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## **Conversations: Listen More, Talk Less** **Part 4 – Understanding Racial Tensions**

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We have been doing a series called *Conversations* and this is the last part of the series and then next week, we'll start a Christmas series where we bring it into Christmas. As you may or may not know, today marks the third Sunday out, so it's Advent. Advent season has begun. Advent means the arrival or anticipation or the coming of a Messiah, the King of Kings who would take away the sins of the world. That's what this season is all about. It's not just about a birthday, but it's about the life, death, and resurrection of a flawless, perfect human, born in humility that would come to take away the sins of the world.

We've been looking at this series with Ted and Travis the last couple of weeks, talking about *Listen More, Talk Less*. So, we've looked at husband and wife and we've looked at believer and non-believer, so, today, we're looking at *Understanding Racial Tensions*.

When you talk about listening more and talking less, that is an oxymoron or a paradox in our culture. This is what social media has created. It would be the equivalent of if four or five of us were right here in this room, having a conversation. What social media has allowed people to do is to just come in the room, blurt something out, and then leave the room. It happens all the time. We jump into a Facebook conversation and then jump right out. We jump into a Twitter conversation and we jump right out. So, actually what social media has done is cultivated this ability for us to become really poor listeners.

Listening isn't genetic. There is no DNA of listening. Listening is a 100% skill; it's learnt. You guys can Google this when you leave. They did research with some husbands that have been married 20 to 30 years. They put headsets on the husbands. The researchers played these different tones and when the husbands heard the tone, they were told to tap the table. They took these tones that were synonymous with their wife's tone or their wife's voice. This is a true story. The husbands would sit there, and when they heard a tone, they would tap. But, when they played the tone of their wife, there would be no tap. They had conditioned themselves to block out that tone.

Our ability to listen or lack thereof, is taught, it's conditioned. So, when we talk about listening more and talking less... which, by the way is biblical. James 1: 19 says be slow to speak, slow to become angry, and quick to listen. That's where we're going with this today.

I'll be honest with you. This has been one of the heaviest and hardest sermons I've ever prepped for at Woodland Hills, as you can imagine. Just look at where we're at in our country right now.

My wife and I flew back from Dallas yesterday. You know how your internet gets cut off on the plane, but if your Twitter feed has already been loaded, you can scroll through and look at it. I'm just sitting there scrolling through it during the hour flight back from Dallas. Just all the hate and venom... I rarely do this, but there was nothing else to read. It was just all the Michael Flynn stuff and Trump stuff and Clinton stuff and Russia stuff, and just these dialogues and so much hate.

If you ask any war general or war strategist how you conquer, they'll tell you that you divide. You conquer any army by dividing that army. So, you heard the quote by Abraham Lincoln in the video at the beginning of the service. It's the rose bushes quote: *"We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses."*

Abraham Lincoln was known during the Civil War to attend church on Wednesday nights. As a matter of fact, he would attend his church about a block from the Whitehouse. Dr. Gurley would let Abraham Lincoln sit in the side room where he wouldn't get bombarded by the patriots. He would go in and listen to these sermons on Wednesday night.

There is history that records that one time he went in and listened to the sermon. After the sermon, he walked back to the Whitehouse with his companion. The president's companion asked him what he thought about the sermon.

President Lincoln says, "I think it was clearly articulated, biblical, relevant, and well thought out."

His companion says, "So, you thought it was a great sermon?"

President Lincoln says, "No, I didn't say that. As a matter of fact, I didn't think it was a great sermon because he didn't challenge me to do anything great."

I would be remiss today, Woodland Hills Family Church, if you left here without feeling challenged to do something great. It might be hard for some of you to hear and I've been preaching to myself for four weeks as I've been preparing for this, but it's needed.

For the majority of my high school years, I lived with my grandparents. As a matter of fact, Richard K. Spurgeon, was my grandfather and he was in World War II. This is his actual uniform that hangs in my house. It was among some other things he left me like a chess board. He was the one who taught me how to play chess. He taught me a lot of good lessons in life.

I actually got to teach him one lesson in life. He served over in Japan and, in his later years, he suffered from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. As we know, World War II was built out of racism. This man named Adolph Hitler believed that there was one supreme race and it cost millions and millions of lives because of this ideology that was rooted in racism. Even then, my grandfather was taught, during World War II, to have this hatred towards Japanese people. Very similar now that we are being taught. What Pearl Harbor was to him, is, for a lot of us, what 9/11 is to me.

