

Human Dignity

Special Session

Voices from Church History

“Human nature, created to rule the world because of his resemblance to the universal King, has been made like a living image that participates in the archetype by dignity and by name. He is not clothed in purple, scepter and diadem, for these do not signify his dignity (the archetype himself does not possess them). But in place of purple, he is clothed with virtue, the most royal of garments. Instead of a scepter, he is endowed with blessed immortality. Instead of a royal diadem, he bears the crown of justice, in such a way that everything about him manifests royal dignity, by his exact likeness to the beauty of the archetype.”¹


—Gregory of Nyssa
(circa 331-396)


Introduction

One of the most powerful symbols of the Civil Rights Movement is the iconic image of sanitation workers on protest while holding signs that said, “I Am A Man.” This phrase has historically been a rallying cry against oppression for minorities. These sanitation workers were decrying that many considered them, because of their race, less than human. And they were declaring what God had already said about them, that they were created in the image of God and endowed with full humanity.

Since the fall in the garden of Eden, we have been tempted to see our neighbors as less than human. The Bible describes humankind as having unique dignity and worth, but in every generation, there are assaults on this dignity. Consider the ways our society often labels and treats certain vulnerable groups:

- The unborn
- The poor
- The immigrant
- The elderly
- The disabled

 What other groups would you say are vulnerable to assaults on their human dignity?

 How might these groups be treated as less than human?

The gospel story offers the world a unique vision of human dignity that begins with creation and ends with God’s redeemed people bearing witness to Jesus as the express image of God.

Session Summary

Most of us understand that being created in the image of God means we are special in creation. But have we fully wrestled with this important reality? In this session, we will discover what it means to bear the image of God, why violence against human life is a sin against God, how Christ restores our image-bearing purpose, and how human dignity influences the way we live in the world.

1. Why Human Life Has Unique Dignity (Gen. 1:26-27)

²⁶ *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.*

Each time we hear about violence on the news, we cringe. Each time we experience the tragic loss of life of someone close to us, we mourn. Each time we see images of tragedy overseas, our hearts break. Why is this? Death strikes us differently than any other kind of tragedy because instinctively we know there is something special, unique, and important about human life.

The Bible tells us why we feel this way. We were created, as Genesis informs us, unlike the rest of creation. The Creator spoke the universe into existence (ex. Gen. 1:3), but we are told humans were endowed with special value. Moses, who wrote Genesis, recorded God's words saying that humankind was created in the image of God.

What does it mean to be created *in the image of God*? Theologians have wrestled with this idea for centuries, but we do know this: unlike the plants and the animals, people were created as imagers of their Creator. In the Ancient Near East, it was common for kings to set up images of themselves throughout their kingdom so that their subjects could be reminded of the king's likeness and would remember who held the power and who deserved to be worshiped. The Bible says that God created humans to image Him.

This has much meaning, but at the very least it means these things: First, it means that human life has intrinsic value. There is something of God's imprint on every human soul.

We are told in Genesis 2:7 that while the rest of creation was spoken into existence, human beings were sculpted by God and given the breath of life. David later described each human conception as an intricately crafted process by a loving God (Ps. 139).

Further Commentary

"In Genesis the Creator bestowed special value on humanity...The Lord blessed humanity, assigning man and woman the responsibility to propagate and to rule over the earth (1:26-28). [Ancient Near East] myths explained the purpose of humanity as servants who met the servile interests of the gods. The Bible elevates the person and role of humans who were 'crowned...with glory and honor' (Ps. 8:5), made in the divine image. God prepared the resplendent Garden of Eden for humanity, giving humanity meaningful work and purpose (Gen. 2:8-18). Also, Genesis presents the first humanity as individuals who were the progenitors of the human race."²

—Kenneth Matthews,
HCSB Study Bible

Voices from the Church

"Perhaps then the best definition for the image of God is the ability to relate to God in a personal way. God breathed into man's nostrils, and he became a living soul. God endowed humans with spirit to relate to God who is also Spirit. We can know God, communicate with him, praise him, and serve him...Herein we also find some of the purpose of God's creation—to relate to the Creator. To miss that may be to miss what we were created for (Acts 17:24-28)."³

—Preben Vang
and Terry G. Carter

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

34. Image of God in Humanity

The image of God in humanity is understood as mirroring God's attributes in our nature, actions, and relational capacities. In Jesus, we see the true image of God. He perfectly mirrors God's attributes, fulfills God's will, and enjoys a perfect relationship with the Father. The Bible continues to speak of the image of God in humanity even after our fall into sin, even though our ability to rightly reflect God has been marred.

