

GOD AND RACE

**A GUIDE FOR MOVING BEYOND BLACK
FISTS AND WHITE KNUCKLES**

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

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HarperChristian
Resources

God and Race Study Guide

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	v
<i>How to Use This Guide</i>	ix
Session 1: Open Your Hands	1
Session 2: Start in Your Heart	25
Session 3: What About Your Home?	49
Session 4: Use Your Influence	73
Session 5: A House That Looks Like Heaven	95
<i>Closing Words</i>	117
<i>Leader's Guide</i>	119

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, we get an amazing glimpse of God's plan for race: "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" (Revelation 7:9). The end of our story is a beautiful picture of a diverse group of people all worshiping together before God. This is where the church will end up one day.

But this is not necessarily how the church looks *today*. In fact, odds are that if you walk into a random church, it will look more like one single tribe, tongue, and nation. Multiracial churches are not certainly the norm. But we believe—with a lot of hard work and honest conversations—we can get there together. The change may not happen overnight, but if we all devote ourselves to discussions and commit to learning how to learn from one another through healthy dialogue, we can work together to build houses that look like heaven.

This is the purpose of the *God and Race* small-group study. Often, we in the church feel that the words *God* and *race* don't go together. They feel like unrelated topics. But nothing could be further from the truth! Diversity and unity are pivotal pieces of God's plan. For this reason, we want to give you a guide for understanding the issues of race and faith from both a *black* and *white* perspective. We also want to equip you with the tools you need

to enter into open, honest, and fruitful conversations about God and race with confidence.

This study is meant to guide you and your fellow church members to move beyond *black fists* and *white knuckles*. We want to help you open your hands to the truth of the gospel and explore what it really has to say about race and how we interact with one another. We'll talk about allowing God to search our hearts to get us ready to engage in these conversations. We will then shift our focus externally and talk about your *household*—helping you to invite diversity into your home and your social circle. Finally, we'll talk about inviting diversity into the *house of God* and lay out some strategies for making that happen.

If you are brand new to the race conversation and scared to death that you are going to say the wrong thing . . . this study is for you.

If you are frustrated with the lack of attention your church is giving race relations and you're interested in being a part of the solution for positive change . . . this study is for you.

If you are a church leader unsure of how to take the next step to help your congregation get it . . . this study is for you.

If you are unsure what to believe about the current state of racial tension in our country . . . this study is for you.

If a friend handed you this book and you are only reading it to do them a favor . . . guess what? This study is for you.

The truth is, that as a nation, we are divided. We may not have created this division, but we are living in it. So, if you still have a pulse, you have a responsibility to be the answer and help push us forward toward the future God designed. Let this study be a guide along the way, because unless we make a solid and intentional choice to connect, understand, reach, and love one another, we will remain divided—and we can't afford to stay divided.

Let's loosen our grips, unclench our fists, open our hands, and come together.

— John Siebeling and Wayne Francis

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The *God and Race* video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or small-group gathering) and also as an individual study. Each session begins with a brief opening reflection and several icebreaker-type questions to get you and your group thinking about the topic. You will then watch a video with John Siebeling and Wayne Francis, which can be accessed via the streaming code found on the inside front cover. If you are doing the study with a group, you will then engage in some directed discussion and close each session with a time of personal reflection and prayer.

Each person should have his or her own study guide, which includes video teaching notes, group discussion questions, and between-sessions personal studies to help you reflect on and apply the material to your life during the week. You are also encouraged to have a copy of the *God and Race* book, as reading it alongside the curriculum will provide you with deeper insights and make the journey more meaningful. (See the “For Next Week” section for the chapters in the book that correspond to the material that your group is discussing.)

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following points in mind. First, the real growth in this study will happen

during your small-group time. This is where you will process the content of John's and Wayne's message, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so that you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only "go through the motions," or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you're looking for during this study.

Second, remember the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship. For this reason, seek to make your group a "safe place." This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else's opinion.

Third, resist the temptation to "fix" someone's problem or correct his or her theology, as that's not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

In between your group times, you can maximize the impact of the course by checking out the personal study guide activity. This individual study will help you personally reflect and actively respond to the lesson. For each session, you may wish to complete the personal study in one sitting or spread it over a few days (for example, working on it a half-hour per day on four different days that week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start!) your between-sessions personal study, you should attend the group study video session regardless. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don't have your "homework" done.

