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Faith

A Study Guide on Race and Faith

PART 3: RACE AND RACISM

The following is a work in progress document under joint development by Epic Movement and the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Initiated in Summer 2019, these materials reflect content last updated in January 2021.

If you use these studies, we welcome your feedback for incorporation into a final draft of the curriculum that will be completed in Summer 2021. Please direct all comments and inquiries to jasonchu@fuller.edu.

Grace and blessings to you.

PART 3: RACE AND RACISM

Study Introduction

Welcome to *Beyond Model Minority Faith*, a Bible study curriculum on race and the Gospel. Over the next weeks, you'll be exploring some of the many intersections between Asian American issues and the Christian faith.

This study touches on many topics that may be difficult, personal, or new to you. As you begin each session, it may help to go over these ground rules, or refer to them during sessions:

- **Respect** one another's stories. Don't explicitly or implicitly talk down on, judge, invalidate, or criticize someone else's lived experiences.
- Speaking is not a competition; no one member of the group should dominate the conversation. **Hold space** for each other to think and reflect. Don't interrupt, jump in, or rush to have your voice or point heard.
- **Listen well.** Some of the subject matter we'll be covering could be sensitive or trigger past pain and hurt. When the study or another group member brings up emotions or ideas you don't expect, instead of getting argumentative or defensive, treat it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and others.
- Respect *both* **personal experience and critical history**. Our lived experiences are valuable and need to be treated with respect. But often our personal life stories only reveal a narrow portion of the bigger picture; remember that what we are learning in this study will help reveal a broader historical context that helps us understand and locate our individual experiences more accurately.

We're excited and hopeful that you and your group will find truth, depth, and community on your journey together.

The Fuller Asian American Center
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SESSION 1: RACE IN AMERICA

Asian Americans are often framed as a racial “Model Minority”. While this might initially sound like a compliment - *you work hard, contribute, and assimilate into American society!* - the reality is that the phrase has deep negative impacts for both Asian Americans and other American racial minorities. We’ll return to this topic next week, but to even start unpacking this, much less debunking it, first we have to explore an even more foundational question: *what is race?*

Money, Power and Politics

From the very beginning of the USA, racial identity was tied to the intersections between economic power and national origin. Identity as White, Black, or Native (and gender) determined how and whether a person could own property, vote, hold elected office, and enjoy protection under the law.

As the United States spread westward, a campaign of genocide and displacement was carried out against Native tribes, resulting in their erasure and mythologization. Accordingly, by the mid-to-late 1800s, race in this country was publicly and legally seen as a simple dichotomy: Black or White.

This **Black/White binary paradigm of race** has continued to dominate popular understanding of race in the USA. In this way of viewing the world, race is a one-dimensional spectrum with Whiteness on one side and Blackness as its opposite. White values, culture, skin, aesthetics, and bodies are portrayed as normal and positive (**White normativity**), while Blackness exists as abnormal and lower.

This has real negative effects: facial recognition software, trained on a White normative AI, often fails to detect Black faces, while medical treatments developed on White test subjects may have different effects on non-White people. Not only that, but the Black/White binary view of race ignores the many ways that non-Black people of color have real experiences of race and racism that differ from our Black sisters and brothers. Often, due to this kind of thinking, Black folks are held up as the experts on race, dismissing or minimizing the experiences of non-Black people of color. We must *both* recognize the deep and painful ways America has hurt Black communities *while also* affirming the racial experiences of non-Black people of color.

By the late 1800s, the racial composition of the USA had started changing. As the nation began colonizing the West Coast, more Hispanic people - descendants of Native Americans and Spanish colonizers - came under US rule. And Asians, Chinese railroad workers and Japanese manual laborers, had started arriving on the west coast. But politically, legally, and socially, America's imagination of race was, and often still is, a simple dichotomy with two fixed choices. Immigration offices, police, landlords, judges, and others were asking the question: *are you Black or White?*

A Changing Nation

By the mid-1900s, waves of new immigrants were arriving from South America and South Asia, and American military expansionism had brought the Pacific Islands under colonial rule. The US grew more racially diverse than ever, and new racial categories were added beyond Black, White, and Native: Hispanic, "Oriental" (East Asian), Filipino, "Hindu" (South Asian), and Pacific Islanders.¹