I'll be transparent and honest with all of you. I'm a recovering racist. Since 9/11, it's been hard for me to walk into an airport and see a Middle Eastern man and not think there might be something happening. What I've had to do in my own heart, to examine that 100% sin, is to begin to have conversations and friendships with more Middle Eastern men, to begin to have more friendships with more Muslims. By the way, this ideology that every Muslim wants to wipe us out and kill us isn't true. There's 1.9 million Muslims in the world. If they all wanted to kill us, we wouldn't be sitting here right now.

What media does is take ISIS and make all of us operate out of fear and think that's every Muslim in the world. As a matter of fact, the word *Islam* is derived from the word meaning peace. Granted, there are some Muslims that hate us and want to take us out, but you can't say that is the whole. We have to not allow media to shape our thinking or our theology or our ideologies for that matter.

My grandfather was a staunch racist. For those of you who don't know, I played high school and college basketball. That culture is predominantly black, especially in the area of San Diego that I grew up in. I had some really good friends that I would bring back to get some of Grandma's cooking. She had the best cooking in the world and I would brag about it. My freshman year, I brought Vince home with me and after he left, I heard some words I'd never heard my grandfather use defining a young black male. I never knew that. And then I had conversations with Grandma.

I sat down on the couch with my grandfather one day after that and tried to explain to him that he wasn't a bad kid. He got really good grades, he didn't drink, he didn't smoke. My grandfather knew I didn't do those things either even though I wasn't a believer. He took me to church every Sunday and he taught me a lot of good things, but I got to teach him one thing.

This was all in the middle of the Rodney King riots, so what he saw on the news and what was portrayed on the news... He began to, in his last years, befriend some of my closest black friends. I will tell you the Holy Spirit did a work in my grandfather's heart to where he realized that just because he saw something in the news, that didn't mean every black male in America. So, Jerod and Vince and Michael, these friends of mine in high school, became friends with my grandfather. You saw this racist wall just come down on this World War II Veteran. That's the power of God. I'm excited because I'm confident that my grandfather is in heaven.

And just so you know, if you aren't being around Hispanics or Asians or black people or Middle Eastern people now, you might as well get comfortable because you're going to be spending eternity next to them, worshipping Jesus. If you're not comfortable with them now, you're going to be really uncomfortable for eternity. It's just the reality. God doesn't see color. Well, he does; he sees red, the blood of Jesus Christ; that's what he sees. And he sees the forgiveness and imputed righteousness of Christ for those that are in him.

So, we're going to talk about *Understanding Racial Tensions*. Comedian Dennis Leary says this "Racism isn't born, folks. It's taught. I have a two-year-old son. You know what he hates? Naps! End of list."

We have no idea how much the comments we make, the way we respond, the things we say are influencing our younger generation. It's taught; it's not born.

Look at this picture. This is my son and one of his best buddies, Anthony, last year. This was before he moved to Houston. We called him Bubba. His dad and I are dear friends, we're family, we've gone on trips together. Never once did Aiden ever ask me... They spent like five days a week together last year. They were best buddies. All they care about are trucks, sand boxes, and Sonic Happy Hour. That's it. Never once did Aiden ever ask me why Anthony's skin is brown or why he looks different. And Dad's not trying to teach him about that. He's a child of God. That's all Aiden needs to know. I don't want him to grow up thinking there's anything... I want him to love everybody.

Look at this story in Numbers 12. You need to read this when you go back. This is one picture we see of a response from God on racism. It's Moses. Moses marries a Cushite woman. Just so you know, a Cushite would have been from the African region. She would have been African, so she would have been dark skinned. Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses, they rebuke him. God shows up on the scene and says, "Whoa, are you questioning my man of God, Moses and who he married? Yeah, Moses is white, and he married a black woman." God, in his rebuke to Miriam, made her white as snow. He gave her leprosy. So, her consequence was that he made her more white. I'm not making this up. She was proud of her whiteness, so God said, "Oh, you're so proud of your whiteness, let me make you more white." So, for over a week, she was a leper and had to be cast out of camp. Then God healed her and brought her back. That's the one rebuke we see... God said not to take confidence in your skin color.

The other side of that coin is... I know this is happening. Don't have white guilt either. It's important to understand that God is passionate about the hearts of men and women, not the skin of men and women.

Ted Cunningham and Travis Brawner... As we've been doing this series, we've been dialoguing a lot through text messages and phone calls. Ted said this to me this week and I thought it was spot on. *"Christians who don't gamble, drink, or smoke, but are filled with bitterness, resentment, and racism may be missing the entire point of the gospel."* I love that. I love all those amens.

Praise the Lord that there are no stereotypes when it comes to the gospel. I would be in a lot of trouble, amen? I would be in a lot of trouble. I've got sin in my life. If it was contingent upon what I did and who I was, I'm missing the boat, y'all. I'm not up there in heaven; there's no way.

