to the matters of racial reconciliation, justice, and unity. What I want you to hear today is that Christianity offers the only real and lasting solution to racism because only Christianity changes the root of the problem—our sinful human hearts.

Last Sunday we studied Romans 15:5-7. As a reminder, here it is:

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:5-7 ESV).

This is a prayer and a holy longing in Paul's heart for the church at Rome. They were divided by ethnic differences and religious preferences that flowed from them. The two primary ethnic categories of the Roman church were Jews and Gentiles. They saw things differently. Their religious preferences and consciences were not aligned. They had different backgrounds and family trees genetically and religiously. So many differences and yet fellow members in one church.

What is breathtaking to realize is that Paul wrote Romans to resolve ethnic divides in the church. Romans is a book on racial reconciliation based on gospel reconciliation.

Last week I shared a simple illustration and I want to repeat it in case you missed it. A cross has a vertical beam and a horizontal beam. We mentioned last week that the vertical beam is a kind of picture, intentional or not, that racial reconciliation begins with vertical reconciliation with God. When they would do a crucifixion, they would set the vertical beam first. They would then nail the victim to the horizontal beam and then lift that beam into a notch on the vertical beam giving us the picture that the vertical beam supports the horizontal beam. If there is no vertical beam, there can't be a horizontal beam.

The cross is a picture of how the gospel unites us. It starts with the vertical and it shows that reconciliation begins with reconciliation with God. It begins with the peace that God provides through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). But based on the vertical reconciliation, there is horizontal reconciliation. We are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation. And that reconciliation is across the barriers that fundamentally divide people. And what divides are greater than ethnic and religious divides of human civilization?

The cross is God's answer to man's race problem. Take the cross out of any solution and it's not an enduring solution. Some of you may be familiar with the website Babylon Bee. It is a Christian satire site which writes spoof headlines like they are actual news stories. Not all are great but some are. This one is for sure (see next page):



BABYLONBEE.COM

Nation Wishes God Would Send Someone Who Could Unify People Across Races, Classes, Genders, Tribes, Tongues

If you jump on a bandwagon offering racial solutions without Christ, you are on the wrong bandwagon. The Internet has blown up with people and pundits offering their take and solutions to the problems of race in America. I've been watching. I heard one person dare to mention Jesus as some sort of solution. Yet they want utopia. A utopia without God. It's the Garden of Eden all over again. It's the Tower of Babel all over again. The human race is still trying to recreate Eden without God.

Friends, beware of Christless and crossless answers to racism. If you lack discernment, you will easily get sucked into worldviews and ideologies that are not biblical. They may sound like they are. We hear what sound like biblical words: Justice; human dignity and worth; even love. The world is shouting these words right now. Where do they get them from? Christianity. They use biblical words, but reject biblical answers.¹

C.S. Lewis describes his own struggles prior to his conversion:

"My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"²

As we saw in Romans 1, *"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."* (Romans 1:21)

The agony of our society right now is largely whites seeking absolution of guilt without a Savior and blacks seeking justice without a justifier. Our culture is writhing in the pains of sin, but refusing the one who can provide both forgiveness and justice. His name is Jesus. This brings us back to the purpose of Romans. What's our takeaway? The most gospel book in the Bible was written with the overarching goal of bringing two ethnically different people groups in the Roman church together. Paul wasn't writing a PhD dissertation on justification, although it qualifies. He wasn't showing off his intellectual gospel prowess, although we are all duly impressed. He wrote it to bring two ethnically different people groups together.

Note all the things Paul didn't do to accomplish racial unity. He didn't say the Jews were better than the Gentiles, even though he himself was a Jew. Paul didn't tell the Gentiles to become more Jewish. He also didn't float his credentials as the Apostle to the Gentiles. He

¹ Seed thoughts from Natasha Crain, "5 Ways Christians are Getting Swept into a Secular Worldview in This Cultural Moment," www.christianmomthoughts.com, June 9, 2020.

