

“Everything Was Very Good,” Genesis 1:26-2:3 (Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 10, 2017)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

PRAY

Before we start a word about NPM: “quick and natural. Start immediately right on time without a second delay theory is great, and having the event end promptly is also good. Obviously, people can hang around, but there should be zero awkwardness of bolting out the door right when we're done. That's the point - to make it doable.

“Show up, pray, sing, read, leave ...Oh yeah, kids are welcome and they don't have to be quiet or polite... I know mine won't be.” The idea is over time we grow closer to God and each other. Over time.

We are working our way through the book of Genesis this fall. This morning we are looking at the end of chapter one and the first three verses of chapter two.

We'll address perhaps the most important question of all time: what does it mean to be human? Why is that so important? Because if you don't know what it means to be human, then you can't know how to live as a human. If you don't know how to live as a human, then you're condemning yourself to a life of frustration. You have to live as a human, but you don't know how. It would be like someone coming to me saying, “Here, J.D., work this calculus problem.” Those who know me know what's wrong with that picture: J.D.'s abilities in math do not exceed long division any more – I certainly can't do calculus. It would be extremely frustrating; I would just stare at the problem and spin my wheels. Yet that is precisely how so many people feel

today – they stare and their lives and mentally, emotionally, spiritually spin their wheels, because they have no idea what they really need to be doing.

If you don't know what you are, then there's no way you can know how to live. Therefore, there's is no more important question than "what does it mean to be human." So what does our text this morning tell us? **To be human means we are made in the image of God.**

Genesis 1:26-27a: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him ..."

Do you know what the Bible is saying here? It's amazing. It's not just saying that human beings are specially created, that we can reason, we can think abstractly, or that we have a sense of morality. All that's true, but that's not what it means to be made in the image of God.

Rather, it means that in a very real way human beings *are not just special but God-like*. In the gospel of John we read how the Jewish leaders are getting ready to stone Jesus because he said, "I and the Father are one." In John 10:33 we read these men said to Jesus, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'?" John 10:33-34.

See, I had to qualify it – I had to say that human beings are "God like", I chickened out a little bit, because if I had said what Jesus said (where he quotes Psalm 82) "You are gods," what would have happened? I'm not saying you would have stoned me, but there would have been some very upset, confused, angry people in the room.

Now, obviously human beings are not God. He is the Creator, we are the creatures. We are not omniscient, omnipotent, eternal as God is. We were once perfect, though. In the Garden of Eden, before sin entered the world, we were perfect, just like God. In Genesis 9:6, even after all the sin in the world that led to Noah's flood, humans are still said to be made in the image of God.

Therefore, we must never forget: to be made in the image and likeness of God means that we, as human beings, are God-like. Very close to being God. As close as you can get to God without being God. We are closer to God than the angels are.

The author of Hebrews writes this: "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking.⁶ It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?'⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor,⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.'" Hebrews 2:5-8 (quoting Psalm 8:4-6). Elsewhere Paul says we will judge angels.

You could say that human beings bear the face of God. Calvin said: “To see another human being is to see a creature that delights God by mirroring Him. Wherever God contemplates his own face, he holds it in honor.”

And C.S. Lewis someplace wrote this: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses [see, Lewis has to chicken out, too], to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship ...”

Friends, no matter who you run into or where, whether it’s at church, or at Wal-Mart, in the Grove, in the classroom, in the governor’s mansion, whether it’s in the most expensive neighborhood in Oxford or the poorest, every single person you meet you can rightly address as “Your majesty.” All human beings can and should be regarded as royalty, for we bear the image of God.

This doctrine has huge implications across a range of life issues, and we’ll look at *seven of those implications the rest of the way*: **first, in parenting**. Your children are sinners, no doubt about it. They take after their parents. But they are made in the image of God. They bear the divine stamp, so they must be treated with respect. Jen Wilkin: “If you asked me the single-most misleading statement I’ve heard with regard to parenting, it would be this: *The Bible is relatively silent on the topic of parenting*. On the surface, this statement appears to be true ... Until we remember that children are people. Because if children are people, then they are also our neighbors [made in the image of God].

