

Individuals Together

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[0 : 00] Okay, so I want us to go back to bear in mind that passage that we read together and as I said, I'm going to be looking through, I'm going to be dipping into a lot of different verses so I hope that's not too distracting.

It's certainly not, it's far from a classic kind of proper sermon you're getting tonight but I hope that nonetheless it's important when we think about this theme.

We've been looking at the image of God in us as Christians, we've been looking at what it means, we've also been looking at how that's been distorted and broken in the world in which we live and what that means.

It's interesting, someone told me this week that you can look on, I think it was online, you can look online at how many times in say theology or in books and in commentaries and in the media that certain biblical phrases come up and apparently the image of God is much more commonly referred to now than it was 50 and 100 years ago.

Now, I have no idea why that's the case but it's interesting sometimes that different spiritual truths are more focused at different times in history.

[1 : 27] It not makes them more or less important but it's just interesting that that happens. So we're really looking at what the image of God means for us, being image bearers ourselves, you as an image bearer, me as an image bearer and also the catastrophic results of sin that have brought about a distortion of that image so that we have a better understanding of what it means to have a biblical worldview of life and what it means for us as Christians to live in the world in which we live.

As we understand the world in which we live from a spiritual, from a theological point of view and what we can see, then it helps us to live by faith in the things we can't see because we see where the world has gone wrong and what sin has brought into the world and what God is doing in reforming us according to His image.

And if you go back to these verses in Revelation chapter 7, what we have there is the fulfillment or heaven is, the new heavens and the new earth is the full restoration of God's image in humanity.

So it's the end game, it's the end picture. So it's what we're aiming towards and that is what God is doing in us. He's recreating His image and when He returns and usher in the new heavens and the new earth, that will be that recreated image of God in humanity and in the universe.

So what I want to do this evening is I want to recall our original verse really that deals with the image of God which is right back from Genesis 1, 26, 27.

[3 : 19] And I've highlighted these two bits of it, then God said, let us make man in our, I could have highlighted the us as well which I'll mention in a minute, later on. Let us make man in our image after our likeness.

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over every, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps in 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 I want us to think about that from the very beginning right to the very end to the verses we looked at in Revelation which is the future, the city of God, the fully restored image of God. And think about what that means in terms of image bearing in this last theme which is that as image bearers, and this is the title of the sermon, we are image bearers at its fullest when we are individuals together.

So that's really the theme tonight, it's about being individuals together which means it is the reflection of God's image most fully in life.

[4 : 35] Because when God created in the beginning, He created them male and female as individuals but He created them together in His image.

So what I'm wanting to do is make us recognize that individuality is important but so is community is hugely important as well because both of these things reflect, will reflect fully the image of God in the new heavens and the new earth.

And that is because we are image bearers of God, okay? And that is what we see in the character of God.

That's what most reflects the Godhead. Individuals together most reflect the Godhead which is that theological reality of the Trinity, three persons in one God.

And that's tremendously profound and it's in many ways beyond our understanding because God is therefore a hugely complex God but it's that image of God that we reflect by being individuals together because what you have in the divine person or in the Godhead you have three divine persons.

[5 : 59] Each are individual. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and yet you have one divine society, God, God the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

It's very interesting we've been looking at the Old Testament in the mornings. The Old Testament from beginning to end of the Old Testament it's stressing that there's one God, not a multiplicity of gods.

There's one God. It's interesting that that's in a sense why the Jews wanted to crucify Jesus because he claimed to be God, God the Son. And yet, you know, there's truth in there.

There's truth, isn't there? That God is one. There's not a multiplicity of gods. There's three persons in one divine society, God the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. They can't be separated. They can't be explained as modes of God or forms of God or manifestations of different manifestations of one God.

It's beyond their capacity to fully understand but there's three persons in one God. That is crucial because it focuses our understanding of what it means to be image bearers.

[7 : 14] And if we misunderstand that, we get things all wrong. And that's why, for example, some people would talk about the crucifixion as being cosmic child abuse for a divine father.

How could a divine father ever allow his son to go through such brutality? Because there's a failure to recognize the uniqueness of the character of God, which is three persons, one God.

God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. So that is deep and that is mysterious, but that is the image of God that we reflect.

So it means that in reflecting His image, we need to have a right understanding of individuality and a right understanding of society and how in Christ we seek the restoration and the transformation of what is distorted and what is broken because of sin.

