

Origins: Humanity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 February 2022

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Okay, so what does it mean to be human? All the big issues being debated in our culture right now are all connected with how we understand our humanity. And so questions about identity, about sexuality, about gender, marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and discussions on conversion therapy, on assisted suicide, individual autonomy, and so on and so on and so on. All of these issues revolve around how we think about ourselves as human beings, about who we are, what we're here for, and how we live with the bodies that we have. And this is a really crucial area because understanding what it means to be human will obviously impact the way that we see ourselves, and it will also impact the way that we treat other people, and it will also have influence on what we're like as a society from the greatest to the least. Right now, this series, as I mentioned earlier, is called Origins because we want to see from the first book of the Bible in Genesis, we want to see how everything started, how it began. And that also includes our humanity. We're going to think about our humanity from Genesis chapter 1, where we're told that mankind or humanity is made in the image and the likeness of God. And so this has a deep significance for how we see ourselves, no matter who we are here today. And so I'd like us to look at these three points this afternoon. First of all, what it means to be created in the image of God. Secondly, why it matters that we are created in the image of God. And then how we live in the image of God. What it means, why it matters, and how we live. So first of all, what it means to be created in the image of God. In Genesis chapter 1, you notice that humanity is really the climax of God's creative work. So the creation of human beings comes last. It comes on day six. And we also get the longest description in God's creation of humanity. And so the pace of the narrative here slows right down. And really, that is to emphasize the importance of this moment when God makes humanity. But as we've already seen, the focus in Genesis 1 is obviously on God. And so verse 26 says, then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. So there is one God, but did you hear how he addresses himself with a plural verb, let us? And then there's the plural pronoun, our.

And so the simple explanation for what is being said here is that in God's plural self-address, we get this allusion to the Trinity, God as Trinity. And that's how the rest of the Bible reveals God to us. He is one God in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So that is his nature, which tells us God is relational and God is personal. And this is emphasized by the distinction between the rest of creation and humanity. And so the first seven creative acts in Genesis chapter one, they're all impersonal. So you would notice if you were here last week that they're all let there be, let there be, let impersonal. Whereas when we come to the creation of humanity, what does God say? He says, let us, telling us that this is a special part of God's creation. So look again, verse 26 and 27. 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. So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. So mankind here is the word Adam, and it refers really to the whole human race. And so this is significant, so significant, in fact, that God's creative act is reiterated three times. So the word created there comes up three times in verse 27. So what does it mean then to be created in the image of God? Well, the most obvious thing is that this expression, the image of God, it is only used of human beings.

All the other creatures were made, we read, according to their kinds. Whereas humanity is made, we read, we read, in the image of God. And so we are creatures, okay, we are made by God, but we're unique because we're made in the image of God. So yeah, we will have a lot in common with all the other creatures because both animals and human beings, interestingly, were created on the same day, the sixth day. And I guess that's why geneticists and zoologists and anthropologists will rightly point out the similarities between human beings and animals because they're there. But we have a status and we have a dignity that sets us apart from the rest of creation because we're made in the image of God.

[5 : 43] And so while God speaks about all the other acts of creation, you notice that God speaks directly to humanity. So we also need to see that God created male and female in his image. Verse 27 again, so God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. And so it's obvious that male and female are categories that define us as human beings, where male and female bear the image of God, which means gender is not a social construct. Rather, it is fundamental to who we are as human beings. Who we are as a person can't be divorced from our gender.

In fact, when you were born, your gender was the first defining characteristic of you as a human being. I was at the births of our three children a long time ago now, two boys and one girl. And I was the first person to say whether it was a boy or a girl on each occasion. In fact, we were so sure that after having two boys, that a third child would also be a boy. So when baby number three was born and I was there looking, I shrieked with great excitement, it's a girl. And then Shona turned to me and said, are you sure? And so I did have to have a kind of double take. And then after checking again, I went round and checked and I said, yeah, that is definitely a girl. I can tell.

And so the fact that Genesis here emphasizes this surely tells us that our gender difference, male and female, is something that our loving creator deliberately built into his creation.

And his creation is good. And so our gender is really something to delight in, not something to be denied, not something to be disappointed with. We are different by design.

And that's why we picked up on the Trinitarian nature of God earlier. Because God is tri-unity. God is tri-personal. Three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All equal, but different. All three persons of the Trinity have different roles and different functions as one God. Which surely speaks to the reality that God created male and female in his own image.

[8 : 26] Where male and female are equal, but different. And so it follows that they will have different roles and functions. Because this is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. And that's why we read in verse 31, God saw all that he had made and it was very good. So Genesis 1 is describing for us God's perfect creation. It's describing what it means to be human. To be human, first and foremost, is to be made male and female in the image of God. But some might say, well, hang on, wait a minute here.

