

# Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation— The Issue of Race and the Gospel of Grace (Part 2)

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” <sup>3</sup> And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, <sup>4</sup> and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>5</sup> And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

<sup>6</sup> And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you 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,

<sup>10</sup> and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” (Rev 5:1–10)

### Unrest and Upheaval

- A. I mentioned last time that I’ve personally never lived through, and I’ve certainly never pastored a church through, such a time of unrest and upheaval. It really is crazy when you stop and think about it, isn’t it?
  - 1. In the midst of COVID-19 and this global pandemic, as if that wasn’t enough, the nation just erupted in protest regarding the senseless murder of George Floyd and with concern for broader issues of racial injustice.
- B. I’ve endeavored for quite a while now to speak into that first issue of the pandemic, but I said last time that I felt it was now of the utmost importance that I speak for a few Sundays at least with particular concern for this matter of racial inequity.
  - 1. These are dizzying days and my hope is that I might help us regain our balance by way of God’s Word and Spirit.

### “Living in Step”

- A. The title of these messages is Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation—The Issue of Race and the Gospel of Grace. Part 1 was last time, and now this morning we pick it back up with Part 2.

1. You may recall, last time I spent pretty much the entirety of the sermon to what I called “Learning the Story,” by that I simply meant I wanted us to see how the issue of race develops through the four chapters of the Bible’s storyline—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation.
  2. But I said after doing all of that we were really going to wrap around today and try to tease out the implications of it all for us as it pertains to race and the stuff we see going down around us today. I want to move us from merely “Learning the Story” to now “Living in Step” with it.
- B. That phrase “living in step”—I borrowed it from Paul, actually, in [Gal 2:14](#), where he’s talking about how he had to confront Peter because he was falling back into his Jewish ethnocentric ways and starting to distance himself from the Gentiles and things.
1. And Paul says: “Listen, your conduct is not ‘[in step with the truth of the gospel.](#)’” God created all people in His image, and He extends His grace indiscriminately to all people in Christ, and He’s bringing together a people for Himself from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Therefore, Peter, what are you doing? When you pull back and refuse to eat with the Gentiles you are not living in step with the story of the gospel.”
    - a. So it’s one thing to learn the story—Peter knew it all too well. But it’s another thing to start living in step with it.
- C. And that’s what this morning is all about. So to do this we’re actually going to run back through those four main chapters again one by one, and for each I’ll quickly sum up what we saw last time, and then I’ll spin out some implications for us and what it might mean to live in light of it.

## Chapter #1: Creation

### Learning the Story (Summary)

- A. You remember, last week, at this point we saw that God who is Himself three in one, as the trinity, creates man, male and female, in His image. Human beings even from the start are diverse and yet united, just as our God is.
1. And because we understand from Scripture that all human beings, regardless of gender, color, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. have been made in the image of God, we therefore see all as inherently valuable, equally dignified, worthy of respect and even honor.
- B. But now what would it mean to live in step with this truth? I have few implications for us to consider. . .

### Living in Step

#### Implication #1: We Remember that All People Matter to God

- A. This seems to me a decent starting point. I recognize that particularly for black Americans—especially given the history of oppression and degradation in this country, and even given the history of the church here in America, with its complicity in all of this and the way it used the Bible, not to put an end to the nonsense, but in some cases to promote and promulgate it—well, there may be some lingering struggles with this idea of your worth and value.
  - 1. “Am I a second-class citizen? Will I always be in the margins because of my heritage and the color of my skin? Am I valuable, respectable, dignified, loved? Do I matter? My country and even my church seems to have stuttered on this through the years.”
    - a. But listen to me. God has never stuttered. His answer by virtue of creation has always been simply this: “Yes, of course you matter! That’s what it means to be made in My image. I didn’t put My image on the birds or the beasts. I put it on man. I put it on you.”
- B. I mentioned David in [Psa 8](#) last time reflecting on this reality, and I don’t have time to read it all again, but he gets what I’m after here, especially when he says this in [vv. 3-4](#): “<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,<sup>4</sup> what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”
  - 1. He looks out at the splendor and majesty of all creation and says: “I can’t believe that you have set humanity on top of it all—that you have specially set him apart to be the honored recipient of your love and care. It’s too much!”
- C. We’ve been created in the image of God. And whatever else that means, it certainly means we matter a lot to Him.