So let's for a minute just look at a world that's separated from God in order to help us understand how Christ in the gospel transforms that brokenness.

[8 : 27] I'm going to use two angles at looking at that. One is the fact that the world has shadows of God's image and I'm looking at that a bit more positively.

And then, but it also has distortions of God's image when it comes to individuality and it comes to community. So we see in the world, and I do think this is important, that we look for shadows of God's image in the world in which we live.

And as you go about your lives, you will see that in terms of the respect there is in society, increasingly I think, for the individual.

And that's a good thing. That's a good thing. We should applaud that. It's a good thing that people have more respect for individuals, people overcoming mental health stigma in individuals or being allowed to be different and not having to fit into a particular kind of norm that's the same as everybody else.

Showing racism the red card for individual racism or seeing the person and not the disability. All of these things are good. Encouraging people to think and be independently minded and to be creative.

[9 : 45] All of these things we can see as pale reflect, pale shadows maybe, but nonetheless shadows of the individuality of individuals being made in God's image and being valuable and precious.

And we can also see it sometimes in society. Even in a broken society, we can see things that I hope that as Christians you can say, it's good and I'm not going to critique and criticize everything. You can see maybe over this pandemic, society, communities coming together, helping your neighbour. People will still talk about good Samaritan acts that happen in society. Charity work, teamwork, sacrificing for others. There's some great stories that we read. Occasionally we'll come up in the press. Maybe about how someone has sacrificed for the common good.

And these are shadows of God's purpose, of God's image being reflected both in individuals and in our thinking of individuals and in society.

[10:51] But you know, and I know there's also distortions of God's image that sin has brought about that is hugely destructive. And maybe we've mentioned some of these things before.

Because that drive beyond a praiseworthy individualism towards something that is much more brutal and much more individualistic and negative.

There was a politician one time, I don't know who it possibly was, but who said, there's no such thing as society. And drove individualism to the nth degree.

You know, today, my experience, what I do in my life, that's all that matters. And freedom is about cutting off from everything, cutting off from the roots of the past.

You know, forgetting the cumulative wisdom of societies over generations. I was speaking this afternoon about the really annoying phrase that people use a lot just now about being on the wrong side of history or the right side of history.

[11:59] Because if all, it's only what happens today that's important and everything else that they were foolish and ignorant. We're feelings for the, and within the individual, trump everything, including science and biology and physiology.

Everything is personalized. Everyone can be a victim. And I guess if everyone's a victim, no one's a victim. We're all personal rights triumph responsibility.

And where technology is driving this individualism, even maybe subconsciously, to be living in an individual online world, which is increasingly detached from reality.

And we need to be aware of that as Christians. And we need to be aware of that coming out of lockdown, where the individuality of choosing a go to church and choosing to be part of society and Christian society, where it's much more comfortable to watch when we want and follow.

It's going to be, I think, a challenge for us. And taking up the sacrifice and commitment of serving Jesus beyond our own individual beliefs is going to be a challenge.

[13:12] So we see distortions to individualism. And we also, of course, in the same way see a paradoxical distortion of groupthink, where identity politics overcomes everything else.

Well, where all people get tired under one umbrella. You know, I'm a white, middle-aged, straight Christian man. That's the worst category in the world to be in today's society.

I am, you know, we're the worst of all. I would be canceled and I will be canceled probably at some point.

And the cancel culture which allows no flexibility, no questioning, no respect for other opinions, and no debate, no thoughtful interactions, no nuancing.

And it leads far from a sense of community to a deep, deep sense of astonishing division, and unhealthy nationalism, religious and political conflict.

[14:13] We see it again in Palestine and Israel, racism, all coming from an unhealthy, unbiblical sinful groupthink. Now I think it's, I think it's simple, you may not, but I think it's important to know these things and to analyze them and to think about them because they reflect the reality of what it means to be broken, to bear a broken image of God.

And not only sometimes it's just a shadow, but often it's a distortion of these things. Because what happens is that people don't know how to have a right balance.

They don't know how to be individuals together. I think there's a, so there's a deep, deep confusion. Everyone wants to be an individual, but everyone wants to be in a tribe.

And everyone wants to belong. And because there's no truth and because there's no template, it's impossible to reconcile these two things. Because what's happening is really people are making up a God, like silver and gold in their own image, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

And that's exactly what is happening. When we put God out of the picture, people imagine and make an image, not in the image of God as we were created to do, but they make up their own

image and it's distorted and it's shadowy and it's destructive and it's confusing and it's sinful and it's separated from God.