In the 1970s, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, a group of "Oriental" American activists wanted to unite for the sake of mutual aid, protest, and political lobbying. They created a new consolidated group identity that could bring together a diverse group of cultures and ethnicities under a single shared identity: and so "Asian America" was born.²

Subsequently, the current *ethnoracial pentagon* solidified in the popular imagination, five racial groups that could describe every American: White, Black, Native, Hispanic, and Asian (later expanded to include Pacific Islanders).³ These racial categories have been used to hurt Americans of color, but they have also become reality and a part of culture for millions of our brothers and sisters. In the effort to be "colorblind" and dismiss race, we lose out on a vibrant understanding of the positive identities and cultures that have been built by Americans of color. We must see systems of race for their real roots and full range of effects on us and other Americans of color.

Demographically, America was and is only growing more diverse and multicultural. So - why is there still racial inequality and injustice?

¹ Immigration lawsuits from Asians reflected and challenged the slowness of American society to create new categories of race. In **Thind vs. US** and **Ozawa vs. US**, judges ruled that Indian and Japanese immigrants were neither White nor Black, and hence ineligible for naturalization as American citizens.

² Specifically, Japanese American Yuji Ichioka and Chinese American Emma Gee, both UC Berkeley graduate students, coined this phrase in 1968 with the "Asian American Political Alliance".

³ Of course, upon further exploration these rigid categories actually break down: there are White Hispanics and Black Hispanics, and multiracial folks.

The Sin of Systemic Injustice

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

–Ephesians 6:10-12

What is “sin”? Listening to many people talk, you might get the impression that it means “a person doing something wrong”. But when the Bible talks about “sin” or “wickedness”, it is clear that it is not only speaking about personal choices and decisions, but also “powers and principalities” (Ephesians 6:12): systems of evil ideologies that oppose the love, peace, and grace of God.

Systemic injustice is sinful, whether a racist immigration system that spent almost 100 years excluding Asian immigrants from becoming American citizens, or a business culture that pays women of color drastically less than men with identical resumes, work experience, and credentials.⁴ God not only asks us to repent of individual acts of sin, but also to reject and change these wicked systems that lead to the mass harm and exploitation of God's children.

Any activist can tell you: changing the system is *really* hard! As we talked about earlier, these systems of racialized power are deeply entrenched in America's social foundation. The *good news* is that God hates and condemns sin, and empowers us to “stand against the devil's schemes” (Ephesians 6:11). God doesn't just tell us to “be strong” against sin, but God gives us “armor” – tools to resist and reject the power and attraction of sin.

When we are fearful for the future of our communities or furious at the exploitation that we see taking place around us, we can turn to God and find comfort in knowing that God stands with us against evil. When we are exhausted from facing microaggressions and entrenched racism, we can remember that Jesus Christ was a racial minority in the midst of a violent supremacist empire. *God knows what racism and oppression feels like!* Our God is not distant, disinterested, or “above” these things, but intimately aware and personally invested in our struggles.

⁴ PayScale, *The State of the Gender Pay Gap 2020*, <https://www.payscale.com/data/gender-pay-gap>

Closing Reflection

Fighting against racism, sexism, and hostility can be tiring. It's easy to get jaded or burned out. But when we are feeling exhausted or hopeless, God walks alongside us.

What does this look like? Some people, often well-meaning, promote attitudes of **colorblind racial reconciliation**: "we need to forgive each other, stop seeing race, and just start getting along". It sounds good, but it's like a bully slapping you in the face, stealing your iPhone, then saying "hey, I'm tired of fighting. Let's just get along."

So-called reconciliation without *repentance* (true changing of one's beliefs and attitude) and *restitution* (making amends for the damage that has been done) is not a step of healing, but of further abuse.

Uprooting sinful systems and undoing the damage that they have done must go deeper than simply shaking hands and forgetting it. Instead, we can look at the example of Christian leaders like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who fought for women's rights to vote, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who opposed segregation and American imperialism in Asia. Their lives show us how prayer, faith, and an unshakable belief in the love of God for all God's children can give us the wisdom to diagnose the deep impacts of sin, and strength to continually resist that sin.

