

# A History of Oppression

What's good fam? How we doing this morning? If you have your bible apps or Bibles handy, go ahead and turn with me to **Exodus 1 verse 10**. So it's been a minute since I've taught so if I haven't met you yet my name is Marcus and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. And if you're new here, we are currently in a series titled Precious in His Sight where we are talking about all things race and justice from a biblical perspective. Kent kicked us off last week by showing us how God has a heart for all ethnicities because they represent and image him the creator. Theologians call this the imago dei. Now what we're going to talk about today is another theme in the bible, from beginning to end. But here's what's interesting: if you grew up in a predominantly white church, chances are you didn't hear this theme talked about very much. But if you grew up in a predominantly black church, chances are you might've heard something about this theme almost every week. **And that theme is oppression**. And what I want to do for us today is to biblically define what oppression is, and to show how from the very beginning oppression is in the Bible, and then show how oppression continues to this day.

Now I understand that might sound heavy to you, but here's why we need to go there in this series. First and foremost this is because oppression is sadly a part of the experience of being a black here in America. The bible over and over again makes the case that to be believers in the image of God in each person means we must recognize, condemn, and oppose anything that functionally denies the imago dei. And oppression is one of the most consistent ways that the imago dei is denied to various groups of people, both in the bible and today.

But before we do all that. I was out in the crowd last week, and let me just say, you guys were tense. Like, for at least the first 10 minutes or so. You could have quite literally heard a pin drop in this room. Which I get. It's almost as if race is a hot button topic or something.

So let me just mention a couple things. First and foremost, we're family here. So yeah, there might be things we all need to grow in and repent of in this series, but that doesn't mean we have to be nervous or anxious about it. That's just part of walking with Jesus—that's everyday life for us—at times there are gonna be things we need to own up to and repent of.

And second, there are parts of today that might be heavy to think on, so when I get to the end more than ever before, I'm gonna need to know that y'all are with me. So if you hear something that resonates with your Spirit or something you think is worth emphasizing, I want you to say Amen, shout a mmmhmmmm, snap your fingers, jot

down notes, however you do it I want you to acknowledge that the Spirit is indeed speaking truth today. Amen?

## A Definition

So first things first. For us to get anywhere we will need a common definition of what the bible means when it's referring to oppression. Now when we look through the Bible, the word oppression, which transliterates to lachats, means to squeeze, press, or to oppress. So in context of what we will overview we would say that **Oppression is when the powerful take more for themselves at the expense of the weak.** It fails to see other humans being made in the image of God. So anytime one person boosts up, solidifies, or increases their power, at the expense of someone with less power than them, that's oppression from a biblical perspective. So in short, oppression is **"My power at your expense."**

## Biblical Oppression

Now once you realize that's what oppression is, you can begin to spot it from the earliest pages in the bible. In Genesis 1:28 after God creates humanity he calls us to rule and reign over creation to help with the flourishing of what he had set into motion. But as soon as sin enters the story of Adam and Eve, it turns them against one another; and they start blame shifting and vying for position and power. Then God tells them that as a result, Eve will forever be trying to rule over Adam and he will forever be trying to rule over her. Instead of ruling and reigning over creation. They sadly try and rule and reign over one another. Church family that is oppression. That is the mindset of **"my power at your expense."**

In the next generation of humanity, there are two brothers: Cain and Abel. When Cain finds himself at a disadvantage with God, he decides to kill Abel to ensure that doesn't continue. That's oppression: **"My power at your expense."**

Then there's a guy named Lamech. He is the first polygamist in the bible: he has multiple wives and treats them all like property. He then brags to them that he "killed a man for wounding" him. So Lamech uses his power to treat others like property and to eliminate others and exalt himself. That is oppression. That is **"My power at your expense."**

Then we have the story of Joseph, which is about a little more than a technicolor dreamcoat. It's about a brother who gloats about his father's favoritism towards him to his brothers, and then they respond in kind by throwing him in a pit and selling him into slavery. That's oppression: **"My power at your expense."**

And then we have maybe the most quintessential story about oppression in the entire bible: the story of the Israelites enslavement under Pharaoh. At this point in the story, the newly minted Pharaoh saw God's people as a threat to his rule and reign over Egypt so he says in v10,

*“Come, we must deal shrewdly with them [them being the Israelites] or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”*

*11So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. 12But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites 13and worked them ruthlessly. 14They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.*

So Pharaoh **oppresses God's people. He makes them work under his rule. He makes them build his houses and work in his fields so he and the Egyptians' lives would be better; while Israel's lives were made bitter.** So Pharaoh as we can clearly see, used his power at the expense of others.