[15 : 52] But I think it's important to see the shadows and the distortions because it enables us to be aligned with what God is transforming us to become in Jesus Christ and the end game which is Revelation 7 or Revelation 21, the new heavens and the new earth where we are to be individuals together.

There's that right balance of image bearing where the two are fused together as we stand on the rock that is Christ.

So just for the last week while, I want to ask the question, you know, what do we do? How are we image bearers and how do we live in this shadowy and distorted world with all of these realities that we face that you'll increasingly face in your workplace or in your studies or wherever it is we find in the media all the time.

Well I think the first thing we do is we look for commonality. I think that's important that we look for the things that do shadow in shadow maybe, but do reflect that this is God's world.

So you take Paul for example and it's a bit of a famous example I know in Athens, the Archaeopagus, many of Athens I perceive that in every way you're very religious for I passed along and observed the objects of your worship.

[17 : 20] I found also an altar with inscription, turn unknown God, what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. So you know, he didn't say you're a bunch of miserable idolaters, you know, repent and believe he didn't immediately, he made a connection with them.

He noted something of commonality and he respected that and as a means of drawing them to something greater and better. And I think it's good and important for us to show respect and to highlight what reflects even in shadow the good things, what we would call theologically common grace, what is evident of God's blessing on every single day and in every single way.

It's not a saving goodness, but it's an evidence of an estranged heritage. It's the whispers of God in the world in which we live, the way it could be.

I don't think we should always be naysayers because we do have good news and we do praise the quest that people have to respect individual choice and to be thoughtful and to be individual in decision making and community and love, only as it points though to something greater in Christ.

So we look for commonality, but I think also, and this is where I'm flicking through some verses, we need to be critically discerning that Paul says is my prayer that your love for the church may abound more and more with knowledge and with discernment.

[18 : 58] So I think discernment is an important gift, an important reality for us to have in our Christian lives that we would expose the distortions that we see in the world, the dangers of extremism, the dangers of rampant individualism, of people not thinking, the dangers of group think for example, not coming to their own conclusions, the denials of rights that we see around us, the vulnerable, the left behind, the isolated, the confused, that we're discerning.

And we're discerning how to bring Christ into people's lives in these situations that connects with them and that provides for them freedom and hope as we share our lives and share our faith.

So critical discernment is the second thing, and the third thing is that we live out lives ourselves where the image of God by God's grace is being restored in us.

So second, therefore, if anyone was in Christ, that's what we are, a new creation. The oldest passed away behold, the new has come. So we live out the image of God and we allow Him to be transforming us.

So what is that going to mean? It's going to mean that we have a balanced individuality. What is it? We're individuals together. So it means that you as an individual are unique in Christ.

[20 : 32] Christ redeemed you. Christ died for your sins on the cross. He is your Lord. There's nobody else in the seven billion people in this world like you.

You're unique. And you're accountable to Him as a believer for how you live your lives, and so am I. And developing your morality and your obedience and your service to others and your use of gifts and your indwelling of the Spirit and your intimate relationship with God and your own thinking so that you're developing your knowledge and growing in your knowledge, that is your responsibility. You are an individual. That is part of the individuality that you have as a Christian. But there's also a group identity as Christians.

So we are individuals together. You know, I could have taken any verse of the whole of the New Testament in many ways. So then you're no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.

So we also have an identity. We also have a group identity. And within that group identity, we all belong to Christ and Christ is our foundation.

[21 : 58] And we're not within that to be mindless or thoughtless. We're to know what we believe as individuals, but we're to be welcoming and open and sacrificial and serving because it's a new community.

We are individuals in Christ together. It's a new community, Galatians 3, 20. These were really radical words when they were first penned. There's neither Jew nor Greek.

There's neither slave nor free. Neither male nor free. Well, for you're all one in Jesus Christ. There's that need, yes, for discernment in the community, but not judgmental spirit.

There's a willingness to be wronged. We're never to be sexist or racist or sectarian because it's a new community, individuals together under Christ, all of us.

Jesus, great prayer, isn't it? You know, he said, I praise to the Father. I do not ask for these only, but I also ask for those you will believe in me through their word that they may be one just as you, Father are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

[23 : 13] It's such a radically powerful truth that the triune God lives in his people and we are one. So there is individuality, but there is communality.

