

# How to Talk About Race

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, go with me to the **passage we just read: Ephesians 4**. If you're new here this morning, we're now coming up on the end of a six week series called *Precious in His Sight*. And at its core, it has been a series about how we as followers of Jesus are called to advocate for and work towards racial justice. We've covered a lot of ground so far, from God's heart for the nations, to an understanding of biblical ideas like oppression, to justice, to some practicals in regards to how we *fight against* oppression in our day and age. So I hope you guys have been growing and learning through this series. I know *I* have, and I helped *plan* the series. So hopefully that's been the case for you as well.

But **what I wanted to do today**, with at least the *bulk* of the series under our belt, is take a step back for a week and do some practical equipping on one thing that I think is very important to this whole topic. And that's **how we talk to each other, about issues of race**. Hopefully, especially after this series, there's a general consensus among our church family that racism *is* an issue in our world. Hopefully there's a consensus on how that's a *problem* because it's an assault on the image of God in humanity. And hopefully there's a common understanding *that* you and I are called to work *towards* justice in some regard. On *that much* at least, hopefully there is pretty widespread agreement within our church.

But that said, there is **bound to be some difference** among us on exactly *how* we should work towards justice. Some difference of opinion as to what that means at an individual level and what that means at a communal level. Difference of opinion on what that means in terms of our *politics*: who we vote for and what party we vote for. There's going to be diversity of opinions on which *organizations* we support and which we don't support. Disagreement on what policies and legislation we get behind and which ones we don't. My point is that while there shouldn't be disagreement on *whether* or not we do something about injustice, there is bound to be some disagreement at times on some of the *ways* we go about that.

And unfortunately, our **society has not helped us** any when it comes to how we relate to people who are different than us. Right now, there's a tendency by many on the political *left* to call most anyone to the *right* of them a "racist" or a bigot or a xenophobe, or whatever else, and cancel them. And then there's a tendency by the Right to call anyone *Left of them* a Marxist or a socialist or a social justice warrior or any number of other things, and cancel *them*. So here we are, in the year 2021, as grown adults, evidently unable to have intelligent conversations with those who disagree with us without calling

people names and saying “I’m not friends with you anymore!” It’s the elementary school playground all over again—just with tweets and Facebook accounts.

But over and over again, the Scriptures are going to point out that **we as the family of God are called to approach our differences, differently.** That as followers of Jesus, **we have the ability and the tools needed to show the world a healthier way to approach disagreement and diversity of opinion.** Now, none of that is to say that the Church has always done a great job of *embodying* this healthier approach—often they haven’t at all. But my point is that it is *possible*. So this morning, I want us to talk about how we do *that*. **What tools do we have at our disposal to sustain that type of counter-cultural presence in the world, especially when it comes to talking about potentially divisive topics like the ones in this series?** We’re going to discuss that from Ephesians chapter 4.

Now, *obviously*, Ephesians 4 is not *specifically* discussing how we talk about *race*. Paul’s purpose here is a little more *generic* than that. He’s talking about how we relate to one another in *general*. But that said, it obviously still *applies* in topics like race. So let’s dig in to Ephesians 4 and talk about...how to *talk* about...race, and chances are it will also be helpful in *all* our conversations as well. I’m going to read through verses 1-6 all at once, and then we’ll spend the rest of our time walking back through the specifics of it. So Ephesians 4, starting in v. 1:

*[1] I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [4] There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—[5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

So Paul, the author of the book of Ephesians, kicks things off here with one big, **almost intimidating instruction**. He says we should “walk in a manner *worthy of the calling*” to which we have been called.” Boom. Now, by “calling” here, he means **our calling to be a part of God’s family through the saving work of Jesus.** If you’ve read Ephesians before, you know that Paul has just spent the entire first half of the letter expounding, in great detail, on what God has done for us through Jesus, through what happened on the cross. He’s talked about the *blessings* we have in Jesus, the *power* we have access to in Jesus, the *salvation* and *relationship* with God we have through Jesus.

