



gospel  
&  
culture

GOSPEL & CULTURE: RACISM  
WEEK 7 | DR. THEON HILL

# The Gospel & Racism

On Sunday, July 31st, Dr. Theon Hill (Ph.D, Assistant Professor of Communication at Wheaton College,) guided us through a discussion on how the Gospel enables us to confront racism in the church and in the world.

## Introduction

“Race,” sociologists Doug McAdams and Karina Kloos suggest, is “the single most divisive, polarizing issue in American history.” This issue divided the colonies at the founding of the nation. It provided cause for the nation’s civil war. It fueled the greatest period of social activism and unrest during the 1950s and 60s. The church has not been immune from the devastating effects of racism, but has often been complicit and even supportive of racist practices and logics in American society. During the slavery era, theologian Albert Barnes noted, “There is no power out of the church that could sustain slavery an hour, if it were not sustained in it.”

But race and racism are not topics relegated to the past. They persist as lightning rod issues in the present. Mention Affirmative Action, Voter ID laws or mass incarceration and see how quickly people divide into different schools of thought. Studies have found that a majority of evangelicals believe that best way to improve race relations is to stop talking about it. Well-meaning brothers and sisters avoid the topic, especially in cross-racial contexts, because they fear saying the wrong thing, offending someone or being attacked as racist.

As Christians, sermons, conferences and books make us excited about the importance and possibility of racial unity in the church. We are thrilled when evangelical authors like Tony Evans, John Piper and Trillia Newbell write about the racial divide and how the gospel empowers us to overcome it.

But what excites us in concept, intimidates us in practice. Successful navigation of the labyrinth of race depends on our ability to understand the gospel conceptually and implement it practically. Much of contemporary preaching on race is not inaccurate where the gospel is concerned, it is incomplete. Evangelicals, both black and white, often fail to provide a holistic account for the ways in which race and racism operate in society.

This failure prevents us from considering how the gospel addresses contemporary manifestation of racism.

Many of us envision a racist as a white person from the South who doesn’t have much education; someone who is consciously racist out of pure hatred or ignorance.

While it is not inaccurate, the dominance of this image constrains our ability to recognize the others forms which it takes. Racism isn’t only a problem for white people, it’s not only committed by uneducated people and it doesn’t have to be intentional.

## A Definition of Racism

I define racism as “individual, collective or societal embrace of discriminatory attitudes, actions or norms in an intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious manner against a marginalized ethnic group due to their marginal status.”

## Leviticus 4:13 and Its Implications for Sin

“If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by the Lord’s commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull from the herd for a sin offering and bring it in front of the tent of meeting.”

- This passage in Leviticus suggests that sin does not have to be intentional for it to be considered sin.
- Sin can operate on different levels of society. God speaks of sin committed by a religious leader (v.3), by the whole community (v.13), by a political leader (v.22) and by a common person (v.27).
- This passage demonstrates that sin operates on multiple levels of society.

We blind ourselves to the ways in which racism functions on a daily basis in hidden and pervasive ways. Our preoccupation with the individual blinds us to the communal ways in which racism operates in American society.

## **Statistics vs. Reality: African Americans and Drug Use**

African Americans are often associated with higher rates of drug use. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse and Health shows that although there may be slight differences in usage rates, blacks and whites use marijuana at roughly the same percentage rates. Yet, arrest rates reveal stark differences in how drug use is policed in the two communities. FBI statistics reveal that blacks are arrested for marijuana usage at rates three times higher than their white counterparts despite the fact that statistically, they are no more likely to be using the drug. In fact, when all drugs are considered, white youth use drugs at a higher rate than their black counterparts. In places like Ferguson, Missouri, “a black driver who was pulled over was twice as likely to be searched by police as a white driver, even though searches of white drivers were more likely to turn up drugs or illegal weapons.” There are racist logics at work in how we seek to preserve law and order in this nation.

## **Personal Illustration**

One Friday night while a student at Bob Jones University, I was packing my belongings into my car when a lady pulled up in a minivan. She abruptly and somewhat rudely yelled at me, “Can I help you?” Let me tell you, it wasn’t the “Can I actually help you?” kind of statement, it was more like the “What are you doing here?” question. I responded that I was just packing my belongings. She drove off, but three minutes later I found myself surrounded by three police cars. This lady had called the police on me and reported me as a thief for stealing my own belongings.

