

Precious People

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to look at another passage as well briefly and we're going to base our thoughts on this passage from Genesis chapter 1, a very well-known passage to us. Thomas mentioned the significance of some chapters, the top 10 chapters in the Old Testament this morning, this is one of them. Genesis 1 and we're just going to read verses 26 to 28 of Genesis 1. 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 other creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image and the image of God he created a male and female, he created them. 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. Okay, so we're beginning, as Thomas mentioned this morning, we're giving a theme this evening on the image of God and how that impacts on the way we think.

As we look for it to help our understanding of God's word and what it says about himself and ourselves, how it affects your worldview and mine as Christians, we have a worldview and we want it to be molded and based on our understanding of God and our understanding of Christ and of his place. But also, I hope it will help us understand the worldview of other people who are not Christians and how we respond to them, so how you respond to them in your day life and how I respond to them. And I guarantee that as we are being transformed by the Spirit, we will find our assumptions being challenged every day and that we will be moved to be transformed by him. So we're going to look at the image of God. It's going to be our kind of our foundation, our base point of thinking and how it helps us to think about some of the hot topics that we find ourselves faced with today. So we want to be theological, but we also want to be practical. So we want to bring our knowledge of God into our everyday lives. So we hope, I've given you a fairly basic level, fairly shallow level, but nonetheless, I hope it will challenge you to think a little bit. We're going to touch on things like human dignity and respect and equality and family and community and sex and gender and the arts and social media and individual rights and some of these issues.

And then we'll finish off with a question time at the end of the six or seven weeks. So today's really just this evening, just an introduction. And it's an introduction into us being made in the image of God and then being renewed in the image of God as Christians. And we saw that in the verses we read in Genesis that man and woman are made in the image of God. It's a huge subject. It's one we've looked at quite a lot in different ways in the church, but it's going to be foundational for this series. And for what we're thinking about, I hope we'll come back to each week. And the theme has been no ordinary people. That's the theme. Now that's taken from C.S. Lewis, really. And there's a great quote that I want to begin with. I'm sure you know it. I just think it's a marvelous quote.

There are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal. And their life is to ours as the life of a nat. But it is to immortals whom we joke with, we work with, we marry, we snub, we exploit. Immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This doesn't mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play.

But our merriment must be of that kind. And it is, in fact, the merriest kind, which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously. No flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And really, that's what C.S. Lewis is trying to speak about. He's trying to remind us that every day, every moment of day when we're with people, we're with people who are made in the image of God. And that should be hugely significant for the way we treat them in our lives. Now there's been theological reams written about the image of God, the image and likeness of what it means for human beings to be in the image of God, what constitutes it in humans, and how it defines us as being different from the rest of creation. And we're only going to touch on one or two introductory thoughts of that this evening. But the reality is we're not simply human apes. And that immediately sets us apart from the foundational philosophical thinking of the world in which we live. It sets us at odds with secular understanding of humanity. However, what I want us also to do is to find common ground in our dealings with people, in our interactions with people, rather than simply blasting down on the presuppositions or the thinkings that people have, because there is common ground, and it's important common ground. Even if it's shadowy, even if it's broken, it's important that we connect with people and point them to the God that we believe they are accountable to. So to be made in the image of God, what is it? Well, I think part of it is it means to know God and to be known. In other words, I think communication with God is an important part of being made in God's image. Do you notice in verse, you may or may not have noticed in verse 28, and God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply. Now, at no other point in creation does God speak to that creation personally. Everything else, He just speaks. It just says He spoke to the animals. He spoke to the sun and the moon, and He declared, but it says specifically to humanity, He spoke to them. And there's a gentle recognition there that is outplayed throughout the chapter that the relationship between man, kind and God is one of, is one of relationship of communication of love, of belonging, and indeed of worship, that created with the Creator. So we were created in His image to be like Him and to communicate with Him because there was a closeness because of the image. But I also think it also means to be, to image God, not only in terms of relating to Him in a relationship of love different from the animals, but also to be like

[7 : 30] Him in a way that's different. Mankind, man and woman together in His image, the centrality of community as reflecting His image of love expressed between man and woman, reflecting His image, a diversity and yet a commonality between the sexes, and a righteousness in that community of relationship in perfection, reflecting God the Father and God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and Trinity.

