THE PROPHETIC VOICE

WHAT CAN THE BIBLE TEACH US ABOUT RACE RELATIONS?

AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

> *IF THERE IS TO BE RECONCILIATION, FIRST THERE MUST BE TRUTH.*

– TIMOTHY B. TYSON

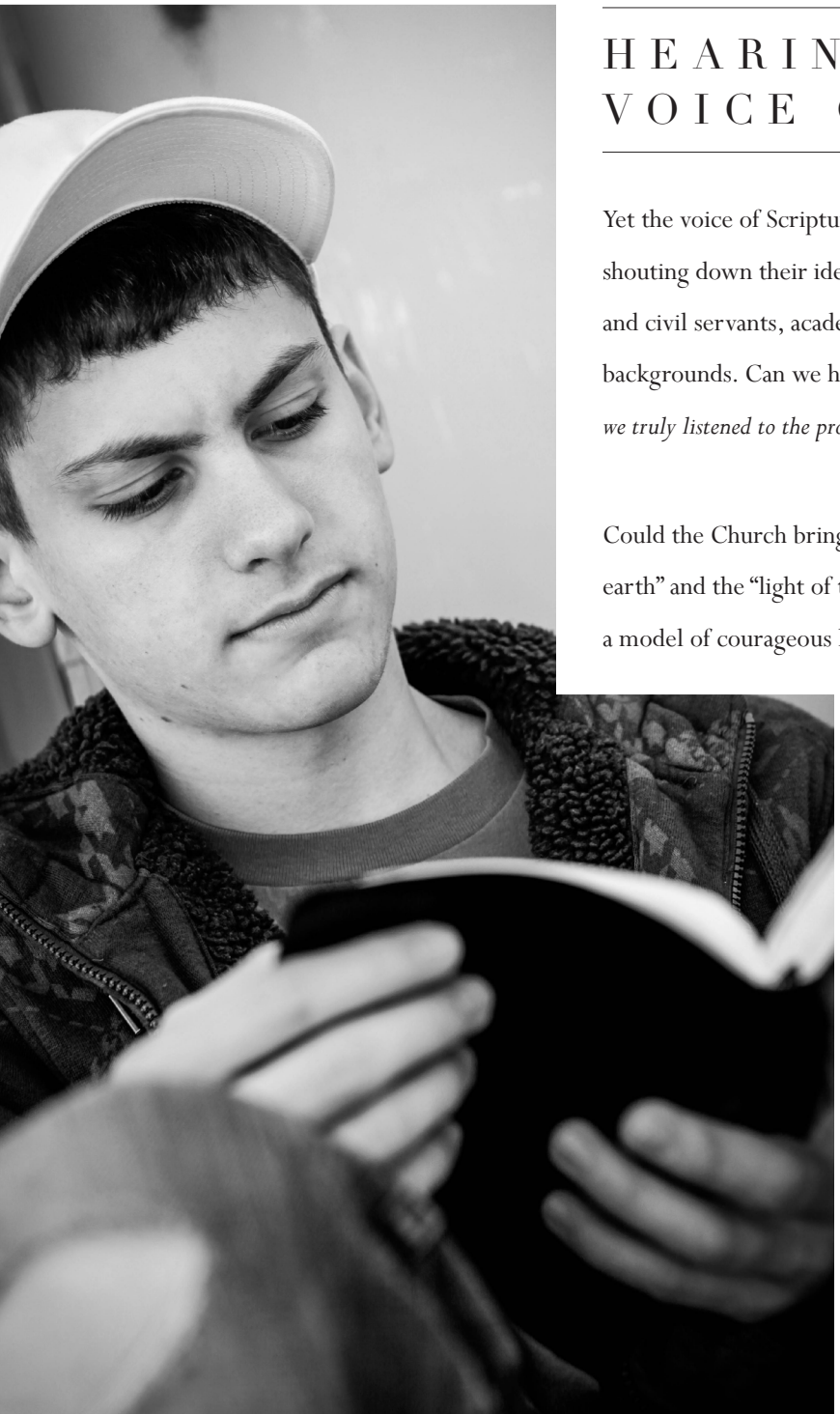
The names and towns are now etched in our national consciousness. *Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Eric Garner in New York. Tamir Rice in Cleveland. Freddy Gray in Baltimore.* Tensions flare up across the country, in cities and small towns alike, with protesters marching to demand an end to the violence, and occasionally sparking new violence. Each new tragedy reminds us that we have not outgrown the racial conflicts of the past.

