

Made In Gods Image

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Date: 01 December 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn back in our Bibles just now. We'll begin in Genesis 1, but we're going to end at hope in Colossians 3. So we'll begin in Genesis 1, that verse is that we've read verse 27. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created a male and female.

He created them. We'll bow in heaven prayer before we study the word. Heavenly Father, as we bow before you just now in prayer, we thank you that even darkness is not dark to you. We thank you that Jesus is indeed the light of the world who has shone into the darkness.

The darkness is not perceived and cannot overcome it. And so we pray that today would be out of experience that we would not allow ourselves, Lord, and be allowed by your spirit today to remain in darkness, but that we would know the light of Christ, the light of the world shining in our hearts. And that today we would see your word in the full light that you have given to us through your Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This week passed, I'm sure probably most of you, and all of you, it won't have escaped your notice that our Parliament has voted in principle at this stage to allow and introduce assisted suicide into the life of the British public. It's something that we've held at bay for a very long time. Perhaps we've maybe felt over the years that it was coming closer.

There's been a growing swell of movement towards it, culturally, and acceptance of it. And yet we are where we are. My suspicion is that this is part of a long trend in our society. And just the latest sign that the shared worldview of the Bible, an informed, a biblically informed worldview, has gradually been eroded. And what we're seeing is the evidence of that. And one of the key areas where I think that's been seen is in that whole question of human dignity and human worth. Just what makes us precious, what affords us dignity. And very often in our society, that's a transactional thing. It's become that. I was thinking this morning, in fact, of a political slogan that had been used maybe just maybe about 10 years ago, David Cameron. I think maybe you remember when he was going through his Hug a Hoodie phase, one of the phrases that he often used was, give respect to get respect. It was almost as if there's a transactional sense in which human worth and respect is earned and therefore given. But the Bible doesn't teach that. The Bible doesn't teach that human worth and human dignity is at all transactional. It's inherent. All of us ought to have this. And I wanted today to ask really the question, where does that come from? What is the biblical teaching that underpins this that was universally shared in British and Scottish society up until fairly recently? And what's been lost? And what must we stand firm on as Christians today in order to hold fast and understand the age in which we're living? And the answer is this teaching, it's called doctrine of the image of God.

[3 : 44] It's the fact that every one of us as human beings is created bearing the image of God. That's what God sees himself. And Genesis one, that passage we've read, so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. I think it's really helpful as we try to unpack that version, unpack some of what's going on there. It's helpful to think first of all about the idea of idols. It's a strange place to kind of start, isn't it, thinking about idols? But idolatry, the worship of idols and carved images, in particular in the Old Testament world, in the ancient world, in the pagan world, a pre-Christian world. The idea of idols was that there was something that you would go to in a temple, in a place of worship, that there would be some kind of statue or edifice erected there that would say to you, this is the image of your God.

The Israelites very famously did this. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai for all of these days receiving the commandments and the instructions for the Tabernacle and so on, the children of Israel had said to Aaron, where's Moses gone? We want to see our God. We need some kind of reminder of who he is. And so make us an idol so that we can say this is our God. And that's where Aaron had constructed the golden calf and said, this is your God.

Whatever attributes, characteristics of that idol, that was representing God to them. And Aaron felt that maybe the image of that idol conveyed something of God's power or whatever else, I don't know. But all over the world, that's the way human societies have kind of functioned. An idol and something is put up and sees to folk worshipers, this is what your God is like. And so when you went to worship, you would go in and you would maybe make an offering to the idol because you're making an offering to your God. You would wave incense in front of it. You would offer up prayers towards it because the idol represented what your God was. And we know obviously there's one of the Ten Commandments is don't make any idols, don't make any graven images of anything that is in the heavens above or the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth and so on. Don't fall down and worship them because it's not real, because it's not what your God is like. And yet in the very beginning, at the very beginning of the story of God's creation and the foundation of the human race,

God actually tells us about an image. He says, I want them, the pinnacle of my creation, I want them to bear my image. And so when they are going around day to day, they will see an image which will functionally remind them of me, which will say to them, this is what your God is like. And that's a really strange idea for us, isn't it? That today, even in this church, we don't have an idol set up, we don't have an image of God, we don't even have a diagram of the Trinity or trying to explain what the Trinity is. We only have one another. I'm not today wearing a mask pretending to be a representation of God in some way. There isn't an image. There are only other human beings around about us.

And these humans, everyone else who's here today, bear the image of God. And God did that deliberately. There's lots of ways we can think about it. There's a classical way of thinking about it, I suppose, which is to say that as image bearers of God, there are things about us, about our structure, just the very fabric of how we are made that reminds us a little bit of what God is like. So when I think about that, I don't mean the fact that we've got 10 fingers and 10 toes and a nose and ears. It's not to say that God has these things, but as structural characteristics, we have righteousness, or Adam certainly had as defaced, as we'll see, but Adam was made righteous. Adam was holy, he was godly, he was capable of conscious thought. He was able to invent things, he was creative, he could create art. He was created with the ability to write poetry. He was made intelligent.

