

WHO'S MY

NEIGHBOR?

TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION



**Church of the Highlands
Small Groups**

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Note: Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the New International Translation (NIV). Other translations used in these materials are the New Living Translation (NLT), the English Standard Version (ESV), the Amplified Bible (AMP), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus emphasized the second greatest commandment, that we are to “*love our neighbor as ourselves*,” someone asked, “*Who is my neighbor?*” Jesus answered with a story about a man who crossed the racial divide to serve another man in need (Luke 10:25-37). Reconciliation between races is very close to the heart of God. We see over and over throughout Scripture that “*every people, tribe, nation, and tongue*” are a part of His Kingdom. Every person of every race is important to God, and He does not see any particular people group as more valuable than others. If we read the New Testament through the lens of racial reconciliation, we will see this topic is frequently and passionately discussed. As God reconciled us to Himself through Jesus, He also began the process of reconciling us to each other. He greatly desires for His people to come together as one here on earth. As Paul said in Galatians 3:28, “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

As Christians, we must fight for the reality of Heaven to be seen on earth: every people group equally valued, embraced, and supported. In this *Who's My Neighbor?* Small Group, we will discuss God's heart for diversity, the obstacles we face in America when it comes to justice and equality, potential barriers that might keep us from personally embracing diversity in our own lives, and our responsibility as believers to be advocates for those who are marginalized in our society. Our goal for this Small Group is for all of us to recognize God's heart for racial reconciliation and to take steps together towards unity.

Before we begin, let's prepare our hearts. There are a few things we need to do in order to make these conversations impactful and fruitful in our own lives and the lives of our fellow group members.

1. Take on a posture of humility.

Each of us is here to learn and grow. If we approach these discussions with humility, recognizing there is a lot we do not yet know, we will make great progress together. *A closed mind and prideful heart are barriers that will prevent meaningful change.*

2. Seek to understand others.

It's more important to be understanding than to be right. Instead of trying to convince other group members of our perspective, we should listen to their experiences and put ourselves in their shoes. If we listen before we speak, we will be better equipped to empathize and love others well. And we will learn!

3. Be honest and kind.

It's ok to not have all the answers. It's ok to feel awkward and uncomfortable. It's also ok to say the wrong thing. We can only break down these barriers if we open up, push each other to grow, and give grace to each other when we put our foot in our mouth. Let's create a safe space to work things out together.

INTRODUCTION

We also want to set some Group Guidelines for this group to help lay the foundation for healthy conversations. We will go over these Group Guidelines at the beginning of each meeting.

Group Guidelines

1. Agree to make this a safe space for everyone in our group.
2. Offer grace quickly.
3. Take condemnation off the table.
4. Give everyone an opportunity to speak.
5. Use words like “me” and “you,” not “us” and “them.”
6. Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.
7. Engage in the conversation.
8. Take risks and be willing to ask the “dumb” questions.
9. Be respectful of others’ opinions and experiences.
10. If you feel resistant to someone else’s perspective, pause before you speak. Ask God why you feel that way.
11. Listen to what God is saying to you, and respond.

It’s going to be a powerful semester. Let’s get started!

Please note: This curriculum is currently “in beta.” We are still learning and will continue to make this content better each semester. Please feel free to send feedback to smallgroups@churchofthehighlands.com.

WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week One—The Value of Hard Conversations

Get to Know Your Group

Before we dive into the content for this group, let's get to know each other first. Go around in a circle and share your name, a little bit about yourself, and why you decided to attend a *Who's My Neighbor?* group this semester.

Big Idea

They say, “Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy,” and that is certainly true in the case of racial reconciliation in America. History shows us that while many strides have been taken in the years since the Emancipation Proclamation towards the equality of all Americans, these strides have been hard-fought and hard-won at every turn. Even when we've seen improvement, that improvement has come up short in one way or another, which is why America has had eight different “Civil Rights Acts” since the first one in 1866 granted citizenship to all people born in the United States, regardless of race. Though we have come a long way since then, a disparity in equality between races still exists in our society today, and many prejudices have been sustained through the generations, whether knowingly or unknowingly. We have more work to do!

