

Racism and Corporate Evil

A White Guy's Perspective

Resource by: Tim Keller

*Editor's Note: This message is part of an event that marked the release of John Piper's book *Bloodlines*. View the whole series: "Race and the Christian." The following is a lightly edited transcript.*

Obviously, I have a somewhat comical title, but what I want to do is to build on what John has just said. John gave us the theological bedrock for why racism is completely antithetical to Christian theology and a Christian understanding of the gospel. I want to talk to you about the concept of corporate evil or systemic evil and injustice. I'll start off by saying Western people in general, and white Americans in particular, have little or no concept of corporate evil or they are actively set against the idea. I think it's very important for me as a white man to say "Look, that's wrong."

If we don't get what the Bible says about corporate evil, we will not only misunderstand the Bible itself, but we also won't understand what so many of our non-white brothers and sisters and friends and neighbors are saying. We just won't get it. We'll think they're all paranoid. I'd like to talk to you first about the idea of corporate responsibility — corporate moral responsibility, corporate guilt — secondly systemic evil, and then thirdly, how the gospel addresses those things.

Corporate Responsibility

First of all, corporate responsibility. Let me just show you how big parts of the Bible — Joshua 7, Daniel 9, and Romans 5 — make no sense if you think of moral responsibility in strictly individualistic terms.

Family Shapes You

If you're reading through the Bible and you get to Joshua 7 — especially if you're a white American, especially if you're a Western person — you go "What?" In Joshua 7, a man named Achan, an Israelite — they're coming into the promised land, they are strictly told you were not here for plunder — Achan takes some plunder, a robe, some wealth, takes it for himself, hides it under his tent. He breaks the law. He goes against God's will, goes against the law for the Israelites. When it's discovered, he's not just punished, but his entire family is stoned to death with him. Western people — especially white Americans — say, "Wait a minute, he did it. They didn't do it!"

Now let me just get right off and say this. Most people and most other cultures, most other centuries understand why that happened. If you're a New Yorker and you have some objection to some part of the Bible that you find offensive, I want you to realize it's your cultural location that's causing the offense. Don't you dare think that just because you find that part of the Bible offensive, everybody in the whole world would think the Bible is offensive. That's culturally narrow of you to think that because most people, most places know that we are not just the product of our choices — individual choices. That if you can do something bad, the fact that you can do it, what helped you become the kind of person that can do it, was to a great degree your family.

Your family produced you directly or at least failed to keep you from becoming that, and therefore at least actively or passively, your family participates in your guilt. Most people, most places, Americans — especially white Americans — don't understand that. Most people, most places recognize that because you're not the product of your own individual choices, you are the product of a community. Not only are you the product of a community to a great degree, but that you by even participating in that community are producing other kinds of people with their particular kinds of character to because of your interaction with them. Joshua 7 says that there is corporate responsibility inside a family.

The Sins of Our Ancestors

I'll take it up a little higher. In Daniel 9, now we're talking about corporate guilt and responsibility inside a whole race or a culture because Daniel, in Daniel 9, confesses sins — repents for — and says it's his responsibility to repent for sins that his ancestors did that he didn't do it all.

I mean I still hear it, though especially years ago when I lived in the South. I heard white people say, "Yeah, it's a shame what slavery did, but I never owned any slaves so why in the world does anybody think that I as a white person now had any responsibility to that community over there at all? I didn't own slaves." But here is Daniel feeling a responsibility for and repenting for things his ancestors did. Why? Because he knows that the culture that he's part of produced the sins of the past and he's still part of that culture. He senses the responsibility and the Bible senses the responsibility. He senses the connection. Now let me throw this over onto the positive.

Not only will Daniel feel that the sins of other members of the community I participate in, so I should experience some of the shame and responsibility for that, but the good things that happen by members of the community, I feel I can take some credit for. If you're white, didn't you have a little trouble understanding "Linsanity?" Just a little? And the reason was because you were saying if a white person makes the Knicks do well, I'm not proud to be white. You don't, but that's because you are the majority here. If you were in China and you were a white American in China and you knew to some degree that there people often looked at you white Americans in this and that way, and some white American in China really makes good and everybody's cheering this person, you would feel that that's reflecting good on you, wouldn't you? Because as a minority, you would sense the corporate connection, but you don't sense it here because you're majority.

If you take the Western individualism anyway and you put on top of that the fact that if you're white in America, you've always been majority, you just don't get all this talk about corporate connection that some members of the community can bring guilt on the whole community and some members of the community can bring credit on the whole community. We don't get it but that's only because of our cultural myopia.

