

THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE | Session 3: Justice and Reconciliation

SESSION GOALS

Every session has a point—what each participant should walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: The gospel unites us with God and others, so we should work to overcome the racial divisions that separate us from our neighbors.

Head Change: To know that the gospel creates a new family made up of vastly different people.

Heart Change: To feel motivated by the gospel for the work of reconciliation.

Life Change: To reconcile with others by exploring our racial formation, repenting where we've gotten things wrong and living lives shaped by the gospel of peace.

OPEN

Think of a film or show where the main characters experience a break in their relationship. What was the nature of their relational conflict? Were the characters able to reconcile? If so, how?

It is normal to face division in our fallen world. We divide ourselves from others for any number of reasons, from our socioeconomic status to our political party. But one of the most long-standing and violent sources of our discord is racial division.

In this session, Rich will address the issues of justice and racial reconciliation head-on, showing us how the gospel transcends our racial divisions and creates a new family of people from all walks of life.

VIEW

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Rich Villodas's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

How does Rich describe the gospel in this session?

What should the gospel do to the barriers that divide us?

What are the five signs which demonstrate that we are "living out" the gospel?

Watch Session 3: *Justice and Reconciliation* (15 minutes).

REVIEW

When we use the word "racism," it's possible that we don't always mean the same thing. So, a good place for us to start is with a definition. Citing sociologist Michael Emerson, Rich said that "racism comprises attitude, actions, institutional structure, or social policies that subordinate persons or groups because of their color." **Do you find this definition of racism helpful? Why, or why not? How would you restate Emerson's definition in your own words?**

Racial justice and reconciliation can be turbulent topics, especially when we observe how they're handled culturally. **What level of experience do you have with the topic of racial reconciliation? Do you have any fears about addressing this topic with others? If so, what are they?**

Rich called racial justice and reconciliation “an important part of the deeply formed life.” Jesus forgave us while we were his enemies; if we are to love others as Christ loved us, we must seek peace, reconciliation, and justice in our community. **In what ways have racial justice and reconciliation been important in your life? In what ways do you still have room to grow?**

As Rich said, the gospel should break down the barriers that divide us, “but the walls of prejudice and racism still exist in our culture and our churches.” **Why do you think prejudice and racism are so difficult to break down? Where do you still see prejudice and racism, and their effects, in our culture today? In our churches?**

According to Rich, Christians have been given what sometimes feels like an overwhelming and impossible mission: to “seek peace and justice across divisions that culture has erected.” **Have you ever considered it your mission to pursue peace and justice as Rich argued? Why, or why not?**

What are the barriers to peace and justice in your community?

What could it look like to seek peace and justice across our cultural divisions?

We may imagine the gospel is simply the good news that we go to heaven when we die. That is true (and beautiful!), but the gospel includes more than our personal futures. The gospel is also about Jesus bringing the kingdom of heaven near *now*, and stripping sin and death of their power today. **How does this understanding of the gospel compare to how you’ve conceived of the good news? Why is it important not to overlook this aspect of the gospel? In what ways can this understanding of the gospel inform our work for racial justice?**

One of the primary fruits of the gospel is “the creation of a new family made up of vastly different people, made whole and united through Jesus Christ.” **In what ways does your local church reflect this new family created by the gospel? How do you seek to embody this aspect of the gospel in your own life?**

Jesus’s death and resurrection destroyed the walls that separated us from the Father and others. Rich put it this way: the cross is “a sledgehammer that tears down the walls that separate us.” But it can be easy to adopt the prejudices and divisions our culture creates. **Why do you think it can be so hard for us to live like the walls between us have been torn down? What can we do to build relationships with our neighbors who are different than us?**

Rich offered five signs that demonstrate the “wall-breaking gospel.” The first is to recognize the complexity of belonging to a diverse church family. While the gospel unites us, there can be some difficulties in creating a new and diverse community. For example, we all have different worship preferences, cultural values, and experiences that may be hard to unify. **What are some of the difficulties that can naturally occur when living in a diverse community? How can we handle those difficulties with love and grace? How does acknowledging the difficulties and complexities help us to deal with them properly?**

Secondly, those who live out the gospel should explore their racial formation or how they have been taught to view people of other races. **Growing up, were any biases or prejudices instilled in you by your family or culture? In what ways do those biases influence you today? How might exploring these biases and their origin help you to overcome them?**

Thirdly, learning to lament is a key feature of moving toward racial justice and reconciliation. We must learn to acknowledge the racial sins that have been committed (whether we’ve committed them personally or not) and grieve the damage they’ve caused.

