

# A Gospel Issue

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, go with me to **Genesis 1**, just a few pages past the front cover. We're going to be all over the place in the Scriptures today, but we'll kick things off there. If you haven't already heard, today we begin a new series called *Precious in His Sight*. Which is going to be a series, at its core, about pursuing racial justice and reconciliation.

Now I am aware that **in America, in the year 2021**, saying that we're doing a series on *race* puts some people on high alert, regardless of what side of the political spectrum you fall on. **I've told several pastor friends that we're doing this series, and the most common response from them has been "I'll pray for your email inbox." They apparently realize that wading into this topic can create some tension.**

But let me just say right off the bat: I **don't think I'm going to need that** many prayers for my inbox. By and large, that's just not how you guys respond to teaching we do here on Sundays. **We did a three-week series on *politics* (of all things) this past summer, and I braced myself for the backlash, and you know what happened? *Nothing*. I got one singular email giving me feedback on the series, and that one wasn't even a critical email. It was an email from someone in our church saying that one of the teachings was especially convicting for them, and they wanted help knowing how to process it and act on it. Even since we announced two weeks ago that we're doing *this* series on *race*, the only feedback I have gotten has been quite a few of you saying that you're very excited we're doing this series.** So I'm just not anticipating that you guys are going to send me hate mail about all the things I say that you don't like throughout this series. That's just usually not our crowd. Some friends of mine pastor churches where that *is* the case, but so far it hasn't been the case here.

But that said, obviously, the **tensions are high in our *society*** right now when it comes to race and racism. So anytime someone brings it up, there can be a *nervousness* about what is going to be said. So as we get started, I'd love to just try to set some of that to bed. First, **this is not going to be a series about what the political *Right* or the political *Left* thinks about issues of race.** Nor would that even make sense to do in a church setting. One of the unfortunate things about the current state of our society is that a lot of people have started viewing nearly *everything* through their particular political lens. It seems like every time something happens in the world—a war, a tragedy, even a worldwide pandemic—we immediately look to see what our politicians of choice say or think about it, and then we form *our* opinion based on that.

This has also happened **when it comes to** issues surrounding **race**. Instead of thinking critically about it—or thinking *biblically* about it—we far too often take our talking points from our party of choice. But **as followers of Jesus, we must understand that our primary filter is not the Left or the Right, it is the Scriptures**. That’s where we go to figure out how to think well about certain topics. So **rather than seeing everything (including race) through a *political* filter, I’d love to try to flip that and help us see everything (including things like politics and race) through a *bible* filter**. Make sense?

Okay. The *second* thing I want to mention is that I, **nor anybody up here during this series, is coming for you**. Our goal is not to spend six weeks making you feel horrible about how we’re all racists and need to do better. That’s not our heart with this series. Now, as we work through this, there will be *correction* to be gleaned. There will be things we need to think on and pray on and process through, and likely be some repentance to be participated in. And that’s just because we’re going to be looking at the *Scriptures*. *Any time* you honestly wrestle with the Scriptures, there is going to be correction to be had. But that said, we are not planning on beating anybody up for six straight weeks in this series. Rather, we just want to unpack the Scriptures, and let the chips fall where they may.

And to do that, I want us to take **a bit of a tour** from the front to the back cover of the bible. And the reason for that is that I want to show you a deeply embedded *pattern* in the Scriptures; something that we find repeated and emphasized from beginning to end. You may have never picked up on it, but the simple fact is that **the entire narrative arc of the bible bends towards racial reconciliation**.

Now, just very quickly here, I know there’s been **some critique on the term** “racial reconciliation,” because sometimes when white people say that, it feels like it’s asking black people to just “get over” some of the atrocious things that have been done to them through the years and “reconcile.” Which is obviously a very silly idea—reconciliation is *never* possible until there is an honest accounting of wrongs and a repentance for those wrongs. That’s true in *any* relationship, and it’s true in this conversation too. So just know from the start that when I use the term “reconciliation,” **what I’m talking about is us all pursuing racial justice, and then through that making reconciliation a possibility**. And *that* is a consistent theme in the Scriptures, beginning to end.

