

# Made in God's Image

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Preacher: Brian King

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's pray. Father, you say that your word does not return to you empty, so we pray that that would be true again this morning.

And may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, my Lord, my rock, and my Redeemer. Amen. Now, if you're new today, we've just started a series called God's Good Design, exploring the nature, the meaning, and the purpose of this universe from the Bible.

And last week, we saw that this universe indeed does have a designer. In the beginning, God. And we saw that he is a big, big God, a God who is eternal, who has all power and authority, but who is also deeply personal, who creates out of love, and who is worthy of our trust.

And last week, we saw that he designed our world to be a world we all want. One created with order, yet filled with diversity.

One created with abundance, and filled with beauty. But what about the humans? You might have noticed they were missing last week.

[ 1 : 1 7 ] In this good, good world, are we also good? Beautiful? Relevant? How has God designed humans?

This is an increasingly important question, especially in light of recent advances involving artificial intelligence. In 2016, the computer program AlphaGo went against one of the best players of all time, Lee Sedol, in the game Go, or Weechi.

Now, I'm a chess player, but I'm told that Go is even more complex than chess. Apparently, on each turn, there are 250 possible moves to make, which increase exponentially, which means 10 moves into the game, there are already trillions and trillions of possibilities, more than even this supercomputer can calculate.

And so the supercomputer can't rely on pure computational power alone to win. It actually needs to think, for want of a better word.

So anyway, AlphaGo was playing Lee, and in game two, on move 37, the computer played a very unusual move.

[ 2 : 4 3 ] It was so surprising that the match commentator, an expert Go player himself, was lost for words. In the end, he turned to his co-commentator and said, it's playing moves that are definitely not usual moves.

They're not moves that would have a high percentage of moves in its database. So it's coming up with the moves on its own. It's a creative move.

In other words, the AI seemed to understand the game so well, it applied its knowledge in an entirely unexpected new way.

It was being creative. It was being intelligent. Was it therefore also being human?

That's really the question, isn't it? What does it mean to be human anyway? Wow. So today, Genesis 1, verse 26 to 31, will begin to help us make sense of who we are as human beings.

[ 3 : 52 ] We'll see what we are designed for, and what makes us significant. And as we do so, I hope that will help us celebrate our humanness, live according to our given purposes, and above all, have confidence in who God made us to be.

So let's proceed under three headings. Firstly, we are designed to be distinct and dependent beings. Distinct and dependent beings.

Now, as we read Genesis 1, did you notice we are not completely differentiated from the rest of creation? We don't even get our own special day.

No, on day 6, verses 24 and 25, God created the land animals, and then, verses 26 and 27, He created us.

From one perspective, we are just another kind of land creature. We are formed from the dust of the ground, Genesis 2, verse 7, But then, verse 19, So are the animals and the birds.

[ 5 : 02 ] And we are all blessed by God. In many ways, we are the same. So what does this tell us? Well, do you remember this diagram from last week?

It reminds us that we are very much on the creation side of the equation, together with the other creatures. We have that in common.

And that should keep us humble. And actually, that also makes sense of the world, doesn't it? If this is true, we shouldn't be surprised or feel threatened when we discover that we share 96% of our DNA with monkeys.

And we are all interrelated humans and non-humans, fully integrated within God's good creation order.

Think of how a big part of our bodies wouldn't even be able to function properly if not for the presence of good bacteria in our gut, helping us digest fiber and keeping our immune systems working.

[ 6 : 22 ] But does that mean the evolutionary biologist is there for, right? Are we nothing more than advanced kind of animals or machines? Is that what we are?

Well, no. Come back to Genesis 1, and we begin to see that even within creation, God has a special place for human beings.

Yes, we share day six with the land animals. But have you noticed how, as God begins to create humans, the narrative slows down and more details get fleshed out compared to the other parts of creation?

It's as if God is saying, this part is really key. And notice how God begins the story of our creation, verse 26.