Keep in mind this study is an opportunity for you to train in a new way of seeing the intersection of faith and race. The videos,

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

discussions, and activities are simply meant to kick-start your imagination so that you are open not only to what God wants you to hear but also to how to apply that message to your life.

Sound good? Then let's get started!

SESSION ONE

OPEN YOUR HANDS

Perfect love drives out fear.

1 JOHN 4:18

Welcome

The most common question we hear about the conversation between black and white communities of faith is *how do we move forward from here?* The desire to move beyond racism—defined in our book as *prejudice plus power*—is real, and so is the lack of understanding about the best place to start in the conversation. A powerful place to start the conversation about race is by understanding two key symbols.

Symbolism is where we find the significance of *black fists* and *white knuckles*. The *black fist* is a symbol made famous at the 1968 Olympics when two African-American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists during the medal ceremony as the Star-Spangled Banner played, symbolizing solidarity with the black community. Ever since, the *black fist* has become a symbol

of standing up against the residue of segregation, slavery, and the systemic oppression that was, and still is, happening against black people in our country.

White knuckles are symbolic in this study of white Americans who are gripping to a long-standing paradigm of privilege that holds an advantage over people of color. When people try to hold on to the past, it is because something is *actually* slipping away—and they don't like change. So, they “white knuckle” it and try to hold on to the “good old days” because they are afraid of new things on the horizon that will not be as good as the things in the past.

But here's what we know to be true—we have to move beyond just *white fists* and *black knuckles*. We can't afford to have the race conversation from just one perspective. We need open-handed conversations about race and opportunities to discuss relevant issues in the church from both a *black* and *white* perspective. Our call as Christians is to love all people, and we can't do that with closed fists. Racial diversity in the church is an opportunity to open our hands instead of an obstacle. We need to learn how to open our hands and surrender.

Consider

If you or any of your fellow group members do not know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to get things started, discuss one of the following questions:

- What opportunities have you had lately to talk about God and race?

— or —

- How has your church recently addressed conversations about race and faith?

Read

Invite someone to read aloud the following passage. Listen for new insights as you hear the verses being read, and then discuss the questions that follow.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. . . .

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have

seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

— 1 JOHN 4:7–12, 16–21

What does this passage say about everyone who is in the family of God?

What does this passage have to do with how we approach the topic of racism?

Watch

Play the video segment for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

God cares about *race*. We have different skin colors, speak different languages, enjoy different cultures, and yet the Bible says we are all human beings made in the image of God.

What is standing in our way of getting to where we need to go? *Clenched fists*. We hold onto the past, but we must be willing to receive with open hands.

The *black fist* is a symbol of standing up against the residue of segregation, slavery, and the systematic oppression that was (and still is) happening against black people in our country.

White knuckles is the other side of that equation. Many white Americans are still gripping to a long-standing paradigm of privilege that holds an advantage over people of color.

There are three big problems that result in us keeping our fists clenched:

The pain problem: the pain of racism

The paralysis problem: the failure to stand up to racism by saying *that's enough!*

The perfection problem: perfection as a prerequisite for progress as it relates to racism

The Pharisees in Jesus' day were the original cancel culture. There is a story in John 8 where they catch a woman in adultery. They demanded perfection from her, but since she fell short, she sat paralyzed in fear in the temple courts—until Jesus entered the picture.

One day every tribe, tongue, and nation will be worshiping together. Until that day comes, our job is to work to make that a reality today. And we can't do that with closed fists.

Discuss

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched, and then explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. What stood out to you from listening to John and Wayne today? How can you identify with the stories they shared?
2. In what ways have problems caused by clenched fists—either *black fists* or *white knuckles*—shaped your own story? Which problem is most prevalent for you—the problem of pain, the problem of paralysis, or the problem of perfection?
3. The Bible gives us a beautiful picture of the beginning and end of the human story in Genesis 1:26–31 and Revelation 7:9–17. What stands out to you in these verses and gives you hope about the beginning and the end of our story?
4. Read Luke 10:25–37. There is a poignant reason that the story is called “The Good Samaritan” rather than “The Good Person.” How is this story a challenge for us today? Can you think of a modern-day example?