Talking about racial injustice and inequality is hard. There's no doubt about it. There are many valid emotional tensions bubbling beneath the surface of this topic. Many people do not feel heard when they try to speak up about racial injustice, causing deep frustration or hurt. Many others do not feel equipped to engage in the conversation, afraid to say the wrong thing. The fear of causing offense or being offended has caused most of us to dodge this conversation at some point in our lives. But we are coming to the table today because we know justice is more important than our comfort.

Each of us has a role to play, and the first step is to lean into the conversation about race. That's why we're so excited about this Small Group. As we choose every week to engage in discussion, we will peel back layers and discover new things about ourselves and the people around us. We will learn to speak about matters of race with both grace and Biblical authority. We will become equipped to advocate for those who are suffering injustice. And we will grow in our ability to develop deep, meaningful relationships with people who do not look like us. It may not always be easy. Chances are, at some point this semester, each of us will either offend someone else, be offended, or both. We have to give each other space to say the wrong thing in this group. In the end, it will be worth it. Awkward is the only way forward, so let's embrace the discomfort, have the hard conversations, show each other mercy, and become united in our heart for racial reconciliation and justice.

Scripture

So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when He judges you.
James 2:12-13 NLT

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.
Proverbs 27:6

Discussion Questions

- In what ways have you engaged with the topics of racial reconciliation and justice in the past?
- What is one fact about America's history with race that has left an impression on you since you learned it?
- What are you hoping to get out of this Small Group? How do you want to be different at the end of the semester?

Action Step

Decide in your heart to approach this Small Group with humility and grace. Commit to listening, learning, and lamenting when others share painful experiences. Ask God to give you an open mind and heart so that you can receive truth and use what you learn to affect change in the world around you. Also, take some time this week to learn more about America's history with race through a documentary or podcast.

Prayer

Father, thank You for leading me to this Small Group this semester. I know racial reconciliation and justice are Your heart for mankind, and I want to learn how to be an agent of change for what is important to You. I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn, grow, and become an advocate for justice. Help me be open-minded, humble, gracious, and brave as I navigate these conversations this semester.



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Week Two—Empathy

Big Idea

Read John 11:1-35.

In this passage, Jesus sets a powerful example for us in how to live in relationship with others. He models a trait that will be crucial in our efforts towards unity and reconciliation: empathy. When Jesus was just moments away from raising Lazarus from the dead, He stopped to feel what Lazarus' sisters were feeling. He knew how Lazarus' story would end and even said it plainly (*"This sickness will not end in death"* - verse 4), but He still took a moment to weep with His friends who were hurting deeply. Jesus didn't weep out of fear or hopelessness; He wept out of love. His love for His friends compelled Him to take on their pain and feel the weight of it personally. In sharing what Lazarus' sisters felt in that moment of despair, He communicated great love and value to them.

Theologian Greg Boyd says, "Love ascribes worth to others at cost to yourself." Empathy validates the feelings of others and gives them worth and weight, even when our perspectives might be different. When we take the time to empathize, we deepen our bond with one another by saying, "I see you, and I want to know more about what you've experienced." Offering this opportunity for connection and validation is a gift to others. It gives them freedom to be open and fully themselves. It will ultimately enrich our lives as well, experiencing the unifying effects of truly feeling with others. Empathy is key to oneness.

The journey towards reconciliation will require each of us to meet others where they are: to be willing to lay our own perspectives and experiences to the side in order to better understand the other person. When we practice empathy, we allow someone else's emotional experience to impact our hearts. While this practice does not necessarily always lead to agreement about a particular issue, it does lead to deeper connection with the other person. And often, we will find ourselves compelled to partner with them and act on their behalf. Truly feeling what other people feel not only promotes oneness but can renew our passion for justice. Empathy is a powerful, important aspect of the work we will do in this group.

Empathy specialist Justin Masterson has developed a practical way to think about and practice empathy in our conversations with others. Remember **DIRO**¹:

- **D - Decide** that the other person is worthy of our empathic connection.
 - We need to choose to recognize the worth and validity of their human experience. The world has affected them in a real way. We must choose not to dismiss them.

