

# Awareness of the Truth

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, tonight we embark on a new sermon series. We just finished one. We were exploring the teachings of Paul, and we have touched for a Sunday about the topic of slavery.

We talked about, did Paul actually want there to be slaves, or was he pushing against systems of oppression? And one of my primary arguments through that sermon series is that this thing that we call the Bible is helpful for us, that even though people have abused it, just because something is abused doesn't mean that it is inherently only used for abuse, that rather, when we allow God to speak through communities throughout time, history, and space, God speaking through Scripture into people can create communities of healing for the world.

And so we are going to take that idea and run with it the next nine weeks and talk about race and justice. Now, maybe this series feels a year too late to you, but I wanted us to not merely be reactionary last year, because there is plenty of reason to talk about race and justice, but rather to think about this in a long-term kind of way, that we are going to always be the kind of church that talks about justice and racial reconciliation, because it's part of the gospel.

It's part of our DNA. It's a value that we are going to keep. And so I didn't want to do it merely as a reaction to something last year. I wanted it to kind of gestate within us a little bit.

So as we talked about it now, we realize that it's not just a trendy thing that we're going to hop on the trend train and then jump off when it gets uncomfortable, but rather we're going to do it now in the middle of 2021, when we're all having fun in our post-vaccinated lives.

[ 1 : 44 ] Let's bring it back down to earth for a minute and realize that there's still work to be done. Now, let me begin with a question. What is the worst apology you have ever received?

What is the worst apology you have ever received? Because we've all gotten bad apologies, right? I'm sorry that you feel that way, right? Not a particularly good apology.

I'm sorry if you feel that I hurt your feelings. Those are bad apologies. When I was a freshman in college, I don't know if you know this about me, but I'm not particularly athletic.

And I only was able to afford college thanks to an academic scholarship. So we were in this, like, this is not like an intention to brag, but like we're in this group of students who all got academic scholarships.

Whip-dee-doo. And we began talking with each other, and we realized that none of us, but people that we heard of, they were athletic, and they had gotten these things called full-ride scholarships to our college.

[ 2 : 45 ] But the academic students, we got the maximum amount, which was a half-ride scholarship, which over the course of four years is tens of thousands of dollars that we weren't getting because we couldn't put a ball in a thing.

So we arranged ourselves into this little group. We did a bunch of research to prove that over time, if colleges and universities invested in their academic students as at least as much as, if not more than their athletic students, it would pay off over time.

And we made this presentation to, like, the board and the presidents to say, hey, if you're giving full-ride scholarships to the athletes, you should consider giving full-ride scholarships to the nerds as well.

So we made our presentation. They said, thank you very much. We left. And, like, a week or so later, we got a letter. And the letter was a very bad apology. It said, we're sorry that we have created the system that was rewarding athletes more than scholars.

From now on, we will offer full-ride to both students, like, scholars and athletes. And we were like, what do you mean from now on? Like, we get that full-ride too?

[ 3 : 55 ] Oh, no, no, no, no. Only the years after you guys. That's a very bad apology. That's a \$40,000 or more apology that we didn't get. Now, as you think about apologies, there are good ones and there are bad ones.

There is the, I'm sorry, how can I help? I'm sorry, how can I make this better? I'm sorry, how can I get out of the way? I'm sorry, how can I fix what is broken that I broke?

Those are the beginnings of good apologies. When we begin a conversation about race and justice and racial reconciliation, there are some very bad apologies out there of, I'm sorry you feel that way, or I'm sorry, but now let's forget about it.

Those aren't particularly great apologies. Next slide, please. The Table Church has a vision and a mission and a goal, and it's not that particular to us.

I believe it's the mission and vision of all churches, churches everywhere, and that is to join God in the renewal of all things. We have this belief that God is up to something good.

[ 5 : 01 ] I already said it multiple times in my prayer. I'm going to say it again right now. God is up to something good in the world to bring healing and restoration, and God wants to do it through us, through the church, through those who are pursuing the way of Jesus.

You could say, if we were to adapt to the words of Jesus, that we want it to be D.C. as it is in heaven, that wherever God's will is being done, we want that to be true here in this street and neighborhood, our communities, our cities, our states.

