

Beautiful Relationships

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Date: 25 April 2021

Preacher: Jon Watson

[0 : 00] So this is the second sermon in the series called No Ordinary People, and we're exploring what it means to be made in the image of God. And I have to caveat this by saying each one of these sermons can only just scratch the surface.

This runs so deep. This doctrine has changed the world. The teaching that humans are made in the image of God has been one of the most massively impactful doctrines of the world.

So we're going to raise questions tonight that I won't be able to answer fully and satisfactorily. So if you have questions then or want to go deeper into something, in a few weeks we're going to have a question time in the evening service, and so you can write down your questions, save it, think about it, and send it in.

And we'll tell you how to do that another time, and we'll address as many of those as we can. So the first passage that we read from Genesis 1 teaches us this important truth, that who we are informs how we live, and not the other way around.

Who we are informs how we live. So he says first that men and women are made in the image of God, that's who we are. We are image bearing males and females.

[1 : 24] And then in verse 28 God says in light of this, in light of who you are, here's what you're to do, go be fruitful, multiply, fill, subdue, have dominion.

That's how you are to live. So how we are to live flows out of who we already are. And that work, being fruitful and multiplying, filling, that's relational work, and that's what we're going to focus on tonight, is how we are relational because we're made in the image of God.

You can't multiply alone. You can't fill something all by yourself. It requires people working together. It requires community and relationships.

So the main question we're going to try to answer or get to tonight is how are we intended to image God as relational males and females?

How are we intended to image God as relational males and females? And we're going to cover that in four points. We're intended to image God by glorifying Him in our gender, by glorifying Him in our singleness, by glorifying Him in our marriage, and by glorifying Him together as the church.

[2 : 43] Now before we get into those points, we have to talk about what it means to glorify God because that can be one of those Christianese words that sounds nice, but if asked to define it, I think a lot of us would be really hard pressed to do so.

So let me use a little bit of a crude analogy. Imagine a massive, flawless diamond in a completely darkened room, even without light, even when we can't see it.

That massive diamond has intrinsic beauty. It's pure. It's flawless. It's special whether we see it or not. It just is that way.

Now imagine you shine a bright light right on that diamond, and it just illumines the room. You know, the light is just stunning through it.

It was already beautiful, but when we shine a light on it, now we can see it for what it is. Now we can see its beauty and its purity. God is intrinsically beautiful, pure, flawless, and unique, and we call that His holiness.

[3 : 49] That's what we mean when we say God is holy. So how do we glorify a holy God? By living in a way that shines a light on His beauty so that everyone can see it.

That's how we glorify God is our lives are to display the beauty of what God is like. We are image bearers.

So how do we live in a way that displays the beauty of God to those around us? Well, let's get into the first point, that we are intended to image God by glorifying Him in our gender.

Genesis 127 again, so God created man in His own image, and the image of God He created Him, male and female, He created them.

God is triune. He is three persons in one God. That great mystery, we call that the Godhead, and within that Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons in one God, there is unity in diversity.

[4 : 57] There's three persons, but one purpose. There is incredible unity in God, distinct and one.

And similarly, it's not an analog one to one, but similarly, we are made as gendered sexes, male and female, but we're meant to work and live and love together as one people in unity.

So that means that God doesn't primarily value homogeneity. He loves diversity. Our nation, our city, our neighborhood, this local church would be diminished if we were all the same, if it was full of just men, or just people who did this for a living, or just people who talked like that.

We would be a diminished people without the diversity that God created us to represent, including male and female.

And that means that every one of you, male or female, was created as you are by God on purpose to glorify Him, to display something beautiful about what God is like.

[6 : 11] Part of God's wise design was to make two sexes, each one made in the image of God, and together they are made in the image of God. Did you catch the language in that poem in Genesis?

God created man in His image, He created Him, male and female, He created them individually and together. It is a very difficult reality in this fallen world that some of us don't feel like what we are.

Gender dysphoria is this phenomenon of your feelings not lining up with your biological and genetic sex. And I'm sure you'll be more and more familiar with that these days.

And it's complicated. There's nothing straightforward about this. So how are we to view our self, the self, if what we feel doesn't line up with what we biologically are?

We need to have incredible care and sensitivity when we approach this topic. But we also, as Christians, need incredible clarity and conviction. To decide that you would rather not live as your biology demands is to say to God something like, I don't think you got this right.

