

Guilt and Shame

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[0 : 00] All right. Good evening, everyone. I was going to say, my job is I train people for a living. So I've spent the last year and a half on Zoom talking to little black boxes. So it's going to be really hard for me to not have any audience participation tonight. This is the first time I've talked in front of a group of more than about two or three people in a year and a half. So I'm very excited and I'm very happy to be here. So this is week three of our racial justice conversation.

And we're following the outline of the book called Be the Bridge. So two weeks ago, Pastor Anthony started us off with this idea of we have to look around us and acknowledge that something is wrong. Right. We have to see something is wrong. But we also have a responsibility to see it as part of our work, our life as followers of Jesus to respond to this. Following Jesus is not a sort of a free ticket to heaven and everything else doesn't matter.

[1 : 02] Right. We have to engage with what's happening in our world today. And then last week, Heidi talked us through this concept of lament. Once we've acknowledged and recognized that something is wrong, there should be an emotional response.

We should have that emotional reaction. And that's good and OK. And we should use that and we should lean into that. And so sort of following on from that, this week we're going to talk about guilt and shame.

Which is not a super cheerful topic, let's be honest. But if we want to be serious about this work of racial justice, once we've been through this process of acknowledging, of lamenting what's wrong, we have to start looking at systems at large, but also at ourselves as individuals and ask, how have we contributed to this?

How are we benefiting from this? How are we causing harm as a result of these unjust systems? And so I'll tell you now, this sermon doesn't have a happy ending.

But the goal of this is not for us to wallow and self-flagellate in guilt, right? It's a process that we have to go through. And next week, and then moving forward, we're going to start talking about what do we do with them, right?

[2 : 14] These emotions, these feelings are real and valid, and it's important that we sit with them. But we can't stay there. We have to move forward. So before we get too deep into this concept of guilt and shame, let's start with a word of prayer.

Father God, thank you for this opportunity to come together, to reflect on your word, to reflect on the world around us.

And how we as individuals have a responsibility to this planet that we call home and to the people who we call our siblings. Help us to think critically of ourselves, to recognize who we are and where we sit in this.

But help us, Lord, not to wallow in guilt and shame. Help us to recognize it for what it is and then move forward. Amen. Okay. So I'm going to read the whole psalm.

If you're not following along, I encourage you to just sit and listen and let the words kind of resonate as you hear them. So Psalm 35 begins, May those who plot my ruin be turned back in despair.

[4 : 01] May they be like chaff before the wind with the angel of the Lord driving them away. May their path be dark and slippery with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.

Since they hid their net for me without cause and without cause dug a pit for me, may ruin overtake them by surprise. May the net they hid entangle them. May they fall into the pit to their own ruin.

Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation. My whole being will exclaim, who is like you, Lord? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them.

Ruthless witnesses come forward. They question me on things I know nothing about. They repay me evil for good and leave me like one bereaved.

And yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting when my prayers returned to me unanswered. I went about in mourning as though for a friend or brother.

[5 : 04] I bowed my head in grief as though I were weeping for my mother. But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee. Assailants gathered against me without my knowledge. They slandered me without ceasing.

Like the ungodly, they maliciously mocked. They gnashed their teeth at me. How long, Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their ravages. My precious life from these lions.

I will give you thanks in the great assembly. Among the throngs I will praise you. Do not let those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause. Do not let those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye.

They do not speak peaceably but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land. They sneer at me and say, aha, with our own eyes we have seen it. Lord, you have seen this. Do not be silent. Do not be far from me, Lord. Arise and awaken to my defense. Contend for me, my God and my Lord. Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God.

[6 : 05] And do not let them gloat over me. Do not let them think, aha, that's just what we wanted. Or say, see, we have swallowed him up. May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion.

May all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace. May those who delight in my vindication shout for joy and gladness. May they always say, the Lord will be exalted who delights in the well-being of his servant.

And my tongue will proclaim your praises all day long. Now for some reason that psalm is not preached on a lot in church. Can't imagine why. It's possible that it doesn't sit with us very well, right?

Let's be real. Prayers for violence, the destruction of people, even if they're really bad people, it doesn't sit right with us, right? That's not how we're taught to pray in Sunday school.

It doesn't seem right. But before we get too deep into this, I want to say that the psalms aren't mentors like theological treatises, right? They're not a lesson in how we should live.