So this morning, we’re going to start at the very beginning, in **Genesis 1**. As a fair warning, we are going to **move pretty quickly from passage to passage** this morning. So if you want to follow along and flip to each passage you can, or we’ll have the entirety of the passages up on the screen, and you can follow along there—either way.

But before we read Genesis 1, just **for context**, God here is in the process of creating the world we now inhabit. The earth, the sky, the moon, the stars, the sea, the animals. He has created this beautiful habitat teeming with potential and possibility. And what we're *about* to read is when he reaches the **pinnacle of his creation** process and creates human beings. Take a look with me, starting in v. 26:

*[26] Then God said, "Let us make man **in our image, after our likeness**. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." [27] So God created man **in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.***

So here we read that God creates man—or more literally, *humanity* or *humankind*—**"in his image."** Now, that *means* that **human beings are different** from everything else in the story so far, right? It *did not* say that the sun or the moon or the stars were made in God's image. It didn't say that the earth or the sky were made in God's image. It didn't even say the animals were made in God's image. All of those things are beautiful and good and worthy of awe and wonder—but **it very clearly makes the point that only human beings are made in God's image.** They are on an altogether different level than everything else in creation. **So listen, practically speaking: I'm sure your labradoodle is adorable. I mean absolutely adorable. And I love that you love your labradoodle. I'm glad you take care of your labradoodle. But your labradoodle is not a human. He is not made in the image of God. You might purchase human clothes for him, but he is not a human. That's for free this morning. That needs to set some of y'all free.**

And **most of us inherently get this** idea—that humans are on a different level than animals. For instance, if you're married, and there's a fire at your house in the middle of night, and you're trying to figure out whether to go back in and save your spouse or your *labradoodle*, most of us aren't going to *deliberate* very long on that decision. We are going to save our spouse. If you *are* deliberating, I would argue that's a separate problem *within your marriage* that you need to sort out. But for most of us, it's not even a question. Because we inherently know that humans are more valuable than animals. Again, that doesn't mean animals *aren't valuable*—it just means that they're not as *valuable as humans*. Okay, biblically, the reason for that is that human beings are the only creatures *made in the image* of God. **Theologians call this the "imago dei," which is Latin for "the image of God." Every single human being has the imago dei within them.**

**From the palest of white to the darkest of brown, every single person contains within them the *imago dei*, and therefore are inherently worthy of dignity and respect and just treatment.** It doesn't matter where they come from, it doesn't matter their education level, their intelligence, their age, their gender, their sexual orientation, their socioeconomic status, their political leanings—none of that changes this reality in the *least*. **Every single human being is worthy of dignity and respect, because they are made in the image of God.**

And this—the *imago dei*—is **ground zero for any coherent understanding of justice**. We have to start *here* to get anywhere in talking about *racial* justice. Because if we are going to say that racism is wrong (which we are), there has to be a *reason* that it's wrong. Does that make sense? **Right now, there is a huge push in our society for racial justice, and I praise God for that.** But when I hear people talk on social media and the news about *why* they feel led to pursue racial justice, usually their answer goes something like this: "...because it's the right thing to do." Or "because it's common sense." "Because we just all *inherently know* that all people should be treated equally."

And **with all due respect** to people who say things like that, I just don't think reasons like that hold up. Because part of the *problem* is that there is what seems like a *surprising* number of people in our country for whom those things *aren't* common sense at all. **The reason that white supremacists are white supremacists is because to them, it is actually common sense that white people are superior to black people.** They "*just know*" that black people are less important, less valuable than white people are. And obviously, they're *wrong* in believing that.