[7 : 41] I think I've been made a mistake. God doesn't make mistakes. God created males and females.

And he knew what he was doing. And both shine forth something glorious about who God is. And our feelings are, they're cruel masters.

And if we live according to the rule of our feelings, they will lead us away from what is ultimately good for us. Now let's put up Ephesians 4.

We're gonna unpack a couple verses from that passage we read earlier to explore this idea together. So Paul says that we've been taught the truth in Jesus, quote, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true holiness, in true righteousness and holiness.

So let's think about these two ideas that Paul's just introduced us to, the old self and the new self. So he's speaking to Christians, and he's saying there's a pre-Jesus you and a post-Jesus you.

[8 : 58] There's a you from before you were transformed by the gospel and the power of God, and there's this new you, this new creation that is somehow recreated in the image of God in a different kind of a way.

So how does he describe this old self? He says two main things about it. One, that it's corrupt. Without Jesus, our self does not line up with God's design for our self.

It's been corrupted by sin, by the fall in Genesis three. And the second thing is it says, it's corrupt through deceitful desires.

So without Jesus, our feelings and desires deceive us. They deceive us, they trick us, because they've been warped by the sin of our first parents.

Our very feelings are deceitful. And as Christians, as new creations in Christ, those who have been renewed in their minds, those who are recreated in the likeness of God, we have to say no to all the deceitful and harmful desires of our past life, all of them.

[10 : 12] And we get to say yes to who Jesus created us to be and how he created us to live. So all were made in the image of God and have inherent dignity and value.

Just to be clear, before Jesus, after Jesus, old self, new self, both in the image of God, there is no non-image-bearing human walking around this planet, which means that Christians and non-Christians alike have inherent dignity and value in God's eyes and should have an ours too.

That's what we are, but how we live, do we live like image-bearers? And that's the power that God gives us when we've been saved by Jesus, to live as image-bearers in true righteousness and holiness.

The implication of that, though, of what I was saying about how there's no non-image-bearing human, is that we have no right to look down our noses at anybody.

No right. You know, if we look and say, well, look how they're living, but you know, I live in true righteousness and holiness, maybe, but not because of anything you did.

[11 : 32] I can't say that. I can't say that any sort of good behavior that I have is because I'm such a good person. That's what the gospel's all about, is to say, we just need to admit that we're not good people and ask Jesus for help.

So it's not because of what we have done, it's only because of what Jesus has done for us. That should breed a deep humility in the Christian people, a deep humility and a grace for dealing and speaking with and working with people who don't believe what we believe.

Now, when Christianity came on the scene 2,000 years ago, it ushered in really kind of the first sexual revolution. It was, you know, 1,960 years before the Beatles came and that time.

But in Paul's day, when Paul was writing Ephesians, the common view of the body was heavily influenced by the Greek philosopher Plato and other philosophers like him.

And to just boil down the teaching of that in my kind of amateur way, basically said, the body is crude and unimportant.

[12 : 40] What really matters is the mind and the spirit and the emotions. Those are the higher aspects of humanity and the body is the lower aspect of humanity. In other words, Greek philosophy said that your feelings and your desires overrule your body.

So in other words, no matter what you do with your body, only how you feel and how you use your mind matters. You know what the result of that was? Slavery all across the empires because if you didn't have status, that your body was just unimportant and it could belong to somebody.

Prostitution was commonplace, unbelievably normal. Every appetite was indulged.

It's just your body. Who cares? If that sounds familiar, it's because we fall into that same error of thinking today.

You know, the society can say in the same breath, body positivity and they can affirm gender altering surgeries. Do you see the inconsistency there?

[13 : 51] Society can say that only feminism fights for women's values and rights and it says that a man can be a woman if he just feels like it. It's inconsistent. And I think it's undignifying of people.

But the Christian teaching on the image of God gives true dignity, value and beauty to men and women in both mind and body.

Only Christianity has the framework to tell us that we are valued as we are made, that we're made as we are on purpose and that we need to be in community with each other to thrive.

And Christianity gives us something more noble to use our bodies for rather than just to fill our appetites. Let's look at 1 Corinthians chapter six, verse 13.

Paul's writing to a different church and said, food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. And he's quoting a popular saying there. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food.

[14 : 55] And God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. There's a lot there.

But let me just pull this out. Our body is made for the Lord, not for us. And your sexuality is not just another appetite.