- **I - Identify** their emotional experience.
 - Our emotional response to a situation they've responded to emotionally may be different. Instead of focusing on the context of the situation, we need to focus on the emotion.
- **R - Recall** a time when we felt a similar emotion.
 - In doing so, we are recognizing a shared experience and a shared humanity.
 - Note: This is all going on in our heads. We aren't necessarily stopping the person to say, "Hey, I've had that feeling!" We are allowing ourselves to associate our humanity with theirs.
- **O - Observe** our own reaction.
 - We need to acknowledge how the person's story is making us feel. What is it doing to our hearts?
 - When we acknowledge that reaction, we give that feeling validity and purpose. This often causes us to ask deeper follow-up questions like, "What was it like, to experience that?" or "What did you need in that moment?" Asking these questions allows us to form a greater connection as we learn more about the other person.

As we grow in the skill of empathy, we will make great progress towards our goal of reconciliation.

Scripture

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" He asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

John 11:32-35

Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.

Romans 12:15 NLT

Empathy Exercise

Today, we are going to view 8 provocative images that have something to do with the conversation on race. As each image is shown, silently identify your immediate emotional response to that image.

Once we have gone through all 8 images, we will take a minute to silently reflect on which image we had the strongest reaction to, and we will try to identify why we had that reaction.

Discussion Questions

- Which of the images did you have the strongest reaction to, and why? As you listen to your fellow group members share, try to practice DIRO. Identify the emotional response, relate to that emotion, and lean in to ask follow-up questions. Work to understand why they feel the way they do.
- Discuss this exercise and how it made you feel. What did you learn?
- How do you think empathy will help us on this journey towards reconciliation? How do you feel right now about this challenge to grow in empathy this semester? (Excited, intimidated, eager, hesitant, etc.)

Action Step

Talk to a friend or family member about the concept of empathy this week. Process how you're feeling about the challenge to give other people's perspective weight and worth, even when it's different from yours. Identify any hesitations you have within you, and bring them to God in prayer. Ask Him to help you grow in your ability to empathize with others and learn to love people more deeply throughout the semester.

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for purposely experiencing everything we experience here on earth so that You could understand us. We know that because You know how we feel, You actively advocate for us before the Father. Help us to truly feel with other people like You do. Help us to validate other people's experiences like You do. Move us to advocate for others the way You advocate for us. Thank You for loving us with kindness, grace, and empathy. Help us be like You.

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WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week Three—Who's My Neighbor?

Big Idea

When Jesus emphasized the second greatest commandment, that we are to *“love our neighbor as ourselves,”* a lawyer asked for some clarification: *“Who is my neighbor?”* In response, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan who was traveling to Jericho when he encountered a Jewish man dying on the side of the road. The man had been robbed, beaten and left for dead. A Jewish priest and a Levite, traveling on the same road earlier that day, had each seen the man and chosen to look away, cross to the other side of the road, and keep walking. The Samaritan, however, stopped to help the man. With a backdrop of racial tension between Samaritans and Jews, Jesus’ message rang clear to His listeners that we are to love everyone. Unity and racial reconciliation are the heart of God. He longs for us to see each person as masterpiece, created in His image.

There are four things the Good Samaritan did in loving his Jewish neighbor that we can learn from as we seek racial reconciliation. First, he saw the man lying on the road and did not turn his gaze. He saw his pain. Second, he had compassion for the man. Unlike the priest and Levite who focused on their own needs and what could possibly be at stake for them if they got involved, the Samaritan focused on the needs of someone else and recognized that this man’s life was at stake. Third, he went to him and engaged with him. In order to love the Jewish man, he could not stay standing on the other side of the road; he needed to go be with him. Lastly, the Samaritan took action and served the wounded man by bandaging him, taking him to an inn to heal, and even personally covering the cost of his care. We, too, can love our neighbors—which includes everyone, regardless of race—by seeing and acknowledging them and their pain, having compassion for them, engaging in relationship with them, and serving them.

Scripture

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Luke 10:27

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:36-37

Discussion Questions

- What feelings do you think the different characters in this story experienced? (The lawyer, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the Jewish man hurting on the side of the road)
- The Samaritan crossed the racial and cultural divide and saw the pain and need of the Jewish man. What are some of the needs and pain people experience who are from backgrounds different than yours?
- What does the phrase “I don’t see color” mean to you? Discuss the implications of this statement.

Action Step

This week, commit to truly seeing the people God brings across your path – this includes seeing their pain, their history, their culture, and their heart. Ask God to stir compassion in your heart, and look for ways to meet their needs and serve them.

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for teaching me what love looks like. Help me to see all people as my neighbors and love them well. Stir my heart with compassion and show me how I can serve the people I meet each day.



