

Dan: Welcome everyone! We are so glad that you have tuned in to join us at The Creek today. My name is Dan, I'm the lead pastor here, and this is Darnell, he serves as our director of community outreach. You may well remember him, as he preached for us just a few weeks ago. Today, we are starting a brand new sermon series called "Things That Matter."

The past several months have been unprecedented. Just last week I saw someone on Twitter say: "I always wondered what it was like to live through the Spanish Flu, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, Watergate, and the Dust Bowl. I never wanted to know what it was like to live through them all at once, but beggars can't be choosers." We've seen a *lot* the last four months. And as we have journeyed through these unprecedented times, we've learned, or perhaps relearned, just how important certain things really are.

We are going to take the next few weeks and talk about some of those things we have learned that really matter. When the vast majority of the world was in quarantine, we learned how much community matters. When tens of millions lost their job and were in economic uncertainty, we learned how much generosity matters. After seeing so much contentiousness and divisiveness in relationships, we learned how much unity matters. And when racial tensions flared up for weeks on end in the wake of specific and horrific violence against black people, we learned how much equality matters. Those are the things we are going to talk about the next four weeks. Today, Darnell and I are going to try our best to talk about equality, which is a very important and a very timely discussion, and also one that is very sensitive.

Darnell: Like Dan said, over the past few months, our church and our country has experienced so much pain and loss. COVID-19, George Floyd, riots, looting, police officers being killed in the street - I know that many of our nerves are on edge and emotions are high, and on top of all that, we're in an election cycle! So words like "racism," "privilege" and "equality" have taken on so much baggage that as soon as we hear them we start to get tense. But the Bible has so much to say about all these things, and as a church, we need examine all this through a biblical lens. And if we're going to choose the kingdom over the culture, we need to know what God says about equality and what he expects from us. So I am going to pray for Dan and I, but also for us as a church, that we would be humble and open to the truth, but most importantly obedient to what God has to say.

Dan: We want to begin by talking about the biblical understanding of equality. If you are taking notes, that's our first topic, the *biblical understanding of equality*. I think it's important to note that equality isn't a 20th or 21st century idea, it's not an American idea, it's not an enlightenment idea, it's not a civil-right's movement idea. It's God's idea, and we see it in the very beginning of God's word, all the way back in Genesis 1, the very first chapter of the Bible. In Genesis 1:26 we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them." From that passage, at the very beginning of the Bible, we learn two things about mankind: (1) We learn that we are made

in the image of God. Every one of us. Every man, every woman, every child, of every race, of every color, of every background. We are all made in the image of God and therefore we have all been endowed by our creator with equal value, equal worth, and equal dignity. That truth does not come from Charles Darwin, that truth does not come from the other religions in the world, that truth comes from the Word of God, and it comes on the very first page. And on that same page we also learn that (2) when God created us, he intended us as his children to rule over the earth. God commissioned humanity to together rule over creation, NOT rule over one another. When God created mankind, he wanted us to work in partnership with one another, exercising dominion together over the created order. It breaks God's heart and violates the created order when his children exercise dominion over one another.

Darnell: It's not only a violation of God's created order, it's a distortion of the Gospel itself. Galatians is one of Paul's harshest letters, and he starts off chapter 3 by saying, "You foolish Galatians!" Foolish is the same word for "not-understanding" or "slow" or even "stupid." Paul says, "Who has bewitched you?" Who tricked you? So what was the problem? The problem was the church was teaching that the Gospel was for the Jews, and if you wanted to stay saved you had to live like the Jewish people. But Paul says in Galatians 3:8, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Gentiles meant people who were not Jewish, different people groups. You see, God's plan from the beginning, when he called Abraham back in Genesis, was to call people from all nations, cultures, ethnic groups and backgrounds to be part of the Church. Not some of the nations, *all* of the nations.

Paul goes on and in verse 26, he says "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female. If we're in Christ, we are one. That's what the Galatians missed and *that* is the power of the Gospel.

Dan: I love that we see equality both in terms of creation from Genesis 1 and salvation in Galatians 3. In Acts 13 we also see a wonderful example of equality in leadership. Acts 13 gives us a snapshot of the church in Antioch, one of the leading cities in the world at the time, and it tells us this about the leadership team in Acts 13:1. "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up in the household of Herod the tetrarch) and Saul." Five men are mentioned as a part of their leadership cohort, and if we pay attention, we'll see something incredible about the diversity in their group: Barnabas was a Jew born in Israel. Simeon was called Niger, which means black, so we know the color of his skin. Lucius is from Cyrene, which is in Libya, so he is black, too. Manaen was brought up in the household of Herod, which means almost certainly that he was Greco-Roman and from the elite, ruling class, and then we have Saul, who was a Jew, but who was born outside of Israel in a town called Tarsus.