What about those who suffer from gender dysphoria? Isn't that a thing? Or perhaps feel some same-sex attraction? Well, we know that hot on the heels of Genesis chapter 1 and chapter 2 comes Genesis chapter 3.

And we will get to this in coming weeks, but Genesis 3 describes the fall of humanity. Where humanity's rebellion against God results in God's beautiful creation becoming broken.

Where that impacts relationships. Relationship with God, relationships with each other, and relationships with the creation. Where sin is the root cause of all our problems. It's like the disease in the roots of a tree that inevitably affects all the branches. Which means that every single part of our humanity is impacted by the fall. And because God made us physical beings, because God made us sexual beings, our sexuality is corrupted by the fall. Along with every other aspect of us as a human being.

And that's all we've got time to mention right now. We will come to Genesis chapter 2 and Adam and Eve and marriage and relationships. And so we can pick it up there again. But what's important for us to see here is that being created in the image of God, it still rings true despite the fall. But it's the fall that helps us make sense of all our struggles as human beings. And we all have struggles about what it means to be human. And so being made in the image of God helps us best understand who we are. Who you are and who I am. But it also helps us see what we should do. And that comes in verse 28 where we read, God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

[11 : 16] This is often called the creation mandate. It's what God gives to humanity as their mission. And there are three parts to it. You notice that the first is the blessing of God on humanity. And then the second is to be fruitful, to increase and fill the earth. And then the third is to subdue the earth or to have dominion over the creation. And so what God does is after making humanity in his image, he then gives humanity responsibility over the creation. Because by ruling over God's creation, what we're doing is we're reflecting God himself who has authority and right to rule over all he has made. And yet God has appointed human beings, us, to be his rulers on earth, like his deputies or his stewards. We've been entrusted with this responsibility to care for his creation. And that doesn't mean, of course, that we're to exploit creation. But as people who are made in God's image, we are to lovingly rule the good world that God has made. So how does this apply? Well, that's what it means to be created in the image of God.

It impacts who we are and it impacts what we do as a human being. And so if we're to discover who we are as human beings, then we need to go back to our origins in Genesis. But when we do go back there, we realize how the Genesis view of what it means to be human actually confronts our culture and its understanding of what it means to be human. So just think for a moment of how the contradictory story that our culture tells us about who we are is in conflict with what the Bible tells us about who we are. So our culture actually gives us two competing perspectives at the same time. So we're told the naturalistic perspective. In other words, essentially, our culture says to us, science says to us, you're just an animal. That's all you are. So we randomly evolve into what we have today, what you're looking at and what I'm looking at. We're just all animals. So we're no more different. We're no more special than any other species on planet Earth. So that's one perspective. Okay, naturalistic perspective.

But alongside this, we're also told by our culture, a kind of narcissistic perspective, which essentially tells you that you are so important that you can do anything. And it's everywhere from the you do you to that you can do whatever you want. And we hear it in the lyrics of pop songs. We see it in movies, in the theater, the cinema, or on Netflix. And it's also the basis, I guess, of reality TV. It's all about you. You're the center of the universe. You look after yourself.

You express yourself in any way that you want. And so can you see the contradiction in this cultural narrative? There's a tension between humans as mere animals or humans as gods. One basically denigrates humanity, whereas the other basically deifies humanity. And yet the biblical narrative tells us that we're made in the image of God. And doesn't that give us a far better story on which to base our lives and understand ourselves? Because our identity isn't defined by science or by ourselves.

Because being made in the image of God means we can enjoy dignity whilst recognizing that we aren't deity. We're significant, but we aren't supreme. And so it stops us from making too little of ourselves or from making too much of ourselves. So can you see this? And even if you're here today and you can't accept this, then don't you want this to be true? Our origins in Genesis not only make the best sense of who we are as human beings, but they give us the greatest hope and security. Because if we're made in the image of God, then we have dignity and we have worth. And only when we grasp this will we get a proper perspective on who we truly are as human beings. So that's our first point. And it's a long one, then the others will be shorter, I assure you. So don't be thinking that was that long. So if I times it by three, it'll be this. So first point, what it means to be created in the image of God.

[16:02] And second point, why it matters that we are created in the image of God. Okay. Because humanity was created in the image of God, this matters for everyone. So everyone who I clock eyes with today, it impacts you and it impacts me. Every human being is important because every human being is an image bearer of God. And so to devalue anyone whom God has made is to dehumanize them.

And so can we see why what Genesis teaches us about the image of God is what our world so desperately needs to hear today. Because there's no scientific basis for arguing that every human being has dignity and value and worth. You can't argue that from science. And so if we jettison the notion that there is a God and he made us in his image, then we also throw out the basis for all human rights.

