

Week 35

Contemporary Issues: What Does It Mean to be Made in the Image of God?

Key Verses

Genesis 1:26-28 Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls 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 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

+ Introduction

I have a distinct memory of being a child and coming across the comedy movie *Major League* when flipping through television channels. If my parents knew I watched this movie about below-average Major League baseball players and their hijinks, they would not have approved. But I vividly remember a scene that both made me laugh and made me afraid at the same time. One of the characters, Pedro Cerrano, is a giant man who lives to hit 500-foot home-run bombs. While in the locker room, one of the other players sees that Pedro has a small display of a deformed-looking figurine of a human smoking a cigarette in his locker. Pedro explains that his baseball bat is "sick," and it leaves him unable to hit a curveball, even though he can hit a fastball to the moon and back. Pedro says that this small figurine idol, which he calls Jobu, will heal his baseball bat and help him hit the curveball. Obviously, this is a silly story of a huge man thinking that a tiny figurine will help him fix his baseball bat and let him hit off-speed pitches. But I remember feeling that there was something **very real** and **very wrong** about the worshiping of this tiny idol. The idea of the small idol representing a potentially evil supernatural force behind it felt like something that could really happen.

The truth is that the worship of idols and images has been around for as long as humans have existed. In the ancient world, people worshipped a plethora of gods. One of the most common ways for people to worship the gods was to have small or large figurines of a particular god, very similar to Pedro Cerrano's Jobu figurine. The statue or figurine was believed to represent the 'image' of the god, so worshipping the statue would also be an act of worshipping that god.

The people groups surrounding the Israelites had many 'images' of their gods among them, and they would worship these images. They did not believe that these small statues were the gods themselves but that they did contain some of the "essence" of the god. In other words, "An idol image of a deity ... was used in worship because it contained the deity's essence. This does not suggest that the image could do what the deity did or that it looked the same as the deity. Rather, the deity's work was thought to be accomplished through the idol."¹

One of the most significant and explosive truths to come from God's Word is the revelation that humans are made in the image of God. The idea that humans themselves were made in the image of God was completely foreign to the ancient world outside of the Israelites. This set Israel apart from the rest of the world, and it set the table for a culture where Jesus could eventually come and show us the true example of a human living out and embodying God's image. The understanding that mankind, made male and female, can reflect the nature of God and accomplish His work in the world is vital to a biblical worldview.

Humans have been endowed with God's image, and there are privileges, joys, and responsibilities associated with that blessing. What it means to be made in God's image is mysterious and difficult to grasp, but some key features of being an image-bearer are important for us to grasp and accept.

In this lesson, we will spend time exploring three elements of what it looks like to reflect God's nature in God's world.

+ We Can Reflect God's Nature in Our Choices

GENESIS 2:15-17 *Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and tend it.¹⁶ The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may freely eat;¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will certainly die."*

After God created mankind in His image, as the pinnacle of the created order, He placed man in the Garden of Eden. We see two key features of what God expected from Adam and Eve in the verses above.

First, He gave man the privilege and responsibility of tending to all of God's creation. Being God's representatives in the world, humans are made to work, build, maintain, and grow God's creation. Genesis 1 tells us that God gave the command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth and subduing it as they were designed to do. Notice that work came before the fall. Work was not a punishment; it was a privilege. Getting our hands dirty in the soil, planting seeds, and nurturing something is a responsibility given to us who are created in the image of God.

Second, He said that they could enjoy the fruit of any tree from the garden except one, and He gave them a choice whether to obey that command or reject it. One of the key things that sets humans apart from the rest of creation is our ability to make moral decisions. We understand what is right and what is wrong and what is good versus what is evil. The only moral choice Adam and Eve had to make was whether or not to obey God regarding the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We may have a wider variety of moral choices to make than Adam and Eve did, but we ultimately must make the same decision: will we obey God, or will we rebel against Him. Part of what it means to be made in God's image is to make conscious choices of what we are going to do with our lives and think about why we are making those choices.

To fully live out and embody God's image, we must learn to make the same moral judgments and have the same priorities as God does. Of course, this is difficult for us because our moral judgment is confused with sin in our lives (which came to all humanity based on Genesis 3). But as we come to be more and more like Christ, we learn to make decisions in line with His character, and we find ourselves living out God's image in new and beautiful ways.

+ We Can Reflect God's Nature in Our Relationships

PSALM 36:5-9 *Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.*

⁶ *Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;*

Your judgments are like a great deep.

O Lord, You preserve man and beast.

⁷ *How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!*

And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.

⁸ *They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house;*

And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights.

⁹ *For with You is the fountain of life;*

In Your light we see light.

JOHN 17:20-24 *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one –²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world*

A key element of God's character revealed in the Bible is that He is a relational God. He freely exists in and experiences relationships, first within Himself, and also with His creation. We believe that God is one, but that He is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three members of

the Trinity were present together before the foundations of the world, we see all three of them at the same time at the baptism of Jesus, and we see them interacting with each other in different moments of Scripture. Jesus speaks with the Father about their love for one another, and for His desire that His people love each other in the same way that the Son and the Father love each other.