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 38.

could have said, *Jews, Jesus called me the Apostle to the Gentiles, so if you're going to be in my church, you better become more Gentilish.* He didn't tell them to ignore their backgrounds and culture and ethnicity and pretend they weren't Jews or Gentiles.

No, but what did he do? He wrote the deepest explanation of the gospel and rested his entire hope in their unity on the spiritual understanding of the mercy of God to them. *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God..."* (Romans 12:1) And what flows from that? His appeal to humility, unity in one body, genuine love and brotherly affection, and to honoring others ahead of themselves.

It is the simple truth that a church who deeply understands the gospel deeply loves each other across ethnic differences. A church or a churchgoer with a superficial understanding will view those ethnically different with prejudice, not grace. Racism, not love. Bias not mercy.

How does Romans 12 sound different if it is read as a guide to gospel-applied racial unity in a church? I'll bet most of us haven't read it that way. Let's read it with that purpose in mind.

Racial Harmony is Based in God's Mercy (Romans 12:1-2)

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2).

The whole chapter, and the rest of the letter, apply this holy pivot. *By the mercies of God* is Paul's summary of Romans 1-11. It's Paul's summary of 11 chapters of ocean-depth doctrine.

Mercy isn't making headlines these days. I haven't heard it in a single protest chant. I haven't read it in a single online rant. Mercy isn't popular right now. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Certainly George Floyd received no mercy. Neither have hundreds of store owners in cities across America.

But for the Christian, mercy is the currency of human relationships because mercy is the basis of our whole relationship with God. We might add love and grace. Perhaps mercy is what love and grace produce? Remember, when it comes to our relationship with God, we don't want justice. Justice sends us all to hell. We don't want a justice-based relationship with God. In fact, any relationship based on justice is a kind of present-day hell. If your marriage is a justice-based marriage, you have a terrible marriage. If your parenting is a justice-based approach to parenting, your kids are going to hate you. We don't want justice. We desperately want mercy. And praise God, that is what we have through Jesus.

"By the mercies of God" our whole lives are to be lived as an act of worship to God. What does that mean? The mercy of God to us means we give mercy to others.

Racial Harmony is Powered by God's Grace (Romans 12:3-8)

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have

many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:3-8).

Verses 3-8 describe the unity of the body of Christ. We are varying parts of the body, but all belong to each other. We all have spiritual gifts, literally, grace gifts, to serve one another. That's a powerful picture of racial harmony. One body. Differing gifts and callings and purposes, but one body. All the parts are equal. All the parts are important. All the parts are valuable.

Why should the thumb care about the knee? Why should the elbow serve the foot? Because we are one body. When one body part hurts, the other body parts hurt with it.

In a healthy body, when one part is injured, the other parts instantly rally. Think about the last time you slammed your finger in a door or hit it with a hammer. How does your body respond? Imagine the body saying, "Now Thumb, it's your own fault for being in the door. Throb away, we don't care." Or, "Thumb, this the fifth time this year you've been hurt. Enough already!"

If I may draw the analogy, George Floyd's death created instant pain among our African American brothers and sisters. How should the white and brown and Asian American members respond? Like a body. Come around. Show we hurt too. Reinforce love and value. In the many conversations I have had, the theme I hear from the black and brown community is that they want to be heard and understood and loved. They are hurting. Will we come around them? Hear them? Hurt with them? Walk with them? What if we don't?

What do we call it when a body part feels pain but the rest of the body is unaware? Doesn't feel it with them? We call it leprosy. Leprosy is bacteria that affect the nervous system. If you get this disease, your foot or hand or body part can experience pain and the rest of the body is ignorant of the pain.

Any leprosy at Bethel Church? Any leprous members not feeling the body's pain? I'm glad to tell you today that Jesus healed leprosy and he still heals leprosy. May there be no leprosy at Bethel Church.