This anecdote highlights the reality of unconscious racism. This lady did not appear to necessarily hate black people. I’m sure if I met her under other circumstances she would have been a nice person. But when she saw me at night packing my car, her worldview led her to believe that I was a threat to the environment, not a member of it. Her perspective did not allow her to understand the ways in which racist logics unintentionally and unconsciously impacted her treatment of others.

## **Trayvon Martin and “Post-Intentional Racism”**

When George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin, I believe that he honestly viewed the 17-year-old Martin as a threat. However, I would argue that his perception of Martin as a threat was informed not by Martin’s behavior, but by the racist logics that governed his perception of black youth. He

suffered from what Princeton’s Imani Perry calls “post-intentional racism” in her recent book *More Beautiful and More Terrible*. You see, the problem is not that we have so many Ben Chapmans’ running around society. The problem is that our sense of what is “normal” has been fundamentally shaped by racist logics.

If we are to overcome the power of racism, we must be attentive to the ways it operates on individual, collective and societal levels. We cannot think of racism in solely individual terms. To do so obscures the ways in which it functions on collective and societal levels. Racism is not a white problem, nor is it an American problem. At the core, racism is a moral problem, a violation of God’s law.

## **Genesis 9:6 and #BlackLivesMatter**

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” As Christians, we oppose murder, abortion and euthanasia because they constitute an attack on the very image of God. We recognize that all human life, born and unborn, poor and rich, male and female bears the very image of God. Jesus finds all his children precious in his sight because they are all created in his image. In this sense, the claim #AllLivesMatter is correct because as Scripture tells us, God is “no respecter of persons.” All life possesses value in his sight. However, as a response to the claim #BlackLivesMatter, the #AllLivesMatter rhetoric fails to grasp or acknowledge the ways in which black lives have been and continue to be devalued in American culture.

## **A Historical Look at Black Subjugation**

People of color have been subjected to racist perspectives that cast them as intellectually inferior, lazy workers and prone to criminal activity. For example, a famous 1925 study by the U.S. War College rationalized a segregated military with suspicions concerning the ability of black soldiers to handle the demands of military service: “It is generally recognized that the pure blood American negro is inferior to our white population in mental capacity. The cranial cavity of the negro is smaller than the white; his brain weighing 35 ounces contrasted with 45 for the white.”

The logics of white supremacy carried so much weight that during World War 2, black soldiers were often forced to give up their seats in transit for German prisoners of war.

Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates concluded “Black people were viewed as a contagion” in places like Chicago where restrictive covenants were put in place to prevent certain communities from integrating. In fact, Mayor Richard J. Daley, the father of the more recent mayor, Richard M. Daley, used the construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway, 190/94, to reinforce barriers of segregation between black and white neighborhoods.

### **Racism and the Image of God**

Like murder and abortion, racism amounts to a basic denial of an individual’s status as an image bearer. When we consciously or unconsciously embrace the logics of racism, we deny the image of God in an individual and reduce them to a stereotype. As the great preacher Gardner C. Taylor said, “However defaced the likeness there is in every man the image of God himself...there is in every man [and woman] a worth attested by God.” King David wrestled with this very idea in Psalm 8. He asks, “What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” Why is God mindful of us? It’s not because of our skin color, education, income or achievements. Each of us in this room was fearfully and wonderfully created in the image of an Almighty God.

Racism constitutes an attack on the image of God by reducing an individual to an inferior or inconsequential status. Our current crisis draws energy from the belief that American culture devalues or disregards the lives of the nation’s most vulnerable populations.

The devaluing of certain lives takes different forms in various social contexts such as school, the workplace or society. The impact on race on one’s employment opportunities makes this value gap painfully obvious. Researchers from the University of Chicago and MIT studied the role that race plays in employment opportunities. They devised an experiment where they sent out identical resumes in response to job calls except for one subtle difference. They changed the names on the resumes to suggest certain ethnic identities. Resumes with “white” sounding names like Tanner and Emily were sent to businesses in Chicagoland and Boston along with identical resumes featuring “black” sounding names like Jamal or Lakisha. When all other factors were accounted for, the researchers found that resumes with “white” sounding names were 50% more likely

to receive a call back.

What does this mean? If you are black and an employer can tell that you are black, you have to work harder than your counterpart to find a job.