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Week Four—Image Bearers

Big Idea

When we see a silver apple, golden arches, a red target, or a cross, we immediately associate them with specific things: Apple products, McDonald's, Target superstore, Jesus Christ. Since the beginning of time, we have been conditioned to associate certain things, and their value, with the images we see. The Apple logo speaks of high-end technology; the big, yellow "M" makes us hungry for a quick, inexpensive meal. When God wanted to create a visual image of who He is, He made us—human beings. The Bible says in Genesis 1:26-28 that we were "created in the image and likeness of God." Not long after we were created in God's image, the schemes of Satan began to distort this in our minds, and sin was brought into the world. The enemy has attempted to "brand" us with his lies ever since. Instead of seeing the image of God in each other, the history of sin has conditioned us to see the varying shades of humanity as images to categorize. Instead of a consistent association as the reflection of God, we are the sum of often divisive and devaluing experiences. This is a lie! The truth is that as bearers of His image, we are His reflection in the world. It's time to rebrand ourselves, and get back to God's original plan!

Because we are made in the image of Almighty God, whose value is without limit, we, too, are invaluable in His Kingdom. All of us—regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Red, yellow, black, brown, and white faces all reflect the image of the same God and have the same inherent value and worth. When we devalue someone else because of their skin color, we overlook God's image in them and subsequently devalue Him. All races were created to look like their Creator. To insult an image-bearer is to insult God Himself. When looking at any person, it is vital for us to see God's image within them. Knowing the value of God is reflected in that person, we will be inspired to treat them with the honor and respect due to our Creator and King.

Scripture

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:26-27

Discussion Questions

- What do you think it means to "devalue" someone? Describe a time in your life when you felt devalued.

- Do you feel the opinions of people who look, speak, or act different than you are as important as the opinions of those who look, speak, and act like you?
- How would looking for God's image in others change the way you feel about them and value them?

Action Step

As you encounter people this week, take a moment to acknowledge God's image within them before you speak to them. This practice will help you approach others with respect and honor. Pay attention to whether or not this changes the way you interact with them. Noticing these things will help you identify any biases you have that you need to overcome.

Prayer

Father, thank You for creating me, and all people, in Your image. Help me to see the value we share as image bearers. I rebuke the lies the enemy has used to blind me from seeing Your reflection in others. Help me to love and honor every person I encounter.



WEEK FIVE

SHARE A

MEAL

WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week Six—Diversity

Big Idea

In our world today, we are seeing a new push and emphasis on “diversity.” Leaders of companies, organizations, and educational institutions across the country are re-evaluating their leadership models and emphasizing diverse representation in student bodies, staff, and marketing materials. Though our society is becoming more aware of the importance of diversity, this isn’t at all a new concept to our God. He created a diverse world on purpose, for a purpose. Across a diverse human race, we see the image of God. We cannot get the full picture of who He is without all the pieces of the puzzle. The Body of Christ is not whole without diversity.

As Christians, God desires for us to live life embracing diversity. Part of the answer to the prayer, “*Your Kingdom come,*” is seeing the visual reality of Heaven manifest in our communities. When we look around at our Small Groups, our children’s soccer teams, and our dinner tables, the hope is that we will see the same spectrum of faces that we will one day see in Heaven, as “*every nation, tribe, people, and language*” come together before the throne to worship Jesus (Revelation 7:9). We have the opportunity to start building this kind of community today! We can begin to intentionally enlarge our circle to include people that are of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds. We need to seek out people with different perspectives and experiences and give them a seat at our table. It is God’s will for us to do life all together. When we do, we will truly see the wholeness of His image and experience the fullness of Kingdom life!

Scripture

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Revelation 7:9

“This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’”

Matthew 6:9-10

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think God values diversity? Why is it important for each of us (and for organizations and institutions) to value and champion diversity?
- Do you see the value other races and cultures bring to the world? What kinds of hesitations do you think you might have about embracing diversity in your life?
- Looking at your circle of friends, how intentional have you been to create a diverse community? What can you do to enlarge your circle? What can you do to diversify your circle?