Because how can you argue for human rights if we've all just evolved and it is all just about the survival of the fittest? Because there's so much talk in society today about equality and individual human rights, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, disability, and so on.

And we rightfully care about the mistreatment of minority groups and justice for the oppressed. But do we ever stop to think where this concept of human rights and equality of all people actually comes from? What is the origin? Where did the idea that every human being is equal come from?

Because clearly it isn't self-evident in our world today. And it hasn't always been assumed. So you just need to look back into history and see how humanity has so badly failed to acknowledge that every human being is equal and has rights. Whether it's human slavery or apartheid or the Holocaust or the civil rights movement, there are plenty of examples. And so why do we believe in human rights? Well, human rights and the equality of all people aren't actually secular values, as much as secular people would like to think that they are and that they're just assumed. But human rights and the equality of all people are deeply rooted in a Christian worldview, where the origins are here in Genesis chapter 1, where humanity is made in the image of God. Now, of course, you can push back on this if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. If you don't believe the authority of the Bible, you can say, that's a load of rubbish. Well, good luck in telling us why we should care about the weakest and the most vulnerable and the poorest and the most oppressed in our society today. Why should you do that?

[19:10] It's the Bible that tells us we do that because we're made in the image of God. And that's the basis for all human rights. It comes from a belief in a creator God who made us male and female in his image and likeness. And this is something that's actually been noticed a lot by historians in recent years.

For example, Tom Holland, not Spider-Man Tom Holland, but Tom Holland, the historian, in his 2019 book, *Dominion, How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. Holland, who is actually sympathetic to Christianity, and he is sympathetic towards Christianity because after years and years of research, what he discovered was just how much our Western world has been shaped by Christianity, even if secular people don't realize it. And he actually argues that people on all sides of today's debates about gender and about sexuality have their ideas shaped about equality and rights. Their ideas are shaped by Christianity. Listen to what he says. He says, that every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. To campaign against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality, however, was to depend on large numbers of people sharing in a common assumption that everyone possessed an inherent worth. The origins of this principle, as Nietzsche has so contemptuously pointed out, lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible. And Holland gets it. He wouldn't call himself a Christian, but I can see the influence of Christianity on our Western world. But even those who aren't sympathetic towards Christianity have to acknowledge that human rights and the equality of all people must have an origin somewhere.

And so I was reading the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari. And he basically says as much in his best-selling book, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*. Because as he attempts to tell the story of humanity from the beginning, he struggles to explain things without the Christian belief that the creator God made male and female in his likeness. And so he says the idea of equality is inextricably intertwined with the idea of creation. However, if we do not believe in the Christian myths about God, creation, and souls, what does it mean that all people are equal? And he comes on to suggest that all we're left with is evolution where there is no God. And if that's all there is, then we can't really claim that a human being has any rights. And he puts it this way. He says, *Homo sapiens* has no natural rights, just as spiders, hyenas, and chimpanzees have no natural rights. It's quite sad and bleak, isn't it?

If there's no God, then you're no more important than a hyena, a spider, or a chimpanzee. Because that's what we're left with if we scrap the notion of a creator God who made us in his image.

I just discovered this week that *Homo sapiens* actually means wise man. And yet it can't be very wise to try and understand our humanity without any reference to the God who made us. That's incredibly stupid as opposed to being wise. It's like knocking out the very foundation block that explains the origins of humanity, which means all we're left doing is standing on shaky ground.

[22 : 54] It's not like playing Jenga, where if you're careful and you're skilled at Jenga, like I am, where you can get the foundational blocks out. There's three of them. You can take two out from the very bottom and still keep the tower intact. It won't fall over. But this is not like Jenga.

No, if we remove the very foundation of what it means to be human from our world, the tower will just collapse and leave a massive mess everywhere. And by mess, I mean psychological damage to people's lives, their well-being, their flourishing. And can you see, that is why it matters that we are created in the image of God. It matters not just for Christian theology, but it matters for every single human being.

Every single one of us and every single person in the UK and every single person in the world, born or unborn. So do we really want to live without a solid foundational and fundamental basis for human rights and equality in our society? Because if we try, then humanity isn't going to get better.

It's just going to unravel at the seams. That's why it's hardly surprising to discover that it was the rise of Christianity in the first century that pushed the world towards civilization. The good news of Jesus Christ revitalized the Greco-Roman world because Christians believed that every person was made in the image of God. And so therefore, every human life was precious, no matter how the rest of the culture treated people. And so the early Christians radically transformed society because they treated women as equal to men. So this is not some kind of recently discovered progressive agenda. It is rooted in the good news that God made us male and female in his image and likeness. And it was the early Christians who looked after orphans. They were the ones who cared for the poor. They were the ones who supported widows. They were the ones who loved the marginalized. And that's why Christians have continued to be at the forefront of every movement in history that fights for human rights, whether it's

William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery, or Lord Shaftesbury and the education of children, or William and Catherine Booth founding the Salvation Army to provide food and clothing and shelter as well as share the Christian message with children. Because there is only the Christian message beginning in Genesis with a creator God who made humanity in his image that truly values life.