It's an interesting verse in Genesis 5.3. I haven't asked the guys at the back, but maybe you can put up the slides. Genesis 5.3 is very interesting. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own image, in his own, sorry, in his likeness, in his own image and he named him Seth. There's that amazing simple link between these two words. It's the same two words that are used in Genesis 1. And I think God is just reminding us that there's a family likeness, not just in looks, but in character as there would be with Seth and his dad. And there's that sense in which, you know, everyone writes tremendously deep and technical and theological things of what it means to be made in God's image. But in some ways, it's simply that divine imprint, that fatherly imprint, like Father, like Son, that we are like God because He's our heavenly Father. There's a divine imprint on us, whether it be our morality, our knowledge of good and evil, our self-consciousness, our creative genius, inventiveness, progress, development, whatever it happens to be that sets us apart. It's to be like God. So it's that recognition of knowing God and being known of God, to be like God, but also to serve God. Being in the image of God was to be ambassadors for God and serve Him as regents, as stewards of the world. You know, He says that in these verses, you know, be fruitful and fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens, over every living thing that moves in the earth.

It was this reflection of being vice rulers, as it were of the universe. God gave us that authority over creation to love and protect it in the same way that He loved and protected humanity.

We're to care for the world and the environment and the animal world, inhabit and develop and create cities and create communities, but do it in a way that is sympathetic with the world that He has given us with love and responsibility. That is the image, a quick rundown potentially of the image of God that we were created to reflect in our lives. Now we know that humanity's choice from the very beginning brutally disfigured that image. We know that, don't we? That's the tragedy of sin entering the world, is that that image was horribly distorted. So as humanity and we as part of humanity have chosen to replace God, to take God out of the picture and undergo a rebrand of who we are and what we are. Out with the old, in with the new. God is left out of the picture.

Instead of being image bearers, we become image makers. Instead of being those who reflect God in our lives, humanity deposes God from our lives. Rather than accepting that we are created and created in His image, we create our own gods and we create our own image. We reimagine ourselves.

[11 : 38] Isn't that what society is so often doing? Reimagining what it means to be human. We see it all the time just now. And we refocus our worship on self-made images rather than on the living God idols. And very often that same word for image that's used in Genesis 1 is used throughout the Old Testament, not exclusively, but often of idols. So other images that are to replace God.

And often we do that with ourselves at the very center, rather than God at the center. And that is the deception and that is the brutality and that is the lie of sin that has broken God's image.

And the outworking of that is manifold. Obviously we recognize that, but it's maybe two important things, pride and shame. Turning our backs on God and being image bearers of God has introduced pride and shame. Sin makes us a caricature of what we should be.

You know, the powers of hell laugh and mock at what they see as we, a caricature of what we ought to be. We become independent of God and therefore pick and choose our morality. We enjoy God's gifts and His mercy on humanity, but we despise His lordship. Humanity does.

Pride makes us take credit for who we are, for the gifts that we receive, for the people that we are, and we become selfish and independent because of that. And yet along with that pride in the human condition is an inescapable expression of shame and guilt and a wrong fear of God that we, that humanity deep down knows exists. And yet within that pride and shame and humanity, we remind ourselves that there is great, there's a great marvel in being a human being. And every individual you come across in your life, and I come across in mine, is a wonder. And we should remember that because the image of God, however tainted, remains and is there and should never leave us and should never, we should always remember it in our dealings with other people. So there's this, there's this individual sense in which pride and shame come into our experience, yet we are to value every single individual. We'll look at one or two texts about that in a wee while. But also sin is brought in the disfigurement of community. We recognize that if part of being God's image is being united in community. So the destruction of that image through sin is the individualization of society, where we replace God and communicate with our own idols and relationships change.

[15 : 06] So relationships become primarily transactional. What can I get from them? What can I get from somebody else? Often is the case where jealousy comes to reside in relationships, where there's covetousness, where we guard our love and keep it from some and give it to others, where there's morality is a battleground for who decides what is right, where there's tension between the sexes we see that, don't we right from the very beginning, it really in Genesis chapter 3, we recognize it's part of the curse of the fall and you know your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you with all the complexity of what these verses mean, but it brings tension between men and women, between husband and wife, that spills over obviously into fratricidal in the next chapter with the death, with the first murder and we see that the shedding of blood becomes something that marks the awfulness of the human condition and Genesis 9 verses 5 and 6, God recognizes that and he recognizes it as a break against the image of God in humanity.