Action Step

It's time to enlarge your circle! Look for opportunities this week to connect with people whose race and background are different than yours. Ask a coworker to coffee, invite another student to sit with you at lunch, or reach out to an acquaintance on social media. Ask questions (be sensitive and kind), listen, and enjoy discovering more of who God is as He is reflected more clearly in the faces around you.

Prayer

Father, thank You for giving me an opportunity to see Your image wholly in the diversity of my community. Help me to embrace those who are different from me. Help me see the beauty and value You see in each person. Show me if I have anything in my heart that keeps me from fully embracing people from different backgrounds, and help me get rid of it. Let Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven, and let it begin with me!



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Week Seven—Overcoming Bias

Big Idea

“Prejudice” is a preconceived notion about a person or group of persons based on their culture, race, background, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, etc. When we are prejudiced, we “pre-judge” someone based on stereotypical factors associated with their particular people group. This creates a bias, or a mindset, that causes us to favor one group over another. Unfortunately, all of us are prejudiced in some form or fashion, whether we know it or not. Most of the time, we develop these mindsets from a young age due to the influence of our families, our school environments, or media. These unbiblical perspectives ingrained by our upbringing develop what is called “unconscious bias.” While we might not have chosen to have these prejudices, we are now responsible for what we do with them. If we want to engage others with the love of Jesus, we have to do intentional work to identify our unconscious biases and actively remove them from our mindset towards others.

This work requires us to consider different people groups and our initial responses to people in those groups. What stereotypes do we tend to assign to a specific group? What is our mindset when approaching someone from that group? It may be helpful to think back to childhood and how our families talked about certain people groups. What was our impression of people of a certain race or background when we were in elementary school? What about high school? After we have identified any prejudices we have, we need to focus on changing the way we think. The first step is to adopt a mentality of “us” and “we” rather than “them” and “they.” Assigning labels or putting people in categories will never help us overcome bias and will only limit the relationships we develop with others. “They” separates “us” from “them.” We have to remember that we are one body in Christ Jesus. We are brothers and sisters, valued equally by God, given equal access to His power, and equally capable of doing extraordinary things for His glory.

It's important to note that being one and equal before God does not mean that our specific heritages, cultures, or histories aren't significant or relevant! We can celebrate our differences while rejoicing that we have been grafted together into the family of God. Our unique earthly experiences should not determine how we communicate and fellowship with one another. We are truly family!

Scripture

My fellow believers, do not practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of partiality [toward people—show no favoritism, no prejudice, no snobbery]. For if a man comes into your meeting place wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in, and you pay special attention to the one who wears the fine clothes, and say to him, “You sit here in this good seat,” and you tell the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down [on the floor] by my

footstool,” have you not discriminated among yourselves, and become judges with wrong motives? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and [as believers to be] heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you [in contrast] have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress and exploit you, and personally drag you into the courts of law? Do they not blaspheme the precious name [of Christ] by which you are called?

If, however, you are [really] fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself [that is, if you have an unselfish concern for others and do things for their benefit]” you are doing well. But if you show partiality [prejudice, favoritism], you are committing sin and are convicted by the Law as offenders. For whoever keeps the whole Law but stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of [breaking] all of it. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you murder, you have become guilty of transgressing the [entire] Law. Speak and act [consistently] as people who are going to be judged by the law of liberty [that moral law that frees obedient Christians from the bondage of sin]. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; but [to the one who has shown mercy] mercy triumphs [victoriously] over judgment.

James 2:1-13 AMP

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Romans 14:13

Discussion Questions

- What are some stereotypes associated with your background (or backgrounds)?
- How does making assumptions about others keep us apart?
- What is a bias you unconsciously developed as a child? How do you think it was passed down to you? Were you aware of it before this group?
- What are some ways you can actively prevent passing prejudice and bias down to the next generation?

Action Step

Sit down with a pen and paper this week and make a list of some of the stereotypes you tend to assign to certain people groups. Pray through the list, asking God to help you remove those prejudices from your mindset towards others. Ask Him to help you change the way you think. Then, as you go through your week, if your mind jumps to any conclusions about someone based on the way they look, take that thought captive and remind yourself of the truth that you are both equal in the eyes of God!

Prayer

God, thank You for giving all of us such great value in Your eyes. I want to see every person the way You see them. I commit to overcoming the lies of the enemy that cause me to view myself as more valuable than others. I reject any stereotyping or conditioning that may have been passed down to me unconsciously. Please help me identify and remove any prejudice I have towards others and learn to love all people well.