But *if that's what they believe*, **it just won't work to insist** that racial equality is just "the right thing to do." We can scream at the top of our lungs that 'it's just common sense,' and that won't change that to some people it is *not* common sense. **So what we need instead, is some type of foundation to stand on. Some deeper reason that it matters that people of all races be treated equitably. And I would argue the most solid footing to stand on is the *imago dei*: the reality that every person and every ethnicity of persons are created in the image of God.** That's the *basis* Scripture gives us to stand on. Make sense?

Okay, next let's head to **Genesis 18**. After the events we just read in Genesis 1, God creates Adam and Eve, he puts them in the garden, and he gives them everything around them to enjoy. Nothing is off limits to them except for one tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He says "do *not* eat from that tree." So of course they *do*. And from that moment, death and destruction *floods* the human story. There is sin,

violence, oppression, superiority, inferiority—you name it. If it's bad and destructive, it now happens in some corner of society.

But almost immediately as all of that happens, **God reveals a plan to rescue humanity from itself. To bless what is now cursed.** God does not just leave humanity to fend for themselves—he formulates a plan to make things right. And what we're *about* to read is one of the places that summarizes that plan. Look with me at **Genesis 18, v. 17 & 18:**

*The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?*

**So God's plan is** to take one man and one nation, and use that to reach and bless *all the nations* of the earth. **Now, this is really important for you to get for the rest of our teaching today.** Whenever you see **the word "nation" or "nations"** in the bible, you need to know that it's not talking about nation-states. Okay? When you and I hear the word "nation," we tend to think of an area on a map, surrounded by borders. *The U.S. is a nation. Mexico is a nation. Canada is a wonderful nation that is made up of much nicer people than the U.S. is.* We think of a "nation" as an area on a map. But that's not what the biblical authors mean when they say "nation." *They meant people and people groups, and most literally, ethnicities.* Specifically, in the New Testament, the word for "nation" is the Greek word "ethnos"—it's where we *get* the word "ethnicity."

**God isn't in the business of blessing plots of land on a map. He's in the business of blessing *all the ethnicities* of the earth.** God's plan, from the very beginning is to reach and bless all the *ethnicities* on planet earth. **Now notice how central** that idea of *ethnicities* is to the plan. It's not secondary, it's not an afterthought—it's right there from the very beginning: **God will bless all peoples, all nations, all colors, all ethnicities, through Abraham and his family.** *Because* all nations and all colors are made in the *image of God*, all nations and all colors are a part of God's plan.

So to borrow some modern terminology, **God is not "colorblind."** He is color-aware. **God made zero mistakes when he chose the various colors of our skin.** It's not that God loves you *despite* the color of your skin—he *loves the* color of your skin. It is part of his intentional, beautiful design for you. And anyone who wants to *ignore* the color of your skin, however positively they spin it, is at odds with God. **Because God prizes every race and every ethnicity.** They are all, to quote the old Sunday school song, "precious in his sight." And therefore, God's rescue mission for the world *necessarily includes* all of them.

So with that, let's hop over to the **New Testament**, to **Matthew 28**. So here, if you're not familiar with the story, **Jesus has just been executed** on the cross, he has risen from the grave, and is about to depart for good to go be with the Father. And what we're going to read are the **final instructions** that he gives his disciples before he does that. **Now, think about that for a second. If you spent several years of your life around a group of people, and you knew you were departing to never see them again, don't you think you'd sweat your last words to them a little? Like, you'd want to say the most essential, most important stuff, right?** Okay, that's the situation here, and *here* is what Jesus chooses to say to *them*. Verse 19:

*[19] Go therefore and make disciples of (what does that say?) **all nations (all ethnos, all tribes, all colors of people)**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

The command is to "go therefore and make disciples of *all ethnicities*." Now, it could be **easy to miss the provocative nature** of what Jesus just said. Keep in mind that when he says this, he is talking to eleven Jewish guys. Some of them with very *ethnocentric* understandings of the world at the time. And yet, *the thing* he wants to make sure they hear before he leaves planet earth is "go to every *nation*, every group of people, every *ethnicity* that there is, and make disciples. Invite all of them into my kingdom. My family." Jesus lets his disciples know that his kingdom is not about *their* people or *their* color or *their* culture. It is about *all* peoples and *all* colors and *all* cultures.

