



The Bible and Racism

SESSION 1

| *Does the Bible justify or resist racism? Or both?*

Goals for the Session

- Explore the extent to which race is a factor in the biblical texts.
- Examine themes found in both Testaments.
- Look at cultural perspectives assumed within the biblical world.
- Examine thematic trajectories within the biblical material and world that resonate with social dynamics today.

Preparing for the Session

- This study is part of the Racism Study Pack. Your group may use this study alone, although we suggest you use it along with the other studies in the pack. The following is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study in any order your group chooses.
 - Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?
 - Racism 101
 - The Bible and Racism
 - A History of Racism in the United States
 - White Privilege
 - Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
 - Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?
- Since this study is on the Bible and racism, it's important that every participant have a Bible. Provide copies of the NRSV for each participant. If possible, have on hand at least one other translation of the Bible for comparison.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Read Scripture
- Pray together

EXPLORING

- Racism defined
- Looking at a puzzling New Testament text
- Examining trajectories of racism in the Bible

RESPONDING

- Reread Scripture

CLOSING

- Sing a hymn
- Close with prayer

- On newsprint, print the following definition of racism: Racism = race prejudice + power.

Materials Needed

- Bibles and hymnals
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Prepared newsprint sheets

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Read Scripture

Tell the group that you will read a familiar Scripture that points to a common shared identity in Christ. Read aloud Galatians 3:25–29.

2. Pray Together

Gracious God, in your Scripture we find your story. For millennia, we your people have read this story and interpreted it through the lens of our own culture and experience. Guide us now as we examine Scripture. Grant us hearts and minds and perceptions that are open to what your Spirit would reveal. **Amen.**

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Racism Defined

If your group has preceded this study with the studies “Racism 101” and “Why Is It So Hard to Talk about Race?” spend a few minutes reviewing both the definitions participants included in their journals and the reasons why these conversations are so challenging. Compare the definitions of racism the group has already explored with the definition the writer includes in the Participant Handout. If the group has not engaged in these studies, call their attention to the definition you posted (from the Participant Handout). Remind the group that our operative definition of racism can make a big difference in our conversation, and encourage them to adopt this definition.

Call the attention of participants to the writer’s observation that there are two points of discontinuity between the contemporary definition of racism they just considered and the biblical world. Ask them to respond to the following:

The language of a divinely chosen people . . . looks much different when situated within the context of a small, colonized state or religious sect than when this belief constitutes the ideology of an empire that intends to subjugate other nations because God is on its side.

Ask:

- How does this apply to the situation in biblical times?
- Is the context and dynamic different today for Israel or for the Christian church? For our nation? If so, how?

4. Looking at a Puzzling New Testament Text

Ask one volunteer to read aloud Mark 7:24–30 and another to read Matthew 15:21–28. You might also want

to have someone read one of these texts from another translation to get a slightly different take on the text. Remind the group that while for us the word “dog” has a positive connotation since in our culture a dog is a favored pet, it was entirely another matter in New Testament times. Because dogs of the time roamed the streets eating what was thrown out, they were considered unclean, and thus this was an ethnic slur. Ask:

- How do you respond to Jesus’ using such an insulting term with the woman? What do you think he meant?
- What is your response to the way in which the woman responded to Jesus’ insult? Is she an “uppity” woman? In what ways does she conform—or fail to conform—to the role she would be expected to occupy in the New Testament?
- Are you surprised by this story? Shocked? What do you make of it?

5. Examining Trajectories of Racism in the Bible

Divide into four small groups. If your group is very small, this might mean having individuals or pairs of persons constituting a small group. Assign to each group one of the trajectories of continuity and one of discontinuity the writer discusses in the Participant Handout. Invite them to read and discuss the trajectories, and be prepared to summarize for the total group. Allow about ten minutes for them to work, and then invite each group to report, first on the discontinuity and then on the continuity. List each one on newsprint or a chalkboard. Then ask:

- Of the trajectories of continuity, which are themes that you would call most powerful in shaping your own experience of the Bible? Are any or all of them positive in some way as well as negative? How can they be reshaped in positive ways? For example, the theme of light/darkness is a prominent theme in Advent. How can its trajectory be shaped so as to recast any negative connotations of darkness?
- Of the trajectories of discontinuity, which do you find the most liberating? The most challenging? How does each show cultural specificity while at the same time challenging negative cultural assumptions and calling us to a new vision of inclusivity and justice?

Responding (5 minutes)

6. Reread Scripture

Ask the group to listen as a volunteer slowly rereads the Scripture used in the opening activity, reflecting as they listen on the way in which Paul shows an awareness of the culturally specific context of Christianity's message even while seeking to envision a new humanity that is more inclusive. Ask that they keep Paul's context in mind as they consider our own context today and how we might envision breaking free of the bonds of racism. When the Scripture has been read, ask them to recast it by coming up with their own contrasts; for example, "There is neither white nor black," and so forth. Invite them to name these aloud.

Closing (10 minutes)

7. Sing a Hymn

Sing a hymn, such as "In Christ There Is No East Nor West."

8. Close with Prayer

God of creation and of exodus, of the nativity and the Pentecost, we give thanks for the Bible and for the story of your loving way with humankind revealed in its pages. Forgive us when we let our own cultural context speak to us through its stories instead of opening ourselves to your Spirit. Grant us the will to let your Word speak. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- **Present a timeline.** If you think your group will need a refresher on Old Testament history in order to understand the postexilic period, refer to a history of the Old Testament for a time line. On newsprint, put only the major dates, such as the approximate date of Abraham and the ascent of David to the throne, and then include major benchmarks, such as the fall of the northern and southern kingdoms. Review the time line briefly with the group.
- **Role-play the Syrophenician woman.** Invite two volunteers to take the roles of Jesus and the woman in the story. Let them role-play the story, then have members of the group interview them to find out why they reacted as they did.

