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THE GOSPEL AND RACE: *AN INTERVIEW WITH JORDAN RICE*

Jordan Rice is the pastor of Renaissance Church in Harlem, NYC. He and his wife Jessica planted the church in 2014. Renaissance is very diverse, reflecting the neighborhood well: 50% black, 30 to 40% white, and the rest Latino and Asian. Jordan recently led the church through a series on the gospel and race. We spoke to Jordan about the church, racism in America and this series.

A lot of churches are talking about diversity, but what gave you the passion for diversity to be a core value of your church plant?

I was originally an opponent of diverse churches. The only diverse churches I saw were white in culture with black people assimilating into the dominant culture, and I was against that. And then about 10 years ago, a good friend challenged me. So I really started to explore the scriptures, and once I got to Revelation 7:9 where you see the picture of the kingdom with *a great multitude ... from every nation, every tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb*, it hit me like a ton of bricks that every single time I pray, “Lord, your kingdom come,” this is what I’m praying for. I’m praying for a diverse group of people coming together to all be family. If the gospel is real, then it makes us actual brothers and sisters. That was a huge turning point in my life when I knew that if we are truly reconciled to Jesus, we can truly be reconciled to each other, regardless of the obstacles.

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BEYOND THE DAILY DEVOTIONAL

BY TIM KELLER, 2019

Like many other believers, I’ve always sought to have a time of devotion and prayer every morning. And like most other believers I have found it to be a struggle to be consistent. Imagine my surprise when I came across a place in John Calvin’s *Institutes* where he argued that when it comes to daily prayer, once is not enough.

Calvin points to the exhortation to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and says that, of course, every Christian should aspire to pray to God constantly through the day. But, he adds, “since our weakness is such that it has to be supported by many aids, and our sluggishness such that it needs to be goaded, it is fitting each one

of us should set apart certain hours for this exercise.”

Calvin taught that we should designate set times during the day that, though brief, “during them all the devotion of the heart should be completely engaged.” He proposed five times — when we wake in the morning, before we begin work, at

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What shaped the message and direction of your recent series on the gospel and race?

Everything I've seen about the gospel and race has asked, "How do white Christians become more tolerant and more accepting? And how does majority culture welcome in other people?"

But those are not the questions people are asking in our neighborhood. So we needed a two-fold approach. For the outsiders to Harlem, we wanted them to have a really good understanding of how people from Harlem understand the gospel and race. And for people in our congregation, we wanted to give them really good language for how to approach this topic.

Novelist and social critic James Baldwin said, "To be black in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all of the time." Just the myriad of things that happen — just what it's like to be black on a Tuesday — is pretty exhausting. When we talked about race, I knew that black members would be coming in fatigued and angry and hopeless in some cases, and I wanted them to feel encouraged and heard and seen and that they would learn new things, and that everybody would be able to walk alongside them on that journey.

Tell us a bit about how your community groups played a role in the series.

American psychiatrist and author Scott Peck talks about four stages of community.

There's **pseudo-community**, which is what people often categorize as real community. Everybody's getting along and hugging.

Then once people realize they actually strongly disagree about things germane to their life and their faith, they start trying to change each other, and that brings **chaos**.

Emptiness is next. That's where people realize they can't change each other.

And then finally there's **real community** — when you see someone who is flawed and you accept them for who they are and engage them with love and care. That is where true community can happen, and that's when I think the gospel is the most profound and most powerful.

I knew that this series was going to take us quickly from pseudo-community to chaos, and we went into it prayerfully. We told everybody that this is going to get uncomfortable (especially in our community groups) and it's going to get uglier before it gets better, but give it some time. And we've seen a lot of healing and progress.

Is there a highlight from the series that stuck with you?

Many black people have heard this argument: "The reason you are a Christian is that slaveholders forced your ancestors to accept Christianity to serve the interests of those in power." We addressed this in the series with a message about the historical roots of Christianity and whether or not Christianity is the "white man's religion." In that message, we used Acts 2 to validate that Christianity in Africa started at Pentecost, not when the slave ships pulled up.

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REDEEMER REPORT

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West Side Church Plant:
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FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT OUR NEIGHBORS

EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

BY JOSIAH HAKEN

I've worked at New York City Relief, a Hope for New York affiliate that serves men and women living on the streets, for seven years now. In that time, I have talked with countless individuals struggling with homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, and every kind of physical and emotional trauma you could imagine.

