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**How Jesus's Teaching and Example Call Us to Reach Out
across Racial Lines to Respond Compassionately to
Those Who Suffer Unjustly**

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Most of the material in this paper is drawn from three blog posts, which I wrote in June-July 2020, in response to the murder of a black man, George Floyd, by a white policeman, Derek Chauvin. This killing took place in my hometown, Minneapolis, Minnesota (USA), on May 25th this year. It was followed by widespread protests and violence, ultimately across the whole country. I wrote these posts from the perspective of a white Christian man, who wanted to look at Jesus's teaching and example for guidance and insight into how followers of Jesus should respond to racism and social injustice across racial lines in America.

In this paper, I'm going to present much of the same material from my blog posts but do so from the perspective of doing contextual theology. Even though my academic training is first of all in New Testament, and second, in Practical Theology; in my opinion, all Christians, especially those with higher academic training as well as those who are in ministry, should be engaged in doing contextual theology on a regular basis. That is, we should all be performing at least three theological tasks within our own contexts. We should be:

1. looking for how God reveals God-self and is at work in our own particular contexts, as experienced and expressed by the people within our contexts,
2. prayerfully, looking at the teachings and narratives found in the Bible through fresh eyes in light of our circumstances and experiences, and
3. reflecting theologically on what we are seeing and experiencing when we hold Scripture and present-day context closely together, letting them speak to one another, in a type of round and round, ongoing interaction, also known as following a hermeneutical circle.

The actual academic discipline of contextual theology is more rigorous and analytical than what I present here. In this paper, I am giving a simple, personal, and practical example of significantly engaging in a phenomenon in my own context (a horrific killing of a black man by a white policeman and related issues of racism and social injustice in America) as a Christian, New Testament theologian, who wants to responsibly draw on the teachings of the biblical text to address the needs of my context in ways that well honor and reflect the character of God in Christ.



Minneapolis rioters burn businesses

Starting with context

I can't get the image out of mind. On May 25, a white policeman calmly kneels on the neck of a face-down, handcuffed, black man for over eight minutes...until he is dead.

In the days that followed, Minneapolis was set on fire. While peaceful protestors marched in the street and set up memorials, violent ones started burning down buildings, smashing windows, blowing up cars, and looting businesses. And the protests spread throughout the country, and then globally.

For several days, I kept watching the endless stream of video clips of the murder and violence on social media. I was horrified at all the destruction and lawlessness, and distressed, witnessing police shoving and tear-gassing protestors. After a while, I couldn't watch any of these videos anymore. They were all too disturbing.

What's going on? How could such a brazen murder by a uniformed policeman of a black man, in broad daylight, happen? Why did this killing ignite protests and riots across the country so rapidly? What kind of response would actually be helpful right now, rather than our usual reactivity, which tends to reinforce our biases, justify the status quo, or, worse, actually inflame the polarization and conflict?

America is in crisis. How does Christian theology pertain to this social crisis? What does God expect from followers of Christ now, in this context?

To begin to answer these questions, in this paper, we have space to only consider a few well-known biblical passages. They have been chosen to represent Jesus's theology and perspective on how his followers should respond to issues of racism, injustice and human suffering in society.

Old Testament theology

First, we will look at an Old Testament verse that would have significantly influenced Jesus's thinking in his role as a Jewish prophet and teacher in the first century. Going back to the eighth century B.C.E., Micah, the prophet, wrote unsparing words of judgment against widespread idolatry, exploitation, oppression, and other unjust practices of the privileged, powerholders in ancient Israel. In one of the most well-known verses in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), he writes,

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8, NRSV

According to Micah, God's righteous expectations of those who worship and obey him are simply this:

- do justice
- love kindness, and
- walk humbly with your God.

When black people and their allies march in the streets, they are shouting out for justice. They are screaming their outrage. They want the world to hear their stories. They are calling out to people with power and privilege, whom they believe could do something to help, to actually do something. And when peaceful protests devolve into violence, looting, and arson, white people need to go beyond judging the external behavior to see and feel the depth of the rioters' hopelessness, rage, and grief.