## Implication #2: We Repudiate Racism Wherever It Is Found

- A. Because all people matter equally to God, it ought to be that they all matter equally to us.
  - 1. There is no place for racism in the church and it is part of our duty as followers of Christ to see to it that we push against any form of racism in our city, nation, and world.
- B. We shall say more about this as we go along, but I thought it important to note this up front here in connection with Creation and the imago dei (the “image of God”).
  - 1. Because I’m not sure you recall this, but one of the key convictions undergirding and fueling the Civil Rights movement as championed by Martin Luther King Jr. is this biblical notion that all people have been created in God’s image.
    - a. When you get that, you won’t stand for racism. You can’t. It collides with the biblical worldview. It attacks at the very foundations of reality.
- C. If you’ll allow me a tangent here for a moment. I have actually found the uproar in recent days a profound apologetic (or defense) of the Christian worldview . . .

- D. I wonder if you realize that when people all around our city and country march and protest and petition for justice and human rights and equality and things, regardless of what their religious affiliation, whether they're even aware of it or not, they are, in fact, marching out into the world of the Bible.
1. The only worldview within which this marching and protesting makes any sense is the one presented to us in the Scriptures.
- E. Think this out with me. We live in a secular even atheistic culture in many ways, especially here in the Bay Area. We believe, as our science books tell us, that we've come to be through natural processes of evolution and nothing else.
1. And this means we like to think that there is no God, there is no transcendent reality, there is no absolute truth, there is no ethical standard of right and wrong—it's all relative and subjective.
- F. Well, listen, in a worldview without God, without absolute truth, without ethical norms, you can't march and protest—at least not in any meaningful way.
1. In an evolutionary worldview why would racism and oppression and marginalization be wrong? It's not wrong, it's just the strong eating the weak. It's just one race trying to survive at the expense of another. You may not like it, but it's not technically wrong.
- G. In fact, the evolutionary worldview, it would seem, far from repudiating racism, actually serves to encourage and undergird it.
1. So one scholar writes even of Darwin himself: "He was . . . convinced that evolution was progressive, and that the white races—especially the Europeans—were evolutionarily more advanced than the black races . . ." (Steven Rose).
  2. And the late Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould said, "Biological arguments for racism may have been common before 1859 [the year Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published], but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory."
- H. So where am I going with all of this? The evolutionary, atheistic worldview that says we just came from the monkeys or whatever can't account for what we see on the streets with Americans right now crying out for equal treatment, civil rights, justice. Only the Bible can account for this.
1. We feel it in our bones, in our guts, in our heart of hearts, this is wrong, this is absolutely wrong. Every human being does have inherent dignity and worth. There should be equality and human rights. Injustice is not just a subjective feeling or experience it is objectively real. Because God is real and we have been made in His image and, deep down, we know it. And it's God who alone can truly make it right.
    - a. When we petition and march we are giving witness to the fact that, whether we admit it or not, we are living in the world God has made and longing for the world only Christ can bring!

### Implication #3: We Resist the Temptation to Dehumanize Those We Disagree With

- A. Here's what I mean by this, I'm sure you've already seen it, but in the midst of all the chaos, people are picking sides on these various issues and then lobbing grenades, as it were, over the fence at one another. Neither side is listening to the other viewpoints or treating them with respect or dignity.
1. You watch the different news stations and it's embarrassing that this is our country. There's so much vitriol, so much mockery and slander. And so little respect and honest human-to-human discourse. We deface the other, villainize the other, dehumanize them.
    - a. We don't feel any sense of shame in bashing and hating because they have become something less than human to us, something beastly, something devilish. No longer are they people to be loved and listened to, they are opponents to be one-upped and outdone.
- B. But now hear me. As Christians we can't go there. This is not "living in step" with the gospel. And it denies what we learn in Chapter #1 of the biblical story—that all human beings, whether they are in the same political camp with you or not, have been made in the image of God and are worthy of listening to, dialoguing with, respecting, loving.
- C. I wonder if you realize James speaks of this very issue of the tongue and how we talk to one another and he grounds his whole discussion on the matter in the reality of the imago dei: "<sup>9</sup> With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> . . . My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (James 3:9, 10b).
1. We can't use our words to tear down and curse and dehumanize because these are people made in the image and likeness of God. How dare we speak of them in such a way and then waltz on into church to praise His name.
    - a. If we have no love for those made in His image, we ought not to think we have genuine love for the One in whom whose image they've been made.

## Chapter #2: Fall

### Learning the Story (Summary)

- A. Here we saw the breakdown of [Gen 3](#) and how, in our sin, we came to push against one another and divide over our differences and things.
1. Adam pushes back on Eve. Cain pushes back on Abel. Things fracture further in Babel and people sprawl across the face of the earth and begin speaking different languages, developing different cultures, and taking on different physical characteristics.
    - a. One people group is set against another, and the horrible history of national strife and warfare begins.

- B. So what, then, does it mean then to live in step with this reality? Well, I'll give us a couple implications to consider . . .