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Week Eight—Forgiveness

Big Idea

As a result of living in a sinful and fallen world, the unfortunate reality is that we will be hurt and offended by others and we will also cause hurt and offense to others. The words and actions of others can wound us to the core. Things like neglect, abuse, violence, betrayal, discrimination, and cruel remarks can cause bitterness and resentment to infiltrate our hearts, and we can harbor unforgiveness (knowingly or unknowingly). Unforgiveness paralyzes us, inhibiting our ability to live, love others, and receive love fully. We may believe that withholding forgiveness punishes the offender, but in reality, it causes harm to us. Harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die. We need to forgive!

It's important for us to understand what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not minimizing the offense, forgetting what happened, or reconciling with the person. When we forgive, we release ourselves and the offender from the weight and pain of the offense. We surrender the event and offender to God, no longer allowing them to harm us or cause bitterness to fester in our hearts. As we do so, we become more open to developing deeper relationships, and we are able to live life more fully.

If we have been offended by someone who targeted us or stereotyped us because of the color of our skin, that can be a particularly painful experience. It can cause us to both harbor unforgiveness towards the offender and also question our own worth and identity. As we release the offense to God and forgive the offender, we need to take care to work through any shame we might have taken on as a result of the offense. None of us has any reason to be ashamed because of our race or ethnicity. We are equal to all others in the eyes of God, greatly loved and valuable to the Kingdom of God. We need to reject and be free from any lies of the enemy that would ever make us question our worth!

As we have gone through this curriculum, some of us may have realized that we have done or said something to someone out of prejudice, or told what we thought was just a harmless joke, that might have hurt that person deeply. It's Biblical and important for us to go to that person right away to repent and ask for forgiveness. Jesus said to do this before we even offer worship to Him! We need to do our part to bring healing to that person. God will use this experience to make us more compassionate, empathetic, and honoring of others. Let's take action to extend and receive forgiveness for discriminatory offenses. These are crucial steps in the work of racial reconciliation!

Scripture

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,

just as God through Christ has forgiven you.
Ephesians 4:31-32 NLT

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”
Matthew 5:23-24

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever been deeply offended by something someone said or did to you out of prejudice? What has been your journey to forgive that person?
- How can we forgive someone who does not seem remorseful? What is the value of doing this?
- Have you ever said something out of prejudice that offended others? How did you respond when you learned that it was offensive?

Action Step

If there is someone you need to forgive, surrender them to God today. Ask God to help you move forward free of offense. Also, make a list of any stereotypes you feel you've been labeled by, and replace those lies with the truth of your identity in Christ. Ask God for healing, and believe that you are who God says you are!

If you realize you have offended someone, go to that person as soon as possible. Humbly ask for forgiveness, and ask them if there is any way you can serve them today. Know that God will not hold this offense against you. You are learning and becoming more like Him!

Prayer

God, thank You for forgiving me and giving me the ability to forgive others who have hurt me deeply. Please show me any way I have let hurt and offense grow into unforgiveness in my heart. Help me surrender the offense and those who have offended me to You. Please show me if there is someone who I have hurt out of prejudice so that I can ask for their forgiveness. I ask for Your forgiveness for dishonoring someone made in Your image, and I thank You for Your faithfulness and willingness to forgive me. Help me love all people well with my words and my actions.



WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week Nine—Justice

Big Idea

“Justice” is defined as “fair and reasonable behavior and treatment.” In the first chapter of Isaiah, we see a deep lack of justice and righteousness in the land of Judah. The Israelites were rebellious, the land was desolate, cities had been demolished, and many were left on the margins of society. God was calling Israel to repentance, to turn from sin and return to Him, and to defend and support the weakest members of their nation. Next to seeing His people come back to Him, justice for the poor and oppressed was at the top of God’s list of priorities. As Pastor Larry Stockstill writes in the One Year Bible, “Justice protects a person’s equal rights.” Regardless of race, status, ethnicity, or ability, “all people are made in the image of God and deserve equal protection and peace.”