[8 : 55] He's not portrayed as being the culmination of an incredibly long process of development that culminated ultimately in this excellent form. He was made perfect. And then he's given a function alongside that in that structure, he's given a function. He's created in order to rule over creation in God's place. That's why Sam 8 says that he's created with glory and dignity. Humankind are given incredible attributes and incredible privileges to go alongside that. We display therefore something of the character of God. God who communicates, made creatures in his image, who communicate. God who delights in things, made creatures in his image, who are able to delight in things. God who loves his son and who exists in the community of the Trinity, created human beings who can love one another and who thrive in community together, who establish community in whatever they do. And these are things that make us like God. They make us, they give us an appearance of being like God. And part of that has also been male and female. The fact that we're created in these two sexes that are quite distinct and yet complement one another, that work together to establish family and to bring order into our society. These ideas that were shared in our society in Britain are biblically based, commonly held views that again we're seeing that same process of erosion. But yet we know, not only firstly then, there is that sense that there is an image that God has made and put into every human being that's inherent to us.

And that affords us therefore dignity. Because all of these creatures, all of these beings, everyone that we see is made in the image of God. But along the way something has happened.

Something has gone clearly very, very wrong. It's as if one of the illustrations that's sometimes used to describe this is that a palace that was constructed has been torn down. It's a bit like when you go out and, I don't know if any of you have ever been to Hadrian's Wall. You can walk along it and you can see the foundations of all of the Roman forts and the mile castles and the turrets and the wall itself. You go a little bit back from it and you can see still in the ground the remains of the Roman roads that facilitated the logistics on Hadrian's Wall. It's an incredible piece of engineering. And you can see just an hint of how impressive that structure as a fortification and a frontier and a defence was just from the foundations that have been left. Because everything else has been torn down. The stone has been quarried away for use in other buildings. It's been defaced, it's been wrecked and ruined. But you can tell once it was impressive. We're the same.

You can see even in the most debased human beings hints of what is noble. What is meant to be magnificent. What is meant to be glorious. What is meant to convey the character of our God. What is meant to say to people, our God is worthy of our attention and our worship and our devotion because He has made creatures in His image. And even though that image has been so marred and defaced, God still delights in His image. That's why the Ten Commandments are what they are. The moral law actually at its heart, we tend to mistake this, but at its heart the moral law places human dignity very, very highly. And the reason for that, the reason that we need a day of rest, the reason that we need to respect marriages, the reason that we need to value human life is because the people that that law relates to bear the image of God. They are inherently therefore of their own right in and of themselves worthy of respect and dignity and preservation and protection and honour because of whose image they bear because they are made like God. And so today we look around and we see an image that has been defaced. The sad thing though is that that defacing continues. We see a society more and more, don't we, that's hostile to God. Hostile to God and his own being, that we would reject God and therefore reject His image. And we see that happen today.

Our society today has created a new idol for itself. You no longer in our temples today do we walk into places where idols are set up. We talk about that. We used to talk about that in the church quite often. We used to say, well, people make an idol of money or career or success. People make an idol of sex or drugs. That people can make an idol of love. And that's true. We can put these things into the position of an idol. We will make great sacrifices to pursue some of these things. And we put them and elevate them into the highest place in our lives. That's what sin does. It puts something else in the throne of God. Our society today has done something else. It's taken the image of God in all of its marred brokenness and put that at the top. Held that up and said that broken image is now what we worship before. That broken image is what our God is. Humanity in its fallenness and in its brokenness and its abandonment of God and His ways. That has become our idol.

[15 : 51] And so it's no surprise that we reach a place where human life is no longer valued. We saw it almost 50 years ago with the introduction of abortion in the UK. We're seeing it now with the introduction of assisted suicide. It might only be a few years away from us, maybe even months. But the devaluing of human life continues apace because the inherent dignity of human life made in the image of God is lost. And for us, even as Christians today, we can lose sight of this at times. We can lose sight of it in terms of what we think about, for example, worship. Worship becomes about what we want, what we feel best about, what we look for. Our own autonomy becomes so crucial to us, becomes the most important thing. And yet, into this, this mess of humanity in its fallenness and into that mess of defaced image bearing and false idolatry that is going on, God did not abandon us. I need to think about that today. My favourite phrase in the whole Bible is simply these two words, but God. But God did not leave us with nothing but a defaced version of his image to look at and perceive and see. He did something. He sent Jesus. Paul is really clear on this in his letters. Paul describes Jesus as, among other things, he says, the exact imprint of the nature and character of God. But if today we want a perfect idea of who God is, if we want to hold up an image to see what God is like, then we can certainly not beat Jesus. He is the exact imprint of our God. He shows us exactly what our God is like and the things he does and the statements that he makes and the promises that he gives are what we must therefore hold on to to understand what God thinks about his own image and what therefore God wants for us. He is perfect in showing love. Remember what we're told in the New Testament is God is love. John tells us this. And Jesus, when he's looked at when we stop and assess him, that's what we see. We see the love of God made perfect in the person of Jesus. We see his long suffering. We see him befriending. Isn't it amazing?