## Living in Step

### Implication #1: We Are Quick to Repent

- A. Living in light of the reality of the Fall means that I have a healthy understanding of sin and my sinful nature. And I know one of the ways this sinful nature manifests itself is I'm going to want to take aim at you before I ever look at me.
1. So one of the ways we live in step with this truth is we invite God, like David in [Psa 139](#), to search us and know us and see if there be any grievous way in us ([vv. 23-24](#)). We are not quick to wiggle off the hook, we're quick to search for sin in our own hearts and lives and repent.
- B. I think especially here for my white brothers and sisters. We may hear all this stuff about racism and things and be quick to dismiss ourselves and maybe even congratulate ourselves a little: "I'm not a racist. I've never worn a Klan hood. I've never owned a slave. I mean for goodness sake, I've even got a black friend or two." And it just stops there.
1. But, if we let God shine the light a little further in, what would we find? Maybe not full-fledged racism, but a little partiality, a little prejudice, a little distaste for people unlike you.
- C. Listen, Christians who have the Spirit of God aren't surprised to find that kind of stuff in their hearts. They know it's there, this yuck has been in the nature of fallen man from the beginning and we need God to lead us in the way of repentance and restoration, to put us back together.
1. So we don't immediately get on the defense in all of this. We repent. <sup>8</sup> ["If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."](#) <sup>9</sup> ["If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"](#) (1 John 1:8-9).

### Implication #2: We Appreciate the Extent of the Problem

- A. When you get the idea that man is fallen in his very nature, that racism isn't just a black-white issue, an American issue, but it's been with humanity since [Gen 3](#), well you have a little more appreciation for the extent of the problem, you know it runs deep.
1. And we're not just going to fix it with a little more education and a little more legislation. That stuff certainly can help, but there's so much more to it.
- B. I thought of what John Stott wrote in his classic [Basic Christianity](#): ["The history of the last hundred years or so has convinced many people that the problem of evil is located in man himself, not merely in his society. In the nineteenth century a liberal optimism flourished. It was then widely believed that human nature was fundamentally good, that evil was largely caused by ignorance and bad housing, and that education and social reform would enable men to live together in happiness and goodwill. But this illusion has been shattered by the hard facts of history. Educational opportunities have spread rapidly in the Western world, and many welfare states have been](#)

created. Yet the atrocities which accompanied both world wars, the subsequent international conflicts, the continuance of political oppression and racial discrimination, and the general increase of violence and crime have forced thoughtful people to acknowledge the existence in every man of a hard core of selfishness” (p. 78).

1. In other words, the problem, fundamentally, at its deepest, is not out there somewhere, it’s in here (my heart).
  - a. What we need most is not more education or more legislation, we need regeneration—we need to be born again by the Spirit of God. That’s how the heart changes. Grace gets in the mix. Jesus comes and makes a home in there and starts tidying up the place.
- C. Now, this is not to say that good Christians will not concern themselves with education and politics and law. We should do all we can to influence these things for good. We labor in these spheres to see justice and equity and things.
  1. But it is to say that we do not place our hope inordinately in such things. We understand what they can do and we know what they cannot. With education and law we may be able to curb and harness the evil in our fallen nature, but only the gospel of Jesus Christ can change the heart.
- D. Can I just say one quick thing off of this here with regard to the whole issue of police right now. The biblical worldview, and this idea of the Fall in particular, informs what our perspective should be on this. Two things.
  1. On the one hand, the reality of all men as sinners by nature, means we need police. If you loosen up the leash on us, we will go as far as we can.
    - a. I mean, straight up, don’t tell me you don’t drive differently when suddenly you realize there’s a policeman rolling up behind you. You were cruising a good fifteen over, on your cell phone, texting or whatever, and then, you see that cop car and suddenly you’re like a model citizen. You tap the breaks, not too much because you don’t want it to be obvious, you toss that phone into the passenger seat, and the officer drives by and you give wave and a salute or something. And then when he gets off at the next offramp you’re back at it, right? And that’s just a humorous example.
      - i. Without police uphold good and just laws, keeping the sinful nature of man in check, my goodness, things could get rough real quick. It’s why Paul says in Rom 13: “<sup>3</sup> [R]ulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (vv. 3–4). The police are God’s idea in view of the sinfulness of man.

2. But now, secondly, on the other hand, here's what the reality of the fall also tells us, police are sinners too. They need accountability.
  - a. Oh yes, God will hold them accountable on the last day. But if we can help establish better policies and oversight and accountability now, well that's a really good thing.
    - i. We need cops, but there are going to be some really bad ones. And we need to have ways of smoking them out before they do more damage to the people they're called by God to protect.