And *then*, with all of that unpacked, he **turns to some instruction** and says “**therefore**, in light of all of that, I urge you to walk in a manner *worthy of that* calling. Now understand

that by Paul saying that, he's not saying we need to *earn* or *justify* what Jesus did for us. His point is not that God is looking down from the heavens going "okay, I did all of that cross stuff for you—I sure hope you show yourselves to be *worth* all that." *That's* not it. **What he's saying is that our lives should now be *reflective* of the realities God has accomplished for us through Jesus.** When people see our lives, they should go "wow—something incredible must've happened to them, to motivate them to live in such a different way." That's what Paul is getting at. "Live in a manner *worthy* of your *calling*."

Put another way, **for our purposes** this morning, if you and I talk to each other about race **the exact same way as the world around us does, something has gone deeply wrong. If when we disagree about things, you and I resort to name calling and writing people off just like the world around us does, that indicates that we've forgotten something important about our calling in Jesus.** Because that *calling* from Jesus should inform and shape every aspect of our lives, *even* and *especially* how we approach things like this. Paul wants us to live in a manner *worthy* of that calling.

So **next**, Paul is going to give us **four specifics** as to what that looks like, to approach things *in that* way. Let me list them out for you, and then we'll spend some time on each one. **A life "worthy of the calling we have received," in Paul's mind, includes things like *humility, gentleness, patience (or, "bearing with one another in love,")* and *an eagerness for unity*.** Those things should characterize the life of a follower of Jesus, and therefore should characterize how a follower of Jesus has difficult conversations about things *like* race. So with the rest of our time, we're going to break down each of these, *define* each of them, talk a little about what they look like in *practice*, and then about how they might *apply* in the specific conversations we have in mind during this series. Make sense? Okay, first up is...

## Humility

*Humility* we might **define** like this: **not thinking of yourself more highly than you should.** Humility means you practice a healthy dose of *self-suspicion*. **You understand that at times, your view of yourself, others, and situations can be clouded by your own sin.** And because you *understand* that, you can acknowledge that you may be wrong on some things. You may be wrong on a *bunch* of things. And even in the things you're *right* on, you realize you're right *not* because of how awesome or wise or mature *you are*; you're right simply because God has given you the *ability* over time to see things more clearly. So even in how you *express* being *right*, there's no *swagger* in your tone. There's no *arrogance*. There's no superiority or *condescension* towards others about it, because you know you only see clearly by the sheer grace of God breaking into your life.

Now, **by contrast**, here's **Proverbs 26:12** talking about *pride*—the *opposite* of humility:

*Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.*

Pride is **when you say** “*man—I see everything so clearly*.” And if everybody else could just *get on my level*, and see things the way I see them, we'd be able to really fix some problems around here.” **Pride is the posture that assumes by default that you are the teacher and others are the students.** That's being “wise in your own eyes.” And if *that's* your posture, Proverbs just said there's more hope for a *fool* than there is for you. Because at least a fool sometimes *understands* that they *don't* know things. Their foolishness gets *exposed*, and sometimes they *change* as a result. **For a *prideful* person, every disagreement they have just becomes one more example in their minds of how *they* get it and no one else does. It just serves to *confirm* their pre-existing bias.** So if your posture is “I see things clearer than *most* other people,” you're not going to get much of anywhere. Because humility demands that there is a mutual desire by two people in a conversation to hear, understand, and consider where the other is coming from. Make sense?

So let me give you a **real-life example** of how this impacts conversations about race and racism. Ant Frederick, who you guys heard from here last Sunday—I knew him back when he and his wife Hannah had just gotten married. For reference, he is black, and his wife Hannah is white. And he often tells a story in a sermon before about how, when they first got married, for the first few years, there was a lot of tension and misunderstanding between them when they would discuss issues of race. When he would bring up racial issues or things he was seeing happen, he would get really frustrated with her. He'd think and say things like “there's no way you can't see the problem. You should be able to see the difficulties of being black in America like *I* see them. I can't understand how you don't see the very obvious things happening in front of you.”

