

2. Image: Rule

Genesis 1:26-31

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Sunday 27 September, 2020

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.”

– C. S. Lewis

“Grown-ups love figures... When you tell them you've made a new friend they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you "What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies? " Instead they demand "How old is he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make? " Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.”

— *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince*

What does it mean to be ‘human’?

That’s the question you’re faced with as you enter the Hall of Human Origins, in the (Smithsonian?) Museum of Natural History in Washington DC.

What does it mean to be human?

The Smithsonian exhibit is all about how humans are different from other apes, primates and mammals. It’s an exhibition about the theory of human evolution. Is that what it means to be human? To be the pinnacle of evolution?

Apparently in the museum, visitors are invited to share what **they** think it means to be human. And so the museum has collected the thoughts of thousands of people on the topic. So what do people say about what it means to be human?

- *To be full of self-doubt.*
- *To live in community and seek to be heard.*
- *To experience joy—and be aware of it.*
- *To strive for a life beyond mere survival and food.*
- *A search to understand our inner voice.*
- *Being capable of great things and terrible things.*
- *Having relationships based on love and hate, sacrifice and anger.*

- Love.
- To create a future heaven or a future hell.
- To live in mystery . . .¹

So many answers to the question of what it means to be human... I wonder what answer you would give to that question?

As we open this Bible today, we come to God's answer to that question. To be human, Genesis 1 teaches, is to be made in the image of God, in his likeness.

That's the topic we're looking into today – being made in the image of God. This is a foundational truth that is crucial to our understanding of ourselves, and crucial to how we view God and how we view other people. So why don't we pray that God will teach us (this morning) as we open the Scriptures?

Heavenly Father, as we come to your word again, we trust that you will speak to us through it. Help us to understand what it means to be human, what it means to be made in your image, and what that means for us as we live in the world that you have made. Be with us now, just as you were over creation, speaking into it and bringing life. We ask you to bring us new life as we hear you speak. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

As we said last week, this Fall we are spending time in Genesis 1-11. These early chapters of the Bible teach us **foundational** truths about who God is, the purpose of creation and the place of humans in it.

As I also said last week, these chapters are not the Encyclopedia Britannica of the prehistory of the world. They're not exhaustive biology textbooks, or history textbooks, or astronomy textbooks. Genesis 1-11 speaks into each of those topics, but they don't answer every question we want to ask. And that's because they are not written from a human perspective, but from God's perspective. These chapters are God's prehistory of the world.

And so our task, as Bible readers, is to look at the record that God has given us, and to find meaning there. We'll be tempted to think, but what about this? Or what about that? My plan with the sermon today is to try and make sense of the passages in front of us, and sometimes leaning on what the rest of the Bible says about them. But essentially we are looking for the message that God is conveying in the particular words that we find in the Bible.

So we saw last week in Genesis 1 that God created the world from nothing, that he spoke and everything in creation came into being: the sun, the moon, the earth, and the stars. But God's particular attention is on earth where he separates water from land, where he places vegetation that thrives, and causes the ocean to teem with sea-life. He creates the birds of the air and animals that live on earth – livestock, and wild animals and all the things that creep and crawl on the earth.

God creates them all, and then he speaks a word over it all, declaring it good.

But there is one last creature to be created. And when this last creature is created, God declares everything 'very good' (v31)

And that last creature is mankind, or humanity:

¹ <https://orbitermag.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-human/>

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

1. Dignity

So the big question is, what does it mean to be made in the image of God?

The first observation is that humanity is very much part of the created order. That is, humans are like the animals in one way, in that we belong to everything that God created on those first 6 days. We were made in creation, and for life within God’s creation.

This is made even clearer in Genesis 2:7 where it says:

⁷ Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

As humans, we are made from the clay of creation – the same matter that God used to form the earth and everything in it. This ‘createdness’ makes us distinct from the creator – God is spirit (John 4:24) whereas we are flesh – from the dust we came, and to dust we will return... (Gen 3:19)

This createdness rejects the notion that humans are somehow part of the divine. That idea could be found in some Ancient Near East cultures at the time these Scriptures were written, and I suspect we could find modern spiritualities that claim the divinity of humans as well.

But Genesis 1 and 2 reject that idea. Humans are part of the created order. We are not ‘gods’.

However that doesn’t make us mere animals.

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said:

“Man is neither angel nor beast...”

Out of all the created beings, humans are given a special dignity. No other creature is created in the image of God, only humans. And that God-given image sets us apart from the animals, as more than just mammals, or primates, or trousered apes as some have suggested. God’s creation story teaches us that humans are created with purpose.

As we bear God’s image, there is something about humanity that points to God, and what he is like. Out of all the creatures in creation, we are the only creatures that disclose something about God.

