

**ONE
NATION**

**UNDER
GOD**

**HEALING
RACIAL
DIVIDES**

**IN
AMERICA**

B. KEITH HANEY

ONE NATION UNDER GOD

Healing Racial Divides in America

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Racial division has always been a reality in our country. At times, it has erupted into protests, violence, arson, and looting. Distrust and suspicions arise on both sides.

What we forget is that we are all creatures of God, equally children of Adam and Eve. We forget that our first parents were created in the image of God; that image is an important unifying force that defines our shared human identity. We forget that God loves the beautiful diversity of His human creation as much as He loves the vast array of plants and animals He has created. And we forget that His Son, Jesus Christ, has redeemed each and every one of us.

This study pulls back the covers over the racial issues that divide us so that we can better understand one another and search the Scriptures for a hopeful path forward.

SESSION 1: STUDENT

SIN DISTORTS OUR IDENTITY

You will not find your true identity in the words that are expressed in today's culture. You will find at best a distorted view of identity. Our true identity is found only in God, revealed through the new life in Christ.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- define the complex racial division that separates black and white America;
- give participants insight into the way black Americans experience life; and
- discuss how the experiences of black Americans have built envy and resentment within them and made the racial division grow deeper.

The racial divide between black America and white America is frustratingly complex and deeply emotional. Each side approaches cultural events from a vastly different perspective and experience, and our differences often divide us.

The purpose of this session is to help us begin to recognize what is dividing us, better understand the issues that are involved on both sides, and search Scripture for a new perspective that only God can give.

INTRODUCTION

I found myself watching a segment of the Bill O'Reilly show one night after another black man was shot by the police, this time in Charlotte. A civil rights attorney was his guest. As they discussed the events of the shooting, Mr. O'Reilly commented that we have to trust the information from the police. This comment really struck me. In one simple phrase, he exposed the heart of the problem between blacks and whites in America. There is a white America and a black America, with a huge racial divide between the two.

White America starts with the viewpoint that all cops are honest, telling us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There certainly may be one or two bad cops out there, but by and large we can trust the police. That is white America's reality, its starting point. Everyone should

believe the police; no one has a reason not to. That makes sense if most of your encounters with police have been fair and reasonable. That is your reality.

But what if your experiences with the police had not turned out so positively? What if you know someone whose experience ended with horrifying results? As a black male, I was taught to be cautious, even afraid of the police. So when a law enforcement officer pulls me over (very rarely has that happened), my heart races and I am on edge not knowing how this whole thing will turn out. I am convinced both parties feel this uneasiness, and it is a recipe for disaster. Two people, both on edge, both afraid of each other. One has a deadly weapon, one is defenseless.

As we begin this Bible Study on healing racial divides in America, I would like to share my observations about this issue in a conversation centered on God's Word. It is my prayer that we end up with a deeper understanding of how to begin to solve this critical issue dividing our country. Today, our starting point is identity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss where you find your identity.

Q2. Identify some of the characteristics you have heard to describe black people.

Q3. What are the characteristics you have heard used to describe white people?

Q4. Discuss how group characterizations fail to accurately describe the identity of individuals.

INSIGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

It dawned on me recently how much I hate the lure of Ancestry.com's new DNA test. The ad seems so appealing: take this test, and you can trace your history and find out about your past. I have almost bought it several times, but one thing stops me: the question Do I want to know? How far back can it trace my past? I love the idea of learning about my ancestors from these DNA tests. The results could take me back to the countries they lived in and help me learn the rich history of my people. They could show me the pride and the dignity of their lives and the value of their culture in Africa.

There is a show called *Who Do You Think You Are?* I have watched it only a few times because I find it too painful. On the show, celebrities get to trace their ancestry using Ancestry.com. Often, these adventures lead to some happy endings. These very satisfied celebrities learn amazing things about their family history that make them proud.

My fear is that my ancestral lines will stop at the slave ships, with a people stolen from their homes and families, with no key to unlock the rich cultural heritage they enjoyed before slavery, the positions of honor my ancestors held in their tribes and nations. Is slavery the only heritage I have? Is my past distorted with the bloodlines of a slave owner? Yes, the institution of slavery was abolished more than 150 years ago, but it still casts a shadow over black America that clouds our sense of identity.

I am not trying to dredge up this ugly past to make white Americans feel guilty or deepen the bitterness black America feels toward the whites, but to help all of us understand why many black people feel we have lost our identity. The connection to our roots has been erased, and that loss of identity still haunts me. I know what I don't want to be, but how can I find my identity? An identity that I can be proud of claiming as my own?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Some people identify themselves as Irish, English, or German. Others identify themselves by their vocation or profession. How would you identify yourself?

Q2. How would you identify yourself if you found out you were adopted and had no idea who your parents and ancestors were? Or if you lost your vocation or profession?

HOW THE LOSS OF IDENTITY AFFECTS THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Loss of identity has manifested itself in a breakdown in the foundation of some black families. It is not the only factor: joblessness, failing schools in urban areas, economic hardship, and an institutional system that has not figured out the most effective way to care for the poor and disenfranchised are all factors. But this loss of identity could be an underlying factor. Take a look at these statistics before commenting:

- Black preschoolers are far more likely to be suspended than white children, according to an NPR report. Black children make up 18 percent of the preschool population but represent almost half of all out-of-school suspensions. (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).
- Black children in K–12 are three times more likely to be suspended than white children. Black students make up almost 40 percent of all school expulsions, and more than two-thirds of students referred to police from schools are either black or Hispanic, says the Department of Education (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).
- The disparities exist in our neighborhoods and communities as well. Take income: in 2014, the median household income for whites was \$71,300, compared to \$43,300 for blacks. For college-educated whites, the median household income was \$106,600, significantly higher than the \$82,300 for households headed by college-educated blacks, the report found (money.cnn.com/2016/06/27/news/economy/racial-wealth-gap-blacks-whites).
- A black man is three times more likely to be searched at a traffic stop and six times more likely to go to jail than a white person. Blacks make up nearly 40 percent of arrests for violent crimes (www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet).
- The Sentencing Project found blacks aren't pulled over (and subsequently jailed) more frequently because they're more prone to criminal behavior; they're pulled over much more frequently because there is an "implicit racial association of black Americans with dangerous or aggressive behavior" (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).

Some people will look at these stats and point to the breakdown of the black family. I have heard some blame the lack of a strong male role model in the home. While it is true in some cases, many in the black community who had a strong father still have a feeling of hopelessness. Joblessness, poverty, and poor education systems are all part of the breakdown of the institution.

I give you this information not because I expect white America alone to fix it, but to help you understand the struggles in the black community. To us, these kinds of numbers—these disparities—prove there has been a breakdown in the institutions. And what you have is a people whom the American dream has left behind.

It is obvious from these statistics that some deep-seated problems are connected to the tensions running through the veins of our nation. On one side of the racial divide, white Americans see progress; on the other side, black Americans often feel frustrated by the lack of progress. So, when those two opposing ideologies and views of America collide, you get Ferguson, Missouri. You get rioting in Baltimore, because the people who feel oppressed also feel no one is paying attention.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. As you look at this stark picture of two different Americas, what comes as a surprise to you?

Q2. Discuss how this insight helps you better understand the situations you are seeing in the news.

I am not condoning the looting and burning in these protests by any means. I believe there are better ways to handle it. But white Americans need to realize the perception among black Americans is that the institution is stacked against them. So, if the institution is against you, any emotions and feelings you have that may be racist are justified because you are the oppressed racial group. Again, do I agree with that? No. Do I understand the frustration? Yes. Have I figured out all the answers? No. What I hope to accomplish in this Bible Study is to give you the biblical blueprint to begin the healing process. I make no promises to solve all the issues, but we are called to be salt and light in the world. The world needs us to be salt and light!

Read Matthew 5:13–16.

Q3. In the context of the racial division in our country, how can the thoughtful words and kind deeds of a large Christian community help provide some light and healing?

SCRIPTURE TEXT: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11–21

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

The apostle Paul begins this section of 2 Corinthians by explaining to the believers that we need to live our life with a higher sense of vocation. We don't live our life for ourselves, but as a faith response to the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul points out that our job is to proclaim the reconciliation between God and humanity Christ accomplished by His death and resurrection. And we, through faith, are the recipients of this divine reconciliation. Believers now have the privilege to be heralds to minister God's message throughout the world.

But it goes even deeper. Christ's redemption has transformed the way we look at other people. Paul says, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh" (2 Corinthians 5:16). Paul is not referring to their flesh—their outward appearance—skin color, ethnicity, or any of the features that make us different from one another. He is talking about our flesh; that is, our sinful human nature. In other words, in Christ, we no longer look at others through the lenses of our sinful perspective; rather, we see our neighbor as God sees him or her.

Regardless of the color of his or her skin, every person we behold is precious to God and dearly loved for Jesus' sake. Is this a way Christ heals the racial division? We will examine that question in this lesson.

THE TEXT

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died. (2 Corinthians 5:14)

The phrase "the love of Christ" has two possible meanings. It could mean either (1) Christ's love for us or (2) our love for Christ. However, looking at it in connection with the last portion of the verse would lead us to believe that what Paul has in mind is Christ's love for us. "Died for all" refers to the redemptive work of Christ. The death of Christ redeemed a lost world, all the children of Adam and Eve throughout the world. "All" in this lost world includes every black or white person separated by our racial division. Jesus reaches out to both sides of the division by redeeming every one of us—and that is the heart of the healing He wants to work. See John 3:16, Christ's death for all the world.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

But how does the demonstration of God's love two thousand years ago on the cross impact our racial division today? Read Romans 6:1–14.