Let us make. All throughout Genesis 1, God keeps saying, let the land do this. Let the waters do that. Let the lights do this.

[ 7 : 33 ] But when it comes to human beings, he says, let us make. For once, we find God pausing, and deliberating before he makes something.

As if what he's about to make is so important, it requires his personal attention. This is reinforced by verse 27.

Notice that the word created is used three times in quick succession. In the Hebrew language, whenever words are repeated three times, is trying to say that this is the very essence that captures the thing we are describing.

So, for example, when we sing, holy, holy, holy, we are trying to express how holiness really captures the essence about God.

God is wanting to say something very, very significant about our essence as human beings.

- [ 8 : 50 ]    There is something distinct about us that differentiates us from the rest of creation. And what might that distinct characteristic be?
- I'm sure you spotted it already. We are, verse 27, created in the image of God. The trees aren't.
- The stars aren't. The animals and the birds aren't. Alpha, Go, and other supercomputers aren't. Only human beings are.
- And so, within that creation circle in the diagram earlier, we need to make a further distinction. There is the creator. There is creation.
- And within creation, there is you. And me. Made in the image of God. That makes us distinct.
- [ 9 : 53 ]    Now, later on, we'll explore in more detail what that means exactly. But I just want to pause here and ask, did you notice how special the Christian view of the human being is?
- We are humans. And yet, the Bible declines to describe us in purely human terms. On the contrary, we are defined in terms of the divine.
- Now, that doesn't mean we ourselves are divine. Let's make that clear. After all, if I show you a photograph of our prime minister, I'm not saying that that very piece of photographic paper is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim himself.
- On the contrary, when I say something is the image of another thing, I'm therefore saying that the image is not the thing itself.
- So, we are not divine. We're not God. But we are defined in terms of the divine. We image God.
- [ 11 : 13 ]    We are certainly not defined in terms of the purely physical and the material. The Nobel Prize winner, Francis Crick, who helped discover the structure of DNA, once wrote this, you, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.
- Now, what a depressing view that is, isn't it? And if that is all we are reduced to, it's hard to escape the conclusion we are ultimately worthless.
- Why even bother? But, if you are the image of the big, big, good, good God, that must mean you are a wonderful thing.
- For you reflect something wonderful. You occupy an exalted place. You are glorious. the psalmist even says God himself thinks so.
- Psalms 8, verse 5, you have made them a little lower than the angels and crown them with glory and honour. And so, you are of immense value.
- [ 12 : 44 ]    It doesn't matter if you are tall or short, rich or poor. it doesn't matter if your appearance doesn't match your culture's expectation of beauty. It doesn't matter if you have a disability.
- No matter what has happened to you, no matter what you will become, no matter how you currently feel about yourself, no matter how dependent you might become on others, you are wonderfully made in the image of God.
- And that can never be taken from you. You don't have to be a Christian for this to be true. As long as you are human, you have an essential intrinsic dignity.
- That is the Christian teaching. To be made in God's image is not a status you earn or a capacity you achieve, but simply a gift you receive.
- It's a feature of your humanity that has been inbuilt from the very beginning. And isn't that good news? Some of you today might be feeling a little disappointed with yourselves.

[ 14 : 05 ] You don't feel attractive. You don't feel you are good company. You're tempted just to hide and project a false image of yourself.

But God says you are valued not for your talents or your personality. You are valued simply because you are already made in his image.

That is your true image. You don't need to make up another one. And of course, if this is true, then how we treat others matter immensely, especially if we call ourselves Christians.

Look at what James 3, verse 9 to 10 says. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been, notice, made in God's likeness.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, they should not be. James says to praise God and curse humans is hypocrisy.

[ 15 : 24 ] To slander, offer false testimony, gossip, or use abusive language against others, no matter how much you disagree with them is flat out wrong.

Why? Because if a person bears God's image, that is good enough reason to respect and dignify and serve them, no matter who they are.

