

Sermon: A Christian Response to Racism, Acts 10:28

*God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.
--Acts 10:28*

Proposition: Christians must respond to racism in their hearts, their friends, and their society by following Jesus' way, which is to love the neighbor in front of you Jesus has cleansed him/her and God has welcomed you.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gather together this morning to worship the living God. That's what our faith is about. We are a Christian church, and the reason we exist is to worship the God who gave His Son's life so that we could live. As we know, worshipping God is about meeting with Him and showing Him our love and appreciation by doing what He likes and enjoys. What does He love to see? He loves to see us gathered together to sing His praise and delight in Him. But He also loves to see us scatter to our daily occupations, doing them for the glory of God by keeping all of His commandments in whatever

places life takes us. It is an absolutely crucial part of the Christian message that we not only gather to worship God, but that we obey Him at all times, doing our very best by the power of the Holy Spirit to keep every aspect of His law. This law is broad; it describes everything that we need to do to be perfect. The hallmark of the world is to cherry-pick, to find one or two precepts of the law and make them the be-all end-all of morality. That does not work. It leads to the violation of many other facets of the moral law. Living with someone who thinks morality begins and ends with chastity, or being in church, or being anti-racist, or any of a million and one other moral crazes, is a very unpleasant experience.

Yet though in order to worship God rightly we must not cherry-pick, at the same time it is not possible to say everything at once. Sometimes we need to review the teaching of Scripture on certain moral questions. This can be to remind us of what we know, to disciple our newer members and help them understand what God desires in a particular area, to rebuke us for our failures, or to address an issue that our culture is wrestling with. Today, I would like to do all of these things by reminding us what the Bible says about racism. Now, I know that no one here approves of racism. We know that our culture considers it to be an exceedingly evil thing. We know that our culture got that idea from the Bible, and that God said racism was exceedingly evil long before any post-Christian culture came up with the idea. And so that's plenty good enough, right? I don't think so. It's not good enough to know that racism is evil without knowing what racism is, and what particular kind of evil it is, and what we ought to do to guard against this evil. In particular, as with every other command of Scripture, if you can't tie it directly to Jesus' mission and work, then you don't truly understand its place in the moral law which He perfectly kept and empowers us to keep as His people.

And so this morning, I want to help you put together the pieces of Scripture so that you can move from knowing that racism is bad to knowing how the work of Christ stands against the sin of belittling, demeaning, or harming another human being based on any physical characteristic whatsoever. You already know the law. It's the connection between the good news of what Jesus did and how it specifically addresses this particular sin we call racism that will empower you to actually *keep* the law. Jesus's work has cleansed this world and its inhabitants, and you and I must learn to love them as cleansed by Him.

I. The Background to Peter's Lesson

We just read the whole story of how the gospel began to go out to the Gentiles, as related in Acts 10. The sheet came down, Peter didn't want to eat the pork and shrimp and other non-Kosher delicacies, and so God did it again, and again. Peter must have been a little gun-shy about the Lord trying to teach him a lesson three times in a row after this. After all, after the triple denial, the Lord asked him three times "do you love me?" Now, He says three times in a row, "Do you believe that I cleansed the whole of the cosmos?"

Now, Peter uses two technical terms to describe what he learned from this vision. They are the terms "common" and "unclean." In the new covenant era, these are categories that Jesus has destroyed. In other words, brothers and sisters, this text in Acts offers us a way into thinking

about demeaning, belittling, or harming someone based on a physical characteristic. We know already that it's wrong to demean, belittle, or harm other people. But when we allow ourselves to think that some characteristic makes those other people essentially unlike us, thus making it okay to demean, belittle, and harm them, we are committing the sin called "racism" in our time and place. Now, how does Peter's experience relate to this? Well, let me take you back to the Old Testament, to the times when God brought His people out of Egypt and wanted to teach them about Himself. How did He do that? He did through the sacrificial system that's described in (sometimes excruciating) detail in Exodus and Leviticus.

A. The Concept of Ritual Purity

One of the major components of that system is this concept of profaneness vs. holiness. God described the priests' mission in these terms: "You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses" (Lev 10:10-11). What on earth is the difference between holy, common, clean, and unclean?