Our Baptism has united us with Jesus Christ. In Him, we have died to sin and now "walk in newness of life" (v. 4). As Paul says, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions" (v. 12). In the context of this study, we especially include the sin of judging

people by the color of their skin and acting out of our preconceived notions based on that judgment.

To heal this divide in America, we who have been united with Christ must stop evaluating people according to their flesh. We need to recognize how we have made assumptions based on the color of people's skin. And no matter whether we are white or black, we all have preconceived notions about one another; notions we hold deep inside, perhaps without even realizing it. But we need to recognize the sinful origins of those notions and repent of them. Only through confession, repentance, and God's free forgiveness or absolution will we be able to follow Paul's apostolic expectation. We will stop regarding people according to the notions of our sinful flesh, and regard them according to the way God does.

APPLICATION

Living in repentant faith, and empowered by God's Word and Sacraments, we can begin living up to Paul's expectation that Christians will see people not "according to the flesh," as he says in 2 Corinthians 5:16. Discuss these practical suggestions to help us see each other as people dearly loved by God. Which might work in your congregation and community?

- Fill our lives with friends of diverse backgrounds. Some of our congregations/members are fortunate enough to live in integrated neighborhoods. Others may want to consider connecting with families in public schools or joining weekend activities such as sports leagues or social clubs that are integrated.
- Choose books that help you gain insights into the life and culture of persons of different backgrounds and ethnicities.
- As a congregation, sponsor visits to museums that feature exhibits about a variety of cultures and religions.
- Have groups in your congregation host and celebrate cultural events with friends of different faiths.
- Invite others to share their cultural experiences.

Although God created mankind as one human race, our sinful, selfish natures have created false lines of color dividing that race. Over the years, these false perceptions about different races have been cooked into the recipe of our culture. We have seen them played out in the media, on television sitcoms, and in books. The challenge now is, how do we get around what we believe to be true and start seeing people as individuals? The apostle Paul gives us a pathway forward—start seeing as God does, not "according to the flesh." To bring about real healing, we have to find our identity in the new life we have in Christ. Paul paints this beautiful picture of that new life: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul presents the benefits of Christ's death for the believer (see v. 14). Because we believers are united with Jesus both in His death and resurrection, we are connected to Jesus and one another

in this new creation. Our new identity as God's children strives against the identity of our sinful flesh. Christ gives us an altogether different perspective from what we had before conversion, and we must resist the urge to return to that former, sinful perspective.

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Ask God to open your mind to understand different perspectives people have, based on their upbringing and their life experiences. Pray for wisdom to perceive how Jesus can bridge the differences between you and them.

In your conversations with people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and skin colors, listen closely to how they perceive the world around them. Ask them to help you understand the origins of their view of the world.

CONCLUSION

Our only hope to change is not to look for our identity in a DNA test but to look to Christ. The apostle Paul describes this new identity that Jesus gives. All things have become new in Christ. A believer's life and identity change because he or she is being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Instead of living for oneself, a believer lives for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Instead of evaluating others with the values of the world, a believer looks at this world through the eyes of faith (2 Corinthians 5:16).

So what is the solution to healing the racial divide? Try this as a start: You will not find true love in the words that are expressed in today's culture. You will find at best a distorted view of love. True love is found only in God, revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

SESSION 2: STUDENT

WHO IS THE REAL ENEMY?

The most dangerous enemy is the one that lives among you and goes about his destructive work undetected.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- describe Satan and his goals and strategies;
- analyze how effective Satan has been at dividing black and white America; and
- discuss the various weapons God provides to equip us to battle Satan.

In the first session, we studied the racial divide in America, the two different life experiences that give rise to the very different perspectives and worldviews that seem to separate these two communities.

In this session, we will study Satan’s role in escalating and intensifying racial tensions, and explore God’s Word to learn how to defend ourselves against and counter Satan’s divisive attacks.

INTRODUCTION

Does it ever seem to you that the solution to healing racial divisions is really simple? Would it all disappear if we just spent more time in authentic, vulnerable, and transparent conversations? If we just view one another as equal, won’t that solve all our problems?

As we continue our discussion about racial tension in America, it is fitting for us to address the heart of the conflict. Who is stirring up all the hostility, the distrust, and resentment? Who is the enemy we are fighting? Is the person with a different skin color our enemy?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. If you have been paying attention, you can’t help but notice that our country appears to be sitting on a powder keg of racial tension. Based on your observations, what do you suspect is causing the racial division in America?

Q2. Who or what do you hear getting the blame for this racial tension?

INSIGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

In the midst of racial unrest, it is easy to see the other side as the enemy. Poor communication and closed-mindedness are definitely contributing to the problem, but deep down something much bigger is at work. A dark force is working behind the scenes, stirring up all our suspicions and doubts. If this were merely a human issue, it would be difficult enough to solve. But this is an enemy no one wants to talk about; in fact, many don't even acknowledge his existence. He operates in stealth mode and lurks in the darkness. He is known as Satan or the devil, and his involvement makes closing the racial divide humanly impossible.

The devil's goal in dividing mankind is to thwart God's plan for His Church to share the Gospel with all people. He strives to make Christians fearful to speak the truth in love. He wants white Christians to be condescending, suspicious, and disrespectful toward blacks who think differently regarding these problems. He stirs black Americans to question and be skeptical of the sincerity of white Christians who do not grasp the difficulty of living as a black in America.

SCRIPTURE TEXT: GENESIS 3:1–6; JOB 1:6–12

THE TEXT

Read Genesis 3:1–6 and Job 1:6–12.

APPLICATION

Most Christians are familiar with the devil's work in the Garden of Eden, but maybe not in Job's life. The Book of Job opens with a glimpse into the unseen spirit world as God and Satan have a conversation. When God mentions Job's integrity and faith, Satan slanders Job, claiming the only reason Job is righteous is because God has blessed him with abundant possessions and protected him from all loss and misfortune. He challenges God to let him take away all of Job's things, then surely Job will curse God to His face.

The second half of this passage catalogs all the losses God permitted Job to face.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. As we look at the two biblical accounts in Genesis and Job, what do you notice about the way Satan operates?

Q2. What temptation did Satan offer Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

Q3. Satan argued that Job was faithful only because God was protecting him; did Job pass the test? If Satan posed the questions to us, what would be our answer? Was God right, or was Satan right?

Does Satan still have that access to accuse Christians directly to God? Revelation 12:7–17 seems to imply that Satan has been cast down from heaven and now wages war with Christians on earth. Revelation 20:1–3, 7–8 likewise gives the implication that since Christ’s resurrection has occurred, the devil has been imprisoned and no longer has access to God’s presence.

BE AWARE OF THE NATURE OF OUR ENEMY

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So, it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. (2 Corinthians 11:13–15)

Satan is crafty; he will pull out all the stops to trip you up! Peter describes him like a hunter, disguising himself to capture his prey: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). What a perfect picture of the devil! In his Large Catechism explanation of the Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Martin Luther declares the devil “chafes and rages as a fierce enemy with all his power and might” (LC III 62).

INSIGHT FROM THE AUTHOR: SOME CULTURAL CONTEXT

Take a step back from the emotional ties we have to this issue of race and look at the bigger picture. It is time to make sure we are asking the right question. Who benefits most from this racial problem getting ramped up and intensifying? America isn’t winning. The communities under attack are not winning. The police on edge—their every decision facing scrutiny—are not winning. Many white Americans and African Americans want to help solve the problem, but they fear if they speak out it will make the situation worse.

So, even though each of these groups is searching for a path forward, we are lost amid this tension. Maybe, just perhaps, there is a spiritual reason behind all this. As we read earlier from Scripture, we have been duped. Satan is attempting to trick us into compliance, trying to get us to buy into the narrative that this is just the way life is, hopeless. Things will never get any better. The racial divide is just too big. Maybe Jesus can straighten it all out when He returns, but there’s nothing we can do now.

Satan has been whispering in all our ears, “There is nothing to see here. Go about the business of living your life. Ignore the poor; the government will handle that problem. Why keep talking about things that happened hundreds of years ago—people should just move on. Besides, you have enough worries of your own to deal with. Do you have time to concern yourself with the weakness of others?”

As the divide grew, white America was ignorant of festering problems and frustrations in a black America that felt trapped and hopeless. It has taken police shootings and riots to open our eyes. There are deep-seated hurts in the African American community that affect the very fabric of America. The frustration boils over into violence and rioting when one event like a shooting by a white officer lights the already volatile powder keg of racial tension, and both sides retreat to their corners, ready to come out fighting. White America is left feeling frustrated, powerless, and overwhelmed by the enormity of the task to fix the problem.

But that is the very trick Satan played on us. He wants us feeling hopeless, looking for the wrong enemy. It is not my brother or sister of another skin color, gender, or creed. It is Satan, the father of lies, feeding this tension. He is the real enemy. He is the one driving a deeper wedge between people.

But God does not leave us at Satan’s mercy. Notice the advice the apostle Paul gives us about this warfare:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not

wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10–12)

SCRIPTURE TEXT: EPHESIANS 6:10–17

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Paul ends his Letter to the Ephesians with a call to stand against Satan’s attacks. The Christians in Ephesus have a new relationship with one another since they now belong to Christ through faith. This new life in Christ leads to a new understanding and attitude toward Satan. As we have discussed earlier, Satan is a devious, wicked, and ruthless enemy.