Further Commentary

"Life is a gift of God, and he is the great defender and preserver of life (Gen. 4:9-12). As such he has the right to put a value on life...The reasons given for capital punishment are not merely to serve as a deterrent to others, or so that the criminal could not commit murder again, or that it is impossible to rehabilitate a murderer, but because in the image of God has God made man. Man has an innate nobility. To murder someone is to extinguish a revelation of God and to display contempt for God who has made mankind with the highest value in all of creation. The senseless killing of animals, while wrong, is not on the same scale as the murder of a human."⁴

—Kenneth O. Gangel and Stephen J. Bramer

Second, bearing God's image means having responsibilities. Humans uniquely are empowered to think, to reason, to create, to love, and to feel. Humans were created to represent God in His unfinished world, to take the raw materials of creation and bring Him glory by creating and filling the earth.

Sadly, the curse of sin has not only diminished our capacity to bear God's image, it has turned us in on one another in ways that violate God's original purpose in creation. We are tempted always either to turn toward God or away from Him.

- How would you explain the "image of God" to someone from a non-Christian background?
- How does the reality of human dignity affect the way you see other people?

2. Why Violence Against Human Life Is Violence Against God (Gen. 9:5-6)

⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

⁶ "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

After the flood, as Noah and his family left the ark and were commissioned by God to fulfill His mandate to subdue the earth and fill it with His glory, God specifically gave them instructions regarding the worth of human life. The taking of innocent life is, in the eyes of the Creator, a violent act not simply against the victim but against God Himself. This is how highly God values human life and why life, at all stages, should be protected and preserved. This post-flood instruction by God tells us that even in a fallen world, even when sin has obscured the full flowering of God's image in humanity, life is still valuable.

Unfortunately, some have taught throughout the centuries that because of sin, the image of God does not apply to some human beings. This teaching has led to the justification of atrocities against the disabled, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations. But here the Bible clearly teaches that human life has value, not because of a perceived value or contribution to society but because each human life has been stamped with God's image, no matter how distorted it may be.

This teaching, unique to the Christian story, has wide-ranging implications for how we see others:

- It means that unborn life in the womb is not simply a clump of cells but is a human life worthy of protection.
- It means that the elderly have value even past the time they can contribute meaningful work to society because their value is assigned not by their ability to perform but by the Creator God.
- It means the poor, the vulnerable, and the stranger are not simply masses of people or obstacles to success but people worth of dignity and respect.

The value God has assigned human beings should cause each of us to stop and think about ways we might unintentionally diminish or attack the image of God in our neighbor. We should ask ourselves questions such as these: *Is there a group of people I'm unwilling to consider as important as myself and my family? Are there ways in which I unintentionally assault the image of God in my neighbor? Are there people groups whose needs I've ignored because I refuse to see their humanity?*

- ❓ What steps do we need to take when we find that we have treated individual persons or an entire people group as less than human?
- ❓ What are our responsibilities when we are witnesses to attacks on the image of God in others?

3. How Christ Restores Our Image-Bearing Purpose (Heb. 1:3)

³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

In his award-winning novels, Dan Silva profiles an Israeli spy who, in his “real job,” works as an art restorer. Silva describes in depth the patient process of restoring classic works of art, such as Michelangelo’s expansive work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Great works of art erode and fade and decay over time and must be refreshed. What’s interesting about this kind of work is that it demands a gifted artist who is intimately familiar with the original.