Condemned by Our First Parents

Let me go one step further though. John has already alluded to this and I'll get back to this in a minute. Go to Romans 5 and you get into the very heart of what's called classic federal theology. At the heart of classic Protestantism has always been this teaching.

In Romans 5, Paul goes way beyond the idea that you are responsible for what other members of your family did and he goes way beyond the idea that you're responsible for what other members of your culture do. He says you are responsible and you are condemned for what your ancestors Adam and Eve did. That is just by virtue of being in the entire human race, you're responsible for things that you didn't individually do. You are condemned for what they do and then of course he turns around and says, "But by connection to Jesus Christ, you can be saved not because of what you have done, but through your connection to him by faith." The whole structure of the gospel is based on corporate responsibility.

If you really want to go all the way down and say I'm only responsible for what I have done and only I have done, there is no gospel. You see that. At the very heart of protestant understanding that in the end our, salvation ends up being corporate. It's not something we earn.

It's something that comes to us by being joined with Christ, but our sin is there not just because of course we do sin ourselves, but we're also sinful and condemned because of our being part of the human race. At the very, very heart of the Bible, at the heart of theology, not just what the Bible says about you and your family, not just what the Bible says about you and your culture, but what the Bible says about you and the human race — how sin happens, how salvation happens — there's corporate responsibility. You got that? If you don't understand that, to some degree, Western people and white people in particular don't realize to what degree they filter out all kinds of things the Bible says. They just don't see them or they resist them because of that individualism. It's not biblical. It's not gospel.

Systemic Evil

Let's talk then about systemic evil. Here's what I mean by systemic: if you're part of a community, there are systems that the whole community participates in. Things get done by the system, and you, by participating in the community, are to some degree getting that done, even if there are levels of responsibility. I'll give you these levels. You might be in the community and know exactly what the system is doing and be happy for it and actually actively doing it. Or secondly, you might kind of know what's happening in the system and you don't think too much about it, but you're in favor of it. Or number three, you know what's happening but you don't do anything to stop it. Or number four, you don't really know what's happening and you don't care and you don't even care to try to find out about it.

Don't Look the Other Way

For example, the Holocaust. At the top of the system, at the most responsible, you had people had set up the death camps. Underneath that, you have guards and people who are in the death camps who were just following orders as they said. Underneath that, you had people in the town, civic leaders who know what was happening there but they didn't want to know. Very often after the war, some of them committed suicide when they actually thought it was happening the camp because they knew but I had no idea exactly and so forth. Then you go down to the citizen, the German citizen who had heard rumors but didn't want to know and didn't do anything about it and just paid their taxes and worked.

Don't you see that at the one end, you've got people who are more corporately responsible, at the bottom a little less corporately responsible, but only all those people died because the whole system was working and everybody who was in the system, everybody who wasn't resisting the system was part of it because the system couldn't kill all those people unless everybody was doing their job, even just looking the other way.

Just Part of the System

When I moved to a little town in Virginia, one of the things I discovered but I didn't really think much about, was there were six city council members and they were elected at-large. Twenty-five to thirty percent of the population of the town was black, but because they weren't elected by region or neighborhood, they were elected at-large by the whole community, they were all six white. The rationale was we don't want that awful word politics where everybody's fighting and because the whole community is electing everybody, every single council member is representing the whole group.

The fact of the matter was of course that the poor part of the city, the poor part of the town, the school over there, the black part of town, was being absolutely starved of resources. Now at the top of this system were councilmen and people like that who really knew exactly what they were doing. Very important in the system was a young, northern, white pastor in his twenties to thirties who knew about it and never really asked and just continued to support it just by not putting up any kind of fuss and just participating in the elections.

Looking back on the thing, I realized what was I doing, I was part of a system. Did I experience some corporate responsibility? Absolutely. In the narrow, I was responsible for something that was keeping the people down, the poor, black people in that town down, partly because I didn't care enough to really think about it. In the broad, by being a white man in the south in the 1970s and I actually had an elder in my church whose father had fought in the civil war, you can figure that out, it actually happened. He was in his 70s. He had lied about his age and got into the civil war at the age of fourteen, but by gosh I had a guy whose father was a civil war veteran in 1975 on my session, so the civil war wasn't that far back. For any white person in that town, it was so obvious that so many of the poor black people in that town were in that situation over the generations because of slavery. For me to say I don't have anything to do with that, I don't have any responsibility to do something about their place is just unbiblical.