Paul is making this new community of believers aware that there is a spiritual war going on. Satan’s kingdom wages war against God’s people.

Jesus was an obvious target for Satan. If the evil one could cause Him to fall, the battle would be won. So Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, standing against the devil’s torrent of temptations. Satan tempted Jesus to prove His identity and misuse His power, all for the lure of personal gain. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, He was confronted by evil spirits and by power-hungry, hypocritical, and misguided religious leaders. He was also tempted by the sinful world around Him to disregard others who did not share His ethnicity. For instance, when approached by the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22–28, Jesus tested her faith with the typical Jewish response, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But He showed His victory over that temptation by commending her faith and healing her daughter. Finally, on the cross, Satan seemed to have the upper hand, as Jesus Christ suffered and died.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss how Christians can survive against the onslaught of such a powerful foe.

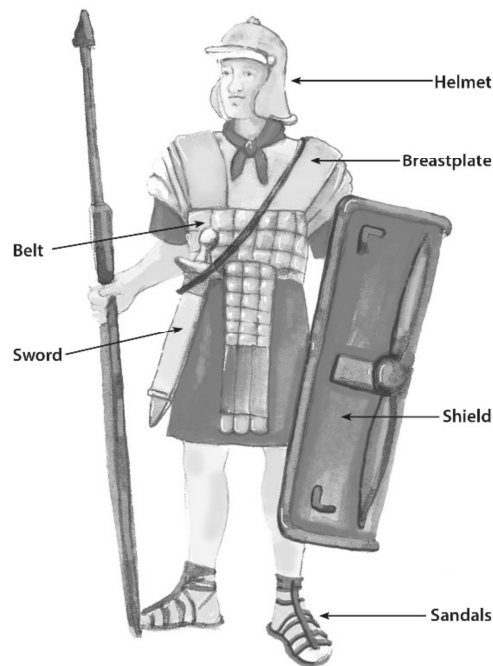
Q2. Discuss how you have seen Satan active in the racial issues facing us as citizens.

THE TEXT

Read Ephesians 6:10–17.

Like it or not, we are all subject to attack from the forces of evil. So we would do well to look at the equipment God gives us for the battle.

OUR EQUIPMENT IN THIS FIGHT



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It has been said that a soldier is no better than his gear. Paul has taught us about our enemy and reminded us that our strength to stand and resist that enemy comes from the Lord. Now, he takes the time to speak concerning our equipment.

Equipment That Is Designed to Defend—The image that is given here would have been familiar to every person in the Ephesian Church. Paul is describing the armor of the typical Roman soldier. His words reflect a messianic passage from Isaiah 59, regarding Jesus’ earthly battle with Satan: “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped Himself in zeal as a cloak” (v. 17).

The apostle Paul may have had this same passage in mind when he described the armor God gives believers to equip them for the onslaught of evil.

The Belt of Truth—“Stand, therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth” (Ephesians 6:14a).

This belt played a more important role than just keeping the soldier’s pants on. It encircled his waist and stabilized his body. The belt protected his mid-section and provided a place to restrain his garments so they would not hinder his movements in the heat of battle. In the same way, the truth of God’s Word guards us and keeps us nimble. In John 8, Jesus talked about the importance of knowing the truth: “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (vv. 31–32). Since Jesus called Satan the “father of lies” (v. 44), it is imperative that Christians be armed with truth to defend against those lies. The truth of God’s Word stabilizes us, protects us, and prevents us from being tripped up in the spiritual battles of life.

The Breastplate of Righteousness—“Put on the breastplate of righteousness” (Ephesians 6:14b).

The Roman breastplate was made of leather. This body armor protected the vital and most vulnerable areas of the body, specifically, the heart. God has declared us righteous through faith in Jesus as our redemptive Savior: “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Christ’s righteousness became ours through Baptism. It guards our hearts and protects us from Satan’s slings and arrows.

The Shoes of the Gospel—“And, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15).

The blood shed on ancient battlefields made the ground slippery and treacherous. Roman soldiers wore sandals with iron nails protruding beneath (like cleats) to provide traction and a solid foundation on the battlefield.

The Gospel gives Christians a firm grounding in the things of God and makes us ready for every opportunity the Lord provides. Bible reading and study give us a firm grasp on the fundamentals of our faith—not just what we believe, but also why we believe it. That gives us a solid foundation when the battle comes to us. That solid foundation in the Christian’s life is found in the spiritual disciplines of daily devotions, personal Bible reading, and weekly group Bible study.

The Shield of Faith—“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:16).

Paul is not describing the cute little round shields you see in the movies. This is the large, rectangular shield that protected a soldier from the enemy’s fiery darts. Roman soldiers commonly soaked these leather shields in water before battle, making the shields more efficient in quenching the flaming arrows of the enemy.

As we Christians go into battle with Satan, Holy Spirit–given faith is our shield. Soaked in the power of God’s Word and Sacraments, it quenches all the fiery darts of the evil one.

Faith allows the Christian to stand firm in the battle and hold his ground regardless of the odds. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation” (Hebrews 11:1–2).

The Helmet of Salvation—“And take the helmet of salvation” (Ephesians 6:17a).

The helmet protected the soldier’s brain. No matter how well the rest of him was protected, a blow to the brain could be fatal or severely injure the soldier.

Paul calls the hope of salvation our helmet. Satan would drive us to hopelessness and despair, but our salvation is secured by Jesus’ death on the cross and His powerful resurrection on the third day. You received this salvation through Baptism and the Gospel. We can confidently stand against Satan’s attacks armed with the blessed assurance of that salvation. “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

The Sword of the Spirit—“And take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:17–18).

All the other equipment we have seen is defensive. The sword served both purposes—defensively blocking the attack of the enemy, and then swinging out to attack. The Holy Spirit gives the sword its effectiveness, its “cutting edge,” since He inspired it in His holy writers. As Luther reminds us in that great Reformation hymn “A Mighty Fortress,”

Though devils all the world should fill,
 All eager to devour us,
 We tremble not, we fear no ill;
 They shall not overpower us.
 This world’s prince may still
 Scowl fierce as he will,
 He can harm us none.
 He’s judged the deed is done;
 One little word can fell him. (*LSB* 656:3)

In this stanza, Luther affirms what Jesus did when tempted by Satan in the wilderness. When Satan struck with his temptations, Jesus countered with nothing but the Word of God: “It is written . . .” He used it both defensively to ward off Satan’s blows and offensively to push him back. The Holy Spirit is at work in the Word, making it powerful. We need only speak God’s Word to fend off Satan’s attack.

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Ask God to open your eyes to Satan’s deception and slander that you may have come to believe about people of different skin colors and ethnicities. Ask God to break through the false belief that rules in other peoples’ minds.

Take some time to analyze your own worldview. If you have a strong internal reaction to something said by someone of a different ethnic background, try to figure out why you reacted so strongly. If you get the chance, ask the person to explain his or her thinking.

CONCLUSION

The good news for us is that we have all we need to win this battle. We need to be aware of who our enemy is, but as Paul pointed out, Jesus has already won the victory, and God has equipped us with all the tools we need to stand firm when Satan attacks most savagely.

SESSION 3: STUDENT

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

If I only ask the question “Who is my neighbor” to find out what is the least I can do, then I have missed the opportunity to be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus to those in need of mercy.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- consider the obligation God has given us to love those on the other side of the racial divide; and
- study the parable of the Good Samaritan to see how Jesus redefined the word *neighbor*.

In the last session, we discussed how Satan is driving the racial division in our country. He seeks to stir suspicion, hatred, and mistrust to thwart the Church’s efforts to share God’s love and peace through Christ.

In this session, we will discuss our own contributions to the racial problem in our country. We will recognize our tendency to lay out sides of “us” against “them.” We narrow our definition of “neighbor” to the people who are like us. But Jesus wants to expand our definition of neighbor to every human—the only real “them” is Satan and his angels.

This session will be challenging because it asks us to examine our own deep-rooted prejudices, fears, and cold-heartedness. Only through repentance and faith can Christ prepare us to reach beyond the wall dividing us and embrace both sides of the racial division in America.

INTRODUCTION

We are dealing with a lot of very emotionally charged issues in our country these days: police shootings in urban neighborhoods, refugees from Islamic countries wanting to relocate to the United States, and unauthorized immigrants in our workforce. These issues challenge our way of thinking. How do we react and interact with people who are very different from us? What is expected of us as neighbors, especially when it feels like people are invading our comfort zone? This raises a critical question: What does God expect of His Christian children and His Christian Church?

To get a handle on this question, it seems appropriate to reexamine our definition of *neighbor*. What better way to start than looking at how Jesus addressed that question? Today, our lesson comes from a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer in the tenth chapter of Luke.

SCRIPTURE TEXT: LUKE 10:25–37

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Jesus created a titanic shift in the culture with this parable and its application. One quick fact: Because this passage is so familiar, we may be tempted to overlook some key details that impact the richness and depth of this interaction. We will miss its benefit if we see this only as a great lesson for the people of that time. But if we stop and allow the words of Jesus to penetrate our hearts, we may identify with the wounded man or we may be convicted like the lawyer. Either way, the lesson has application today to the issues feeding the racial tensions in our world.

THE TEXT

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25–29)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. The lawyer is troubled with his eternal fate. Discuss the way his question, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” betrays his view of how he can gain heaven.

Q2. In the text, the lawyer attempted to justify himself by the way he defined the word *neighbor*. Whom did the lawyer see as his neighbor?

Q3. How do you define *neighbor*?

