

“The Image of God and Human Dignity” – Genesis 1:26-31

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and meet me in Genesis 1...

Today we are going to examine the same passage that we considered last week, but tease out some of the implications of what we learned last week. Our focus last Sunday was on the fact that humanity was created in the image of God and how this is foundational for our understanding of our identity. We saw that despite the fall into sin and its effect on the human condition, the Bible affirms that we are still a people in the image of God and after his likeness (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). And once we recognize this truth it shapes how we treat others and engage in the issues that mark our day. I'd like to illustrate that today, though, admittedly, we can merely scratch the surface. But at the very least I hope this will stimulate your thinking and encourage you to consider how the *imago Dei* (i.e., God's image) relates to the various crises we face as individuals and as a society.

To that end, let's read the text. Follow along as I do, beginning in verse 26. This is God's Word...

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’²⁹ And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:26-31)

Last Sunday we saw that being created in “*the image of God*” it means that we are in some sense “like God and represent God.”¹ The various views of what that likeness could entail, we've considered, so I encourage you to look online to review that sermon if you missed it. How we represent God in this world is something that we will consider more in the days ahead, in particular when we see how Adam, the first man, failed to do this well, anticipating our own failure. But today I simply want to remind us that the teaching of this text—that human beings are made in the image of God—implies that every person you encounter in this world is someone who has dignity and that, therefore, we have a responsibility to recognize it and treat them accordingly. Sin, of course, wreaks havoc on the human condition. We can't ignore that. But even still, being created in the image of God matters. Always.

So then what are some of the implications of recognizing that humanity has been created in the image of God? What difference does it make to know that every person you encounter in life possesses the divine image? One of my favorite resources that explores the difference this biblical truth makes in our setting is called *The Dignity Revolution*, by Daniel Darling. In it he asks the reader to consider what would happen “if God's people began to lead a new, quiet revolution whose foundation was a simple premise: every human being—no matter who they are, no matter where they are, no matter what they have done or have had done to them—possesses dignity, because every human being is created in the image of God.”²

If you think back to the historical blemishes of our past, were they not transgressions that flowed from a neglect of this doctrine of the *imago Dei*? When this aspect of our humanity is forgotten, certain groups, over time, begin to be seen as sub-human. Our rhetoric begins to change. Our depictions of those people rob them of dignity. And when left unchecked this can reach a boiling point like that experienced by the Jews under the Third Reich or Native Americans at the hand of certain colonizers. “This same bent toward dehumanizing people enabled Americans to participate in the trafficking, selling, and ownership of black slaves during much of the history of the US, and even enshrine this sinful concept of sub-humanity into law with a compromise which saw African Americans counted as three-fifths of a human.” And this is why Martin Luther King Jr., when marching for civil rights, “famously declared, ‘I am a man’—because he recognized that the question of humanity lay at the heart of the issue of civil rights and indeed of racism itself.”³

We might think that we have progressed beyond the point of such mistakes, but the more I study history the more I’m not so sure. Those atrocities of the past did not spring up overnight. There was a progression. There was an increasing tolerance for dehumanizing rhetoric that over time desensitizes a people to the point where such tragic displays of our depravity can grow. Do you remember when Jesus declared things like,

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:21-22)

Similarly, Jesus warned,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-29)

What was Jesus trying to show us? Among other things, these teaching help us understand that the sin that stands behind murder can be found in seed form in our sins of anger and insult. And the seedling of lust is absolutely related to the sin of adultery. There is a relationship, a trajectory, between the sins our society deems as more acceptable (like anger and lust) and the more heinous sins (like murder and adultery). So Jesus calls for swift and severe action. Leave your gift at the altar—put your worship on hold—and seek reconciliation with the one you have angered. Gouge out your eye and cut away the hand that leads you to entertain your lusts. Hyperbole? Yes. But hyperbole is used to make a point. And the point in these cases is that the acceptable sin—the seedlings of anger and lust—must be regarded as serious because, if left unchecked, they will blossom into poisonous bud.