And **after a few years** of that, Hannah finally said to him one day, “Ant, I'm really sorry I'm having trouble seeing this. I really do want to, but I'm struggling to see it like you see it.” She said, “where I grew up in the country, everyone was poor. Black people were poor, white people were poor. Everyone was the same *kind* of poor. Working the same kind of jobs. And the only time that I saw a difference in people being treated differently based on their skin color was when I was applying to colleges, and I saw people who were less academically qualified than me get into schools that I didn't get into because they were people of color. So I *want* to understand your experience, and I want to understand it *more*—but it is very different than my experience, so it's just taking me some time to get there.” And **Ant says that conversation made him realize that he had lived with his**

wife for three years, *insisting that she understand his experience, while mostly neglecting to understand hers*. When he talks about it now, he uses the word “pride” to describe his posture in that season of his marriage. That is what pride does: it makes us constantly convinced that other people aren’t understanding us, while simultaneously preventing us from understanding others.

And we could just as easily flip that situation around, right? It could be a *white* person trying to get a *black* person to understand something about *their* experience without trying to understand *theirs*. It could be *any* man trying to get any woman to understand something about his experience without first understanding *her* experience as a woman. It could be *any* two people about most *any topic*. **Pride, like all other sin, knows no boundary lines of race or gender or anything else. We’re all susceptible to it.** And the only way to undo its power is for *all* of us to approach conversations with *humility*—seeing ourselves rightly, and then seeking to understand the other person even more than we seek to be *understood*.

So here’s a very practical tip on how to do that: when you’re in a conversation where there is disagreement, or the *potential* for disagreement, **listen to the point that you can summarize what they said in a way that they’d agree with**. Listen, and ask enough questions, to where you can say “so if I’m hearing you right, you’re saying \_\_\_\_\_,” and then they go “yeah, that’s what I’m saying.” If you say that and they go “no that’s not what I’m saying,” then that means you need to ask *more* questions. You need to listen *more*. Then try it again. Listen enough that you can state their case in a way that they would agree with, and *then* respond to it. That’s a good way to ensure that you are modeling a listening, understanding *humility*. Make sense?

Now, hear me on this: **humility doesn’t mean you have to agree with everything the other person says**. Somewhere along the line we have been taught that *listening* to someone is the same as *approving* of their behavior. It’s not. Those are not the same thing. **Humility doesn’t mean you have to validate everything the other person says. But it does mean you have to be willing to listen to them**, try to understand them, and consider what they’re saying and why. If you are *unwilling* to do that, you are not modeling humility...in a conversation about race, or any other conversation. If you *can* do that consistently, chances are you’re walking in humility. Let’s move on to the next one...

## Gentleness

Here’s a functional definition for *gentleness*: using the least amount of force or aggression necessary. It’s *power*, but under *control*. So I’ve heard this explained before

with the metaphor of a *surgeon*. A *good* surgeon is going to cut you only the absolutely necessary amount to correct a problem. They're going to do the minimal amount of damage possible. A scalpel is a finely tuned, meticulous type of instrument. A good surgeon does not bring in a hatchet, and just hack at stuff until they fix the problem. They use a scalpel.

When it comes to disagreement, we want to **be like good surgeons**. **We need to spend** time listening and understanding and praying and discerning, and then *once we've gotten clarity from the Spirit* on what exactly is going on and why, *that's* when we make our incision. For some of us, the reason conversations don't go well when we disagree with someone is because we tend to use the *maximum amount of force possible*. Figuratively speaking, we are coming in with a hatchet and just swinging until we hit something.

So let me put forward a **not-so-hypothetical scenario that could benefit** from some gentleness and show you how it works. Let's say Person A in a conversation says "Black lives matter!" Person B says "no, *all* lives matter!" Person A says "you know what?! You're the *problem* with our country, because you are *bothered* by me saying something as basic as '*black lives matter*'!" Person B says "no *you're* the problem, because you're trying to *imply* that *all lives don't* matter!" And the hatchets are out.

