

One People: The Church, Race, and the Gospel

Work Together

Psalm 94

Mark Vroegop

“O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; and they say, “The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.” Understand, O dullest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke? He who teaches man knowledge— the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath. Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it. Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, “My foot slips,” your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out” (Ps. 94:1–23).

I just prayed and read through Psalm 94. It is a lament psalm. And what you heard and what landed on you is directly related to both your experience and your posture as you come to worship today. This lament psalm has the potential to bring healing, to teach us, to convict us, and to unite us—if we’ll let it.

This is the third and final week of our series on racial harmony. The vision for this series has been to help our church take some steps in looking and acting more like the one people that Jesus bought. Given the history of our church, our commitment to biblical orthodoxy, what God has done in our church in the last five years, our Core Value of unity in diversity, and our proximity to both the suburbs and city, I believe God is calling us to engage in this conversation—even though it’s messy and challenging.

We live in an ethnically diverse community. And our church should continue working to look like and serve our local community. That’s what One Fellowship Church is going to do. And our church will need to keep working on that moving forward.

Walk and Weep Together

Two weeks ago, I challenged us from Colossians 3 to embrace the right kind of mindset as it relates to this issue. I wanted you to see how the gospel and your love for your brother and sister in Christ get underneath all other social, ethnic, cultural, and racial categories. In case you missed the messages, and just to be sure we are clear, here are my working definitions.

- **Ethnicity:** 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

Last week I identified a model for moving forward in racial reconciliation:

- **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 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 suggested that lament helps to empathize—to weep with those who weep. And it also helps us memorialize—to remember and to learn. Now we come to our last step.

Work Together

I want to look at Psalm 94, a lament psalm, to help us learn how to work together. This psalm is instructive for those who are hurting, for those who are indifferent to hurt, and also for those who are part of the problem. Let me show you what is in this passage and then we'll make some applications.

1. Desire for Justice

The psalm begins with a cry to God for justice. Now, what word is used twice in this text? Vengeance. Are you okay with crying out to God for vengeance? Apparently, the psalmist is. We don't know exactly what the background is, and I'll give you some clues later on. But one of the ways that lament psalms help us in general, and when it comes to racial harmony, is that they help us to see how hurting and oppressed people talk to God—how they pray—when they are struggling.

Verse 2 says the same thing but in a different way. The psalmist wants God to rise up and repay people for what they have done. He wants the proud to receive what they deserve.

Do you know that a desire for justice or even divine vengeance is a godly emotion? Now, let me be clear. The Bible never calls you to take your own vengeance. Listen to Romans 12:19.

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19).

So, whose responsibility is justice/vengeance? Ultimately God’s, and that day will come. But in the meantime, the civil government is responsible for justice.

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:3–4).

Government—even its broken forms—is designed to be a servant of God’s will for justice to be done. Now, this is important for a number of reasons.

First, we should thank God for the grace of government, courts, laws, and law enforcement. They are a necessary vehicle for the common grace of God in the world. We need gospel-centered Christians to embrace these careers and understand the brokenness of the world. If you are in one of these careers, you need to know we are thankful that you are serving our community in this way. We need you to bring the light of Jesus to broken people. We need you to use your divinely-given authority in a God-honoring way.

Secondly, we need to realize why this psalm is being written. The psalmist is appealing to God because the divinely-given system is not working. So, it is not just that the psalmist is being personally affected, but it is also that the God-given system is broken. And that’s doubly scary.

I know where some of you are going. You are thinking, “Where are you getting that from?” I’ll show you, but just to help you keep listening to me here is verse 20-21:

“Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death” (Ps. 94:20–21).

Do you see it? Now, it’s important to recognize that this is in the text, but also to acknowledge that some people in our church feel this text with a greater weightiness because they’ve experienced someone treating them as inferior or because something wrong was done to them. And there are few things more depressing and hurtful than feeling powerless to address those wrongs because the scales of justice don’t seem to tip in the right direction.

The desire for justice is not wrong. It’s right. And the desire for justice is not incongruent with love and forgiveness.

2. Weariness with Injustice

The second thing to note in this lament is the emotional weariness and longing for justice to be done. One of the ways lament psalms help us is by validating layered frustration:

- Verse 3 – the psalmist asks the Lord how long shall the wicked exult.
- Verse 4 – He laments arrogant and proud words.
- Verse 5 – He mourns over actions that are “crushing.”

The point of praying this kind of prayer is to remind your frustrated and grieving heart that God does in fact see.

As we think about how to work together toward racial harmony, let me speak first to our majority brothers and sisters. This text is very useful for those moments in your life when you feel like you are being mistreated. You can use this text to channel your frustration and talk to God about it. When you face individual injustice, use this text to talk to God about your struggle.

But when you do, I need you to remember that most of us who are white mostly only know injustice at a personal level. Because of our historical experience, we’ve not known the same type of systemic injustice that characterizes our nation’s history. Part of the problem in this conversation is that white brothers tend to look at injustice through an individual lens while our minority brothers see injustice through a personal and group lens. That’s why a video of a racial incident one thousand miles away affects our minority brothers differently than it does if it happened to someone who looks like you. It’s important for you to understand the difference in weariness when it comes to real and perceived injustice.