This always reminds me of the work Jesus does as He sanctifies His people. Ephesians 2:10 describes the redeemed as “God’s masterpiece” (NLT). If you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit is at work slowly, patiently, and productively peeling away the decay upon our souls that the curse has wrought. As we learned above, every human being was created in the image of God and has worth and dignity, regardless of utility, but there is a functional aspect of the image of God that can only be restored in the gospel work of Christ. Jesus restores our image-bearing purpose.

Further Commentary

Christians are divided regarding the issue of capital punishment. Some Christians appeal to Genesis 9 in support of capital punishment. Because this passage precedes the Mosaic law and reaffirms humanity’s image-bearing status, many believe capital punishment should still be applied today. To uphold the value the Bible places on human life, a murderer should face the most severe of punishments. Other Christians have reservations about capital punishment or reject it due to the way it can be unfairly implemented. Both sides appeal to the image of God in humanity to make their case.

Voices from the Church

“As long as we are human we are, by definition, in the image of God. But spiritual likeness—in a single word, love—can be present only where God and man are in fellowship; hence the fall destroyed it, and our redemption recreates and perfects it.”⁵

—Derek Kidner

Further Commentary

“The Son is ‘the exact representation of his being.’ The word rendered ‘representation’ (*charakter*)...originally denoted an instrument used for engraving, and later the impression made by such an instrument. For example, it could refer to the impression made on coins. The word thus speaks of the features of an object or person by which we are able to recognize it for what it is. The imagery may also call to mind the ‘representation’ of a parent one often sees in the face of his or her children. To see the face of the child immediately exhibits the close family relationship. What the Son represents is the ‘being’ of the Father, that is, his essential nature. The phrase ‘representation of his being,’ therefore, closely parallels other New Testament passages that speak of Jesus as the ‘form,’ ‘likeness,’ or ‘image’ of God (e.g., John 1:2; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15). So the Son provides a true and trustworthy picture of the person of the Father.”⁶

—George H. Guthrie

Since Eden, humankind has been turning in on each other, inventing new and different ways to assault the image of God by violence. We lament the tragic reality of our fallen world: the violence, the poverty, the disrespect, and the corruption. We can work and fight against it, but ultimately, we are powerless to resist the work of the enemy. This is why the coming of Jesus is so important. Jesus reversed the curse of sin and death and begins restoring the image-bearing purpose in His people through sanctification. The gospel turns people from doing violence to the image of God in others to loving their neighbors as themselves (see Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39-40).

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, as the God-man, is the perfect image of God, “exact imprint of his nature.” Another Bible translation renders this phrase “the express image of his person” (KJV). Paul declares in Colossians that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

What’s interesting is that while we are created according to or in the image of God to be a mirror or reflection of God, Scripture never describes human beings as *the* image of God. This might seem like theological hair-splitting, something bored seminarians debate about over lunch, but this distinction is very important because only one human being is ever described as being the perfect image of God—Jesus Christ. Paul reminded his readers that it is Christ alone who is the image of God:

- “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).
- “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15).

The biblical writers were careful to insert a preposition when referring to human beings in this manner: Humans are created *in* the image of God. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, *is* the image of God.

This is what makes the Christian vision of human dignity so unique. The Bible makes the case that it was God’s eternal purpose to create humankind to reflect the image of Christ, who is the image of God. Jesus matters because in Jesus we see the fulfillment of what Adam was created to be but failed. Also, Jesus, in His flesh, tells us that our full humanity matters. We are not simply embodied spirits awaiting an idyllic rapture to a cloudy paradise; we are body and soul, holistic beings awaiting our full resurrection and restoration as children of God (Rom. 8:23).

This is why it is so important for us not simply to dwell on the beautiful fact that every human is created in God’s image. We are to direct our worship toward Jesus, who is the image of God and in whose likeness we are being transformed (Rom. 8:29).

Christ not only redeemed us from the power of sin and death that assaults the image of God in us; He not only defeated the curse and is making all things new; He is molding us into His image and transforming us into renewed image-bearers who spread His glory throughout the earth.

❓ What are some ways Jesus treated people as being made in the image of God that we must imitate as we are being transformed into His image?