Now, I want you to watch what happens if you **sprinkle just a little gentleness** on both sides of the conversation. Person A says "black lives *matter*." Person B says "I can tell you're very passionate about this. If you don't mind, can you help me understand what you mean by that? Because sometimes it sounds like *black lives matter* is implying that other lives *don't* matter." Person A says "oh no, that's not what I mean. I of course think that everyone's life matters. I just think we have a long history in America of operating and legislating as if black lives often *don't* matter. So I think it's especially important at this moment in history that we *say black lives matter*." Person B says "oh okay, that helps me understand what you mean." Then they hug and go have milkshakes together. Okay, maybe not that last part. But do you see how both people looking for ways to apply the *least* amount of force possible helped turn the conversation in a much more helpful direction? That's *gentleness*: applying no more force than is necessary.

Now, hear me on this: **sometimes a lot of force is necessary**. When a person's actions and attitudes are constantly visible, are unrepentant, and are actively hurting a lot of people, and they don't care about any of that—a good bit of force may be entirely *appropriate*. **Jesus himself, at times, used a lot of verbal and emotional force with his**

words to call out unhelpful behaviors.<sup>1</sup> But here's the thing: he didn't use that amount of force in *every interaction he had* with every person, right? Jesus described himself at one point as being "gentle and lowly in heart." That didn't mean he wasn't bold when he needed to be, that didn't mean he didn't speak up when he needed to speak up—he did all of those things. But in how he did it, he didn't use force just for the sake of force. He gravitated towards *gentleness*. He didn't show up with a hatchet, he showed up with a scalpel. And we should too. That's what gentleness looks like.

Now, **you might be thinking** to yourself, "okay, but what if I *am* humble and gentle, and the other person chooses *not* to be those things back to me in return?" Okay, that's where #3 comes in, which is...

## Patience (a.k.a. bearing with one another in love)

Here's **what this one means**: a willingness to sustain *offense in the pursuit of unity*. It's a willingness to *bear with* the other person, knowing that they may offend you. Other words the bible sometimes uses for this are the words *forbearance* and *longsuffering*.

Forbearance means a predetermined posture of grace towards someone. It is essentially *pre-forgiveness*. Practicing forbearance means that you understand other followers of Jesus are probably going to say or do things that are hurtful to you, but you decide in advance to *forgive* them for those things. You *bear with them* by choosing not to retaliate in those moments.

Now, you need forbearance **in all your relationships**: roommates, friends, spouse, kids, parents—you name it. If you cannot learn to practice forbearance, you are going to have a really difficult time with any relationship that involves other flawed humans. But we *especially* need it in these conversations about things like race and injustice. It is going to be very helpful if—in conversations with people you disagree with—you decide in advance to not be shocked and offended and triggered by every single thing out of their mouth. If you decide in advance, "this person is probably going to say some things I don't like, so I am going to prepare myself to extend compassion in those moments." Now, that's not to say you never *engage* them on those things—it's just that you don't engage them on every *single thing* that bothers you.

Think about it like this. **Imagine how defeated we would feel** if the Holy Spirit confronted us about every single sin we committed against him during the day. Every ill-motivated action, every split second of selfishness, every tiny expression of impatience. What if the Holy Spirit confronted us on every single sin, no matter how small during every day. We would all be so utterly defeated that we would never grow at all. But instead, the Holy

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, read most of Matthew 23.

Spirit shows us patience and forbearance. He bears with us, and some things he brings to our attention, and some things are just covered over by the incredible, forgiving blood of Jesus.

That, I think, is **the perfect reference point for how** we should live out our interpersonal relationships too. There are *some* things that we need to address and engage people on when they come up—no doubt about it. And yet, that does not mean that we need to engage them on *every single sin* and issue we ever see in them. Doing it that way makes the relationship impossible. Some things we can show patience and forbearance towards them for.

Okay, here's **one way I have seen a lack of patience** and bearing with one another when it comes to conversations about *race*. It's what sociologists call "*de-individualizing the outgroup*." **If you meet someone for lunch today and they asked you what we talked about today, tell them we talked about "de-individualizing the out group" and they'll think we are all smarter than we are.** Here's what that means. Generally, you and I tend to see people as *individuals*. We *get* that every person makes their *own* decisions about who they are and what they will do. But sometimes, when it comes to people we *disagree* with, we tend to forget that.