DIGGING DEEPER INTO THE TEXT

In this parable, Jesus does not mention the victim's ethnic identity, but because of the location of the crime, he was almost certainly a Jew. Jesus' listeners were quite familiar with the dangers that lurked along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The path most travelers took was a solitary, dangerous mountain path with many blind turns and switchbacks—great hiding places for thieves. Even today, travelers experience a loneliness and sense of uneasiness here. This is the backdrop for this parable. Let's dig into the text.

THE STORY

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." (Luke 10:30–32)

Let's make sure we are clear. What is a Levite? Levites were descendants of Jacob's third son, Levi. God set this tribe apart from the other eleven tribes to serve as religious leaders among the Israelites. Levites were teachers, temple assistants, guards, and musicians in Jesus' day. One special family from the tribe of Levi, the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, were set apart as priests by God. The priests and the Levites were the religious leaders in Israel. And these two offered no help. They just passed by on the other side.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. As Jesus told this parable to the lawyer, do you think the lawyer identified the beaten and dying Jew as a neighbor?

Q2. Why does it seem like Jesus is teaching salvation by works in this parable?

THE KINDNESS OF AN ENEMY

“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was.” (Luke 10:33).

THE JEW-SAMARITAN CONFLICT

This section of the parable is key to getting at the heart of Jesus’ message. But we must understand the divide between the Jews and Samaritans first. There was far more than a general dislike between these two groups; there was a long and deep-seated hatred. We see this same kind of hatred expressed today in the racial tensions in our country and among other groups around the globe.

Many would trace the hatred between Jews and Samaritans to 722 BC, when Assyria conquered the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and took most of its people into captivity. The invaders then brought in Gentile colonists “from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim” (2 Kings 17:24) to resettle the land with the few surviving Israelites. The foreigners brought their pagan idols with them. The Israelites intermarried and followed an all-too-familiar pattern as they began to worship those idol gods alongside the God of Israel (2 Kings 17:29–41).

Now we return to the situation in our text. For those hearing Jesus’ parable, things are looking rather grim for this poor, unfortunate soul. Then along comes a Samaritan. Now, if you are basing your reaction to this story on the history we just uncovered, you are thinking to yourself, well, this guy is toast. There is no way in the world this enemy will stop and help if a priest and Levite won’t. If anything, he might come along and put him out of his misery.

Samaritans in that day were viewed with the same level of hatred as whites viewed blacks during the Civil Rights movement of Dr. King’s day. It is the tension you feel racing through the veins of our country today as some of our neighborhoods are sitting on powder kegs. Just one event could set off riots again. What is the Samaritan going to do? Will he set off another border war between Samaria and Judea? The balance is just that delicate. No, he does the unthinkable. He puts aside all the anger. Ignoring what society says he should do, he stops and helps. And he not only helps, but he also goes well beyond what is expected of him,

And when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.” (Luke 10:33–35)

What is amazing about all of this is if the man had known who was helping him, he probably would have rejected the help. And the Samaritan took a chance, not only in taking the time to help the man on that dangerous stretch of road, but even walking into town with this injured Jewish man on his donkey. The townspeople might well have assumed the Samaritan had beaten the Jewish man. It was like an Indian walking into town with an injured cowboy in an old Western. But I love what the text says: the Samaritan man looked on him and had pity on him.

THE SURPRISE ENDING

Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’ ” (Luke 10:36)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Notice the response of the expert in the law; how did he refer to the Samaritan?

Q2. Discuss what similarities you see in the tension between black and white America.

In this parable, Jesus is really describing Himself. Despised and rejected by His own people—including this lawyer—Jesus nevertheless reaches out to befriend His enemy. On the cross, He was winning salvation for the very people who despised and rejected Him and drove Him to that cross.

We are the bleeding, dying victim whom He has rescued. Now He calls us to “go, and do likewise” (Luke 10:37)—in gratitude for His loving sacrifice—to our neighbor, whether black or white.

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Identify those people in your life you struggle to see as neighbor, and add them to your daily prayer list. When you pray for someone, especially your enemy, God changes your heart to start looking on that person with the same love God feels when He looks upon him or her.

Make a list of some concrete ways you can love your unlovable neighbor. This could be a simple offer to help with lawn work. Or going out of your way to open up a conversation to get to know the person better. The goal is to start seeing the neighbor through the eyes of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

It is a sad reality that Dr. King’s dream to see a time when the color of our skin is not a dividing factor in America has not yet come to fruition. It falls into the lap of the Church to be that voice of truth in the world. We have the Gospel message of the new life in Christ. Although we are regenerate men and women, Christ helps us see people of all ethnicities, creeds, and colors as our neighbors. When we see them persecuted and disenfranchised, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ calls us to be a neighbor to the ones who need mercy, to love our neighbor as ourselves. And who

is our neighbor? Anyone we encounter; not just the people who look like us and think like us, but every human God places in our life.

Like the Good Samaritan, our mission in the world is to “Go and show mercy.” In doing so, you model the love of the Savior and the mercy and grace of God for those who are far from Him. And you start to undercut the negative, discriminatory life experiences that have built mistrust between blacks and whites. So, go and do likewise.

SESSION 4: STUDENT

WE ARE ONE IN CHRIST

Imagine living in a world where people saw you through the eyes of the Creator. They would marvel at the beauty of God’s creation and not be preoccupied with the color of your skin.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:28–29).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- analyze the implications of black Americans believing they cannot be prejudiced; and
- discuss how the white American thought “I don’t see color” can actually increase distrust among black Americans.

FOR THIS LESSON, YOU WILL NEED

A copy of the movie “Remember the Titans.” You will be showing a short clip of scene 17, “Service Denied.”

In the last session, we spoke about how we can start seeing all people as our neighbor, especially those of a different culture or ethnic background. By showing them loving kindness as Christ Jesus has shown us, we can begin to provide positive life experiences that might help break down the general distrust that is dividing black and white America.

In this session, we will look at a false perception in black America that makes it nearly impossible to bridge the divide in our country. That is the belief that black Americans cannot be prejudiced. This session will help white participants understand how that belief arose and how it distorts their well-meaning efforts to improve relations. It will also encourage black participants to examine their own beliefs and lean more upon God to overcome the painful life experiences which have divided them from their white neighbors.

INTRODUCTION

INSIGHTS ON RACIAL RELATIONS FROM THE AUTHOR

Before we get into what could unite us, we should first explore two more attitudes that are further dividing us; the first from black America, the second from white America.

Growing up as an African American, I was told by many black people whom I respected that “we really can’t be prejudiced.” Yes, you read that right, many in the black community feel it is impossible for them to discriminate.

We all recognize discrimination when we see it—treating one group of people differently simply because they are of a different skin color, age, or sex. It would certainly seem that blacks are no more exempt from that than whites or anyone else.

However, far more African Americans believe they can’t be prejudiced than you may realize. It stems from the notion that their ancestors were victims of exploitation and oppression from white Americans. Since they are descendants of a victimized, oppressed people, they feel they are not prejudiced when they lump all white people together or make judgments about what must be in a white person’s heart.

I know in writing this I am exposing an erroneous perception. No group of people is immune to the effects of sin, and to believe otherwise is a trick of the evil one. Because of this fundamental distortion of the truth, any discussion on race starts as a one-sided conversation. Blacks who hold this view see white people as the ones with the prejudice problem, and since they have the problem, they are the ones who need to change. It is obvious this isn’t helping the racial situation in America.

But even worse, this assumption turns black people into powerless victims. That is wrong. I hold the belief that whether one person or two create a problem, it takes both to seek reconciliation. While I acknowledge that history, slavery, and the pain of the Jim Crow segregation laws have made the divide deeper, we need both parties to work together to find a new pathway forward. The work of healing race in America is our problem, not a problem for “those people.” We need to work at this together. The racial divide in this country is ripping apart the fabric of the nation and putting us at risk of destroying ourselves and the freedoms that so many of our ancestors bled and died to defend.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. In what way does this attitude increase the divide between black and white America?

Q2. Describe an experience you had with this kind of distrust when you were trying to interact with a person on the other side of the racial division.

Q3. Discuss how Black America's one-sided view of prejudice makes it impossible for white Americans to heal the racial divide by themselves.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: "I DON'T SEE COLOR"

Imagine you are a white person talking with a black neighbor, co-worker, or fellow student who is telling you about the racial discrimination he or she has encountered from whites in the past. You say, "When I look at other people, I don't see color." But the person responds with skepticism, distrust, or a harsh reply. What is going on?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Why do you think a black person might object to the statement "I don't see color"?

Q2. Describe a time when you were once mistreated by one person and later found yourself having a hard time trusting anyone when you were in a similar situation.

Q3. How might a black person's former experiences with prejudice and discrimination contribute to his or her skepticism at remarks from well-meaning white people?

Deep down, under everything else, is this black presumption that they cannot be prejudiced. Remembering this can help white Americans know how to move forward.

The movie *Remember the Titans* was set in 1971. It is about two football coaches, Bill Yoast and Herman Boone. White football coach Bill Yoast is demoted after leading his team to fifteen winning seasons; he is replaced by Herman Boone. Yoast is loved and respected in his hometown. Boone is very different: he is black, tough, and opinionated. How these two men overcome their differences and turn a group of racially diverse and hostile young men into state champions plays out before your eyes in this movie.

In this scene, the Titans have been starting to experience success. They are racking up wins, and the town is starting to rally around this new team. It looks like sports is accomplishing the type of unity that only sports can seem to do. It has drawn the city together, and skin color appears to no longer matter. Maybe they have moved beyond seeing color.