But, Ephesians 4: 29-32 says this: ***29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths...*** There is a great precursor to the next time you jump on social media. ***...but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs...*** Not what is going to benefit you and not what is going to build up your needs, but what is going to benefit others and their needs.

It's amazing how the gospel always gets our eyes off of ourselves and onto others in Jesus. Jesus, what's the greatest commandment. Mark 12: 20-30 – ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and self, and then love your neighbor as yourself.*** It always points it back to others.

Back to Ephesians 4. **...that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...** I told you I believe the Holy Spirit of God worked in my grandfather and I believe I watched him die a non-racist and he carried this with him for years. So, when he walked into heaven, he was like, "Glad I dealt with this when I did! There are a whole lot of brothers and sisters in here worshiping Jesus. Praise the Lord!" **...with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander...** I will add racism and venom. **...along with every form of malice.** Here's Ted's word **32 Be...** He gave you guys a little bee sticker. **...kind and compassionate to one another...** You cannot be compassionate with one another without stepping into somebody else's shoes. That was the point of the video at the beginning of this sermon that you would step into somebody else's... That's what cultivates compassion.

Do you know who the greatest listener was to ever live? Jesus. He asked question after question after question. He would ask a question and then he'd get a response and rather than listening to reply, he would ask another question and he would hear the heart and be compassionate.

With the adulterous woman that the Pharisees wanted to stone, he gets down on her level and shows compassion. He enters into their shoes, he enters into their world, he walks where they've walked, he knows where they've been. So, rather than thinking they know everything just because they've had somebody go through a similar experience, he just listens. Someone doesn't want to know what it's like to have a miscarriage because you had a miscarriage, they want to know that you care and that you want to listen to what they're going through. Everyone experiences things differently. We are all wired differently. The only way you can cultivate compassion is by genuinely listening to understand and walking in other's shoes.

**...forgiving each other...** This isn't an option, right? **...just as in Christ God forgave you.** That's the gospel, that's the beauty of the gospel. Regardless of whether or not you think someone that acts differently, talks differently, reacts differently, has different religion... Regardless of whether or not you think they deserve your forgiveness, it doesn't matter because you didn't deserve his forgiveness either and neither did I. Just as in Christ God forgave you, this is how you forgive others. It's unconditional, it's unmerited. That's why it's called grace and that's why it's amazing. God freely gives it not on anything you or I have done. As a matter of fact, he gives it on even dumb things we have done.

So, maybe somebody has hurt you. Maybe somebody has frustrated you. Maybe somebody does think politically different than you. Maybe somebody has made stereotypical or prejudices towards you. Even in that, we are to forgive. That's the beauty of the gospel. That's where there is no racism, no stereotypes, no prejudices – in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every tongue, every tribe, every nation will kneel before him and confess that he is Lord.

Stephen Covey says this: *"Listen with the intent to understand, not with the intent to reply."*

If we're just waiting for someone to stop talking so that we can get our words out as soon as the last word comes out of their mouth, we're not listening. Ted said it a few weeks ago that he believes Jack Herschend is one of the wisest men he's met and that's because Jack does very little talking.

As a matter of fact, Proverbs say when words are many, sin is not absent. The fewer the words, sometimes the wiser the man. You listen better when you're not thinking on how to reply. When you're thinking of how to ask a question on top of what is being asked.

Some of you husbands might be able to get rid of that tone if you would just start asking that question after a question. Some of you are hating me, thinking it's going to be a long ride home. Listen with the intent to understand. Wives want to be understood, they don't want to be fixed, right? They're not Coldplay with *Fix You*, they just want to be understood, they don't need to be fixed.

It's the same way when we think we're going to solve this issue or this racial problem. They want to be understood. Just so you're aware, a groomsman in my wedding was a black male that I'm still very close with. I was in his wedding and I've had a lot of conversations with very close black friends of mine, B.J., A.T., Richard, T-Dot. Just a lot of friends that I've been having conversations with about this and trying to understand. What it has really taught me is that they just want people to listen, to be better understood. Not in a paternalistic way. They don't need paternalism or pity. That's the wrong approach. They want people to listen. They want people to understand. I'm having a lot of these conversations, a lot of dialogue and it's pertinent that we would begin to listen and understand.

If you're not ever having people of different ethnicities over to your home for dinner, they're not your friend. If you just feel better about yourself because you say hi to them when you see them at the supermarket... No, we're called to be a diverse group. We're called to be together in unity of all tongues, tribes, and languages. We're called to come together.