I'll try and prove it to you in a *non-racial* context, and then show you how we do it when it comes to *race*. Let's say this fall, you're at a football game in Neyland Stadium (fingers crossed on that happening) Let's say it's the Georgia-Tennessee game, and Tennessee has just scored their seventh touchdown of the game (if it's *hypothetical*, might as well make it a *fantasy*, right?). And after we score that touchdown, a Georgia fan gets mad, and throws his drink, full of soda, down onto the field and hits a Tennessee player with it. How are you and I, as Tennessee fans, going to respond to that? Probably, we're going to think or say something like "classic Georgia fan. Classless, despicable, rude, Georgia fan. You know, that's *just like* a Georgia fan to do something like that—that's what *all* Georgia fans are like." Okay, the second we do that, we have *de-individualized the out group*. We've taken the actions of *one* fan, and we have extrapolated it out to represent the *entire group* of fans, simply because they happen to cheer for the other team. Because we all know that if it was another *Tennessee fan* that did that, we would go "hey I just think everyone should know that that fan is an *exception* and is not representative of Tennessee fans as a whole. That is *not* what we *stand for*." This is what we do.

Okay, now let me help you see **how we do the same thing with race**. Let's say you're a white, and you see on the news that some people at a *Black Lives Matter* protest have set a building on fire. There might be at least a *temptation* for you to say "see—that's the problem with these *Black Lives Matter* protestors—all they want to do is tear down and



destroy things.” Even though in reality, there may have been 2,000 people there at that protest that had nothing to do with setting the building on fire. You’ve just *de-individualized the out group*. You’ve taken one or several people out of a group, and assigned their *behavior* to the *entire* group. But if you’re a white, and you see a white person on the news who just got fired for using a racial slur or burning a black church to the ground, your response is probably going to be to go “what an awful *individual*. That person does not represent the views of white people as a whole and I want everyone to know that.”

Or, **flip the situation around**. Let’s say you’re black and you see a Trump supporter in the news yelling racial slurs or attending a white nationalist rally, torch in hand and everything. Internally, in your soul, it might be easy to go, “wow. See? Typical, racist Trump supporter. That’s just *like* a Trump supporter to do something like that. They’re *all* like that.” But if you see a BLM protester burning down a building, you’re gonna point out all the people there that had nothing to do with burning down the building. That too is de-individualizing the out group.

But **on the other hand**, *bearing with one another*, means we *at least* take the time to get to know one another as *individuals*. Not as stereotypes, not as caricatures, not as voting blocks—but as *individuals*. If you’ve met a black person, do you know what you’ve met? *One black person*. If you’ve met a white person, do you know what you’ve met? *One white person*. If you meet a BLM protester, you’ve met *one* BLM protester. If you’ve met a Trump supporter, you’ve met *one* Trump supporter. It is *not okay* to assume you know a person entirely simply because you know *one thing* about them. That rejects the imago dei in that other person, it de-individualizes them, and it is no way to have helpful conversations with people you disagree with.

Rather, **wouldn’t it be better** if when we met a person—or joined a LifeGroup with a person—who is *in* the out group, from our perspective—we took the time and the patience to get to know *them* as a person? Wouldn’t it be better if we took the time to acknowledge and understand that people are individuals, with unique beliefs and experiences and convictions, and that they likely do not fit perfectly in the preconceived mold we have established for them. That’s part of what it means to show *patience* in our relationships with one another. And lastly, Paul says that we should be...

## Eager to maintain unity

Now, **this language** is really interesting to me. Paul doesn’t say we should *try to achieve* unity. He says that in *Jesus*, we already *have* it. That’s what verses 4-6 in our passage are pointing out: “...there *is* **one body, one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism,**” and

so on. Paul's point is that *we already have unity* (or at bare minimum, have access to it). And that *because* we have that, we should seek to *maintain* that unity. For this one and everything we've talked about today, here's what you need to know: **Jesus has already done what was required to make unity possible for his church.** His death and resurrection saw to it that unity is a reality.