[25 : 41] Believing that every person is made in the image of God means that every human life matters, irrespective of gender, age, race, status, income, achievements, ability, or disability.

Which means this has massive implications for how we think about every single aspect of human existence, from the womb all the way to the tomb. And that's why Christians grieve over abortion and euthanasia, because it is taking a life of a person made in the image of God. And we know that any challenge to the sanctity of life leads us down a dangerous slippery slope. And I think this is illustrated by Peter Singer, who's a professor of bioethics at Princeton University. And Peter Singer thinks that we're basically no better than animals. And because that's his logic, because that's his philosophy, then he can justify infanticide, which is the killing of babies. And so he defines in his book, Practical Ethics, a person as a self-conscious or rational being. And then he bluntly states, infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings or any other self-conscious beings. See what happens when you remove the reality that we're made in the image of God? It is hopeless and bleak. It's evil. And so can you see why it matters? Can you see why this is a better story that you and I and everybody we ever lay eyes on is made in the image of God? Because how we treat people, how we operate as a society, is determined by your understanding of who we are as human beings. So without the origins of humanity and the image of God in Genesis 1, we're not contributing to a better quality of life for all.

We're only taking that quality of life away. Listen to what C.S. Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*. He says, there are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Every person you have ever looked upon, smiled at, frowned at, greeted, encouraged, insulted, slandered, touched as a person bearing the marks of divine likeness and the *imago Dei*. Brilliant, isn't it? You have never talked to a mere mortal. Every person you've ever seen is a person made in the image of God.

Okay, so first, what it means to be created in the image of God, why it matters that we are created in the image of God, and then finally, and more briefly, how we live in the image of God. I'm just going to cut this short. I did have three things to say. One was being made in the image of God impacts our attitude towards ourselves. So if we're made in the image of God, you need to know, and I need to know, God loves you. He made you for a relationship with you.

If we're created in the image of God, it also impacts how we treat other people. Knowing that they are image bearers of God means that we need to treat them in the right way, doesn't it?

[29 : 11] And also, it impacts our mission as a church. If we're made in the image of God, all the people out there who know nothing of God, we as a church need to introduce them to the God who made them. He is their maker, and he loves them. And so humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. And Genesis chapter 1 verse 31 at the very end gives us God's verdict on this. What's God's verdict? God saw all that he had made and it was very good. So creation and humanity was perfect. But we know that it isn't perfect anymore. The creation, as we said earlier, is fallen because humanity rejected God and turned away from him. And so the harmony that did exist between God and human beings, between human beings and creation, it's been smashed and broken. And yet, even after the fall, what we find in the Bible is that the image of God remains in human beings. So we still bear the image of our creator. The fall hasn't taken that away. It has tarnished it. It's been tarnished by sin and humanity has been corrupted. So we don't relate to

God as we should. And we fail to properly rule over God's creation as we should because we're separated from our creator. And yet, we're still image bearers of God, which means God has not abandoned us. In fact, God has actually come to us. How has he done that? In Jesus Christ. We read this in Colossians chapter 1 verse 15. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. So humanity was made in the image of God, but the Son of God became a human being. Why? Well, as the one true image of the invisible God, Jesus entered into his creation to be the perfect human being for us.

He is the second Adam. He completely fulfilled the role that God gave him to do. And that was to bring salvation for humanity. So Jesus was the perfect man. Jesus lived the life that we could never live, a life without sin. Jesus died the death that we deserve to die, death for our sin. And Jesus was resurrected to bring everything under his rule, including Satan and sin and death. And Jesus did it for us so that we could be restored to our true humanity. So Jesus took on our likeness and human flesh, and he took upon himself our sin on the cross so that one day we might take on his likeness and fully bear the image of the image of the heavenly man. And so for all those who trust in Jesus, we are being gradually, slowly but surely, but gradually being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory by the Holy Spirit. And so living in the image of God means becoming more like Jesus.

Because as we receive what Jesus Christ has done by faith, our lives are then reorientated away from ourselves and towards God, so that the image of God is better reflected in us. And as it is better reflected in us, then we will be better at valuing every single human being who ever comes across our path. Because we know that each and every one is an image bearer of God. So let's go for it.

Reflect our creator God and love the people he puts across our path.