Why do you think it's important to acknowledge past racism before we can move forward? How can naming past forms of racism help to prevent us from recommitting these sins ourselves?

What could it look like for you to grieve over the damage that racism has caused for the people in your life of other races?

In addition to acknowledging and lamenting the damage done by racism, Christians are those who are called to both repent and forgive. **Do you sense God calling you to repent for anything in this area? Insensitivity? Stereotyping? Indifference? Could God be calling you to forgive others for their sins against you?**

Finally, a life rooted in the “wall-breaking gospel” is a life rooted in Jesus Christ—depending on him instead of giving up when things get hard. In Jesus, “a new world has been born, and we are called to live in this world by clinging to him and his ways.” **How difficult do you find it to cling to Jesus and follow his ways? Who helps you cling to Jesus?**

Rich ended this session by restating his definition of the gospel, that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has come near, and the powers of sin and death no longer have the last word. We are citizens of a new kingdom, and we belong to a new family. **What practical steps can you take to build friendships across cultural barriers in your neighborhood, work, and church?**

BIBLE EXPLORATION

In this session, Rich spent the bulk of his time discussing the “horizontal walls” that were torn down at the cross of Christ. Read Ephesians 2:11–16.

Writing to Gentiles (anyone who wasn't Jewish), Paul reminds his readers that “at one time. . . you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise.” In other words, his readers were not part of the family of God. Before we were saved, that was true of us as well. **Do you remember your life before you were made a member of God's family? To what extent were you aware of your separation from God?**

Verse 13 marks a stark turn in this passage, where Paul states emphatically, “now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” **When did Christ save you? Who and what did he use to awaken you to the gospel? What are some of the ways that your life has changed since becoming a follower of Jesus?**

One of the changes that this passage outlines, and which Rich highlighted in this session, is that Christ makes peace between people who were not previously at peace. He unites us with people who were once divided, including those of other races. **How have you seen God mend relationships in your life? How long did it take for God to apply his peace to those relationships?**

To say that God simply makes peace between those who were once divided isn't quite strong enough. Instead, he tears down the “dividing wall of hostility” and makes peace by forming one group, or “one new man” (v. 15). As Rich stated, he puts us in a new family—his family! **How could it change the way you relate to Christians of another race to know that you are both members of his family? In what ways could it change the way you share the gospel with others to know that you are inviting them to be a part of the family of God?**

Racial reconciliation is a spiritual issue. We could even call it a gospel issue. In the gospel, Christ is reconciling people of all races to himself “through the cross” (v. 16). Whatever hostilities that still lie within us, he has “put to [them] death” (v. 16).

Are there any hostilities toward others that you're still carrying? Who do you need to confess your hostilities to? What could you do to relinquish those hostilities and receive the peace that Christ offers?

Since racial reconciliation is so near to the heart of God, what could you do to make it a top priority in your own life?

LAST WORD

Racial reconciliation is a gospel issue. In the gospel, people of all races, tribes, and nations are being reconciled to God and one another—we are being joined to the family of God. That is great news!

But the work of racial reconciliation is not yet fully realized. As we wait for the kingdom of God to come in full, the work of racial reconciliation has been given to the church. As heralds of the gospel, we bring good news to a society plagued by racial division and injustice: the dividing walls of hostility have been torn down, be reconciled to God and your neighbors through Christ.

This week, make it your ambition to share this good news with the people around you who haven't yet heard it.

DEEPER WALK

Explore: Set aside 15–20 minutes to explore what Rich called your “racial formation.” Think about your family of origin and the environment you grew up in, especially as it relates to the topic of race. What attitudes were present toward people of other races? What words were used to describe them? Who was viewed as trustworthy, and who wasn't? Who was viewed as safe, and who wasn't? Explore these things and reckon with them.

Lament: Based on what you learn as you explore your racial formation, lament what you find that isn't godly. Consider how your formation differed from the vision of the gospel and engage in the Christian practices of confession and repentance.

Read: For a deeper dive into the topics of racial justice and reconciliation, read chapters 3–4 of Rich's book *The Deeply Formed Life*.