

Menlo Church
950 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park, CA 94025 650-323-8600

For personal or small group use only. For other uses, please contact
communications@menlo.church.

Series: Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly

June 21, 2020

“Use Your Privilege”

John Ortberg

I'm so glad you're here for this message. I want to spend this time talking about what the Bible says about race and racism. There are so many opinions all over the place, but the Scriptures have spoken to the human condition with unique power for 2,000 years, so I hope you'll be really glad that you tuned in for this message.

The main observation I want to make is one that might come as a surprise. In the last book of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, there is a picture of what the human community will look like when it is redeemed by God. The text says, "*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*"

This is a picture of enormous joy and gratitude and worship and adoration with no social distancing and no masks. They keep standing up and then falling down before the throne throwing their crowns. It's a picture of enormous energy and delight and unimaginable diversity but just one great multitude.

There is a ride at Disneyland that you have to go on if you have little children. It features all kinds of people, tribes, customs, dress, language, and everything, but over and over again you hear these words, "It's a small world after all. It's a world of laughter, a world of tears. It's a world of hope and a world of fears. There's so much that we share that it's time we're aware it's a small world after all." By the time you're done with that ride, you are sick of those words. That song will drive you crazy for a week later.

Where did that idea come from of a small world after all with so much that we share? As far as I know, there was never a true actionable plan to create a community of all different kinds of human beings from every nation and every culture before this picture in Revelation. That idea was actually the payoff of a promise God made to Abraham way at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, chapter 12, where he says, "And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you (every nation, every tribe, every people, every language)," and in Jesus it happened.

What God said God will do. The Egyptians couldn't stop them. The Babylonians couldn't stop them. The Romans couldn't stop them. Not with a cross. Hitler couldn't stop them. Stalin couldn't stop them. Mao couldn't stop them. Pol Pot couldn't stop them (every tribe and tongue and people and language).

According to Ethnologue, there are now 7,097 languages spoken in the world. Which is God's favorite? Which one is God going to love to hear around his throne? Every language. Every tribe. Think about this. Albanians and Tasmanians and Pomeranians and Mesopotamians and Canadians, Philistines and Filipinos and Philipians and French and Fins and Scotch and Irish and Dutch, Israelis and Palestinians,

© Menlo Church, All Rights Reserved

For personal or small group use only. For other uses, please contact communications@menlo.church.

Babylonians, Belgians, Bulgarians, Belarusian, and the Botswan. If you're from Botswana, you're not Botswanian; you're just the Botswan. I don't know why.

For 2,000 years, this vision of reconciled and redeemed family of humanity has challenged and thrilled the world, and it's our legacy. We're part of this, but here's what's striking for today about that text in Revelation. John, the author, says nothing about including people of all races. In fact, this little description of diverse human community gets repeated seven times in Revelation, and the order of those four words (nation, tribe, people, and language) gets varied in very ingenious ways, but not one single time does that description mention God including people from all of the races. What's up with that?

Oddly, we see this weird and strange phenomenon elsewhere. When the early church got started, its single most striking characteristic from a human perspective was its remarkable inclusiveness. Before this, religion was basically a tribal affair, but now all of a sudden, there is this community meeting all over the place, and Paul puts it like this. *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

Historian Thomas Cahill says this is the first expression of egalitarian thought in all of human history. It would change the world. It's not just there. Paul writes to the church at Colossae a very similar notion. *"Here..."* That is, in the church. *"...there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."*

Israel had pretty much divided people up into Jew and Gentile. That wall has come down. Rome divided people up pretty much into Romans or barbarians. They got the word *barbarian* because other languages sounded like people were just saying "Bar, bar, bar..." not educated and not cool like us. That wall came down. Scythians were regarded as particularly uncouth barbarians. Nobody wanted the Scythians around, but Paul says at Colossae, "Here they are," but Paul never mentions race.

When he's talking about the early church, he never says, "In Christ there is neither black nor white." Now, we know there were people from Africa in the early church. In Acts, one of the early members is a government official from Ethiopia. He finds out about Jesus and gets baptized. In the church in Antioch, an amazing church, there is a leadership team of five people, very diverse. Two of them are from Africa, but Paul never says...look at this...black and white people worshipping together. Why not?

Was race just too touchy a subject for Paul to talk about? Go back earlier in the Bible at the very beginning in the book of Genesis. We're told God begins the human race, but we're never told what race Adam is. The whole tenth chapter of Genesis is called the *table of nations* of all peoples from different tribes with different languages. It never says a word about race.