That's what we want. Next slide. Now, there's this idea of good news or gospel that sometimes it's hard to wrap our minds around, but N.T. Wright puts it like this.

He says, the good news is that the one true God has not taken charge, has now, it's supposed to be now, has now taken charge of the world in and through Jesus and his death and resurrection.

The ancient hopes indeed have been fulfilled, but in a way nobody imagined. God's plan to put the world right has finally been launched. Next.

[ 6 : 07 ] He continues. He has grasped the world in a new way to sort it out and to fill it with his glory and justice as he always promised. The ancient sickness that had crippled the whole world and humans with it has been cured at last so that new life can rise up in its place.

Next slide. The good news was and is that all of this has happened in and through Jesus, though one day it will happen, completely and utterly to all creation, and that we humans, every single one of us, whoever we are, could be caught up in that transformation here and now.

This is the Christian gospel. Do not allow yourself to be lied to with anything else. Now, as you think about that definition, think about what's missing. It's not about going to heaven when you die.

It's not about being a good person. It's about transformation being made possible through God's spirit, living and active in you, changing the world.

That is the good news. That is the gospel. Through what happened in the life and the death and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit into God's children, we become catalysts of change in the world.

[ 7 : 21 ] That's the good news. It's not good advice. It's good news. It's not live this way. It's that something changed with Jesus and we are being caught up in it if we only would participate, if only we would get involved and get active.

That's the gospel. That's the good news. Next slide. So how do we actually put this into practice? How do we actually not merely be spectators in the stands? How do we not merely be waiting for, you know, a chariot to take us into heaven? How do we not merely wait for a rapture or anything like that, but rather how do we become these agents of transformation?

So if you have a Bible, I invite you to turn it on or flip it open to the book of 2 Kings chapter 22.

We're going deep into the Old Testament, into this story you've probably not read before.

The words will not be on the screen. So I do encourage you at home or here in the chairs, flip open a Bible or turn it on to the book of 2 Kings chapter 22. And we are deep, deep, deep into the history of Israel.

[ 8 : 33 ] And by this point, Israel has been split into two kingdoms. So this is after Saul and David and Solomon, the kingdom has been split into two. And the northern kingdom of Israel has been exiled by the Assyrians.

The 10 tribes basically disappear off the face of the earth. And the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, are left in the south. And for the most part, they fail at following the ways of God.

King after king after king fails and fails and leads the nation astray away from Yahweh God and rather chases after the gods and idols of other nations.

Until we get to 2 Kings chapter 22, where we meet the eight-year-old King Josiah. He reigns for a long time. And in the 18th year of his reign, he sends some people to the temple and says, hey, we collect this temple tax regularly, but we've let the temple to God basically kind of go to dust.

So why don't we use that money to start some renovations, start clearing all the clutter and stuff that we put in there and make this temple actually do what it's supposed to do, be a place of worship to Yahweh.

[ 9 : 44 ] So they go and in verse eight, 2 Kings 22 verse eight, it says, So what this means is that the book that we now know is Deuteronomy, this collection of instructions about how to worship and how to bring sacrifices and how to live like an Israelite worshipping God, this book had been lost for hundreds of years.

That's how far astray they had gone. It got stuck in a back closet collecting clutter underneath old copies of Life and Monopoly in the temple. Nobody knew where it was till finally Josiah starts his big spring cleaning project.

So he gives it to Shaphan who reads it, verse nine. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him, your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple. They've entrusted it to workers and supervisors.

Shaphan the secretary informed the king, Hilkiah the priest has given me a book and Shaphan reads it from the presence of the king. And so now Josiah, for the first time in hundreds of years, is hearing the book of instructions, the book of Deuteronomy, the book of the law, what Moses heard from God and passed on to the people, but how to be in relationship with God.

Verse 11, When the king heard these words of the book of the law, he tore his robes, which is the sign of lament and anguish of, oh my dear God, what have we done?

[ 11 : 12 ] And what have we left undone? So he gave orders to Hilkiah the priest and Ikkim the son of Shaphan and Akbor the son of Micaiah and Shaphan the secretary, the king's attendant. Verse 15, Go and acquire the Lord for me and for the people and for all of Judah.