Now, **for clarity** here: just in case you're **white in the room and thinking** "oh that's how all of *them* became a part of the kingdom of God." No...this is how *you* became a part of the kingdom of God. I hope we realize that if this idea of "going to all nations" wasn't in the Bible, no white person in America would be sitting here in Knoxville, TN, studying the bible. There are lot of different ethnicities represented in the bible—hardly any of them would be considered "Caucasian" by our definitions today. **So this is what makes so-called Christian white nationalism so utterly moronic. Because if it weren't for people of color taking the gospel message to the ends of the earth, there would be no such thing as a white Christian.** It is so silly that people believe Christianity is a white man's religion. It doesn't even make sense *historically or geographically*.

**But because people of color** in the days of Jesus took obedience to Jesus' command *seriously*, you and I have the *ability* to participate in the family of God. How incredible is that? And in return, we are called to pick up that mantle. God wants *all* of his disciples, then and now, to "go to all peoples and ethnicities" and tell them about the good news of Jesus, such that God's kingdom becomes a place for all peoples and colors and nations.

And so on that note, let's look at **two more passages** together before we're done, both from the book of Revelation—the last book in the bible. We'll look at **Revelation, chapter 5** and then **chapter 7**. **Revelation, if you've never read it before**, is shall we say an *intense* book at times. But much of it focuses around visions of what the bible calls the “new heavens and the new earth.” In other words, the day and time when Jesus returns to earth to set things right and return everything to how it should be. The passage we're about to read speaks of what the elders and creatures around God's throne are saying on that day. Starting in v. 9 of chapter 5:

*And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you (Jesus) to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”*

So here, it **explicitly connects everything that happened on the cross** of Jesus to **his desire to rescue people from every ethnicity into his family**. Did you see that? So the cross, then, was not *just* about saving individual souls. The cross was about ransoming people from every ethnicity, every color, every language from their sin, and forming them *together* into a new family. A new community that represents and glorifies God. And this is actually a *theme* in the book of Revelation—it comes up multiple times. Look with me a couple chapters later at chapter 7, where it says this, starting in v. 9:

*[9] After this I looked, and behold, 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, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

So **what Jesus wanted to happen**—what he was aiming to accomplish from eternity past and brought to fruition through the cross—finally *happens*. **At the end of all things, when it's all said and done, there are people from every nation, every ethnicity, every people group, every language—they're all gathered around the throne of God, and they're all singing out the song “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne.”** If we wanted to shorten that, we might just say “Jesus wins.” Jesus' desire, that he would rule and reign over a group of people made up of all different colors, comes true. Jesus *wins*. That's where the story ends. So when you join yourself to that multi-ethnic cause with Jesus, you are on the winning side of history.

And on the *other* hand, to *oppose* Jesus' desire for a multi-ethnic kingdom of God is to *oppose* the victorious kingdom of God. Which, just for clarity, makes you *not* victorious. And by saying "those *oppose* it," I *don't just mean those who outright oppose* it. There are people who *outright* oppose racial justice and racial reconciliation—those are the people that make it into the news headlines: the KKK, the white supremacists, the white nationalists—so on and so forth. There are groups of people that make their opposition to racial harmony very *obvious*. But there are also people that more *subtly* oppose it. There are those that say things like "well I'm not a racist, *but...*" "I'm not a racist, I just don't think racism is *that* big of a deal." "I'm not a racist, I just think white people ought to keep to themselves, and black people ought to keep to themselves..." "I'm not a racist, I'm just uncomfortable around black people." Those are all just subtle ways of saying "the thing that was of *central importance* to Jesus, is just not all that important to me." Because of central importance to Jesus is to reconcile to himself a group of people from every ethnicity to represent him in the world.