“Recognizing my children as my neighbors has impacted the way I discipline them, the way I speak to them, the way I speak about them to others. It has required me to acknowledge how quick I am to treat those closest to me in ways I would never treat a friend or a co-worker. It has helped make my children objects of my compassion instead of my contempt. I am better able to celebrate their successes without taking credit for them, and to grieve their failures without seeing them as glaring evidence that I’m a terrible parent. Recognizing my children as [made in the image of God] has freed me up to enjoy them as people rather than to resent them as laundry-generating, food-ingesting, mess-making, fit-throwing financial obligations.”

Second, racism. If all human beings are made in the likeness of God, then any philosophy that is built on the premise that one race is superior to others must be regarded by Bible-believing Christians as evil. We are called in Romans 12 to “hate what is evil and cling to what is good.” If we don’t do that with racism, we are denying those human beings their dignity as image-bearers. And likewise, any political philosophy that says the races need to be separated to maintain the purity of one or more of the races is also evil. Paul says in Ephesians 2 and 3 that Jesus died to tear down the walls dividing the races so that in Christ there could be one new humanity living together in peace as brothers and sisters. Paul, writing as a Jew in Ephesians: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs [with the Jews], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Ephesians 3:6.

Third, abortion. Planned Parenthood is wrong, dead wrong, when it says that babies still in the mother’s womb are not humans. They say those babies are not yet human beings but are instead

“potential life”. They won’t tell you when they go from being potential life to actual life, but they will say that in the womb babies should not be regarded as having human rights. Nonsense! We need to shout it from the rooftops: from the moment of conception, all human beings are bearers of the image of God and mandate dignity, respect, and care.

In the text of Genesis 1 itself there’s a **fourth implication** to what it means to be in the image of God: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:27. Now, I had to choose when I came to this verse: either preach a whole sermon on this topic or try to summarize as a part of a sermon and move on. I chose the latter, and maybe I shouldn’t have, but here goes: I’m going to try to cram a lot into the next five minutes, so bear with me.

Genesis 1:27 is saying that fixed genders, **being born male or being born female**, is fundamental to what it means to be a human being. That would have been a totally uncontroversial statement fifty years ago all over the United States. When I started preaching almost fifteen years ago in rural Louisiana, it was an uncontroversial statement. But not today, not anywhere in the U.S., because we are products of a culture that now not only normalizes homosexual behavior but also the phenomenon of being transgendered – being born with the anatomy of one gender but then choosing to identify as another.

I didn’t even know what it meant to be transgendered until about 2012, and now there are entire television shows devoted to it now. It just goes to show the breakneck pace at which our culture is changing.

What does it mean according to the Bible to be male or female? Let me tell you first what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that if you are a male, you’ll only like certain activities: football, weightlifting, deer hunting, and *Fast and Furious* movies. Nor does it mean that if you are a female, you’ll only want to wear dresses, go shopping, work on your Pinterest board, and watch Reese Witherspoon movies.

Those are cultural caricatures of what it means to be male and female. According to the Bible, maleness and femaleness doesn’t have a lot of application in the vast majority of life. Sure, there’s always the biological differences between men and women: men have different sexual organs than women, men are bigger and stronger specifically in the upper body than women. And there might be some extreme cases where we say, “You know, it’s probably not a great idea for a woman or man to participate in this or that activity.” But in most spheres of life whatever men can do, women can do. Or, as Annie Oakley says to Frank Butler in *Annie Get Your Gun*, “Anything you can do I can do better; I can do anything better than you.”

Christians have virtually no argument with that statement because it’s only inside two places, the family and the church, that we really get to see what it means to be male and female.

Why? Because inside those two spheres both men and women get to take on the role of Jesus, but in different ways so that the glories of who Jesus is are put on full display. Inside the church and the family men play the role of Jesus in his role as they head, the authority over all humanity. So men who are married are in authority in their respective families, and men who are

elders are in authority in their respective churches, and their jobs are to **feed and lead**. Men are to provide for their families as best they can by bringing in literal food for them to eat (if you're a husband) or providing for the church by making sure they have spiritual food that nourishes (the Word of God, if you're an elder).

