

Huge Potential

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[0 : 00] Well, this evening we are going to continue our study which is called No Ordinary People, which is looking at the amazing truth that the Bible reveals on its very first page the fact that humanity is made in the image of God.

We're going to touch on the two passages that we read, but we can read again actually from Genesis 1. These wonderful words from verse 26 to 28, when it's where we read, 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.

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

Page one of the Bible makes it absolutely clear that there is something incredibly special about humanity. And that of course means that there's something incredibly special about you.

[1 : 28] So we are looking over a few weeks in our evening services at what it means to be image bearers. In each of these we are recognizing that when the Bible says that we're made in God's image, it means that as humans we resemble God.

So that means when you look at a human, you see something of what God is like. But it also means that we represent God. We are given a unique position and role in his creation.

We resemble him and we represent him. And what I hope that will show you over these weeks is that so many of the things that really matter to the human race, the things that people would regard as absolutely crucial and non-negotiable, can be traced back to this truth, to the fact that we're made in the image of God, even though a lot of people may not realize that or make that connection.

So for example, if you asked anyone today, does equality matter? They will say absolutely. And as we saw in the first sermon two weeks ago, the biblical teaching about the image of God is telling us that everyone, absolutely everyone is precious.

Everyone has the same worth and value. And it's because we're made in the image of God. Now, you could go out into the streets of Edinburgh.

[2 : 59] I don't think you'd find anybody who would deny that we have equal worth. But without the doctrine of the image of God, it's very hard to say where that worth comes from.

Today if you were to ask anyone, do relationships matter? They would say absolutely. And last week, John explored how relating to one another is such a crucial aspect of who we are as humans. We need each other for so many reasons. But the way that we relate to one another needs to be within appropriate boundaries. And again, nobody would deny that boundaries are essential, but without the doctrine of being made in the image of God, it's hard to know where to put them.

Tonight, we're thinking more around the question, does what you achieve matter? Does what you do in your life matter?

So you think of the stuff that you put your energy into over the past week, your job, your studies, your research, your interests, your talents, your skills, your efforts.

[4 : 00] Does any of that matter? Well, I think everybody would say, yeah, it does. But are we able to explain why?

The Bible's explanation for why it matters is because we are made in the image of God. And when God made you in his image, he made you a human with huge potential for doing awesome stuff.

And so that's our title tonight, Huge Potential. And we're going to think about it under three headings, Huge Potential Created, Corrupted, and Reclaimed.

Just the heart of the doctrine of the image, the fact that we're made in the image of God is the fact that there's a correspondence between what we are like and what God is like. That's just what it's saying at a very basic level.

So that means that to understand what we are like, we need to recognize what God is like. Accurate anthropology is impossible without robust theology.

[5 : 08] And of course, there's so much we could say, and we are only going to scratch the surface of this this evening. So when we're thinking about potential, when you look at God, there's many things we could say, but there's four that I want to pick out.

We could say that God is rational, communicative, capable, and creative. And I want to just unpack these very briefly because they're all evident in Genesis 1 and throughout the rest of scripture.

So rational. When you read Genesis 1, you're immediately struck by how orderly and coherent everything is. There's separation, progression, order, structure.

It's so clear that God is rational and methodical. In fact, there's a big contrast in Genesis 1 between the kind of chaotic void of verse 2 and the beautifully ordered universe that gets created in the rest of the chapter.

Everything is in its right place. Everything is according to its kind. And of course, that incredibly fine tuned life supporting balance that exists in the universe has fascinated humanity ever since.

[6 : 20] And that rational coherence is especially evident in the creation of humanity where God pauses. And as you can see, says, let us make man.

And at that moment, we're just given the briefest of glimpses into the thinking and planning that takes place in the mind of God.

God is also communicative. Genesis 1 is recording the speech of God. In fact, the whole of the Bible is the speech of God. In a sense, so too is the universe.

It's a general revelation of his character. And the key point in all of that is the fact that God communicates. He speaks, he conveys information, he reveals himself.

He's not a stone or a machine. He's personal and he communicates. God is also capable. If you look at Genesis 1, God only needs to speak.

[7 : 18] And all the mass of energy and complexity and diversity in the universe comes into being. It's an astonishing display of capability in creation.

