

A Parent's Guide to
RACISM
in the United States

axis

"How curious a land is this, how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!"

— W.E.B. Du Bois, [*The Souls of Black Folk*](#)

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ What is racism?
- ❓ Does racism still exist in America?
- ❓ How does the Bible talk about racism?
- ❓ Did Jesus say anything about racism?
- ❓ Why is racism wrong?
- ❓ Does racism matter to teens?
- ❓ How should I talk to my teen about racism?
- ❓ How can I avoid fighting with my teen about racism?

Nations, kindreds, people, tongues

In April of 2019, [the Pew Research Center released a report](#) called “Race in America” which gave an overview of how Americans thought about racial issues in our nation. According to the survey, 58% of people say that race relations are going poorly.

56% say that being Black hurts a person’s chances of succeeding in life, and 51% agree with the same statement regarding Hispanic people. 65% of Americans agree that it’s more common to hear people expressing racist views or sentiments than it used to be. 76% of Black people, 76% of Asian people, and 58% of Hispanic people say they experience race-based discrimination.

Add to that the deaths of [George Floyd](#) and [Breonna Taylor](#) in 2020, the [increase in violent crimes](#) against Asian Americans in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the [unethical treatment of immigrants](#) at the border, and it’s no wonder this has become such a massive conversation.

The purpose of this guide is not to give a definitive solution to the problem of racism, to give a history of racism, or to unpack every way racism may intertwine with our social systems today. At Axis, our goal is always to equip parents and caring adults with information and confidence to have conversations with the teens in their lives. We want you to be ready when the topic of racism arises, so this guide will be based on a Biblical understanding of what racism is and how we as Christians are called to respond to it. Our goal is for you to be able to create a space where you can talk about the difficult topic of race in a way that creates empathy and understanding in both your teen and yourself, and ultimately brings glory to God.

What is racism?

Racism is discrimination against a person or group of people based solely on their race or ethnicity. Most often racism is perpetrated by a person or group who has more status, influence, wealth, power, or leverage than another person or group. Racism can be on an individual level, when one person thinks or behaves in harmful ways towards others of a different race, or it can exist on a higher level, when racial discrimination motivates lawmaking or judicial rulings that remain in effect over time.

[Slavery of African people](#) is what many think of when the topic of racism is brought up, but racism has affected many aspects of our nation's history. Native Americans were subjected to atrocities like the [Trail of Tears](#), Japanese Americans who had lived in their homes for generations were forced into internment camps [during World War II](#), and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 incited a huge wave of anti-Arab sentiments which led to [a 500% spike in hate crimes](#) against anyone suspected of being Muslim.

Racism has divided America perhaps more than any other issue. This is at least in part due to the fact that racism, in many cases, has been present in the structures that underpin our country. Although Black men's right to vote was passed into law in 1870, state laws and practices made it almost impossible to do. [In some places](#), Black people were forced to recite the entire Constitution before they were allowed to vote or simply told that they'd showed up to the wrong polling place or come at the wrong time, even though these things weren't true. The Voting Rights Act which prohibited these practices wasn't signed into law until 1965—around just sixty years ago, [almost 340 years](#) after the first Africans were brought to North America to be slaves. And that's just one issue. If it took centuries for Black people living in America to be given the right to vote, and another 95 years for that right to be protected, then we shouldn't be surprised to find evidence of racism still at work in our social systems.

Today, some hold the belief that everything about our country is racist, and others hold the belief that racism has been completely eradicated, or at least reduced to the individual level. No-one wants to be called a racist, and no one wants to believe it about themselves. But refusing to discuss a problem never makes it go away, it just makes us unprepared to deal with it when it arises in a way we can't dismiss.

Reflection Questions: What have been your experiences with racism, either in your own life or what you've observed and learned about from others? How do you hear racism talked about in your community? What about in the media, or online?

What does Scripture say about racism?