SESSION 2:

RACISM AGAINST ASIAN AMERICANS

For Asian Americans, race is an ever-present factor that looms over every interaction and conversation where our faces and names are on public display. We don't interact with others in a vacuum, but in an atmosphere filled with actions and impressions that come from upbringing, cultural expectations, previous interactions, media, and more. (For more on this, check out *How's the Water* in Part 1, Session 2: *Where Am I?*)

Asian Americans have experienced racism on many levels, from laws that affect our entire country, to violence against our communities and neighborhoods, to personal attacks.

1. National and Systemic Discrimination

For almost 100 years, it was illegal for Asians to immigrate to America.

In 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, making it illegal for Chinese to enter America. Initially only set to last for ten years, it was extended and made permanent in 1902, and then in 1924 extended to apply to all Asians. This would last until the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 finally removed racial restrictions on immigration.⁵ To this date, Chinese Exclusion was the only time America has ever legally prevented an entire ethnic group from entering America.

Our government has taken other overtly racist actions against Asian Americans. In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed **Executive Order 9066**, authorizing the creation of “relocation center” concentration camps for Japanese and Japanese Americans. Over 120,000 Japanese, including over 70,000 American citizens, were removed from their homes and neighborhoods and forced to live for years in shacks in the desert under armed guard. German Americans, meanwhile, did not face such restrictions on their freedom.

(Both Chinese Exclusion and Japanese American incarceration are examples of **Yellow Peril**, a racist stereotype that represents Asians, and particularly East Asians, as dangerous, threatening, and unassimilable: “They’re taking jobs and our country away from us”.)

⁵ Technically, 1943's Magnuson Act allowed Chinese (and not other Asians) to immigrate; but its yearly quota only allowed for 105 Chinese immigrants per year!

Systemic racism against Asian Americans hasn't only been legal. In business, resumes with Asian-looking names are 45% less likely to earn interviews for the same job as a resume with a White-looking name.⁶ In media, only 5.3% of roles in Hollywood films go to Asian actors – many of them stereotypical characters with minor importance and fewer lines than other roles.⁷

2. Communal Violence

Yellow Peril has also threatened communities on the ground. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, waves of anti-Asian massacres and riots left hundreds of Asian Americans dead and their homes, businesses, and neighborhoods torched and shattered. The largest mass lynching in American history is the **Los Angeles Chinese massacre of 1871**, where a mob of over 500 people entered Chinatown and left over 20 Chinese Americans hung and shot in the streets. None of the killers were sentenced.

In 1885, 78 Chinese American homes were burned to the ground and 28 miners were killed in the **Rock Springs massacre**. This ignited a string of violence up and down the West coast, with Asian laborers and communities singled out as targets of hatred due to their cheaper labor costs, competition with White workers, and other Yellow Peril-fueled reasons. In the 1887 **Hells Canyon massacre**, 34 Chinese gold miners were ambushed and murdered.

This kind of mob violence against Asians continued in the 20th century. In 1930, Filipino farm workers in **Watsonville**, CA, were taken from their homes, beaten, shot, and killed. In 1982, **Vincent Chin** was beaten to death in Chicago by two White auto workers who blamed Japanese competitors for recent industry layoffs. The violence and public racism against Asian Americans during the **COVID-19 pandemic** echoes this ugly history.

South Asians have also been targets of racist violence. In the **1907 Bellingham riots**, a mob of 400-500 White men attacked a primarily Sikh South Asian community, driving them out of their jobs and neighborhood. Since **9/11**, South Asian and Arab Americans have been targeted with hate crimes, profiling, and casual racism.

⁶ Harvard Business School, *Minorities Who 'Whiten' Job Resumes Get More Interviews*, <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/minorities-who-whiten-job-resumes-get-more-interviews>

⁷ Smith, S., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Gillig, T., Lee, C., & DeLuca, D. (2015). *Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014*. The Harnisch Foundation.

3. Individual

Racism can take many different forms in daily life. Racial **microaggressions** are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership”.⁸ Though each incident seems minor, psychological researchers have demonstrated that sustained racial microaggressions are traumatic, leading to PTSD symptoms.⁹ Examples of microaggressions include:

Compliments - An Atlanta-born third generation Korean American woman is told she “speaks English so well”. A Tamil American man is told his name is “beautiful but hard to pronounce”. A Japanese American freshman is told by his White frat brother “No man, you fit right in! You’re not like other Asians, you’re cool.” Intended as compliments, these statements subtly signal that these people or their communities are social outsiders who don’t fully belong.