1. Profane, Common, Holy - Unclean, Clean, Holy, Lev. 10:8-10

Well, you need to think of this as two parallel series. There are holy things, things set apart by God for His particular service. Then there are things that are capable of being set apart, but are not actually so. These are the clean things. They are not yet holy, but there is no pollution or defilement on them. Another term for "clean" is "common." This is sort of the default condition of persons and items in this world. But when something is ritually defiled, say by a bodily emission or something reminiscent of death, then it is unclean or profane.

Three Ritual Conditions		
Profane	Common	Holy
Unclean	Clean	Holy

Now, what lesson was it that God taught Peter? He taught him that the old ceremonial way is dead. Profane and unclean no longer exist as ritual categories within biblical religion. There is no legitimate way to declare someone profane or unclean now.

Now, what did "profane" and "unclean" mean? They meant that the person or object in question was not permitted to worship God. The profane and unclean were unwelcome in God's presence. If an unclean thing touched you, it made you unclean and unfit to enter God's presence in worship. That unclean thing could be a dead body of a human or an animal. It could be your own blood or semen. It could be dung or even the touch of an unclean, non-Kosher animal like those Peter saw in his vision. Over and over, if you're ever read Leviticus, you've heard the refrain "He shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening." That means that for the rest of the day after you got defiled, you weren't welcome in the presence of God. Some events defiled for much longer than a day. To give birth to a baby girl made you

unclean for two weeks (Lev. 12:2). What was all of that about? It was about teaching the people about God's holiness. He exists for Himself, and His holiness is not to be defiled.

2. "Touch not, taste not, handle not," Col. 2:20-23

But in the new covenant era, those old categories of ritual cleanliness and uncleanness have been abolished. Nothing now can ritually defile you and unfit you for God's presence. And, of course, if you're good enough to meet with God, then you're good enough to meet with your fellow human beings as well. Paul describes the abolishing of the old way of ritual purity in Colossians 2. There he boils it down to "touch not, taste not, handle not." What in the world is he talking about? Well, if you survey world religions you'll find that pretty much all of them contain the idea of the taboo, the off-limits, the thing that you shouldn't mess with because it will defile you in some way. And, of course, if they don't readily contain that idea, many of their practitioners attach it to them anyway. Thus, you've probably met some Christians who think that alcohol is defiling and should not be touched. Muslims are well-known for avoiding pork. Traditional Hindus avoid human beings from the wrong castes. And so it goes. Well, that whole system of thinking is garbage. Yes, there are still actions that are morally wrong that Christians should avoid. But there is no substance, no person, no item, and no physical condition that has the power to defile you, make you unfit for God's company and thus unfit for the company of human beings either.

B. The Unwarranted Extension of Ritual Purity, Acts 10:28a

We know that is the case. We rightly deplore the Muslim fixation on diet, the temperance movement's attempt to reintroduce the concept of ritual purity into the Christian faith where it has no place, and the Hindus' reprehensible treatment of the Dalits. But brothers and sisters, we human beings have a natural attraction to defining certain people as dirty and not to be associated with, certain items as profane and damaging to our walk with God. Peter explains in our text how the ritual purity teaching from God had been extended to the totally unwarranted idea that Jews could not associate with or enter the home of any non-Jew. That idea is not found anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. It has nothing to do with biblical religion, any more than the idea that alcohol is defiling has to do with biblical religion. And yet Peter and the Jewish folks of his era accepted it without question, just as so many American Christians even today accept the premises of the temperance movement without question.

II. The Substance of Peter's Lesson: Welcome One Another, Rom. 15:7

Brothers and sisters, God taught Peter that this old system of don't touch, taste, or handle was dead and gone. The Jews, sometime before Jesus came, had read their Bible and come to the conclusion that all Gentiles were ritually unclean and touching them or being in their houses would make one unfit to worship God. That is not in the Bible. But they believed it anyway. God broke Peter out of that wretched idea and told him to welcome Gentiles as fellow saints in the kingdom of God.

