

Time of Grace Ministry
Culture Collision: Race Matters
Romans 15:1-9
January 14, 2018

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Hello, I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace. When my oldest daughter was five years old, we enrolled her in an elementary school of 200 students. And of those 200 students, my daughter was the white student; she was the one white student and 199 black students. Later on during that school year, we were at a Christmas party with some relatives and one of the relatives came over to my wife and asked, "Well, how does your daughter like being the only white student in the school?" And my oldest daughter happened to be listening in and she came over and she said, "I'm not the only white student in the school. In fact, I'm not the only white student in my class!" And we looked at her and we said, "Oh, yeah? Well, who are the other white students in your class?" And she started rattling off these names of all these different students who were in her class but who were not white. My daughter didn't see color, which was a beautiful thing because you know that's not the norm in the world today. Color is seen quite clearly and, often, it causes a lot of divisions and we see a lot of ugliness because of it.

But today, we're going to help you deal with it in a godly way and with a lot of love. Pastor Jeske has a powerful message to share today titled "Race Matters."

Pastor Mark Jeske

You might think that the election of a black president finally means we're over race. And that's why the violent year that our city had last year, pivoting around race – and not just here in our town but really, all over America – why there still needs even to be a conversation that black lives matter. It's humiliating, isn't it, that this just goes on and on?

I'm personally embarrassed by it. I'm personally disappointed in everybody else and myself for doing too little or for doing the wrong things. Why are we still caught in this mad circle of, "Black lives matter!" "No, they don't. All lives matter. And, P.S., blue lives matter, too. What are you, a cop hater?" And why is this shouting still happening? What's wrong with us? What a bunch of idiots we are.

My hometown paper a few years ago had a series on race. It was really good; it had a major impact on me. I clipped it and I read it about four times because it not just pontificated, but it actually was based on a lot of interviews with people's own views and, man, this really hit home. Here's people talking and really laying it out where they're at and one of the questions was: Does our city, does Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have a race problem?

What do you suppose was the percentage of people who said yes? Seventy percent? In survey, in public opinion polls, 70 percent is a monster landslide. No, higher than that. Eighty percent? Higher than that! Ninety percent? Higher than that. Ninety-eight percent! That is statistically

unachievable to get that many people to agree about anything. You can't even say yes or no, the sky is blue; you can't even get 98 percent of Americans to agree that the sky is blue or that gravity exists. You could not even get 98 percent of Americans to agree that gravity exists. But 98 percent of the people thought that yes, this city has a race problem.

The follow-up question right after it was really interesting: So, are you a racist? What percent said yes? Alright, let's just see what you think. Pick a number; what percent of people said, "Yes, I am." Was it 50 percent of people admitted to having confused racial ideas? Yeah? How many people think 50 – 50 percent or higher; raise your hand if you think 50 percent or higher. Okay, a couple. Too high; not that many people admitted. You may think at least that many should admit it. Nope, too high. How many think – how many picked a number in the 40s; the 40 percent range admitted to being racist? You're getting a little smarter; now you're getting cautious. You know I'm playing with you and setting you up so you don't want to commit; alright, I get it. Alright.

Alright, you're right, I'm glad you didn't raise your hands because 40s is still too high. How about in the 30s range? One or two; also too high. How about the 20s; in the 20 percent range? Now there's a few more; yeah, it's got to be in the twenties. No, still too high.

How about the teens? I wish it were so but still too high. Do you know what the real number was? Two. Two percent of brave people actually admitted to having and harboring racist thoughts. The fact is the real number that God can see is 100 percent. Hello? Just as if I – if you'd ask people who among you are liars, the true answer should be 100 percent. We're all liars; we're born with an urge to evade responsibilities and the quickest way to do that is lie. We're all blamers. We all want to shove responsibility off on somebody else. Accepting responsibility is learned behavior; it's even a – I call it – a Christian behavior. But it's hard and it goes against the grain, which is to shove off responsibility and to dodge it.

We're all adulterers. Our thoughts and desires – all of us – are impure. We all need to exercise self-discipline, self-control, to stay within our lane that God has laid out for us. And the same thing is true of race; it is easy – it's the want to do thing – to see what you don't like in society and get out your blaming finger; this one right here. This is the blaming finger. Careful where you point this thing because this means our society's broken and wounded and guess whose fault it is? And you take out your blaming cannon and you start pointing out the flaws of other people instead of looking in the mirror and saying I'm part of it. He gave us human diversity to make our lives better and more interesting and for him, too! He loves looking at our differentness; all his children are different. Some are kind of birch or maple colored on the lighter end, some are mahogany and cherry wood kind of middle, kind of brownie – middle brownies. Some are the darker woods, like walnut, and he made every one with beauty. And Satan sticks a wedge in there so that you think my color's better.

