

One People: The Church, Race, and the Gospel

Weep Together

Romans 12:15-18

Mark Vroegop

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:15–18).

As we did last week, I’d like to start this sermon with a prayer of lament:

Oh Lord, our world is broken. We’ve seen it all week in hundreds of ways. We’ve heard news of the death of hundreds of people in Ethiopia with a plane crash. We read about people manipulating the college admissions process and multiple people who lost their lives in our city this week. Closer to home, we’ve heard about cancer diagnoses, marital problems, relationship conflicts, and children making bad decisions.

But, Lord, the brokenness is not just outside of us; it’s inside us. The problem is not just in the world, but inside us. Whether it’s saying something we shouldn’t have, looking at something defiling, harboring bitterness toward someone, being judgmental, or any number of individual sin issues, we’ve all sinned. We come as broken people in a broken world.

A lack of harmony among people of differing ethnicities is just another example. How long, O Lord, will division or defensiveness mark your people. The legacy of racism has cut a deep wound that still affects even our approach to this Sunday. Some come apprehensive. Others come annoyed. Still more come hurting. Others come confused. Oh God, the layers in our culture, our history, and our hearts are so complicated.

Jesus, we need you. We believe that you want us to be one. We believe that the world will know that we are your disciples by our love for one another. We believe that you gave your life to ransom a people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. We believe that you want your church to be united. And we confess that the brokenness is so deep, our defensiveness so quick, and our solutions so few that talking about racial harmony is complicated and scary.

Lord, help us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. We need the Holy Spirit to teach us, to guide us, and to heal us. We trust that your grace is brighter than the darkness of our past, more glorious than the pain we’ve experienced, and deeper than any wound. And so, in our brokenness, we say, “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.” Amen.

This is our second week examining the biblical issue of racial harmony in the church. The vision for this series is for our church to look and act more like the **one people** Jesus bought through his blood. My dream is for our church to lead the way in bridging a painful racial divide that still exists in the church in the United States. Yet, division between people of different ethnicities is not just a problem in the United States or merely in our history. Wherever there are differences, human brokenness tends to exploit them.

A lack of unity along racial or ethnic lines is one of the dark effects of sin in the world.

And it seems to me that the people who know the story about creation-fall-redemption-restoration should be leading the way in leveraging the gospel to create an other-worldly harmony. Tragically, that has not often happened, especially in the history of the church in the United States.

I believe that our church is uniquely positioned for this “Antioch moment.” When you combine our deep commitment to biblical orthodoxy, our physical proximity to both the city and the suburbs, our Core Value of Biblical Unity in Diversity, and what the Holy Spirit has accomplished over the last five years, I think that we can make a dent in the disunity which exists in the Church at large and bring some level of healing.

Last Week: Walk Together

I realize that this is a potentially loaded conversation, so thanks for leaning into these messages. As I said last week, for some of you, it is a great statement that you listened last week. And I appreciate that trust that you give me to teach you the Scriptures. I don’t take that for granted.

The goal of last week’s message (Col. 3:11-17) was simply to renew our understanding of how the gospel gets underneath all other categories in life—especially those that are historic, ethnic, and cultural. The gospel doesn’t negate your history, ethnicity, or culture. The gospel transforms it.

As a part of that message, I defined some key words. Let’s review them just to be sure that we are still on the same page:

- **Ethnicity:** A classification of groups of people based upon cultural and/or geographic origins
- **Culture:** The typical beliefs, behaviors, and customs of a group of people
- **Prejudice:** Beliefs and attitudes toward a person based upon that person’s association or group
- **Race:** A socially-constructed term in the United States that deconstructed ethnicity into the categories of “white” and “colored” in conjunction with a cultural view of the superiority of “white”
- **Racism:** The systemization of racial ideology in language, laws, culture, and thinking, leading to the unkind and unjust treatment of people based upon the belief that they are inferior

My goal was simply to help you understand the categories connected to these words so that you could faithfully apply Colossians 3:11—“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave free...= . . .” And I want you to consider that the gospel calls us not only to not be a racist or to be non-racist but to be anti-racist. In comparing it to abortion, we should not be an abortionist or non-abortionist, we should be anti-abortion. Jesus lived and taught in this way. We

certainly should not be guilty of hateful actions, and we should know that hate is wrong. But he calls us to go further—“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The apostle Paul, in our text for today, says the same thing: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

The starting point for racial reconciliation is a willingness to walk together under this gospel-centered, cross-motivated banner.

