



Lesson 1 – What Is a Human?

Mankind and the Image of God

In 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species*, a book that would revolutionize the world. In this book he argued that people were not the result of a divine, special act of creation as had been previously thought, but instead had evolved incrementally over many years. This proposal radically changed not only how people thought about where they came from, but also how they thought about who they were. Darwin's proposal made man a highly advanced animal rather than a uniquely dignified representative of the holy, all-powerful Creator.

This new proposal was more radical than anyone at the time could have imagined. If man was just an animal, then he was free to act like an animal... and free to treat others like they were animals. The twentieth century saw devastation and suffering on an unimaginable scale, much of it stemming from Marxism, Communism, and other ideas that replaced God with Darwinian evolution. The ripple effects of this view continue to be felt today as people are confused by who they are and what meaning and purpose their life has.

In what other ways has evolution led to a devaluing of humanity?

How would our culture look different if people truly saw other people as being image bearers of God?

The Bible tells a very different story. The Bible informs us that God made man to bear the image of God. But what does it mean to be an image bearer? "Image bearer" is a phrase too often thrown around with little understanding. In this lesson, we will examine what the Bible has to say about being made in God's image, because before we can understand the confusion in our culture we need to realize what God thinks of humanity. As we study this issue, we will try to answer two questions: 1) "*What does it mean to be made in God's image?*" Answering this question will require us to describe the phrase "image of God." We will also ask 2) "*What does it mean that we are created in God's image?*" and answering this question will require us to apply the concept of the image of God.

The Description of the Image of God: What Does It Mean to Be Made in the Image of God?

Two words are used in Genesis to describe our relationship to God: image and likeness. Man is in some ways a "copy" of God. Something about God is reflected in man. Now obviously God is different from us in many ways, but according to Scripture there are some very significant ways in which we are similar to

Him. We are God's self-portrait. If I drew a self-portrait, that picture isn't me, but it represents me. In a similar way, we are not God, but we represent God. What exactly this means is often debated, so we will take some time seeing how the Bible uses the phrase.

The Image of God in the Old Testament

God states that man will be created "in His image" and "after His likeness." A lot of ink has been spilled trying to distinguish these two nouns (and even at times the two prepositions "in" and "after"!). One clear distinction has yet to win over the majority of theologians, however, and so it's likely that these two phrases are mostly interchangeable. The Hebrew word for "image" is *tselem*, and it is a surprising word to find here because elsewhere the same word is used for idols (Numbers 33:52; 2 Kings 11:18)! In fact, perhaps part of the reason God told man not to make an image of God is because God already did that – man is a representation of God.

The Hebrew word for "likeness" is *demuth* and is slightly more general word than image. This word is used by Ezekiel when he is having a hard time describing his vision of God's glory (Ezekiel 1:5, 10, 13, 16, 26, 28). Interestingly, when Ezekiel is describing this vision, he describes God sitting on his throne as having the likeness of the appearance of man (Ezekiel 1:26)!

The first time these words show up after Genesis 1 is when we are reminded that God created man in the likeness of God, and then it tells us that Adam fathers Seth "in his own likeness, and after his image" (Genesis 5:1-3). This helps us understand a little bit about what it means that man is in God's image. Man reflects God like a son reflects his father.

In what ways do sons reflect their fathers?

If we look further for a description or analysis of what it means that we are God's image, we will come up empty. The Bible just does not explicitly lay out for us what it means to be in God's image, which is probably because the totality of who we are is made in the image of God. The Bible does not single out one aspect of us and say that this one thing is the image of God, and so defining the image of God overly narrowly must go beyond Scripture. Being made in God's image describes the totality of man, and whenever we see something of God reflected in man, we are seeing the image of God.

What are some ways that man reflects God?

Although this list is not exhaustive, some of the ways people have suggested man is like God include the following:

- **Intellect** – man is a rational creature. He thinks, reasons, judges, argues, discerns, builds, and communicates. Man is different than animals not just as a matter of degree (animals are smart but we are smarter), but as a matter of kind (our intelligence is on a whole different level from animals).
- **Relationships** – Man is made for relationships. Just as God has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so from the very beginning God looked at man and decided it was not good for him to be alone. God seeks and desires relationships, and since we were made to reflect Him we need relationships as well.

- **Morality** – God created us to be moral creatures who follow His instructions. Although we have often failed in this category, nevertheless man was made to reflect the goodness and perfection of His Creator. The very fact that we are moral creatures and can do right and wrong points out the fact that we were made in God’s image.

Finally, Genesis 5:1-3 also shows us that since Adam is the image of God and Seth is the image of Adam, the image of God is something that continues to be passed down. The fall did not erase the image, and the next generation was not born without it. Later passages in the Old and New Testament both apply the image of God, which means the image of God is something that continues to the present (cf Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). As we will see in a later lesson, the image of God has been damaged, but not destroyed.

How has the image of God been damaged by our sinful choices?