Recently, Christians got upset over the opening ceremony of the Olympics because it seems as if one part possibly referenced the Lord's Supper in a demeaning, insulting manner.

Why did we get upset? Because we recognize that image, that symbol represented our faith. And so to treat that in a mocking way is to treat those represented by that image in a mocking way.

God's image, how does God feel whenever we mistreat his images? A human being.

[ 16 : 42 ] Do we get similarly upset? God does, maybe even more so than over the Olympics. Olympics. You see, if all humans everywhere are made in God's image, then there can be no room for racism or ageism, sexism, or chauvinism.

Indeed, Genesis 1 verse 27 makes clear both male and female together bear the image of God. In some ways, this basic sex differentiation is essential to our collective humanity.

And in today's sermon, I won't have any time to explore the topic of gender, but if you're interested to learn more, do go onto the sermon archive on our website, look for the sermon series Inside Out from 2021, and look for the sermon Male Plus Female.

But none of us are to mistreat a human being. If you are aware you've done so recently, then can I encourage you to repent and seek forgiveness?

And when we take seriously this teaching, the world takes notice. This past week, Sultan Nazrin Shah gave a speech at the regional Southeast Asia Human Dignity Conference.

[ 18 : 12 ] And in that speech, he praised Bishop Danaujud, the Anglican Bishop of Sarawak. for the way he defused a potentially inflammatory situation from several years ago by refusing to go on the attack against his perceived opponents who had damaged his church building.

And he cited this as an example of affording human dignity to others. The bishop had recognized the image of God in others. God that's how it should be.

But even as distinct beings, we remain dependent. Let's not forget that. To say we are made in God's image is to acknowledge we belong to him.

We need him. An analogy might help here. Imagine you wanted an image painted of Ford Margherita. Well, for that to happen, first of all, you need Ford Margherita to exist.

And only then can an image of Ford Margherita exist. The image is dependent on the thing it reflects.

[ 19 : 29 ] An image of something can only come about from the thing it mirrors. So it is with human beings. We can't just define ourselves however we like.

We are dependent on the God whose image we are. We can't just change the way we are designed without consequences. And so that means as our world continues to make technological advances, we need to think through them carefully.

We shouldn't automatically reject them, but neither should we uncritically embrace them. What we need to keep asking is, does this technology in some way fundamentally alter how God made us to be?

The bioethicist Professor John Wyatt is very helpful to us here. He says what we need is an art restoration view of humanity. If we know that our bodies are originally artistic masterpieces designed by a good creator, and we also know that that masterpiece has been somewhat spoiled by the effects of the fall, by sickness and so on, then what we should be doing is to restore the body back to the creator's original intention, the way an art restorer restores a painting.

that is the purpose of medicine, for example. If laser surgery helps me see better, great. Innovative technology is fine as long as it intends to restore people to their original glory.

[ 21 : 21 ] But what we shouldn't have is what Professor Wyatt calls a Lego kit view of humanity. In this view, our human body is just a collection of different pieces like Lego.

You can do whatever you like with it. Your only limit is your imagination. There is no designer or original design. God doesn't come into the picture. Instead, we play God.

Our human bodies and human lives are just commodities to be used, not gifts received with thanks. us. And if we are Christians, we need to reject this view.

So, for example, we need to ask, are some forms of augmented reality technologies beginning to cross the line? I'm not sure, but we need to at least ask.

So, what does it mean to be human? It's to know we are distinct though dependent beings as those made in God's image. But I still haven't covered exactly what being made in God's image is all about, so let's move on to that now.

[ 22 : 36 ] Secondly, we are designed to be royal representatives. Royal representatives. Now, over the centuries, many theologians have debated what it means to be made in God's image.

And quite a number of them say it's to do with certain capacities we have. So, for instance, we have the capacity to reason, the capacity to feel, the capacity to have relationships, capacity to recognize right from wrong.