So it’s troubling to me when I hear the dehumanizing rhetoric that tends to mark the political landscape of our day, especially in seasons like this where elections are on the horizon? When politicians do rhetorical gymnastics to avoid referring to the one developing in the womb of a pregnant mother as a child, but prefer the language of “fetus,” as though the impersonal talk of cells and tissues erases humanity, then it has a desensitizing effect on us. It paves the way for abortion on demand—and the loss of life on a scale that vastly exceeds any conflict or genocide in the history of the world—and yet those numbers don’t even make people blush. Or when others describe immigrants as “riff raff” or “illegals”—but never “people”—what affect does that have on us over time? What might it lead to? “But, pastor, they are illegals.” Indeed, in many cases they are—they have broken the law of the land, and that is not right—but fundamentally that’s not *who* they are. The child in the womb, at a certain stage of development, may accurately be described as a “fetus” too, but fundamentally that’s not *who* he or she is. In each case we are dealing with human beings—created in the image of God—who regardless of their decisions or the decisions of others should be afforded dignity in accordance with the One in whose image they were made. “When we don’t see people there, we start to free our

consciences to accept or commit violence and death against our fellow humans.”⁴ When our shared humanity is suppressed, consequences are sure to follow. History proves the rule.

And sometimes we can even land on the correct side of an issue but arrive there through dangerous and subtle means. I remember hearing a speaker share his testimony when I was a new Christian. His story was quite moving, but it began with the tragically when his mother, at the age of 17, was sexually abused. Despite the advice of people around her, she carried the pregnancy to term. The child born was this man.⁵ He was a very gifted speaker, a vocational evangelist, on a youth camp circuit, and it was quite clear that the Lord was moving powerfully through his ministry. He emphasized that God has a plan for every life, even those that are born out of tragic circumstances.

Though his testimony was a beautiful story of redemption—and one that God has used to save many lives, both from the clutches of hell and the instruments of abortion—my initial takeaway from his passionate account was actually quite dangerous. This was owing to my own fallen reasoning, not anything he has said or encouraged. But I walked away thinking (and in the days following saying), “See, abortion is bad because you never know who that child may grow up to become. He could be a gifted evangelist like this man or the person who cures cancer.” But such reasoning is laced with poison. What if the child had grown up to be very average? What if they were born disabled? What if they had a condition that reduced their mental capacity? Then the argument breaks down. But, you see, that’s not the biblical argument. The biblical argument is that the value of a person is not a consequence of their ability in life or utility in society, but is instead a consequence of their being made in God’s image. You see the difference? So you have never met a person who doesn’t have value because you have never met a person who was not an image-bearer. You’ve never met a person who was created without a purpose. “There are no exceptions, no asterisks, placed against the truth than man is made in God’s image and that this is where we derive our value.”⁶ And this fact, brothers and sisters—the doctrine of the *imago Dei*—affords the church the resources necessary to speak meaningfully into the various issues that occupy the thoughts and minds of people in the world around us.

For example, the church should be a place where not a hint of racism is tolerated because we understand that all people—regardless of ethnicity—share God’s image and so, not surprisingly, are welcomed into God’s kingdom, which will consist of a “*ransomed people...from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev. 5:9-10; cf. 7:9). Indeed, the Apostle Paul notes that the ingathering of the nations into God’s people “was a feature, not a bug, of the gospel” of Jesus Christ:⁷

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:14-22)

If Christ has torn down the dividing wall of hostility, then why would His people ever want to reconstruct them? We should not. And we should, as we have been commissioned, share the good news that anyone—calling them to repentance and faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. He is God the Son, who took on our humanity that He might live a life of perfect obedience, substitute Himself in death for the disobedient, and be raised on the third day for the victory of His people. He forgives our sin and grants us into His people, God’s Kingdom, when we trust in Him alone to save. He would do that for you today. He’s the Savior. And the earlier church bore witness to the fact that no other power on earth can bring people together as one than the blood of Jesus. “We must believe

that if the fledgling movement led by a resurrected itinerant Middle Eastern rabbi could unite Jew and Gentile in the first century, it can unite those divided by racism, suspicion, and hurt in the 21st.”⁸