Husbands and elders are to lead their families and churches to try and do the will of God. Inside the family, it helps me to think of leading this way: husbands constantly go to their wives and say "let's," as in "Let's go for a walk," "Let's read to the children," "Let's pray," "Let's talk about finances," "Let's read the Bible," "Let's go to church," "Let's talk about this and make a decision as a family," "Let's talk about our new dog and what to do with her because she's driving us crazy with her barking" (that's a reason conversation at the Shaw house).

Leading in these conversations, by the way, emphatically does not mean that men always get their way in these conversations. **Not at all** – in fact, good biblical male leadership means most of the time the men won't get their way because they are playing the role of Jesus. All Jesus ever did was sacrifice his desires for the church's good. Jesus lived a perfect life, the life none of us ever could live, and on the cross he died the death we deserve for our sins, but he didn't deserve. That's the heart of the gospel – Jesus dying for the sins of his people. If you believe that, you are one of God's people. But Jesus being the head of the church meant Jesus had to suffer and die for his bride. That's the model husbands have to live up to.

Women, by contrast, inside the family and church play the role of Jesus with regard to his submission to God the Father. Jesus willingly submitted to the Father's leadership: he said, "Not my will, but yours, be done," when it came to God's plan for the redemption of humanity. So women also are to willingly and joyfully submit to the leadership of the men in authority over them – their husbands and their elders. They work to make themselves a delight to be led. When the men in authority say, "Let's," they say, "OK." In this way, women and men who aren't elders have the same role inside the church – they both must submit to leadership.

This is why you can be a man and think football is boring and be much more biblically masculine than someone who is an all-Pro football player. It has nothing to do with physical strength. It has everything to do with being willing to lead the people God has given you and **take the hits** that are bound to come from doing so. And likewise you can be a woman and hate wearing skirts and be a tomboy and be much more biblically feminine than Miss America, because it has nothing to do with cultural notions of beauty but instead has to do with a condition of the heart.

I honestly think about a third to a half of all the wondering that goes on about, "Am I gay?" or "Am I transgendered?" would disappear if our culture really understood what it means to be male and female. All the confusion wouldn't disappear, it's more complicated than that, but a lot of it would.

Yet seeing ourselves as male and female is absolutely necessary because through this part of our humanity we get a sneak peak into the character of not only of Jesus, but of God, that we would never otherwise have.

Maleness and femaleness forces us remember how we are *all human, yet distinct*. We are one human race, yet there are real, fixed differences among us because of gender – not because of race, not because of intellect, not because of strength, but gender. Likewise, *God himself is One, there is only one God, yet within himself God is also distinct*.

This gets us to the doctrine of the Trinity. God exists eternally as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each person is God, yet there is only one God. Maleness and femaleness helps us to remember this. And what is it that the persons of the Trinity have been doing forever? *They've been loving one another, and being loved by one another. Love is at the heart of what it means to be God.*

Therefore, **the fifth implication** of being made in the image of God is we were made to be loved and to love. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that though every other gift will pass away love never will. He writes, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13.

Do you want to be really human? I mean *really human*? You must love one another. If you want to guarantee that J.D. Shaw starts crying, all you have to do is sit me down in a rocking chair, give me a child, and then hand me a particular book to read to said child. That book is *The Velveteen Rabbit*. If you know the story, the Velveteen Rabbit is a stuffed animal. But his owner, a boy, has just gotten some flashy new toys and forgets about the Rabbit for a while. If you've never read this book it's kind of like the plot of the first *Toy Story* movie, where Buzz Lightyear is the new toy and Woody the Cowboy gets forgotten.

At one point in the book we read this: “The Velveteen Rabbit turned to the old wise experienced Skin Horse in the nursery, and asked, ‘What is Real? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’ The Skin Horse replied, ‘Real isn't how you're made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’ ‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit. ‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,’ he asked, ‘or bit by bit?’