Now to our minority brothers and sisters. This text could be so helpful when you are, to quote Fannie Lou Hamer, “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Lament validates the frustration. It acknowledges the outrageousness of the unfairness. But here’s the thing: It takes action by taking it to the Lord. If you don’t do this, the poisonous mist of bitterness will set in. That’s true for any hurt, not just this one. And you could end up letting your hurts define you, instead of allowing them to refine you. You can allow injustice to become your identity instead of your history.

Here me. I’m not saying hurts in the past and in the future should be disregarded. But I am saying that working together means your commitment to long for change is out of the gospel, not just out of a grievance. I can only imagine how patient you’ve had to be, how many unhelpful conversations you’ve had, and how many times you’ve been hurt. But I’m pleading with you not to retreat—physically or emotionally. We need you. The church needs you.

As a white pastor and because of our nation’s history, I think the onus lies more on me to take the first step. But I’m often scared of saying the wrong thing in the wrong way and making it worse. So, thank you for persevering in your weariness. I can’t imagine how long it’s been. Lament allows us to take our weariness to the Lord so that our weariness doesn’t take us down

- Verse 6 – Particular focus is given to most vulnerable: the widow, immigrant, and orphan. These people are the easiest to oppress because they have limited access to power.

- Verse 7 – Something that is especially frustrating is the brazen attitude of those who commit injustice. They live as if God doesn't see.
- Verse 8 – the psalmist calls upon people to be wise. Commentators suggest that this clues us in to the fact that the oppressors are not external but internal. In other words, this psalmist is grieving over godless people within Israel who are guilty of injustice and oppression.
- Verse 20 – The psalmist laments that injustice can even make its way in statues
- Verse 21 – A regrettable mob mentality can prevail.

Reflecting on this psalm, one commentator said, “. . . there is a breakdown of law and order and the mechanisms designed to protect the innocent become instead the instruments of violence.”¹ I'm sure you can think of examples of this in our laws and our history, Jim Crow laws being the most obvious.

As we work together, it's important to recognize that often the cultural injustice of racism made its way into the church. Part of the reason we need to work on this is because often the church didn't. A few examples:

- In a recent tour of the Museum of the Bible, there was an exhibit called “The Slave's Bible.” It featured Bibles that had sections cut out of them (Exodus, Psalms, parts of Galatians, etc.) in order to keep slaves in submission.
- It isn't hard to find sermons or writings that attempted to justify slavery or segregation based upon the misuse of the text.
- The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) began in 1845 due to a controversy over whether slave-owning missionaries were qualified for service. A similar division had already split the Methodist Church, and it would soon hit the Presbyterian Church as well. Thankfully the SBC has publicly repented of this sinful foundation and is working hard to reconcile. But it's important to remember that the official resolution passed in 1995.
- The African Methodist Episcopal Church is the first Protestant denomination founded by African-Americans. But it was started when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were removed from the church for praying in the wrong pew.
- Even some of our heroes, like George Whitefield, were on the wrong side on the issue of slavery. He was a staunch advocate for the expansion of slavery in Georgia.²

I could give you multiple additional examples. The point here is merely for you to understand how injustice was not outside the church but also inside.

As we work together, that should make us work even harder at loving one another. Our brotherhood in Christ should lead us. I received a great example of this in an email this week:

¹ W. Domeris as cited by Daniel Estes, Psalms 73-150 – The New American Commentary, (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2019), 202

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-01/george-whitefield-s-troubled-relationship-race-and-slavery>

Keith White, an African-American Sheriff, is a member of our church, as is Curt Collins. He's a white officer with the IMPD.

I wanted to tell you about unity at College Park Church that extends to the streets of Indianapolis. Curt Collins who is an IMPD Officer (Blue) and myself, Sheriff (Brown), are brothers here and get along well. Our families have fellowshipped together outside the church. We have found ourselves working together on the streets. At one point we were at 40th and Winthrop where there were shots fired and issues with juveniles. After things settled down and we were all standing around talking. . . all IMPD (Blue) all majority culture, and me (Brown) minority culture. Curt stepped forward, gave me a brotherly hug said, "Hi, brother," and I reciprocated. I could see the wonder and puzzled look in the other officer's faces. There were 2 things going on there. Historically blue (IMPD) and Brown (Sheriff) have not worked well with each other. And as you know our two cultures have issues. Curt told me that afterward some of the officers asked him "what was that about" and he explained that we were brothers in Christ. Curt and I are working to do what you are preaching about and it's good to see that people notice.

With all that's broken in the world, I hope our church—lived out by you—can bring refreshment to the weariness of racial division.

3. Hope for the Future

The other passages in this lament psalm are designed to reaffirm the trust we should embrace when life is hard or unfair. The text is beautifully God-centered.