And ever since creation, God shows his capability in sustaining and upholding the whole of the universe. So God is rational, communicative, capable.

All of these combine to show us that God is creative. Now that, of course, seems obvious if he's creator, then of course he's creative. But the thing that I want to highlight is that if you look at the world around you, if you look at the universe, all the beauty and majesty and wonder that you see is showing us the phenomenal creativity of God.

I was trying to back this up with a bit of evidence, so I took the extremely scholarly approach of Googling awesome photos. And so I did that. And what came up was a picture of a stunning star, some big, massive, I don't know what you call it.

You see these massive, awesome star, cloudy, explosiony things in space. Beautiful landscapes from across the world.

[8 : 36] Amazing animals and plants. And even a photo of someone's iris. And that was possibly the coolest photo of all. Somebody's iris.

And every one of them is showing the astonishing creativity of God. All of that's reminding us that God is amazing.

But if you are made in the image of God, it means that you are like him. And the Bible makes it very clear that all of these things are through of you as well.

Now that doesn't mean that you're at God's level, none of us are, but it does mean that you are created with huge potential. So as humans, we are rational.

That means that you have a level of understanding whereby you can recognize order, you can make observations, you can formulate theories, you can establish logical connections, you can make and implement plans.

[9 : 37] In other words, you're able to think. And that ability to think and the rational coherence that you have is higher than in any other part of creation.

Humans are able to communicate so you can speak, you can listen, you can give and receive information, you can laugh, you can persuade, you can relate, you can express yourself, you can reveal who you are.

Humans are capable, so think of everything that humanity has achieved in science, mathematics, technology, exploration, learning, harnessing the earth's resources, inventions, advancements. Humanity is so, so capable. And humans are creative. So think of art, music, drama, architecture, literature, song.

There's amazing creativity in humanity. And in all these areas, we're seeing that humanity has been created with huge potential.

[10:50] And even after thousands of years of human civilization, there's still the potential for so much more. And it all makes perfect sense because the God who is rational, communicative, capable and creative has made us in his image and after his likeness.

And that of course is one of the key things that makes humanity unique. And we see that when we compare ourselves to the world around us. We can think and speak and achieve and create in a way that no other part of creation can.

This probably sounds like a rather almost, it's almost so stupid. It's not worth saying, but I've never seen a stone design a house.

I've never seen a mountain make a speech. I've never seen a tree do algebra. I've never seen a sheep paint a masterpiece.

Humanity is full of evidence to confirm this. So whether you go back to the great mathematical discoveries of Pythagoras, whether you think of the cities and wonders of the Greek and Roman empires, you think of the explorations of Columbus, the music of Mozart, the writings of Shakespeare, the paintings of Rembrandt, all the way to the laptops and phones that are made by Apple, but all amazing examples of the potential in humanity.

[12:19] But the Bible is also full of examples of this as well. And throughout scripture, you see the potential of humanity being realized in many wonderful ways.

But one of the best examples in scripture is the Tabernacle and Temple, which is what we read about.

So the Tabernacle Temple served as the center point for Israel's religious life. It's the place where God's presence dwelt, where the tablets, where the Ten Commandments were kept.

It's where the people worshiped God. And when we read about the Tabernacle, we hear about the Tabernacle being described as a tent, and we hear of the temple being built. And it's easy to maybe imagine, well, you think of a tent, you could maybe think of a rather kind of yucky marquee that you have at a festival or something, not like that at all.

These buildings were remarkable. The Tabernacle, as we said, functioned as a movable tent, but not like something you'd see at a car boot sale.

[13:35] The temple was a permanent building in Jerusalem, but both served the same purpose. And in the building and in the functioning of the Tabernacle and Temple, we see wonderful examples of the huge potential that humanity has been given.

So we read in Exodus 35, when plans were being made to build the Tabernacle, God gave the command, let every skillful craftsman among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded. And in that chapter and in the chapters around it, the whole narrative of the Tabernacle being built, you see all the things that we've been talking about. You see meticulous planning plans are given by God.

There's careful measurement. There's precise shapes and sizes, a clear orderly design. There's a vast range of skills involved, construction, metalwork, embroidery, engraving, carving.

There's a wonderful harnessing of resources as people share their wealth and bring their wood and their precious stones. And the same is seen in the construction of the temple, later in the Old Testament, only it's on an even bigger scale.