[Watch the video clip: Scene 17—Service Denied]

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. What happened in this scene with the new quarterback, Sunshine?

Q2. What impact do you think that event had on the unity of the team?

MORE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

While we have made progress, the deep and often dark history of black and white relations in America clouds our progress and increases our distrust of one another. When a black person hears you say you don't see color, that person feels you are not acknowledging the past conflict and issues. The embarrassment and humiliation felt when that person was singled out precisely because of the color of his or her skin can make you come off looking insensitive and naïve when you say you don't see color. The lesson from the scene in the movie is that to pretend color was not an issue created a possibly dangerous outcome.

It is important for white people to understand the life experiences that have led black Americans to distrust police officers, politicians, white people, and even black people who think

differently than they do. But it is also important for black Americans to see how blanket distrust of all whites, or all police officers, or all of those in authority is a form of prejudice in and of itself.

For black Americans who are participating in this study, let's take a moment to look at what well-meaning white people mean when they say, "I don't see color." As children, many white Americans watched the video of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. They agreed with his dream of a day when all of us will not judge a person by the external color of their skin, but by the character of their heart. To reflect their belief that all people are equally precious in God's sight, they try to look deeper than the color of the other person's skin, to look into the heart and soul and see people as individuals. That is what they mean when they say, "I don't see color."

This same miscommunication process happened in connection with the "Black Lives Matter" movement in 2015 and 2016. Many whites heard the chant "Black lives matter" and responded, "All lives matter." They expected the blacks to answer, "Of course!" but were upset when they learned their words had only offended the Black Lives Matter people more. It came off as though the Black Lives Matter people thought *only* black lives matter. Again, the racial divide grew larger and larger.

What was needed was for white Americans to understand what led the blacks to say black lives matter. Look back at the statistics we covered in the first lesson showing the vast statistical differences between blacks and whites in America. This is the past experience that drives the distrust of blacks, the feeling that to America, black lives do not matter:

- Black children make up 18 percent of the preschool population, but represent almost half of all out-of-school suspensions.
- Black K–12 children are three times more likely to be suspended than white children.
- The 2014 median household income for whites was \$71,300, compared to \$43,300 for blacks.
- A black man is three times more likely to be searched at a traffic stop, and six times more likely to go to jail, than a white person.
- A black person in a store or church is more likely to be approached and watched by store personnel or church leaders than a white person.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Q1. What would be a more helpful response to "Black Lives Matter" than retorting, "All lives matter"?

The reality is that we do have a diversity of cultures in America. To say, “I don’t see color,” might also mean “I don’t see culture.” That would be a mistake. In not seeing color, we also risk not seeing the rich diversity God created within our human family and the rich contribution each culture brings.

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

To put this in a biblical context, look through the eyes of the Church in Ephesus. The conflict in that particular church went back long before its founding. It began in the Old Testament, when God chose a little insignificant nation, the Israelites, to be the one through whom the Savior, Jesus Christ, would bring salvation to the world. The way the Israelites handled that responsibility put them into direct conflict with every other nation.

Other nations were suspicious because the Israelites separated themselves from all other countries, as God had commanded, and because they lived differently. But the Israelites let this go to their heads. They became prideful, valuing themselves and despising the Gentiles. They valued their position more highly than their calling by God. Their calling was to be the vehicle of God to send His Son into the world to save the world from their sins. In the meantime, they were to be sharing the glory of God and His promised salvation with their Gentile neighbors.

The same dynamic was true of the Jews in Jesus’ time. Jesus told a Samaritan woman, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). But Jesus didn’t stop there. He went on to teach her that God seeks worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth—it doesn’t matter what nation, tribe, people, or language they come from.

The Jews should have seen themselves as ones called to lead others to the Most High God. Instead, they formed this exclusive circumcision-only members club. The thousand-year-old tension reached a boiling point in the Church in Ephesus.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. (Ephesians 2:11–17)

THE RACIAL TENSION IN EPHESIANS

The Early Church was far from perfect. The young Ephesian Church experienced friction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This is the reason Paul assumes a shepherding role and opens a discussion about the destructive relationship between those two groups. In verses 11–12, Paul shows the hopelessness of the Gentiles' condition before the coming of the Gospel by contrasting them with the Jews.

God's plan of salvation in the Old Testament came through the nation of Israel. That did not mean the Hebrews were intrinsically more holy than Gentiles, or closer to God, only that the Anointed One of God, the Christ, would be a descendent of the Hebrew nation. The salvation of every Israelite was completely dependent on his or her Holy Spirit–given faith in the coming Messiah—not based on birthright or circumcision. Paul points out that the Gentile Christians in Ephesus did not receive their salvation by inheritance (birthright), as the Jewish Christians were claiming. Paul contrasts the conditions of the Jews and Gentiles to show the Ephesians how significant their salvation is.

For the Jews, circumcision was a source of pride. It provided them with a visible sign of their historic relationship with God. Therefore, they used the term “uncircumcised” as a religious slur against the Gentiles. Paul challenged the false security of the Jewish believers who thought their salvation was based on their birthright and/or their circumcision; he also challenged the Jewish presumption that the Gentiles were excluded because they were uncircumcised. He even had to confront Peter when he began treating Gentile believers different from Jewish believers.

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:11–16)

The division between Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus was a deep divide over which side had the right relationship with God. And what was to determine that right relationship? Was it about birthright or was it about faith?

In truth, the Gentile Ephesians had it right—by God's gift of faith they were truly God's people. And actually, so long as the Jewish Ephesians relied on their own circumcision and heritage, they were separating themselves from God.

Just as in the racial division facing our country today, there were technically two different groups of people. In our text, it was the Jews and the Gentiles. They did not have two different skin colors. They were, however, two distinct kinds of people. Yet in Jesus Christ, they were now one, ready to reach out to their neighbors—both Jewish and Gentile.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. In Ephesians 2:11–12, Paul describes the fact that the Gentiles had no relationship with God before the Gospel was brought to them. How does Paul make his case?

Q2. Paul also explains the deep spiritual rift between the Jewish and Gentile believers in Ephesus. Describe the primary theological understanding that separated them.

Q3. Describe how Jesus restores this broken relationship between two different peoples in the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2:13–14.

Q4. As we consider the racial issues that divide us today, Paul shows us a pathway to reconciliation. Where does that path begin, as laid out in this text?

Q5. If Jesus Christ was able to heal the rift between God and humanity caused by sin, can He not also heal the racial divide? What is the tougher thing to cure?

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Ask God to help you appreciate the diversity He has created within the human family.

Explore the similarities and differences you share with people from your work, school, neighborhood, or friends who are from the other side of the racial divide.

CONCLUSION—HEALING IS POSSIBLE

The Jewish temple was surrounded by three walled courtyards. The court furthest from the temple building was the Court of the Gentiles. On the wall leading from the Court of the Gentiles into the Court of the Women (for Jewish women and children) was a sign giving warning that any Gentile who passed beyond it would be killed. In His death on the cross, Jesus Christ tore down every wall dividing one human from another. In Him, all are made one.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28–29)

So, what is the proper response when a person from the other side rejects your attempts to embrace the diversity God has made? If you are white, ask the person of color what his or her experiences have been. Then assure the person that you are not trying to understate the difficulties he or she has suffered, but to see how we can move forward together with Jesus, our Savior. If you are black, ask God to help you forgive and put your trust in Him so that you might reach out in love and give white people in your life another chance.

Jesus did not notice nationality, color, or gender. He saw people as individuals, people for whom He took time out of His life to stop and show love and mercy. Jesus shows understanding and unconditional love to each person regardless of skin color, nation of origin, or gender. Our mission, if we chose to accept it, is to view everyone as an individual brother or sister in Christ while at the same time recognizing the beauty of the diversity God has created within our human family.

Christ alone can tear down the racial walls. Christ not only made peace between sinners and God through His death and resurrection but He also made peace between Jews and Gentiles, male and female, black and white. Jesus took sinful tribes, nationalities, and even political party affiliations and, through His death on the cross and His shed blood, He made for Himself a new

man, a new nation, a new tribe—the Church. We can now celebrate the beauty and the diversity of “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). We are a diverse people united by our shared faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

For a glimpse of humanity from God’s point of view, read Revelation 5:6–10. Notice the beautiful diversity within humanity, but also the righteousness of Jesus Christ which unites all believers as one.

SESSION 5: STUDENT

WHAT CAN I DO?

Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice.

—Nelson Mandela

MEMORY VERSE

“But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- analyze the “Black Lives Matter” movement to see what is working, what is not, and why; and
- search Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer to learn the distinct benefit Christians can bring to the problem of the racial divide.

In the last session, we looked at the effects of black America’s belief that it cannot be prejudiced. We aimed to help white participants understand how that belief arose and how it prevents black Americans from accepting their well-meaning efforts to improve relations. We also tried to encourage black participants to examine their own beliefs and lean more upon God to overcome the painful life experiences that have divided them from their white neighbors.

In this session, we will look at how black America is crying out through protests and movements. We will see why these efforts have only widened the gulf between both sides, and we will look to Jesus to teach us the way we Christians can bring light and salt to begin healing this division.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, after the death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, the “Black Lives Matter” movement began. Three women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, are credited with starting the movement.

They claimed that after his death, Trayvon Martin was tried for his own murder, and his shooter, George Zimmerman, was not called to account for his crime. They claimed black lives are being targeted for destruction. (To read their claims for yourself, read the first two paragraphs of “A HerStory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” at blacklivesmatter.com/herstory.)