There is a problem here. We can't deny it any longer. Something is broken.

And now we add Charleston, South Carolina, to the sad litany. A multiple shooting in a church, in a *Bible study*.

The mass media provide a steady patter of canned comments from the right and left, voices arguing past each other on issues of race, violence, and justice. But is there another voice that should be guiding our thoughts today, one with greater insight and depth of wisdom? Perhaps the nine fallen saints of the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston can inspire us to turn to the Bible for answers.

We're told that the inspired Scripture is "useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living" (2 Tim 3:16). At the same time, it is "alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). The Bible challenges us when we are wrong. It cuts through our deepest, underlying assumptions and unconscious biases, calling us to move beyond our long-held understandings. Unlike any other voice out there, the Bible speaks powerfully to our past and present, while avoiding conformity to any modern ideological bent. It must inform our response to contemporary issues.



HEARING THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF SCRIPTURE

Yet the voice of Scripture is increasingly drowned out by those concerned only with shouting down their ideological foes. Pundits and politicians, community organizers and civil servants, academics and clerics . . . so many voices, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. Can we hear and heed God's Word through this din? *What could happen if we truly listened to the prophetic voice of Scripture?*

Could the Church bring healing to our communities? Could we, as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt 5:13-16 NIV), present our neighbors with a model of courageous love and soul-baring truth? Might this be an opportunity for the Church's relevance to go on display as it speaks the truth of Scripture to volatile situations, provides solutions to broken circumstances, and fosters healing in hurting communities?

As we seek to move through our current crisis, the prophet Micah gives us a roadmap. What does God ask of us? "To do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God" (Mic 6:8).

> *YES, STOP DOING EVIL AND LEARN TO DO RIGHT. SEE THAT JUSTICE IS DONE.*

–ISAIAH 1:16-17

DO WHAT IS JUST

Do you practice justice in your daily decisions? Chances are, you do—or at least you try to. "All of us are moral beings," notes Kyle Fedler, assistant professor of religion at Ashland University. "Day in and day out we engage in behaviors and patterns of thought, feeling, and action that have a profoundly moral dimension" (2006, p. 3). As a Christian, perhaps as a Christian *leader*, you're aware of this moral dimension, and you seek to live your personal life with fairness to those around you. You don't cut in line at the bank, you tip your waiter, you don't cheat on your taxes, and—more to the point—you treat people of all races equally.

But in the passage cited above (Isa 1:16-17), the Lord challenges us to take justice a step further. "See that justice is done," he says through the prophet, using a rich Hebrew word with the basic meaning of *seek*. Search for it, study it, beat a path to it—but make justice a priority. Our personal morals may shape how we respond to various personal situations, but the prophetic voice of Scripture challenges us to ensure that justice is being done both in our personal relationships *and* by the larger social systems in which we participate.

Author and speaker David M. Bailey suggests that each of us has some level of implicit racial bias that has been shaped by our communities, our cultural experiences, and our racial backgrounds (Bailey, 2015). This bias frames how we see the world and how we perceive the circumstances around us. Thus, though one person may perceive systemic injustice in the political powers, economic systems, educational arenas, and civil service organizations (e.g., police) of our society, another may interpret the same situation quite differently. What will it mean to "see that justice is done" when we have very different ideas of what justice looks like?