III. The Lesson for Us Today

That is the lesson for us today. Brothers and sisters, some people have said outright, and many Christians in our own nation have said by their actions, that our black brothers and sisters are somehow unclean or profane, and that to be around them, to enter their homes or to sit with them or to let them live next door is somehow defiling. This is complete and total garbage. Peter thought something similar about Gentiles, and God showed him in no uncertain terms that he was not to call any person common unclean.

A. We Must Welcome People of Every Color

Brothers and sisters, we must welcome people of every color as Christ has welcomed us. They can't defile you; they don't lessen your standing in God's sight or make you unworthy to stand before His presence in worship. Quite the contrary! It is only a multinational, multiethnic congregation of the redeemed that we will worship in Heaven.

1. Christians, "One Another"

So welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you. That means welcoming into this church, first and foremost. It means exercising hospitality towards our fellow church members, welcoming them into our homes, routines, and daily lives. It means welcoming converts of every kind, people who want to come into the church but have no idea how to dress, act, or speak like we do. Anyone who knows Jesus is to be welcomed. He doesn't demand that you become a first-century Palestinian Jew, and you may not demand that other Christians become a 21st-century white American. You can encourage them to put off sinful actions, and ask them to encourage you to put off sinful actions. But here as everywhere else in Christianity, the church runs on the golden rule. How would you like to be treated? How would you want them to deal with you at a Japanese church, or a church in Ghana, or a church in Ecuador? Would you like to be welcomed, or shunned? Of course I don't expect my Japanese brothers and sisters to conduct worship in English to cater to me — but I do expect them to invite me to the potluck afterward, to make room for me in the pew, and to show as much friendliness as the language barrier allows. Brothers and sisters, we must welcome one another.

2. Non-Christians, our Neighbors, Friends, even Enemies

But this welcoming of one another goes beyond the church into the world at large, where we are commanded to love our neighbors and our enemies by welcoming them. There is a place for thoughtful work on immigration policy. It is as silly to say that the Bible mandates unlimited immigration as it is to say that the Bible mandates the supply of unlimited water to every home. But in terms of your personal attitude, it must be one of welcome. In terms of the policies you advocate and vote for, they must be ones of welcome. Telling certain people that they have no place in your daily life, or in your neighborhood, or in your workplace because of their physical characteristics is directly contrary to what God says. Yes, obviously, I don't mean that you should hire someone who can't walk to carry heavy bags of cement, or hire someone with a broken arm to help you nail shingles on a roof. But to say "Your skin is the wrong color, so you're not welcome here" is indeed an act of hate and a rejection of the commands of God

Almighty. Not only does His word command it; the gospel demands it too. Through His death, Jesus has destroyed the old ritual purity paradigm. No longer is there any place for saying that certain items or people make us unfit to worship God, that they defile.

B. We Must Reject the old Ritual Purity Paradigm

You and I must reject the ritual purity paradigm, both when it comes to the temperance movement and when it comes to any social reality in which race is a factor. Our African and African American brothers and sisters are not a threat or a defilement. God has shown that He hates anyone who calls someone else unclean or even clean. Clean isn't enough. Other people are holy. The items and substances of this world are holy.

Common/clean is a category of things that have many purposes that are fine purposes but not ultimate purposes. A holy stone is one on which animals can be sacrificed to God, in the old Levitical way of thinking. A common stone is one which is perfectly appropriate for building a house or well with. But God showed Peter not to call anyone common. They aren't. They are holy.

C. We Must Align Our Concept of Holiness with Scripture's

Now, how can I say that? Most of us think "holy" means "good." Holy doesn't mean good! Holiness is not a moral category. It is an ontological category. In other words, to really appreciate this lesson God taught Peter, you and I need to understand that in the wake of Christ's resurrection, the world is holy! We're going to talk more about that in a moment. But first, what is holiness if it doesn't mean the same thing as righteousness?

1. Holiness is existing for God

Well, holiness is an ontological category. Holiness is about existing for God. Holiness is about your purpose more than it is about anything you're doing or not doing.