But I have also been astonished by the movement of God in the lives of my neighbors who are homeless. I have learned from them and their experiences, and I have come to know and love God more fully as a result of knowing and walking alongside of those who many of us would consider "the least of these."

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are five things I've learned over the last seven years about how to best love my neighbors experiencing homelessness:

1. Sometimes all you can say is "I'm sorry."

When someone is detailing the horrors, challenges, and circumstances that have led them to a place of homelessness, sometimes there really isn't much to say other than, "I'm sorry."

Most homeless folks are dealing with trauma that the

rest of us could hardly imagine, let alone empathize with. Yet, my experience tells me that if we have the courage to follow God into a space that we don't



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understand or feel equipped to handle, there will always be others who meet us there to make up the difference.

2. Helping someone is not about a return on investment.



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After seven years of doing this work with countless failures and false starts, I think the point is simply to remember that value is defined by presence, and not by productivity.

With every failed attempt to help someone get off the street, we are given the opportunity to redefine how worth is ascribed.

If you think your investment is only as valuable as the return you get, you will be perpetually disappointed and you will constantly attach strings and expectations to your generosity that will drain the power out of your sacrifice.

The point is that to live and love like Jesus means ascribing worth to the worthless, hope to the hopeless, and mercy to the merciless, regardless of what they do with it along the way.

3. Our homeless neighbors are not a problem to be solved.

What we think about homelessness matters. If you assume every panhandler or homeless person you see is addicted to drugs or alcohol and cannot do anything but spend their money in a self-destructive manner, you will inevitably miss the opportunity of a lifetime to engage with — and learn from — the child of God who is right in front of you.

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mid-day meal, after the meal (or after the day's work), and when we are getting ready for bed at night. He immediately adds "this must not be any superstitious observance of hours ... as if paying our debt to God" and forcing him to hear us. (*Institutes* 3.20.50, See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, 917-918.)

I had known about this exhortation years ago, but only more recently I learned that Calvin prepared five prayers for these various times of day and they had been included in his 1542/45 *Geneva Catechism*. They were meant to be examples for individuals and families to use. This encouraged me to use his prayers as a foundation for composing my own.

I would encourage others to do the same thing I did with Calvin — take these as examples and use them to compose your own. I've found that having something written, which I can read and in my heart use as a basis for prayer to God — and taking only 1 minute for each of them — has been extremely helpful for remembering the presence of God and the truths I had learned that morning in Bible reading. It 'frames' the entire day with God and the gospel.

Below are the prayers I use. Again — use them as the basis for crafting your own.

Prayer upon rising: *For love*

Father — Thank you for the grace that preserved my life to this moment. Now give me enough love for this day — a sense of love from you (so I'm not scared or driven), a welling up of love for you (so I'm not proud or selfish), and a resulting love for others (so I am not cold or distracted). Let your Spirit illumine my mind and enlarge my heart for that. And because it means nothing to begin well if one does not persevere, I ask that you would continue and increase your grace in me until you have led me into full communion with your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, that I may see his beautiful and great glory. And as I lay down in sleep and rose this morning only by your grace, keep me in a joyful, lively remembrance that whatever happens, I will someday know my final rising — the resurrection — because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me, and rose for my justification. *In Jesus' name.*

Prayer before workday:

For perseverance

Lord, all day may you give me an awareness of you and your presence, fruitfulness yet patience with your appointments, wisdom and compassion in my dealings, and your fatherly protection against dangers and adversities. Let me accept whatever degree of success or difficulty in my work you give

me this day, and especially make me compassionate and ready to be interrupted to do good to others. *In Jesus' name.*

Prayer at Mid-day:

For presence and recollection

O Lord God, thank you for sustaining my physical life through food and shelter; for giving me new life through the gospel; for the assurance that my bad things will turn out for good, my good things cannot be taken from me, and for the certainty of the best and perfect life which is yet to come. Now give me a joyful sense of your presence, and freedom from my characteristic sins of perfectionistic works-rightness, fear of criticism, and self-comfort. Don't allow my affections to be tangled in inordinate desires for the things of this world, but let me set my heart on things above, where Christ, my life, is seated at your right hand. *In Jesus' name.* (Recollect AM Bible insights)

Prayer at end of workday:

For people I've met or dealt with today

Lord, send down your blessings, temporal and spiritual, on my family, friends, and neighbors. Bless those who have done us good today, and pardon all those who have done or wished us ill, and give them repentance and better minds. Be merciful to those who are

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After that message, establishing Christianity as indigenous to Africa, an African woman stopped me in the hallway with tears streaming down her cheeks and said, "Thank you so much for showing how the gospel truly has embedded itself in every culture well before slavery or colonization." That was what we were aiming for in the series.