### **Unconscious Racial Prejudices**

Last semester at Wheaton College, there was a student, not one of mine, who always made disrespectful, sarcastic remarks about me and my work at the college. For a while, I couldn’t figure out if I have offended this student or if she had heard some negative things from one of my students who was unhappy about a class. Finally, her behavior around me grew so severe that I felt the need to ask her about it. Her response illustrates the problems that we face. She looked at me and said, “Dr. Hill, I really like you and am not trying to be offensive or anything like that. I’m not trying to be racist or anything like that, but how I treat you is how you are supposed to treat black people. You are supposed to harass them, tease them and give them a hard time.”

This student’s comments betrayed her unconscious prejudices. As one cultural commentator noted, “the essence of American racism is disrespect.” She didn’t see me as an individual worthy of the respect owed to someone made in God’s image. Because it constitutes an attack on the image of God, we must treat it with the same urgency that we give to abortion, murder, or euthanasia.

### **Commonly Discussed Factors of Racial Disparity**

**Black Fatherlessness:** The problem of black fatherlessness has been grossly exaggerated to mythic proportions. Is there a problem of broken families in the black community? Yes. Does this problem translate to cycles of fatherlessness, no. In fact, studies have shown that among fathers of children living in broken homes, black men are more likely than any other demographic to remain involved in their children’s lives.

**Black-On-Black crime:** Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani is correct when he states that 93% of crime in black communities is black-on-black. However, that statistic doesn’t offer the whole picture--80% of the crime in white communities is white-on-white. These statistics tell us that people commit crimes against those who live around them which shouldn’t be shocking.

Given all the attention that Chicago's murder and violent crimes rates have received in the media, keep in mind that both murder and violent crime in Chicago and nationally are near 30 year lows. Last year, Chicago witnessed 473 people murdered. 20 years ago in 1995 that number was at 824.

### **Important Questions to Consider**

Important questions emerge from this topic "Why does any of this matter to the Church?" "Why should we be concerned with racism?" "In a sinful world, can we really expect much to change?"

### **Galatians 2:5 and Counteracting the Effects of Racism**

*"To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."* This is beautiful. Paul's motivation for taking a stand was his defense of the gospel and desire to see its truth and power unleashed in society. Our current crisis offers the church the unparalleled opportunity to preserve the truth of the gospel for a world desperate for answers.

At its core, the gospel is the good news that the power of the cross triumphed over the power of sin. When the church stays silent on race, it marginalizes the power of the gospel and becomes complicit in racial injustice. When the church stays silent on race, the legitimacy of the gospel is challenged. When we take stands on issues of sexuality or the lives of the unborn, our legitimacy to do so is frequently challenged because of our past failures in the area of race.

We are ambassadors of Christ. When we fail to acknowledge or speak out against the sin of racism in society, we misrepresent the one who sent us. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., "our witness can be the spiritual salt that preserves the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times." Brothers and sisters, the question and challenge we face is, "How do we activate the transformative power of the Gospel in this area of race?"

### **Conclusion**

In order to address race, we must make ourselves vulnerable. We cannot allow fear to cripple our ability to engage this controversial issue. If you talk about this issue with others, especially in cross-racial contexts, there will be difficult moments. There will be misunderstandings and conflict.

But these difficulties that may lie ahead cannot prevent us from living out the power of the Gospel. We don't stop evangelizing or advocating for the unborn because someone's offended.

In my small group, I've had the privilege of seeing some of my brothers and sisters in Christ make themselves vulnerable as we've engaged in difficult conversations about race in the context of some of our meetings. My dear brother Brandon has taken the risk and sent me numerous questions about race and society. Guess what? We don't always agree, but we love and respect one another and have learned how to appreciate the other person's perspective and preserve our sense of humanity.

When Brandon and the other members of my small group make themselves vulnerable every time we have frank conversations about race in society, they embody the words of John Piper in his book *Bloodlines*: "The bloodline of Christ is deeper than the bloodlines of race."

We may not always agree, but we love and respect one another. We learn that what makes us human and Christian runs deeper than that which makes us racial, political and cultural beings. Making ourselves vulnerable allows people of all ethnicities to see past dominant cultural stereotypes and see a person made in the image of God.

As believers, if we are to overcome the devastating power of race, we must make ourselves vulnerable, we must embrace empathy and we must engaged in advocacy. As Cornel West said, "Empathy is not simply a matter of trying to imagine what others are going through, but having the will to muster enough courage to do something about it. In a way, empathy is predicated upon hope."

In our efforts to engage contemporary forms of race and racism, we have an opportunity to give the world a little clear picture of what heaven is like.

## Further Reading on Race & Racism

### Contemporary Forms of Racial Inequality

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