

Racial Diversity, Racial Harmony, and the Gospel Walk

by John Piper

The gospel produces a way of life among us like this, promoting racial diversity and harmony by breaking down ethnic hostilities and promoting unity and harmony among believers.

Duration: 42:36

Scripture: Isaiah 1:18, Romans 3:29-30, Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:14, Galatians 3:26

Topics: "Racial Harmony", "Justification By Faith"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of racial harmony and diversity, reflecting on historical events like Martin Luther King's impact and the Civil Rights Movement. It delves into Galatians 2:11-16, highlighting the need for behaviors and actions to align with the truth of the Gospel, emphasizing justification by faith alone as the unifier of all believers regardless of ethnicity.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Oh, what a rich and sweet time it is, Lord, when we gather in your name, under your Word and by your Spirit, and for your great glory. I love to be with your people.

And I love to focus on this great cause of racial harmony and racial diversity, ethnic harmony and ethnic diversity. So, Lord, I pray that you would use this weekend in our church, in all six services, to glorify Christ through advancing us in the cause of ethnic diversity and ethnic harmony to the glory of Jesus. Oh, may the cross have its intended horizontal effect.

May the Gospel produce a way of life among us like this. So help me, Lord, to tell the story well and to open your Word well. And would you use these imperfect and faltering words to do a great work for the advancement of your cause.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Thirty-eight years ago, January 16, 1968, when I was a senior in college, Martin Luther King gave a message in Memphis, Tennessee, entitled, The Good Samaritan or If I Had Sneezed.

It became known as the I've Seen the Mountain sermon because he knew his death was coming. And he thought, looking out over the Jordan into the promised land of freedom and justice for African American people and did not expect to get there alive. And he didn't.

He was killed April 4 of that year in that city at age 39. Now, why would a 39-year-old man be killed like that? Shot down in a motel. We need to teach our children these things.

If you have children or if you don't know them yourselves, you need to read a biography like Stephen Oates or some other biography and familiarize yourself, lest we forget. I lived through these things in Greenville, South Carolina, and they are very real to me. I will never forget this movement.

I was very, very much on the wrong side of things. Segregation was the world I grew up in. Legally mandated separation of races of all kinds of levels.

It had an unbelievably oppressive and demeaning effect upon the African American community, and it had an unbelievably deadening effect on the conscience of the white community. One looks back on it with shame and disgrace. Separate schools, separate motels, separate restrooms, separate swimming pools, separate drinking fountains.

How could you more clearly communicate the lie that to be black was a disease? It was a despicable time in our history, and it was a despicable time in the Church of Jesus Christ, which for the most part was blind and inactive, tragically silent and consenting, at least my church was. The change, called the Civil Rights Movement or sometimes just the movement, had many catalysts. Let me mention a couple.

One in particular leads us into our theme. May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court decided the Brown versus Board of Education case and declared that state-mandated separation or segregation in public schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment about citizens' rights. Many scholars say, quote, Brown remains the most important Supreme Court decision in the 20th century.

Well, some of us would say that the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision was equally important only for opposite reasons. Brown tried to restore the rights of an oppressed group and Roe v. Wade took those rights away from an oppressed group, but more on that next week. Here's another catalyst.

A year and a half later, 1955, December 1, there was a 42-year-old black woman named Rosa Parks. We just marked her funeral, right? November 2nd. She refused to get up from one of these no-man's-land seats in the middle of the bus, which you were allowed to sit in as a black if-nobody-asks-you-for-your-seat.

And a man did ask her for her seat. The driver said to the three sitting around her to move, and they all moved but her, and she was put in jail. And for 381 days, no black rode a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

The reason that's an important moment is because Martin Luther King had just become a 26-year-old pastor of the Dexter Street Church in that town, and through no choice of his own was simply thrust into the leadership of the movement in Montgomery, and for the next 13 years he was an absolutely unrivaled influence and spoke with more effect than anybody else for 13 years. On October 19, 1983, the Senate, the United States Senate, voted to make the third Monday of January a national holiday, which it now is, and President Reagan signed that into law on November 2nd, 1983, to commemorate the birth of Martin Luther King, January 15, 1929. We will mark this holiday at Bethlehem, and we will do it not because Martin Luther King was exemplary in theology or private and public moral life.

His views at Crozer Seminary, in fact, were distinctly and seriously unbiblical, and it's difficult to trace in his later years whether or not he rejected any of those papers which are published online. You can go see them. I've got the websites here in the manuscript, and you can go read his seminary papers.