Before we move on to consider exactly *how* we bear God’s image in the world, I want us to pause and think about the dignity bestowed upon each and every human as a person made in the image of God.

We are so used to looking around the room and judging one another by the clothes we wear, or the colour of our skin, or the shape of our bodies, or a hundred other criteria. We judge one another and assign value or worth based on whatever measures matter the most to us.

To look at others like this is to reject the innate value that each and every person has *purely* by virtue of their createdness in the image of God.

I've said before that I've spent some time in a little African country called Rwanda. Most of us know Rwanda because of the genocide in 1994. 1 million Rwandans were killed in the space of 100 days, 10% of their population murdered because of tribal factionalism. One of the precursors to the genocide was a propaganda campaign that described the members of minority tribe as 'cockroaches.' And this became the way they were known in the leadup to the genocide. "Those people are cockroaches. They are not even human. And that's why they deserve to be killed. You don't need to feel remorse. They are cockroaches."

It's horrible isn't it. I've sat with Rwandans who remember that systematic dehumanization firsthand.

Here in the USA, it's much more subtle, the way we do the same (sort of) thing...

Every time we look down on another human, we are rejecting the truth that they have been created in the image of God, just like we have been. We do it in so many ways, it's almost reflex.

Martin Luther King Jr said:

The whole concept of the "image of God" is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. . . . And this gives [man] a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this. . . there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.

[And woman, I'll just add.]

If we take the image of God seriously in ourselves, then we need to see the image of God in those around us.

That's my first big take-home today. In a polarized world, let's remember that every one of our opponents, everyone who threatens us, everyone who we see as below us, (or more dignified than us) – in God's eyes, they are all image-bearers, all created with equal dignity, equal value, equal worth. And we ought to see them the same.

Sometimes we have the opposite problem. We struggle to see ourselves as someone who is valuable, even to God. There are so many ways that this world robs us of our dignity, so many ways that other people rob us of dignity and value and worth, based on the factors I mentioned before – our role in society, our socio-economic status, our body type, our skin colour, our age, our failures. If that's you, hear the word of the Lord. You are created in his image. You are special in his eyes. And nothing can change that.

That's point one – the **dignity** of being made in God's image.

2. Representation

The second big idea about being made in God's image is that as his image-bearers, we represent God.

In the Ancient Near East, when a king or an emperor conquered new territories, he would set up statues in those places to represent his rule over that area, his dominion. People would look up at the statues, and remember who was in charge.

When God creates humanity in his image, he's saying that humanity is designed like those statues – designed to point to the rule and dominion of God over creation. I said it before – humans are the only creature that discloses something to the world about what God is like, because humans are the only creatures who display the image of God to the world.

I think that makes us a bit like brand ambassadors for God. Where I grew up, in high school, we had prefects. I think some private schools here have prefects. Anyway, the prefects are Seniors who are given a position of leadership within the student body. You might think of them as glorified hall monitors, but it was more than that.

Essentially Prefects are elected as brand ambassadors for the school. If you want to know the image and values of a school, and the kind of students it aims to produce, you look at the prefects. The Prefects were the ones who always wore their uniforms correctly, and would issue prefect detentions if they saw you without a tie, or with your shirt untucked. The prefects were the ones who escorted prospective parents on school tours. They were the brand ambassadors for the school.

If you want to know the image and values of an organization, you look to their brand ambassadors. And so it should be with humanity. At creation, humanity resented the image and values of God in the world.

Now I realize the analogy breaks down because brand ambassadors aren't always up to scratch, and we'll get to that when we look into the Fall in Genesis 3 in a few weeks.

But at creation, humanity represents God in a unique way out of all the creatures. And unlike statues, God gives humans the mandate to act in the world on his behalf, to rule over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26)

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may **rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

God give humans the mandate to rule over creation, in the likeness of the way that God himself would rule over creation. Our ruling should represent the way that God would do it.

How would God rule? If we just stick to these chapters, God rules over creation in a way that promotes order. And flourishing. And life. God's rule is a blessing to all the creatures of the earth, not just humans – we saw that God blessed all the other creatures back in Gen 1:22, even before the creation of mankind.

As we see this picture of what it means to be made in the image of God, and to share in his rule over creation, we see what a privilege it is to represent the creator. Our rule over this earth should image God's goodness, his tender creativeness, his nurturing provision.

This is a mandate for creation care, not a licence to abuse and exploit and pollute the earth's resources.

That's one realm where, as Christians, we represent God to the world, in the way that we care for creation.

But of course, as God's people, we represent God wherever we find ourselves in the world. And so as we 'rule' over whatever God has given us to rule over, we want to do that in a way that represents the image and values of the one in whose image we are made.