Men and Women in the Image of God

As we study this passage, we need to pay careful attention to the statement at the end of Genesis 1:27: “in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” This statement makes clear that when we talk about God making “man” in his image, we need to understand this generally as “mankind” and including both men and women. Men are not more the image of God and women are not created less in the image of God. God’s image is seen both in men and women, who are different from each other but together reflect the image of their Creator. There are some things about men that uniquely show the image of God, and there are some things about women that uniquely display the image of God. We need not pit one against the other, but should see the two as reflecting together what God is like.

What about men uniquely displays God’s character?

What about women uniquely displays God’s character?

The Image of God and the New Testament

The idea of man being made in the image of God shows up in the New Testament as well. We will spend more time in future lessons looking at many of these passages, but for now look up the following references and describe what they teach us about the image of God in man:

- 1 Corinthians 11:7¹
- 1 Corinthians 15:49
- 2 Corinthians 3:18

¹ We examine this passage carefully in a future lesson. To answer some of the questions that might come up, Paul isn’t saying women are not created in the image of God or that men are more like God than women (cf Genesis 1:27). Rather, Paul is emphasizing that women must show honor to God in a way different from men, because they honor God as well as their husbands. For a more thorough answer to this question, see Wayne Grudem’s chapter “Men and Women in the Image of God,” especially pages 227-228 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem.

- 2 Corinthians 4:4
- Colossians 1:15
- Colossians 3:10
- James 3:9

Many in our culture today see humanity as a blight on the planet that needs to be fixed. The Bible would disagree strongly. The Bible pictures man as the pinnacle of creation, a being who was made to represent his Creator and as we will see later, a creature who has been given the noble task of overseeing God's creation. The Bible teaches that when God made man, He made a self-portrait. The fall damaged this image, but the image remains. Man continues to reflect His Creator, although imperfectly and with differing levels of success. But if man is still made in the image of God, how does that practically impact us?

The Application of the Image of God: What Does It Mean That We Are Made in the Image of God?

The Bible teaches that we are made in God's image, so what? How should that change the way we think about ourselves and our neighbors? The Bible applies the teaching of our being made in God's image in at least two ways. 1) Because we are made in God's image, we have a special value, and so does everyone else you meet. 2) Because we are made in God's image, we have been given a special calling.

We Have Special Value

- **We should think rightly about our own value because we are made in the image of God.**
 "Why do I matter?" It's a question many discouraged people have asked. It's a question for which the world doesn't have a good answer, because if we all evolved from protoplasm and have no purpose other than to pass on our genes, we don't have much inherent value. The world compensates for this by shouting all the louder that you do have value, but it can't answer *why* you have value. "You have value because you are valuable" doesn't work because it's a shallow answer. "You have value because you are unique. No one else is just like you" may provide some help, but every dog is unique, too. Are we any more valuable than dogs? Christians have an answer for this question: "You have value because you are made in God's image." Such an answer provides human value but does so in a way that ultimately points back to the Creator as the great source of all value.

Why do you think the world spends so much time on an individual's seeking to affirm self-worth?

Would the Bible agree or disagree with this emphasis? How is the biblical view of worth similar and how is it different from the world?

- **We should think rightly about the value of others because they are made in the image of God.**
 Personal value is often where we run first today, but that's not the main emphasis of Scripture. The value of being made in God's image should effect not only how we see ourselves, but also how we see others. God wants you to know that you are made in God's image, but so is everyone else! In Genesis 9:6, Noah is told that those who murder should be put to death, because they are attacking

the very image of God. By striking out at man they are striking out at God. James takes this even further in James 3:9 when he says that cursing (i.e., speaking in a cruel, harsh degrading way to others) is also an attack on the image of God. We cannot bless God and then curse the picture God made of Himself. Such behavior is absurdly hypocritical.

How can thinking of other people as being made in the image of God change the way I interact with them?

We Have a Special Calling²

The image of God is put side by side with another important biblical concept – the dominion mandate. In Genesis 1:26a we are told about God making man in His image, and then in Genesis 1:26b we are told that man was given the task to rule over creation. We were made to be God’s representatives on earth, and as such it is our job to take care of the world God made. This is not a free pass to do whatever we want, but a solemn responsibility to watch over that which God made and loves.

What does it look like for man to rule over God’s creation well?

Why do you think God set up a representative to rule over the world on His behalf, rather than ruling over it directly Himself?

The world we live in wants to argue that man is inherently special but also that he is a plague that should be removed. It wants to argue that you are basically good but also that the world is thoroughly evil. The world wants to say that man has a purpose but also that he is just an animal. Man was created to be the image of God, a role that he still holds although a role that has broken down somewhat. When people reject that, they lose the ability to understand what man is. Once you reject the Bible’s understanding of humanity and replace it with molecules to man evolution, you have taken the first step down a path of disintegration that will lead to some dark places. In the weeks to come, we will explore how our culture has been walking down that path.

² Some students of God’s Word collapse the image of God into the dominion mandate so that being “in the image of God” is something that we do – ruling over creation on God’s behalf – rather than something that we are. While the Bible does connect the image of God and the dominion mandate, these ideas are still distinct. The image of God is the basis for the dominion mandate, not another way of saying the same thing. We will discuss the dominion mandate more thoroughly in our next lesson.