The danger? The danger is you have your own personal Jesus. It makes you unconnected and distant from others.

The danger is that you belong to a church or you belong to a tradition where you don't think for yourself, where you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus. You just follow the crowd.

You just believe what everyone else believes, but you haven't come to Him personally. You haven't dealt with Him personally. You just want to live outwardly in a certain way to look good within that community to be accepted, but there's no radical relationship with Jesus on the inside.

There are dangers for us to not be transformed, to not be like Jesus. We are to be image bearers and that picture which I hope you've kept in your mind of the great multitude which comes from every tribe and every people and all languages is what we are aiming for, individuals together, not just of what we share but in who we are.

[24 : 40] And we are asked, you ask the question about evangelism, about sharing your faith? How do we do it? How do we draw people out of the shadows and the distortions that sin has brought into the image bearing of the world?

How can we show them a better way? How can we be individuals together? Showing ourselves to be transforming and transformed image bearers.

You know, people talk about the importance of preaching, the power of preaching. Nothing's no good if there's no one who doesn't know Jesus if we're going to be preaching for people's souls and to save them.

How can we as a city center church in the 21st century coming out of pandemic live in such a way that shows a renewed image of God in us as individuals together?

That is for me a huge challenge. How are we going to do it? Because it involves therefore sharing, not just our individual testimony and story, it involves sharing our community and our life together and our society because that is as individuals together when we reflect God and His image most.

[26 : 08] I don't know, one hour of formal worship in a Sunday where then we retreat to our own individual lives is not the height of transformed image bearing.

How is it? How will we do it better together? I think that's a political statement, isn't it? I don't mean it as a political one, better together.

But how do we do it? How do we reflect the image of God better together which reflects God and His glory? It's a huge challenge for you, for me, for us as leaders, for you as members of the Christian church and community here, especially as things change again and as people leave and new people come.

How do we share that renewed image bearing reflection of God as a people, as individuals together? It's a huge challenge.

But we're looking as people who have looked into the face of Jesus Christ and seen His glory that we all, we all, it says, we all are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

[27 : 30] And there's this sense that there's a collectiveness in our own individual reflection as we come together which shows the glory of Jesus.

So I've left you some questions there and I'm not going to give you the answers because I don't have them. But I do think coming out of a pandemic there is going to be a challenge for us in terms of society and community and the risk of being involved in society.

The risk of being involved in serving again, which has been great maybe for a whole year and 16, 17 months maybe, not just to be committed and involved in serving in ways we might have done in the past.

I think that will be, I think that will be a challenge for the whole of the church in our nation and maybe throughout the world as well. And there's always the challenge of being image-bearers, being recreated in Christ in a world which is both broken, has shadows and whispers of God, but also deep, desperate distortions of God.

And so we come to the end of that series looking at that theme of being individuals together which reflects the character of God and which points us forward to heaven where we will be individuals together for eternity.

[29 : 08] Next Sunday evening, if you have any questions from this series because it's intended, it has intended to be quite practical and looking at society and God and what that means.

If you have any questions then Thomas and John will be delighted to answer them next week because I'm going to skive and not be there.

But they will, are more than adequate to answer your questions. So let's pray. Jesus, we thank you for who you are.

We thank you for the love of God. We thank you for the amazing continuity of the Bible, of your Word, which we saw about this morning but also which we've recognized right from the beginning that we are made in your image and the brokenness of sin and the destructive brutality and horror of Satan and his jealous, vicious, brutal envy of God and destruction of God's creation, the horror of that, the evil and darkness.

We thank you that you crushed him on Calvary and that you are recreating what has been lost and will surpass that in glory, which we long for.

[30 : 29] And we know that times it's difficult to see, so difficult to see sometimes the changes. It's difficult to see your kingdom coming because we're so, myopic, our vision is so blunted so often and we just can't see beyond ourselves.

So help us Lord to have that faith and that hope and that love which enables us to persevere and to become individuals together, knowing our individual value and worth in Christ.

Your amazing love for us as people, as individual people and how you've brought us into your family and that we are collectively one, that Christ is with us all, that we are to outwork that renewed relationship together with all its struggles and battles and beauty as well.

So help us we pray and give us vision and clarity moving forward as to how to come out of this pandemic as people who are allowing our fears and our mind and our mentality and our perspective change through Jesus.

Amen.