Notice the way Psalm 36 describes God in relational terms with humans and the rest of His creation. The Psalmist highlights that God loves people, that He provides for them, and loves to bring joy to them. God desires that humans know Him and that they would desire Him and take delight in Him. Likewise, when we see Jesus talking to God the Father in John chapter 17, He talks about His love for those who follow Him. He says that He desires for His people to be united with Him and each other in the same way that He and the Father are One. In His Word, and most importantly in Jesus, God has revealed Himself to be a God who loves and thrives in relationships.

If we are made in God's image, then we too are made to experience and seek healthy relationships. God experiences perfect mutual love in Himself, so we are most alive when we are experiencing relationships. First of all, we reflect God's image when we are walking in relationship with Him. The most important relationship for us to cultivate is our relationship with our Creator, and the One who holds us together. God knows us intimately in ways that we could never understand, and He wants us to know Him as well.

PSALM 139:13-16 *For you created my inmost being;*

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;*

your works are wonderful,

I know that full well.

¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you*

when I was made in the secret place,

when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ *Your eyes saw my unformed body;*

all the days ordained for me were written in your book

before one of them came to be.

In addition to this, we reflect God's image in the world when we cultivate healthy relationships with others. Marriages built on self-giving love and sacrifice, friendships built on mutual love and reciprocal affection, families that are knit together with unconditional love—these things reflect God's image in the world. If you want to live out God's image and experience meaning and purpose, then you must form healthy relationships.

Is there a relationship in your life that is not healthy right now? Is there an area of your marriage or family where you are not living out God's image of self-giving, relational love? God has given examples throughout Scripture about relationships of all kinds, whether it deals with friends, family, spouses, in-laws, or people in authority. Prayerfully consider how you are reflecting the image of God in all of your relationships.

✦ We Are Made in His Image; Male and Female

Here we come to the most controversial component of God's image, at least by our current societal standards. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that humans are created in the image of God male and female. Genesis 1 gives us a list of things that God created on each day of creation in complementary pairs. It looks like this:

Day 1: Light and Darkness, Day and Night (1:3-5)

Day 2: Waters Above and Waters Below (1:6-8)

Day 3: Land and Sea, Plants with Seeds and Plants with fruit-bearing seed (1:9-13)

Day 4: Sun and Moon (1:14-19)

Day 5: Sea Creatures and Birds (1:20-23)

Day 6: Animals and Humans, Male and Female (1:24-28)

The entirety of Genesis 1 sets up the idea of complementarity – parts of creation that are different but still linked together. The pinnacle of this complementarity is the difference between male and female. God creates Adam first but then says that it is not good for man to be alone. From the beginning, God designed men and women to be different for each other and made for each other. Men and women equally bear the image of God, and one is not better or more important than the other. Yet, there is no denying the obvious differences between men and women. We differ biologically, we generally differ in the way we see the world, but we are made to be linked together.

GENESIS 2:23-24 *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

Adam immediately realized that this woman was linked to him in the most intimate of ways and that they were made for each other. The biological differences, and the union of man and woman together in marriage, give us perhaps the most powerful clue to the mystery of living out God's image. Whether you are a man or a woman, you bear a unique part of God's image that is beautifully displayed when you come together as one with your marriage partner.

Right now, in the culture of our world, the complementarity of men and women is often viewed as a dangerous and oppressive idea. There is a significant movement to deny the obvious differences between men and women and to pit each group against each other. Beyond this, almost every major western institution is now moving closer to denying the biological reality of what it means to be a man or a woman. The dominant cultural narrative is now that your biology is not determinative of whether you are a man or a woman.

The Bible and nature itself contradict this, as our biological sex clearly defines whether each one of us is a man or a woman. Of course, some people feel like their gender does not correspond with the reality of their bodies. We should feel deep compassion and love for people who are living in

this reality. But the way we feel about our bodies does not define the reality of our bodies. God has created us in the bodies we have for a reason, and to deny the biological reality of our bodies is also to deny a piece of the image of God that we bear within us. Nancy Pearcey's book *Love Thy Body* is one of the best resources to learn about transgender issues, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, pornography, and other questions about the body.²

+ Conclusion

There is undeniably some mystery in the idea that we are made in God's image. Part of the reason it is hard to understand is because God's image has been tarnished by our sin nature. This makes it difficult for us to make appropriate moral decisions; we run into broken and destructive relationships and experience broken and confused bodies.

In spite of this, we were made to reflect God's nature in the world. We can only do this by finding ourselves aligned with God in right relationship with Him. If we submit our hearts, minds, and wills to God, He will slowly chip away at the extra broken layers we have added to ourselves until His nature and image are shining through us.

If you have broken relationships, you can still learn to experience life-giving, healthy relationships. If you have made a series of bad choices and deficient moral judgments, you can still learn to see the world the way that God does. And if your image of your body and your sexuality are broken, you can still learn to conform your image of your body to God's design.

Even when Adam and Eve sinned and disobeyed God, there was ultimate grace and mercy in their repentance as He covered their nakedness and continued to want them to be fruitful and multiply. Throughout Scripture, time and again, God's forgiveness is available for those who believe. As those created in the image of God, let us be quick to do the same.

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¹ Walton, John H. *Genesis. The NIV Application Commentary*. Zondervan, 2001. p. 130.

² Pearcey, Nancy. *Love Thy Body*. 2018, BakerBooks, Grand Rapids.