So on the one hand, all of us experience the effects of the fall in our bodies and in our sexuality. But even in our brokenness, we still have a purpose. Our bodies and our sexuality is made for something far more beautiful and far more sacred than just appetite like hunger.

It's made for the Lord to image the world and it's made for the Lord to image something about who God is, to shine the beauty of God to those around us.

And honestly, if we really believed that, if we really believe Paul when just a few verses later, he'll say that our, he said, don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?

[16 : 10] If we believed that the pornography industry would die, it would wither. Our relationship to food and to health would totally change.

Men and women would treat each other with deep respect and dignity. And we could begin living according to our design, male and female, in true righteousness and holiness.

And it would so change how we live together, wouldn't it? God honoring churches who follow Jesus ought to be places where all people are given the warmth and respect and dignity that is do them as image bearers of God.

So God willing, this church building, this community right here will be home to people who have come alive to God and who have struggled all their lives with gender and sexuality.

We must not have emotional coldness toward them or distance or judgmental attitudes. Paul says in Romans, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.

[17 : 25] That one verse can change the entire dynamic of the world, if we did it. He doesn't say welcome one another nicely, you know, or warmly or in measure compared to how well people welcome, you know, in your culture.

He says the same measure that Christ opened wide his arms to you is how you open wide your arms to the people around you. So this church opens wide her heart to all, not because they look or act like we want them to, but because Jesus opened wide his heart to us when we were far from him.

Let's be honest. Before I knew Jesus and loved Jesus, I was so far. And that didn't stop him.

We may not have experienced this yet in this church, in this local congregation, but God willing, someone will come to know and love Jesus in this building one day, and maybe they're married to someone of the same sex, and then they become a Christian.

That's complicated. Or perhaps they've gone through a surgery that complicates their gender. Those situations will be messy and complicated, and when that time comes, we need to have patience.

[18 : 48] We need to trust Jesus for wisdom and walk in grace and love toward one another, believing that Jesus is big enough to heal every wound, to save every soul who comes to him with faith.

So that's how we glorify God in our genders, at least scratching the surface of it. We embrace the design by which God has made us and others, and we hold every person of every gender in honor with the dignity that they are due, no matter what.

Now, we're going to shift a little bit and talk about more of the relational aspect, like I mentioned earlier. The relational side of being made in the image of God. Genesis 1, 27 to 28 again says, So God created man in his own image, and 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. Human fruitfulness and multiplication.

Filling the earth, these are things that we can't do on our own. So being made in the image of God means we're made for relationships. Well, more than just relationships though, in Genesis 1, it's clear that part of the implication of being made in the image of God is that men and women should marry and have children and fill the earth.

[20 : 17] Now, hold on. John, are you saying that only married people can properly image God? No, no, definitely not. So hear me out.

I'm going to talk about singleness first, and then we're going to talk about marriage, but bear with me. So this is the second point. We are intended to image God by glorifying him in our singleness.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, in Matthew's Gospel, for instance, he did not stand on the mountain and raise his arms toward his disciples and say, now, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

He didn't repeat that old command that he came to properly fulfill. What did he say instead? Matthew 28, verses 19 to 20.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

[21 : 24] So in Genesis 1, God says, I'm eager to see the earth filled with new life, with new humans filling the earth. And in Matthew 28, Jesus says, I have been given by God the Father all authority on heaven and earth, and I am eager to see new spiritual life, new creation humanity, fill the earth.

He doesn't say, go get married and have kids, though that's still a good thing to do if God is calling you to that. He says, go evangelize and make disciples.

The primary way that Christians today are meant to be fruitful and multiply is discipleship. It's coming along somebody and helping them follow Jesus.

Walking with them down that road. So if you're single, please hear this. You have such vital work to do in the kingdom. Such vital work, no less marvelous at all than marriage and childbearing.

In fact, the apostle Paul, a lifelong single, by the way, and happy that way, said that he wished that everyone could be like him. Why? Because they could have the privilege of being fruitful in the kingdom of God with undivided attention.

[22 : 45] That's a privilege in God's eyes. So church, let us never explicitly or implicitly tell our single brothers and sisters that they are incomplete without a spouse or that they are less effective in ministry without being married.

The Bible just says that's not true. Jesus is all in all. He is all sufficient. So we can display the beauty of God in singleness. We glorify God by wholehearted devotion to Christ and His kingdom, and by displaying to the world and the church the all-sufficiency of Jesus.

