



## Twelve Bible Verses About Race and Ethnicity

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The United States established Martin Luther King Jr. Day to honor him and to serve as “a time for Americans to reflect on the principles of racial equality and nonviolent social change espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr.” It has been celebrated annually since Jan. 20, 1986.

In keeping with the purpose of this observance, I would like to reflect on what the Bible teaches about race and ethnicity. The Bible is divinely inspired and infallible, so what it says about race and ethnicity sets the standard for what Christians believe and practice. The term most commonly used in the Bible to describe racial and ethnic others is “nations” (Hebrew, *goyim*; Greek, *ethne*), although Scripture uses other terms as well.

In what follows, I outline 12 Bible verses that touch on race and ethnicity, and I offer a brief explanatory comment about each. These 12 Bible verses follow the plotline of the biblical narrative: creation, Fall, and redemption. The list is illustrative, not exhaustive.

### 1. Created in God’s Image (Genesis 1:27)

According to Genesis 1:27, God created all humanity in His image.

*“So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”*

The creation of humanity in God’s image is the basis of human dignity and equality, as well as the sanctity of life (Genesis 9:6).

### 2. Marred by Sin (Romans 5:12)

Though created in God’s image and blessed to live in Paradise, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:1–24).

The apostle Paul taught in Romans 5:12 that the sin of Adam and Eve infected all humanity, and that all humanity imitated the First Couple in their sin.

*“Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”*

Taken together with the first point, this means that no race or ethnicity is more sacred or more sinful than the others. All are created equal, and all are equally fallen.

### 3. Judged Impartially (Romans 2:11)

All humanity stands guilty before God deserving judgment. Scripture teaches that God is an impartial judge.

As the apostle Paul put it in Romans 2:11, “God does not show favoritism.”

Paul made this statement in the context of explaining the standard God will use on the Day of Judgment (Romans 2:1–16). Alluding to Psalms 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12, he wrote that “God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done’” (Romans 2:6). By implication, God would use the same standard whether a person was a “Jew” or a “Gentile” (Romans 2:9–10).

### 4. Chosen to Bless the Nations (Genesis 12:1–3,7)

In Genesis 12, the biblical narrative turns from the nations to one nation — Israel, the descendants of Abraham.

Genesis 12:1–7 describes God’s election or choosing of Abraham (and his descendants). It is easy to misinterpret God’s choosing of Abraham as an example of partiality, as if God favors one people group over others. In reality, however, Abraham’s election is missional. God chose Abraham and his descendants to bless the nations:

*The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. ... The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring [literally, seed] I will give this land” (verses 1–3,7).*

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul noted that Christ was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:16):

*The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.*

### 5. Commanded to Love Foreigners (Leviticus 19:34)

Because God is impartial and desires to bless the nations, He commanded his chosen people Israel to love foreigners, that is, to treat them impartially (Leviticus 19:34):

*The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.*

### 6. Governed Providentially (Acts 17:26)

Although the Old Testament story line focuses primarily on God’s chosen people, Israel, we should not misinterpret this as meaning God was unaware or uninvolved in the history of other people groups. In Acts 17:26, Paul presented the gospel to the Areopagus assembly. He focused on God’s providential governance of history:

*“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”*

## **Christ does not discriminate in His offer of salvation to humanity.**

In saying this, Paul was echoing the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, who viewed God's kingdom as extending to all nations, not just Israel. In [Amos 9:7](#), for example, God said, "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites? ... Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?"

## **7. Messiah for All Nations (Isaiah 42:1–7)**

The Old Testament prophets foretold the coming of a Davidic king who would fulfill God's promises not only to Israel, but to the nations as well. We see this in [Isaiah 42:1–7](#), where God said this through the prophet:

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ... I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles (verses 1,6)."*

Matthew's Gospel quoted this prophecy and stated that Jesus Christ fulfilled it ([Matthew 12:15–21](#)).

## **8. All Justified Freely (Romans 3:22–24)**

In many ways, the apostle Paul reflected more deeply than any other New Testament author on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Christ's work. We have already seen what Paul wrote about human sinfulness and divine impartiality. In [Romans 3:22–24](#), he argued that "all" are affected by sin and justified by faith in Jesus Christ:

*"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

Christ does not discriminate in His offer of salvation to humanity. The word *all* here does not mean every person will be saved regardless of what they believe, however. Paul wrote "to all who believe." This indicates that Christ made atonement for all, so everyone who confesses faith in Jesus Christ will be saved.

## **9. Poured Out on All Flesh (Acts 2:17)**

Christ not only offered justification to all races and ethnicities, but He also poured out the Holy Spirit impartially.

Luke recorded the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Peter's sermon about it in [Acts 2:1–41](#). Referring to [Joel 2:28](#), Peter said this in [Acts 2:17](#): "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people."

In the Book of Acts, Luke told the story of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth ([Acts 1:8](#)). At critical points in the narrative, the Holy Spirit fell on converts to demonstrate to the Church that God was including new people groups in the body of Christ. This is clear in Acts 10, where the gospel first came to the Gentile Cornelius and his household through Peter's preaching.

Reflecting later on this event, Peter said: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8–9).

## 10. Neither Jew nor Gentile (Galatians 3:28)

One major implication of being justified by faith and being baptized in the Holy Spirit is that race and ethnicity cannot be used to distinguish membership in the body of Christ. Galatians 3:28 makes this clear, and also shows that neither socioeconomic status nor biological status can be used as boundary markers:

*“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

The point is not that Christians lose their racial or ethnic identity when they follow Christ, nor that they cease to be men or women, or rich or poor. The point is that Christians cannot use these things to suggest anyone is more favored (or less favored) by God. Unity in the body of Christ forbids using these identity markers for those purposes.

## 11. Mission to All Nations (Matthew 28:18–20)

Because Jesus Christ is the Messiah of all nations, because all have sinned and are judged impartially, because Christ died to offer justification to all through faith, and because the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, the Church has a mandate to take the gospel to every nation. That indeed is the point of the Great Commission given by Jesus Christ to His disciples just prior to the Ascension (Matthew 28:18–20):

*“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

## 12. A Great Multitude (Revelation 7:9–10)

Finally, we should note that the Book of Revelation depicts the end of human history as a multitude before the throne of God in worship (Revelation 7:9–10):

*“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”*

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Throughout human history, people have used race and ethnicity to differentiate themselves from others. All too often, instead of recognizing God’s image in one another, people have elevated their racial and ethnic group over other racial and ethnic groups. In the United States, this took the form of white supremacy over Black people, Native Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities. Sadly, even some Christian churches succumbed to the temptation of racial and ethnic superiority.

It should be clear from this brief survey of 12 key Bible verses that God does not countenance racism or ethnocentrism of any kind. He created humanity in His image. When humanity fell, God purposed to redeem all people. He accomplished redemption in Christ, applies it through the Holy Spirit, and calls the Church to act impartially and reflect heaven’s diversity in its membership and mission to the nations.