So we have 5 people, none of whom are like one another. They have different skin colors, spoke different native languages, inherited different family backgrounds, different cultures, different socio-economic statuses, and yet, even with all those differences, they were all recognized

equally as leaders in the church - prophets and teachers. And I think it's important for us to note that if we like the idea of equality, if we like the idea of diversity, if we like the idea of judging men and women not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, we have Jesus to thank. He is the one who introduced those concepts to the world, and it's in his church that we see the very first example of true equality and diversity anywhere in history.

Now we can look around the church today, and it is clear we have a long way to go to get back to what we saw in Acts 13. We have ground to retake. But just like the church pioneered the conversation on equality and diversity in regards to leadership 2,000 years ago, the church can do the same again today, not because we are driven by a political ideology or secular humanism, but because we are driven by the *gospel*.

Darnell: Just like Acts 13 gives us a snapshot of equality in *leadership*, the book of Revelation gives us a snapshot of equality in *eternity*. In Revelation 7, John has a vision of that future reality. He says in verse 9 and 10: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" Nobody is left out in that description - nation, tribe, people and language covers *everybody*. Think how different this is from where we are now. We have black churches and white churches and Hispanic churches, but in eternity we won't be saying "Ok, 'black church' over there, 'white church' over here, 'Hispanic church' over there." No, there will be the one Church filled with all God's people, not looking in, not side to side, but looking out, saying "salvation belongs to *OUR* God."

There's a pastor I like named Seymour Helligar and he says, "Ethnicity is recognized but ethnicity is not idolized." This is part of what makes the Church beautiful. This kind of unity, diversity, and equality is a preview of heaven. God's plan is for his people, of all different backgrounds, to be unified in their love for him. And that is a powerful testimony to the world. In a world full of racial lines and political divides, for the world to see the body of Christ, all nations, tribes, people and languages coming together, recognizing our differences but knowing that we are equal and unified in God. Just like a choir, or a beautiful painting or even a good meal, all these parts coming together to make something amazing! That's what is happening here in Revelation 7 and that makes Jesus look glorious!

Dan: I hope we are beginning to see and appreciate the biblical understanding of equality. It's all throughout Scripture. But here's the thing, the Bible also speaks very honestly about just how challenging it can be to actually express true equality, even for people who know and follow Jesus. Darnell and I want to give you a couple examples, from the Bible, where God's people had to confront inequality and prejudice in their midst and how the gospel paved the path for them to walk a different way. There are several examples we could pull from, but for today we are going to focus on just two. The first is in Galatians 2.

Galatians 2 tells us about the interaction of two of the most influential men in the history of the church, Peter and Paul. Peter is the one of the earliest followers of Jesus, he was the leader of the twelve apostles, and on the day of Pentecost, he gave the very first christian sermon and led the

way in baptizing 3,000 people. He performed numerous miracles and wrote a couple books of the Bible.

And then you have Paul. Paul was originally persecuting and killing Christians, but then Jesus appeared to him, transformed his life, and Paul went on to plant many churches and write 13 books of the Bible. These are two heavy weights! After Jesus himself, these are the two most powerful, influential men in the history of the history of the entire church! And in Galatians 2, they clashed. They had a sharp disagreement. And what do you think caused these two guys, these two powerful men of God, who loved Jesus and loved people to disagree with one another? Race. Ethnicity. Matters of equality.

Here's what we need to know: Peter believed that all people were equal. He knew that God wanted people of every nationality to be saved. In Acts 10, he was the first person to baptize Gentiles, because God spoke to him three consecutive times and told him to do it. So he knew about the importance of equality; he could have written a book on it! But here's the thing, when it came to living it out, he didn't really practice what he preached. He was all set up on the surface, but practically, in his actual relationships, there was still underlying prejudice.

When Paul observed who Peter ate meals with, he noticed that there were certain people Peter didn't sit with. And who you share meals with makes a big difference. We know that! From the lunchroom in high school to the board room in corporate America, the people we eat with are those we like, those we trust, those we want to establish close relationships with, those we are willing partner with. And Paul noticed that Peter didn't eat with Gentiles, only with other Jews. So in Galatians 2:11 Paul says that he opposed Peter to his face because he stood condemned. His prejudice was compromising the gospel. It's not enough to love God - Peter loved God. It's not enough to know the truth in your mind - Peter knew the truth in his mind. Sometimes we need other people, just like Peter needed Paul, to confront us and help us realize where we have prejudice in our lives, even at a subconscious level.