He was a friend of sinners. So that's so often the case today when we see terrible things happen. We see that person as a monster. We want to dehumanize them. Murderers and rapists.

And yet Jesus, far from dehumanizing the worst of sinners, befriends them. Doesn't see your sin as meaningless. Doesn't see your guilt as nothing. But he promises them life and hope.

The thief who's crucified with him, today you will be with me in paradise. He brings hope into those whose lives have been so tarnished, whose lives are so marred by the brokenness of sin that looking at it objectively, you might say that person is so lost and so far away from what they should be, so far away from what they could be, so far away from what they ought to be, so far from being images of God. How on earth could they ever find acceptance by Almighty righteous God himself? And God says, no, I have sent my son. And amazingly, if you look at Isaiah 52, Isaiah 53, these passages that talk about the crucified servant, the suffering savior, they tell us that he was marred for our iniquities. They tell us that he was disfigured beyond recognition. It's almost as if he didn't look human anymore.

It's almost as if you're thinking Jesus and what he endured at the cross. He almost becomes unhuman because of what is experienced in the wrath of God poured out upon him for sinners.

[21 : 22] That at the cross, that image is plunged into darkness. That the image of God, you might even say, is almost lost. You almost hear it in the words of Jesus himself, where he feels that relationship has been plunged into such darkness that he doesn't appeal to his father anymore. He says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Even that relationship that is at the core and essence of his being as God the Son, that thing that is crucial to his image of himself, it seems to have been blotted out for these moments of darkness at the cross. He was marred in our place so that we who are the marred disfigured images of God can therefore be restored so that something can be brought back and improved, redeemed, saved. And that's today what we rejoice in is that hope therefore of the future because even though we have defaced the image of God so gravely, God has intervened and what he does in that intervention is he promises a future. He promises redemption. And that passage in Colossians that we were reading this morning, it tells us a little bit about this, that

Paul writes there and says, therefore put on the new self which has been renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator. That today as Christians, that's what we are.

We're being perfected, image-bearers. We're being perfected to show and radiate the image of God more beautifully and more perfectly in this broken world in which we live. And it's been renewed, that process of sanctification, of ongoing renewal that has begun when we come to faith and continues apace until we reach the destination, the glorification that is before us. We're in heaven, I'll say that in inverted commas, because when we die we go to be with Christ and our bodies rest in the graves until the resurrection and the new heavens and the new earth when Christ returns to renew and perfect this world to bring about that complete renewal of everything, then we'll be with Him and that'll be heaven on earth. And so that's our future, this perfect renewal. And the amazing thing is that Jesus there in his prayer in John 17, it's his prayer of Jesus where he's praying about the church in the future and he says, Father I want them whom you have given me to be with me that they may see me, that we will see the perfect image of God on the throne, Jesus, the Lamb who was slain and that in his light we will reflect his radiance perfectly, that we will be completely transformed to be forever perfected images of God, full of hope and future and dignity and light. And so I wondered just briefly to think about what we do, three practical things we can do right now because Christ has done it all, so what do we see in response?

I think one is that we recognize human beings as images of God. We can recognize in human beings the perfected image of God and therefore we can worship God before the idols that he has provided for us. We can worship God by caring for people. We can recognize that when we try to do good to people that we are actually declaring the worship of God. And so we long to see people blessed. And that means I think for one thing for example it means that we carry out these functions of being in God's place and creation wisely and well. We exercise good stewardship over the whole of creation. As Christians we take time to reflect on that and be at the forefront therefore of sensible discussions around that. What does good stewardship of creation look like? We shouldn't isolate ourselves from that. And that means there's a place for Christians serving in community councils or in youth clubs or in school boards, parent councils. All of these things are actually acts of worship because we're seeking to do good before the image of God that he has put before us. We have a place to bless and encourage others. And so I think as well alongside that we also respect the image that God has made.

Consider what it means to be made male and female in the image of God. To respect that and to honor and value and dignify these creations of God's hand. But above all it's rejoice. I mean today we rejoice in what God has done. He has redeemed us from darkness, from all of the cracks and all of the defacements and all of the imperfections and all of the ruin that has been visited upon the image of God in human nature. Rejoice today that Jesus promises to undo it all. To bring full redemption. To bring glory. To God's name in the people that he restores. Let's bow and give him thanks.

[27 : 29] Heavenly Father we thank you today for the Gospel that is in Christ Jesus. We thank you that there is a hope of redemption and salvation in him and that today we know he was marred for our iniquities. He experienced defacing for the sake of his people so that we can be redeemed from all of the defacement and all of the abuse that has been subjected to ourselves because of our sin. And so help us today to value and to honor and glorify in Jesus more and more. Help us to recognize in him salvation and hope and to hold on to and cling to the promises of grace that are in him. And therefore to live as people so transformed. Help us to value what you value and to honor the things that you honor and to prioritize the things that you say are important. Bless us and prosper us in this act we pray. May I ask in Jesus name. Amen.