The first chapter of Isaiah offers a clue in its repeated emphasis on cleansing. "Wash yourselves clean" (v. 16); "I will wash you clean as snow" (v. 18). Perhaps our lenses have been muddied by the media and our surrounding culture, but the Lord can clean us up and clear our vision. Rather than clinging to the assumptions we have gathered from the many voices around us, can we allow God to show us how things really are? He can remind us what justice means. In Isaiah 1, for instance, it means defending the vulnerable. It means guarding the rights of the orphans, the widows, and the "oppressed." How can we do this in our communities?

Then in Paul's letter to the Romans we are instructed to "Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody" (Rom 12:18). Clearly, retaliation is not the Christian way. Violent response to injustice does not honor the Lord. Neither does out-shouting our opponents or forcing our definitions of justice on them. We serve the Prince of Peace.

Many of us stop there, satisfied with maintaining peaceful relations between people of all races. But the text offers a further challenge: "Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good" (Rom 12:21). What sort of peaceful-yet-powerful actions could we take to overcome the evil of injustice in our society with God's goodness? Could we "conquer evil with good" by stepping into the situations and circumstances of others who are different from us? Could we genuinely listen to them, to better understand the experiences that have shaped their ideas of justice?

>> WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Consider collaborating with other leaders in your area to uncover the various justice needs of your community. How are the existing systems just or unjust? How are you and others seeking justice or contributing to injustice within your communities?

This could start simply by having conversations with others in your community—possibly voices you would not normally hear, from those of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

You might also consider connecting with local officials—police, judges, district attorneys—to gather their perspectives. Bring any issues you uncover back to your church or community.

Another suggestion would be to host a conversation within your community around issues like racial profiling—bringing together police, government, or other civil service officials to offer insight.

The idea here is to do more than simply hear or try to change another's opinion, but rather to ask honest questions. In this way, you could help your community comprehend the different perspectives within it by understanding the experiences that have shaped those opinions.

Bottom Line: God made the church to be a reconciling community. As agents of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19), we have a duty to pursue accord with those around us. However, as David M. Bailey highlights, the reality is "that the church is better known as a segregated community than a reconciling community." A humble conversation—in which we seek to understand rather than be understood—may serve as the first step toward racial reconciliation within our communities.