The System Excludes and Marginalizes

Here's a definition what I mean by systemic evil. It is a system that excludes and marginalizes people on the basis of race, even though most of the individuals in the system are not probably intentionally trying to do it. The individuals aren't intentionally trying to do it, they're part of a system that's doing it, and therefore there's guilt and therefore there's systemic evil.

For example, let me give you a mini system. I knew a man who was the head of a set of car dealerships in the South. The way in which things were done was you could come in and negotiate, and the salesman had a pretty big window of what they could give you the car for. They would negotiate, you would negotiate, and it was a lot of horse-trading going on except there was car-trading I guess. The salesman couldn't go lower than this, but they could get this high and so it was a tradition. Somebody did some research and found out that men always were better negotiators with the salesmen than women and white men and black men were better negotiators than African- American women.

When somebody actually looked at what was going on, African-American women were regularly paying far more for their cars and were actually subsidizing the price of what white men who were paying for cars in that particular town.

They realized that even though nobody thought they were doing something — if the result was unjust, and it was unjust — then even though there was nobody in there who originally had said let's do it this way because that way we will really hurt African-American women, but they were hurting African-American women. There are two things you can do. On the one hand, you could say because we're not deliberately trying to hurt African-American women, we make better profits this way, we have no responsibility.

The owner, a Christian man, said we do have responsibility and he changed the model. He changed the whole approach. His own profits have gone down, but he says it's the only way to be just. Have you got the eyes to see systemic evil or are you a typical white Westerner? I know a lot of you aren't white and a lot of you aren't Westerners, but I'm particularly looking to you. Do you have the eyes to see that kind of thing? If you do see them, do you take responsibility?

How Does the Gospel Address Systemic Racism?

Now lastly, how does the gospel actually address this? On the one hand, you've got to keep in mind that just converting some individuals with the gospel, if the system needs to be dealt with won't be enough to deal with racism.

I mean to me, the most dramatic example of that was Robert Linthicum some years ago wrote a book called City of God, City of Satan. He tells a true story about how when he was a young man, a minister student, he spent a summer doing evangelism and ministry in a big city. He met a girl named Eva who was from the projects. She was from a very poor background, a black girl, African-American.

She became a Christian under his ministry. He put her in a Bible study. She was growing, went back to school — seminary college or something like that. A year later, he came back to see his friends and found out that Eva had gone into prostitution. He found her. He started berating her.

He started saying, "Why didn't you go to your Bible study?" And then she said, "Men came, told me I look good, said they wanted me to be a prostitute, and if I wasn't, they would beat up my father and my brother." This is Robert Linthicum, the author saying, I said to her, "Eva that's just terrible. You should have trusted God and gone to the police." She said, "It was the police who came and said they were going to beat up my father and my brother. What was I going to do?" Linthicum said, "I suddenly realized I don't think it's going to be enough to help her just by converting her and getting her to a Bible study. I've got to do something about the system."

There's a corrupt system going on here and of course black and Hispanic women were being used in this way. Now that's particularly dramatic, very vivid. I tried to show you the car dealership, to show you systemic racism can happen at all kinds of levels, almost at an unconscious level but there it is. At the other end, that's very, very obvious but it just goes to show you got to do something about systems.

You can't just simply say we're just going to convert everybody and convict them of the individual sin of racism, everything will be okay. Here's three ways the gospel I think can address this.

Not About Individualism

First, if you begin to understand gospel theology, the idea that a lot of people say that the very doctrine that Adam and Eve's sin is imputed to me so I'm guilty and now when I believe in Jesus Christ, not only are my sins put on Christ, but his righteousness is put on me and I'm clothed in the righteousness of Christ. I've seen people criticized in reviews of John's books saying reformed theology, protestant theology classic imputed righteousness theology is individualistic and it's no help. I'm trying to say are you kidding, you have you read this. To me, the reason that I have been able to get beyond my individualism and start to think in terms of corporate responsibility is because of the gospel. It gives anybody who really digs down into it the ability to see that God sees things happening through communities through bodies, not just simply through individual actions.

On the one hand, I'd say the gospel theology gives people, even those of us from the most individualistic background, the spectacles through which we can finally start to see things we never saw before. We can look at things in other ways other than just simply individual rights, individual actions, number one.

New Identity

Second, the gospel changes your identity so that you are less sucked in to the social system around us, which tends to be racist. Michelle Alexander, in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, points out that gangster-rap culture is a way for stigmatized people desperately trying to do something about the low self-image, and they are embracing an identity given to them by society as criminals. They embrace beating up women and violence and are proud of it, and it's a desperate way for people to say, "Okay, you're going to treat me as a criminal, I'm going to revel in being a criminal." But of course all it does is digs them in deeper. They've got to have an identity, but even if they do go to prison, keeps them from being sucked into what the culture is telling them about themselves.