So early in the Bible we see how God's mandate to rule and reign was marred by the effects of sin. That from the very beginning mankind sought to use their power at the expense of others rather than seeing each other made in God's image. And not just individuals, entire populations of people groups, as we saw with Pharaoh. And anytime you have an individual with oppressive tendencies using their power to enact oppressive laws and practices, you're going to end up with oppressive systems as a result. So oppression can be interpersonal and it can be systemic.

## **Disclaimers:**

Now what I want to do for the next little bit is show you how the plight of black Americans fits squarely in the biblical category of oppression. I think part of the problem when it comes to addressing the treatment of minorities in our country from a biblical perspective is that we lack a biblical vocabulary for it. So we might think back over America's history and go "yeah that was awful how people of color were treated," but we struggle with where to go from there. But by giving biblical language to things in our world, it helps us discern what happened and is happening, and therefore to know what, biblical speaking, we should do about it.

In this teaching, we're mainly just going to cover the oppression of black Americans. Not because they were or are the only ones oppressed. Native Americans were and sometimes are. Asians were and sometimes are. Hispanics were and sometimes are. There has been plenty of oppression in our nation's history. But in every teaching, you have to decide what you're able to cover well, and based on my ethnicity and my experience, I wanted to focus on that. But the ideas we'll discuss very much apply to all oppression. And hear me say, as we dive into this it will not be easy to listen to for my white brothers and sisters. Now my goal today is not to guilt or shame. I only want to help all of us see the broken history that all of us have come from. **We are where we are today because of the fruit of 400 years of oppression.**

## American Oppression

Now most of us have probably heard the broad strokes of America's history, but today I want us to walk through some of it with an eye for this theme of oppression. We want to do that so we can discern how God feels about it, and also how we should think and feel and act in response to it. So we'll start where you'd expect: with the institution of slavery. And I will not do this section true justice since we only have but so much time today. But here me say, if we were in a black church I'd take my sweet time in each section and we'd most likely be here for 3 hours because in the black church we typically run long. All that to say, since we will only go over some of the more major events of oppression throughout history let me suggest that you check out the [Color of Compromise](#). It's a fantastic book by Jemar Tisby where he thoroughly walks through America's history when it comes to the injustices done to black people.

So to start off with this history we have to start at the beginning. White Europeans had a new country to call their own, which they stole from the native Americans. But currently, it was just that: land. There was no infrastructure, no commerce to speak up, no conveniences, etc. So what they needed was human labor to help build up that infrastructure quickly and cheaply. Enter the concept of chattel slavery. Which meant you were the personal property of your slave owner.

So there's really no way to sugarcoat it: black men, women, and children were forced to serve white people. From the bedrock of our country's history, white Europeans took land from another people group and enslaved a people group to build up a society where they would thrive. This is the very definition of oppression: **"My power at your expense."**

And one of the saddest and most infuriating parts of the American church's history is how similar to the world they looked during this time. [White Christians were frequently](#)

some of the loudest proponents of the colonial slave trade. Proclaiming Christians owned and treated slaves just like their non-Christian neighbors. Now often, these Christians would attempt to “evangelize” their slaves and tell them about Jesus, but if and when those slaves converted to Christianity, they were still seen as their slaves. They chose to see African people through cultural categories, slaves, rather than biblical categories, brothers and sisters. Often, Christian slave owners would abuse texts in the bible to convince their newly converted slaves that they should do a better job of “submitting” to them.

During this time, black slaves were not regarded for their full humanity or citizenship. Case in point, there was a policy *written into our Constitution* by our (white) founding fathers that decreed that each slave would count as three-fifths of a white person.