These claims reflect the distrust many African Americans feel toward this country. But they go even deeper—making the bold claim that white America is intentionally targeting black lives for

destruction. As an African American Christian, I cannot condone this charge—it sounds like Satan’s slander. But it is another example of black Americans wrongly believing they cannot be prejudiced—and explains why they don’t see anything wrong with lumping all whites together and prejudging the intention of every white person.

White America hears this harsh accusation and is baffled—if not aggravated by it. It will admit that there may be a small minority of whites who wish for the destruction of black lives, maybe even a handful of police officers—but the vast majority of whites, politicians, and police officers are repulsed by the idea.

And the racial divide grows yet again.

But I ask, can white America understand that each police shooting of a black man simply reinforces what we black Americans were taught as children—we can’t trust police officers; we need to be afraid of them? Like I said before, on the rare occasion when a law enforcement officer pulls me over, my heart races, I am on edge not knowing how this whole thing will turn out. I am convinced both parties feel this uneasiness, and it is a recipe for disaster. Two people, both on edge, both afraid of each other. The officer has a deadly weapon; I am defenseless.

We need to remember there are two sides of this racial divide—and both sides have real and valid concerns alongside grave misunderstandings and distrust of those on the other side.

Amid all this heightened racial rhetoric, several high-profile players have joined the chorus of voices shouting for people to notice that “Black Lives Matter.” In 2016, the movement picked up the public support of music icon Beyoncé, and Colin Kaepernick, quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers. It is not my place to judge the worth of their actions or their intentions. I am unsure whether these types of public approaches in such a racially charged environment are the most effective response.

If the point of their actions and other public protest is to bring awareness that in turn will create some open, receptive hearts ready to embrace change and a culture of cooperation, then speak out. If the aim is to find a way for black men to stop losing their lives at the hands of white police officers, or any police officers for that matter, then I could respect that, because no matter what choices those and others victims made in life, every life matters to God. If the goal is to make things better, both acts—Kaepernick’s not standing for the singing of the National Anthem and Beyoncé’s performance at the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards—have created the opposite effect, as have the protests that have led to riots, arson, and looting in the streets of far too many cities. The divide has only grown larger.

Again, this is serving no one but Satan. More police hit the streets every day with the sense of fear and dread that there is a target on their backs. More blacks are afraid at a simple traffic stop. Nelson Mandela was correct. If our goal is reconciliation, both sides of the divide should come together and stop the divisive talk, really listen to those who feel disenfranchised, and find solutions that will put a stop to the injustices of the past.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Q1. Describe a moment in history when a public stand or protest like the examples mentioned above got peoples' attention and made a positive difference.

SCRIPTURE TEXT: JOHN 17

Below are some steps to begin the reconciliation process. I am approaching this with the idea that only God can truly heal this problem; it is, of course, beyond human problem-solving abilities.

The text for today's study is Jesus' High Priestly Prayer from John 17. First, Jesus prays for Himself; then He prays for His twelve apostles; and finally, He prays for all Christians. This touches the racial division in our culture in the sense that the Church can be God's instrument to touch lives. So, in today's study, we look at the vital ways the Church can impact race relations in America, one person at a time.

This is a critical text in that John lays out three key relationships:

1. The relationship of God the Father to His Son, Jesus Christ (vv. 1–5)
2. The relationship of Jesus to the twelve apostles (vv. 6–12)
3. Jesus' relationship through the apostles to the Christians

As a result of these three relationships, the Christians can make an impact in the world (vv. 13–19). It is this Christian impact that will be our focus in this study. We look at the vital ways the Church can heal this division in America, one person at a time.

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Jesus' prayer in John 17 begins His agonizing road to Golgotha. He sees the suffering that is coming closer by the minute. This prayer is bathed in the confidence that His Father will provide the strength He needs to complete the task of redeeming the world. The image is compelling of the Suffering Servant Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is about to lay down His life for the sheep, as He commends His disciples into His Father's protecting hand.

In contrast to the Garden of Eden, where sin sneaked into the world through Satan's temptation, Jesus boldly approaches the Garden of Gethsemane. By His obedience here, mankind will be redeemed from the sin, death, and hell we inherited because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Here, Jesus prays for those He has chosen and connected to His mission. This, His mission work, will soon pass on to them. Without His apostles' continuing work in the world, that

mission will be in jeopardy. Today, the Church still brings reconciliation and peace as it carries out Jesus' mission in the world. This is the role the universal Church plays in healing the racial divide.

Jesus begins this section of the prayer by expressing the reality of joy in the lives of believers and in His life too. "But now I am coming to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves" (John 17:13).

Jesus is reminding the disciples of the joy He already expressed at the Last Supper in John 15: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (v. 11).

Jesus had already pointed out to His followers that joy comes by an expectant faith in the resurrection.

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20–22)

This joy and expectation of the resurrection are important because the very next section of this prayer will lay out for believers the steep road ahead. You will not be popular in this world. Your life, your values, your beliefs, and even your very existence will irk and annoy the world that would rather live in darkness.

THE TEXT

But now I am coming to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:13–19)

APPLICATION

There are three key things that each of us can personally do to help begin the process of reconciliation. Notice I did not say three easy steps. Or three simple things. None of this is simple. It is not easy. The truth be told, anything worth accomplishing in life always comes with effort and, at times, great difficulty. This problem did not develop overnight, and it will not be solved with just a piece of legislation or some very great sermons. It will require the believers in Christ to live out their calling and not just be in the world, but to be light and salt in the world. So, here we go:

1. WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO ADMIT WHEN WE HAVE BEEN PART OF THE PROBLEM.

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

As a teen, one of my favorite after-school television shows was *Happy Days*. I wanted to be Arthur “Fonzie” Fonzarelli. That was one cool dude. Part of his coolness was he was never wrong. On the rare occasion when he had to admit fault, he stumbled over the words. He could never seem to get out the entire sentence, “I was wrong.” It came out more like, “I was wrrooon.” In this issue of race relations, it seems that no one wants to come out and admit any culpability. Neither side wants to budge. Neither side wants to admit it bears some level of responsibility. The rhetoric and divisive attitudes continue to make matters more toxic and volatile. Until both sides are willing to admit they are part of the problem, no real healing is possible.

We Americans have a choice. When it comes to the racial divide in our country, we can either keep focusing on what’s tearing us apart or we can choose to find strength in those things that hold us together. My issue with the talk so far is that the focus is on all the things that are ripping us apart. Little to no attention is paid to those universal values we all share.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. What attitudes did the members of your family and your friends in school have toward people with a different nationality?

Q2. Take a minute to discuss what role, if any, you are playing in widening the racial divide in America. Are you passing along generalities and stereotypes that further this division? Are you judging a whole group of people based on the words or actions of a few? Have you remained silent when you could have spoken up to stop divisive talk?

2. WE NEED TO COME TO A TRUCE.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. (John 17:20–23).

Here is the ultimate evil of racism—the Gospel is ignored and the world does not come to believe in Jesus.

William Wallace, the leading character in the movie *Braveheart*, chastised his Scots for allowing minor issues, internal strife, and power struggles to stand in the way of their fight for independence from the English. “We have beaten the English, but they’re back because you won’t stand together.” I feel that is what is happening far too often in the racial division in our churches.

Lifeway Research surveyed one thousand Americans about race. They found only about a third (34 percent) of Americans have regularly attended a house of worship where they were a minority. Among those who had attended a church as a minority, one in five said their ethnicity hindered their involvement.

Of those who have not been a minority in a church, nearly a quarter (22 percent) say being a minority in a congregation would make them feel uncomfortable. Many Americans believe churches should be more diverse. Half (50 percent) agree with the statement “Churches in American are too segregated.” Four in ten (44 percent) disagree (www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/sunday-morning-segregation-most-worshippers-church-diversity.html).

The enemy, Satan, has been defeated. When Jesus Christ rose on Easter Sunday, the message was clear: “Satan, you are finished! Christ is victorious.” But with our racial division and disagreements, we keep the world from seeing and hearing the Gospel in action. We should be giving unbelievers the sweet taste of Christ’s victory. Understand, we realize disagreement is a part of relationships, but what is not normal is the inability to forgive and move forward. When there are issues that need correcting, people need to have honest discussions. Imagine a world where instead of rioting and holding picket signs, we could have a cup of coffee and a croissant and talk about our disagreements. One pivotal role believers play in healing racial division is our ability to teach the truth of God’s Word and to model the heart of Jesus, but only if we are united in our love for Christ and for one another.

In this racial division, we need to call for a truce and find a way to work together in unity and harmony. When I mention unity, I need to clarify what that looks like. To be crystal clear, unity is not the absence of opinions nor the need to be one homogeneous people. Opinions and diversity are healthy. But this unity I am speaking of is the lack of divisions. Our racial relations are suffering the greatest damage due to disunity and the inability to come to a place of peace. The past tensions caused the most significant damage. The current conflict has created an environment and culture

that allows disagreement and disunity to grow in the body like an open sore. That open wound continues to go unchecked and only festers, swells, and spreads until it kills the body.

At some point, for the racial divide to heal, we should call for an end to the fighting. Each side needs to stop seeing the other as the evil villain they are bent on defeating. The only way that will happen is to realize that sin is what is keeping us apart. Sin is causing the bitterness and hatred. The effects of sin are growing and breeding between blacks and whites. The only thing that can defeat sin is God's love. Like Nelson Mandela said so beautifully, "Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice." This nation desperately needs God's hand of restoration. I fear more and more each day where this situation is heading. It is time for us to lay down the call for retribution, the hateful speech that only breeds more fear and distrust. We need to come together and ask for God to turn the guns into plowshares. Only God can turn weeping and mourning into rejoicing and dancing.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss some ways you saw Jesus work with people of a different mindset or nationality.