I've seen this video three times and I get teary-eyed every time. I don't know if this guy is a believer or not. I have no idea. But, I do believe the spirit of God is moving in him, even if he's not a believer.

[Video plays] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr3z79lkCn4>

When all the police brutality stuff started to surface... I have a dear friend... I told you people in my wedding were people of color. I didn't understand why they were so upset because when I looked at the statistics, white cop on white crime was higher. I didn't understand so I just reached out to them and rather than trying to be argumentative and have a lawyer approach, I just said, "Help me understand where you guys... I hear you and I want to understand."

They put two books in my hand that had a significant impact on me while I was processing. One was called *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. The other book they put in my hand was *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Then they put a documentary on my Netflix docket to watch called 13<sup>th</sup>. I wanted to think for myself. I didn't want Fox News or CNN... I didn't want mainstream media shaping my view or my thoughts. I wanted God's word above all else. So, reading those books, watching those... I just kept diving into God's word and realized God is passionate against injustice. He's passionate against racism. As a matter of fact, there are only two races in all of the Bible in God's eyes and we're going to see what that is.

I wanted to walk in others' shoes. We run a basketball program over at the Link Year that I run. Once again, the majority of those basketball players are from inner city areas and I get to love on them. Maybe this was a one-time event, but as I was wrestling through and doing these things... This happened last year. I've been in Branson for close to 15 years. I used to go to the Walmart on the strip before they created the Super Walmart. I still go to Walmart all the time.

Last year, I take two of my players on this basketball team and I buy them some groceries. They needed some groceries, so I went up there and bought them some groceries. They get their groceries bags and I buy something separate. They are walking ten feet in front of me out of this Walmart. The person at the door asks for receipts from both of them. Not a big deal; maybe this was a one-time event. I'm telling you that I've been here for 15 years and no one at the door of Walmart has ever asked for my receipt. They show them their receipt because the receipt was in the bag. Sure enough, I walked right by him and he doesn't ask for my receipt.

I get in the car with these two players and I just start crying. I tell them both... God was starting to shape me. When you start to step into someone else's shoes, you begin to see things differently. Rather than assume they have a victim conscience... No, it takes place; it happens. Let's just pretend for a second. And I'm not making a statement at all. Let me precursor this. This is not a statement on standing for the anthem or taking a knee. Let's just say this (bottle of water) is the NFL for a minute. Some of you have already boycotted the NFL and refuse to even listen to why they are taking a knee. What has happened is you have these lenses (puts on clear lens glasses) that have been shaped, whether from grandparents or media or Fox or whatever else, and you're looking at the NFL from this side.

And then you have the other side that is taking a knee and they are over here looking at the NFL with this lens (puts on dark lens glasses) from the other side. What you are doing, or what I was doing I should say, was keeping the same lens, but then just coming over here and thinking yeah, I still see it and we're saying you're entitled, you're overpaid, you ungrateful athletes. Rather than saying you know what? Even if I don't agree with you, how about I just come over here and listen and try to see things the way you're seeing them? Rather than being angry and mad and throwing a one finger wave at you and being upset and boycotting the NFL, what if I just came over here and put on different lenses and tried to understand and listen?

Just because we disagree with people, that doesn't mean we have to hate people. We're allowed to disagree. But, the one place I'll never disagree... I'm going to look at the NFL through the lens of God's word. Whether we're angry by the way that they are exercising their constitutional right or not and the rhetoric that's being driven up by different... That doesn't solve anything. That only drives more hate. That only drives more fuel and it's impossible to have compassion until we're willing to start looking at things in a different perspective, through a different lens.

God's word never changes. We should always filter things through that lens. But, when we just try to look at things without putting on their lens and understanding their background, culture, experiences, and everything else... That day at Walmart I experienced a new experience that I had never seen before or had any idea of. That was another work of compassion the Lord was doing on my heart.

This was a quote that Ted shared with the staff and me in a text message this week. *“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”* – Martin Niemoller – Lutheran Minister and early Nazi supporter who was left in prison for opposing Hitler’s regime.

There is a historical figure that has had a significant impact on the advancement of colored people even before the NAACP was here. His name was William Wilberforce and he believed that slavery and racism found no place in the word of God. As a matter of fact, you can watch the movie called *Amazing Grace*. What a great seasonal movie to watch with your family. William Wilberforce was so passionate about abolishing the transatlantic slave movement, he made it his life’s goal to end it. And by God’s help and by God’s guidance, William Wilberforce had one of the biggest impacts. What is my point to that? William Wilberforce is white. The Jews will always speak for Jews. The Asians will always speak for the Asians. Black people will always speak for black people. Until white people are just as passionate about injustices that take place and what God’s word says, things will continually be divisive. How do you defeat a county? You divide and conquer.