5. Why do you think it is so hard for us to open our hands when it comes to the conversation on racism? What do we miss by keeping our fists clenched?

6. What will you do to stay engaged and open to challenges throughout this study? What specific commitment will you make to your group today?

Respond

Review the outline for the video teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down your most significant takeaway from this session.

Pray

One of the most important things you can do together in community is to pray for each other. This is not simply a closing prayer to end your group time but a portion of time to share prayer requests, review how God has answered past prayers, and actually pray for one another. As you close your time together this week, thank God for creating every tribe and nation in his image and for loving *all* of us as his children. Ask him to search your heart and give you that kind of love toward others, especially when they look different than you. And ask God to help you keep an open mind and open hands regarding this conversation on God and race over the next few sessions. Use the space below to record prayer requests and praises.

Name	Request/Praise
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SESSION ONE

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

Reflect on the material you have covered during this week's group time by engaging in the following personal studies. Each day offers a short reading adapted from *God and Race*, along with a few reflection questions to take you deeper into the theme of this week's study. (You may also want to review chapters 1–3 in the book before you begin.) Be sure to read the reflection questions and make a few notes in your guide about the experience. At the start of your next group session, you will have a few minutes to share any insights that you learned.

Day One: The Pain of Racism

Read Genesis 32:22–32 and Matthew 11:25–30.

If you've ever experienced racism, you know how bad it hurts. When Wayne was just eight years old and living in the Bronx, he watched a white teenager call his mom the N-word and throw a rock that hit his mother in the back. He could tell it hurt her because she grimaced in pain when it happened. But she just looked over at Wayne and said in her deep, calm Jamaican voice, "Don't worry, jus' keep walkin,' babee." As an eight-year-old boy, Wayne was angry,

confused, and sad all at once. The way his mother responded was one of the most important lessons of his life. She responded like a champion when she felt the pain of those rocks of racism—like a seasoned veteran taking the high road once again.

Unfortunately, Wayne's story has happened millions of times, in millions of different ways, to millions of different people. From microaggressions to blatant acts of racism, our nation has experienced deeply rooted racism since day one. Every time we turn on the news or open social media, it seems there is *another* story of blatant racism. Only now it's in plain view, caught on camera for everyone to see. And each incident hurts. It's no wonder open-handed conversations about race are so tricky when the pain of "racism rocks" is so real.

Persevering through the pain is not easy. Suffer enough pain, and you will eventually lose your willingness to engage. Experience enough hurt, and you will be tempted to stop showing up—or you will show up beaten down, with bruises and clenched fists. We have to keep walking and keep moving forward if we don't want to be paralyzed by our pain. We persevere through the pain of racism when we're willing to open our closed fists and be honest in conversation about our experience of *God and race*.

1. Have you ever had the "rocks" of racism hurled at you? Or have you ever watched someone throw rocks of racism at someone else? What happened?
2. Jacob walked around with a limp after a night of wrestling with God (see Genesis 32:22–32). He was no stranger to lifelong

pain, just like those of us who have experienced the lifelong pain of racism. How has the pain of racism affected you or the ones you love?

3. If you haven't experienced the pain of racism, do you understand why? How has the color of your skin or your life experience protected you from this pain?

4. What past experiences make you clench your fist and cause you to feel a sense of pain? How do the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28 comfort you regarding this pain? How does the promise of Jesus allow you to keep moving forward despite the pain?

Talk to God about the pain of racism you've experienced in your life or the pain you've witnessed at the expense of others. Ask God to give you the courage to stay open-handed and willing to have hard conversations about the pain of racism with your community and church.

Day Two: The Problems of Racism

Read John 8:1–11 and Colossians 3:12–17.

White people are often nervous about whether it's better to say "black" or "African-American" because one wrong word could ruin you in the current age of cancel culture. But semantics are an obstacle to the crucial conversation we all need to be having. Saying the exact right thing is not as crucial as entering into a relationship and jumping into the conversation on God and race. As long as perfection with our words is a prerequisite for progress, we will stay paralyzed. Accountability is important, but open-handed conversations about race cannot happen where cancel culture abounds in both black and white communities.