[7 : 22] They're prayers. They're expressions of emotions of humans like us, right? They're real feelings. They're real thoughts. And keeping them locked up is not helpful. And it's also worth noting that just because the author of the psalm prayed for these things, that doesn't necessarily mean that God responded in the way that he wanted to, right?

There's always two sides to a prayer. But what we do know is that God listened and God heard. So this psalm was written by a person.

And I think it's putting it lightly to say that this person was pretty frustrated with this continued mistreatment that he was experiencing. But I want us to pause for a second and ask, who do we most identify with in that psalm, right?

When we read scripture, we often find we see people in the story that we identify with. We want to put ourselves in the story. Are we the psalmist? Are we the ones crying out in anger and frustration to a God who seems ambivalent towards our pain and suffering?

I'm pretty sure that every one of us in this room can identify some point in our lives where we've been in that place, right? Where something's just gone horribly wrong and we need to let that emotion and frustration out.

[8 : 41] But for most of us, that's not a continued experience, right? There may be points in our life where we look at it and say, that was a terrible moment. But it's rarely a terrible life experience, right?

It's not the whole package. So what if, what if we're not the psalmist? What if we're in fact the people or the group that the psalmist is complaining about?

What if that's where we sit in this story? What if those of us, like me, who are white, are actually the target of those words spoken by our brothers and sisters of color here in the United States today?

What would that look like? Well, let's be clear, right? I assume that none of us are actively in the business of plotting people's ruin or seeking their death or slandering and maliciously mocking people.

But maybe we're not quite as innocent, progressive, just, compassionate as we think we are. And I want to say this before I go any further forwards.

[9 : 49] This is not an attempt to manufacture guilt, right? This is not us taking us through a process to make ourselves feel bad for the sake of it. The church has a bit of a history of manufacturing guilt sometimes, making people feel bad for things that are irrelevant.

The point of this is to get us to think, right? The point of this is to help us see who we truly are in a space, not make us feel worse than we need to or deny the realities that people are experiencing and try and excuse ourselves.

And as I was thinking about this, I realized that it's difficult sometimes to pinpoint that single moment where you realize, oh, maybe I'm not on the right side of this.

Maybe I am in the wrong. Maybe I'm on the wrong side of history. But there's a couple of moments that stand out for me, and I want to share those with you. And then we'll move forward into talking about broader systems.

So there was a moment for me when I was part of a training at Little Lights in southeast D.C., completely unrelated to the work I was doing at the time. And they showed us this video as part of a training.

[11 : 02] I think it was called Redlined. I was searching the internet like, I think that was the one I watched. But the point of this video was that it talked about the history of property discrimination in the United States.

And I grew up in Britain, and we don't really cover much U.S. history. We also don't think there is much U.S. history. That's slightly beside the point. But I'd never heard of this concept of redlining. I'd never heard of like, oh, the cities were actually consciously divided up this way. That generations of middle class, black and brown Americans were literally legally reduced to second class citizen status who couldn't own homes.

Because they were either completely denied mortgages, or the mortgages they were offered were so subprime and so predatory that they put houses out of their reach of what they could reasonably afford. I'd never learned about housing contracts.

If you haven't heard about these housing contracts, they're a pretty hideous thing where a buyer would literally sign a contract that said they would never sell or lease their property to someone who wasn't white.

[12 : 11] And if those of you who are keeping track of history, those were banned in like the 40s, so recent. But I didn't know any of this, right? I didn't know any of this history.

And I don't think it really sort of hit me at the moment, because that was, you know, even though it was relatively recent history, right, it was still a long time ago. It was the 1940s.

It was the 50s. It was, I wasn't born. My parents weren't born. I wasn't responsible for this. But then as I made this connection a little while later, that my nice apartment in Columbia Heights that I could just about afford by scraping all my paycheck together was a symptom of that gentrification and the harm that housing policy still does to people today.

I had no, like, racist intention of kicking someone who was lower income or someone who was a native to Columbia Heights out of their housing.

But my actions and my choices had led me to do that, even if it wasn't intended to cause harm, even if it was doing what I thought was in sort of the best interest of myself and my family and my friends.

[13 : 18] I made that choice, and I don't think it was a bad choice, but it was a choice that had an impact on other communities. And that's what I want to talk about today, right? Most of us are not going around, like the psalmist said, making these malicious choices.