Because Christians believe that people are created in the image of God, we are people who should champion the cause of justice. The victims of crime have dignity, which is why those who break the law should receive the due penalty. This is the logic we find in Genesis, as when Noah disembarked from the ark and was told, “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image*” (Gen. 9:6). The point is that the punishment that falls upon those who harm image-bearers demonstrates that the value of those created in God’s image. Indeed, as Darling writes,

“[P]enal justice actually [shows] dignity to the perpetrator, by treating them as a human, accountable for their actions. Penal justice says to the law-breaker that they are a real person, not just the sum of their circumstances and their synapses—and that their real choice has consequences, because they are a human and not an automaton.”⁹

Yet, related to this, we also are a people who care about the equal application of the law, with just sentencing for all. Because we believe that all humans—even lawbreakers—have dignity as image-bearers, we should, like the prophets of the Old Testament, do what we can to reform inequalities of imperfect justice systems that characterize a fallen world (Cf. Amos and Micah). We should encourage systems that are both penal and restorative, that recognize the dignity of victims and perpetrators, and that have outcomes predicated on crimes not one’s ability to afford representation.

And it is because we value those created in the image of God that we are against atrocities like human trafficking. We are not willing to turn a blind eye to the 21 million trafficked image-bearers around the world, 68% of which are subjected to forced labor, 28% of which are children, 55% of which are women and young girls. It’s a \$150 billion dollar industry worldwide.¹⁰ Because we believe these victims are created in the image of God, we care about how these atrocities plague our world, and even our own community. And because the exploitation of these image-bearers is unacceptable, Christians should be those who make war on our lusts—including those internet lusts—since those clicks fuel the industry.

Because we believe that all people are created in God’s image we should not conform to the values of the world that places a premium on youth, attractiveness, and activity, all of which, in the eyes of the world, can diminish with age. But age does not diminish the image of God in us. “There is no season of life that erases the image of God in humans.”¹¹ As we age our bodies may give way, we cannot do the things we once did, and the world may celebrate us the way it once did, but that doesn’t mean our lives are without value and purpose. Proverbs says, “*The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair*” (Prov. 20:29). I appreciate what Darlings writes on this:

“For the Christian, age brings experience, and experience buys wisdom, and wisdom needs a hearing. Even infirmity brings opportunities. No longer dynamic and independent, we can learn a fresh dependence on others, and supremely upon Christ. And those around the older generation can learn to serve them, sacrificing their own comforts and time to give to another. That is also a step close to the way we were created to exist.”¹²

These are all examples of how a recognition of the image of God in people allows us to see dignity where the world overlooks it. And we have only scratched the surface of how this doctrine can shape our actions and outlooks in the world. How might this doctrine shape our view of our use of technology, people suffering in poverty, the way we speak of political opponents, sexuality, employment, and so on? No single sermon could explore such things, but our understanding of the image of God should impact our views on all of these issues and more.

But I am grateful to be in a church where we have so many examples of people who model what it looks like to treat people with dignity that the image of God calls for. I think of Denny Burk, who regularly visits shut-ins and people residing in nursing homes, modeling the love of Christ to a people the world is prone to forget. Or Ferna Mills, who has dedicated countless hours knitting together and training others how to create mats and pillows from discarded grocery bags so that the homeless in our community can have a place to rest their heads at night. Or Mary Campbell, who for so long has been involved in ministering to incarcerated women, treating them with dignity and sharing with them the hope of the Gospel. Or Stacy Glenn, who has shared the hope of the Gospel with so many who find themselves in the bondage of addictions. Or Luke Youngblood, a young man in our church, who has served youth in our community through the ministries of the Mentoring Alliance. Or Kendall Heenehan and Miles Morrison, who are actively involved in ministry that combats the expansion of human trafficking and caring for those who have been exploited through it. Many of you in this room, who actively caring for loved ones that they might live out their remaining days with dignity and grace. And there are so many others among us, who in their own ways, treat their fellow image-bearers with dignity and worth. They lead us, by example, in living out a “kingdom ethics of dignity and service within our own hearts—so that we see others as made in God’s image, and so serve others because we wish to cultivate their humanity and promote their dignity rather than because we wish to cultivate our ambition and promote our reputation.”¹³

