



Human Dignity

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Humans are created in the image of God; therefore, humans have both unique dignity and unique purpose in God's creation.

One of the most powerful symbols of the Civil Rights Movement is the iconic image of sanitation workers on protest while holding signs that said, "I Am A Man." This phrase has historically been a rallying cry against oppression for minorities. These sanitation workers were decrying that many considered them, because of their race, less than human. And they were declaring what God had already said about them, that they were created in the image of God and endowed with full humanity.

Since the fall in the garden of Eden, we have been tempted to see our neighbors as less than human. The Bible describes humankind as having unique dignity and worth, but in every generation, there are assaults on this dignity. Consider the ways our society often labels and treats certain vulnerable groups: *the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, the elderly, and the disabled.*



What other groups would you say are vulnerable to assaults on their human dignity?



How might these groups be treated as less than human?

The gospel story offers the world a unique vision of human dignity that begins with creation and ends with God's redeemed people bearing witness to Jesus as the express image of God.

Most of us understand that being created in the image of God means we are special in creation. But have we fully wrestled with this important reality? In this session, we will discover what it means to bear the image of God, why violence against human life is a sin against God, how Christ restores our image-bearing purpose, and how human dignity influences the way we live in the world.

1. Why Human Life Has Unique Dignity (Gen. 1:26-27)

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

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

Each time we hear about violence on the news, we cringe. Each time we experience the tragic loss of life of someone close to us, we mourn. Each time we see images of tragedy overseas, our hearts break. Why is this? Death strikes us differently than any other kind of tragedy because instinctively we know there is something special, unique, and important about human life.

The Bible tells us why we feel this way. We were created, as Genesis informs us, unlike the rest of creation. The Creator spoke the universe into existence (ex. Gen. 1:3), but we are told humans were endowed with special value. Moses, who wrote Genesis, recorded God's words saying that humankind was created in the image of God.

What does it mean to be created *in the image of God*? At the very least it means these things: First, it means that human life has intrinsic value. There is something of God's imprint on every human soul. Second, bearing God's image means having responsibilities. Humans uniquely are empowered to think, to reason, to create, to love, and to feel. Humans were created to represent God in His unfinished world, to take the raw materials of creation and bring Him glory by creating and filling the earth.



How would you explain the “image of God” to someone from a non-Christian background?



How does the reality of human dignity affect the way you see other people?

2. Why Violence Against Human Life Is Violence Against God (Gen. 9:5-6)

⁵ And I will require a penalty for your lifeblood; I will require it from any animal and from any human; if someone murders a fellow human, I will require that person's life.


⁶ Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans his blood will be shed,
for God made humans in his image.

After the flood, as Noah and his family left the ark and were commissioned by God to fulfill His mandate to subdue the earth and fill it with His glory, God specifically gave them instructions regarding the worth of human life. The taking of innocent life is, in the eyes of the Creator, a violent act not simply against the victim but against God Himself. This is how highly God values human life and why life, at all stages, should be protected and preserved. This post-flood instruction by God tells us that even in a fallen world, even when sin has obscured the full flowering of God's image in humanity, life is still valuable.

This teaching, unique to the Christian story, has wide-ranging implications for how we see others:

- It means that unborn life in the womb is not simply a clump of cells but is a human life worthy of protection.
- It means that the elderly have value even past the time they can contribute meaningful work to society because their value is assigned not by their ability to perform but by the Creator God.
- It means the poor, the vulnerable, and the stranger are not simply masses of people or obstacles to success but people worth of dignity and respect.

The value God has assigned human beings should cause each of us to stop and think about ways we might unintentionally diminish or attack the image of God in our neighbor. We should ask ourselves questions such as these: *Is there a group of people I'm unwilling to consider as important as myself and my family? Are there ways in which I unintentionally assault the image of God in my neighbor? Are there people groups whose needs I've ignored because I refuse to see their humanity?*

 What steps do we need to take when we find that we have treated individual persons or an entire people group as less than human?

 What are our responsibilities when we are witnesses to attacks on the image of God in others?

Voices from the Church

“As long as we are human we are, by definition, in the image of God. But spiritual likeness—in a single word, love—can be present only where God and man are in fellowship; hence the fall destroyed it, and our redemption recreates and perfects it.”¹

—Derek Kidner

3. How Christ Restores Our Image-Bearing Purpose (Heb. 1:3)

³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, as the God-man, is the perfect image of God, "the exact expression of his nature." Another Bible translation renders this phrase "the express image of his person" (KJV). Paul declares in Colossians that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

What's interesting is that while we are created according to or in the image of God to be a mirror or reflection of God, Scripture never describes human beings as *the* image of God. This might seem like theological hair-splitting, something bored seminarians debate about over lunch, but this distinction is very important because only one human being is ever described as being the perfect image of God—Jesus Christ. Paul reminded his readers that it is Christ alone who is the image of God:

- "In their case, the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4).
- "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15).

The biblical writers were careful to insert a preposition when referring to human beings in this manner: Humans are created *in* the image of God. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, *is* the image of God.