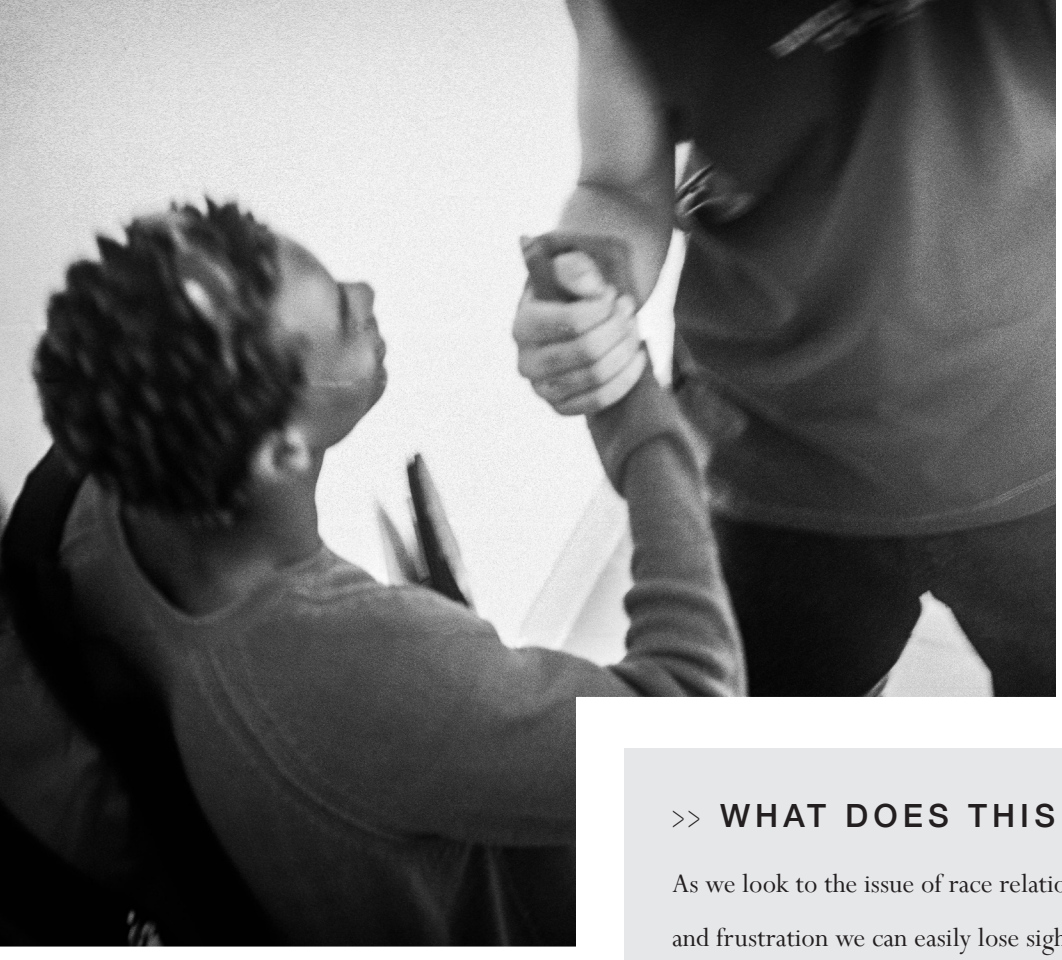
SHOW CONSTANT LOVE

Jesus challenged his followers to rethink how they looked at the laws that stood as the centerpiece of the Jewish tradition. Ultimately, he summed them up into what he described as the most important commandments: (1) "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" and (2) "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Mk 12:29-31). Jesus modeled this love for his disciples, teaching them to open their hearts to each other and to those around them. Christ's life was their example of what love looked like, and thus their love would be the evidence of their discipleship. The same remains true for his followers today. Our love for our neighbors not only points them to God, but also confirms us as disciples of Jesus.

> *"IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER, THEN EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES."*
>
> *–JOHN 13:35*

It's hard to overstate the importance of love in the Bible. Love is central to the overarching story of God sending his Son (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4-5) and essential to our response (Rom 13:10; 1 Cor 13:1-3). We love God and we love others. The two loves are firmly linked. "If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars," (1 Jn 4:20). Even more strikingly, John writes, "If we are rich and see others in need, yet close our hearts against them, how can we claim that we love God? My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action" (1 Jn 3:17-18).

In Micah's challenge to "show constant love," he actually uses two different Hebrew words for love. Literally, he calls us to "love love." The first of those words (*ahab*) is



generally used for human connections, faithful friendships, long-term loyalty to those we care about. The second word (*hesed*) is generally used for God's mercy and loving-kindness. By mashing together these two words, is the prophet challenging us to love other humans with God's kind of love?

Isn't this essentially what Jesus asked of his disciples: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34)?

>> WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

As we look to the issue of race relations within our communities, in all the chaos and frustration we can easily lose sight of the fact that we are called to love each other. Our words and actions should display Christ's love in us and point others back to his love for them. The apostle Paul speaks to this when he notes, "Be wise in the way you act toward those who are not believers, making good use of every opportunity you have. Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting, and you should know how to give the right an-swer to everyone" (Col 4:5-6; see also Eph 5:15-17).

Along these lines, you may want to consider having dinner with someone whose opinion you don't agree with, or maybe host a meal that brings together divided parties within your community.

Consider tasking your staff or encouraging co-workers to follow your lead and break bread with others with whom they have differences. Focus on finding areas of agreement and setting aside differences during this time of communion.

Bottom Line: By doing so, we reset the scales that have potentially tilted toward bitterness, and we allow love to outweigh the dissimilarities that often separate us.

"WHATEVER YOU HAVE DONE FOR THE LEAST OF THESE YOU HAVE DONE FOR ME." –MATTHEW 25:40

LIVE IN HUMBLE FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

When Jesus encountered the religious leaders of his day, he usually chided them for their pride. Their lack of humility kept them from being made "right with God" (Lk 18:14). Because they wouldn't admit their spiritual blindness, they were "still guilty" (Jn 9:41). Modern religious leaders should learn from those encounters. When others look to us for answers, it's easy for us to start thinking we have all the answers. Humility can be hard to maintain.

