

## SESSION 5: STUDENT

# WHAT CAN I DO?

Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice.

—Nelson Mandela

### MEMORY VERSE

“But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

### OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

- analyze the “Black Lives Matter” movement to see what is working, what is not, and why; and
- search Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer to learn the distinct benefit Christians can bring to the problem of the racial divide.

In the last session, we looked at the effects of black America’s belief that it cannot be prejudiced. We aimed to help white participants understand how that belief arose and how it prevents black Americans from accepting their well-meaning efforts to improve relations. We also tried to encourage black participants to examine their own beliefs and lean more upon God to overcome the painful life experiences that have divided them from their white neighbors.

In this session, we will look at how black America is crying out through protests and movements. We will see why these efforts have only widened the gulf between both sides, and we will look to Jesus to teach us the way we Christians can bring light and salt to begin healing this division.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2012, after the death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, the “Black Lives Matter” movement began. Three women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, are credited with starting the movement.

They claimed that after his death, Trayvon Martin was tried for his own murder, and his shooter, George Zimmerman, was not called to account for his crime. They claimed black lives are being targeted for destruction. (To read their claims for yourself, read the first two paragraphs of “A HerStory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” at [blacklivesmatter.com/herstory](http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory).)

These claims reflect the distrust many African Americans feel toward this country. But they go even deeper—making the bold claim that white America is intentionally targeting black lives for

destruction. As an African American Christian, I cannot condone this charge—it sounds like Satan’s slander. But it is another example of black Americans wrongly believing they cannot be prejudiced—and explains why they don’t see anything wrong with lumping all whites together and prejudging the intention of every white person.

White America hears this harsh accusation and is baffled—if not aggravated by it. It will admit that there may be a small minority of whites who wish for the destruction of black lives, maybe even a handful of police officers—but the vast majority of whites, politicians, and police officers are repulsed by the idea.

And the racial divide grows yet again.

But I ask, can white America understand that each police shooting of a black man simply reinforces what we black Americans were taught as children—we can’t trust police officers; we need to be afraid of them? Like I said before, on the rare occasion when a law enforcement officer pulls me over, my heart races, I am on edge not knowing how this whole thing will turn out. I am convinced both parties feel this uneasiness, and it is a recipe for disaster. Two people, both on edge, both afraid of each other. The officer has a deadly weapon; I am defenseless.

We need to remember there are two sides of this racial divide—and both sides have real and valid concerns alongside grave misunderstandings and distrust of those on the other side.

Amid all this heightened racial rhetoric, several high-profile players have joined the chorus of voices shouting for people to notice that “Black Lives Matter.” In 2016, the movement picked up the public support of music icon Beyoncé, and Colin Kaepernick, quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers. It is not my place to judge the worth of their actions or their intentions. I am unsure whether these types of public approaches in such a racially charged environment are the most effective response.

If the point of their actions and other public protest is to bring awareness that in turn will create some open, receptive hearts ready to embrace change and a culture of cooperation, then speak out. If the aim is to find a way for black men to stop losing their lives at the hands of white police officers, or any police officers for that matter, then I could respect that, because no matter what choices those and others victims made in life, every life matters to God. If the goal is to make things better, both acts—Kaepernick’s not standing for the singing of the National Anthem and Beyoncé’s performance at the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards—have created the opposite effect, as have the protests that have led to riots, arson, and looting in the streets of far too many cities. The divide has only grown larger.

Again, this is serving no one but Satan. More police hit the streets every day with the sense of fear and dread that there is a target on their backs. More blacks are afraid at a simple traffic stop. Nelson Mandela was correct. If our goal is reconciliation, both sides of the divide should come together and stop the divisive talk, really listen to those who feel disenfranchised, and find solutions that will put a stop to the injustices of the past.

## REFLECTION QUESTION

**Q1.** Describe a moment in history when a public stand or protest like the examples mentioned above got peoples' attention and made a positive difference.

## SCRIPTURE TEXT: JOHN 17

Below are some steps to begin the reconciliation process. I am approaching this with the idea that only God can truly heal this problem; it is, of course, beyond human problem-solving abilities.

The text for today's study is Jesus' High Priestly Prayer from John 17. First, Jesus prays for Himself; then He prays for His twelve apostles; and finally, He prays for all Christians. This touches the racial division in our culture in the sense that the Church can be God's instrument to touch lives. So, in today's study, we look at the vital ways the Church can impact race relations in America, one person at a time.

This is a critical text in that John lays out three key relationships:

1. The relationship of God the Father to His Son, Jesus Christ (vv. 1–5)
2. The relationship of Jesus to the twelve apostles (vv. 6–12)
3. Jesus' relationship through the apostles to the Christians

As a result of these three relationships, the Christians can make an impact in the world (vv. 13–19). It is this Christian impact that will be our focus in this study. We look at the vital ways the Church can heal this division in America, one person at a time.

## BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Jesus' prayer in John 17 begins His agonizing road to Golgotha. He sees the suffering that is coming closer by the minute. This prayer is bathed in the confidence that His Father will provide the strength He needs to complete the task of redeeming the world. The image is compelling of the Suffering Servant Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is about to lay down His life for the sheep, as He commends His disciples into His Father's protecting hand.

In contrast to the Garden of Eden, where sin sneaked into the world through Satan's temptation, Jesus boldly approaches the Garden of Gethsemane. By His obedience here, mankind will be redeemed from the sin, death, and hell we inherited because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Here, Jesus prays for those He has chosen and connected to His mission. This, His mission work, will soon pass on to them. Without His apostles' continuing work in the world, that

mission will be in jeopardy. Today, the Church still brings reconciliation and peace as it carries out Jesus' mission in the world. This is the role the universal Church plays in healing the racial divide.

Jesus begins this section of the prayer by expressing the reality of joy in the lives of believers and in His life too. "But now I am coming to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves" (John 17:13).

Jesus is reminding the disciples of the joy He already expressed at the Last Supper in John 15: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (v. 11).

Jesus had already pointed out to His followers that joy comes by an expectant faith in the resurrection.

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20–22)

This joy and expectation of the resurrection are important because the very next section of this prayer will lay out for believers the steep road ahead. You will not be popular in this world. Your life, your values, your beliefs, and even your very existence will irk and annoy the world that would rather live in darkness.

## THE TEXT

But now I am coming to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:13–19)

## APPLICATION

There are three key things that each of us can personally do to help begin the process of reconciliation. Notice I did not say three easy steps. Or three simple things. None of this is simple. It is not easy. The truth be told, anything worth accomplishing in life always comes with effort and, at times, great difficulty. This problem did not develop overnight, and it will not be solved with just a piece of legislation or some very great sermons. It will require the believers in Christ to live out their calling and not just be in the world, but to be light and salt in the world. So, here we go:

1. WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO ADMIT WHEN WE HAVE BEEN PART OF THE PROBLEM.

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

As a teen, one of my favorite after-school television shows was *Happy Days*. I wanted to be Arthur “Fonzie” Fonzarelli. That was one cool dude. Part of his coolness was he was never wrong. On the rare occasion when he had to admit fault, he stumbled over the words. He could never seem to get out the entire sentence, “I was wrong.” It came out more like, “I was wrrooon.” In this issue of race relations, it seems that no one wants to come out and admit any culpability. Neither side wants to budge. Neither side wants to admit it bears some level of responsibility. The rhetoric and divisive attitudes continue to make matters more toxic and volatile. Until both sides are willing to admit they are part of the problem, no real healing is possible.

We Americans have a choice. When it comes to the racial divide in our country, we can either keep focusing on what’s tearing us apart or we can choose to find strength in those things that hold us together. My issue with the talk so far is that the focus is on all the things that are ripping us apart. Little to no attention is paid to those universal values we all share.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

**Q1.** What attitudes did the members of your family and your friends in school have toward people with a different nationality?

**Q2.** Take a minute to discuss what role, if any, you are playing in widening the racial divide in America. Are you passing along generalities and stereotypes that further this division? Are you judging a whole group of people based on the words or actions of a few? Have you remained silent when you could have spoken up to stop divisive talk?

## 2. WE NEED TO COME TO A TRUCE.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. (John 17:20–23).

Here is the ultimate evil of racism—the Gospel is ignored and the world does not come to believe in Jesus.

William Wallace, the leading character in the movie *Braveheart*, chastised his Scots for allowing minor issues, internal strife, and power struggles to stand in the way of their fight for independence from the English. “We have beaten the English, but they’re back because you won’t stand together.” I feel that is what is happening far too often in the racial division in our churches.

Lifeway Research surveyed one thousand Americans about race. They found only about a third (34 percent) of Americans have regularly attended a house of worship where they were a minority. Among those who had attended a church as a minority, one in five said their ethnicity hindered their involvement.

Of those who have not been a minority in a church, nearly a quarter (22 percent) say being a minority in a congregation would make them feel uncomfortable. Many Americans believe churches should be more diverse. Half (50 percent) agree with the statement “Churches in American are too segregated.” Four in ten (44 percent) disagree ([www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/sunday-morning-segregation-most-worshippers-church-diversity.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/sunday-morning-segregation-most-worshippers-church-diversity.html)).