That family is oppression: **“my power at your expense.”**

Around the late 1800s, after the Civil War, the Reconstruction era began. In the Dred Scott decision of 1857, the Supreme Court of the United States in an official opinion and verdict, declared that black people and I quote were **“an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race”** and that black people **“had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”** This was how the highest court in our country interpreted our Constitution. And as we know also goes against the imago dei. **“My power at your expense.”**

In 1865, newly-freed black people were granted land, in a form of reparations. It was termed 40 acres and a mule. But shortly after, Andrew Johnson, Lincoln’s successor, overturned the 40 acres and a mule mandate and ordered that redistributed lands be returned to former enslavers. Which gave land, property and power right back to white people, forcing blacks to either abandon their land and property and start over with nothing, or serve their former enslavers just to pay for the land that was taken out from under them.

From here the reconstruction era gave way to the Jim Crow era. While there are many instances that were designed to segregate and subjugate black people in this era, in the north and west part of the states, which was supposedly not as bad as former confederate states, they had “sundown towns;” which were communities where black people had to be out before sundown or face violent repercussions. White people, of course, did not have to abide by the same practice. **“My power at your expense.”**

While Congress ratified the 15th Amendment in 1870 to ensure that no one could be denied the right to vote based on the color of their skin, state legislators, especially in the

South, had other ideas. They passed laws that instituted poll taxes, understanding clauses, and literacy tests in order to exclude black people from voting. That is called voter suppression, or for our purposes today oppression, which is “my power at your expense”.

In the 1900s the Civil Rights movement was beginning to make way. Names like Martin Luther King Jr, Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and many others were starting to fight for black people’s rights. But still oppression continued.

There are some who would say that between Lincoln and MLK, they were the one-two punch that ended racism all together. But you can’t erase four hundred years of race-based oppression by saying you’re colorblind or by passing a few laws. In modern day America oppression is not as overt as it once was but it’s effects still linger and have a commanding grip on black and white people alike.

Let’s just zoom out for a second and look at nationwide income levels when it comes to racial disparity, according to the US Census in 2011 the median wealth holdings of a white household was \$111,146. For a black household it was \$7,113.

When you further control those numbers for education, you might think that removes some of the disparity. It actually doesn’t—the disparity gets worse. For college degree headed households the numbers are \$301,300 vs \$26,300. The difference is so large that if all homes and vehicles were taken from white americans, they would still, on average, have greater net worth than black americans. And a most recent study was done to show that the net worth of a white american family versus a black american family was 10 times greater.

So what's going on here. We no longer have slavery, we have done away with at least some of America's previous racist policies—why is there still such a dramatic difference between the experience of a black person and a white person in America? Well think about it like this:

Imagine with me for a second that my great great grandfather sits down with a white person's great great grandfather who happens to be a slave owner and they decide to play Monopoly. So they play and when my great great grandfather passes Go he looks to collect his \$200, but instead of \$200 he gets a punch to the face by the white slave owner and is told he will never be able to gain any money and thereby not being able to buy any property. And that’s how the game is played in their generation.

Now let's say a few generations go by and my grandfather at the height of Jim Crow sits down with a white person's grandfather at the height of Jim Crow to continue that same game of monopoly. When my grandfather passes Go, he has learned to cover his face in fear of getting punched, but the white person's grandfather says actually, I will let you collect your \$200. Matter of fact I'll even let you buy some property. But you can only buy the brown and light blue properties. You can't get the red, green, or yellow ones and don't even think about buying Boardwalk or Park Place. So this goes on for another generation.

So as they die off, I pick back up the same game of Monopoly with great great grandchild of the slave owner. And they are very apologetic for their family treated my family. We sit down and the white person says to me, "you can pass go, collect your money, buy whatever property is available to you. **We are now equal.**" But let me ask you: is that true? Is the game equal? Is it fair now all of a sudden? Sure, in some ways we are now being treated 'equally.' We both get to roll the dice, we both get turns, we both collect \$200 when we pass go. But the game is far from equal. They've had five generations to enrich themselves and acquire property and I've had none. And now everywhere I land, I have to pay them, because they own all the property. That's their power, at my expense. Do you see this? The oppression of the past still carries weight into the future.