Some of you get this. But you’re tired. You are pouring yourselves out. And you’re exhausted. Others of you are called to do so, but you are afraid to because of what it might cost you, because it feels like risk. I get it. I felt both of those things at different points. I think the counsel of Russell Moore, given at the 2018 Evangelicals for Life conference, is a helpful reminder:

“The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us: you give up your life in order to save it. Caring for women in crisis is worth it. Caring for unborn children is worth it. Caring for orphaned little boys and little girls and those who are ping-pong back and forth in foster care is worth it. Caring for the elderly is worth it. Caring for the mentally disabled is worth it. Caring for the poor is worth it. Caring for the diseased is worth it. And in all of those cases, it’s difficult. You have to sacrifice your life in order to do it. And as you’re sacrificing your life, as you’re pouring out your time and your energy, and all sorts of things you want to protect and you don’t want to risk, the weakness that you feel is not a sign that you should give up. The weakness that you feel is not a sign that you have lost power. The weakness is where the power is. ‘We have this treasure in jars of clay.’ We are not waiting for an armada of experts to stand up for a culture of life, to stand up for the vulnerable. God never works that way. God works through the slow, small, often seemingly invisible efforts of yeast, of mustard seeds, that grow into something huge and powerful, but do so in ways that are often imperceptible to the values of this world. The weakness is the power.”¹⁴

So where should we start? Right here. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love one another. Think about those people God has surrounded you with in the local church and apply those one another passages. It’s easy to get stirred to compassion by pictures on social media or the cause of the moment trending on twitter. But the world doesn’t need more virtue signalers. It needs God’s people to love people—even Samaritans and Prodigals—as Christ has loved them. It needs people who value the image of God in others and seeing people be conformed to the image of Christ, God’s purpose for our lives. It needs the church to be the church, a place where all sinners are welcomed to cross of Christ because we have rejected “the tribalizing ethos of the culture around us.”¹⁵ As Darling writes, “A church that moves toward the vulnerable, using its power and influence on behalf of those who have seen their dignity ignored or denied, becomes a powerful witness to the nature and reality of the kingdom of God.”¹⁶

Of course, none of this means we ignore sin and the call to repentance. Far from it. We tell the truth. We tell the truth about what is right and wrong. We tell the truth about God’s judgment. We tell the truth about the blood of Jesus can wash away any sin. But that means we have to tell the truth about sin.¹⁷ We recognize that sin harms those who created in God’s image—both victims and perpetrators. So we should encourage one another to mortify sin and have our minds renewed by God’s Word. That will often put us into conflict with societal norms

and trends—not by choice, but by necessity. Yet because we love God and those made in His image, we must stand on the truth, despite the cost to our own selves and reputations. Even this passage that affirms that we have been created in God’s image, also has clear implications for matters that our society is growing increasingly confused on.

For example, how does the teaching of Genesis 1:26-31 inform a proper understanding on the topic of gender? We should talk about that. And next week we will. I recognize that such topics can be quite sensitive, so parents please use your discretion. Don’t skip next week, but know that we will have a children’s church option available in the second service next week. These are tricky subjects I know, and the Bible speaks to them, but I still wanted you all to have a head’s up. To be continued...

Let’s pray...

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 235.

² Daniel Darling, *The Dignity Revolution: Reclaiming God’s Rich Vision for Humanity* (The Good Book Company, 2018), 16. Much of the following is influenced by Darling’s reflections in this book, which is a thought-provoking book I wholeheartedly recommend for consideration.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵ If I’m not mistaken, that speaker was Ronnie Hall, whose testimony has been recorded here: <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/first-person-i-was-the-product-of-a-rape/>.

⁶ Darling, *The Dignity Revolution*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ Statistics drawn from *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121. “The truth is that even those who reject euthanasia are often unwitting evangelists for its arguments. When we prioritize youth and attractiveness and marginalize the elderly, we are communicating a message far different than the Christian gospel.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴ Russell Moore, “Image of God and Human Dignity,” accessed online at <https://vimeo.com/252596794>.

¹⁵ Darling, *The Dignity Revolution*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ Moore, “Image of God and Human Dignity.”