The enemy, Satan, has been defeated. When Jesus Christ rose on Easter Sunday, the message was clear: “Satan, you are finished! Christ is victorious.” But with our racial division and disagreements, we keep the world from seeing and hearing the Gospel in action. We should be giving unbelievers the sweet taste of Christ’s victory. Understand, we realize disagreement is a part of relationships, but what is not normal is the inability to forgive and move forward. When there are issues that need correcting, people need to have honest discussions. Imagine a world where instead of rioting and holding picket signs, we could have a cup of coffee and a croissant and talk about our disagreements. One pivotal role believers play in healing racial division is our ability to teach the truth of God’s Word and to model the heart of Jesus, but only if we are united in our love for Christ and for one another.

In this racial division, we need to call for a truce and find a way to work together in unity and harmony. When I mention unity, I need to clarify what that looks like. To be crystal clear, unity is not the absence of opinions nor the need to be one homogeneous people. Opinions and diversity are healthy. But this unity I am speaking of is the lack of divisions. Our racial relations are suffering the greatest damage due to disunity and the inability to come to a place of peace. The past tensions caused the most significant damage. The current conflict has created an environment and culture

that allows disagreement and disunity to grow in the body like an open sore. That open wound continues to go unchecked and only festers, swells, and spreads until it kills the body.

At some point, for the racial divide to heal, we should call for an end to the fighting. Each side needs to stop seeing the other as the evil villain they are bent on defeating. The only way that will happen is to realize that sin is what is keeping us apart. Sin is causing the bitterness and hatred. The effects of sin are growing and breeding between blacks and whites. The only thing that can defeat sin is God's love. Like Nelson Mandela said so beautifully, "Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice." This nation desperately needs God's hand of restoration. I fear more and more each day where this situation is heading. It is time for us to lay down the call for retribution, the hateful speech that only breeds more fear and distrust. We need to come together and ask for God to turn the guns into plowshares. Only God can turn weeping and mourning into rejoicing and dancing.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Discuss some ways you saw Jesus work with people of a different mindset or nationality.

**Q2.** Discuss some things that Christians can do to be light and salt in this broken relationship between black and white Americans.

### 3. WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR THE RELATIONSHIP.

I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14–16)

Building relationships, especially difficult ones, can feel like climbing Mount Everest. But if you are struggling and can't ever seem to reach the summit, maybe that means the systems you're using aren't working.

It's okay to fall. It's okay to make mistakes and even be dead wrong. You will get mad. Relationships will cause you frustration. Heck, we are human, and as sinful humans, we struggle with maintaining healthy relationships. But does that mean that we should never be in a relationship? Or does it say we keep fighting for relationships because we would die without them? The racial divide needs the chance to heal. It's not an option. What we see around us in our neighborhoods and in the media is painful, exhausting, and humbling, but we should work together to solve this. It is too important not to.

## APPLICATION

There are several things you could try to help close the racial divide. Here are just some suggestions to get the conversation started.

- Make the relationship a priority. What steps can you personally take to make improving racial relations a priority in your life?
- Be willing to accept that there will be disappointments and setbacks in the building of that relationship.
- Don't play the blame game with the group you are trying to connect with.
- Let go of the desire to fix or change the other person and be willing to forgive.

There may be other things to try, but this at least gives you a starting point. The issue of repairing a broken relationship seems overwhelming. These are small steps that anyone can try. And never forget—with God, all things are possible!

## MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK

Identify one person of a different ethnicity, national background, or skin color with whom you can begin building or improving an existing relationship. Add the person to your daily prayer list, and ask God to open your eyes to opportunities and give you the wisdom to build a relationship with that person.

Make a list of ways you can reach out to this neighbor. Look for areas of common interest, ground on which you can stand with this neighbor.

## CONCLUSION

It is my heartfelt belief that many people have good intentions, that they care about the racial divisions in our country. I also believe many have no idea how to help and where to start. And deep down, many believe the racial division has reached a point that it is too far gone to save. I hope that is not true. If we give up, the outcomes are bleak. The alternative is to leave things the

way they are today and just hope for the best. But can our nation handle the possible results of future deterioration? Are we prepared to see more riots, more funerals, more caskets until one or both groups are extinct? When one group feels the bus of progress has not only left them but backed up over them, we shouldn't be surprised if they stand and fight. America, hear the voices of those who feel left behind. They are crying out for justice. They are crying out for our attention.

The only hope is the light of Christ that shines brightly in the lives of God's people. But the forces speaking against unity and reconciliation resist the light of Christianity because it is a threat to their way of life. It is a threat to the darkness of sin. So, the world will hate Christians just as it hated Jesus. But remember who rose victoriously from the grave. The expectant joy of the resurrection is a source of comfort for Christians. Jesus is saying, "Look to the clouds; your Savior will return." Keep your ears open to the voice of the Bridegroom and drown out the voices in the world. "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete" (John 3:29).