Micah calls for a humble "walk" with God—an ongoing relationship in which we are constantly humbling ourselves.

Throughout Scripture, humble fellowship with God leads to humble fellowship with others. For instance, after reminding them of their "fellowship with the Spirit," Paul urged the Philippians to "be humble toward one another, always considering others better than yourselves." He went on to describe the amazing humility of Jesus (Phil 2:1-11).

Perhaps we see this most clearly in the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, in which the Christ-figure blesses those who showed kindness to the needy. "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me" (v. 35-36). There is a sense of urgency here—as individuals cared for those around them, they in fact cared for Christ (Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas, 2000). When we serve others, we serve the Lord.

Just as we saw with love, our "humble fellowship" can't be confined to God. It must spill over into our human relationships. And according to this parable, it should specifically involve "the least of these"—those who are hungry, thirsty, alien, homeless, sick, and imprisoned (Matt 25:40). Our humble fellowship with God requires that we serve those around us.

But we must remember that it's *humble* and that it's *fellowship*. We can't just launch loving deeds in the general direction of the needy and then boast about our generosity. Scripture calls us to walk humbly in relationship with others, as we do with God.

>> WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Many of our churches and organizations are actively serving the needy in various ways. But with race relations, we must be even more intentional to see our brothers and sisters as just that—members of the family.

Could you collaborate with another church in your community—one with a different racial makeup—to do a service project together? In the planning, take time to better understand the justice needs of the whole community from a variety of perspectives.

You might also think about hosting a special community prayer service in partnership with other local churches. Prayer is a powerful tool of reconciliation that can bring together individuals and communities where tensions might exist.

Bottom Line: As we work together to serve each other sacrificially, we ultimately live out the humble fellowship that God created us for.

"HOW AM I USING THE POWER THAT I HAVE? AM I CONTRIBUTING POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY TO THE ISSUE OF RACIAL INJUSTICE AS IT EXISTS IN MY COMMUNITY?"

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Do you believe in racial justice? Sure you do. As a leader appointed by God to your ministry or position, your heart is already tuned toward reaching the last, the least, and the lost. Finger-pointing and guilt-mongering won't help us. Yet our communities are in crisis—not only Ferguson and Baltimore but *your* community, in corners you might not even know. It's tempting to see racial injustice as "someone else's problem," but this is a dangerous attitude. We need the moral courage to own up to our own complicity in a broken system.

Nor is "color-blindness" a helpful approach. We need to see and celebrate the image of God displayed in people of all races—not blind to the differences but understanding as much as we can about how people have been shaped by their diverse cultures. To truly love as Christ loved, to live as Christ lived, we must step out of our comfort zones, meet people where they are, embrace their cultural stories, and uncover the varied experiences that make them unique.

As Micah shows us, our path forward is marked by justice, love, and humility. This will involve listening, confessing, courageous boundary-crossing, and speaking truth to power.

Remember how the prophet Nathan confronted David regarding his adultery and murder (2 Sam 12:7-15). Sometimes we're David and sometimes we're Nathan. Sometimes, like David, we need to hear the prophetic voice and be convicted in areas where we may not realize we need correcting. And sometimes, like Nathan, we need to stand before the guardians of our society and say, "You are the problem." Either way, we must continually ask ourselves, "How am I using the power that I have? Am I contributing positively or negatively to the issue of racial injustice as it exists in my community?"

Finally, we must own our responsibility to follow in the steps of Christ, speaking biblical truth to the racial injustices we find in the political, socio-economic, and educational systems around us. In doing so, leaders and churches take up the ministry of reconciliation given to them by Christ (2 Cor 5:18). Only then do the words of the prophet Micah take on their full importance in the cause of racial justice: "the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God" (Mic 6:8).

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