Whoever sheds human blood by human shall their blood be shed for and the image of God, God is made, this is after the fall and he's, God is appealing to the image of God in humanity to bring out the awfulness of murder and so we recognize that the image of God remains however broken in humanity and suffering enters the equation and the value we put on other people changes so that it's often based on wealth and power on race on beauty on talent on politics on sexuality and life becomes cheaper because of that both inside the womb and out of the womb, there's division and disrespect in community because the image of God is broken and because people no longer value one another on that basis, the basis on which we value people changes so that it becomes easier for us to devalue them. Our community today is often a pale reflection of the original image of God however it's disfigured and not destroyed so you should and I should in God's mercy applaud and highlight what is good community in the society that we see around us and enable that to point people to a better community that there is in Christ and we should reflect that better community as a transformed people as a church of God. You shouldn't be afraid to participate in community as is seen in this world even though it's shadowy even though the motive for it is not the right motive and it's not to glorify God if it is in a secular environment, you shouldn't be afraid to participate or to value it or to be engaged in it. You know I really like what the Christians in sport kind of ideal is that you don't set up lots of Christian football teams or Christian basketball teams but you go as a Christian into a secular basketball team or a secular football team or whatever sport it is or whatever community is bowling or if it's knitting or flower arrangement, whatever it might be and you engage in that community because there's a reflection of God's image there in community. Now it's imperfect and we recognize that but we applaud what reflects the image even though that image is tainted whether it's individually or whether it's in community and the same goes for the environment. It's clearly a battleground we know from part of what God says in judgment on the fall of man in verse 17 he says because if you've done this cursed are you oh sorry that's the wrong verse. Cursed is the ground because of you and pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life thorns and thistles it shall bring forth you and you shall eat of the plants of the field. There's this sense of which what was once in unity and where humanity was the vice regents of this universe to care and to look after that has changed and humanity's lost sight of that loving stewardship and greed and self-interest have taken over whether that's in the creative world or the animal kingdom. The environment's often not seen as a gift but something to use and abuse to satisfy humanity's greed. It's there randomly, it's there by cosmic chance and we can just use that but there's also a reflection of our stewardship in much of what's

happening to protect the environment and we stand against the miserable inequality, the idolatry of profit at all costs and the materialistic drive that will destroy the planet, the insatiable appetite of self-interest that crush the cries of sustainability. Now we reject the fact that the environment and how or we reject the idea that we can be the saviours of the environment which is much of the philosophy of environmentalism that we're not the saviours of our planet, the planet is God's creation. He alone can save it and can save us and can restore the image of God in it and through it. But we can say to Greteth Thunberg into David Attenborough, you know, we stand with you here. You know, stewardship's God's idea, it's not yours.

Why wouldn't you say that because that might seem a bit smart-alike. But you know, we can't simply just ignore this important reality of being steward-bearers, dealing with the consequences of greed and sin and rebellion against God as it reveals itself in the destruction of God's glorious creation. Too often I think the churches and Christians have naysayed it or dismissed it as insignificant or unimportant and that needs to change if we understand theology, if we understand God's word and if we understand who we are made in God's image. Because our image is being restored, we recognize that. Romans 8 verse 29 tells us that those who God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son so that he might be first born with many brothers and sisters.

Then Colossians 3-10 which says, don't lie to each other since you've taken off your old self with this practice and we put on the new self which is being created and the knowledge and the image of its creator and it's the whole reality that in Christ we are being renewed in God's image.

[22 : 58] And our attitude to the environment, to God's world and to ourselves and to others is influenced by that surely because all of it is a recreation in God's image. We're not to be thoughtless, we're to be intentional stewards of all that God gifts us with ourselves. We're to remember as if you're a Christian this evening that you're being recreated because he's redeemed you and loves you and loves me and that means pride and shame have been dealt with by Christ and that we shouldn't be proud Christians nor should we think we're worthless people as Christians. We're not the center of the universe but we're image bearers and we have great dignity and we're recreated in that ambassadorial role and we're empowered to be like Jesus to display the fruits of the Spirit we were praying about earlier. And just to finish with this emphasis on others, not just others in the church but also particularly can I say others outside of the church.