And those are certainly things that we do share with God. It seems to form part of our human makeup. For example, in Ecclesiastes 7 verse 29, we're told that God created mankind upright.

But they've gone in search of many schemes. So, we know from there that humans are moral beings designed originally to be ethical. But that doesn't seem to be the whole story.

What about the intellectually disabled, for example? Do they have less of God's image? That doesn't seem right. So, it seems as if the image is more than just about having certain attributes that we share with God.

[ 23 : 53 ] And more importantly, Genesis 1 verse 26 to 31 never goes in that direction to define what the image is. So, let's come back to the text.

What clues can we find there? Well, did you notice where verse 26 goes? 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.

And then when we come to verse 28, we find rulership is also in view. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the air and so on.

So, there seems to be a close connection between image, and rule. And that link becomes even clearer once we consider the ancient Near Eastern cultural context.

Now, in those days, whenever a king wanted to demonstrate his authority in a certain place, even if it's far away from the capital city, he would put an image of himself, a statue, right there.

[ 25 : 13 ] So, in the Bible, think of King Nebuchadnezzar, or in the modern day, think of Kim Il-sung in North Korea. It's his way of saying, I'm the king here.

Where his image was, his rule was. Where his image was, his presence was. And that is exactly what God says, we are.

We are his image bearers. We are the royal representatives of his rule and his presence. In those days, in places like Egypt and Assyria, they did sometimes think of kings as images of God, but only the kings.

Every other human being, what are they? They're just the slaves of the gods. But according to Genesis 1, every human being is royalty.

Even if you are just a cleaner, an admin assistant, a farming hand, you are a king or queen. You are made in God's image.

[ 26 : 30 ] And you rule over creation. Indeed, have a look at verse 29. God said, I give you every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it, they will be yours for food.

Now, did you notice how the verse is written? God is declaring that the plants are for us. We are over them.

Similarly, earlier on in verses 24 and 25, when God describes the animals, he doesn't categorize them as mammals and reptiles and so on.

Rather, he talks about them as livestock or wild animals or creeping things. In other words, he describes them in terms of how they relate to human beings.

These are either animals we can raise or hunt for food or animals to avoid. the point is, they exist in relation to us, the appointed rulers of creation.

[ 27 : 45 ] But of course, we must never ever forget, we are not just royalty, but royal representatives. We rule on behalf of God, not in place of God.

We have to answer to him. God invites us to share in his rule, but this rule is to be done his way.

So just as he cares for creation, he blesses it, he seeks to make it fruitful, so should we. It is a sad truth that these verses have sometimes been twisted to justify greedy exploitation of the earth.

earth. And indeed, while verse 29 clearly states that the plants are given to us for food, did you notice that verse 30 also reminds us that the animals at the same time are given the same plants?

And so even though we are put in charge of creation under God, we can't use it solely for our benefit without forgetting about the welfare of creation at large.

[ 28 : 58 ] Have a look at Exodus 23 verse 12 later on in your spare time, and you might see that this care for creation is reflected even in the Old Testament law.

But how exactly does being royal representatives look like in practice? Well, let's come back to Genesis 1 and notice how intentionally God makes his rule a model for our rule.

Now, do you remember how last week the earth was initially formless and empty, and then God deliberately formed things on day 1 to 3, and then he filled it on days 4 to 6?

Well, a similar pattern is going on here. First of all, verse 28, we are to subdue the earth. In other words, we are to form it in some way.

Perhaps the best illustration is to think of a garden. Left on its own is just a patch of dirt, and if you just leave it alone, and you never impose your will on it, it will just grow lots of weeds and wild grass and things like that.

[ 30 : 09 ] But if you want that garden to actually grow some nice vegetables, you have to make the ground do something it won't do by itself. It requires your energy.

It requires your cultivation. You need to be active to form it to be a place where your midin or your baku, whatever veggie you're planting can flourish.

And that is exactly how God designed things to be. You see, God made this world good, and in seven days God did all that he wanted to do. He completed his task, but that doesn't actually mean that there is nothing left to be done.