What is written in this book that's been found, great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book. How could they? They didn't even know it existed.

They've not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us. So the priest and the Hakim and Akbor and Shaphan and Esaiiah went to speak to the prophetess, Holdah, which is this great parallelism that happens in the Hebrew of go and inquire of the Lord.

And so when the people want to hear from God, who do they go to? They go to a woman. Can I have an amen? Who is the wife of Shalom, the son of Tikva, the son of Haras, the keeper of the wardrobe.

She lived in Jerusalem in the new quarter. And this is what the prophetess Holdah says to them. She says, this is what the Lord says. I'm going to bring disaster on this place and on its people according to everything written in the book that the king of Judah has read because that was the instructions in the book.

[ 12 : 19 ] Choose the way of life or choose the way of death. Because they have forsaken me, God says, and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made.

My anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched. Tell the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of the Lord. This is what God says. Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken.

And because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares God.

Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors and you will be buried in peace and your eyes will not see the disaster I'm going to bring on this place.

So they take the answer back from the king. Go inquire of the Lord. They go to the prophetess. The prophetess says, look, you didn't do the instructions. I am a God of my word. There is going to be destruction.

But because you inquired of me and have sought my will, that destruction will not come on your generation. Keep reading chapter 23. We'll summarize a little bit.

[ 13 : 18 ] So the king gathers the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He goes up to the temple of the Lord. Verse three, the king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of God to

follow the Lord, to keep his commands.

The king ordered the high priests and the priests in rank to remove all of the idols made for Baal and the false gods. And he burned them outside of Jerusalem in the Kidron Valley and took the ashes to Bethel.

He got rid of the idolatrous priests. And basically for the rest of the chapter, it's all about all of the false idols and the false gods that Josiah says, burn them, get rid of them, put them away.

Finally, verse 21 of chapter 23, the king gave this order, celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God as it's written in the book of the covenant. And then lastly, Josiah dies, his son becomes king. Verse 32, he did evil in the eyes of the Lord just as his ancestors had done. Okay, now why read this big, long story?

[14:25] When we talk about a good apology, a good way to say sorry, when we talk about the idea of reconciliation, reconciliation, there can be a tendency to think it's a one or maybe two-step process.

Become aware of what you've done, say sorry, move on. But that's rarely how these things work. Think about your own relationship, say with a parent or a sibling or a neighbor or a loved one where you recognize you've crossed the boundary somehow.

You have, that's what the word trespass means. You've broken the law. You've sinned against them. You've hurt their feelings. You broke the favorite dish. You hurt them in some way.

If you just say, well, now I know that. That's not an apology. If you say, now I know that. I'm sorry. That's still not really an apology. If you say, now I know that.

I'm sorry. How can I help? Now you're getting closer. And as we see in this story of the book of 2 Kings chapter 22, the story of Josiah and the restoration of Judah, following the ways of God, the ways of the book of instruction, we see this multi-step process.

[15:40] So we're going to walk through this again quickly. And this is going to set the trajectory for our next nine weeks of study together. So Josiah, he begins the spring cleaning project in the temple and they find the book of the law and Shaphan reads it in the presence of the king.

That's step one. That's awareness of the truth. That's where we begin our journey as reconcilers, as people who want to join God in the work of renewal of all things that we've got to face the truth. Something is broken. Something is wrong. And I played a part in it. We begin there. Then the king hears the words, verse 11, and he tears his robes.

There's lament. When we recognize that something is broken and something is wrong, the only proper response is lament. To tear our proverbial robes, to weep and to cry and to feel that deep sense of anguish within us.

If we don't feel that deep sense of anguish within us, maybe we're not fully aware of the truth yet. So we become aware of the truth. We lament.

[16:53] And then the king says, go and inquire of the Lord. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because we haven't obeyed the words of this book. So then we move into the steps of shame and guilt.

Now, speaking to the white folks here for a moment, if you have gone through any sort of journey of understanding our nation's history of race and whiteness and the oppression against people of color, many of us have gotten to this point and we freeze.