Recognize that we share a commonality with them in being image bearers, great old Scottish phrase we're all Jock Tamsen's bearers but there's a lot of theology in that. But we will challenge the foundations that separate us from them in their understanding of what it means to be made or they wouldn't attribute it to be made in God's image but some of the commonalities that we share.

But it means two very important things in terms of recognizing that we are all, there's a commonality even though we're being renewed and we recognize what's gone wrong.

The first is equality. Galatians 3:28 is that great reminder to us of what is happening in Christ. There's neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, there's neither male nor female for you, you're all one in Jesus Christ. So it's policy and there's a reversal of inequality that has come about because of sin and there's a reminder that we are all image bearers of God and in Christ that is revealing itself first and foremost in the Christian community but also in the way we recognize others. So it's a reversal of the inequality in gender, in race, in class, intelligence and of measuring someone, someone's worth by these external values and we do it all the time and we do it in the church and we do it in the world in which we live. There's no place in the transformation of our image bearing through Christ for being phobic, for being sexist, for being racist, for being a snob, for being an inverted snob, for being an intellectual snob, for being classist, for finding your identity in any of these things. You should never come into God's house and say, I'm different from somebody else because I have a university education, they don't or I come from this part of town, they don't. I went to that school, let's go, we know that happens then but all the time but that's not how it's to be in the Christian community, nor is it to be in how we consider others. Yes, we recognize there's a difference in roles in life that God gives but we never suppress or disdain or look down on others. We believe in equality and we need to act it out in our lives and agree with those who speak about equality, even if the definitions are different, we agree that at a basic level, equality is a

Christian principle. The church has no place to be imaging the world in its views of others and an inequitable vision of one another. There's a recapturing of something radical and revolutionary in the message of redemption and we mustn't just leave it in the kind of vague spiritual realm that doesn't affect our day-to-day living. It must be something that comes to the core of our being, says, I need to think of and treat others differently because my sinful heart chooses often to justify inequality because it means I'm better than others, even if we think we are better because of grace. So inequality is one very powerful outworking of understanding the image of God and so also therefore as it's connected, cousin respect. James 3 verse 9 which was our text, was one of our texts, one of our readings earlier on picks that out James 3 and verse 9 it says, with, we're talking about the tongue, the great dangerous weapon, whether we bless our Lord and

[28 : 32] Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. So you know James there pulls out this image of God theology to say we need to respect other people and then also from 1 Peter 2 verse 17, show proper respect to everyone, love the family members, fear God, honor the emperor. That recognition of respect that C.S. Lewis says no other person is ordinary. Everyone remains an image bearer and are worthy of our respect in life. Think of how easy it is for me, I think of how easy it is for me and maybe it is easy for you to disrespect people.

Whether it's the way we judge them, we think about them or as James challenges the way we speak about them, it's easy to disrespect people and reject them because we recoil maybe from their rejection of God and the mess of sin in their lives but we are to be different and it's tough but it's beautiful to recognize what it means not only that we are being transformed by God in His image but we recognize that we treat other people who are not Christians differently because they remain those who are image bearers of God and that is reflected in how we personally deal with those we fundamentally disagree with. I'm not saying that we agree with everyone and it's all kind of like jelly and ice cream and we recognize there's huge differences in our basic philosophical standpoint and our faith and our understanding of the universe but it's crucial that you learn and I learn how to fundamentally disagree with people respectfully and with love and with grace and we respect them for God's sake even though they may be mortal horrors as it were who need Christ's love and forgiveness. More than anything being in Christ enables us to love them and your shackles up, oh God says love your enemies, love those who despise you and who treat you badly and we shrug our shoulders and say I never get an opportunity to share my faith. We will, every time we live like this I guarantee it we will because this is not how the world thinks. We see it all the time just now don't we with identity politics.

As we live out this transformational life that understands respects and equality and the fruit of the Spirit I guarantee people will ask questions. We will not need to manufacture opportunities to share our faith and wedge it in unnaturally into the conversation because it will come. The question is will we answer or the question is are we different and that's a great challenge isn't it? Amen.