Q2. Discuss some things that Christians can do to be light and salt in this broken relationship between black and white Americans.

3. WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR THE RELATIONSHIP.

I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14–16)

Building relationships, especially difficult ones, can feel like climbing Mount Everest. But if you are struggling and can't ever seem to reach the summit, maybe that means the systems you're using aren't working.

It's okay to fall. It's okay to make mistakes and even be dead wrong. You will get mad. Relationships will cause you frustration. Heck, we are human, and as sinful humans, we struggle with maintaining healthy relationships. But does that mean that we should never be in a relationship? Or does it say we keep fighting for relationships because we would die without them? The racial divide needs the chance to heal. It's not an option. What we see around us in our neighborhoods and in the media is painful, exhausting, and humbling, but we should work together to solve this. It is too important not to.

APPLICATION

There are several things you could try to help close the racial divide. Here are just some suggestions to get the conversation started.

- Make the relationship a priority. What steps can you personally take to make improving racial relations a priority in your life?
- Be willing to accept that there will be disappointments and setbacks in the building of that relationship.
- Don't play the blame game with the group you are trying to connect with.
- Let go of the desire to fix or change the other person and be willing to forgive.

There may be other things to try, but this at least gives you a starting point. The issue of repairing a broken relationship seems overwhelming. These are small steps that anyone can try. And never forget—with God, all things are possible!

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Identify one person of a different ethnicity, national background, or skin color with whom you can begin building or improving an existing relationship. Add the person to your daily prayer list, and ask God to open your eyes to opportunities and give you the wisdom to build a relationship with that person.

Make a list of ways you can reach out to this neighbor. Look for areas of common interest, ground on which you can stand with this neighbor.

CONCLUSION

It is my heartfelt belief that many people have good intentions, that they care about the racial divisions in our country. I also believe many have no idea how to help and where to start. And deep down, many believe the racial division has reached a point that it is too far gone to save. I hope that is not true. If we give up, the outcomes are bleak. The alternative is to leave things the

way they are today and just hope for the best. But can our nation handle the possible results of future deterioration? Are we prepared to see more riots, more funerals, more caskets until one or both groups are extinct? When one group feels the bus of progress has not only left them but backed up over them, we shouldn't be surprised if they stand and fight. America, hear the voices of those who feel left behind. They are crying out for justice. They are crying out for our attention.

The only hope is the light of Christ that shines brightly in the lives of God's people. But the forces speaking against unity and reconciliation resist the light of Christianity because it is a threat to their way of life. It is a threat to the darkness of sin. So, the world will hate Christians just as it hated Jesus. But remember who rose victoriously from the grave. The expectant joy of the resurrection is a source of comfort for Christians. Jesus is saying, "Look to the clouds; your Savior will return." Keep your ears open to the voice of the Bridegroom and drown out the voices in the world. "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete" (John 3:29).

SESSION 6: STUDENT

BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

While we are in the moment, we don't always understand the purpose for the events in our lives.
But rest assured none of those events are without a purpose.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him”
(Ecclesiastes 8:6).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- move from a theoretical discussion to practical steps to build relationships that can begin to bridge the racial divide;
- analyze Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well to learn how He reached across a divide; and
- discuss five practical steps to forge a new relationship with a person of another ethnicity, culture, or skin color.

In the last session, we looked at how black America is crying out through protests and movements. We discussed why these efforts have only widened the gulf between both sides, and we looked to Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer to teach us the way we Christians can bring light and salt to begin healing this division.

In this final session, we will look at practical ways to reach across the racial divide and build new relationships one person at a time.

INTRODUCTION

As this Bible study on racial division draws to a close, we come to the toughest of the lessons. It’s one thing to sit around with Christian brothers and sisters talking about the things that are dividing the people in our nation, but it’s another thing to have the courage to go out and forge an authentic relationship with a person from the other side. If you are black, can you move past so many bad experiences and give one more white person an honest chance without prejudging what he or she is thinking? If you are white, do you have the courage to open your heart to your black brother or sister who may be suspicious of your motives? Sounds kind of dangerous and risky, doesn’t it?

One day, a father and son were out hiking, climbing around on some cliffs. The father heard a voice above him yell, “Hey Dad! Catch me!” He turned around just in time to see his son leaping fearlessly off the rocks just above him.

They had just been to the circus, where his son’s favorite act had been the high wire entertainers. The young boy wanted to attempt a similar trick and experience that feeling of flight for himself. His dad was barely able to catch him, and they both fell to the ground. The young boy was laughing, pumped with excitement. His breathless and shocked father had a very different emotion.

When the father managed to catch his breath, and when his heart had stopped racing, he turned to his son. Trying to keep his cool and sound calm, he asked him, “Can you give me one good reason why you did that?”

The young boy, still excited from the experience, said, “Because I knew you would catch me—you’re my Dad!”

This young man had complete confidence in his dad—and the power of their relationship. His confidence was based on his experience—again and again, his father had proven himself to be trustworthy. Like that time in the swimming pool, when he stood trembling on the edge of the diving board and his dad was down in the pool below, arms reaching for him, urging him to jump. His dad had caught him. So the young boy had the confidence to live life on the edge of danger because he knew his father would always be there to catch him.

When it comes to taking chances to show God’s love to our neighbors—even those across the racial divide—can’t we Christians have that same confidence in our heavenly Father? I am not sure what kind of relationship you had with your dad—whether he was always there for you or not. But even if he wasn’t, we know our heavenly Father always will be. God has a history of faithfulness, and He has always kept His promises. If He sent His Son to die for you, do you think you can lean on Him now and trust Him to help you reach across the racial divide?

But you may be thinking, “I would not know where to begin.” In the previous sessions, I have been approaching the concept of healing the racial divide from a theoretical point of view. However, in this last session, I want to give you some practical things to help make the task seem less daunting.

In my work with congregations, I am often asked for the magic bullet the congregation can use to reach their community. And I am sure over the course of the last five sessions, you have been asking for the magic bullet to mend the racial divide in America. Okay, so come a little closer; no, closer still. Here it is: If you want to know how to change the hate speech, to rebuild the brokenness in our society, and to heal the racial anxiety in our communities, the secret is *relationships!*

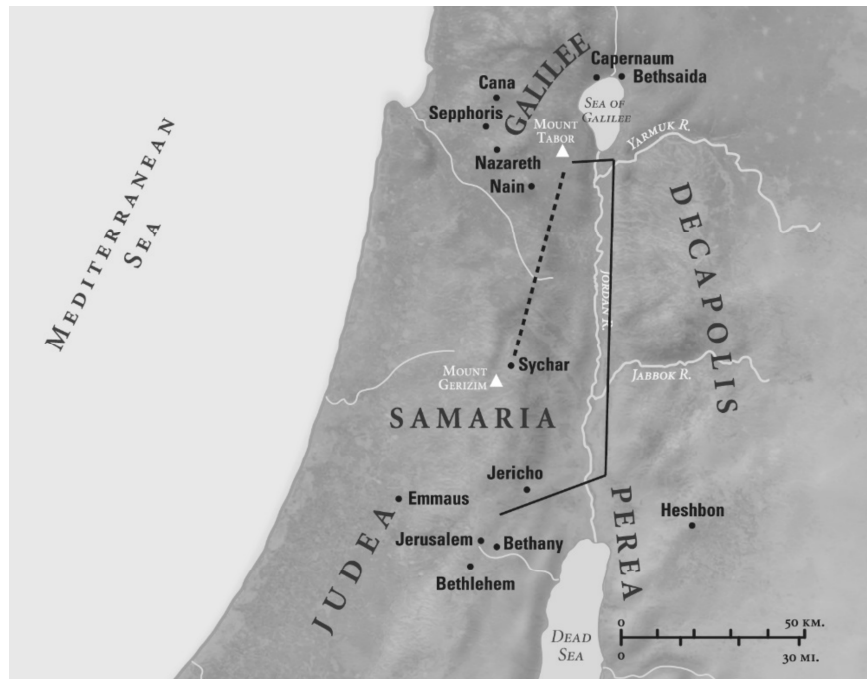
Any hope we have of overcoming racial tension, any hope of seeing beyond color, is based on our ability to build authentic relationships. A caring friendship will break through the distrust based on untrue stereotypes. So, how do you do that? How do you develop a circle of trust? I believe there are five key elements. But I’m not going to lay them out for you like a self-help manual; this is a Bible study. So we need a biblical foundation for these points. We will look at these five steps

through the eyes of Jesus, who modeled this for us with a Samaritan woman who just arrived at the town well to get water.

THE CONTEXT

I covered the relationship between Jews and Samaritans rather extensively in session 3: “Who Is My Neighbor?” I would refer you to that section for review. At this point, I want to emphasize the cultural issues at play here before we delve into the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

First, let’s begin with this point. This encounter was no accident. If you look at the dotted line on the map below, you will notice that Jesus did not travel the conventional Jewish route to get from Judea to Galilee. The standard practice (represented by the solid line) was to avoid Samaritan territory at all cost. To do this, Jews crossed the Jordan River south of Samaria and traveled north along the east bank. But this particular time, Jesus did the unthinkable. He went right through Samaritan territory. He had a divine appointment with the women at the well. This was not an accidental meeting. It was planned and purposeful.