Brothers and sisters, Peter learned a lesson that day when the sheet full of non-Kosher food came down to him. He learned that not one single human being is unclean. Not one single human being is common. Well, if you're not unclean and you're not common, then there's only one other thing you can be: Holy. Every last human being is holy. This is not holiness in the sense of being saved by the Father, reconciled by the Son, and sanctified by the Spirit. We're not talking salvation holiness here. We are talking about creation holiness. God made the human race for Himself! We weren't made to be the top of the food chain. We weren't made to keep the birds fed. We weren't made even for the sake of dominion over the earth. We were made for God, to glorify Him and enjoy Him in a way that no other creature can. We exist for Him. That is our purpose. And that is the purpose of every human being on this planet, Christian, Jew, atheist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, secular or minority religion or anything else. Whatever you think you're here for, the truth is that you're here for God Almighty who made you for Himself and sent His Son to open the way for you to come back to Himself. You are holy because that's what God has made you to be. You exist for God. And so does every other human being! Not all of them live up to that purpose. Many of them are hiding from that purpose, not daring to believe that they are for the God of the universe and that He has made them matter more than they can

imagine. But it is still their purpose, even if they never get out there and attempt to live it out. And because it is their purpose, then you and I better not even think about harming that purpose, damaging that purpose, ignoring that purpose, sinning against that purpose or, God forbid, making that purpose harder to fulfill.

If you send the message to a black coworker that she is not as much created for God as you are because of how her hair grows, then you are condemned by Peter's vision. If you don't want your children associating with other children because of their skin color, then you are condemned by Peter's vision. If you think that you can be holier by spending time with people who look like you than you can by spending time with people who look like Jesus did (which was probably not like you), then you are condemned by Peter's vision. Call no one unclean or common! Don't live like any person is unclean or common. Don't allow any person in your orbit, any person to whom you have a chance to speak, to walk away from the encounter thinking that s/he is unclean or common to you. You probably can't change how people think about themselves in a single interaction. That takes a lifetime. But you can let them know what they are to you. They may reject it. They may not believe it. Holiness is not a category that the world believes in. Holiness is a hard thing for people to get their minds around. But Jesus treated the Samaritan woman as though she existed for God, and she blossomed. Jesus treated the stuck-up Pharisee Saul of Tarsus like he existed for God, and he blossomed. Jesus treated Peter the scrupulous Jew like he existed for God, and he blossomed.

Don't you dare think of, speak of, or treat other human beings as unclean or common. That is God's law. But not only is it the law. It is a consequence of the gospel, for it was only after Jesus came that this principle could be announced in its fullest expression.

2. Holiness is not furthered by joining the world's moral crazes

Let me just say, then, that holiness is about the purpose of your existence. It means that you exist for God. And if you exist for God, you don't exist for anyone or anything else, not even to be good or to do your best. Those things are great. The Bible focuses a lot on moral behavior. But it focuses more on holiness, because you do what you believe. Actions follow thoughts. And let me just say this: To be holy is to live for God. Following the moral crazes of the world does not further holiness. You are not living for God better when you join the world's mania for colonization and bringing better government to ignorant natives across the sea. We know that. It's easy to see that, because it happened hundreds of years ago. But in its day, it was a moral craze and the establishment was on board with it because, well, European civilization had a lot to offer and the natives simply didn't know what was good for them.

You are not living for God better when you join the temperance movement and spend a huge chunk of your life attempting to get a constitutional amendment banning liquor sales passed. We can see that now, because that amendment was repealed almost 90 years ago and it's clear that prohibition was a stupid idea. And today, brothers and sisters, when the world is onto its latest moral craze of firing people who say or do racially insensitive things, or who are related to people who do them — following that craze is not going to contribute to holiness either. It

seems so much more right because it's the world's craze today rather than centuries ago. But it's still the world's moral craze, one that elevates one or two precepts of the moral law very high and then ignores the rest of it.

IV. The Gospel Power that Obliterates Racial Pride

A. Christ Has Cleansed the Whole World, Col. 2:20-23, Acts 10:15

So don't follow the moral crazes of the world. Instead, realize that Jesus Christ's work obliterates racial pride and vainglory. You are not holier because of your color, your smarts, your knowledge, or your social status. You are holy because of the work of Jesus Christ cleansing the world from the old way of don't touch, don't taste, don't handle the things (whatever they are; fill-in-the-blanks with whatever) you want to consider unclean. He has made the world clean. How did He do it? By dying in the place of wicked sinners like you and me. He took the penalty our sins deserved. He is the Savior and cleanser of the world.