[14:41] But it's not just in the building of the Tabernacle and Temple that we see the potential of humanity being displayed. It's also in the ongoing serving and life of these things, which is what we read about in First Chronicles.

We read about all those who were involved in the service of the house of the Lord, in the music of the house of the Lord with symbols, harps, liars, and the number of them who were trained in singing to the Lord, who all who were skillful was 288.

All of this is telling us that if you could step into the Tabernacle or the Temple, you would be looking at a work of art.

Prep design, stunning craftsmanship, beautiful furnishings. And you would also hear a astonishing talent.

Outstanding musicians, phenomenal singers, and all the beautiful poetry of the Psalms. It's all a brilliant example of the huge potential of humanity made in the image of God.

[15 : 52] And it's reminding us that when God created humanity in Genesis 1 and 2, He created us to thrive. And that's our huge encouragement for us all to remember what we're capable of.

But Genesis chapter 3 tells us that that's not the whole story.

The huge potential that we're created with has also been corrupted. So when humanity sinned against God, it didn't mean that we stopped bearing the image of God, but it did mean that that image has now been damaged and marred.

And as we often say, humanity is now beautiful and broken, and you only need to pick up a newspaper to know that that's true in both directions. And this applies to every aspect of being image bearers, and it definitely applies to the huge potential that we have.

Because of our sinfulness, the fact that we've rejected our created, it means that not only do we have the potential to thrive, we also have the potential to harm.

[17 : 09] So in terms of our rationality and our thinking, people can take that great potential for thinking, planning, organizing, and they can use it to commit terrible crimes, to mercilessly exploit others, to satisfy appalling greed, lust, and selfishness.

In terms of our communication, we can say the most awful things. We can laugh at people's suffering.

We can use our words to deceive and manipulate. In terms of our capabilities, all too often, our advancements contribute to warfare, pollution, exploitation, and the destruction of natural resources.

And in terms of creativity, you can look in books, in music, in art, in drama, in poetry, and find grotesque immorality.

And very often it's actually glamourized. The potential for harm has affected every aspect of our humanity.

[18 : 30] And I want to say that I think that as Christians, we have been at risk of misunderstanding this over the years. Because often this recognition of the sinfulness and the potential for harm in human behavior can lead us to make very definite categories of good stuff and bad stuff.

So we'll maybe see sin in one aspect of our culture, and so we'll label that area as bad. So if we hear of an immoral TV program, then TV is bad.

Same for the internet, same for movies or Facebook. Something bad's happened, so that's bad.

It's the same for going to a pub or even playing football or a different sport. Often we can categorize these things as bad because there's bad aspects of them.

It's a good example of that today. This afternoon Manchester United fans forced their way into their stadium and they're protesting and they're going beyond appropriate behavior in terms of protesting.

[19 : 42] So you could say, well, football is bad because that kind of thing happens. But it's not just stuff like that, we might even do it with churches.

So you look at a church and you see, well, they're not maybe on the right page about some issue. They're bad. We'll keep away.

We might even just do it with people. So they're socialists, they're bad. They're Tories, they're bad. They work in the oil industry, they're bad.

They're gay, they're bad. Donald Trump actually did that very effectively. He labeled the other side not as political rivals, but as people who were evil.

And that kind of categorizing things as good or bad. It's very tempting, but it's very simplistic and it is definitely not biblical.

[20 : 46] Because the impact of sin doesn't mean that there's some good stuff and some bad stuff in very definite categories. And it doesn't mean that we have to kind of retreat into one and make sure that we avoid the other at all costs.

The impact of sin does not mean that. The impact of sin means that in everything, there's a mix of good and bad.

So take books. Some books are masterpieces. Some books are the most important words ever written.

Others have inspired some of the worst crimes in history. Take music, some music is mind blowing in its majesty and beauty. Some music is desperately dark.

Laboratories can discover the cures to awful diseases. They can also produce the drugs that leave millions of people in desperate bondage.

[21 : 47] Governments can build great nations and maintain stability over huge civilizations. They can also ruthlessly exploit people and mercilessly destroy the lives of enemies.

The internet's a doorway to discovery and to contact with friends and loved ones. It's also the theater for almost every sin imaginable.