In fact, the word *race* never appears in the Bible. Check it out. The reason for this is in the Bible races did not exist. In other words, God did not create race. Another way of saying this largely not understood in our day is the idea of categorizing people by race and categorizing them by the color of their skin (white, black, brown, Asian, indigenous) was not done in biblical times. It was not done in the ancient world.

Of course, they knew there was diversity. They were aware of the fact that people looked different and had different languages and different customs and had different appearances, and they were just as capable as we are of treating people in the out group badly, but they did not take a bunch of people from Europe and say, "You're white," or people from Africa and say, "You're black."

The reason the Bible never condemns the sin of racism is that racism had not been invented yet. That took a while. That took power and greed and the Devil. It's covered in a book called *This Side of Heaven* published by Oxford University Press, but there are a lot of other authors who cover this topic also. A lot of us think about race as a scientific term, and we were taught, maybe, that people could be put into pure racial categories based on genetics or biology or something, but they cannot. The category of race did not arise from science.

In the early history of our century, slaves were mostly Scots or Irish or poor English. They were indentured servants. They could work off their servanthood, but one of the problems was, if they ran away from the plantation, because of their language and their skin color they could blend in and they were hard to track down.

However, people from Africa could not blend in because of their skin color and their language. As shipping improved, kidnapping Africans and making them slaves became a huge business. Back in Bible times and in the ancient world, slavery was ubiquitous, but it wasn't race-based. You became a slave because you were poor, so you got sold into it to work off your debt or because your tribe lost a war or because you committed a crime. They didn't have many jails back then, so slavery was also a punishment.

Around the 1500s or the 1600s an idea arose, and it came from hell. It came from hell. It was that you could place people in a category called *race* based on their skin color or hair type, and from the beginning welded to that was the idea that some races are superior to others. White people were smarter. They would work harder. They had more emotional control. Therefore, they ought to rule over, particularly, the black race. This was all driven by greed and power.

During the 1700s and 1800s, as science gained prestige, pseudoscientific theories reinforced this. Naturalists back then began to talk about words like *Caucasoid* or *Negroid* or *mongoloid*. If you're old enough, I can remember when those words used to get thrown around as though those were categories that existed as though those were subspecies of the human race that could actually be kept pure.

Now, this had never been done before, and eventually by about the second half of the twentieth century, it was clear to biologists there was no scientific basis for those categories at all. In other words, there is no genetic variance that occurs in all members of one racial group but not others. In fact, the variations within any particular group are much, much bigger than any variations between groups.

From a genetic or scientific standpoint, one geneticist puts it like this. The answer to the question whether races exist in humans is a clear and unambiguous, "No." Let me say that one more time. The answer to the question whether races exist in humans is a clear and unambiguous, "No." In other words, God didn't make races.

That's why the word is not in the Bible. God made diversity. He made people with different cultures and different languages and different appearances and different customs. He loves that. That will go with us into heaven, but the category of race and the idea of dividing people up based on skin color is an invention of the Devil.

In Romans, Paul talks about how God gives people over to a depraved mind. Sin always causes us to think wrong thoughts. It always does. Part of what is so evil about this is in the ancient world they had slavery. It was ubiquitous, but they didn't justify it. They didn't feel like they needed to. It was, "I have more power. You are my slave."

© Menlo Church, All Rights Reserved

For personal or small group use only. For other uses, please contact communications@menlo.church.

Once people began to follow Jesus, then we had to follow the Golden Rule, and then, in those centuries of the 1600s and 1700s, if I'm going to break the Golden Rule, I have to find a way to justify it, so this narrative arose of white supremacy that enables me to oppress and exploit other people and think it's okay. Now, I'm not calling on us to never use the word *race*.

The concept right now is not something we can make go away. It's part of our culture. Part of the growth that a lot of people, including me, need to have is to just be freed and cleansed from the remnants of those centuries of thought that just get into my perceptions and my facial expression and my body language where I look at people through a lens that distorts the image of God in them. It's not that I want to. It just gets in me.

What I want all of us to understand is race is not a product of our God or of nature or of science. Race was a lens human beings invented to justify sin oppressing and exploiting others by looking at other human beings and not seeing the fullness of the image of God in them. That's race. Race is a lens human beings invented to justify sin by enabling me to look at another person and not see the wonder and the fullness of the image of God in that person.

That's why Paul doesn't say, "There is now neither black nor white." That's why Revelation does not say, "...every tribe and tongue and people and nation and race." That is why it is true that God invented only one race and that is the human race. Raucous applause at this point. Now, here's the good news. God gave us the solution to racism way before racism ever got invented. All this way of dividing human beings up in the world is us versus them. This is as old as Cain and Abel. We create in groups and out groups. This does go way back to ancient times and right up to modern times. We can do this over anything.