And honestly, that's where I think a lot of the inequality that exists in our lives today is found. Not all of it, but a lot of it. Most people I know would never say an unkind word or do an unkind thing to a person based upon the color of their skin. Never! And even though that's the case, there might still be subtle ways, ways we are even unaware of, where we treat people with prejudice. And that's one of the reasons these sorts of conversations can be so helpful. Because they help bring these underlying issues to the surface where they can be exposed, where they can be dealt with, and where they can be replaced with truth and love.

Sometimes we need to be like Peter in those conversations and have prejudice brought to our attention, other times we need to be like Paul in those conversations and say the hard truths. The gospel requires us to have those conversations *and* to hear those conversations. Because it's not enough to know in our minds that all people are created equal, it's not enough to say with our words that all people are created equal, we have to actually *live* like all men are created equal.

Darnell: Dan showed us a clash between two heavy weights in Peter and Paul. And in the book of Philemon we see a clash between a slave and a slave owner. The book of Philemon is Paul's shortest letter, and he's writing to a friend to intercede on behalf of a slave named Onesimus. At

some point Onesimus had run away from Philemon, come in contact with Paul and become a believer. So Paul is stuck between a runaway slave who had come to faith and that slave's owner, who had also been converted by Paul and come to faith. So Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter and listen to what he says in verses 15 and 16: "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."

What makes this so amazing is that in Christ, not only is injustice and inequality removed, but in their place we have grace and reconciliation. And even more than that, we become brothers and sisters in Christ. The gospel not only reconciles us to God, but it reconciles us to each other.

Going back to the letter, Paul says in verse 18, "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." This is reminding Philemon of the message of the gospel. In the same way that Jesus said, "Charge it to my account, I'll pay the debt," Paul is saying, "Charge it to me and I'll make it right." Paul, Philemon, Onesimus are all equal in the Gospel.

Paul could have demanded that Philemon release Onesimus and stop owning slaves but instead, for love's sake, he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back in the same way that he would receive him. Meaning, "Philemon, when I send this slave back, he's my equal, he's your equal but more than that, he's our *brother*."

Dan: That is such a powerful example! And I think one of the things we learn from that example is that the gospel really does have the power to heal and restore even the deepest of fractures in human relationships. And ultimately, that's what this conversation is about, it's about relationships, how we interact with one another. Sometimes, when people talk about racial matters, the initial response is to jump to facts. Facts about history, money, education, crime, the list could go on and on. We all know that facts can be helpful. Facts can influence and inform conversations, but we also know that facts don't solve problems, friendships do. Obviously we need more than friendships. But friendships are the starting place because friendships enable two or more people who don't necessarily look like one another to come together and find common ground, even when they don't have a common skin color, or a common culture, or common experiences. It's when we really get to know one another and come appreciate one another that walls and defenses begin to come down, ignorance and prejudices begin to fade away, and that love begins to win the day.

Two of the principles we've tried to model today are the centrality of God's word in forming our thoughts and opinions about race relations, and the importance of having these conversations in relationship with one another. What I'm seeing these days is that a lot of Christians I'm having conversations with seem to be having their ideas shaped primarily by the news media, social media, political candidates, even celebrities, rather than going first and foremost to God's word - which is always the starting place for followers of Jesus. And something else I'm seeing is that often when conversations are had, they end up taking place in echo-chambers with other people who look nearly identical in terms of their age, skin color, political beliefs, and socio-economic status. If we want to learn and grow and mature, we have to actually engage *deeply* across those potential divides with people who have different experiences than we do. I know some Christians

who are really good and going to the Word. I know other Christians who are really good at developing relationships. I think God is calling us to do both! To ensure every thought we have is informed and shaped by Scripture, in the context of loving, diverse relationships. When we do that, we are going to learn a *lot*.

Darnell: One of the things I think we tend to forget is just how much our history shapes our present reality. In this country, slavery lasted 246 years and for a hundred years after that, we had lynchings and Jim Crow laws and segregation right up to the 1960s. This is not a long time in the span of history. One of my classmates in college told me that his grandfather had been part of a mob that lynched a black man in their town. I'm adopted, both my parents are white, and they would tell me stories of a time when blacks and whites didn't even share the same sidewalk. I could tell you a dozen stories off the top of my head of deeply hurtful experiences I've had for no other reason than because my skin was too dark. My point is, thinking about racism in America as some kind of ancient history just isn't true - these wounds are still healing. And just speaking as a brother, family member to family member, when I hear people from my church minimizing the effects of hundreds of years of racism, it's hurtful, because I want to see the church leading the charge against racism and inequality. If you're white, you'll never know what it's like to be black, and I'll never know what it's like to be white. But we both know what it's like to be one in Christ. And being one in Christ means trying to understand the pain of others and being passionate about loving them and fighting for their equality.