Like any kind of behavior that treats one person or group of people as less than another in the eyes of God, racism is a sin. In [Genesis 1:27](#), we are told that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” There is no hierarchy of people, there are no lesser humans in God’s design. In fact, even [sociologists assert](#) that the word “race” arbitrarily sorts people into groups that don’t have any biological basis. All humans, despite any of our differences in appearance, are designed the same. We are *all* created in the image of God in equal measure, and participating in racism, denying that someone is an imago dei creature like you are, is definitively sinful. Beyond any politics, any moral discussion, any stereotypes or history, to treat another person as somehow less valuable than you because of their ethnicity is wrong in the eyes of God.

We also know that racism is not a new sin. Ancient Egyptians [enslaved the Israelites](#) because they feared being overpowered, suggesting that there was a firm distinction between who was Egyptian and who was not. Though historical sources differ wildly regarding the skin color of Egyptians and Israelites, we know that the latter would have been considered a [racial group](#) given that they shared common biological traits, came from a certain geographic region, et cetera.

The New Testament sometimes describes different groups’ feelings toward each other in ways which communicate racism in the culture. Samaritans, with whom, according to [John 4:7](#), “Jews have no dealings,” were not only religiously divided from Jews, but were actually [an entirely different ethnic group](#). Ancient Romans also practiced racial discrimination against the Jews; [Roman historian Tacitus](#) identified the Jews as “a race...prone to lust,” and wrote that they “profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor,” and were “base and abominable.”

Jesus’ life and ministry took place in a world that was even more racially divided than America today. And yet, one core tenet of his teaching was that under God, race was not even considered. The Kingdom of God was open to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, an idea the Jewish religious leaders vehemently rejected. The problem of Jews rejecting Gentiles was so prevalent that Paul even affirmed in [Galatians 3:28](#) that there was no hierarchy of any kind no matter what earthly

discrimination might exist: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus actively sought out society’s outcasts and those for whom discrimination was a part of their daily lives. From the very beginning, [five women](#) are included in his genealogy, a list which would have traditionally only included men, two of which were foreigners: Rahab (a prostitute from Jericho) and Ruth (a widow from Moab). The first time [Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah](#) in the gospel of John is to a Samaritan woman with a checkered past. With his twelve disciples, Jesus refutes the very concept of group hierarchy at all. For example: though Matthew and Simon the Zealot were both ethnically Jewish, [zealots](#) considered themselves to be more truly Jewish than those who did not subscribe to their beliefs. On the other hand, Matthew’s status as a [tax collector](#) prohibited him from taking part in any Jewish religious practice, and many would have refused to call him a Jew at all. Yet both walked with Jesus as his closest friends. They were sent out during his ministry to perform miracles and preach the gospel, and [were even martyred](#) for their unwavering faithfulness to it.

If we as Christians are to follow Jesus’ example, we must accept that there is no room for racism or discrimination of any kind in our lives. We must show those around us the love, dignity, and respect due to a human made in the image of God, recognizing that Jesus taught, healed, forgave and died for all of us.

Reflection Questions: Where else in Scripture can you think of verses that talk about how we treat foreigners and outcasts? What do you think Jesus might have to say about racial issues in America?

Why does Gen Z care about racism?

Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation America has ever seen; [only 52% are White](#), and the [Census Bureau predicts](#) that White people will be the minority race by 2050. In other words, the issue of race is personal to them in a way it might not have been to previous generations. This will only become truer as Gen Zers start to get married and have children (the [oldest Gen Zers](#) turn 26 in 2023, so that stage of life is already here for some of them).

According to a survey conducted by [Ypulse.com](#), as of January 2023 the issue of racism is 2nd in a list of the top 5 social justice concerns for Gen Z. And not only is the issue personal, but Gen Z actually believes they have the power to make a difference. According to a survey by [Wunderman Thompson Data](#), 75% of Gen Zers believe that their generation will change the world for the better. Racism matters to Gen Z because they don't see it as an inevitable part of life, and many of them are determined to make a positive change in our country and across the world.