What do we do with this theology? Here are some real-world implications: *First, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see ourselves.* We were created by God with intricate care. We are loved by God enough that He sent Jesus to redeem, rescue, and restore us. We are not defined by our struggles or sins or preferences, nor are our identities found in what others think of us or our social or economic status. We see ourselves rightly when we see ourselves in Christ alone.

Second, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see our loved ones. Our neighbors, our family, and our friends—these are people created in the image of God. When we respect and love and care for them, we are fulfilling our God-given mandate.

Third, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see our mission in the world. In Christ, we've been restored again to our original image-bearing purpose (Eph. 2:10): our daily work has a new dignity, our existence has a new purpose, and our lives have new meaning. We've been empowered to live on mission in the world.

Instead of turning in on each other, we should look for ways to love our image-bearing neighbors. Instead of ignoring the vulnerable, we should speak up for those who have no voice (Prov. 31:8). We must be motivated to share the gospel with our neighbors. The most loving thing we can do for a fellow image-bearer is share with them the good news that in Christ they can be reconciled to the Creator who created them in His image.

This teaching is exactly why we should not be embarrassed to be Christians but to press the goodness of this gospel story into the brokenness of our world. Christian theology uniquely offers the world a better story than other religions and philosophies and has the only resources to solve its deepest and most vexing problems.

❓ How does the gospel of Jesus Christ answer some of the most pressing problems in our culture today?

Voices from Church History

“Though Adam be here called the image or similitude of God; yet but so as that he was the shadow of a more excellent image. Adam was a type of Christ, who only is ‘the express image’ of his Father’s person, and the likeness of his excellent glory (Heb. 1:3). For those things that were in Adam, were but of a humane, but of a created substance; but those that were in Christ, of the same divine and eternal excellency with the Father.”⁷

—John Bunyan (1628-1688)

Voices from the Church

“The distance [between people and God] is great now, but because God is transforming people into the very image of God in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), that distance will eventually decrease substantially. The basic idea here is that God has a likeness-image, and God has created people with that in view. It is a standard for what God intends humanity ultimately to be.”⁸

—John Kilner

Further Commentary

“Verse 9 mentions both a positive and a negative use of the tongue. The positive use involved praise of God, the highest function of human speech (see Ps. 103:1-5). The negative use involved cursing human beings. Cursing refers to personal verbal abuse, perhaps arising from loss of temper in an argument or debate. It also involves the expression of angry wishes on enemies. It includes speech which is insulting as well as profane. Verse 10 spotlights the inconsistency of this action. We are sinfully inconsistent when we bless God and then curse those made in God’s likeness. When we curse those whom God has made, we are effectively cursing God. He is the object of both expressions. Such a double standard is outrageous: My brethren, this should not be.”⁹

—Thomas D. Lea

4. How Human Dignity Influences the Way We Live in the World (Jas. 3:7-12)

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

I’ll never forget my tour of Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Its dark and narrow corridors take you on a historical journey through the attempted genocide of the Jewish people in Europe in the 1940s. What was most haunting, perhaps, was not the cruel and barbaric ways in which Hitler killed a people he despised but the subtle ways in which his rhetoric slowly dehumanized the Jewish people and convinced entire countries that their neighbors were less than human.

It began by scapegoating wealthy Jewish bankers for Germany’s economic woes. Then it moved to cultural marginalization. The artwork at the time depicted Jewish people as subhuman. Then the Jewish people were ghettoized. Then they were systematically killed. The holocaust didn’t begin with a gas chamber but on the lips of ordinary people and with the pens of artists and writers.

James reminds us of the power of the tongue to offer either life or death, humanizing rhetoric or dehumanizing rhetoric. He says that we are capable of denying dignity to our fellow image-bearers in the way we talk about them.

Consider the ways we do this in our contemporary society. We are tempted to “otherize” people with whom we disagree or whom we see as obstacles to our success. The unborn are referred to as “fetuses” or “clumps of tissue” in ads for abortion services. Immigrants and refugees are “those people who threaten us or our way of life.” We can even do this by applying the simple article “the” to groups of people: “the blacks,” “the poor,” “the Mexicans,” etc. Rhetoric that dehumanizes others is one step toward delegitimizing them in our minds, toward accepting behavior directed at them that we would not invite for ourselves. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Levite and the priest passed by the ailing man on the roadside because they were able to convince themselves that he was less than human (Luke 10:30-32). And so it is with us.