On the other hand, Bill Stuntz, who was a great scholar of criminal law at Harvard University, wrote a book that came out after he died called *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice*. It's an amazing book, and he points out in the 1840s, the police forces were invented. You know why? Because of the Irish. The Irish showed up in the 1840s. They came here because of the potato famine.

They came into the big cities and there was all this violence and everybody said, "Oh my gosh the Irish." They were the first urban, criminal culture and police forces were actually invented to deal with them. But he pointed something out over a period of twenty years. He said Irish criminals were tried by Irish juries. They were tried by Irish judges. They were arrested by Irish policemen and Irish district attorneys. In other words, it says the Irish community was empowered to actually deal with their own crime problem and they got on top of it.

These inner-city black communities are not empowered to do that because the criminal justice system, he says, is in the hands of white people. And it's particularly white suburbanites — people who don't even live there. He makes a long list of the ways in which the criminal justice system is absolutely broken and it's one of the reasons why black male incarceration rates are far higher than they were just a generation ago — far higher. He says it's absolutely broken until white people begin to realize that they are us.

First and the Last

Michelle Alexandra does the same thing. At the end of her book, she says that the criminal justice system right now is a disaster for black people in general and black males in particular, and she says there isn't any way out of it unless white people get some new understanding that we are together — some new humility, some new sense of care and love. There's a place in James 1:9 that says the poor believer should take pride in his high position and the rich believer should take pride in his low position because he's going to pass away like a flower of the field. And probably what that is saying is this: If you are a Christian affluent person, you should remember that you are a sinner.

That's one of the things the Bible says. If you are a poor person and you become a Christian, you should remember that you are a child of the King, you should think of your high position. The gospel takes white people and keeps them from really getting their identity from their place in society, and it takes poor people and it keeps them from taking their identity out of their place that's been assigned to them in society. That helps destroy the power of the system.

Grace and Grace Alone

Lastly, an awful lot of people that talk about systemic racism and evil and systemic race injustice are incredibly self-righteous as they do it. Christians ought to get alongside of people who say the criminal justice system is a systemic evil that is keeping people of color and non-white people down.

There are a whole lot of systems out there that are a huge problem, even when you have individual rights and that kind of thing. The fact is that so many of the crusaders against systemic racism injustice have an enormous amount of self-righteousness and anger that makes people write them off. If we're Christians, we know that we're sinners saved by grace. The gospel should humble us so that when we talk about injustice, we don't look at everybody else as the problem. May we never say, "We are the ones who understand these things. All you idiots that don't believe in systemic evil. I heard Tim Keller preach on it, I know. Here's a stupid individualistic white person that doesn't understand these things. You just don't understand, but I do."

See, the gospel takes that out of you forever and makes you a person who will probably be more likely to persuade people. In all those ways, the gospel takes a look at corporate evil, helps us understand it, and changes our hearts and changes our ways of thinking so that we can do something about it.



Life Group Study Guide
January 20-21, 2018
Not For Polite Conversation - Racism
Dr. Kurt Bjorklund

Message Notes:

Reference:

Open in prayer and read John 4:1-30.

Review: What was one thing from this week's message that stood out to you?

Reflect:

1. How have you personally experienced racism or institutional/corporate racism, whether you were a victim, perpetrator, bystander, or unknowing contributor?

2. Discuss the Racism and Corporate Evil article by Tim Keller. Do you agree with Keller? Disagree? Explain.

3. Consider Revelation 7:9-10 and Romans 10:12-13. How do these passages inform you about the incompatibility of racism and the kingdom of God?

4. Do you think the goal of racial reconciliation is a color-blind society? Why or why not?

5. Where have you seen evidence of institutional or corporate racism where you live, work, worship, etc? How does your race impact your perspective on this?

6. Some who speak against racism build their argument upon the fact that all human beings are bearers of the Image of God (Genesis 1:26). What impact does this truth have on our thinking about racial issues?

7. Jesus crossed a racial barrier when he spoke with the Samaritan woman in John 4. What barriers have you crossed for the sake of the gospel? Have others crossed barriers for you? Explain.

Respond/Reinforce:

Reflect on your own experience, or lack thereof, of racism. Pray that God would open your eyes to new opportunities to engage with this issue, embrace a new perspective, or simply love someone different than you.