Seminary papers are not always a good indicator of what a 40-year-old, 30-year-old man believes, but it's hard to know. He did not express himself distinctly on the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection bodily, all of which he did not believe when he was a student in seminary, having come under very liberal influences. That's not the reason we mark the birth and keep the day.

It's not why we do it for any historical figure. We mark these days because of what he stood for publicly and the good that he unleashed in the world. Martin Luther King called for freedoms and rights and justice that were long overdue, and he did it with an appeal to historic Christian values and vision, and he had an amazing rhetorical skill in the process, and he did it without condoning violence, and he did it with unprecedented and lasting success, and those are the reasons why we mark this holiday.

In fact, I would go further now and say that very personally, I want to join a ninth-grade white girl from 1958 who wrote to Dr. Martin Luther King and said in her letter, I'm glad you didn't sneeze. He told this story. You can go online and listen to five of his speeches at least.

Just go to historyoutloud.org and pick Martin Luther King and just listen away. You don't have to be ignorant about the real things that were said anymore with the Internet the way it is. So he gave this sermon January 16 of 1968 called If I Had Sneezed, and he told the story of how back in 1958 he had just written a book called *Stride Toward Freedom*, and he was doing a book-signing tour, and as he was sitting at a table writing, a black woman came up to him and said, Are you Martin Luther King? And he said yes, and she stabbed him in the chest, and they rushed him to the hospital, and obviously he survived, and the doctor said the tip of the knife was resting against your, I don't know whether it was aorta or just a major artery, and if you had sneezed, you would be dead.

And he built this whole sermon around If I Had Sneezed. It's really quite a remarkable sermon, and that story went all over the country, and a white ninth grade girl from White Plains, New York, wrote him a letter and said, I'm glad you didn't sneeze. And I just want to say publicly, from one who grew up disrespecting him, calling him a communist and stuff like that, I'm glad he didn't sneeze.

I think we all should be very glad he didn't sneeze. There were alternative ways the revolution might have come had not his voice been so powerful. So I'm thankful, God, that the knife did not penetrate his aorta.

Let's go to Galatians 2, verses 11-16. I want this Scripture to refine and increase our commitment to racial and ethnic diversity and harmony for the glory of Christ at Bethlehem and in our city. What I mean when I talk about a commitment to racial diversity and harmony is this.

It is a good and beautiful thing when Christians of different ethnic origins, and I'm not just thinking black and white anymore, that just happens to be the weekend we're on, when Christians of different ethnic origins live and work and worship and relax and eat together in joyful, Christ-exalting peace. That's a beautiful thing. It's a good thing.

There may be situations where living with all one race is inevitable, like a town in Minnesota, for example. And in such cases, I do not condemn it. But there are solid biblical, historical and cultural reasons why ethnically diverse Christians should be living and working and worshipping and relaxing and eating together and that it's a beautiful and good thing.

If it's a beautiful and good thing, it's worth pursuing. I think Galatians 2.11-16 will help us now forward in this. And I'm very modest here.

I'm 60. I've been thinking and working at this for a long time and I have no illusions of heaven on earth before I die. But I just know that as long as I have breath, I'm going to push you on this one.

I'm going to push us forward. That's all I can do. It may be that God would be pleased, according to Kenny's prayer, that something extraordinary would happen at this church.

That might happen. My obedience does not depend on that happening. I'm on a long journey in the same direction and I'm just going to stay on it until I drop and try to take as many people with me as I can in Christ-exalting racial diversity, racial harmony.

And I'm just praying that in this weekend we'll just move forward a little bit. And if God wants to do more than a little bit, I would be thrilled. God, do whatever you want to do, but I'm pushing forward on this one and I hope I can come back to this for another ten years or so with you.

We'll see. A key phrase is verse 14. Got your Bible open there? Let's go to the key phrase first then work our way out from it.

Let's read verse 14. But when I saw that their conduct, Peter and Barnabas and the rest, when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas, another name for Peter, before them all, if you thought a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, in other words, he was eating with Gentiles, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? His decision to abandon eating with the Gentiles was functioning with force, like a law, saying don't eat with them because I've stopped eating with them. Now the key phrase is conduct not in step with the truth of the Gospel.

You see what that implies? It's huge. It implies there is conduct, there's behavior, there's action that isn't in step with the Gospel. It's out of step with the Gospel.

The truth of the Gospel. There are lifestyles, there are choices, there are relational issues that are out of step with the Gospel. I can hardly catch my breath when I think of how many thousands of churches were so deeply, massively, blindly out of step with the Gospel as the one I grew up in.