James's words to the church are a sobering warning that sin against our fellow human beings begins in the heart and escapes through our lips. Our words do matter. They have the power to offer either respect toward our fellow image-bearers or hatred, either death or life. This is why Jesus said that hatred in the heart is as sinful as murder. Cain's first assault on the dignity of his brother was not when he killed him; it began when he started to see Abel as less than human, as a mere obstacle to his success (Gen. 4:3-8).

The gospel shows us a radically different way to engage and live in the world. As redeemed image-bearers, we are not only tasked with speaking up for those who have no voice, but we are also commanded to make gospel-shaped arguments. We can be on the "right side" of the issues and yet be employing the dignity-denying rhetoric of the enemy. Instead, here are some simple ways to ask ourselves if we are employing life-giving rhetoric in our public speech: *When we speak to our family members, do we speak to them with the respect due someone created in the image of God? When we engage in arguments with people with whom we disagree, do we listen and learn about their view point and treat them as human beings? When we post our political opinions on social media, do we treat our ideological opponents as people created in the image of God or do we employ the dignity-defying rhetoric of our contemporary culture?*

- ❓ What are some words or phrases we should weed out of our vocabulary in order to be consistent in our worship of God?
- ❓ What are some actions that violate our desire and commitment to reflect the glory of God in the world?

Conclusion

The gospel story teaches us that there are no accidental humans, that each person is created with care and wonder by an artistic God. We are more valued than the animals, than the angelic host, than the plant life. This should inform the way we see the world and should motivate us to speak up for the most vulnerable, who have no voice.

We live in a world where humans are inventing new ways to assault the image of God in each other. But the good news is Christ has broken in and has reversed the curse of sin and death and is calling His redeemed image-bearers to be conformed to His image and to live on mission for Him in the power of His Spirit in the world He created.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Sin turns humans in on each other, committing violent assault on the image of God. Christ, as the express image of God, both defeated the enemy of death and restores His people to their full image-bearing purpose to represent Him in the world.

Voices from Church History

"Nothing bitter should come out of a mouth which has uttered the praise of so great a mystery, nor should the tongue say anything which is unworthy of a holy mouth. Let us keep it pure and not use it to curse. For if those who rail against God will not inherit the kingdom, how much more will this be true of those who curse?"¹⁰

—Andreas (circa 7th century)

Voices from Church History

"If, therefore, you wish truly to honour the image of God, we declare to you what is true, that you should do good to and pay honour and reverence to man, who is made in the image of God; that you minister food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, hospitality to the stranger, and necessary things to the prisoner; and that is what will be regarded as truly bestowed upon God."¹¹

—Clement of Rome (circa 30-100)

Additional Resources

Human Dignity

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Study Material

- “The Story Begins”—Episode 1, Act 1 from *Telling God’s Story* by Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter
- “Being Pro-Life”—Article by Karen Cole; find a link to this article at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

Sermon Podcast

Matt Chandler: “The Sanctity of Human Life”

Find a link to this at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

Tip of the Week

Sanctity of Human Life

On or around Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, many churches choose to stand up publicly against abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, recognizing that all people—regardless of age, gender, race, or social status—have been made in the image of God. Yet some in our churches and groups are struggling because of a past experience in which he or she was the offender and made a choice for abortion or a choice that diminished the dignity of another. Such people need to hear afresh the good news of Jesus Christ that His forgiveness covers all sin for those who repent and believe in Him. He is the ultimate mediator before our God and Father. In Him there is no condemnation for those who believe (Rom. 8:1).

The Gospel Project®
Adult Leader Guide ESV
Volume 5, Number 2 Winter 2016-17

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Printed in the United States of America

The Gospel Project®: *Adult Leader Guide* ESV
(ISSN 2330-9377; Item 005573550) is published
quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources, One
LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234, Thom S. Rainer,
President. © 2016 LifeWay Christian Resources.

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