Reflection Questions: Do you feel like the teens in your life have hope for the future? How can you encourage them in that?

How do I have a conversation with my teen about racism?

As a parent or caring adult, you don't have to agree with everything your teen is saying about racism or how they're saying it, but approaching them openly and with questions and curiosity creates a foundation of trust and safety. Genuine interest in your teen's convictions can help remove any defensiveness they might feel.

[Statistically](#), only 34% of Gen X (the generation which largely parents Gen Z) believe racial and ethnic diversity is good for the country, compared to 51% of Gen Z. Because of the way older generations are sometimes represented on social media, Gen Z might be prepared to fight every

time someone older than them starts a conversation about race. Patient, empathetic, genuine listening can help create a neutral space, where your teens are more likely to unpack their beliefs with you rather than resorting to accusation and stereotypes.

Another important element of a productive conversation about race with a young person is depoliticization. As we discussed above, though race may be a huge topic in politics, politics only matter because they affect people. Casting the sin of racism in light of “liberal” or “conservative” categories falsely assumes that sin only exists on one side of the political aisle or the other. Anyone, regardless of their political affiliation, can hold racist beliefs, even if they don't know it. Racism isn't limited to neo-nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. [In Matthew 5:22-30](#), Jesus says that anger can't be justified just because you haven't murdered someone, and lust can't be justified just because you haven't committed adultery. In the same way, perpetuating racial stereotypes can't be justified just because you haven't committed a hate crime.

Honesty and humility can play a huge part in conversations with our teens. Assuming that we are above reproach in every way does not create a space where our teens feel free to express themselves and their feelings—or even free to misspeak or say something incorrect without fear of backlash. Being vulnerable about the things we don't know and about the ways we ourselves have failed models a posture for our teens of being open to God's convicting Spirit.

As raisingchildren.net.au puts it, “The stronger your relationship with your child, the more influence you'll have, because your child will be more likely to seek your guidance and value your opinion and support. In fact, if you have a strong relationship as your child becomes a young adult, they'll probably end up with values, beliefs and behavior (sic) that are similar to yours.”

Reflection Questions: What is the posture of your heart towards racism in our country? Do you think diversity is good for our country? Why or why not?

All you who are weary

In complex, emotional, personal, and especially political conversations with your teens, it's essential to behave the same way you want them to behave. If you want your teen to start conversations with you, trust you, respect you, and listen to your opinions and advice, you have to do the same with them. The dynamic will be different since you are an adult and they are not, but that does not mean you shouldn't treat them as valued and unique individuals whose opinions and beliefs are just as important as yours.

Above all, keep Christ at the center of your conversations about race. Return to the language Scripture uses to speak about oppression and discrimination; emphasize Jesus' passion for society's mistreated people and the equity of all believers under God. If a significant instance of racial injustice becomes a topic of public conversation, cover those involved with prayer at meal times or during any family devotions you might have. Pray with your teens for wisdom to speak with love and truth, and to articulate yourselves clearly and winsomely when you talk with each other and those around you. Pray for your teens to experience the heart of Christ for those who are suffering. And be bold to pray that God would reveal any sinful thoughts or even subconscious beliefs in yourself that don't respect others as His image-bearers.

Conversations with your teens about race will often be difficult, and won't always go the way you want them to. But that doesn't mean they aren't worth pursuing. Racism is an issue that many teens feel strongly about, and you have the opportunity to help root them in Scriptural truth that will serve as a foundation for them to form opinions and behaviors that guide them as they walk alongside their peers. With God's help, these opinions and behaviors could change the world.

Reflection Questions: How can you have grace for yourself when a conversation with your teens doesn't turn out how you expected it would? What are things you can do to intentionally practice compassion for your teen during difficult conversations?

Invitation to Generosity

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org. Thank you!

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Related Axis Resources:

- › [A Conversation Kit on Racism](#)