

4-25 The Church and Race Ezra 9:1-2; 10-12; Luke 24:36-47; Rom. 3:21-24; 27-31

Before I start a new summer series, I'm preaching on topics of importance to the church and to Christians. Last week, it was *change*. We must constantly be transformed and transforming into the image of the kingdom if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus. This week, we're going to look at Scripture and deal with one specific kind of change that's necessary for the church today. I'm talking about changes in our views, attitudes and practices regarding race, race relations and racism.

Wouldn't it be grand if the only race that mattered was the next one on the NASCAR circuit. Wouldn't we live in a better world, if differences in race were only the numbers worn by athletes as they competed? Alas, we are a world conflicted by racial wars; we are a country still suffering from the affects of slavery; we are a state divided by race just like our community. But more tragically, we are the church in America, probably the most segregated institution in our country.

Recently, I had two very different people of different races comment about a single news event and their perspectives were as different as black and white. The event in question was a history month decree and commemoration of the Confederacy made by Virginia's new governor.

A caucasian said to me that they didn't see anything wrong with celebrating what was good about the Confederacy; things like chivalry, honor, states rights and drinking mint juleps on the front porch of your plantation. The other voice I heard came from an article on the same subject. The author was African-American and he interpreted the event very differently.

He said, in essence, *when you remember the Confederacy, you cannot omit or dismiss the core cause of its existence. What romantics love about the South was created on the backs of African slaves. Had there been no slaves, there would have been no Scarlett; no Rhett; no Tara; no fanning yourself on the plantation porch while the cotton was picked. And most of all, had there been no slavery, there would have been no Civil War that killed hundreds of thousands of our citizens.*

Clearly, these two people lived in different worlds and were descendants of different cultures and races. Every race and culture struggles with other races and cultures. It's the human condition. We speak different languages; look different on the outside and have different cultural ways.

This difference is compounded by our ignorance of other races and cultures. Ignorance, of course, is the foundation of prejudice. **Apart from first hand knowledge and experience, we simply hold on to stereotypes that were handed to us.** Reportedly, when C.S. Lewis was a boy, he confided to his father that he didn't like the French, so he must be prejudiced. His father asked him why that was and Lewis replied, *If I knew the reasons, it wouldn't be prejudice.*

What continues to confound and condemn us is that we are unaware of our **ignorance**. *We don't know that we don't know.* It is the **proud** assumption that we see objectively that takes our experience as the norm and virtue while holding others in derision. Racial discrimination is rooted in ignorance and pride.

We've not walked in the shoes of another race. Most of us in here are descendants of those who have always known and enjoyed freedom in this country. How could we possibly understand the residual impact of slavery? So in this context of ignorance, we say that slavery's impact and influence should be long gone in this country. It is the same with power. Those who have it cannot really understand what it's like to be without it.

If we are going to hear and obey the Scripture regarding race, we must first admit that we see only half the equation at best. I'm no math wizard, but I do know that if you see only one side of an equation, you cannot solve it. We need eyes to see and ears to hear.

Which brings us to the Bible, a book that Baptists have declared is their final authority on such matters. What does the Bible say about race? Please turn to **Ezra 9**.

Ezra spoke to Jews who had returned from exile and those who had remained in the land. He was critical of their intermarriage and demanded this practice to stop. He called upon the people to separate themselves from the other peoples in the land; among them Hittites, Jebusites, Moabites, Kryptonites, mosquito bites. The word *separated* here comes from the same root as the word holy. It means separated FOR God's holy purpose and from that which is a threat to faithful living.

By commanding that the Hebrews stop intermarriage with other peoples, Ezra is not promoting racial purity. He is seeking **religious purity**. From the inception of this religion with Abraham, God's purpose was to draw all nations to himself. He did not choose the Hebrew race to be superior and cut off from other races.

Ezra says the unfaithful have *mixed the holy seed with the people of the lands* (v. 2). This is not biological seed that passes along race—it is HOLY seed; the passing of **faith** from generation to generation. Ezra has provided many proof texts used to support the idea that a pure race cannot be diminished or diluted by intermarriage. Race is a factor in this story but is ancillary. *Separation* does not mean *segregation*. It's a religious term, not a racial one.