There was a teacher named Jane Elliott back in the 60s who was teaching a class of third-graders in Iowa of all white children. This was the day after Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. She wanted to try to communicate to these children what was going on and what racism was about, so she got this idea. The kids came into class this day, and she said,

"Children, I have to tell you something. We need to divide our class up into blue-eyed children and brown-eyed children because blue-eyed children are superior to brown-eyed children. Blue-eyed children are smarter and prettier and better and nicer. That's why we need to make their experience different. If you're a blue-eyed child, you get to go to lunch first, and you get to have seconds, and you can stay at recess longer, but not you brown-eyed children."

The brown-eyed children had to wear a collar to show they were brown-eyed children. Then, this difference got spread really quickly. Jane said at one point, "Everybody is ready to read except Jody," and one of the kids said, "Yeah, Jody has brown eyes." Jane said, "You'll find we have to wait for the brown-eyed a lot."

At recess, kids would get into fights over whether they were brown-eyed or blue-eyed. Brown-eyed students had the look and the behavior of thoroughly defeated human beings. This happened so fast it was stunning. The next day, the children came in, and she said, "Children, I have to tell you something. I lied to you yesterday. Actually, it's brown-eyed children who are superior. It's brown-eyed children who are nicer and smarter and prettier and better."

The whole thing flipped. She said she watched what had been a marvelous, cooperative, thoughtful, wonderful group of children turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating little tyrants in about 15 minutes. Us versus them. This is deep sin, and this is lovelessness, and at the heart of the Bible is tearing down the wall that separates any us versus them. This is what the Bible is about.

I know there are lots of complexities as we look at our society right now, but we're looking at the Bible right now, and the Bible says the wall that divides us and them has got to go. We see this all through the Old Testament. I'll give you one very striking little example in the book of Numbers back in the day of Moses. We're told,

"Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the Lord heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)"

By the way, we all know Moses is associated with the Pentateuch. One of the ways we know there was an editor involved is it's very hard to imagine Moses himself writing, "I was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on earth." Miriam and Aaron say this about him. Then, we're told, *"The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous..."*

There is an irony in this that's almost funny. Does anybody know what color leprosy turns the skin? I have a few people in here. Does anybody know? It turns the skin white. It's like God is saying, "You enjoy being white so much let's double down. Just go to it, as white as you want to get." Moses prays. Moses, the humble man enough to say, "There must not be any us versus them."

By the way, this is a time for real humility. One of the things that sin always does is it blinds us to its presence. When there is pride in me or lust in me, very often I can't see it, but other people can. It's that way with the sin of racism, too. There's a really good chance if it's in me that I may not be the world's leading expert on being able to see it. To be humble enough to listen and particularly to be humble enough to listen to some of my black brothers and sisters and say, "Tell me. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you think?" To be humble... God, do we need humility right now!

That's Moses. Now, his wife, a Cushite, is a part of God's people. Now, God's people have a little Cushite DNA in them. We see it. It's like a little grace note that runs through the Old Testament. Ruth is a Moabite. There's a little Moabite DNA. Rahab is in Jericho, and that DNA gets in. Of course, our master teacher here, as in everywhere else, is Jesus, and Jesus is the great includer.

Within Israel, the out group...people like prostitutes and lepers and the differently abled because they were considered deformed and tax collectors...are constantly embraced by Jesus. He talks with them, touches them, eats with them, and gets in big trouble for this, but where it gets really interesting, gang, is with the Samaritans.

Samaritans were despised in Israel for being spiritually unfaithful and morally unclean. There is an ancient Israelite saying. "May I never set eyes on a Samaritan! God, would you keep my eyes holy so I would never even have to look at one of them?" Yet, the Samaritans keep popping up in Jesus' life. You might think it's an accident at first, but over and over again...

One time, he cleanses a group of 10 lepers. It's so fascinating. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. That word *priests* is plural. If they were all Israelite, he would just say, "Go to one priest, an Israelite priest, a Jewish priest," but he tells the Samaritan, "You can go show yourself to the Samaritan, non-orthodox priest." That's really interesting. The Samaritan is the only one who comes back to say, "Thank you," and Jesus points this out and commends him for it (the Samaritan).

"Let me never have to set eyes on a Samaritan." Maybe Jesus' most famous story is about a man who Jesus says is robbed and who Jesus says is stripped of his clothes and left lying on the side of a road. Two Jewish heroes (a priest and a Levite) and religious leaders just pass him by on the other side, but the man who stops, the man who cares, and the man who helps is a Samaritan.