The issue is not just one abominable murder. And it's not simply about a corrupt police force, as if there would be no problem of crime or violence if only the police were better people. Most police are good, sincere, hardworking, and dedicated to their responsibilities in America; but there are some very racist, violent, corrupt ones, too. Significant improvements are needed in training and law enforcement, but that's not the whole solution. The issue is also not about law and order, that is, the need to deal firmly with violent criminals who are serious threats to society. There are many criminals, of all colors, who need to be stopped; but controlling all the lawbreakers isn't going to provide more opportunity, respect, and justice to people who are routinely demeaned,

mistrusted, and mistreated just because of the color of their skin or racial/ethnic background.

No, the issue at hand, as I see it, is a whole society blighted by a spiritual disease of the heart (racism, self-interest, blindness to injustice) that keeps manifesting itself at the expense of those with the least power to defend themselves or to right the wrongs. All human beings, of all colors and backgrounds, have this disease to some extent (biblical writers call it, “sin”). Yet, what those of us in position to ensure justice and provide mercy must understand better is this: Those who suffer the most effects from this societal sin tend to be people of color, at least in the United States.

They and their allies are right to take to the streets. They are not right to destroy other people’s property, but they are right to protest, call for reform, and even scream as loud as they can. And if whites—those of us in positions of power and privilege—don’t listen, the screams will get louder. And should.

Theology applied to today’s context

Micah’s moral instruction was for the whole community. Justice, loving kindness, and humble submission to God is the calling for all of us, rich or poor; powerful or powerless; white, black, brown, or whatever color, race, or ethnic group we might be. Micah is telling us that this is what God expects from everyone. Each of us has to determine for ourselves what that means in our contexts. Sometimes, the application is obvious. Other times, it takes a crisis to wake us up. We’re there now.

As a follower of Christ, George Floyd’s murder (and countless other atrocities in society where the powerful exploit or abuse those who have less power) and Micah’s teaching demand that we ask ourselves, how does our faith apply to the blight of racism

and injustice? Are we looking deeply into our hearts and at our own attitudes and behavior? Are we asking the Holy Spirit to show us where we have harbored racist, indifferent, or even hateful feelings toward those who have a different skin color or ethnic background? Or, are we using most of our energy reacting to the extremists and defending ourselves, as if proving that we're not as bad as some people accuse us of being means that we are actually innocent and not responsible to try to do more to help?

I am not speaking from on high, but as a privileged white person who was raised in a highly racist environment. Even as an adult, pastor, and Christian leader, I confess that at times I have shamefully nurtured prejudice against others whom I did not understand or was afraid of. I don't have all the answers for myself, let alone for our broken church and society. Racism and injustice are huge, deep-seated problems, without obvious or easy fixes. But I am sorry. I'm sorry for all the ways I've contributed to the problem and have failed to take action to right the wrongs when I could have done something.

Since I witnessed George's murder on video, I've been wracking my brain, trying to think about what difference I could make. I don't know yet. But I do know this. It's not going to be just one thing. It's got to start with a real change of heart and attitude toward others who are different from me. And the internal changes have to translate into external action. Action that translates into tangible benefit for those who are suffering from racial discrimination, exploitation, mistreatment, and lack of compassion and empathy. That's what the prophets, like Micah, called for when they preached repentance to people in positions of power and privilege. It's what God expects.

New Testament theology: The parable of the Good Samaritan

Jesus's teaching and personal example reflected well Micah's emphasis on justice, mercy, and humbly walking with God. Many of his parables talked about God's character and our calling to reflect God's character in our relationships with others and as members of community and society. The parable of the Good Samaritan is just one of many teachings we could look at, which are applicable to the issues of racism and unjust suffering in society. The introduction to the parable sets the stage to understand the meaning and importance of the story. Luke writes:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Luke 10:25-28, NIV

In short, by affirming the two greatest commandments, Jesus taught us that God's purpose for our lives is *to know, love, and serve God with all of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves*. Love is the chief characteristic of God. Loving others is thus the hallmark of godliness (literally, god-likeness). This, then, is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Such a message is not hard to understand, intellectually, but living by this kind of love can be very difficult in practice. Why? Because we human beings tend to put ourselves or something else at the center of our universe instead of God (biblical writers call that, idolatry). Then, by nature, we are selfish and driven by all sorts of desires and impulses that run contrary to love. Even when we love those who love us, our "love" tends to be conditional, with strings attached. (I'll love you, if.... I'll continue to love you,

as long as you....) But the moment we're afraid, we'd rather do something else, we're mistreated, or loving others becomes inconvenient or too costly, our "love" can easily fly out the window.