We start the journey of awareness of the truth and then we're sad about it. And then we just feel shame and guilt because we don't know what to do. And then we just maybe follow that same loop again and again and again.

We'll read another book. We'll read another article in The Atlantic. We'll sing another sad song or read another sad poem on Instagram and then we'll feel bad and start all over again.

And that's not reconciliation. That's just a form of a, forgive the language, but emotional masturbation. When you're just going through the same thing over and over again.

[17:59] And yet you kind of, again, I'm speaking to white folks here, you kind of feel good about yourself. You feel good that you feel so bad but you haven't actually done anything. So the king goes and inquires of Holdau, the prophetess, and begins this statement of what's going to happen.

Yeah, there are going to be consequences because we read this in the prophets, because Israel and Judah refused to follow the way of God, they oppressed people. We read that today in our scripture reading during worship, Isaiah 58.

I don't want you to fast out of like a religious, religiosity, a sense of like, you got to appease God. No, this is the kind of fast that I require that you feed people and that you break the bonds of oppression and that you actually do something with this sense of shame and guilt that you have, that you actually help people be, feel like people again.

That's what leads to the shame and guilt. And then, Holdau says, because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord, then I will give you peace.

And so we move from shame and guilt into confession. I have sinned. I have done something wrong. I have been part of systems that have hurt people.

[ 19 : 17 ] Confession is then what can lead to forgiveness. I have heard you, declares the Lord, and I will gather you to your ancestors and you will be buried in peace.

But forgiveness isn't the end of the process. You can seek forgiveness. You can receive forgiveness. But then you still got to take action. So the king stood by the pillar, renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord and began to tear apart the idolatrous systems that Judah had set up that were oppressing and hurting everyday people.

That's the work of repentance. And notice that confession and repentance are separate things. Confession is the words, the verbal admission that I have done something wrong.

Repentance is now changing our mind to go in a different direction than the way we went before. Repentance then leads to making amends.

The king cleans the temple and puts it back into its glorious state as a place of worship for God. Then in chapter 23, verse 21, they celebrate the Passover.

[ 20 : 24 ] And the Passover is all about reconciliation with God and with neighbor to be restored in relationship. Now, again, when we talk about forgiveness or reconciliation, either in our personal lives or on a big scale in terms of like systemic oppression or racism in America, quite often the mistake is made.

And again, as a white person talking to other white folks, I realize we've got a multicultural church here and we'll talk about that in a minute. But as a white person talking to other white folks, oftentimes we want to skip from awareness to reconciliation.

I know that there's something wrong. Let's make it all better as fast as we can. There's a lot of work to be done in between. And then the final step is reproduction.

And chapter 23 kind of ends on a gloomy note because they failed that reproduction, that multiplication part, where it's not just a one cycle, okay, few for done.

How do we pass this on to the next generation, our children or our neighbor's children or the people that we train up and teach? And Josiah, he did a lot of good things, but he failed at that because his son becomes king and they just go back to the same old patterns they were at before.

[ 21 : 45 ] Now, these nine steps all come from a book called Be the Bridge by LaTosha Morrison, which is all about the idea of racial reconciliation. And so that's kind of the model that we're going to be using this go around to talk about race and justice this summer, these nine steps of reconciliation.

Because I am no expert on this. I'll admit, I'll confess, when I was applying for this job and interviewing for it, I brought up to our interview team here of like, I lived in Northwest Iowa.

It was 99% white. This was not a conversation that we had a lot. But then as I began my own journey, I began at this awareness stage of, how did Northwest Iowa get to be 99% white?

It doesn't happen on accident. There are reasons for that. And then I began interviewing with the table church and saying, and this is going to be a journey for me to figure this stuff out.

And they asked me some brutal questions and I gave some brutal answers and started in this place of humility. And that's where we all have to begin this process.

[ 23 : 01 ] Of me recognizing I'm no expert. You recognizing that you're all experts in the things that you are only experts in. And sometimes we overestimate or underestimate what that is.

So we need teachers and guides and we need to be students and scholars of what other experienced people have taught and written. So for us, we're going to begin with LaTosha Morrison, Be the Bridge.