By the way, the reason Jesus actually points out the man is stripped of his clothes is, of course, Jewish people were circumcised, and the Samaritan sees this man who has been stripped of his clothes and knows he is the enemy. He is one of them, and, still, it's the Samaritan who stops. Jesus is just in people's face with this Samaritan thing all of the time.

In the chapter right before that story in Luke 9, Jesus and his disciples are passing through a village. It's a Samaritan village. Not surprisingly, that village does not want to provide hospitality, and his disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy them?" Like they could do that. Jesus says, "No, I don't think so." Jesus rebukes not them, the Samaritans, but us, his disciples. He says, "I came to save people not destroy them."

The longest conversation Jesus has with any human being in any of the Gospels is recorded in the fourth chapter of John, and it is with a Samaritan woman. He meets her at a well. You might remember, if you know the story, that he asks her for a drink of water, and she is stunned that he does. There is good reason for this.

There is an ancient rabbinic saying. "Let no Israelite eat one mouthful of anything that is a Samaritan, for if he eat but a little mouthful, it is as if he ate a swine's flesh." There was nothing more offensive and more blasphemous than that. Yet, that's what Jesus does. There is a little verse in this story, gang, that is marching orders for you and me. I love this.

Jesus, in this story, was going from the south (Judah) up north to Galilee. Samaria is in between them. The old King James Version puts it like this. "***Jesus must needs go through Samaria.***" Now, the thing is he didn't have to go through Samaria. There was a bypass road. Generally, for Israelites, they would take that bypass road going north so they did not have to pass through Samaria.

This is most likely not a statement of geographical necessity. One writer puts it like this. "Jesus was under divine necessity as an envoy of the Father to seek out the Samaritans." He must needs go. "I have to go where they are." We must needs go. We must needs go beyond us to them, whoever they is. We, if we're followers of Jesus, must needs go beyond our comfort zone. We must needs go beyond what is familiar. We must needs go beyond what is easy. We must needs go beyond people who look like us. We must needs go beyond our little in group.

Now, this is going to get Jesus into a lot of trouble. "Hey, Jesus! Your job is to get people into heaven. You start hanging out with the Samaritans and that's going to be divisive. People will be tired of hearing about it. I've never hurt a Samaritan. I've got nothing against Samaritans. Why do you keep bringing them up?" In fact...*in fact*...this is in the Bible. Jesus' identification with the Samaritans (them) was so strong

© Menlo Church, All Rights Reserved

For personal or small group use only. For other uses, please contact communications@menlo.church.

that eventually his own people said to him, "Aren't we right in saying you are a Samaritan and demon possessed?"

Now, those two are just about on a moral par. A Samaritan (one of them) and demon possession. Jesus seemed to think the Samaritans were part of us. Jesus seemed to think his mission included the Samaritans. It's like he went around with this big sign, "Samaritan Lives Matter." He appeared to think that his mission included creating a community of people so devoted to love for all human beings that their signature move, their great source of joy, was trampling down the barriers that had separated human beings before his great movement.

It's a small world after all. There is so much that we share. What is it that we share? We hear a lot about diversity in our day. You understand what makes people so prized is not how we are different; it is how we are the same. It is what we share in common, and that is the image of God. That's what makes people so prized.

Diversity matters, because every human being is made by God, and all of those customs and tribes and languages and cultures help me to see and understand the bigness and the vastness and the goodness of God in much richer ways than I ever could if I was just by myself. Every one of those human beings is somebody for whom Jesus went to the cross to tear down the dividing wall of hostility.

Diversity is incredibly important, but we'll never understand that what makes human beings most valuable is not what makes us diverse; it's what we share. There's so much that we share, and that is the image of God in everybody. That's what makes diversity so valuable. I tell you what. The Samaritans loved that man. The outsiders loved him because he came as the great outsider. Misfits loved him because he came as the great misfit.

The woman in John 4 went back and told her whole town, and many believed in Jesus just because of what she said, and they begged Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, to stay with them, and Jesus said, "Okay," and he stayed with him two days. "God, may I never set eyes on a Samaritan." Anybody who eats what a Samaritan does is like they had eaten a little mouthful of a whole swine.

He stays with them two days. Then, we're told many more of them become believers. Now, what are you going to do with all of those Samaritans? This is the beginning of his ministry. Now, gang, I'll tell you what we're all called to, because he's our leader. These were words that would remake the human race. Early Christians used to talk about the church, because they had been so used to thinking Jew and Gentile as a third people or a third ethno or a third tribe of neither *this* nor *that*.

Paul writes, ***"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."*** What is a worldly point of view? "I carry more of the image of God than you do. I'm on top. You're on the bottom." We're all done with that now. We're all done with that now. Now, that may take some time. God is going to have to help me with that and maybe you. ***"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way..."*** Do we not speak the truth when we say, "You're a Samaritan"?