So, not surprisingly, the religious leaders of Jesus day easily agreed with him about the priority of love, *intellectually*. But then they quickly sought ways to excuse themselves from actually putting love into practice when they didn't want to do it.

But wanting to justify himself, [the religious lawyer] asked Jesus,

"And who is my neighbor?"

Luke 10:29, NIV

But Jesus was ready to close any loophole any of us, those who want to justify our lack of love for others, might want exploit. He responded to the Pharisee by telling the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan to put his answer in no uncertain terms.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:29-37, NRSV

Why the Samaritan is Good

When Jesus identifies a Samaritan as the role model for his Jewish audience, he is both (deliberately) offending and challenging them to raise their standard for loving others in society. Jewish leaders in Jesus's day looked down on Samaritans, who were a racially mixed people. Their religion was also a syncretistic blend of Judaism and pagan religions. After the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC), most of the people were taken away into captivity. When they eventually returned, many had intermarried with the Assyrians or other non-Jews. These racially mixed people became known as Samaritans. They were rejected by the so-called, pure-blood Jewish people from the southern kingdom (Judah).

By choosing a Samaritan as the hero of the parable, Jesus is speaking directly into the racism and disparities in his society. He is answering at least three important questions: Who truly pleases God? Who is our neighbor? And, "How far are we expected to go in loving others?"

Who pleases God?

Not those who have the "right" color of skin

But those who have compassion on those in need, who show mercy and kindness to those who don't deserve it or who can't repay them

Who is our neighbor?

Not just those of our own color, tribe, or race

But anyone in our society, especially those who have been victimized, exploited, or mistreated by others, or who may simply need an extra helping hand

How far are we expected to go?

Not only as much as is comfortable or convenient

But as far as necessary to adequately address the needs and suffering in society

Love is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling, or cute emoji. Showing mercy costs us something. The two religious leaders, no doubt, could have preached wonderful sermons on love and the God of mercy; but when it came to addressing real-life, human needs in their society, they crossed to the other side of the road and just walked on by. In glaring contrast, the Samaritan paid for the beaten man's medical, housing, and food expenses out of his own pocket. He took time away from his business. He planned to check back in with the innkeeper to see if there had been additional expenses.

Theology applied to today's context

Let's be honest. Like the well-educated, sincerely religious, lawyer in Jesus's day, most of us would prefer to justify our own way of living and acting rather than do much more than make a contribution, read a few articles, and watch news shows. Many of us would rather spiel off all our good deeds and righteous behavior than do the soul-searching work to examine our deepest attitudes toward minorities, if we are in the majority; or toward other minorities, if we are members of just one of many ethnic or racial minority groups. We would rather just be outraged or find reasons to congratulate our progressiveness than ask ourselves, "Am I truly loving my neighbor to the extent Jesus calls for?"

Jesus's answer to the Pharisee's attempt to justify his inhospitality and neglect of people in need was clear: *Your neighbor is precisely the person you may least want to*

reach out to, and probably has done nothing to deserve your help. Loving him or her is going to cost you more than you want to give and is likely to take more of your time and energy than is convenient.

The Good Samaritan does not offer a role model for working for systemic change, something essential for real change in America. Yet he does offer a concrete example of a godly (God-like) attitude toward those who are disadvantaged, suffering from racial discrimination, injustice, or are just “different” from us. The loving response from his heart is what we call compassion. And when we put compassion into action, it’s called mercy.

[Jesus said,] Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” [The expert in the Jewish Law] said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:36-37, NRSV

Who is *your* neighbor?



Corner of 38th St. and Chicago Ave., S., Minneapolis

Returning to context

I started feeling emotion the moment I began walking up 38th Street. I could see the memorial site just ahead on the corner. Flowers, placards, graffiti, and personal notes were everywhere. There was so much to take in. I could feel the grief, rage, and despair hanging thickly in the air.

When I reached the place on the pavement, where George Floyd gasped for his final breaths, begging for his life and calling for his mama, tears came to my eyes. I could feel anger well up within me. This killing was so wrong. How could someone who was hired to “protect and serve” the community, callously, slowly, choke the life out of a subdued, handcuffed suspect, lying on the ground?