- **Explore *herem*.** Explore the concept of *herem* in more depth. Discuss the three ways the writer asserts that a divinely sanctioned conquest lends itself to the possibility of racism. Discuss whether participants can cite possible contemporary examples of this concept in operation. What was the result? What is the danger to the group assuming a divinely sanctioned commission of extermination, or even war?
- **Design a new Advent or Easter liturgy.** Challenge the group to try their hand at writing new Advent liturgy that recasts the theme of light and darkness in more positive ways.
- **Examine other cultural religious material.** The writer of the Participant Handout observes that scholars and archaeologists find little cultural difference between the ancient Hebrews and their neighbors. Obtain a copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Babylonian creation story (both can be found with an Internet search). Discuss how these religious stories are similar to or different from what we find in Genesis.
- **Exploring radical hospitality.** Invite the group to do more exploration into the biblical understanding of welcoming the stranger. A good source for further study is *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* by Marjorie J. Thompson (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). See chapter 8, "Entertaining Angels Unawares: The Spirit of Hospitality."
- **Looking at ethnic and national identity in Scripture.** Ask someone to briefly summarize what the Participant Handout has to say about how cultural identity was defined in biblical times (first paragraph under the heading "Ethnic and National Identity in the Biblical World").

Then divide the group into two small groups. Assign to one Genesis 10 and Deuteronomy 7:1 and to the other Jeremiah 46–51 and Amos 1:1–2:3. Ask them to read these passages and allow a few minutes for them to do so. Then point out the writer's assertion in the Participant Handout that the Israelites were virtually indistinguishable from the Canaanites. Ask:
 - What inferences can we draw from these texts?
 - How can we account for the Israelites' sense of being a distinct people in the light of what biblical scholars and archaeologists have concluded?

Teaching Tip: Adults are just as apt as children to get bogged down trying to pronounce tongue-twisting biblical names, and they are more likely to be thoroughly intimidated if they stumble. The passage from Ezra carries just as much meaning if you give participants permission to avoid reading all the names in verses 20–43 and skip to the concluding verse.

- **Examine the impact of the postexilic period.** Call the attention of participants to the writer's observation that historic realities following the Babylonian exile informed the ideas that we find in the Bible regarding Israel and its relationship to others, and that most biblical traditions took shape or were reshaped within the postexilic period. If you think participants are a little hazy about this period, briefly say that this is a time when the descendants of those who were taken into exile after the fall of both kingdoms were allowed to return to rebuild Jerusalem (further information can be found in any history of the Old Testament). Invite two volunteers to read aloud

Ezra 10:1–19, 44 and Nehemiah 13:23–31. Ask: What events during this time were shaping the Israelites' view of themselves and of their relationship to the land? How did this impact how they viewed other cultures?

- **Examining alternative views: Jonah and Ruth.** Divide the group into two small groups and assign the reading of the book of Ruth to one, the book of Jonah to the other. Encourage the groups to take turns reading aloud to get the full impact of these short stories. When they have completed reading, ask:
 - How are these books countercultural to the prevailing view of the time?
 - What messages are being conveyed in each book about the other or the stranger?
 - Given their countercultural view, can you hazard a guess as to why these stories made it into the Bible?

Additional Teaching Tips for Various Types of Groups

Leading a session on racism is ideally accomplished with a diverse group of participants representing a variety of heritages. But unfortunately this is not always possible or realistic. Given these circumstances we have provided tips for facilitating these sessions in a fruitful manner.

General Guidelines

- Remind participants that these sessions are a starting point. The work to challenge racism is ongoing. Remind yourself that conversations dealing with racism are difficult and uncomfortable. This is normal.
- All voices need to be heard and respected. Be mindful that no one is targeted for their views. Encourage everyone to listen to each other and the writers of the sessions without being defensive.
- Be mindful that the conversation stays on topic with time to share experience, analysis, and hopes for the future.
- Identify your own struggles with race and racism in order to check any negative assumptions or stereotypes you may have.

All-White Congregations

- Be alert that the conversation stays on topic and does not downplay the effect of racism.
- An all-white conversation may provide a forum for an honest expression of views. Issues of white guilt and denial are normal if the discussion is fruitful. Address these issues and avoid the tendency to downplay or ignore them.
- Racism cannot be and is not an issue only for people of color. Encourage participants to take ownership.

Primarily White Group with a Few People of Color

- Be alert to statements or questions that ask the person of color to make a sweeping generalization for all people of color. For example: What do people of color need or want?
- Racism must be challenged together by people of color and white people. Watch for manifestations of white guilt in the form of denial.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.
- This group makeup can be tricky because the power dynamic so closely mirrors what people of color experience in many aspects of their lives. Be mindful that the people of color in the room don't feel pressured to "educate" the white participants about race or racism. Also, make sure that the experiences of the people of color don't get sidetracked, downplayed, or explained away even if there is disagreement in the room.

Primarily People of Color with a Few White People

- The white participants may feel unable to express themselves openly, resulting in a lack of honesty. Be careful to keep the conversation from becoming accusatory.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.

Group with All People of Color

- Facilitator must be a person of color for honest exchange.
- Not all people of color will agree about what the definitions or implications of racism are in society or in their lives, so don't assume opinions or feel the need to force consensus. Instead, call participants to a spirit of support amid different experiences, creative collaboration, and coalition building.