Wayne, as a black pastor leading a racially diverse church, often faces this tension. If he doesn't address certain issues at just the right moment, the concern is that the black community will jump online and talk about how he's not "*woke*" enough. Or, if he doesn't phrase things just the right way, that the white community will Tweet about how he's part of the problem. Even worse, people from either side of the conversation on race will leave his church and make the desire for diversity even more difficult. But Wayne keeps moving forward in the conversation on God and race with an open hand because he wants an atmosphere conducive to healthy relationships and healthy conversations.

The pain of racism played out in either paralysis or perfection can make anyone want to throw in the towel and stop fighting for diversity. It's in those moments when we realize we've settled down with a group of people who look just like us and call it a day on the idea of diversity. But we must keep moving forward. We must look for similarities with those who are different from us, rather than

get tripped up on semantics. We don't have time to let awkward, less-than-perfect interactions or past mistakes paralyze us if unity is the goal.

1. When you search your heart, what fears do you have about addressing this issue?

2. Have you canceled anybody recently, whether online or in person? If so, what was your motivation—panic, power, or something else?

3. Critiquing and canceling others is a convenient way for people to avoid their pain. But the beautiful and brilliant thing about Jesus is that he loves us too much to let us fall into that trap! Jesus may not have agreed with the Pharisees in the story told in John 8, but he never wrote them off. Rather, he engaged them in conversation. How does Jesus model this idea of dealing with people rather than dismissing them?

4. How can you do the same? How can you let the “peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (Colossians 3:15) by walking with someone or listening to them instead of canceling them when you disagree?

Talk to God about the paralysis or the need for perfection you’ve experienced regarding conversations around racism. Ask God to give you the courage to keep engaging in conversation and keep working toward unity in diversity in your life and your church community.

Day Three: Keep on Walking

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 and Hebrews 11:1–40.

If you’re looking for a quick fix to your discomfort around the conversation on racism, you’ve come to the wrong place. This study isn’t a quick fix. Rather, it’s a *guide* that offers something better than fast solutions and quick fixes. It offers space to acknowledge your pain, paralysis, and imperfections, and *hope* for the future. It’s meant to help you get back up and keep walking the walk and talking the talk even when it hurts—*especially when it hurts*.

Now, we are *not* suggesting you become walking target practice for those who commit racist acts of violence. But we *are* suggesting you keep moving forward with God in the midst of those acts, because God is your source of strength. Faith isn’t weakness, and open-handed conversations about race are not for the faint of

heart, so you'll need all the strength you can get. Walking with God will allow you to walk *through* the pain of systemic racism rather than running away from it and denying unhealthy reactions of perfection or paralysis.

We know that we have a lot of gumption to come along and tell everyone to just get along—to simply open their hearts and their hands regarding conversations on race. But we assure you, there are no easy ways for a bunch of imperfect people to fix centuries of pain and paralysis. Instead, this is an invitation to join the journey and keep walking. Just like Wayne's mother kept walking as those boys taunted her and threw a rock at her, we need to keep walking too. Walking paves the best path toward what we should be walking toward.

So, we are going to have to keep walking on the path toward conversations on *God and race* with open hands and open hearts if we want to know where we *should* be walking. When in doubt, keep on walking. And it's even better if we keep on walking together.

1. What makes it hard for you to keep walking on the journey of racial reconciliation? Where do you need a guide?
2. What invitations have you received from others and from God to keep walking this journey? How has God shown you his strength?



GOD AND RACE STUDY GUIDE

3. As you read Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, what reasons does he give for delighting in his weakness? Like Paul, how can you rely on God's grace and power in light of the reality of racism?

4. The author of Hebrews gives us a list of faith-filled people of God, all of whom had to keep walking when life got hard. Pick two or three people who stand out to you. In what ways was their weakness turned to strength?

Talk to God about what makes it so challenging for you to keep walking with open hands on the journey toward racial reconciliation and unity. Ask God for the strength you need—his strength—when you feel weak along the way.

Day Four: Standing Up Against Racism

Read Matthew 5:1–12 and Matthew 21:1–13.

We all know the feeling we get when our house isn't in order and someone comes over to visit. We are quick to speak up in those moments about our messy kids or busy schedule or lack of storage. We feel this way about our home because we take personal responsibility for our space. But are we willing to do the same when racism is the reason that things are out of order in our churches and in our communities?