Point three, we are intended to image God by glorifying Him in our marriages. Now, again, just scratching the surface, but if you're married in the church, you have the privilege of imaging God in a specific way.

That is, that your marriage itself is a picture. It's a signpost meant to point to what the relationship is like between Christ and His church.

Paul gets into that in Ephesians and in several other epistles. But here's the thing, married folk, we have to remember. This one's hard for me, but we have to remember that marriage, your marriage, is temporary.

[24 : 11] It is not eternal. Jesus said that in heaven, it will be like the angels that we will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

That's a difficult teaching for some. So your marriage should be a beautiful, sacred and temporary picture of Christ and the church. In other words, your marriage is not your ultimate reality.

But here's my caveat. Marriage, not your marriage, but marriage is ultimate reality. We, all of us who love Jesus, are called together the bride of Christ.

So whether we're married or single, male or female, or someone who experiences gender dysphoria, all Christians are part of this eternal cosmic betrothal to the lamb who was slain for his bride.

Let's look at Revelation chapter 19 verses 6 to 8. This is the apostle John reporting what he saw in a vision given by God.

[25 : 24] He said, then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the lamb has come. And his bride has made herself ready.

It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure. For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. That's our ultimate reality, a marriage feast.

We are the bride of the lamb. So how do we glorify God in our marriages now? By living with our spouses in such a way that points to the sacrificial love of Jesus for his bride.

And by treating our marriages as sacred signposts to a greater reality. Marriage is good, but sometimes Jesus wants it to take it down off the pedestal a little bit.

[26 : 34] It's a beautiful and temporary signpost. Now lastly, we are intended to image God by glorifying him together as a church.

Jesus is the only perfect imager of God. He's the only image bearer unwarped by sin. And he is creating for himself this bride, this beautiful community of the riff-raff of the world, all redeemed by this bridegroom, all washed in the blood of the lamb.

And that church, that bride, is the one place in the world where we can expect the most unlikely of people to be welcomed and embraced and loved and served.

And frankly, if we're not doing that, how could we be called the church? And the church is the one place in the world that should be most free of holier-than-thouism.

I don't know a more technical way to say that, but we should be most free of holier-than-thouism. Because after all, who among us here deserved this? In John chapter 13, Jesus gave his church this command.

[27 : 53] He said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

By this, all people will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another. We glorify God together as the church by sacrificially, radically loving one another.

It is the single greatest testimony to Jesus. It was when Jesus went to die on the cross.

This is in the same section of John. When he's on his way to the cross, Jesus says, now I am glorified. Why? Because the thing that makes Jesus look most beautiful, the light that most illumines that gorgeous diamond, who is Jesus, is how he died for the undeserving, because he loved them.

And it's by loving others like that, completely into the end, that we most display the beauty of Jesus. And we need each other for that.

[29 : 16] That's relational. That's something we can't do alone. We need each other. We're made in the image of God to be in relationship together.

And every one of you is precious and valuable in the kingdom. Now let me just end by saying this. If you are here, or you're listening or watching, and you don't call yourself a Christian, we want you to know that we love you, and that Jesus loves you.

And he is not waiting for you to get your act together before coming to him. He didn't wait for any of us. And he does not want your morality. He just wants your love.

And this is a place where you can safely explore what that means. You can safely explore Christianity here. And you can ask us questions, and you can wrestle with the hard topics, and you can wrestle with what following Jesus would mean for your life.

And I pray that you will do that. And I pray that you will do so. Let me pray, and then I'm going to invite Derek up, and he's going to lead us in the Lord's Supper. Heavenly Father, as I read about your church in Revelation 19, this beautiful, pure bride, we long to be like that.

[30 : 51] We long to love one another like you loved us, and it's so hard. And we need your help. And we yearn for marriages and relationships, and for communities that are reflecting the beauty of the gospel, reflecting your beauty to those around us, and it's so hard.

But we know that you are more committed to our love, and to our obedience to our increasing in holiness than we are.

So we lean on you, and we just ask you for help. But Father, thinking back on Revelation again, it's not to the church that we should turn our eye, but to the Lamb.

So we just take a moment and give you our praise and our thanks for your incredible mercy. When we did not deserve your love, you gave it.

And for your deep, unfathomable, steadfast love that you followed all the way through death, bearing the sins of the world. Lord Jesus, we love you, and we thank you for that.

[32 : 06] Amen.