I've been thinking about racism as it compares to our church's decades-long heavy involvement in the value of the unborn child. This flows from our firm belief that life begins at conception and God's image is stamped on that unborn child. God's image is treasured because God is treasured. What does that look like here? Lots of financial and volunteer support to the Women's Center of Northwest Indiana. Many people are heavily vested in saving lives that bear God's image. Amen. It's a great thing we are doing.

Might it provide a model for an equally important life and justice issue like racism? What would it look like if our effort for racial harmony resembled our effort for the unborn of Northwest Indiana? The same biblical truth is at stake in both. What if a similar effort for both was put forward?

What does that look like?

Racial Harmony Triumphs in God's Love (Romans 12:9-21)

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 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. 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. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:9-21).

Let me highlight these statements in particular:

- *"Let love be genuine."* (v. 9)
- *"Love one another with brotherly affection."* (v. 10)
- *"Outdo one another in showing honor."* (v. 10)
- *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."* (v. 15)

It's natural for us to do these within our own clan, family, or friendship circle. But remember, Paul isn't urging the Jewish Christians to genuinely love the Jewish Christians or the Gentiles to genuinely love the Gentiles. There is a natural affection within our own tribes. Nobody is particularly impressed by it.

But when people who are different from us love like this, now that is captivating. This is where our commitment to the gospel is tested. Not can we love people who look like us, think like us, vote like us, live like us. Will we love across the differences? Love for Jesus' sake? Love like God has loved us with grace and mercy? We have such an opportunity to put this on display in Northwest Indiana. If I were to go back 15 years ago, our opportunity would be much different. Back then, we were only one campus. One fairly monochromatic look to our church. Mostly white. OK. We should love our fellow white brothers and sisters.

But that isn't always easy because people are people. If who we were back then was who we are today, we would be starting from scratch. We'd ask, how can we get some diversity around here? How can we minister to our multiethnic region? That's the kind of discussion going on in many racially monochromatic churches for whom this is a starting point.

But that's not us today. We have two campuses decidedly non-white. Our Asian church campus led by Pastor Tim Chen and our Gary campus led by Pastor Dexter Harris. In addition, we have more diversity at all our campuses than we used to. We celebrate that and hope it continues to diversify until our church resembles our community.

This is why in some way, this is our moment. We have taken huge strides in this area. Praise God. We have huge strides to go. What does "go" look like?

- *"Let love be genuine."* (v. 9)
- *"Love one another with brotherly affection."* (v. 10)
- *"Outdo one another in showing honor."* (v. 10)
- *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."* (v. 15)

When this kind of love is on display in Rome between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, the city of Rome sits up and asks, *what's up with this Christian Church thing? They don't worship the government, like we do. They don't worship the pantheon of gods, like we do. Yet, they are achieving something we can't do. They are doing what all our Pax Romana and Senators and Emperor can't do.*

The church in America has a lot of ground to make up before America pays attention. As is often said, Sunday mornings are the most segregated hour of the week. That is a tragic missed opportunity. We can't make America sit up and wonder, but we can make Northwest Indiana do so.

While we have a long way to go yet, I was touched this week by this email from an African American member of our church (below). I share this with her permission:

"As an African American woman, I am so pleased to be associated with Bethel Church. Over the years, your messages that addressed racism as a sin touched the depths of my heart. Some of the statements you made even brought me to tears. Believe it or not, it's rare to see Caucasian believers boldly condemn racism...I pray that God will continue to use Bethel...to reconcile the body of Christ. Racial reconciliation in the body of Christ is overdue. I hope and pray that Bethel will not only speak of bringing believers together but to walk in it. As Janet Parshall stated, all of us need to realize that racism isn't a political but heart issue. And every heart issue is an issue for the body of Christ. I urge you to continue to be bold and courageous. This isn't going to be easy. And...if it hasn't happened already, you will get backlash and persecuted for speaking of this. May our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ continue to bless you, your family, and Bethel Church to be a beacon of hope and an example for others."

What a kind note. Let it encourage us to take more steps forward even as we seek to discern what forward means.

Why will we do it? *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* (Romans 12:1-2)

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