The vast majority of police throughout the United States do not harass, let alone kill, people of color; but the bad ones have given rise to fear, rage, and despair among many African Americans nationwide. Much of the graffiti and signage seethed with anger at the police.

Just to the north of where George died, well over a hundred names are painted in multi-colors on Chicago Avenue, memorials to black people who have died at the hands of police in recent years. George's killing by a white policeman wasn't the first time. Though such killings are relatively rare (according to statistics), what happened to him has happened to others. And the perception (rightly or not) of police bullying and of brutal treatment of minorities has been widespread enough to strike a nerve in urban communities across the country.



George’s now famous plea, “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe,” has become a rallying cry for black protesters. A recent New York Times article¹ indicated that at least 70 other people of color over the past decade have died in police custody, crying out that they couldn’t breathe before they died. Songwriters, rappers, and activists throughout the country are saying, this is what it feels like to be black in America—we can’t breathe.

How many black people feel this way? What does the average black person feel when a police car drives by or when they are stopped on the road? I don’t think anybody really knows. It may not even be the majority of people of color who feel fear or anxiety around police, but it is a sizable minority. A 2015 Gallup poll² indicates that more blacks, nationally, believe the police treat minorities *fairly* than unfairly, but the numbers are very close (52% vs. 48%, respectively).

These statistics should make us pause before demonizing the police or assuming that the police should be abolished, but we are still left with the question, why do 48% (+/- 5% for margin of error) of black people feel that the police treat minorities unfairly? And what could we, as a society, do to lower those numbers? What could any of us, as individuals, do to advocate better for those who do not have the power or opportunity to effectively advocate for themselves?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html>

Accessed July 15, 2020.

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/184511/blacks-divided-whether-police-treat-minorities-fairly.aspx>

Accessed, July 15, 2020.

New Testament witness: What would Jesus do?

The cultural context in Jesus's day is not the same as today in America, and there is no one biblical teaching or story that directly applies to the complex racial strife in America. However, there is material in the Gospels that pertain to racism and injustice.

In Jesus's context, he was very concerned about the treatment of those with less power or status in society, those who were being neglected, exploited, or abused by others. Jesus did not offer systemic solutions to racism or social injustice, but, by his personal example and teaching, he provided a powerful witness to God's compassion and concern for those at the so-called, "bottom" of society.

As another example (in addition to those we've already looked at), the story of Jesus and the two blind men speaks to God's heart, values, and response to the needs of those who cry out in distress. Notice how Jesus's behavior stands in contrast to the crowd.

There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Matthew 20:30-34, NRSV

In glaring contrast to those who felt they had the power and position to silence the shouting men, Jesus actually cared and listened. He stopped in his tracks. He asked questions. He wanted to know what was wrong and how he could help. And when he heard what they had to say, he was moved by compassion. Then, he took action.

Theology applied to context: Seven practical steps you can take now

White people's response to the protests and riots has ranged from sympathy to condemnation (some for the protestors, some for the police), but overall, my impression is that most of us (white people) care about those who have suffered the most and want to help. In just Minneapolis, millions of dollars have poured into the hands of nonprofits seeking to rebuild burned out businesses and to rally around black communities. Thousands of people have been volunteering to do clean up. However, at the same time, many of my white friends feel powerless to do anything of substance to address underlying issues. Sometimes, I feel that way, too.

Yet, as we grapple with how to respond to cries for justice, greater safety in black neighborhoods, and more equity and opportunity for people of color, Jesus's compassionate response to human beings in need provides an example for us. While there are no easy, quick solutions to racism or social injustice, there are at least seven practical steps each of us can take now, as individuals.

1. **Stop, look, and listen.** Over and over again, I'm hearing pleas from black people to "see us." In other words, African Americans are not asking white people to become "color-blind," but to remember that when white people see a black face that that person's experience has likely been quite different from theirs. Don't assume you know what their experience is. If you don't know whom to listen to, many inner-city organizations are very willing to talk with anyone who sincerely wants to hear the stories and perspective of blacks living in America.
2. **Hang in there, without becoming defensive or judgmental.** If you are listening to someone from a different cultural background, you are likely to be upset by something that person says. If you react harshly, turn them off, walk

away, or jump right into trying to counter their point of view, you will be no further ahead. Keep listening. Stephen Covey famously advocated that we should “first seek to understand, then to be understood.”