Voting on a Wednesday night to forbid blacks from coming to this church. So there is action and behavior that flows from the Gospel. We usually think there's beliefs that are accorded with the Gospel, right? Faith in Jesus accords with the Gospel.

Well, there are behaviors that accord with the Gospel and beliefs that accord with the Gospel. The Gospel unleashes beliefs and the Gospel unleashes action. And beliefs should accord with the Gospel.

Martin Luther King didn't get all those right. And there are actions that accord with the Gospel. And most of the Christian church in the South did not get those right in the Jim Crow era.

The most important question you can ask about your behavior is, do I have any habit, do I have any action, any behavior, any attitude that contradicts the Gospel? That is out of step with the Gospel. That looks as though it isn't flowing from the Gospel. That's the most important question to ask about your behavior.

Is this pattern of life, is this action flowing from the Gospel? Now, there is no book, no book in the New Testament clearer on the Gospel than the book of Galatians. You might think, whoa, what about Romans? Romans is just bigger. There is no clearer book on what the Gospel is than Galatians.

And you don't have to go any further than verse 16, so let's go there. Verse 16, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, so that we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the law, because by works of the law, no one will be justified. That's a very repetitive verse.

To get the point across, justification is by faith alone not works of the law. For Paul, that's the heart of the Gospel. It's not the whole of the Gospel.

It's the heart of the Gospel. You ripped out of the Gospel, no Gospel. Justification by faith alone apart from works of the law.

Justification is what a judge does by issuing a verdict that sticks in the universe. Justification is what a judge does. He justifies or he condemns.

It's an action of a judge. It's not your action. It's his action.

You come into his court guilty or innocent. He listens to the evidence and he pronounces guilty or innocent, justified or condemned. That's God's work.

Justification is an act of God, not your act. And it always, in a just court, accords with the truth. Guilty people go to jail in a just court.

Innocent people go free. So, justification with a good judge is you get justified if you're just and you get condemned if you're guilty. That's what a good judge does.

That would not be Gospel in our case, would it? Every one of us goes into the courtroom of God guilty. Our conscience bears witness to it. The Bible bears witness to it.

People around us, if they were honest, would bear witness to it. We deserve not to be pronounced just, but to be pronounced guilty because we are guilty. And clearly, that's not the Gospel.

Rather, the Gospel is that the most holy, just, and upright judge that ever has been, is, or ever will be looks upon me and you and says, not guilty, no condemnation, just. And the question is, how can that possibly be just? And the answer is, Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ lived a perfectly just life, fulfilling every requirement of the law that we did not fulfill, and then Jesus Christ, in a magnificent substitutionary way that only a God-man could do, places Himself under the wrath of God and bears all the wrath for our failure and endures our punishment so He provides the righteousness we should have had and He bears the punishment we should have had and how do we benefit from that substitution? And the answer is, not law! It's just written so clearly in verse 16. We are justified not by any kind of works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

So picture it this way. He's there in the courtroom as our substitute. He's standing before the judge and the judge watches us make our plea and this is what you should say if you die tonight and meet God.

I am guilty. I have no rights in this courtroom. None.

I deserve hell. But Jesus Christ died in my place, provided all the righteousness that you ever dreamed of requiring, Father, and bore my sin and I'm trusting Him only. He's my only claim, judge.

He's my only claim. He's my only hope. I love this Jesus.

I depend on this Jesus. This Jesus is my righteousness. This Jesus is my punishment.

That's all I claim. And you know what will happen at that moment? It did happen already if you said that. God said, not guilty.

God sees you in His Son. He sees you connected to His Son. That's verse 16.

That's the gospel. And oh, how many new, sweet, tender, deep, strong, beautiful, noble, humble, kind, wise, patient, caring, serving attitudes and behaviors flow from this God. Just read the second half of all Paul's letters, right? The second half of each letter is, this is the life that flows from the gospel.

One of the central cadences, when I think of walking or watching the choir, one of the central cadences in the gospel walk, the gospel walk, is the breaking down of ethnic hostilities. It's very close to the center. It really, really dominates the New Testament between Jews and Gentiles.

The breaking down of ethnic hostilities. They're all mixed up with religion. I know that.

I know that. I'm not saying there's a one-to-one correspondence between black, white or Asian, Hispanic and Jew, Gentile. But there's enough of an overlap that the meaning can be transferred.