But what we are often part of are systems that are perpetrating or even making worse inequality and racial injustice. So that's what I want to talk about today is that sort of conversation, right?

This isn't about sort of this self-flagellation that we get into. This is about recognizing where we are within these systems of injustice and what we can do about it. So I want to share a quote from a scholar, Dr. Christopher J. LeBron, who wrote a book called *The Color of Our Shame*.

And he says, Systemic racial inequality is a robust feature of our society. Many of our institutions proceed in a way that frighteningly recalls a time when strange fruit hung from trees.

We as a society seem to know better, but not do better. Hence the appropriateness of shame. There's a lot to unpack in that quote.

[14:32] If you don't get the strange fruit hung from trees reference, that's a Billie Holiday song from the 30s talking about lynching. But the point that Dr. LeBron is making here is that we know about racial injustice.

We know that this isn't okay. But we don't seem to be doing anything about it. So that's sort of the conversation for folks that look like me, for white folks.

But shame around racial injustice isn't just the purview of white folks. Many communities of color grow up being told that racism in America is fixed.

America is equal now. Everyone's the same. And that any failure to achieve your potential is now a moral failing or something that you are culpable in. It's not a systemic one because we got rid of racism.

And so communities of color feel shame around racial injustice too. But it looks different. Why, for example, do so many black and brown athletes kneel during the national anthem at the start of sporting events?

[15:37] Why do they look away from the flag when they're representing the United States?

Because America's failing to live up to its potential. And there's some shame in that. Oh, and trust me.

It's not just America. This is the context that we're in. But like I said, I grew up in Britain. So I want to share a little bit about racism in Britain because, trust me, America's not the only place.

So there's a woman called Ebony Rainford Brent who was the first black woman to play cricket for England. And she has been speaking a lot on racial justice issues in the past few years.

And she has this very powerful quote that, again, I think will appear on the screen behind me. But she said this. I had comments about where I grew up. Maybe I didn't know who my dad was.

About my hair. About body parts. About how the food that I ate stank. Did I wash my skin?

Everyone in your area gets stabbed, don't they? I've been in team environments dealing constantly with people referring to your lot.

[16:38] And I'm not surprised that people coming into the environment don't want to deal with it. I questioned myself sometimes why I stayed so long.

I love the game. I think it has so much to offer. But it can be really difficult dealing with that day in, day out. For it to hit me that I was the first black woman to play cricket for England, I felt a mixture of emotions.

Pride, but also embarrassed and a bit uncomfortable. Think about that. Your life goal is making you feel uncomfortable.

And I think it's fair to say that some people who worked in that environment, and maybe some of them are still there, were, let's call it what it is, they were racist assholes. But no one within the setup, even the folks who were not racist, seemed to have any vested interest in stopping this happening.

The system allowed it to continue. And that's where this feeling of shame starts to make sense, right? It's both on us as white folks for allowing this racist environment to continue.

[17:49] And then we put that shame onto Ebony and other athletes of color who have to live this life every day asking whether showcasing their world-class talent on the biggest stage and winning the biggest prizes is worth it.

Because they feel like they're not wanted, protected, or valued. How would that make you feel? Or another way of looking at it, Michael Holding writes in his absolutely excellent new book called *Why We Kneel, How We Rise*.

He says this. He says, For folks of color who grow up and live in this environment every day, there is a constant choice.

Do I make a fuss? Do I keep my head down and just carry on? We could talk a lot more about that. There's a lot that's mixed up in that. But I am not the right person to talk about that.

So I just wanted to share those stories of others and then talk a little bit more about the white context that I can speak honestly to. So there's two different types of shame that exist there.

[19:12] There's this sort of, the one for me where I realized that the values that I had or the values that I professed about caring about justice and housing didn't actually line up with my actions, namely renting a gentrifying apartment in a historically non-white neighborhood.

And then there's another one where folks of color feel that their colleagues, their friends, community makes them literally want to run and hide or deny the pain that they're feeling.

So to come back to Psalm 35, I think it does have something to say to these two experiences. It's what people like Michael Holding, Ebony Rainford-Brent, Colin Kaepernick, Naomi Osaka, LeBron James, we could go on, right?