Weep Together

Today I want to help us take a second step in our journey together. I want to show you the importance of learning to weep with those who weep as a means of racial reconciliation. We are looking at Romans 12 because it is a signature text on how believers should live in light of their spiritual position.

Paul begins in 12:1-2 with a famous statement about not being conformed to the world, but being transformed by the renewing of the mind. Right living flows from right thinking. Immediately after establishing this dichotomy (not conformed but transformed) he cautions the church about three things:

1. Don't think yourself more highly than you ought (v. 3). Humility and pride affect everything.
2. Remember that the church is made up of many members and gifts (v. 4).
3. We are part of the body of Christ and members of one another (v. 5).

Why does he say that? Well, because one of the main ways that we express the brokenness of our humanity is by proud, tribal associations. Every culture in every part of the world has this in it. One of the clearest pieces of evidences of the fall is the way that humans consider themselves to be superior to others, gather in ideological groups, and leverage their collective power for power.

That's why Paul says, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). Verse 11 presses it further by encouraging them to not give up. Complicated relationships can be exhausting, and the gravitational pull in every arena of life is away from unity and other-centeredness. Tribal posturing is popular and effective. But it's not Christian!

Verses 12-13 invite us to not allow the pressure-cooker of life and hardship to sink our fidelity to living out the gospel. And while life is hard, we still need to contribute to the needs of others and show hospitality.

In verse 14, we see the stunning statement that it's not enough not to hate persecutors. We are called to bless them—yet another expression of the bell curve graph. We are not to act in hate or to be filled with hate, but to bless. This is when the gospel is stunning and transformative.

Now we come to the key verses in this text for our purpose today:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for

evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:15–18).

You can see the call for unity and humility. There’s a clear focus, not on what the other person should do, but on what you can do to be godly. And one way that we express our godliness is through entering the emotional highs and lows with people. We are to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

The foundation of the gospel creates a position and a posture when it comes to the brokenness in the world and in the lives of other people. A right understanding of the gospel sets us up to enter into the space of people’s pain. It’s not the only thing we do, but if we don’t do this, we negate our ability to take further steps. Weeping is one way we embrace an incarnational ministry. We come alongside people.

I’ve found this to be especially true in my closest relationships. I’m not effective in helping my wife or my kids if I remain aloof from their pain. I give short-sighted, arrogant answers when I keep their pain at a distance. Weeping with those who weep is a vital part of caring for one another. And it’s central to a path for reconciliation.

Here is a model that I’ve developed over the last year. It takes what we’ve just learned from Romans 12 and applies it to the issue of racial reconciliation. There are five steps:

- **Love** – a commitment that we are all blood-bought sinners who serve King Jesus (Col. 3:14-17)
- **Listen** – a commitment that my posture will first be one of listening (James 1:19-20)
- **Lament** – a commitment to “weep with those who weep” and to enter into the brokenness of this issue (Rom. 12:15)
- **Learn** – a commitment to benefit from the insights of one another (Rom. 15:14)
- **Leverage** – a commitment to take steps toward creating greater harmony in the church (1 John 3:18)

I’ve watched this model work. Our Diversity Discipleship Discussion Group (3DG) has modeled this beautifully. I’ve learned a lot from the group members by watching them live out this model. I saw it work last September when fifty leaders from our church embarked on a Civil Rights Vision Trip. Let me help you understand what it means to lament.

The Language of Lament

Lament is the language of weeping in the Bible. It is how the people of God have historically taken their pains, sorrows, and burdens to the Lord. Over a third of Psalms are laments. They express personal pains. They can also vocalize the grief of a group of people. Laments can be used in situations where we need to tell God we are sorry for our sins. And laments give voice to the desire for justice to be done.

