

Leadership and Racial Injustice: 4 Guiding Thoughts

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The number one question and conversation I have been engaged in with leaders across the country is literally, “How do we lead in times like these?”

There are far more questions than answers. Leadership principles remain true and clear, but context and culture are moving rapidly and are blurred at best. The good news is that great passion runs deep in leaders. We want to make a difference.

There is a great emphasis today on *saying the right words in the right way*. That is a good, noble, and right thing. It’s incredibly important. But as I think, pray and talk with leaders, I wonder if that isn’t rivaled with the idea of *doing the right things at the right time*.

There is an old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” You and I know both words and actions are important. As leaders, how do we blend the right combination of saying the right words in the right way and doing the right things at the right time to solve real problems?

Racism is wrong. Taking a stand against racism is right. *But is there only one way to make a difference?* Or can each person have the freedom to find a way to do their part? God seems to favor words and actions that build bridges rather than create division.

4 Guiding Principles:

1) Extend freedom for how others choose to take action.

A good starting place is to extend grace and freedom to each other to lead in the way we can personally do the most good and be most helpful in realizing change. Here is what I mean.

If you and I sat down over coffee and you tell me what you believe you are called to do, perhaps march in a protest, or speak on a podcast, or post on social media, I’m going to champion your action. I am not going to critique you. I am going to cheer you on. There is much more power for progress and change when we can agree on the big picture and support each other’s approach.

Last week I was part of a very candid, beautiful, intense, and enlightening conversation with a group of African American followers of Jesus where we as church leaders listened. As I listened, my heart became more sensitized.

I don’t pretend to fully understand because I have not had to walk in the shoes of people who have been wronged simply because of the color of their skin. But I understand more, and I can certainly continue to listen with a compassionate heart for change.

As each person spoke and delivered honest reality, their stories painted a picture that deserved my attention. One African American man spoke, and it seemed like the Holy Spirit had something specifically for me. Garry said, "Relationship Resolves Racism."

That resonated deeply with me, and I believe God is saying to me, "I'll use you to build bridges and open doors through relationships." I don't yet know the fullness of what that might entail, but I have direction for action and freedom to pursue it.

2) Refrain from judging and criticizing.

No leader will always get leading in complex circumstances right or do it perfectly. And candidly, as a leader, I bet you face more than one problem to solve. Be encouraged by this, if you are involved in some way, in any way, that is good!

Someone may do something big, another person something small. One person may be loud and another quiet. Still, another may act more in the moment and the other more planned and deliberate. There is room for everyone to do their part, each in their own way.

Criticism and division do not help. If there are enough people all rowing in the same direction, we will get there. Notice, I said, "enough people." Not everyone can or will take part. That is just honest reality. Use your time and energy wisely. It's not productive or helpful to focus on those who are not involved; instead, join in the larger picture of those who choose to do something.

As leaders, you and I cannot completely avoid criticism, but we can do two things:

- Determine what is worth being criticized for.
- Avoid criticizing others.

3) Stay in tune with what is happening in the moment.

I'd like to combine two thoughts here that may sound slightly contradictory but hang with me. First, think and lead with the long view in mind. Huge problems are never solved in a few weeks with one grand effort.

Major systemic issues such as racism require massive long-term effort from resilient leaders who are willing to accept the advances and setbacks that come with the process of change. This should not be seen as an excuse to be casual and go slow, but rather to be intentional and move forward. Many small wins bring victory.

Second, with that said, there are moments in time when a window of opportunity arises to gain great momentum all at once. If you/we miss the moment, that is a great loss. But how "momentum in the moment" is gained often determines how much progress is made over the long haul. We are in that moment.

To underplay, it loses the opportunity, to overplay it puts credibility at risk. So how do you, as a leader, know how to lead? (...back to the opening question.)

That brings us to the last point.

4) Lead from your foundational beliefs.

When pressure rises and a dozen issues clamor for your time and energy, it's important to lean into your bedrock biblical beliefs and allow them to guide you in your decision-making. Scripture shapes your values, values direct your actions, and actions determine your outcomes.

No matter how smart you are or how much experience you have, when cultural realities change this rapidly, it's easy to veer slightly off track in your thinking. That's true for all of us. When a leader's foundational baseline of thinking is compromised, even a little, it can veer way off track over time. It happens slowly, almost imperceptibly.

For example, it has been suggested that this is not the time to emphasize the gospel because it is too general, and the issues of the day must take center stage. The gospel is the center stage of the church, no matter what the issues of the day are.

That's not an excuse for being tone-deaf, disconnected, or oblivious to the real needs of the day. Still, the moment Jesus is no longer at the center of our attention, we will never find real solutions to serious problems that last for eternity.

Start with God's word and lead boldly, as He directs you, to help solve real problems, including racism. The following is an example of a values-shaping scripture for me:

*"He has told you, O man, 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