God deliberately made this world with much untapped potential for human beings to cultivate. And that's why later on in Genesis 2 verse 5, God will imply that human beings are needed to work the ground.

God made this creation resource-rich, but under his direction we need to do the work of planting and farming and mining and assembling if we want the world to flourish.

[ 31 : 26 ] We need to be engaged in the work of culture making. Even after the fall, later on, in Genesis 4 verse 17, we find people building cities, or 4 verse 20 to 22, people engaging in livestock farming and making music and new technology.

As the Christian journalist Ken Myers famously once said, culture is what we make of this world. And that's exactly what God has asked us to do.

Again, not in a greedy or exploitative way, but in an orderly way, to bring out appropriately what is already good in the earth.

that's what you are doing when you are making kombucha tea, filtering and fermenting and I'm not sure what else you do. Melvin, you can enlighten me later.

That's what you are doing when you take raw programming code and you turn it into an app that can be useful to others. That's what you are doing even as you set the tone in your workplace, giving tangible tokens of respectful communication.

[ 32 : 41 ] You are doing the work of culture formation and you are acting as a royal representative. You are bearing God's image.

You are being authentically human. And for this work of forming to happen even more effectively, God asks a second of all to fill the earth.

Verse 28, be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth. Now here is the basic idea. When Adam was first formed, he was placed in a specific location on earth, in the garden of Eden.

We'll see that in Genesis 2. And in fact, Eden was kind of like a temple. I'll mention that in passing for now.

We'll explore this temple idea more in two weeks time. But the idea is that temples are where God's glory dwells, and the earth is not yet filled with images that reflect God's glory.

[ 33 : 48 ] And so that's what God wants. He wants more royal representatives throughout not just Eden, but the whole world, so that his rule and presence may be perfectly manifested everywhere.

That's why he gives this command. God is into cute babies. It's because if we want to rule creation well, we need to have enough of us.

And that is partly why God made us male and female, his designers to be able to reproduce. Now, I'll leave just how exactly we're to apply this to a little bit later, but let me just mention for now, I don't think this means that we need to have as many children as we can.

You'll see why later. But at the same time, we also shouldn't look down on childbearing. Bearing children nowadays seems to be taken in a completely negative way, even by Christians.

But I want to suggest that according to Genesis 1, this is not a Christian attitude. So if we've seen that being made in God's image is to acknowledge we are distinct, though dependent, and that we are royal representatives.

[ 35 : 04 ] But I said at the beginning of the sermon that there are three headings, and so there's just one last thing to say. Thirdly, God has designed a human being to be the crown of creation.

You see, here is the bad news. Yes, God has designed us humans to rule creation, but what has happened is that we've worshipped it instead, haven't we? Romans 1 says we became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Genesis 6 makes clear we have filled the earth, not with image bearers who worship God, but with evil. And did you know that word image in Genesis 1 is actually the same word sometimes translated idol in other parts of the Bible?

That's not surprising since that's what idols essentially are, aren't they? Concrete images of things we worship as gods. And God is against such images because they are cheap imitations.

He has already created living beings, us, who reflect his glory. So why be satisfied with such counterfeits? And yet the tragedy is we so often turn to these counterfeits and so we fall short of the glory of God.

[ 36 : 37 ] We fall short, not just in the sense of not meeting God's standards, but we fall short because we have abandoned what we were designed to be, his glorious images.

And in fact, when we worship idols, we can cause destruction to true images. A culture that idolizes sex, for example, might end up exploiting human bodies and have no qualms about aborting unwanted lives.

We've messed up God's design, big time. But praise God, all hope is not lost. Genesis 9 shows us that even after messing up, we are still made in God's image, even though it's now tainted.

God is determined to restore creation to the way it should be. He's determined for a human being to still be enthroned and rule over creation.