This language of lament serves us as we learn to “weep with those who weep.” It helps us to do three things:

1. **Vocalize** – Lament gives us a prayer language to talk to God and others about our pain

Laments help us to both acknowledge the depth of pain that we either experience or see, and they aid us in moving toward a renewed trust in God. Think of a lament as a prayer in pain that leads to trust. It is a prayer that helps us to live in a world that is broken. Laments have a purpose beyond just a vomit of emotion. They give us a biblical language to talk to God and pray with others about our pain—sometimes wrestling with really pointed questions.

2. Empathize – Laments allow us to enter and express pain together

The Psalms and the book of Lamentations help us to not only express our sorrow but also to rehearse the pain. Lament is the way you navigate the brokenness of life. Pain and grief are scary. And they're very complicated. Those of you who are white may have left last Sunday's service feeling guilty for being white even though you've never done anything racist. That's not an uncommon response to the presence of pain or grief. For some reason, it quickly moves us to guilt and not just to talking about racism.

Our lack of lament leaves us with wanting to “do something” about the sadness. Often the result is that we either live in the ditch of despair (“I can't do this”) or denial (“everything's fine”). We are not accustomed to just sitting in the space of lament. And when this happens with the subject of race, it pushes us toward the historical response of the church: “talking about this makes things worse” or “it's not a real problem.” We need to learn to weep.

Let me give you an illustration of this that I referenced in 2016. In the spring of that year, I attended a council meeting of The Gospel Coalition. Mika Edmondson, an African-American pastor at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids gave an address comparing the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement. It was a compelling and helpful address. The climax of the address was when he said this:

*My wife has to beg me (a grown 37-year-old man) not to go out to Walmart at night, not because she's afraid of the criminal element, but because she's afraid of the police element. Because she knows that when the police see me, they aren't going to see Mika Edmondson, pastor of New City Fellowship Presbyterian church. When they see me, they aren't going to see Mika Edmondson, Ph.D. in systematic theology. When they see me, all they're going to see is a black man out late at night. And she knows we're getting stopped at 10-times the rate of everybody else, arrested at 26-times the rate of everybody else, and killed at 5-times the rate of everybody else. Black Lives Matter can see the injustice in those statistics. How can Black Lives Matter see the value of black life better than we can? Why does Black Lives Matter care more about the value of my life than you do?*¹

Now when you heard this quote, where did your heart go? Did you gravitate toward the statistics, and did you think, “Where did he get those?” Did you hear his reference to Black Lives Matter and begin to offer your argument about that movement? Did you hear his comment about being afraid of the police and think “that's ridiculous”? Or were you able to cut through all of that and weep with an African-American pastor whose wife is afraid to have him go to Walmart because of how he might be perceived?

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-black-lives-matter-the-new-civil-rights-movement>

Does his comment cause you to want to understand him and hear why he feels that way? Or do you immediately want to argue with him? I'm not saying that discussions about statistics, social movements like Black Lives Matter, or policing are off the table. But what I am saying is that part of the problem is that so often we come to the topic of race and our first step is not marked by being quick to hear and slow to speak. And that is not just a racial problem. That's a human problem. This is why weeping with those who weep is so powerful. H.B. Charles Jr. says, "The Bible exhorts us to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). It doesn't tell us to judge whether they should be weeping."

Some of you are privately wondering, *but does this go both ways?* Is there just a need for the majority Christians to lean into this? Of course, it goes both ways. When anyone experiences prejudice, we ought to identify it as wrong and weep with those who weep. But you need to remember our history as a nation. And while things are certainly better than they were a hundred or even fifty years ago, we need to recognize that the legacy of slavery, the break-up of African-American families, the sexual assault of black women, the impoverishment of a class of people, the segregation of schools and churches, the racialization of laws and local ordinances, and the use of law enforcement have created wounds, pains, and mistrust that are going to take time to heal and to rectify.

But we'll never get there if we don't learn to lament. Back to Romans 12: We'll be haughty, wise in our sights. We won't live in harmony with one another. We'll think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.