In our nation, the injustice and inequality experienced by American minorities has become a central topic of conversation. In recent years, many stories, documentaries, and other powerful resources have become available to help us better understand the way certain people groups have been historically deprived of an equal opportunity to thrive. While it may not be our current generation’s fault that oppressive systems and mindsets are ingrained in the fabric of our society, we have the opportunity to change the narrative by loving people well in our lifetime. Just because we have inherited an unjust society does not mean we are powerless to intervene and affect change.

It can seem hard to engage with issues of injustice today. Many people don’t feel equipped to discuss disparities in equality and the different ways that racial oppression plays out in our society. These problems can feel too big to solve. But, as believers, we cannot turn our eyes from the plight of the oppressed. That goes against the heart of our God. When we were completely powerless to change our circumstances (“*dead in our sins*,” as Paul says in Ephesians 2:1), God sent Jesus to make us alive again. In doing so, He revealed His heart for all people to be helped, to be justified, to be eligible for a redeemed life—regardless of our background or what got us into our situation in the first place. As the Body of Christ, we are called to emulate Him. This means actively helping those who do not have the power to change their circumstances and working to give everyone an opportunity to rise. Let’s be advocates, just as Jesus is our advocate, and commit to being agents of change.

Scripture

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.
Isaiah 1:17

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were

dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.
Ephesians 2:1,4-5

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever witnessed a racial injustice or felt an injustice was committed against you? If so, how did you respond?
- How does injustice communicate the devaluing of life? How can that value be restored to those who have suffered injustice?
- It's important for us to acknowledge the pain and injustice other people experience. How can we empathize or lament with oppressed communities or individuals?

Action Step

In order to become an advocate for justice, we need to educate ourselves on the injustices that exist in our society. Choose one of the resources listed at <https://www.churchofthehighlands.com/unity> and begin watching/listening/reading about the circumstances many minority groups experience. Also, reach out to someone of another race this week to talk about how your experiences in various aspects of life may differ. Ask questions about banking, education, employment, shopping, and general interaction with others.

Prayer

Lord, as I recognize the pain in our society, I cry out to You for Your love, grace, and mercy. I pray that You would make America a just nation of equal opportunity. I repent of any contribution I have knowingly or unknowingly made to racial injustice, and I commit to being an agent of change in my community and in our nation. Help me clearly see the suffering of others and properly lament in response, mourning with those who mourn. Help me identify opportunities where I can be a part of the solution. Thank You for giving me the opportunity to love others as You have loved me!



WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week Ten—Our Role

Big Idea

It's time to make it practical. We now know who Jesus was referring to when He told us to love our "neighbor" as ourselves. We have learned about the value every person has in the eyes of God and that we are all equally important to Him. We have also learned that there is a discrepancy between the universal equality of the Kingdom of Heaven and what people experience in our nation in today's society. Knowing that our world does not currently reflect Heaven, as Christians, we have work to do! We can start to bring the reality of Heaven to earth by taking personal responsibility for reconciliation and justice in our own sphere of influence, in our city, and, as much as we can, in our nation.

Our first step is to educate ourselves about the realities people around us experience. It's important for us to understand what is needed and what is causing pain. What minority groups are suffering injustice in our city, and how? What services are less accessible to low-income areas? In light of what we learn, we should seek out ways we can step in, and take action. If we personally needed something and had the means to get it for ourselves, we wouldn't hesitate to fill that need. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means we should have that same lack of hesitation in providing for the needs of our neighbors. Jesus said in Matthew 25:45 that if we see someone in need and refuse to help them, we are in effect refusing to help Him. He takes our involvement in the lives of the marginalized very seriously and very personally! So we should be diligent to attend to the needs of others and raise our voices for change when people experience inequities that we cannot adequately address ourselves. As we have discussed in previous weeks, many unjust practices in our nation feel too big to tackle, but if all of us take steps towards justice together, we can make substantial progress. We all just need to be faithful to play our part.

Scripture

"And He will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'"

Matthew 25:45 NLT

Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

James 2:15-16 NLT

"You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," [Jesus] said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever

wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away His life in exchange for many who are held hostage.”

Mark 10:42-25 MSG

Discussion Questions

- What is an injustice you are aware people experience in your community? Is anything currently being done to address it?
- Talk about a time when the Holy Spirit moved you to act on behalf of someone else. What hesitations did you have about helping meet their needs or advocating for them? What was the result of your intervention?
- In America, there are many instances of systemic oppression that might seem impossible to make right. What should you do when you encounter an injustice like this? Are there ways you can still help affect change, even if you can't solve the problem entirely?