In some ways we are like God's prefects in the world. People watch as we go about our lives, as we work in offices or hospitals or schools, as we spend time in community groups or with our neighbours. People watch as we do our grocery shopping, as we film church services, as we take the trash out. All these little moments are part of how God's people represent God to this world. And the way we live in the world can actually disclose something of God to the people watching... for good, or for ill.

That brings with it a responsibility, and Jesus said: *from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded...* (Luke 12:48)

That's the second big idea. Humanity made in the image of God represents God to the rest of creation.

But what happens when that image is tarnished?

And that brings me to my final point: recreation.

3. Recreation

Genesis 1 and 2 sees humanity born into creation, with great expectations, created in the image of God to be his representative and agent in the world. And then we read Genesis 3 – the story of Adam and Eve, sin and the fall... And humanity's reputation is tarnished.

What happens to the image of God in us at the Fall?

As we read these foundational chapters of the Bible, we'll see that humanity wasn't able to live up to the high expectations of living as image bearers of God. Whether you're a Bible scholar or not, you know that humans don't go through life like perfect, godly statues in the mould of God. We all know that people are messed up.

And that's because at the fall, sin messed up some aspects of the image of God in us.

Being made in the image of God implies having a special relationship with God – and we see that in these early chapters before the fall. In our passage today (1v28) God would speak to Adam and Eve, presumably like I'm speaking to you now, or like if you were here in the room anyway. In Genesis 2, we see God bringing Eve to Adam like a father gives away his daughter in a wedding. In Genesis 3, we see God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, presumably coming to visit with Adam and Eve. God created humans to have a special relationship with himself.

Being made in the image of God also conveys sonship. The New Testament describes Adam as a son of God (Luke 3:38), just like Seth is the son of Adam, in his own likeness and in his own image.

At the Fall, that relational closeness is between humanity and God changes, and the break in relationship is symbolized by God sending Adam and Eve out of the garden. That relationship is ruined.

Rule is also ruined, or complicated at least. We'll see when we get to Genesis 3 that our relationship with creation becomes marked by difficulty, and toil, the orderliness of creation becomes marked by thorns and thistles, and the fruitfulness of chapter 1 is replaced by complications with reproduction.

The idea of representation is also tarnished at the Fall. Humans no longer faithfully represent God to the world, instead representing their own interests and purposes and priorities.

We have to wait until Genesis 12 for God to raise up a new man, whose family will be God's chosen people and special possession, through whom God will bring blessing to the world once again, and from whose offspring God will raise up a new representative, another one made in the very likeness of God, one whose rule will never end...

And of course that plan finds its fulfilment not just in Abraham, and David, but ultimately in Jesus.

Because it's in Jesus that we see the image of God completely and perfectly lived out, the firstborn over creation that Adam could never be:

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. (Col 1:15)

³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:3)

Jesus is the perfect human. The perfect image of God. The true Son of God. And the only one who can restore the image of God in us, if we allow him to recreate our lives.

Because that is the good news of the story of the Bible. God's intentions for us are still good, like they were at creation. Despite our sin, God still sees us as his image bearers, and longs for us to have that image recreated in us, to see the tarnish of sin wiped away, and to see us live according to the purposes that He had for us at creation. God is in the business of bringing order back to our lives, reshaping the clay of our bad decisions, restoring us to flourishing and blessing, when we realign our lives towards Jesus. That's the reason Jesus endured the shame of the cross for us.

John Calvin, the famous reformer, said:

"the face of Christ, dishonoured by spitting and blows, has restored to us that image which had been disfigured, and almost effaced, by sin."

PAUSE

Brothers and sisters, the doctrine of the image of God is one of the wonders of the Biblical message. The idea that the God of creation would bestow that honour upon us, that dignity, that responsibility. And that he desires to restore us to that image despite our failings, if only we trust in him... It makes the mind boggle, doesn't it!

But that is what God says about us, as his creatures, made in his image, in his likeness.

Shall we pray?

Further Prayers by Joanna Bidwell

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler of the works of your hands, you put everything under his feet. O lord, our Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth.

With grateful hearts we thank you, Lord, for creation. Thank you for making each person unique and special, made in your image. We pray that we take our role as rulers and custodians over your creation seriously and to care for it well.

Father, we pray that you would use this new sermon and bible study series in Genesis to confirm in our hearts and minds your truths, to give friends, family and neighbors of our church family a way to start at the beginning of the gospel story and to lead people to faith in your son.

Father, we pray for our country. We pray for wisdom for all of those in authority, in our County, in our State and our President and his government. They are your servants Lord and given their full time to governing. Help all those in authority to be respectful and to do their jobs well.

To the only wise God be glory forever, through Jesus Christ, Amen