

Racism, Riots, and the Gospel

In light of the recent events and unrest in our country, I need to talk about them. Racism, riots, and the Gospel. But to be honest, I'd rather not. Because I don't know exactly what to say. And what not to say.

And I'm pretty certain that whatever I say, some of you will find it unacceptable. It won't be worded just right, or I won't include something you think I should, and you'll find fault.

I'm also worried I might offend some of you. And I'd rather not.

I Feel Compelled

But I feel compelled. I feel compelled by the events themselves, I feel compelled to address them from a biblical worldview, I feel compelled by the Spirit, and I feel compelled by a host of thoughts that I think are worthy of being heard.

Plus, I'm tired of rhetoric that consists of vague generalities meant to placate people instead of confronting the issues. "If we just get on a stage with each other and have a conversation, everything will be alright." I don't think so.

I'm also tired of the mob mentality and shallow "crowd-think" of social media. Fueled by impulse, extremists, and a lack of critical thinking. Including slogans that sound good and feel good but *do* little good. And often represent a whole lot of bad.

10 Thoughts

So I'm going to lay out 10 thoughts, that I hope addresses some of that, and helps us have the mind of Christ in all this.

"Lord, I don't know exactly what to do, or say, by my eyes are on you (2 Chron 20:12). Will you give us eyes to see and ears to hear? Help us apply the essence and ethic of the Gospel to all this. We pray in Jesus' name, amen."

Here's the first thought:

1. Most black people live in a state of constant wariness and weariness because of the distrust they feel or experience from time to time.

Not all. But most. A constant state.

I've never walked into a department store and noticed the security guard tailing me. Ever.

They do. Maybe not every time, but enough times to cause them to look over their shoulder to see who's looking over their shoulder.

We need to realize that and try to understand how wary and weary that makes them. The very thing King David expressed in Psalm 55. For our black brothers and sisters in Christ, it gives words to their heart when their heart is without words.

[1] Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! [2] Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, [3] because of the noise of the

enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me. (Ps 55:1-3; ESV)

That's how they feel. Wary and weary because of the distrust they experience.

2. Instances of police brutality toward those who are black amplify feelings of fear and distrust of their own.

Fear that it might happen to them. Or their kids. It's amplified. As is distrust of the police in general.

Instances of abusive power amplify feelings that are already there. They resurrect images and events of the past that cause them to wonder whether that might happen again, on a widespread basis. Brutality reminds them of their own negative experiences with police.

It's expressed in Ps 55:4-8.

[4] My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. [5] Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. [6] And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; [7] yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah [8] I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest." (Psalm 55:4-8; ESV)

That's how they feel. And it's important that we realize that. And try to understand it.

Try to understand their amplified fear and distrust in times like these. To do otherwise, especially as followers of Jesus, fails to love them as ourselves. (Mt 22:39)

3. Most black people are not looking for sympathy, just an acknowledgment of their plight, and progress to change it.

An acknowledgement of how they feel, what they experience, and what they fear.

Not that we need to fall all over ourselves and lay it on thick. Or virtue signal to make sure they know we care. But that we should listen well, acknowledge their plight, and express it in a personal, genuine way.

"I can see why you feel and think the way you do. And it makes me ache. Is there anything I can do?"
That goes a long way.

But they're also looking for progress. Not just words, but progress. Progress to *change* their plight. Measured most by their personal experience.

That's the change most black people desire. The progress most want. A diminishing fear and an increasing trust. Both in their heart *and* ours.

Which can only be accomplished by the power and presence of Jesus. Only he can change our heart. Only his love can drive out fear. And until you believe that and submit to him, we will never make progress.

Give way to the mind of Christ. Acknowledge the plight of those in distress. And grow in your love and trust for all who are made in the image of God.

4. When something happens to legitimize the fears of black people, they want others to condemn it for them and with them.

Especially white people. And rightly so.

When a black man is unjustly shot by a white man while jogging, or a black man is unnecessarily killed by a white policeman, they want people to say so. Openly and unequivocally. Without caveats, excuses, or anything else.

And we should. We should condemn those things. Sometimes, silence really is compliance.

Does that mean you have to post something on social media? Or stand on the corner with a bullhorn? No. But you do have to tell someone. You do need to speak to your circle of influence.

And just because you do, just because you say something, doesn't mean you're agreeing with everything that everybody else is saying. It just means you're condemning what you should. Acknowledging what you can. Supporting what you ought.

Stand with them. Condemn it for them.

5. Only the lunatic fringe has failed to condemn the abuse of power in George Floyd's death.

In fact, I haven't even heard of someone not doing so.

One poll I heard mentioned found that 96% of Americans condemn it. And while that 4% on the lunatic fringe is still a shameful problem, I don't know that there's ever been such widespread agreement on something in our country. Not even terrorist attacks.

Don't be on the lunatic fringe when it comes to condemning the abuse of power and brutality. Don't even get close by making excuses for it.

6. Too many people have failed to condemn the rioting and looting.

The vast majority condemn the abuse of power, but far fewer condemn the abuse of freedom. With some even condoning it. Don't go there either.

Every single one of us, black and white, must call the rioting and looting what it is: evil and wrong. Openly and unequivocally. Because Isaiah 5:20 says – *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.* Woe, as in doomed and pitied. Better to say it like it is and call it wrong.

And don't succumb to the thinking that the reasons somehow justify it. The anger somehow excuses it.