Some of you wonder, "Well, isn't it time to get over the past?" First, we have to realize the length of the history of racism and ethnic tension. The past does have an effect on the present. While I'm not in favor of weaponizing victimization, it's important to realize that scars and pains are part of our story. The past doesn't define you, but it does shape you. And walking through traumatic and painful experiences inside and outside is especially painful when people's first response is to argue with your tears.

Let me give you an example. My wife has a small scar covered by one of her eyebrows. In high school, she was playing in a three-on-three outdoor basketball tournament when a tornado struck the city. A number of people died. In the chaos of trying to get to safety, she was hit in the head with a bucket that was flying through the air. After a few stitches and some time, the wound healed. But to this day when the scar gets bumped, it hurts worse than other parts of her body. And when a big storm hits, she is much more fearful than I am. Her past doesn't define her. But it does inform particular moments that are unusually sensitive.

One time we were traveling with a group of people from my home church. As we were getting out of the van, a thunderstorm rolled in with lightning and thunder. When the van door opened, my wife paused as she was getting out. And a woman in the van pushed her in the rear end and said, "Good grief, it's just a storm." The historical fear combined with insensitivity was uniquely hurtful.

I remember sitting in a hotel room processing with her how hurtful and frustrating that moment was for her. I didn't argue with her pain. I sat with her. I needed to help her respond biblically to the person who was so unkind. But that began by lamenting with her.

That's the value of lament.

3. Memorialize – Laments help us remember or learn

Biblical lament tunes your heart to be more sensitive. Lament help us to learn by rehearsing our pain and walking through someone else's.

For example, think of the Vietnam Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, or the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery. These are important memorials. They help us remember—to enter into the scale of a tragedy. A well-designed memorial seeks to both allow mourning and to teach—if you use it for the right purpose. Sadly, though, memorials without lament can be counterproductive.

Here's what Jesus said to the Pharisees about their memorials:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets” (Matt. 23:29–31).

The problem in Jesus's day is no different than in our own. It is easy to build memorials to prophets in the past and act as if you would not have participated in the acts which led to the memorial. That's what was happening in Jesus's day. Jesus rebukes the religious establishment because they won't listen now, but they act as if they would have listened then!

Russell Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the following about this text:

“ . . . {Jesus says} the problem is that you come and you decorate the tombs of the prophets. He says, you come and you recognize Jeremiah, and you recognize Isaiah, and you recognize Samuel, and you recognize Ezekiel, and you recognize Elijah. And yet the reason that you are so comfortably able to honor them is because they cannot speak to you any longer. You honor them because they don't disrupt the power that you have or the social order that you have. . . . Martin Luther King is relatively non-controversial in American life, because Martin Luther King has not been speaking for 50 years. It is easy to look backward and to say “if I had been here I would have listened to Dr. King,”—even though I do not listen to what is happening around me in my own community, in my own neighborhood, in my own church.”²

Do you feel what he is saying? It's possible to visit the MLK Memorial and feel like you've done your duty because you've honored history. But if you don't lament, you can actually make it worse. One of the

² <https://www.russellmoore.com/2018/04/10/king-and-kingdom-racial-justice-and-the-uneasy-conscience-of-american-christianity/>

reasons we took our Civil Rights Trip was for us to do more than just visit the sites. It was a pilgrimage of sorts so that we could feel the history—to personalize it. And that’s what happened.

We visited Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham where a bomb blew a gaping hole in the church in 1963—only fifty-six years ago. Four African-American girls were killed: Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Denise McNair (11). Afterward, we received word that one of the girls was a relative of a church member at College Park. Our trip allowed us to lament at a different level.

Laments can be memorials. They can intentionally re-tune our hearts to the pain in the past but also the pain in the present. Instead of watching the news and being filled with prejudice or condescension, we can lament. We can listen to the voices of our minority brothers and sisters in the past and in the present so that we can weep with those who weep.

And when we think that the divisions are too deep, the path too complicated, or the conversation too loaded, it is good to be reminded that Jesus entered our mess. He wept in our world. He was a man of sorrows and was acquainted with grief. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. And it is this same Jesus who said, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29).

Since we are one people with that Savior, let’s let our first steps be marked by loving, listening, and lamenting. We won’t stop there. But it’s where we need to start.

If we walk together, we must weep together.

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