It’s obvious, right? You look around... It’s not like Branson is booming with diversity. I understand that. But, even the way we navigate social media and even the way we navigate conversations and communication goes a long way. You show people the gospel when you forgive them. You show people the gospel when you project compassion on them. You show people the gospel when you listen well to them. You project the gospel onto people when you respond the way Jesus did to those that didn’t think like us, act like us. Jesus loved the Samaritan. Jesus loved people that didn’t look like other people. Jesus loved the lowly. Jesus loved those that were orphaned and widowed. Jesus loved all those people and we get to show people the gospel when we respond similarly.

Romans 1: 16 says, ***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...*** Everyone... Green, Yellow, Black, White... everyone who believes. ***...first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*** The gospel is for everyone. For us to think it’s just for us... That’s not the gospel. As a matter of fact, we don’t portray the gospel very clearly when we walk in our own elitism. As a matter of fact, this is saying Imago Dei. We are all created in the image of God to be God’s image bearers. There is no bearing of God’s image when we walk in racism or prejudice or hate or divisive rhetoric. Imago Dei. Everyone in here was created in the image of God.

1 Peter 2 says this: ***9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*** Do you see what’s going on here? The Bible makes it clear. There are two races: those who don’t believe in God and those who do. That’s it! Those are the two races and the Bible makes it very clear. And guess what? Scripture tells us to love those who don’t belong to the kingdom of God, which includes Muslims, which includes atheists, which includes agnostics and secular humanists and cosmic humanists and everything else. Love, love, love.

They will know you are my disciples by the way you love others, by the way you project love, by the way you listen to others. There's no black, no white, no brown. There are two races in the kingdom of God.

Timothy Keller says this: *"When you become a Christian, you are not primarily from Ohio or Germany or Asia; you are not primarily Anglo, African-American, Asian, or Hispanic; you are not primarily white collar or blue collar. You are a citizen of God's nation."*

I told you this sermon would completely fail if I didn't challenge you to do something great. Here's the reality. I have to stay away from a lot of mainstream media. There's an agenda. Everyone has an agenda. The challenging you to do something great is to seek understanding on your own. Seek God's understanding. Seek how God responds to racism. Seek how God responds to those things. If there is racism in your heart or prejudice in your heart, whether it's towards Middle Eastern, like I've had to work through, or black people or Hispanic or whatever the case may be, I'm challenging you to do something great. Work through that because that's going to be an awkward day when you take your last breath and the next thing you know, you're praising Jesus standing next to people that you didn't want anything to do with on this earth. And, I don't know about you, but I don't want to be more white; I'm already pale and it's December. I don't need leprosy.

We do something else every first Sunday of the month at Woodland Hills. We take communion. We hold communion the same way we see it in 1 Corinthians 11. As a matter of fact, 1 Corinthians 11 says that we believe communion is for the believer, for those that have professed faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, that he did come through a virgin known as Mary, which we will celebrate here in a couple of weeks. We believe that he lived the life we all should have lived and died the death we all deserved to die. That he lived a sinless life, was tried, crucified on the cross at Calvary, was buried, and three days later rose again. He tasted death so that you and I would never have to. He is the only spotless lamb that can take away the sins of the world and can take away your sins and mine. And that he is the way, the truth, and the life and no one shall come to God except through him. If you believe that, we invite you to take communion today.

Before you do that, it even says to examine yourself before you take of the bread and drink of the cup. It says without examining yourself, you may eat and drink judgment upon yourself. Scripture calls us and encourages us to examine our own heart. So, before we take the bread, I just want to give you a moment to see if there's anything going on in your heart. As Psalm 139 says, ***23 Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*** Is there racism there? Are there prejudices there? Is there anger, bitterness, slander, malice. ***24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.***

***...on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."***

I pray by God's grace that I challenged all of you to do something great today. If the Spirit is stirring in your heart, if God is just moving, we have a prayer team up here every Sunday. They would love to pray

with you and for you and conversate with you. Let me close us in prayer and the worship team will take us away.

Father God, we just praise you and thank you. As we look to the Virgin Birth, we're reminded of the life that Jesus lived and thank you for what he's done for us. Despite our color or background or ethnicity or culture, you see Christ in us.

God, thank you for navigating this series. I pray you would help us all be better listeners. Be with this church. I pray that a year from now, this church would look more diverse. Thank you for these people. Thank you for your grace.

It's in the matchless, mighty, powerful, and pure name of Jesus Christ I pray. And all God's people said... Amen.