The impulse to unity and harmony of those who are believing in Jesus is so strong, when the blinders aren't on us. I don't know how they can be there. When the gospel is being faithfully preached, the blinders are taken away, and the breaking down of the things that separate brother from brother in the faith, and the impulse to unity becomes gospel strong.

It's in the gospel, this impulse. Let me read you one of the most remarkable places where this is stated besides Galatians 2. Listen to these words from Romans 3, 29 and 30. Is God the God of the Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles? That means all the ethnic groups besides Jews.

Is He not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also. Since God is one, He will justify the circumcised Jews by faith, and the uncircumcised through faith. Do you hear how the doctrine of justification by faith functions? It functions to make all believers profoundly one.

The only place where we stand before God is faith before the cross. There is no ethnic claim here. My ethnicity, my intellect, my body, my marriage, my history, have zero to do with my claim before God.

I have one claim. I believe in Him. And when a black and a white and a yellow and a red and every shade in between says that, every other separator is relativized.

It's that massive only, justified by faith only, which removes everything else from the union that we have in the gospel. So Peter, what happened? What in the world happened, Peter? Let's go to verse 11. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his faith, because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. Good for you, Peter. But when they came, he drew back, separated, segregated 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. Maybe I shouldn't be so surprised at what happened in my church 40 years ago. If Barnabas... Paul says in verse 14, that is not according to the gospel.

He looks at that. Peter, eating with Gentiles, experiencing gospel liberty, justification by faith, knit together, hanging out together, relaxing together, eating the same food at the same table, unashamed. That's gospel liberty.

That's gospel unity. And something happened. And when Paul sees this, he says, I confronted him to his faith, he stood condemned.

This is not in step with the gospel. It's not a little minor, little flaw here. This is not in step with the gospel.

What's going on here when Peter backs out of this relationship? He's eating. Don't miss that. He's eating.

Didn't say worshipping. He's eating with them. Just hanging out.

Just eating with them. You know, eating is a good thing. Eating with people is a good thing.

That ought to happen a lot in this church. More than it does. I don't know how much it happens.

I just think it should happen more. My imagination tells me it should happen more. A lot more eating together.

Not staged. Not artificial. Not programmed.

Just simple, free, natural relationships. Eating together. Huge amounts of eating together in this church.

And in the process, we should enjoy the gospel freedom of forgetting all the ethnic limitations. I really do believe that there can be and should be natural, joyful, spontaneous mixing it up at table fellowship across ethnic lines. Natural, joyful, spontaneous mixing it up.

I really believe that is spiritually possible without a program to force it. So what happened to Peter? These guys were coming from James. Now that's the conservative Jews coming from Jerusalem who believed that the uncircumcision of the Gentiles and the uncultured diet of the Gentiles and the failure to keep certain holy days put them off limits.

Even as Christians. They're off limits. Compromising our biblical commitment to hang out with these defective Christians.

Paul says, justification by faith alone has overcome all that. Galatians 3.26 In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. There is neither Jew nor Greek.

There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

But at the end of verse 12, look at the end of verse 12. We see what Peter was governed by temporarily. Fear.

Fearing. Fearing those who were coming from James. He's not governed by the gospel at this point.

He's governed by fear. Fear of what? He was not afraid of the Gentiles. He's eaten with the Gentiles.

He's afraid of his own kind. What's going on here? He's afraid of Jews. He's a Jew.

He's afraid of Jews. Because he's eaten with Gentiles. So what's he afraid of? Now it doesn't say what he's afraid of.

So I'm going to give you three possibilities. And I think what you should do with these three possibilities is just ask if you do any of this. Does this kind of fear govern my life? In relationships.

Ethnic relationships. Other kind of relationships. I think these are three possibilities.

My guess is all of them have a little part to play in Peter's fear. But here's number one. Was he afraid of conflict? The people coming from James are going to make a scene.

They're going to make a scene. Peter's a big deal. And there he is eating with Gentiles.

This is going to be very awkward. Now I would just like to avoid a scene. And so maybe if I just withdraw.

And all the Jews withdraw. And even Barnabas withdraws with me. Then they won't get bent out of shape.

They'll see everything's going the way they expect. They'll go back to Jerusalem. And then we can do it again.

And Paul has a name for that. He hates it. It's out of step with the Gospel.

Avoiding conflict is out of step with the Gospel. So if you're driven as a conflict avoidance person and you get into some clear issues like this one, just change. Just believe the Gospel.

It's really good news. He'll carry you through. Here's the second possibility of what he was afraid of.

Was he afraid that his convictions about his liberty weren't well founded enough and the James people would get the better of the argument when they started arguing about this. They're going to bring up circumcision. They're going to quote Genesis 17.