3. **Learn about the issues from multiple perspectives.** Don't buy into one of the extreme narratives, whether it is police-bashing and assailing white supremacy (as if all whites are conspiring against black people), on one side; or putting all the blame on the minorities for their own problems (as if the only thing black people need to do is take more responsibility), on the other. The truth is always more complicated than broad caricatures and over-generalizations. And voicing the extreme narratives only fuels the fires of conflict.
4. **Let your compassion move you.** If you're not already grieving over the killings and struggles of African Americans, ask God to soften your heart. Consider their suffering with greater empathy. Feel more deeply. Think of the children.
5. **Be patient, but diligent.** Making personal, let alone societal, progress will take time and a great deal of effort. The racial and social issues that are in sharp relief right now have been centuries in the making. Stay with the process of listening and learning. Ask God to show you what you need to see in yourself, in the other person, and in our society's structures and systems. Get ready to make changes.
6. **Link arms with others.** Find out who's already doing good work on the street level to address social, educational, justice, and other human welfare needs. Seriously consider the merits of proposed policy changes in local and state government. There are countless opportunities to volunteer, donate money or materials, or simply stand up and be counted.

7. **Start somewhere.** Don't get stuck in analysis-paralysis or freeze up because you don't know what to think or do. If you haven't already started to engage in practical ways, do something today, however small. Go beyond just feeling sorry for others and confessing your sins. Get involved.

Comments on methodology in doing contextual theology

In this paper, I have not discussed methods of doing contextual theology in an abstract or academic sense, and certainly not in a comprehensive manner. Rather, I have provided a concrete example of doing one type of contextual theology in a particular setting (Minneapolis, Minnesota) at a particular time in history (now). My intention has been to illustrate the mutually complementary roles of the Bible and the social-political context in doing theology (intellectually) and applying it (practically). Both the biblical text (here, an Old Testament prophetic teaching, a parable of Jesus, and Jesus's personal example) and the modern context (racism, injustice, and police brutality in America) have been placed in dialogue with one another. Doing contextual theology well requires seriously examining and expounding both the text and context, and doing so in ways that move back and forth between them, traversing the hermeneutical circle to bring greater depth of understanding both to theology itself and to its relevance to a socio-political issue or situation.

In this particular case of doing contextual theology, I have started with the context (i.e., George Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests and violence) and then moved to the specific biblical texts. (In other cases, a theologian might prefer to move in the opposite direction, starting with the text and then look for applications in the modern context.) Yet, in making the decision to move toward the biblical text from the

context (and not vice versa), I did not just seek prooftexts for a predetermined social agenda (such as promoting human rights, affirmative action, socialism, reparations, or some other proposed “remedy” for the problems at hand). Rather, I genuinely asked the question, how does Jesus’s teaching and personal example provide spiritual and moral guidance for me, as a follower of Christ, as I grapple with the best way to respond to the issues at hand?

In other words, I didn’t seek validation for my own pre-determined solutions to these glaring societal problems. Instead, I wanted to listen for whatever fresh insights or words of wisdom, conviction, and guidance that the Holy Spirit might bring to me through the biblical text(s). I already knew what the texts would say, intellectually (having studied them countless times over the past six decades). I also had a hunch about where to look in the Bible for teachings or narratives that might be particularly helpful (knowing the promising texts very well already). I was not searching the Bible for the first time, but rather following the hermeneutical circle to *return* to the Bible, with an open heart and heightened concerns over what was happening in America, eager to learn how to follow Jesus in more profound and fruitful ways for the sake of my people, in my context.

Final reflections: How did this theological process influence me?

- I now see better how love *must* cross racial/ethnic lines.
- Jesus’s example challenges me to stop more often and readily respond to the cries of the desperate.

- Jesus's call to godliness (god-likeness) goes beyond simple moral uprightness (i.e., following the letter of the law and moral purity). It also includes reflecting God's heart of compassion and concrete acts of mercy.
- Thus, I now have a deeper appreciation for how compassion, mercy, and kindness are at the heart of God's character. These attributes are not just for my personal (individual) benefit. They show me how God wants me to treat others as well.