But we're also going to be listening to other voices throughout the series, listening to other good examples, trying to put ourselves in a position of humility. Let me give you a few definitions of what we're going to be talking about.

What's our next slide? So let's begin with the definition of race. We're having a conversation about racism. What is race? LaTosha Morrison says, race is a political and social construct created by man for the purpose of asserting power and maintaining a hierarchy.

So we're talking about race as separate from ethnicity or separate from nationality. We're talking about race as a social construct that's about power.

[ 24 : 04 ] So we're talking about racism in America as how white supremacy has tried to maintain power over people of color. Definition.

Next slide. Definition of white supremacy. This comes from Janiqua Walker-Barnes in her wonderful book, I Bring the Voices of My People. White supremacy is the systemic evil that denies and distorts the image inherent in all humans, the image of God inherent in all humans based upon the heretical belief that white aesthetics and values and cultural norms bear the fullest representation of the Imago Dei.

White supremacy thus maintains that white people are superior to all other peoples and it orders creation, identities, relationships, and social structures in ways that support this distortion and denial.

Now notice she uses the word heretical because this goes against that gospel or good news that we talked about earlier.

If it is true that Jesus came to break down these barriers and boundaries, to tear down, as Paul writes in the book of Ephesians, the dividing wall of hostility between people, if it is true that the gospel is not only about reconciliation of people with God but with people to other people, then any sort of idea or teaching that says that there are some people inherently better than other people is heresy.

[ 25 : 32 ] I had a conversation with somebody last year about some of these things and they understood in their guts that racial justice was an important topic, but in all of their years of being in the church and hearing sermons, they really weren't sure that it was a Jesus or gospel issue.

And so one of my goals through this series is to help us recognize this is deeply, deeply important to the heart of God and to the teaching of Jesus. Next slide.

Definition of racial reconciliation. Racial reconciliation is part of God's ongoing and eschatological, that means the end of the world, mission to restore wholeness and peace to a world broken by systemic injustice.

Racial reconciliation focuses its efforts upon dismantling that heresy called white supremacy. Now, racial reconciliation is somewhat of a touchy word for some because it can conjure up images of white and black and brown people all holding hands and singing kumbaya, ignoring the past that has happened.

But remember, reconciliation is not just about warm fuzzies. It's about doing the work, about our awareness leading to change, our awareness leading to repentance.

[ 26 : 53 ] Repentance comes from a Greek word metanoia, meta to change, anoint your mind to turn and go in a different direction. Racial reconciliation is not just about forgive and forget.

It's about let's heal what is broken. And you can't heal what is broken if the heresy of white supremacy is allowed to go on.

Next slide. So awareness is step one. Awareness is where we begin, an awareness of the truth about what is really true.

A few more quotes for you before we wrap up tonight. Latasha Morrison writes, when we lack historical understanding, we lose part of our identity. We don't know where we came from and we don't know what there is to celebrate or to lament.

Likewise, without knowing our history, it can be difficult to know what needs repairing, what needs reconciling. And if you read the news at all, you know that there is this great debate about how we educate our kids in history.

[ 27 : 57 ] But we begin with this, that we need some sort of awareness of the truth that does not whitewash, pun intended, the ideas and the facts of what has happened before.

This happens not only in terms of race, it happens in terms of our faith, Christianity. When we ignore the first two-thirds of our Bible, all that Jewish sacrifice stuff that we don't quite understand, the whole story of Jesus won't come into focus.

We need an awareness of the truth. Next slide. If we avoid hard truths to preserve personal comfort or to fashion a facade of peace, our division will only widen.

Jesus can make beauty from ashes, but the family of God must first see and acknowledge the ashes. Forgiveness and healing cannot begin until we become aware of the historical roots of the problem and acknowledge the harm caused.

Next slide. awareness is step one of a multi-step process. Now again, talking to a lot of white folks here, we can be awfully proud of ourselves when we start with awareness and then end there.

[ 29 : 13 ] We read the book or the article or listen to the podcast and think we're so woke because we know a thing. But that's not where the journey begins.