And even churches. Many examples of truly awful behavior can be seen in the history of the church. And it still happens today. And I could go on with examples from any area of life. The key point is that the effect of the fall is total, not partial, not selective, total.

It's not that there's some categories of things that are good and others are bad. Every area of life has been affected by sin in every area of life. There's potential for great harm.

[22 : 51] And perhaps the hardest thing for us to recognize is that the problem is not music or books or the internet or the markets or politics or religion. The problem is humans.

And that includes us. And that gives us the sober reminder that even in the best things of life we have potential to do harm. And sometimes we do it even without thinking.

It's so easy to snap at our children, to moan about our colleagues, to gossip about someone's mistakes, to be happy to see someone fail or to be nice to someone just to get them to do what we want.

And so a moment ago we said that remembering what we are capable of is a huge encouragement. At the very same time, remembering what we are capable of is a huge warning to us all.

[23 : 57] But at the heart of the Bible is the message that God is not going to leave things this way. And so huge potential is created, huge potential is corrupted, but huge potential is reclaimed.

The message of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come to undo the damage of sin, to restore creation and to reclaim and renew humanity as God's image bearers.

That means that even in the midst of all the damage that sin has caused and even in all the mess of humans' failures, God has never forgotten the extraordinary potential that he created us to have.

And this is where it's very important for us to remember that if you are a Christian or if you become one, you must not forget that God's goal for you is not the forgiveness of your sins.

Often we think that that is the goal. We need to have our sins forgiven so that we can get to heaven. But that is not God's goal because God's goal is way bigger than that.

[25 : 08] So yes, forgiveness of sins is part of it, but it's only part of it. It's not that God wants to be like, oh yeah, that person's sins are forgiven. Well, I'll forget about them until they die and then I'll let them in because they've got the ticket to heaven.

That is not God's goal and that's not how Christianity works because God's goal is bigger and way better. God's goal is to restore you to his image.

And the way in which he does that is to conform you to the image of his son, Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God.

God's goal is to completely renew you. That's why Paul says in Ephesians 4, for us to put off our old self which belongs to your former man of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

God's goal is to completely renew us, to reclaim us back from all the brokenness of sin, to make us into the people he created us to be.

[26 : 20] In other words, what God wants for you is that you'd fulfill all the amazing potential that he's given to you. And this is so important because very often in life all we can see is huge problems.

So we look at the world around us, we see huge problems. We look at the week ahead, we see huge problems. We look at ourselves, we see huge problems. And it's true, there are many problems around us, ahead of us and within us.

But at the same time, what does God see? When God looks at the people around you, when God looks at the week ahead of you, when God looks at you, what does he see?

He sees huge potential. And that makes perfect sense because he's the one who made you. He's the one who knows what humanity is capable of.

I often think of this, I don't know, I've got a computer at home, it's a Dell, something or other. It was one of the kind of top of the spec computers.

[27 : 32] I like to think of a very kind of patient person in life, but with computers I'm not. So if my computer doesn't work, I get annoyed in about one second, potential for harm.

So this is probably not the way to shop, I wouldn't recommend this. When I had to buy a new computer, I went into the shop and said I want the fastest and most reliable computer you've got and I don't care how much it costs.

Which isn't the best way to do it. But I did end up with a good computer and I love it, it's worked really well. But if the person who made that computer came and sat beside me, he would be like, you're such an idiot.

You've got no idea what this machine is capable of because I probably use about 2% of what it's able to do. And if the person who made it sat beside me, he'd be like, look at what I can do.

Look at the potential this machine has got. I sometimes think that must be how God feels when he looks at us. He's like, look at the potential that I've placed in you.

[28 : 35] He's the one who knows what humanity is really capable of because he's made us and he sent his son to rescue us, to restore us, to reclaim what is rightfully his.

Humanity has huge potential and that potential should be used to honor and glorify the one who gave it to us in the first place.

And all that raises four important lessons that I want us to conclude with. Lesson number one, God is not boring. And if you think he is, then you know absolutely nothing.

Number two, God is not looking for the finished article. So often in life and even in church, we're looking for people to work with us.

And as we do so, we look for people who are the finished article or not far off it, people who are capable, strong, reliable and stable. Where would any of us be if God did that to us?

[29 : 42] God does not look for the finished article. Instead he sees the potential. And God grant that with our colleagues, our friends and our churches, we would always do the same.