Two wrongs don't make a right. Or 2000 wrongs in this case. From destroying stores and buildings, to stealing and killing. Including the killing of police officers and bystanders. It should be condemned. All of it.

I'm not talking about peaceful protests; I'm talking about rioting and looting. Even if those who are doing it feel "unheard." Rioting may be the voice of the unheard, but that doesn't make it right.

Frustration is never a justification to kill, steal, and destroy. The only exception being an unjust government and unjust laws. Like in Communist China or North Korea these days. Or Great Britain in the 1700's. Nazi Germany in the 1930's. Our country in the Civil War.

Short of that, short of an unjust government and unjust laws, and short of exhausting all other means, it's not okay to defy the law with civil disobedience and violence.

Listen to what **Dr. Martin Luther King** said about that in his Nobel Prize lecture, 1964.

“Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.” (Dr. Martin Luther King, Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>)

Rioting and looting is evil and wrong. Just like the abuse of power that killed George Floyd is evil and wrong. Condemn both.

7. To the extent that you fail to call all wrongdoing sin, you diminish your voice and perspective on what you do call wrong.

If you call the death of George Floyd sinful, wicked, and wrong, as you should; but you condone or soften your response to the rioting and looting, you diminish your voice on the former. And vice versa.

Don't do that. Be heard on all fronts. Call it all wrong. Police brutality, abuse of power, vigilante justice, destruction of property, wanton violence, senseless killing, all of it.

King David did. Ps 55:9-11.

[9] Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues [as in disrupt their communication and conniving]; for I see violence and strife in the city. [10] Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; [11] ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace. (Psalm 55:9–11; ESV)

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? He lamented for himself in v1-8, and condemned the rioting in v9-11. Both-and.

Failing to call it all wrong, including the looting, is a poor rationalization and blatant accommodation of lawlessness. The very thing that sparked all this in the first place.

Don't do that. Let your voice and perspective be heard instead of ignored, by calling all wrongdoing sin.

8. We must distinguish between those who are sinful and those who aren't.

Just because *some* people are racist, doesn't mean all people are racist. And we need to distinguish between the two, or we will come to the wrong conclusions as a society and take the wrong actions.

Same for police officers. Just because *some* have abused their power, doesn't mean all do. In fact, the vast majority don't.

And likewise those who are black. Just because some resort to criminal behavior, doesn't mean all do. The vast majority are good, upstanding citizens.

Black, white, or blue – we need to distinguish. In our thinking, our hearts, our speech, and our actions. We need to distinguish between those who are sinful and those who aren't. Otherwise, we will succumb to racism, stereotypes, and fear.

9. We must base our thoughts and conclusions on facts and truth, not feelings or ideology.

Because feelings and ideology tend to cloud our thinking instead of clarify it. They tend to lead us to wrong conclusions instead of right ones.

I once served on a jury with a woman who had been attacked by a man earlier in her life, and it clouded her entire thinking about men. They were all bad. End of story. Because she allowed her feelings to determine her thinking instead of the facts.

Or how about those who think that all black people are looters because that's who they see doing most of the looting. Or those who think all white people are racist, because the two go hand-in-hand according to some ideologies.

We can't do that. Not if we're going to live well. Love one another. Flourish as a society.

Frederick Douglass spoke to our tendency in this respect, in 1883. He was a civil rights pioneer in the days both preceding and following the abolition of slavery.

And on the occasion of a Supreme Court decision that threatened to undermine the civil rights of black people in his day, he said this:

"The temptation at this time, is of course, to speak more from feeling than reason, more from impulse than reflection." (Frederick Douglass, The Civil Rights Case, October 22, 1883.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-civil-rights-case/>)

More from feeling and impulse than reason and reflection.

It was the temptation then, and it's the temptation now. To give greater weight to our feelings, and lesser weight to the facts. If we even care to find the facts. Greater weight to the ideologies and mantras being repeated, and lesser weight to the truth, the data, the experience of the whole.

We must base our thoughts and conclusions these days on facts and truth, not feelings or ideology. Otherwise, we're doomed.

10. The only thing that is going to heal wounds and restore trust, is the essence of the Gospel.

Repentance, forgiveness, love, and grace.

Repentance for anything racist you've ever thought or done. "Search me and know my heart, oh God." No repentance, no peace. Not in your soul and not in our country.

And forgiveness. Another part of the Gospel. Forgiveness for those who have wronged you, even when they haven't apologized. No forgiveness, no peace. At least not in your heart.

Same for love. Loving your neighbor as yourself. Whether you're white and your neighbor's black, or black and your neighbor's white. Love them. It's the essence of the Gospel. The essence of Jesus' love for us.

And last is grace. The only thing that's going to heal wounds and restore trust, is grace upon grace. Grace when you've been offended. Grace when you've been hurt. Grace that reaches out. Grace that includes. Grace that shows deference. Grace that blesses.

Black or white, if we continue to hold grudges, demand vengeance, or think less of one another, we're done. Our culture as we know it will end. And it will be replaced by a tense tribalism, complete with even more geographic segregation, and a restriction of all our rights and livelihoods.

We must return to the essence of Jesus. The essence of the Gospel. Believers and unbelievers alike. It's the only way we will heal, trust, and endure the failures along the way.

"Lord, help us apply the Gospel. Lead us to repentance and forgiveness. Help us root out racism. Cultivate a mutual love in our hearts, our church, our city, and our nation. In Jesus' name, amen."