Dan: That's a really helpful word. Thank you for sharing that. I think for white people, who clearly make up the predominant race in our country, it's important to understand that even though we live in a country with tremendous opportunities, black people often don't experience the same America as white people do. We are still living with the effects of horrific injustices from just a few generations ago. Hundreds of years of slavery and another hundred years of segregation will set a community back and affect a culture and a country in ways that are impossible to fully appreciate. And we need to deal with those issues at both an internal heart level as individuals, as well as at a structural level as a society. It's not either or, it's both and.

And again, relationships provide such good context for these conversations. Personally speaking, I've learned a lot recently. In talking to non-white people, I've heard about the unique challenges of being the only person of their skin color in an entire classroom, or an entire restaurant, or in an entire church. I've heard about what it feels like to not get an interview because of the spelling of your name. I've heard what it's like to get pulled over six times in the same year because "you matched the description of someone we were looking for." I've spoken with several black women in the last few months, all of whom cried when we talked, with tears falling down their cheeks they shared about the fear they live in for the safety of their husband, their sons, their brothers. And I can tell you: there is something powerful, undeniable and unifying that happens when we listen to one another and enter into each other's stories. We begin to weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, and together, in loving relationship, we can confront injustice and begin to build structures that honor God and promote the good for all of his children.

Darnell: One of my favorite memories so far this year is a meeting I had with a man named Harold. Harold is a 67 year old white man, and he emailed me because he wanted to understand

how my experiences as a black man might be different than his. So I invited Harold to come over and sit in my garage and just talk. And what stood out to me was how determined Harold was to hear what I had to say. He brought a pen and notepad and he said, "I have no idea how life might be different for you as a young black man, but I know it's different and I want to know how, why and what I can do." Now the world might say, "This is not the demographic that will be interested in race-relations." Older, white, conservative male from the Midwest. But what the world doesn't realize is that Harold and I are brothers in a way that makes our differences a non-issue. The power of the gospel means that we are two equal people who are *one* in the family of God. And beyond that, it means that as family members we are committed to finding out how to love one another better.

Dan: I love that! What a beautiful story. Again, the power of relationships and the unity we have in Christ. As a church, I think we've seen God do some great work in this area. Now clearly there is more work to be done! We don't have a ton of diversity at the present moment, but we have a lot more than we've ever seen before. And I believe we are on a trajectory, not to hit a certain quota, because that's not our goal - but to truly be postured as a church in a loving way to all people, with open arms, with a seat at the table and a voice at the table for anyone and everyone who God would bring to our church.

My heart broke just a few weeks ago when I got a message from a black person in our church who told me that when she started coming here, about 20 years ago, someone came up to her and asked her, "Why are you coming here? Don't you know there is a black church on this side of town?" Then she said, "It's been 20 years, and I'm still trying to fit in." I said to that woman: "I love you. We love you. I am so glad you stuck with us for 20 years. You are so important to this church family." I want to say, as our lead pastor, on behalf of the leadership at our church, no matter who you are, if you are at The Creek and you are not white, we will do everything we can to ensure that you will never be asked, "Why did you come here?" Instead we will say: "What an honor, what a privilege, what a gift it is to us that you are here! It means the world to us that you would join us for worship at The Creek. And if God would call you to join this body, this family of believers, you will be welcomed and treated with complete equality, you will be shown love, kindness, and grace, you will be extended opportunities to serve, contribute, and influence in meaningful ways. We are so glad you are here!"

Friends, there is a war going on. But it is not a cultural war against different groups of people. The battle is not against one another. It's not against flesh and blood. God's word tells us that the real battle is against our spiritual enemy, who not only wants to destroy us, but he knows we are weakest when instead of standing side by side one another, arms and shields linked together, he can actually get us to turn on one another. Right?! Our enemy has been trying to get us to fight against one another and do his work for him! And there have been times when we've fallen into his trap. We have to remember that there is a war going on, that we have a real enemy, and instead of fighting against one another, instead of giving up ground, instead of just holding the line, the Bible calls us to put on armor, pick up the sword of the Spirit, and together, march against the enemy and reclaim ground for the glory of God and the good of our fellow man. That's what we hope and intend to do. With that framework in our minds, Darnell is going to prepare us for a time of communion.

Darnell: As we take communion, and you get whatever you have that represents Christ's body that was broken and his blood that was shed, think about the love that Jesus has for us in coming, taking our suffering, and calling us into relationship with Him. And think about what it means that because of his incredible love and sacrifice, we can now gather at the table as equals, in our relationships with each other and in our need and gratitude for him.