"...we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore

Christ's ambassadors... "God helping us, we're done looking through old, sinful lenses like the race lens. ***"The old has gone, the new is here!"***

O God, may this come to us today! May your kingdom come! Your will be done on earth on the corner of 38th and Chicago in Minneapolis, in every school, in every home I'm looking into right now, in every neighborhood where you are, in every office, in every city, in every church, in every heart starting with my heart.

Now, if you want to be a part, what do you do? Well, use your privilege. Use your privilege. We're hearing a lot about the notion of privilege these days and especially white privilege in our day. Privilege, white or not, is a bundle of assets I did not deserve or earn. That's what privilege is. It's a bundle of assets I did not deserve.

Where do we go to find out how to manage our privilege? Who was the greatest privilege manager of all time? If you're not saying, "Jesus," by now, you are not listening, so the answer would be, "Jesus." It would be Jesus. This is the greatest passage on privilege that you will ever read, and it was written, for crying out loud, 2,000 years ago.

In your relationships, in your culture, in your society, in your small world... I don't care what cable channel you listen to. ***"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God..."*** My friend and Greek professor, Jerry Hawthorn, used to say, "Who precisely because," as the best translation. It's a little circumstantial verb we park on.

"Who [precisely because he was] in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

If you want to know how to use privilege, nobody ever had the privilege that Jesus had being in very nature God. Lots of us would like to think we're there. He was, and he deserved it, and he decided precisely because he was God, rather than use privilege to enhance his own life he would spend his privilege to save ours. That's the cross. That's the man for me.

Now, that's our call of Menlo as a church, so use your privilege, whatever you have. If you have resources, if you have an education, if you have a network, if you have a job, if you can help tutor, if you can help fund, if you can make a difference in the life of a single human being, if you can go shop in a neighborhood where you wouldn't normally shop just to be around some people your eyes could take a good look at through a different lens, if you can read a book like *The Hate You Give* that I read last year, an amazing book about a girl who grows up black written by a radiant follower of Jesus...

If you can have a conversation, if you can assist at a school, if you can tutor somebody, if you can pray, if you can let one person in your circle know in a non-superior kind of way that racism is not okay... Be like Jesus. Use your privilege. Go online. We have all kinds of partners as a church. We have Able Works and New Door Ventures and Bayshore Christian Ministries and Generations United and Ravenswood Education Foundation and a bunch of other folks who would love to have people who want to come alongside and work and learn together.

Then and then, for sure, every one of us just needs to get on our knees. Again, this is an issue that involves lots of different arenas (politics, education, law enforcement) that calls for people to think really deeply and become subject matter experts on them and speak into them, but it is ultimately a spiritual battle. We're fighting against an evil that came from the pit of hell, and it vies with Jesus for supremacy in the world, so we start with prayer.

Guys, you understand what changed the ancient world was not that Rome got it right. It's the church that got it right. I'm not a minister of the United States of America. I'm a citizen and I pray for it, but I'm a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and what made the church explode in particular was that one man (Paul) who had been the single biggest excluder and hater ever became under the power of Jesus through the cross the biggest includer and lover and sacrificed himself, his comfort, and his career. He got beaten, got stoned, got shipwrecked, and ultimately martyred to just say, "You come in. You come in. You come in."

I want to pray. Pastor Hurmon last week talked about the prayer of lament. It's often something we don't engage in a lot, but I want to pray a prayer of lament that I want to invite everybody to join in as we lament this particular problem in our world. Then, I want to confess personally. If that's helpful, you can join that or you can just hear it. I want to invite everybody to use these moments right now with God. Would you?

I lament the unbearably cruel assault on and death of George Floyd. I lament Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Alton Sterling, Michael Brown, and so many others we have seen on video and unnumbered more that we have not seen. I lament the kidnapping of 11 million from Africa, the death of 2 million on the ships, the enslavement, and brutalization of those who arrived on these shores. I lament 250 years of chains and another century of Jim Crow dehumanization. I lament the gaps of opportunity and education and health and income and safety and mass incarceration that last until now. I lament the polarization that divides our nation.

Then, I confess. This I do just for myself, but whatever brothers or sisters need to do this can as well. I confess my apathy. I confess my blindness. I confess my timidity in speaking with clarity and boldness. I confess my preoccupation with my own career and life and agenda that cause me, God, to miss yours, my avoidance of entering into pain, my ignorance of the damage and exhaustion and the names of those who have suffered. I ask, God, for the knowledge to do your will and the power to carry it out. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.