So, *do you now see what I mean* when I said the entire narrative arc of the bible bends *towards* racial reconciliation? This is what God has been about from the very start. This is absolutely *central* to God's plan for the world. I know that even some of us that grew up in the church may not have heard it unpacked in quite that way, but it is *undeniable* from the pages of the bible. From beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation, at every point of the story, God's heart is for all nations, all *ethnos*, all colors to be represented, reconciled, and reunited in his kingdom.

So *how might we sum all of this* up? In a sentence, I think we might put it like this:

## Racial reconciliation is a gospel issue.

So first, do you guys know what I mean by that—"a gospel issue"? *There are a lot of people in the American Church, who, when you start talking about something like race—they will respond with something along the lines of "let's not get caught up in all that stuff—those aren't gospel issues. Let's just preach the gospel, let's just teach the bible, and the race stuff will sort itself out."* Their take is that *talking* about race just causes more division, more strife, more disagreement, and so it's better that we just stick to "gospel issues."

Now, let me just start off by saying, I *don't think I'm in love* with that framework: deciding that certain things as "gospel issues" and other things are not "gospel issues." Because my understanding has always been that when you become a follower of Jesus, the gospel now applies to *all of* your life. It doesn't just apply to spiritual things, or the things you want it to apply to—it applies to *everything*. There is no aspect of your life that you



get to *exclude* or *hold back* from the good news of Jesus breaking its way into. So in some ways, I think we could say that if you follow Jesus, *everything* is a gospel issue.

But **if I were to assume the best** about what is meant by “gospel issues” and “non-gospel issues,” I’d bring up at least a couple of things in response. **One is that those who say racism isn’t a “gospel issue” tend to be a little inconsistent.** Because many of the same people who think we *shouldn’t* speak explicitly about racism *do think* we should speak explicitly about other justice issues—things like *abortion*, for instance. They think that when it comes to things like *that*, Christians *should be consistently* vocal in speaking against it and against those that support it. But let me just ask, why wouldn’t the same rationale apply *there*? Why is the counsel when it comes to *race* to “just preach the gospel, and everything else will sort itself out,” but the counsel when it comes to *abortion* to specifically speak and condemn and legislate *against the issue itself*? If all human beings are made in the image of God, that encompasses everything from the unborn child, *on*. So why is one worthy of mentioning *explicitly*, and the other one one that we need to keep quiet about? It seems like, when the imago dei is being denied *anyone*, no matter their stage of development or the color of their skin, we should speak up.

But the other, **more important, problem** with thinking race “isn’t a gospel issue” is, well, the bible itself. Because the bible actually *presents* race, racism, and racial reconciliation as “gospel issues.” In **Revelation 5**, it *explicitly said* that what God was doing in sending Jesus to the cross was that he was “gathering people to himself people from every tongue, every nation, and every tribe.” That sounds pretty *core* to the message of the gospel to me.

But there are other places in the bible where we also see this clearly. **One of them is in Galatians chapter 2**. I’d encourage you to read the story on your own time, but I’ll give you the summarized version. In the passage, Peter—a Jewish leader of the early Church—has begun refusing to eat with Gentiles—people of other ethnicities—in that church. He is guilty of racial discrimination against the Gentiles. Paul—another leader of the early Church—gets wind of this and decides he has to confront Peter about it. He goes and rebukes Peter for his *racism*, and in doing so says that Peter’s conduct was “out of step with the *gospel*.” He doesn’t say “it was this secondary theological issue I needed to address in Peter’s life.” He says Peter doing this exposed a lack of belief and trust *in the gospel itself*.

So **based on those passages** and plenty of others, it seems apparent to me that **racial reconciliation is indeed a gospel issue. It’s not over to the side, it’s not secondary or tertiary—it is a fundamental implication of the gospel itself. God sent Jesus to die so that he could reconcile every tongue, tribe, nation and ethnicity to himself, and**

therefore to one another. And I think we dishonor that message when we pretend that part of it isn't that important to us. When Jesus went to the cross, he had all people in mind. When his blood was spilled, it was spilled for people of every nation, tongue and tribe. And as gospel people, we should think in the same way.