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Jesus reached the town of Sychar at midday and stopped to rest at Jacob’s well. He sent the Twelve off to buy food. That way, He could wait alone for the Samaritan woman to arrive. If this was any normal woman, Jesus would have been left waiting for hours. Usually, people went to the well in the morning and late afternoon. But this woman came at midday. As we will learn from Jesus shortly, she was a woman of bad reputation in town and was trying to avoid the whispers and

looks of disapproval from her neighbors. Not only was Jesus reaching across the cultural divide, but He was reaching across a social divide as well.

That brings us to a second point. This encounter normally would never have taken place because of the way both Jewish and Samaritan culture viewed and treated women of that time. Jesus broke three major social rules just to reach out and speak to her:

1. A Middle Eastern man never spoke to a woman in public, not even to his wife, mother, or sister.
2. No Jew ever talked to a Samaritan. Jews viewed Samaritans as traitors in the sense that they betrayed their faith when they intermarried with Gentile foreigners. The Jews and Samaritans hated and avoided each other.
3. No self-respecting man, especially a teacher, would ever speak to a woman of such despicable reputation. This woman was a well-known social outcast. You see this outrage in Luke 7, when Jesus was approached by another woman who was a social outcast:

One of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him, and He went into the Pharisee's house and took His place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that He was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed His feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:36–39)

Jesus ignored all these social barriers when He reached across the divide to begin forming a relationship with the Samaritan woman. He revealed Himself as the Messiah. He offered her the much-needed gift of forgiveness, redemption, and a new direction for her life. This Samaritan woman took a hearty drink from His cup of living water.

This new life in Christ so impacted her that she ran back to town to witness to the very neighbors who despised and rejected her. These men and women came to Jesus and begged Him to stay with them a few days longer. All of this because Jesus reached across the divide to forge a relationship with one lost and forsaken woman. What a gift to the Church to see how this woman at the well was so overwhelmed by Jesus' grace and kindness that she proclaimed with unembarrassed excitement the arrival of the promised Messiah.

Now that we have that biblical foundation in place, let's look at five key elements to develop a circle of trust.

1. ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN INTEGRITY.

Integrity is the foundation of trust in any relationship. Integrity, by definition, means keeping promises and always telling the truth, no matter how difficult it might be. In a relationship, it is so easy not to say what needs to be said. We do that because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings. However, if we are going to have an authentic relationship, we need to have the freedom to share open and honest truths. If the relationship you are developing has integrity, it can stand the test of time.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." (For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do You get that living water?" (John 4:7–11)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. How does Jesus establish a relationship with the Samaritan Woman?

Q2. What challenges did He have to overcome with regard to integrity?

Q3. If we are going to connect with people of a different ethnicity or color, and there has been a culture of distrust already set in people's mind, how do we establish and maintain integrity?

2. OPEN AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT.

One of the biggest problems we have seen in the racial divide is the way people are not really hearing one another. Black America says, "Black Lives Matter"; white Americans assume they

mean “only black lives matter.” So the whites respond, “All lives matter!” The blacks hear that and think they are saying, “No, black lives do not matter—not to us!” Since neither side hears what the other is really saying, tensions arise and the distance only grows.

This happens so often when we think we know what the other person is thinking. But notice, we are doing something else too. We are breaking God’s Eight Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). Martin Luther explained it this way, “We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” That means, do not automatically assume the worst—but assume the best. If he or she says something that sounds wrong in your ears, ask for an explanation, and really try to understand and talk it out.

That is what the woman at the well did. She didn’t understand what Jesus meant, so she asked.

“Where do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” (John 4:11b–15)

The woman at the well thought she heard Jesus offer her magical earthly water. She heard, “Here, drink this and all your physical problems of thirst will be solved. You will no longer have a need to come here and draw water from this well.” But is that what Jesus said? Was He just offering her temporary relief, or was it something much deeper? Dr. Martin Luther explains this section beautifully,

Christ entered into the conversation with the woman because it afforded Him an opportunity to quench her thirst with living water. It is surely strange that this Man had to sojourn here on earth and beg for a drink of cold water, that He did not own enough to acquire food or a drink of cold water but was constrained to beg this woman for it. But this is recorded as a warning, for all who are willing to be warned, that during His earthly sojourn Christ was hungry and thirsty, that He was wretched and destitute, and that He finally died on the cross. (LW 22:517)

APPLICATION

Listening is an essential component of open and transparent communication. Here are four keys to being a better listener:

1. Listen attentively. Listen without interrupting. Make it about the person you are listening to, and not about yourself.

2. Stop talking. This one is hard. It is easy to want to jump in and explain yourself. But you will learn more about the other person if you let him or her talk it out—and that person will learn something about the kind of person you are.
3. Ask for clarification. If you don't understand something, ask the person to explain.
4. Repeat back to the person what you heard to make sure you understood correctly. The person will see you are really trying to understand, and that you are genuinely interested in knowing how he or she thinks and feels.

These four listening tips will help to avoid misunderstanding.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Describe a time when you were hurt by something someone said, and then later found out you had heard wrong.

Q2. Take another look at the four listening skills we just discussed. Which of them comes most naturally for you? Which is the most challenging?

3. CONSIDER ONE ANOTHER AS EQUAL PARTNERS IN THE RELATIONSHIP.

Trust is established when you begin this relationship as equals. Now, that may sound strange, but often we enter into a relationship with a sense of superiority. We might be thinking to ourselves, “I have something valuable to offer that person.” If the relationship begins with a hierarchical mindset, it will start at a huge disadvantage for both parties. You don't develop authentic, healthy relationships when one partner feels superior. It is hard to respect and find value in someone you think is beneath you, and hard to open up to someone who thinks he or she is above you.

Again, we see this equality modeled for us by Jesus as He speaks to the woman at the well. He doesn't treat her like a slave and demand water, He politely asks her. He offers her living water. He doesn't accuse her of living an immoral life, He merely lays out the facts that she has been married to five men and is now living with another who is not her husband. Even when she brings up the topic of the coming Messiah, Jesus simply tells her, “I who speak to you am He.” He treats her as an equal throughout the discussion.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Being the almighty Son of God, Jesus came to His discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well from a superior position. But how did His humble approach make her more open to discussion—especially when He wanted to confront her immorality and turn her from it?

Q2. Describe a time when you approached someone from a superior position and attitude. How might it have been different if you would have come to that person as an equal?

4. FOCUS ON SHARED INTEREST AND VALUES.

When you are developing a relationship, it helps if you can focus on your similarities rather than always pointing out what makes you different. What do you both commonly value? God? Family? Golf? What are your passions, your fears, your struggles? When you have shared experiences with a person, you can move on to share lessons you learned from those experiences. It is often in this situation that the deepest and strongest connections will be formed, through the fires of trials.

In an attempt to find common ground, ask these questions:

- What gives you joy?
- What challenges do you face?
- What do you fear?
- Where are you hurting?
- What can we do as a body of believers to address your pain and show you mercy?

Besides helping you get to know this person better, the answers to these questions will end up being a great list of prayers to bring to God on behalf of this new friend. God will use these prayers to knit your hearts more closely together.

5. BE WILLING TO BE VULNERABLE, REGARDLESS OF PERSONAL RISK.

How does that look? It requires a willingness to be transparent and authentic, having an openness to share your mistakes and faults. When you are vulnerable and have nothing to hide, you radiate trust. Though Jesus had no mistakes or faults, He made Himself vulnerable. He went into enemy territory, Sychar, to sit by a well all alone, and broke all the social norms to connect

with a woman who was obviously immoral and an outcast. And Jesus did this because He thought their eternal relationship was important enough to put His comfort, life, and welfare on the line.

In closing, for those who thought the theoretical was hard, now we get down to the nuts and bolts. Changing the culture happens slowly, over time, through forming deep and authentic communities, one relationship at a time. Jesus did this by offering the woman at the well a different direction for her life. She in turn went back rejoicing and brought her whole town to Jesus. What an amazing witness to the transformational power of the Gospel!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Name a person of another ethnicity, nationality, or skin color at church, work, school, or in your neighborhood with whom you would like to reach across the divide and form a relationship.

Q2. What have you heard about this person—or what do you already know? What common ground might you have in common?

Q3. Why is it important to not cling too tightly to impressions you have formed about this person before you have gotten the chance to sit down and get to know him or her?

MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Pray God to help you analyze the way you approach other people, including your friends and family. Ask God to make you more like Jesus—more humble, more focused on other people’s needs and desires than your own.

Pick one of the five elements of healthy relationships above and focus on improving your relationship skills in that area as you interact with others.

CONCLUSION

It would have been easy for Jesus to ignore the woman who came to the well, or to give her a polite smile and say, “Hi, how are you doing?” hoping she wouldn’t really tell Him. But He took

the time, the effort, and the risk—and their shared reward was a new relationship of faith and trust and a woman who was transformed; freed from shame, guilt, and fear; and bold to share her new-found Savior friend with her neighbors.

I pray Christians never give up or get discouraged with the relationships between blacks and whites, because I believe in the power of the almighty God. Jesus has transformed us through “living water,” just as He transformed the Samaritan woman. He forgave our sins, turned us to a new life, and freed us from shame, guilt, and fear. Remember, He said, “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Now you have that living water to offer to hurting people. Jesus Christ can work through us to change this racially divided culture, rewrite the hateful speech and dialogue, and heal the racial division one person at a time. Once again, Jesus Christ can use His Christian brothers and sisters to change the world.