Now, we're talking about this for nine weeks, so let me say this and kind of set the table correctly. We fit most commonly used definitions of a multicultural or multi-ethnic church.

Usually, the definition is somewhere around 20% or more do not identify as white, they identify as some other ethnicity or race. And we're about two-thirds white and one-third other on the survey.

Okay? That means that there's going to be a lot of talk to white folks that maybe a lot of people of color in this room or listening online, they're like, yeah, I know this, I've lived it.

And so, from this point, I just want to say, I'm sorry that we've got to do this work publicly because I'm sure there's a certain amount of exhaustion that you have by it.

[ 30 : 20 ] But, I also have this belief that we're not just going to expect a bunch of black and brown folks to do the work for us.

And it can't only be done around tables or small groups. There is an important piece of white leaders like me doing our best to speak the truth to white congregations.

So that's part of what's going on right now. Now, we have other preachers lined up over the next nine weeks, some of which are black and brown people, and they will also be speaking directly to their fellow black and brown people, as well as, you know, putting the word and the truth out to white folks.

So we're trying to get this right, and I'll be honest, it's my first time preaching a series like this. I'm going to mess up, and I expect you to tell me, I'm ready for it. We need that.

But give us a little bit of, I was going to say give us some grace, but I take that back. Tell us how it is. Tell us how it is. Next slide. The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.

[ 31 : 32 ] I spent a long time in the interwebs today trying to figure out who originally said this.

Nobody really knows. Don't bother looking it up. But it's a darn good quote if somebody needs to like stencil on a pillow or something.

The truth will set you free. Awareness of the truth is the first step of a journey, but if the truth is not making you miserable, you have to wonder if you're grasping the whole truth. And so we're going to keep leaning and pushing in to what Scripture and Jesus and God has to say as well as otherwise people that God pours his wisdom into about these topics.

Because it's important not just to be like, I don't know, extra woke or extra progressive or feel really good about yourself. It's important in terms of the day-to-day stuff as well.

We all kind of suck at reconciliation, like just in our lives with our family members that we have difficult conversations with or we don't have difficult conversations with because we don't want to.

Awareness by itself doesn't do a lot of good. I have a friend who's really into the Enneagram and he identifies as the Enneagram 9. Enneagram, it's like this personality typing profile and 9s are known to be conflict avoidant.

[ 32 : 42 ] And so whenever, you know, we asked him to like go have that hard conversation, he would say, oh no, I can't, I'm a 9. Like no, that's not the point of a personality typing system. Yes, great, you're self-aware that you avoid conflict.

Now you've got to push yourself to go lead into the things that you don't naturally do. Great, self-awareness or awareness of problems in our country or our history, that's a good start but now you've got to push into how do we actually bring healing into the world and sometimes as you seek the truth that will make you miserable.

Next slide. Here's the goals of the series and I'm done. Number one, help the table church see that racial reconciliation is deeply integrated with the good news of Jesus' kingdom.

This is not an ancillary extra like bonus heaven glory points. This is part of the project of what it is to be a Jesus follower.

This is crucial important stuff. Goal number two, to teach a process of reconciliation that is applicable to social systems, individual anti-racism efforts and other interpersonal relationships and so we're going to try to do our best to not only talk about race and justice but also talk about like that

hard conversation with your mom that you got to have.

[ 33 : 58 ] Okay, number three, take a step to set the table church on a course towards making Jesus-centered justice and reconciliation that includes anti-racism and the dismantling of personal and systemic white supremacy as core values of our community which is related to point one.

This is not extra. This is not bonus glory points. This is part of what it is to be a church that when we see broken things we ask God's spirit to fill us so that we can join in the project of renewal.

With that, I invite you to pray with me this prayer of awareness and then we'll move into communion. Would you join me in this prayer? You love each of us profoundly.

in the spirit of gratitude and solidarity, we ask you to increase our awareness of both the gifts and the needs of those around us.

Open our hearts, minds, and doors to the gifts and burdens of every person. Help us to become truly welcoming communities where everyone can find a place at your table.

[ 35 : 15 ] We ask this in the name of Jesus who lives with you in the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

Amen.