Despite their wealth, despite their platforms, despite their incredible human talents, they are more likely to identify with the psalmist in Psalm 35.

They're part of a system that's oppressing them. And I think for white folks like me, we maybe have to look at this and swallow that pill that despite our commitment to or supposed professed commitment to justice, that we might be the people or at least a part of the system that the psalmist is writing about.

[20 : 29] And that's uncomfortable and it makes us feel bad and it should. Heidi gave us a wonderful roadmap last week of how do we lament this? How do we honestly engage with these emotions?

But I want to give us a word of warning. Heidi did a great job of explaining what lament is last week. I'm just going to spend two seconds explaining what it's not. It is incredibly unhelpful to the cause of racial justice and very annoying to folks of color for white people to engage in this public self-flagellation around racial guilt, right?

This sort of, oh, I'm so bad. I'm so terrible. I didn't realize there was all this harm that I'm being done. How we do that breaking down in tears.

Oh, I feel so bad. Because what happens then is that the folks of color who were trying to explain their situation, instead of having the opportunity to say, this is what I'm feeling, this is what I'm thinking, this is how we move this conversation forward, they then have to turn around and comfort this white person who's complicit in their oppression.

And that's messed up. That's not healthy lament. That's not a healthy processing of our guilt and shame. The feelings that we have may be right, right?

[21 : 40] We should feel bad. We should want to go back and kick our ancestors who endorsed slavery. We should go back and yell at our churches that didn't engage in the civil rights movement. We should do that. But there is an appropriate place to process that.

And that is around like-minded white folks who are not emotionally burdened by the conversation that's being had. And if that doesn't work, let me recommend therapy.

It's great. Don't put the labor for processing our white guilt on folks of color. It's really important. So as we move through this, I've been framing this idea of shame as sort of systemic, right? This sort of everything's not quite right.

We know it's not quite right. But we can't necessarily pinpoint exactly where to jump in and make change. We know that collectively we have this clear moral imperative and often desire to create a truly racially equal society.

[22 : 40] But the outcomes don't match, right? I work in criminal justice, and I could literally spend the next 20 minutes telling you about all of the racial injustices in the justice system. Justice system.

People who work in housing can do the same thing in housing. People who work in food and nutrition can do the same in food and nutrition. Outcomes are not equal, right? And one of the biggest examples we saw of this was COVID, right?

COVID disproportionately harmed black and brown communities, not because black and brown communities were more susceptible to COVID, but because of the systems that we've created that meant that they had less access to health care, less access to food, were not able to take time off work to recover, may have worked in essential positions.

Let's be honest, we didn't do a very good job taking care of during the pandemic. So that's this recognition, right? Something is wrong, and we can see that as a society that these imbalances continue to exist.

But coming back to where I started, where do we fit in? Where does Matt fit into this injustice, right? I didn't create food deserts. I didn't, you know, write medical textbooks that say that black people have a higher pain threshold than white people.

[23 : 51] I didn't build a prison solely to incarcerate low-income black Americans. I didn't do any of this. How is this my fault? And so I want us to spend just the last few minutes thinking about there's these systems that rightly cause shame.

But I want to think about what did we do to contribute to this? And again, this isn't an exercise in making us feel bad for no reason. Next week, we're going to talk about confession, and in the

following weeks, we're going to talk about things like reparations and how do we move this forward. But if we don't think we've got any part in that, the rest of this conversation is irrelevant, right? If we have no role in systems of racial injustice, then we don't need to confess anything. If we have no role in racial injustice, we don't need to think about reparations.

But I think we do. So I want us to spend a few minutes just thinking about what might we have done. So let's be honest with ourselves.

Let's really think about this. The Anglican tradition that I grew up in has this rather wonderful phrase from the Book of Common Prayer when it comes to confession. It says, Have mercy on us, most merciful Father.

[25 : 07] In your compassion, forgive us for our sins, known and unknown. We could, again, spend 30 minutes unpacking the theology of that statement. But what I want to suggest today is that we want to move this conversation around recognizing our sins and our harms of racial injustice from this unknown space into a known space, giving us concrete things to think about.

So here's one example. I have a bank account with Bank of America, who are, you know, they're a bank, so they're pretty scummy and exploitive at the best of times.

But until last year, they funded private prisons. They still indirectly give money to private immigration detention centers. They've handed over information on their customers to law enforcement. They've contributed to campaign funds for racists.