And God forbid that we forget how important it is to give people a chance. Number three, God deserves more than mediocre.

We said earlier that in the Old Testament, one of the greatest, if not the greatest example of human potential was in God's tabernacle and temple. That's what you saw, the very best art, music, engineering, craftsmanship and study, all happening.

But obviously that's the Old Testament. What about today? Where should the great potential of humanity be seen most today? So if you entered the Old Testament, you said, well, where are we going to see humanity's potential?

You said, well, here in the temple and in the tabernacle. But what about today? Where should the great potential of humanity be seen most clearly today?

[30 : 52] The answer is exactly the same. In God's temple. But where's God's temple now?

It's you. It's the church. And it's reminding us that the Christian church should never be the place where study or research or art or music or literature or technology or science or creativity.

It should never be the place where these things are despised. It should be the place where these things are deeply valued and energetically pursued to honor and glorify God.

Now, obviously, there's potential for sin in all of these areas. We must never forget that. But if you stood in the temple in the Old Testament, you'd have been blown away by the display of human potential.

And not for one second would you have thought, well, this is a bit half-hearted. When we stand in the temple today, not in a building, I don't mean a building. I mean, when we stand among Christians, when we are part of that crowd as ourselves, whether it, when we worship on a Sunday or as we work on pursue our leisure activities on Monday to Saturday, God forbid that our behavior, our efforts, our worship are half-hearted.

[32 : 20] May they, may they be where we show the potential that God has given us. But coupled to that is lesson number four.

So I've said God's not boring. God's not looking for the finished article. God deserves more than mediocre, but number four is also, well, I think it's actually the most important one.

God is not looking for geniuses. The pinnacle of human potential is not genius. Now, genius is a wonderful thing, and humanity has many geniuses, and we have benefited hugely from their achievements.

And I preach to several of them every week. But in God's great plan of restoring humanity, the pinnacle of human potential is not genius.

It's something else. And the answer to that is given in Luke 22. There there was a dispute among the disciples about who was the greatest, and you're thinking, well, who is the most important?

[33 : 29] Who's the greatest? Who's the most significance? Jesus responded to that argument by telling the disciples that the person who is the greatest is not the person who's a genius.

Is the person who serves. The person who serves others. That's the pinnacle of human potential, not talent, skill, and ability, even though all those things are important, the pinnacle is serving others.

And we know that that is true because the greatest ever example of human potential is when Jesus lived and died to save humanity.

And how did he do that? He did it by serving others. And as he served, he actually endured the worst of humanity's potential for harm.

But he did it to rescue us and restore us to what we were created to be. And this is so cool and so exciting because it means that the pinnacle of our human potential is something that every single one of us can do every single day of our lives.

[34 : 51] Just for everyone here, for everyone listening at home, this week you've got the potential to do something amazing. You've got the potential to love and serve others for the honor and glory of God.

And that's where all the kind of jewels and carvings and splendor of the Old Testament temple is replaced now with a temple of love and warmth and friendship and encouragement and patience and gentleness and kindness and goodness.

And that's what the world needs to see so much. And you and I can do it. We have that potential from God.

And it's pointing us forward to what's even more exciting, the fact that Jesus is calling us to a new humanity where one day all the potential for harm in humanity will be gone and we'll see just how beautiful and wonderful our God-given potential is.

But right now, the church's role is to be a glimpse of that, to be a firstfruits, to be the place where the brilliance of the age to come is seen in the here and now.

[36 : 19] And I hope that every one of you wants to be part of that. And to be part of it, all we have to do is put our trust in Jesus, which means that if anyone's not yet a Christian here or watching at home, this moment right now has the potential to be the greatest moment of your life.

Jesus is asking you to follow him. And all you need to say is, to right I will. May God make that through of us all.

Amen. Dear God, our Father, we praise and honour you as our Creator.

We confess before you our abuse of the potential you've given us, but we repent of that and we pray that in the week ahead, you would take the potential that you've placed within us and use it for your glory, that we would do everything in our jobs, our homes, our studies and our other responsibilities as wholeheartedly as we can.

But that over it all, we would make our number one priority in our work and in our homes and our responsibilities that our number one priority would be to serve others to the glory of your name.

[37 : 58] Blessed be your name, O God, for the huge potential you've given us. Amen.