But **too often, we are eager to break** unity. Sometimes we look for any and every reason to divide and break unity with one another. **Case in point: as of last count, there are about 1200 different Christian denominations in the U.S. alone. 1200.** Now some of those have divided because of really significant theological issues. Things that mattered and that there needed to be clarity on. But some of them also divided on really silly things that they really could've just agreed to disagree on. There *are* hills to die on, theologically speaking. There are not *1200* theological hills to die on. At some point I think you're *well into* majoring on some minors. As followers of Jesus, I think we could stand to grow in seeing *past* some of our differences in the name of unity.

The **temptation**, anytime there are differences, is to immediately *divide* over it. Specifically when it comes to racial issues, the temptation is to say "because you voted for this person, I can't be in relationship with you." "Because you support or didn't support this policy, I can't be in relationship with you." "Because you want to go at the problem of racism slightly differently than I do, I can't be in a relationship with you." That's the opposite of being "eager to maintain unity." That's being eager to *break* unity.

Now, do understand that **by "unity," I don't mean** we should just avoid difficult topics so that we can be 'unified.'" That's what a lot of people mean right now when they talk about unity. But that's not *biblical* unity. The goal of a church family isn't to *ignore* the things that might divide us. **The goal of a church family is to be willing to navigate directly into the difficult conversations, knowing that the cross and resurrection of Jesus are big enough to sustain our unity in those conversations.** It's knowing that however much we may differ on certain things, we have the most *important* thing in common: *Jesus*.

And because of that, within a family of Jesus-followers, **we always care more about the relationship** than we do about our particular opinions on the issues. We *welcome* hard conversations, dialogue, and even at times *debate*. **But at the end of the day, we always see the other follower of Jesus as a fellow, blood-bought, forgiven, brother or sister.** We all see *ourselves* as a follower of Jesus *first*, and *then, on down the list*, as white, or black, or hispanic, or Asian, or conservative, or liberal, or liberatarian, or "I honestly could care less about politics," or whatever the category is. Jesus died to give

us, as his followers, *unity*. Now all we're called to do is put forth the humility, gentleness, and patience to *maintain* it.

So today, we're going to **end very very practically**. If you've been around City Church very long, you probably saw this coming from a mile away. Here's what I'm going to invite you to do: If there is currently a lack of *unity* (of any sort) between you and any other person in our church—or between you and any other *follower of Jesus*—I want to exhort you, by the power and the authority of the risen Jesus, to go deal with it. Whatever that might be. Maybe there's disagreement over issues connected to race. Maybe it's another issue entirely. Maybe there's *conflict* that hasn't been dealt with or resolved. Maybe there's residing *frustration* with someone that you haven't even brought up with them yet.

But whatever it is, I want to encourage you to **deal with it, right now**. **That's part of what it means to be eager about unity: it means you don't put things like that on hold.** It may be a thing where one or both of you need to repent, or it may just be a thing where you need to agree to disagree and still care for one another, because the person is more important than the specifics of the issue. But one way or another, let's show that we are "eager to maintain" the unity that Jesus accomplished for us.

We're **going to sing** some songs here in a few minutes as we generally do, but the gospel of Matthew makes it clear that **if we are worshipping Jesus without first making things right in our relationships with one another, that is not worship that God is interested in.** It's not *true* worship. So let's actually deal with whatever it is. If you've been around City Church very long, you know how this works: go and pull the person aside, step into the lobby, step into the hallway back here, step outside and text or call the person if they're not here—but one way or another, let's deal with it. And as we deal with whatever it is, let's remember everything we just talked about. *Humility. Gentleness. Patience; bearing with one another in love. And unity.* And by pursuing all of that, let's put on display the life that Jesus made possible for us all. Let's live a life 'worthy of the calling we've received.'

Let me pray, and then we'll take some time to do just that.