## Chapter #3: Redemption

### Summary

- A. Here's where we come to remember that God hasn't left us in our sin. He's made a way back to Himself, back to one another, through the cross of Christ.
  1. From [Gen 12](#) onward God is engaging in this cosmic rescue mission as it were and it all culminates in the arrival of His Son. Jesus lives the life we should have lived, dies the death we should have died, and then rises from the dead, and pours out His Spirit upon fallen humanity so that in Him we can now be born again from above and put back together from the inside out.
- B. Now, what does it mean to live in step with this? Well, I'll give you just a couple implications . . .

### Living in Step

#### Implication #1: We Step towards the Suffering of Others Not Away from It

- A. There's a sort of trajectory that the gospel sets in motion in the lives of God's people.
  1. Before Christ, we likely moved away or pulled back from stuff that made us uncomfortable. We likely avoided the suffering of others in fear that we would get caught up in their suffering ourselves.
  2. But when Christ comes in He starts pushing us out. And suddenly there's empathy, compassion, love.
- B. One of my favorite examples of this comes from the book of Galatians.
  1. Paul, you remember, used to be this self-righteous Pharisee, always defining himself over and against others. But then Jesus got ahold of his life and everything starts to change. And God calls him to minister the gospel to the Gentiles.
  2. And he's been doing that for a while now, but he just wants to run his gospel ministry by the other original apostles and make sure all is good. And then in [Gal 2:9-10](#) we read this: "<sup>9</sup> [W]hen James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.<sup>10</sup> Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."

- C. I just love that last part. You see it, right? He's not looking to avoid the needy and oppressed people. He's not looking to neglect them to secure his own stuff. No. He's "eager" to go to them more than anyone else. That's what the gospel does!
1. You see, it's not just about right doctrine, preaching the gospel. Okay, that's good, that's important. Let's make sure the gospel is legit. But it doesn't stop there. It's just getting started. Right doctrine leads to right action.
    - a. We preach a God who so loved the world He stepped down towards sinful man and suffered in our place. Okay, well and good. Now let's start to live and look like the gospel we preach.
      - i. Go to the poor. Or in the case of our day here, go to black Americans. Listen to their stories. Hear their cries. Labor for their well-being. Lobby for their justice. Don't just talk about a God of love. Go out and love!
- D. I appreciate what Charlie Dates says on this point in his sermon entitled: *The Most Segregated Hour in America: Overcoming Divisions to Pursue MLK's Vision of Racial Harmony: "The Bible recognizes no significant distinction between personal orthodoxy and corporate orthopraxis. To be a person of orthodox faith is to at the same time be a person of right action toward one's fellow man. . . . The Christian has an obligation to call out wickedness where it exists, to challenge systems of injustice where they reign, and to love mercy and justice on a corporate and societal level."*

## Implication #2: We Leave No Room for Hatred in Our Hearts

- A. Here I am speaking to the African American Christian in particular and any of us who have so taken up their cause.
1. We catch videos of things like the murder of George Floyd and we hear stories of other similar things in the news and elsewhere, and it is hard not to hate.
- B. But we'd do well to listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s words here: "Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. . . . In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. . . . I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. . . . This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love." He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God."
1. Here is a man who, undoubtedly, had seen, and indeed tasted, devastating expressions of injustice and oppression, and yet, here he stands in the pulpit of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama calling for, not bitterness, nor hatred, nor violence, but love—durable, powerful love.
    - a. How? Well, simply put, He'd seen and tasted something more potent than the animosity of white men against black: namely, the love of God for sinners in Christ.

- C. Now, to be clear, this doesn't mean don't protest. This doesn't mean don't stand in the gap for the vulnerable and marginalized against injustice and inequity. I've already said as much. It just means, in all your concern for God-honoring ideals, don't let your soul slip and slide towards devilish sentiments and means.
1. It is not wrong to stand for the oppressed. On the contrary, it is utterly necessary! But, how we stand, makes all the difference in whether we are truly glorifying God or rather playing into the devil's hand.
- D. To quote Martin Luther King once more: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." Or to quote Paul the Apostle now: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

## Chapter #4: Consummation

### Summary

- A. For this I didn't leave myself any time, but we return at this point to the vision John is given in the text I read at the start, [Rev 5:1-10](#). There we see, as I said last time, where Jesus is taking history. By His blood, He's redeemed a people for Himself from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.
- B. And here's the simple implication I wanted to bring out from this as we close . . .

### Living in Step

#### Implication #1: We Do Not Lose Hope

- A. We may look out and feel like this world is going nowhere but backwards. I imagine this is especially poignant if you're a person of color. "Is there ever going to be equality, justice, unity?!"
- B. God's answer: Yes!!! The vision John's given in [Rev 5](#) doesn't isn't God projecting into the future what He hopes will be. It's Him telling us what He knows will be. This is where God in Christ is taking the world. It is ever moving towards a good and glorious end.
1. Therefore, we do not lose hope. Instead, we roll up our sleeves and we get to work!