That's sick, isn't it? It is learned behavior to see the world through Jesus' glasses. And Jesus' glasses have three lenses in them, three different refractory points. One is to see the world as God's design; that every human being you look at was designed to be just like that because it pleased God. And not only to like yourself – I hope you like your own skin; that's what God gave you. He wants you to be happy in your own skin and I like myself and I want you to like

yourself. I don't like my weaknesses, I don't like the trashing that aging is doing to a once rugged, muscular body; I hate all that stuff. But I'm comfortable in my own skin because God gave it to me; that I had no choice in this. I didn't vote; neither did you. Then why would we be cruel to somebody else depending on how they landed in this world? It's insane; it makes no sense.

But God would like us to enjoy the diversity. Why would we not also put on our Jesus lenses to see other people as redeemed at the cost of the life of the Son of God? Jesus bled to death for your friends and the people you know, including the ones who don't look quite like you. Why do we not extend that same love toward people who've been redeemed to be part of the body of Christ?

And God has gifted everybody. Putting on your Jesus glasses means if we're not close, I'm missing your piece of the body. I'm not complete if you and I are apart; I'm not complete until our hearts are together and until we can have not just tolerance – I've got way bigger aspirations than we just tolerate each other, like, alright, I'm not going to kill you today and you should feel lucky because I'm not going to kill you. Is that insane? No, it's beyond just tolerance; just leaving people alone. It's unconditionally loving another human being and giving them the dignity of personhood which, sad to say, needed self-sacrificing leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King to reteach our country how to do that. And it was his Christian faith that fueled his desire to reteach America to show the dignity of personhood to all Americans; not just one of the certain subgroups of Americans.

But also, even more than that, not just to tolerate, not just to respect and even love the way Christ loved unconditionally, but to appreciate the value that all Americans bring. We sang a couple of the great songs of that treasury today and there's so much more. I am personally extremely grateful to the many people not like me in our community and congregation who have helped me to be a better pastor, to be a better man, to be a better Christian, and to be a better community leader. I am better because of all of you who are not like me who took the time to take me by the hand and teach me things. And I hope to bring that value and return to you, as well.

What inspired Dr. King to take those risks, to throw himself as just one guy into what looked like an unsolvable problem – for crying out loud, the slavery had been abolished a century ago and still, most black folks lived the lives of second class citizens in the 1950s when he came out of the theological school, ordained in 1954, I was two; completely oblivious to what all was going on. But it didn't take long for me to fall in love with Hank Aaron, who was my childhood sports hero; I adored Hank Aaron. He was a slugger for the Milwaukee Braves and won many games for the Braves; the homerun king. An absolute, incredible athlete and was my childhood hero. My Hank Aaron baseball card, which I still have, is all creased and bent because I touched it so much; touched it too much. Now they put them in plastic, you know, so you can't hurt them or touch them or anything. My Hank Aaron card is kind of creased because a lot of other people wanted to see my Hank Aaron, my 1958 Hank Aaron card, too.

When Hank Aaron was touring and playing winter ball down south when you couldn't play up here and the team bus would roll up to a restaurant, the white players got out of the bus and went into the restaurant and sat down at the table. The black players stayed on the bus and somebody

came out the back door of the restaurant with some bags where they could eat separately. Does that make any sense? Why did this happen? Who let this happen? Whose idea was this? Why did everybody cooperate with this insane thing? It had been going on for a century.

When they got to the hotel, the white players got out of the bus and went into the hotel to get some nice comfy beds; the black players were on their own. They had somehow had to find an invisible network of safe places to stay. About a block and a half – right from where this sanctuary is right now – there’s a great big, old house that was owned by two kindly white folks who used their house as a secret underground hotel for all the black musicians and entertainers that came through Milwaukee in the ‘30s and ‘40s and ‘50s to play in Bronzeville. But since they could be turned down at any restaurant or any hotel at any time, they let – had to find a secret clandestine – almost like the underground railroad – they had to have an underground hotel place where they could find a place to stay; a safe place to stay before moving on.