Psalms 2 and Psalm 110 spells that out. He promised that a king from David's family would come and subdue the world. Isaiah 11 spells that out.

[ 37 : 49 ] And so God doesn't hold back. He sends Jesus, his son, who comes as a human. But he isn't just someone made in the image of God. He is the image of God.

He's the radiance of the Father. He represents God exactly. He is the ultimate royal representative. And in fact, Colossians 1 verse 15 to 16 is quite mind-blowing in this regard.

See, in verse 16 we're told that he is before all things, he created all things. And so that's telling us he's God. That is echoing Genesis 1 verse 1.

And yet verse 15 says he is the image. And he is the firstborn, that is the one with authority over creation. So that is echoing Genesis 1 verse 26 to 28.



Only in Jesus alone do we find this perfect union of the divine and the human, of someone who is 100% God and 100% man.

[ 38 : 56 ] And when Jesus comes, he isn't afraid to engage in the ordinary work of culture-making, of subduing the earth. He is a carpenter by trade. But that is not his ultimate work.

Rather, he has come to restore humanity to its true glory by dying and rising again. God is going to the position of all rule and authority.

What a significant moment that is. Do you remember what the psalmist said earlier about human beings? God has crowned him with glory and honour.

And the writer to the Hebrews picks up on that and he says, wait a minute, right now we don't see everything subject to humanity. It is not as it should be, that is verse 8.

But then he goes on to say, Hebrews 2 verse 9, we do see Jesus who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

[ 40 : 11 ] A human now rules over the created order because Jesus' humanity has never come to an end and he is now bringing all things in heaven and on earth to himself.

And so this is where Genesis 1 verse 26 to 31 is ultimately heading. The first Adam failed to rule over creation but that doesn't stop God from having another Adam, a better Adam, become the crown of creation and his name is Jesus.

And his work of forming and filling continues. You see here is the good news. Jesus alone is the true image of God but he is now forming us to be more and more like him.

Listen to Romans 8 verse 29. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son that he might be the first born among many brothers and sisters.

If Jesus is God and we are made in the image of God then it's no surprise God's plan is to transform us to become more and more like Jesus his exact image.

[ 41 : 33 ] knowledge. And that is why Colossians 3 verse 10 we are to put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of his creator. And the work of filling the earth with those recreated in the image of their creator continues.

That is the whole point of the great commission in Matthew 28 verse 18 to 20. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

Now did you notice the same themes as in Genesis 1 verse 26 to 28? There is the authority given to the true image himself.

There is the work of going to the whole earth and multiplying worshippers of God as they are recreated in Christ. And there is the possibility of people making godly culture as they obey the Lord Jesus eating and drinking and doing good works to his glory.

And that is how we are to primarily apply Genesis 1 verse 26 to 28 today. It is to make new creation images of God who will then steward and cultivate God's creation well as we make disciples of Jesus Christ.

[ 43 : 14 ] And while Genesis 1 verse 26 to 28 probably isn't a call today for us to have as many kids as we can, I think it is fair to say that one of the ways we fulfill the call to make disciples is to have and raise families who will worship the Lord.

So my friends, here is the good news of scripture regarding us. We are made in God's image. In creation, we are distinct yet dependent on a good God designed to be his royal representatives in this world.

And we have failed miserably but Jesus has succeeded where we have failed. And as a result, we are being renewed in God's image. And so as Billie Eilish sings in the final lines of a hit song, what was I made for?

I am something I'm not but something I can be, something I wait for, something I'm made for. I'm not yet fully like Jesus, but I can be as I wait to be glorified in the new creation and being made like him is something I'm made for and something I can work on even now, thanks to the God who has filled me with his spirit.

So let's praise God. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this wonderful, wonderful truth that we are made in your image, that you have given us this great privilege of reflecting who you are.

[ 45 : 02 ] So Father, please help us to do just that. Help us to be able to come and fulfill your call to us. help us to also be people who seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ wherever we are, so that the earth might be filled with your glory.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.