- Verse 9 – God's power is celebrated as creator. If God created sight and hearing, he knows and sees.
- Verses 10-11 – God knows the thoughts of man. He has the power to make it right.
- Verses 12-13 – the psalmist praises God for what the suffering and hardship will teach him.

Take note of this posture. The psalmist is equally committed to personal growth as he's about verbalizing what is wrong.

- Verses 14-15 – God is not going to abandon his people; justice will eventually be applied.
- Verse 16-19 – We can rest in God's faithfulness and his love for his people.

If you were to examine the African-American church experience, you would find that Sundays were a day of refuge and hope from the weariness of the culture. That's why titles were/are important. That's why dressing up was expected. That's why services were long. Sundays in the African-American church meant dignity, worth, value, and hope.

My desire is that Sunday mornings for our minority brothers and sisters would be a place of refuge, not just a place with less ethnic tension. I want our church to be a place where we are reminded about who Jesus is, who we are, and how we should treat one another.

The vision for our church is to point people to the Lord as their stronghold and God as the rock of their refuge (vv. 22). I want people to love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage our love for Jesus and our belief that one day Jesus is going to make it all right (v. 23). Until then, we've got some work to do.

How to Work Together

As we think about some next steps that we can take, let me give you some applications in some broad categories:

Spiritual

I encourage you to pray that the Lord would continue to help you live out the gospel through your ethnicity and culture. If you've felt legitimately convicted over something—your attitudes, actions, willful ignorance—confess it to the Lord and repent. The cross is powerful enough to forgive your sin and make you new. Take time to read books on racial harmony. Listen to podcasts of people who are not in your tribe. Follow minority leaders and listen to what they are saying.

Emotional

I hope this series has given you more compassion. I've tried, in particular, to represent what I've learned from our minority brothers and sisters. I hope that in your first step, you will be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Weep with those who weep. Tune your heart to the struggles in the minority community by lamenting for them and with them. Be humble. Be sensitive. And when you make a mistake—I've made so many!—own it. Learn how to feel the bigger picture.

Several months ago, I was meeting a guest speaker at a nearby hotel for breakfast. His buffet breakfast was part of his room charge, and I didn't want to eat for free. So, I stopped by the desk and told the receptionist that I was here to eat with someone at the hotel, and I'd like to put it on our account. Well, something went wrong. The woman, who was African-American, said to me, "Wait. Hold on. I don't know what's going on here, but I don't like you just coming in here and telling me what you are going to do or not do." I was stunned. And offended. I was trying to do what was right, and the situation escalated. But then the Lord helped me remember what I was reading and studying. I thought, *here I am a white man telling an African-American woman what I'm going to do. Who knows how she's been treated. I don't.* So, I stopped and said, "Oh ma'am, I mean no disrespect. Let me try it again. . . ." Halfway through, she said, "Oh, you just want to eat? Well, go on then. It's no problem."

I hope you can see life through a more compassionate and considerate lens.

Relational

I would be nowhere in this journey without minority brothers and sisters as my friends. And the best way to make progress is to do life with people from different ethnicities and backgrounds. That's the vision for 3DG. The group's once-a-month meeting is designed to help create those relationships. But you need to have them as a true friend, not just your diversity consultant. In other words, build a relationship, not just a resource.

Societal

We live in a broken world, and I want you to see the lack of harmony between ethnicities through a gospel-centered lens. We have to avoid falling into the traps of race-blindness and race-baiting. Pray that God would help you to set a different tone and a sweet reasonableness when it comes to this topic. Don't allow your hurt or your history to inform your response more than what you believe about the gospel. And when you encounter something that violates Biblical Unity in Diversity, do what you can to stop it or make it right. Don't laugh when others do. Ask people to stop saying things that are inappropriate and wrong. When you find injustice, do what you can to make it right.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I were a restaurant in another city. The man next to us was by himself, and when the waitress tried to take his drink order he was condescending and demanding. When she brought his drink order and his appetizer it got worse. He berated her. Making things even more complicated was the fact that he was white, and she was African-American. The situation was so upsetting to the waitress that the manager ended up taking the table. I was upset. After we finished our meal, I found some cash in my wife's purse, and I walked over to the waitress. I said, "Ma'am, I saw what happened at the table. I'm really sorry for how you were treated, and I just wanted to thank you for being so gracious. Here's a tip from me and my wife." Well, she started waving her hands in front of her eyes because she was tearing up. She called her manager over, introduced us, and she said, "Would you tell him?" So, I affirmed her to the manager. And after the manager thanked me and the waitress expressed her gratitude, our waiter caught me with a fist bump as I walked out.

I share that with you not to make a big deal out of what I did, but for you to consider the kind of opportunity you have to live out unity in diversity in the world. I don't know if he had prejudice or not. All I know, the waitress was hurting. And the racial difference didn't help.

God calls the church to walk together, to weep together, and to work together. In the words of John Perkins, let me remind you why:

"There is no institution on earth more equipped or more capable of bringing transformation to the cause of reconciliation than the church."³

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³ John Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 63.