So we want to help with precisely that throughout this series. We've got six weeks, so we're going to cover a lot of ground by the time it's all said and done, but let me just give you a few practical things to know going into the rest of the series. First, **you will be hearing a lot less from me in this series than you normally do.** I love this stuff, I love talking about and shepherding us through this stuff. But at the same time, this series felt like a really important time to lift up the voices of people of color, rather than my voice and my perspective. So I'll only be teaching this week and one other week during the series. In the rest of the series, you'll be hearing from Marcus, one of our pastors who is black; Jeff, another one of our pastors who is Asian; and a friend of mine, Antony Frederick who is a pastor in South Carolina who is black and has come and taught for us at City Church in the past. So my hope is that *even in how we think about the teaching of this series*, we can model as a church family the willingness to seek out and listen to the voices of people of color.

Which leads me to the next thing. I realize, looking around this room, that right now, **we are a very white church.** Like very white. **And there are at least a couple reasons for that. One is because of our surroundings: Knoxville, in general, is a very white city compared to a lot of other places in the country.** But some of that too is that we still have a lot of growing to do in being a welcoming place for people of color. We've grown a lot in it since we started as a church going on five years ago, but we want to do a lot *more* growing in it too. And not just growing in it for *diversity's* sake, but growing in it because our world needs it, and because the gospel and the kingdom of God *demand*s it.

So on that note, one other practical thing. I know that because we are still growing in that, **some of our LifeGroups** might only have one person of color or maybe a few people of color in them. And as many of you guys know, most of our LifeGroups spend time discussing the teachings each week when they meet. Which could make for some awkward moments in our LifeGroup discussion time if we're not prepared for it. So I wanted to offer some quick **pointers** on how to navigate those moments together:

- First, **prepare in advance to actively participate in discussion.** Some of us don't think much about the teaching between when we leave here on Sundays and when we sit down at LifeGroup later in the week. And while that might be okay at times, if you do that in this series, it will be very unhelpful, and here's why. **If there are people of color in your group, and they are met with complete silence**

**from everyone during group discussion, that to them communicates that these issues are not important to you.** So I would encourage you not to respond with silence. Now you don't have to say something crazy smart or insightful. You don't have to say something beautiful or eloquent, but do *not* be silent. As our black brothers and sisters have said before, sometimes silence is deafening. So I would just encourage you to prepare in advance to *participate*.

- Second, **leave the political discussions at home.** As I mentioned at the beginning of the teaching, this is not a series about what the Left or the Right thinks about race, racism, or justice. It is a series about what the *bible teaches* about those topics. So your LifeGroup leaders will be given full permission to, if they feel like the conversation is turning in an overly political direction, to just say “we’re not here to talk about that.” If you want to dialog about politics with people, grab a meal or a drink with them on your own time (although good luck finding people to do *that*). That’s not what this is for. Leave that at home.
- And third, **don’t expect the people of color in your group to be the spokespersons for all people of color.** Understand that being one of the only, or *the only* person of color in a room full of white people can be a very uncomfortable situation in general—but certainly more so when we’re discussing issues of race. So even though it might be well-intentioned, don’t do the thing where you look at the person of color and go “what do black people think about...?” Or, “why do y’all always...” Do not expect them to speak for all people of color, or even for them to speak at all. If they *choose* to speak up, be very ready to listen and listen well—but don’t force them to be the loudest or most constant voice in discussing these teachings.

That all make sense? But with all of that said, here is our hope. **Our hope is that** if we can put some thought and intentionality into our LifeGroup discussions in this series, we can all move together towards God’s heart for every tribe, nation, ethnicity and tongue together as a church family. That’s our goal with this series.

Let me pray to that end for us.