How did this happen? Why didn’t somebody stop it? Martin Luther King had it up to here. And along with an army of other people – I don’t want to make it seem like he’s superman or something; he’s a sinful fool just like me. In fact, I’d say he’d be the chief of sinners except I am the chief of sinners. He can be the assistant chief of sinners. But he was a sinner still. But he stuck his face out there and he was a kid! It took me five years to figure out the basics of the pastor game. Already in his second year – literally, one year after his ordination – he already was helping to organize the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. And he and his friend Rosa decided they’ve had enough and Rosa refused to get up and give some white guy her seat on the bus, which was the rules that you had to do that. So she was – can you believe it – arrested. I was three; still kind of oblivious to all that. But that this would go on in a country that supposedly said it’s a foundational principal of our land that all people are created equal. This is shameful and humiliating that it had to come to that. And they made a test case out of it and boycotted the transportation system which, as you can guess, black folks used pretty heavily because they couldn’t afford cars. And that was the beginning and it went so fast!

How old was Martin Luther King when he was shot? In his eighties? Who thinks eighties? Okay, now you know you’re getting set up; yes, you are. Seventies? Sixties? Uh-uh. Was he in his fifties? No. In his forties, then? No. Thirty-nine. In 13 years, he got all that stuff done; laying his body on the line. His house was firebombed twice. He endured numerous assassination attempts, including one – it’s not just that he was scared of crazy white people – but a crazy black woman put a knife in him; tried to kill him. He had black haters, too. Isn’t that insane? How much insanity can there be in this story? Until finally, somebody didn’t miss on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. 1955 to 1968; thirteen years blazed by. But his work isn’t done and the fact that we still have angry racial divides – we also have angry gender divides, which is like opening up a whole new, a whole new cracks and fishers in our country, right? What it means is you and I have a reason for being here. Who better than the Christians to, first of all, personally believe and then live and demonstrate a compassionate and diverse embrace of our country? Who better than – we should know better. Our Lord, our Creator, has made us to be better than that. Our Savior has made us to be better.

I want you to take a Bible near you and look up with me Romans 15 for some inspiration on a day we’re thinking about Dr. King. Your smartphone or a tablet is allowed if you promise not to

look at emails. Romans 15 says, “We who are strong ought to be bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” In other words, if you are stronger than somebody – let’s say in racial understanding or compassionate across economic lines – don’t be arrogant and look down on somebody. Bear with the failings of somebody else. “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good to build him up. Even Christ did not please himself. But as it is written,” – now listen to this; this is a prophecy from Messianic psalm 69: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” In other words, Christ did his greatest work by suffering an injustice and returning love for hatred. Dr. King embraced that concept. You know his words, don’t you? “Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can drive out darkness. Hatred, more hatred, and more and more hatred cannot drive out hatred. Only love can drive out hatred.” And that means he put his body, his home – firebombed twice – his family at great risk and himself, his own body, on the line and absorbed the ultimate injustice; a bullet on the porch, on the deck, of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, knowing that every time he stuck his face out there, he was a target. But he did it anyway and bore that abuse, bore imprisonment, bore the weariness of feet of those long marches to advocate for the worth of every human being. What a Christian thing to do. How should that not characterize the vibe and the mood of this congregation and of every Christian church? It should leak out of our pores. It should be in the air. You should smell it when you walk in. You should feel it. You know how dogs can smell fear? People can smell a spirit of inclusiveness or the spirit of “back off” or rejection or, “you’re an outsider.”

We are called by God to make outsiders insiders and that cannot happen with separation; it never works. For this is not just – my goal in talking about all of this is not just to make America a better place to live, although that is certainly a byproduct – and not just to make our crazy city a little less crazy and violent. But so that the gospel can be communicated and the gospel cannot be communicated where there’s mistrust and suspicion and fear. Only when you trust somebody will you let your guard down. Only when you let your guard down can the word of God get at your heart. And you and I will be miserable evangelists unless we absorb this to the full.