B. Christ Has Welcomed You, Rom. 15:7

Secondly, He's welcomed you. You have received welcome. We love because He first loved us. We welcome because He first welcomed us.

Brothers and sisters, here in church you are not in your house. You are, but it is your house because God has invited you in and told you to make yourself at home. It's really His home. He wants to share it with you for all eternity. He welcomed you, fed you, gave you a bedroom with an en suite bathroom, and is literally planning to host you for eternity, all out of His own pocket. And it cost Him big time — not the house, but the expense of cleansing you and making you fit to live in His mansion. That cost Him His one and only Son. But because His Son paid the ultimate price, you are now welcome in His house.

So you're there, sitting on your Father's couch, eating His potato chips and reading His books. The doorbell rings. You go open the door, and it's some people who look different and dress differently than you do. Right away, you say "I don't want your kind in here" and slam the door. Right?

Wrong. It's not your house! How do I say this? You don't have authority to exclude. God has given you invitation rights. I have those rights at my parents' home. I can invite anyone to come into their home at any time. They are prepared and happy to host anyone I choose to invite. I don't have those invitation rights at my in-laws' home, and my wife doesn't either. They would prefer to do their own inviting. Well, needless to say, we don't have exclusion rights at either house. We can't say to anyone at all "You can't come in here" when our parents have invited them in. It's not our house, after all. It's our parents' house.

Brothers and sisters, if you go excluding certain people from God's church, letting them know they're not welcome, letting them know that you think they are defiling rather than holy, you are way out of your lane. Yes, the elders have the right to warn members of the church that they are in grievous soul-destroying sin and ask them to leave the church until they choose to repent of that sin. That is what Jesus meant by the power of the keys — the power to exclude, to lock out. But the vast majority of the work of the elders, and of the body, is not locking out and

excluding, but bringing in and including. For every hour the church spends excluding someone, we ought to spend thousands of hours including one another. At this church, we do. We could do more. We should do more. But I do not know of a single person who has felt excluded at this church. Praise God! That's how it should be. If you think you have the right to slam your Father's door in someone's face, you don't know the Father. You don't know His attitude. Welcome one another to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, as Christ has welcomed you.

C. You Must Treat the World as Holy

As you do that, treat the world as holy. Alcohol is not a threat to you getting into heaven. Your own drunken belly is a threat to you, but alcohol is not. The gorgeous figure of the sister in the next pew is not a threat to you. Your own lustful heart is, but the body that God has given that sister isn't. The world as created is holy; the world is not defiling! Yes, the corrupt world system that generates human desire and is generated by human desire, that is defiling. It is not from the Father. But everything that is from the Father (including our fellow human beings, who are without exception made by God, not by the world) — those things are holy. And you must treat them as such. They exist for God. So if you graffiti them, if you damage them, if you poison or insult or abuse them, you are damaging something that's for God. And He's no more pleased about that than you about the UPS driver damaging the computer you ordered for yourself. Didn't he know its purpose? Didn't he know it was for you? Why did he wantonly damage it?

Folks, the world is currently in a moral craze about the environment and about the status of American black folks. As with most moral crazes, there is a valid moral point in there somewhere. But the point is made much better, with far more context, nuance, and motive power, right here in the word of God — which is where the world originally got it anyway.

D. You Must Welcome One Another

So brothers and sisters, welcome one another. Remember that you have no right to close the door of God's house against anyone whom God welcomes into it. Treat every human being as holy, not as common or unclean. Remember that even the most wicked sinners were made for God, and that their sin itself acknowledges that fact even as it attempts to fight it.

Welcome others. Treat them as holy, even when they're unrighteous. And remember the lesson Peter learned. What God has cleansed, don't call unclean. What God has created, don't call common. He cleansed everything, sanctified everything, through His Son's death. If you believe in Jesus' death, you don't have an exclusionary leg to stand on. Welcome the holy. It's all around you. Amen.