Second, Ezra is describing for the second time that the peoples of the land are not unclean because of race, but because of their abomination. That word used in v. 1 and again in v. 11 is means sacrilege and is a word sometimes translated idol. Ezra is says that their intermarriage has led them to idolatry.

If we had only Old Testament texts about race, we would have a more confusing study before us. But when we go to the New Testament, God's chosen people cease having a racial identity. Race simply has no bearing in God's great salvation.

Please turn to Luke 24 where Jesus says in v. 46, ***Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.***

All nations is a phrase synonymous with *all races and all peoples*. Jesus invites all races, classes and genders to the great banquet table, said most clearly by Paul: ***in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all one...*** Gal. 3

I read an article in the Journal, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. The research for this article was done at Baylor University, my alma mater. And now for the first time in history, I can say I hope our research is as good as our basketball program.

The study showed a significant positive correlation between American Christianity and racial prejudice, meaning that some ideas in our Christian faith are linked to prejudice. The researchers don't know why this is so, but they now have data that shows it happens. Brothers and sisters, this does not come from Scripture.

Baptists especially in the south have a sad and sullen reputation about race and it's well-earned. Rather than being those most likely to live out the teachings of Scripture, we have been slave to our cultural values. Of course, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed because Baptists in the south wanted to keep their slaves.

In 1871 the editor of the Baptist paper in Virginia wrote that the Anglo association should not even correspond to the African American association. He expressed the broad sentiments of

white Baptists when he wrote, *God has made two races widely different... We take it for granted that it was not the purpose of the creator that they should be blended.... Suppose we admit colored delegates to seats in our association, we must of course, allow them to sit where they choose, in juxtaposition with our wives and daughters...* (Baptist Ways, p. 220)

Much worse came from Baptist pulpits all over the south. From the 18th century forward preachers argued that Africans were the descendants of Ham, the cursed son of Noah. They proclaimed that the curse placed upon Ham's descendents was **slavery**. Preachers even into the 20th century argued that Africans had no souls, which of course meant they weren't really people and could be treated like animals.

Dr. King once said... *11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week*. It still is. Maybe it's not explicit conscious segregation like we saw in the 50's, but it looks just the same. The real difference in our churches today is between those who see this congregational segregation as a biblical failure and those who don't.

I'm leading a discussion group beginning this Wednesday at 6:15 around a DVD presentation on Baptists and race. We will discuss this openly and honestly, seeking to understand rather than be understood. If the church has a negative witness regarding race, we must address and correct it.

The real challenge for white Christians is to discover the ways racism is alive underground in our churches and in our communities. Baptist groups have formally confessed their racist past, but I don't think we've actually repented. Repentance in the NT means doing a 180 and heading in the opposite direction. That would mean Baptists Christians attempting to build relationships with persons of different races, not just abstaining from slurs and acrimony. It would mean asking for help in understanding what we do not understand. And it would mean treating other races in ways that honor dignity and value.

I said to one of my black pastor friends that I had heard anecdotal evidence that people who went to see the movie **Blind Side** were overwhelmingly white. I told him that I kind of liked it myself and that others had said the same thing to me. So I asked him, **what do you make of that?**

He smiled and asked me, why do you think you and your friends liked that movie? I thought for a bit and then said, *I suppose it's because this rich white lady takes in a poor black...* and then a light turned on. In a soft voice he said to me, *whites like that movie because the white lady is the hero who takes in the poor Negro. Her generosity, courage and ability saved this kid and she even taught him to be a great football player... who owed everything to the white family. This isn't inspirational to blacks.* And I got it.

It saturates our culture, this reinforcement of stereotyping. And it makes slaves of everyone involved.

Brothers and sisters, the only race God loves more than any other in creation is the **human race**. God is no respecter of persons from a racial point of view. Race matters not one iota to God's plan of redeeming or saving creation. **Only faith matters**. It was about faith in the beginning. It's about faith in the end. There is no white faith, black faith, brown faith or yellow faith. There is no upper class, middle class or lower class faith. There is no male faith or female faith. As Paul declares, there is **only one Lord and one faith**. If we believe this, we must live it individually and our church must picture this truth.