This list goes on and on and on. And yet here I am, still banking with them. But there's a complexity here, right? Again, doing the right thing for my family might be, you know, keeping that bank account open.

Closing bank accounts, canceling credit cards can seriously impact your credit. But that has a knock-on effect, right? It's not necessarily simple and clear-cut. Many families who, you know, can only afford to shop at Walmart know that Walmart is exploitative and harmful.

[26 : 26] But also that's the only way they can get a good meal for their families. It's not clear-cut and simple. But I want us to think about the behaviors that we engage in that contribute to and perpetrate systems of racial injustice by thinking about things that we actually do.

So that Bank of America is one example. But I want to list a few others. And I want to say that these things that I'm going to suggest are things that I've done in the past. And I admit now that a lot of them would horrify me and hopefully will horrify you too.

Some of them are still habits and practices that I'm unlearning. And as I grow and as we all grow, we'll discover more things that we did that were part of systems of injustice. And this isn't meant as an exhaustive list.

But what I want you to do this week is think about these sorts of questions. Think in this framework. So, for example, have you, like me, supported, encouraged, maybe been a part of white-led community renewal projects that leave out or don't center the voices of the people of color who live in that community?

Are we dropping in with a white savior mentality? Have you, like me, contributed to gentrification of neighborhoods by the choices we make when buying or renting a place? Or even choosing to shop at Yes or Whole Foods as opposed to the local community-owned store?

[27 : 48] Have you, like me, encouraged, defended, supported law enforcement when they murder black and brown children because there was nothing they could do or the shooting was justified?

Have you, like me, spoken over, silenced the voices of people of color when they try to explain an issue to you? Have you, like me, dismissed the concerns of people of color because they presented their opinion too aggressively or in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?

And have you, like me, stood by while people we know, people we care about, made racist comments or discriminatory comments and then not challenged them?

And then maybe even worse, tacitly accepted whatever stereotype was being presented? Have we used othering language, creating an are-people-their-people dichotomy?

So this is not an exhaustive list, right? There are many things that we can do consciously or unconsciously that perpetrate racial injustice. But I wanted us to think about these are things that I think we can all say that we've probably done at least some of them.

[28 : 58] And they are harmful to communities of color. And we did that. And that is something that we should feel a certain way about and then come to confession and then seek to make some reparation to restore the harm that was done.

As we sort of get ready for confession next week, I want to leave us with a final thought about the person of Jesus when he walked the earth and the way that he modeled how we handle guilt and shame.

So one of the truths about Jesus that's a little uncomfortable is that he likely walked on roads built by enslaved people, for example.

And interestingly, when he taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he uses the phrase, forgive us for our sins. Somehow he was including himself in that collective guilt, right?

Why would he do that? He was without sin, right? Jesus is without sin. That's Gospel 101. You learn that when you're three years old in Sunday school. And yet in his prayer, he says, forgive us for our sins.

[30 : 09] And the truth is that Jesus lived in a time when people were exploited for their labor, executed without trials, displaced from their ancestral homes in the name of power and greed.

Jesus was without sin. But he still took time to confess and acknowledge his complicity in using those oppressive systems.

If you walk by the side of a road that was built by enslaved people, are you really absolving yourself of the guilt of not using the road? So I want to say that as we go into confession next week, the process is not just identifying the actions we've taken, but recognizing that the world is not as it should be, and that, like Jesus, as uncomfortable it is to say, we benefit from these systems, and we need to confess them.

So the time for confession is coming. But I want to leave you this week with those questions to think about. What have I done that might have caused, that might have been a part of an oppressive system of racial injustice?

What have I contributed? What role do I play? What do I need to unlearn? What do I need to seek to undo? Because that's the only way we're going to move forward. If we don't think we've got anything to confess, confession's a meaningless exercise.

[31 : 24] So with that, let's end with a word of prayer, and then we'll move into communion. Heavenly Father, our world is not as it should be, and we all, in some ways, play a role in perpetrating those systems.

Give us the courage to confront our own behaviors, interrogate the things that we do, the things that we say, the things that we don't do, and give us the confidence to come to confession next week, recognizing who we are and where we sit in these oppressive systems, and what it can look like to move forward in racial reconciliation.

Amen.