“All these things were written in the past to teach us so that through endurance and encouragement of Scripture we might have hope. So may the God who gives that very endurance and encouragement give” every one of you – whether you’re here with me live or whether you’re watching me on television or the internet – “give you a spirit of unity among yourselves.” Realize we’re born separate and Satan is trying to keep you separate, suspicious, angry, blaming, self-congratulatory, pride, full of pride in your heart, arrogant. And he’s trying to keep us apart. But God calls you to build a spirit of unity; that is learned behavior. It does not happen; it’s not automatic. You must choose it. You can choose it. The Spirit enables you to choose it. Choose it now and choose it again tomorrow for Satan will be back tomorrow to mess with you and your head and your heart tomorrow in a different way; you’ll look for a way. But you and I are called to build a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus so that with one heart and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Therefore – drumroll for the grand finale – “Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God.”

When you think of the gap between the holy Son of God who shed his blood to redeem us, the gap between us and Jesus was a gigantic chasm; so big no human being could ever bridge it.

You were born outcasts. You were born God's enemies with a toe tag for hell strapped on your big toe. Doomed, condemned, hopeless, and he came to our world and became one of us, took abuse from people not worthy to put a little shine on his sandals. He bridged that gap and went first; taking the risks so that he might be bonded with us forever and we might become his body.

And he invites us now to do that same blessed work. The gaps between us and each other are so much smaller than the gaps between sinful us and the holy God. We can do this thing and I lay it out to you today, personally, to give yourself to this holy, wonderful work, which our nation and our world desperately need. But I urge you to do this also as a congregation so that anybody who's been broken or excluded or shunned or made to feel like an outsider will walk into this place and will feel tolerance. But not just tolerance; acceptance. And not just acceptance; genuine, unconditional love. The same love that Jesus gives us. And not just love, but respect. And not just respect, but appreciation for you have come to bring stuff we need.

And as we get to know each other, we not only want to do things for you, but we want you now to bring what you've got and do things for us. All this brings about unity and that unity brings praise to God who is a healer and a binder together of what Satan is trying to wreck. This is our holy mission. This will honor the legacy of Dr. King better than just gloating over a day off of school or work. And that work is not over yet. In fact, it will never be over for Satan will keep coming back. People are sinful and stupid and will keep being full of pride and arrogance and blaming. This will go on and on and on but you and I can choose a different path.

May his example and may Scripture's words inspire you to this wonderful mission mindset. Are you in or not? Yes or no? Yes! Excellent! That was the right answer. Then we can be done. Amen.

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

We moved to a new city the day before I started kindergarten. My dad was going to start as a new pastor at a new congregation and a week into the school year, I was invited to a birthday party for one of the kids in the class. I was surprised by that because I didn't know the kid before. And I went to the birthday party and brought a gift and we had a lot of fun and it was then time to open the presents and he opened up the first present and it was a G.I. Joe kid toy that he had received from one of the other kids. And then he opened the second present and it was a G.I. Joe toy that he had received from one of the kids. And then he opened up the third toy and it was a G.I. Joe toy that he had received from one of the other kids. He opened up all the presents and they were all G.I. Joe toys that he had received; all the kids had given him that.

And then finally he came to the gift that I had brought him and it wasn't a G.I. Joe toy; it was a model airplane kit that my mom helped me pick out that we thought he might love but we didn't know. And all the kids kind of looked at the model airplane kit and just, "Well, that's not right," and I felt kind of left out at that moment. And then it was even worse a couple of days later at school when one of the other boys who was at the party walked up to me and said, "You know what, Jeremy? You know - you do know the only reason you were invited to that party is because your dad was the new pastor and we didn't really want you there." I felt pretty left out.

About a month later, the boy whose birthday party it was, he invited me back to the house just to hang out for a couple of hours on a Saturday. It was just me and him and we were hanging out having a good time and he showed me - he was - he showed me some of the things in his bedroom, his posters on his wall, and things like that. And I looked over on his dresser and you know what I saw? I saw the model airplane kit that I'd given him all put together. I don't know how many pieces it was but it took a long time. And you know how I felt at that moment? I felt valued. I felt valuable.

That's the way that God makes you feel through Jesus Christ; that your life is valuable. It's meaningful. And so is the life of the person next to you and the life of the people that you will see today. That is a gift that God has given us so clearly in our Savior Jesus and it's a gift that we can give to others, as well, as we interact with them in love.

Let's pray together.

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift, the healing that you bring through your grace, the value that you assign to us for your sacrifice and through your love. Help us to bring that same healing wherever we go. This world is hurting so badly because of division and hate and you've given us the one gospel that can heal and bring us all together. We thank you for that gift. Help us to use it well and faithfully and bless our efforts in doing so. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace and it all starts now.