Action Step

Research to identify some of the inequities marginalized people groups experience in your city. Look at how people in your community are responding and how you can get involved. Take action to advocate for others in some way this week, whether big or small (e.g. sign a petition, spend a Saturday morning at a local food kitchen, gather friends together to serve a local family in need). Ask the Holy Spirit to show you your role in advocating for justice and reconciliation, and commit to playing your part.

Prayer

God, thank You for giving me the ability to advocate for others. Even if I do not have extra resources to meet physical needs, You have given me a voice. Show me how to use what You have given me to affect change that dignifies people who are not valued in our society the way they are in the Kingdom of Heaven. Help me see the needs around me, and give me direction for how to respond. Use me to make a difference.



WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Week Eleven—Unity

Big Idea

At the heart of the Gospel, we see both salvation and reconciliation. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross saved us from our sins while also restoring what was lost in our relationship with God. Throughout this semester, we have seen that God's heart for reconciliation applies to both our relationship with Him and our relationships with each other. God's Word is clear that when we choose to believe in Jesus, a shift happens in our hearts and minds that empowers us to not only reconcile to Him but to all people. He gives us eyes to see the reality of Heaven: we are all one in Him. Colossians 3:10-11 tells us we *"have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."*

As God's chosen people, we are all called to "clothe" ourselves with characteristics that mark us as Christians and bond us together as one united body of Christ. Colossians 3:12-14 (NASB) says, *"Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."* When we "put on" the love of Jesus, we are marked by a unifying love for all people. This is the tell-tale sign of a Christian. 1 John 4:20 says plainly that we cannot love God if we do not extend love to others. When we commit to a life of loving Jesus, we commit to a life of loving everyone else! So, as we end our time together in this group, let's reaffirm our love for Jesus with a fresh commitment to pursuing unity with all people, no matter how different we might seem. Let's remind ourselves every day: Because we choose Jesus, we choose each other.

Scripture

...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.
Colossians 3:10-14

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.
1 John 4:20 NASB

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:5-6

Discussion Questions

- How does knowing that we cannot love God without loving all people affect your resolve to pursue unity?
- Of the characteristics that we “clothe” ourselves with as Christians, which are most difficult for you to put on as you work towards racial reconciliation? Why?
- Looking back over the semester, what do you feel has been your greatest takeaway from this group? How are you different now than you were in Week 1?

Action Step

1 Peter 1:22 (ESV) says, “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.” Moving forward, continue to ask God to show you anything in your heart or mind that might hinder you from pursuing unity with all people. Empowered by what you have learned this semester, be bold in your stance on racial reconciliation and desire to love like Jesus. Pray about your next step in leveraging your voice for reconciliation and justice. Consider leading a *Who’s My Neighbor?* Small Group, look for opportunities to advocate for the marginalized in your local community, and get involved!

Prayer

Jesus, I love You. I am committed to living a life of love for You and for everyone You love. Give me a pure heart and mind that see all people as You do. Help me grow in my love for You, so my love for others will increase accordingly. Give me boldness and strength to stand for unity, advocate for the oppressed, and be a light in this world. God, I ask You to bring reconciliation and justice to my community and our nation so that every person is seen and valued equally, as we all are in Your eyes. May Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven, in Jesus’ Name.



WHO'S MY NEIGHBOR?



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS RACIAL RECONCILIATION

A Prayer for Unity

Heavenly Father, I believe every person is created in Your image and likeness and therefore has inherent value. Help me see every person as worthy of respect and honor, regardless of their color, race, socioeconomic status, or physical and mental abilities. Help me love like You do and intentionally treat all people respectfully, so that my actions toward them will rightly acknowledge their value and bring honor to You.

Father, help me identify any thoughts or habits in my life that could be harmful to others, and transform the way I think through the power of Your Word. Give me courage to be an advocate for unity and oneness in my home, church, workplace, and other spaces where You have given me influence. I pray also for oneness in the body of Christ, so that the world will know that You sent Jesus. Thank you for the opportunities You give me every day to love, honor, and bring value to everyone who crosses my path. Make my light shine before others so that they may see my good works and glorify Your Name. In Jesus' Name I pray, Amen.

WEEK TWELVE

SHARE A

MEAL