Now all I've done thus far is just show you a handful of isolated instances of oppression. Examples that even just on their own are instances of oppression. We don't even have time to go into the general injustices in our country that cumulatively have contributed to the oppression of black Americans. We haven't talked about lynchings or the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. We haven't talked about voter suppression that continues to this day and the war on drugs that Nixon's administration explicitly admitted was just an attempt to imprison more black people. There's so much more we could go into. But I think you guys can see the point: the experience of black people in America, from the beginning until now, has been characterized constantly by oppression. By other people gaining and sustaining power, at their expense.

## **So Where Do We Go From Here**

After hearing all of this, how do we tackle this mess that we have inherited? How do we tackle all of these issues as Christ followers? Well after hearing all of this, your gut reaction may be that you want to do something. And to that I would say yes and amen. And we will surely talk on application in future sermons but before that I want us to do two things as a church. *Band you can come on up.*

## Jesus and Oppression

First we need to look to Jesus. The entire biblical story continually points to a messiah who would do something about the oppression of his people. When Jesus arrived on the scene, that was one of the most pressing questions on everybody's mind: "how are you going to liberate us from oppression?"

And he did. But he did it in a way that no one would have anticipated—by undergoing oppression himself, and through that, using oppression against itself in the form of the cross. So for my black brothers and sisters in the room, Jesus knows the pangs of suffering an unjust death. He understands being despised and rejected by mankind for no reason. He exposed the ugly realities of oppression by becoming a victim of it. Isaiah 53 would say that by his wounds we are healed. We are healed from the effects of sin. Not just ones we commit but from those that others commit towards us.

For my white brothers and sisters in the room Jesus shows you a better way to use your privilege and power in this generation. No one was more powerful than Jesus. A point that [Philippians 2](#) actually makes. Check it:

*[5] Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: [6] Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, [7] but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself [somebody say humbled Himself] and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.*

So Jesus humbled himself for our benefit. If oppression is **'my power at your expense,'** the opposite of oppression is to say **'your power, at my expense.'** Leverage the cultural power and position you often have just by virtue of being white, and use it to lift up, elevate and advocate for people of color. That's how Jesus often used his power, and that's how you're called to use yours.

White folks in the room: when black people talk about you having privilege, we're not so much telling you to feel bad and guilty about it, as we are trying to get you to recognize your privilege, and then *use* it to better ends." Much like Jesus did. This looks like humbling or disadvantaging yourself to the advantage of others less fortunate than you.

In his roadmap to racial justice *Where Do We Go from Here*, King wrote, **"Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes."** He went on to explain, **"Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything**



that stands against love.” Love is not a mere feeling of affection. In the beloved community, love is an action that uses the levers of power to bring about justice. Jeff is going to get into the specifics of justice a lot more next week. But for today, suffice it to say that justice looks like giving power to those who are weaker at your own expense, and sometimes at the expense of your own power.

## Lamenting Oppression

Second as followers of Jesus and brothers and sisters of one another we need to lament our history properly. Now sadly we are not taught this at all in church today, but lament is actually what followers of Jesus have done anytime something in their world isn't as it should be. It's when we both *mourn* the painful realities of our world, and *cry out desperately* for God to do something about them. So for my black brothers and sisters in the room, be active, protest, and march where needed, but don't forget to seek the face of God and be on your knees because only through him can you truly deal with the emotions that come from injustices.

For my white brothers and sisters, seek reconciliation, stand up for your black brothers and sisters when you spot injustice, but don't skip this step to mourn with your black brother and sisters who are mourning. It may not seem like much but lamenting is a Godward first action. When you truly stop to reflect, to truly lament, you are feeling the weight of this cultural moment and actually following the scriptures when it calls us to weep with those who weep. Oh there is something when you cry alongside someone who is hurting. This empathy creates a bond and acknowledges the very imago dei with those who are hurting.

May we not make the same sin of the past of seeing this whole thing as us vs them, may we see those mourning next to us as our brothers and sisters. In our midst we have black brothers and sisters weeping and mourning and as one family of God we mourn.

Now during this time I want us to pray and lament the realities of America's history.