Unfortunately, far too many Christians have remained silent about racism for far too long. So many of us are content to say *good enough* instead of *that's enough*. We feel like it's *good enough* we aren't racist or don't hang out with racist people—but *good enough* is not enough. We are God's plan for racial reconciliation as the church, yet we are hesitant to stand up and say something when others are treated like they don't matter. We're hesitant because we're afraid of what it will cost us. Perhaps this is because the moments when we stand up and say *that's enough* are expensive. History shows those moments can cost us our reputation, friendships, our job, even sometimes our lives. For Jesus, it cost him all of those things.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and found the court outside the temple filled with vendors and money changers, his response was costly. The temple was supposed to be a place of prayer for everyone. But the Jewish people of Jesus' day were intentionally blocking the Gentiles with vendors and money changing tables, making it nearly impossible for them to worship God. Blocking the outside court to prevent people from worshiping was not a spiritual issue—it was a racial issue.

When Jesus saw what was happening, he stood up to them and overturned their tables as if to say *that's enough*. Now it's time for us to do the same. When we are willing to stand up against racism in our homes, in our communities, and in our churches, there will be breaking points that bring about change.

1. What experiences do you have of you or people around you sticking up for someone else by saying “that's enough”? How did that courage impact the situation?



GOD AND RACE STUDY GUIDE

2. What experiences do you have when you or others didn't stand up for what was right? How did the lack of courage impact the situation? What do you wish had happened?

3. The story told in Matthew 21 relates how Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves outside the temple court. What else do you notice about the story? What spaces, activities, or ideas need to be "overturned" in your church community today so that all are welcome to worship Jesus?

4. According to Jesus' words in Matthew 5, who should we be standing up for in the world? How should this impact our response to racism?

Talk to God about what makes it costly or fearful for you to stand up against racism. Ask God to show you the small, simple, and tangible ways that you can start exercising those muscles right now so that you're ready to stand up against racism when the cost is high.

Day Five: Standing Up Together

Read John 15:9–17 and John 21:15–25.

Before we talk about all the ways we can change the world as a church or a community, we first need to look inwardly as individuals. The journey to open-handed conversations about God and race begins in our hearts. But we can't always do this journey on our own. Most times, we need the presence and the accountability of a friend—one who is willing to tell us when we have food stuck between our front teeth, literally and figuratively. We need friends who are willing to point out when we've excluded people who look different than us for more of the same—around our dinner tables, in our leadership circles, and in our board rooms.

Learning to not only stand up against racism but represent real unified diversity in our lives will be a process for many of us, but we can do it because of the people who have come before us to pave the way. And we can do it because of friends who are willing to walk with us along the way. Take Wayne and John for example. On the outside, it might look odd to see a black guy and a white guy partnering together to pastor a network church located in two different places—and they've received their fair share of challenges from concerned friends for doing so. But they are united in purpose to do something great, something God-ordained in a racially fragmented nation, *together*. This is called spiritual friendship.

When two friends intentionally choose to connect at the soul level like this, not only are they standing up against racism together, but they are also elevating the conversation about God and race in their respective church communities. The real power in the fight against racism comes when we open our hands together. It comes when, side-by-side, we unclench our black fists and white



GOD AND RACE STUDY GUIDE

knuckles and have open-handed conversations without muting our diversity or compromising our integrity.

1. Who are the soul-level friends who choose to love you the way you are and yet challenge you to change?
2. How have you changed your point of view regarding race or faith as a result of a spiritual friendship?
3. In John 15, Jesus gives several reasons why he calls the disciples his friends. What are those reasons? What do they reveal about Jesus and his perspective on the disciples?
4. Jesus also illustrates how he views his disciples as friends by appearing to them three times after his death. On the third time, as recorded in John 21, we see and hear how deeply connected Jesus was to his disciples by the way he interacted with Peter and the way he talked about John. What are the signs of soul-level spiritual friendship displayed by Jesus in this

passage? What challenge does Jesus give Peter? How has that challenge changed the trajectory of the church as we know it today?

Talk to God about your current friendships as you embrace the conversation on racial reconciliation with open hands. Ask God to show you the friends who are willing to stand up with you in the fight against racism. Or, if needed, ask God to bring new soul-level friends into your life who will stand up to racism with you in this season.

For Next Week

Use the space below to write any insights or questions that you want to discuss at the next group meeting. Before your next session, read chapters 4–7 in *God and Race*.