“Genuine” Mistakes - Julie is a Thai American member of a large, predominantly White church. Jennifer, their Associate Pastor, is the only other Asian in the congregation. Church members often call Julie “Jennifer”. She wonders if her community sees her and Jennifer as interchangeable and indistinguishable.

Jokes and Media - “Hey, Jim - what’s Bruce Lee’s favorite drink? Wataaaaawwwww!” Not only is this not a very good joke, but statements like this reference uncomfortable stereotypes that remind Jim of ways he’s been made to feel foreign and alien.

In **Dating and Romantic Attraction**, Asian Americans face particular forms of racism as well. This topic is particularly intersectional: racial and gender stereotypes layer on top of one another to form distinct challenges for Asian American women and men.

Asian American women - Asian women are often portrayed as submissive and “cute”. Two centuries of American militarism in the Pacific - in the

⁸ Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, (Wiley, 2010), xvi.

⁹ Kevin L. Nadal, Tanya Erazo, Rukiya King, “Challenging Definitions of Psychological Trauma: Connecting Racial Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress.” *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, 11(2) (2019), 2-16.

Philippines, Southeast Asia, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere - has propagated dehumanizing stereotypes of sex workers and “war brides”. Asian American women often face sexual fetishism and unreal expectations; and when they don’t live into them, it can lead to verbal or physical violence. Though they may be portrayed as “desirable”, we emphasize that this “Yellow Fever” is actually a form of misogynistic sexual objectification.

Asian American men – Asian men in America, stereotyped as less masculine, silent, undesirable, and weak, often face erasure in romance. It’s common for them to hear or see “I don’t date Asians” – even from fellow Asian Americans. On the other hand, in gay communities, Asian American men face similar challenges to Asian American women: stereotyped as desirable, cute, and effeminate. With the recent global popularity of Kpop, a new romantic desirability – and “Yellow Fever” objectification – of Asian American men is on the rise as well.

Our Father - Rescue Us from Evil

Racism has done such terrible damage to our nation, communities, and lives. It’s easy to grow depressed or furious when we consider all that we are fighting against, and how long and consistent this wickedness has continued.

Last week, we talked about how God can give us strength and hope in the battle against systemic injustice. In the Bible, Jesus offered a way to pray, crying out for God’s healing and deliverance:

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

–Matthew 6:9-13

When we are hurting and needy, God hears and comes to us. When we look at all the wicked things that are done, a God of justice sees and knows our pain, fury, and confusion, and brings us comfort and rescue.

At the same time, Jesus' prayer reminds us that we too have hurt others. We aren't pure, perfect people who never made fun of someone for how they looked, accidentally (or intentionally) sent a microaggressive Tweet, or did something else that could be cause for cancellation.

This is good news! God doesn't ask for us to be blameless or pass a purity test before we come asking for healing and relief. Even as we pray for justice, Jesus reminds us that we also can find forgiveness for our own sins. The justice that he offers is not a destructive ideology or mob mentality that discards people who have made mistakes, but a kind and knowing love that corrects flaws and failures.

God's justice doesn't follow our agenda of grudges and grievances, but transforms them. There is no room for hatred, oppression, or pride in God's family, but there is plenty of space for people who are hurting and need love and hope.

Closing Reflection

When we look at everything wrong in the world around us, it can feel like there are only three ways to live: anger, apathy, or burnout. We can get furious and try to destroy every system and individual who has done wrong. Or, seeking peace and rest, we disconnect and decide to ignore the truth of the racism, sexism, pollution, and corruption around us. Or, exhausted, we just run out of hope and energy.

But Jesus offers another way to live: following God. When we embrace God, we realize that we don't have to choose between justice and peace, but we find both in the family and kingdom of God. God is a God of truth, and so we cannot avert our eyes from the suffering and oppression around us. God is a God of grace and forgiveness, and so we don't need to endlessly rage against everyone who has hurt us or done something wrong until they stop doing it.

If you are tired of being hurt and angry, God offers you rest, peace, and the promise that justice will be done – on earth, and ultimately in eternity.