They're going to bring up some food law stuff. They've got the Bible on their side. I've got Paul on my side.

So it seems. Do you ever fear that your Gospel intuitions just might not carry the day when you get opposed by somebody? And then you wimp out. They might have a better argument than I do on this issue and I just don't want to take my stand.

I'll just kind of go underground until they're gone and then come back up and take my stand. Real courage. So it is fear.

My feet are just not firmly planted enough. I don't have my ducks in a row theologically. Sometimes you've got to go with your nose.

God doesn't call everybody to be a theologian and spend hours and hours studying the arguments on the other side. You know what He calls you? He calls you to be conformed to Christ, to have the aroma of Christ, to put your nose to the Gospel and then sniff out a few behaviors and choose the one that smells like the Gospel. If you can't give a good, clear, articulate argument, you say, it smells like Gospel! That's the way I think most people have to live and just pray that God would give you a good nose.

Maybe it's this one. I think this one comes closest, though it may sound a little trendy to you. Maybe he was afraid of being called a Paul groupie.

I mean, picture it. We just heard the story earlier in the chapter of how they went to Jerusalem, this big issue about circumcision, and at the end of it they shook hands. Peter and Paul shook hands.

They looked into each other's eyes and said, I believe you're called. I believe you're an Apostle. I believe you've got the Gospel.

So Paul, you're Apostle to the Gentiles. I'm Apostle to the Jews. God bless you.

See you. So here are these two giants, one orienting on the Jewish community and one orienting on the Gentile community. And here goes Peter leaving the cozy hometown and as soon as he gets out, he conforms to Paul! He does it Paul's way.

And I can just imagine these James people come and say, Everybody does Paul. Everybody's following Paul. Don't you have any backbone at all? Can't you see what's at stake here in the law? Just join the Paul movement, the Paul craze.

Being a groupie is a dangerous thing. And being afraid of being a groupie when it's all about the Gospel is also a dangerous thing. Are you afraid of doing something in the cause of racial harmony because you will look like you're associated with blank? Maybe even a liberal.

Can't do anything that looks too liberal. I'm not sure which of these three Peter was afraid of. I just know from the text he's driven by fear, out of fellowship with ethnically different people.

And it was fear of his own kind. Fear ruined the Gospel for a season in Peter's life. Peter was free.

He was eating with brothers across ethnic lines and fear destroyed it, for a moment at least. Destroyed diversity, destroyed harmony. So, I think in closing, maybe the best thing I can do is ask you a few questions.

Or just make perhaps an exhortation or two. Don't let fear, don't let fear ruin your joyful freedom in living and working and worshipping and relaxing and eating with brothers and sisters who are different from yourself. Don't let fear govern you that way.

Or let me put it positively. Fall in love with the Gospel again. You love the Gospel? When we sing, I don't know if we sang this on Sunday morning.

I think we did. Makes me want to shout, Hallelujah, thank you Jesus. Does that have any emotional correspondence in your heart? If not, ask that God cause you to fall in love with the Gospel again.

So that justification by faith alone just floors you with joy. Just floors you. I'm accepted.

I'm loved. I'm received. I'm not guilty.

I'm righteous. All because of Him and His suffering. Let that floor you.

And I promise you, when you get up off the floor in love with the Gospel, you won't be able to do what Peter did here. Peter had a lapse. That's encouraging, isn't it? He had a lapse.

He acted out of step with the Gospel. Paul had to do some corporate sanctification by getting in his face. And we should do that for each other.

When we wake up to the Gospel, I think we'll wake up to the beauty of justification by faith alone. Faith and nothing else is the great eternal unifier of all those peoples in the world who put their faith in Christ. So let's live like that together.

Father in Heaven, I'm thankful for Christ. I love Christ. Christ, You are very precious to me.

And I know I speak for hundreds in this room. And I pray that Your preciousness, especially Your righteousness and Your blood, would rise and rise in our hearts. And that we would keep in step with the Gospel in our relationships across ethnic lines.

Oh God, do a new fresh work. Take us another step forward in our church and in our city. May Bethlehem be a part of the solution at work and in the neighborhood and politically not part of the problem, Lord.

May we bring this message to bear everywhere we live. May the aroma of Christ be on us so that we live and work and worship and relax and eat with people different from ourselves. In the name of Jesus.

For the glory of Jesus. In His name I pray. Amen.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/Om9h-LrpYjk.mp4>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/racial-diversity-racial-harmony-and-the-gospel-walk/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net