Final thoughts and how can we pray?

If you think about all of the intentional and horrific acts that had to happen to bring America to this point, how could we ever think that we would unintentionally unravel the mess, the historic trauma and racism that has been pervasive in this country for 400 years? Nothing that has happened in America has been unintentional to get us to this place. Why in the world would it unintentionally just magically unravel with good gospel preaching?

I don't think we would assume that with any other area of life. But with race, for whatever reason, we think, "Hey, if we just stick to the gospel, it's all going to figure itself out." But it's going to take bold, intentional actions, and I think we could all pray for courage to do some bold things to undo racism.

I'll be praying for our churches. I'm praying for pastors who take stances and get fired. I'm praying for new churches to open. I'm praying for seminaries that are going to lose funding because they take a direction where they highlight the injustices. I pray for denominations that are going to be in jeopardy because they stand for what's right. To take a stand means that you're going to put yourself in a vulnerable position. Make no mistake about that. But I'd rather be in the middle of a storm in God's will than to be laid up on the shore somewhere outside of it.

The fact that we're having these conversations more and more is no small thing. And the fact that people are so receptive is no small thing. And I imagine there are Christians in America that 30 or 40 years ago thought we would never be where we are today. I don't want to discount the progress we have already made and only look to what is still lacking. So I am grateful to everyone, in no matter how small a way, who is taking steps in the right direction, because direction is really more important than speed. I'm praying for more boldness to continue walking down this path.

BEYOND THE DAILY DEVOTIONAL ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 4)

in any trouble or suffering; and minister to them according to their needs. Do this for the sake of the one who went about doing good, the man of sorrows, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. *In his name.*

Prayer upon sleep: *For rest*

O Lord defend us from all dangers and also from the fear

of them tonight. Grant us grace, not only to rest my body, but to have spiritual repose, in soul and conscience, in your grace and love, so we might be comforted and eased in all ways. And since no day passes that I do not sin in so many ways, please bury all my offenses in your mercy, that I might not lose your Presence. Forgive me for Jesus' sake.

Finally, grant us grace always to live in such a state that we may never be afraid to die; so that, living and dying, we may be yours, through the merits and satisfaction of thy Son Christ Jesus, in whose Name we offer up these our imperfect prayers. *Amen.*



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FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 3)

Richard Galloway, one of the founders of New York City Relief, likes to say, “The poor are not a problem to be solved, but a portal to the heart of God.” After seven years of traveling in and out of that portal, I can absolutely affirm that there is nowhere on earth you will feel the presence of God more powerfully than when you’re talking to a new friend who sleeps every single night on a cardboard mattress.

4. Homelessness is not a state of being.

That guy you walk past on your way to work every day is a human being who is dealing with homelessness, not a homeless being. There is a difference. In our society we are way too conditioned to associate our being with our doing. We are not what we do, and the

same should be remembered about our homeless neighbors.

Our society almost always considers homelessness an identity rather than a situation. This way of thinking has infected us all. We must consider the language we use and the way we talk about people in order to change the way we interact with them. As long as we think that our homeless neighbors are more “homeless” than they are “neighbors”, we will treat them like an issue to be addressed instead of person to be loved.

5. Loving our neighbors is not a cherry on top of our theological sundae.

We tell volunteers all the time that one of the main priorities of our organization is to “love the person in front of you.” We also believe that the

mandate of Isaiah 58 “to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them ...” is not just an add-on to our faith.

This is essential to the call of every Christian. It is a call to connect with people and point them to local resources and programs that offer food, shelter, clothing, and the chance at a new life through advocacy and rehabilitation — and to new life in and through Jesus Christ.

Josiah Haken is the VP of Outreach at New York City Relief. He lives in New Jersey with his wife and two children. You can read more about him and his work with NYC Relief at thereliefbus-teamhaken.org/