“‘It doesn't happen all at once,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand ... but once you are Real you cannot become unreal again. It lasts for always.’” Can love turn a stuffed animal real? I'm not going to put limits on what God might do in the new heavens and the new earth, but I do now that nothing will make you more truly, really, human than love.

That gets us to **a sixth implication for being made in the image of God**: from time to time over history, people have argued that those with disabilities or birth defects are somehow less human than the rest of us, because they don't have the same capacities and others, and often over history they've too often been treated as if they aren't really human. But that can't possibly be true, because people with disabilities are capable of immense love, and boy are they loved. They are

real, they are made in the image of God, and therefore worthy of dignity and the best care and being taught in school and in the church and worthy of all our respect.

Seventh implication: if we are made in the image of God, then we can rest. “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Genesis 1:26. “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” Genesis 1:31-2:3.

These verses tell us that God made man in his image and has set man over all creation – so man has dominion over it. God sees all he has made and declares it “very good,” then rests. Now, God rests not because he is tired, not because he needs a break, but because he wants to stop and enjoy what he’s done.

Have you ever had a meal at some great restaurant, and pushed yourself back from the table and said, “Oh, that was so good”? That’s what God is doing here – he’s not evaluating what he’s making, wondering if it’s good. No, he knows it’s good! Instead, he’s enjoying what he’s done.

If you don’t remember that you are made in the image of God, and that he has given man dominion over creation, *then you will never really enjoy the world in which you live in, and you will certainly never rest.* The Bible says we don’t naturally believe we’re made in the image of God because we don’t naturally acknowledge there is a God. That’s Romans 1:21: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

You know what we naturally think we are? *Beasts.* That’s the rest of Romans 1. We exchange the truth of God for a lie. And you know what beasts never do? **They don’t enjoy, and they never rest.** They may sleep, they may hibernate, but they never rest. Deer never rest. They’re always on the lookout for predators. Birds never rest. They’re always looking for food. Beasts are always fighting to survive.

And as long as we are fighting to survive you know what we aren’t doing? ***We aren’t loving one another.*** We are too busy trying to survive to do that. We feel like love and rest and enjoyment is a luxury, something we can do after we get all the stuff on our list accomplished.

We are too busy trying to make grades or make money to rest and love. Can’t rest when you’ve got to pay the bills or get a job. We are too busy trying to make sure our kids get on the right travel team, get to practice on time, and have all the right clothes and opportunities to rest. We are too busy trying to win the approval of people around us. We can’t tell anyone “no,” so we can’t afford to rest.

We default into thinking we are beasts, the world is hostile, and only the strong survive, and that doesn't leave us any time to love, to stop and be kind to one another, to consider one another better than ourselves.

I don't want to be too hard on us. It's easy to feel like we are beasts now, after sin has entered the world and wrecked everything. Before the fall, before Adam and Eve sinned, the world just yielded itself to man, just did whatever man said, and there was no frustration. It was easy to feel as if you had dominion over creation then. But now there are thorns and thistles. Now there is a curse upon the earth, and so it is much harder now to rest than it was in God's original design. Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, weren't tempted to think they were beasts. We, who live east of Eden, outside of paradise, easily fall into the trap of thinking we are animals.

We must remember what Jesus said: *you are gods!* You are made in God's image. If you really believed that then you could say "no" to all the things this fallen world is screaming at you to do, that's sucking all your time and energy away, and *really rest and really love*. Only by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, that God made you in his image, that you've been messed up by sin, but by his grace God has restored you to a right relationship in Jesus Christ and has made and will make you perfect once again, will you ever be able to rest and enjoy and love, because you'll feel like you can afford to.

There is a hymn that goes like this: "Though dark be my way, since He is my guide, 'tis mine to obey, 'tis His to provide; Though cisterns be broken, and creatures all fail, the Word He has spoken shall surely prevail." Do you believe that? Revel, friends, in being like God, and treat one another just the same. Amen.