This is what makes the Christian vision of human dignity so unique. The Bible makes the case that it was God's eternal purpose to create humankind to reflect the image of Christ, who is the image of God. Jesus matters because in Jesus we see the fulfillment of what Adam was created to be but failed. Also, Jesus, in His flesh, tells us that our full humanity matters. We are not simply embodied spirits awaiting an idyllic rapture to a cloudy paradise; we are body and soul, holistic beings awaiting our full resurrection and restoration as children of God (Rom. 8:23).



What are some ways Jesus treated people as being made in the image of God that we must imitate as we are being transformed into His image?

What do we do with this theology? Here are some real-world implications: *First, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see ourselves.* We were created by God with intricate care. We are loved by God enough that He sent Jesus to redeem, rescue, and restore us. We are not defined by our struggles or sins or preferences, nor are our identities found in what others think of us or our social or economic status. We see ourselves rightly when we see ourselves in Christ alone.

Second, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see our loved ones. Our neighbors, our family, and our friends—these are people created in the image of God. When we respect and love and care for them, we are fulfilling our God-given mandate.

Third, our status as redeemed image-bearers should affect the way we see our mission in the world. In Christ, we've been restored again to our original image-bearing purpose (Eph. 2:10): our daily work has a new dignity, our existence has a new purpose, and our lives have new meaning. We've been empowered to live on mission in the world.



How does the gospel of Jesus Christ answer some of the most pressing problems in our culture today?



Voices from Church History

"Though Adam be here called the image or similitude of God; yet but so as that he was the shadow of a more excellent image. Adam was a type of Christ, who only is 'the express image' of his Father's person, and the likeness of his excellent glory (Heb. 1:3). For those things that were in Adam, were but of a humane, but of a created substance; but those that were in Christ, of the same divine and eternal excellency with the Father."²

—John Bunyan (1628-1688)

4. How Human Dignity Influences the Way We Live in the World (Jas. 3:7-12)

⁷ Every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish is tamed and has been tamed by humankind, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way. ¹¹ Does a spring pour out sweet and bitter water from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a saltwater spring yield fresh water.

James reminds us of the power of the tongue to offer either life or death, humanizing rhetoric or dehumanizing rhetoric. He says that we are capable of denying dignity to our fellow image-bearers in the way we talk about them.

Consider the ways we do this in our contemporary society. We are tempted to “otherize” people with whom we disagree or whom we see as obstacles to our success. The unborn are referred to as “fetuses” or “clumps of tissue” in ads for abortion services. Immigrants and refugees are “those people who threaten us or our way of life.” We can even do this by applying the simple article “the” to groups of people: “the blacks,” “the poor,” “the Mexicans,” etc. Rhetoric that dehumanizes others is one step toward delegitimizing them in our minds, toward accepting behavior directed at them that we would not invite for ourselves. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Levite and the priest passed by the ailing man on the roadside because they were able to convince themselves that he was less than human (Luke 10:30-32). And so it is with us.

The gospel shows us a radically different way to engage and live in the world. As redeemed image-bearers, we are not only tasked with speaking up for those who have no voice, but we are also commanded to make gospel-shaped arguments. We can be on the “right side” of the issues and yet be employing the dignity-denying rhetoric of the enemy.



Voices from Church History

“Nothing bitter should come out of a mouth which has uttered the praise of so great a mystery, nor should the tongue say anything which is unworthy of a holy mouth. Let us keep it pure and not use it to curse. For if those who rail against God will not inherit the kingdom, how much more will this be true of those who curse?”³

—Andreas (circa 7th century)

Instead, here are some simple ways to ask ourselves if we are employing life-giving rhetoric in our public speech: *When we speak to our family members, do we speak to them with the respect due someone created in the image of God? When we engage in arguments with people with whom we disagree, do we listen and learn about their viewpoint and treat them as human beings? When we post our political opinions on social media, do we treat our ideological opponents as people created in the image of God or do we employ the dignity-defying rhetoric of our contemporary culture?*



What are some words or phrases we should weed out of our vocabulary in order to be consistent in our worship of God?



What are some actions that violate our desire and commitment to reflect the glory of God in the world?

Conclusion

The gospel story teaches us that there are no accidental humans, that each person is created with care and wonder by an artistic God. We are more valued than the animals, than the angelic host, than the plant life. This should inform the way we see the world and should motivate us to speak up for the most vulnerable, who have no voice.

We live in a world where humans are inventing new ways to assault the image of God in each other. But the good news is Christ has broken in and has reversed the curse of sin and death and is calling His redeemed image-bearers to be conformed to His image and to live on mission for Him in the power of His Spirit in the world He created.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Sin turns humans in on each other, committing violent assault on the image of God. Christ, as the express image of God, both defeated the enemy of death and restores His people to their full image-bearing purpose to represent Him in the world.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: The gospel calls us away from our inward and sinful focus to look outward and speak out for those who have no voice. As agents of gospel reconciliation between humans and their Creator, we work for justice against the violent assaults on human dignity and show the world a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God.

1. Who are some specific people we can share the gospel with as an intentional affirmation of their human dignity?

2. List some actions your group/church can take to affirm and promote human dignity in your community or city.

3. How can we address these public issues concerning human dignity in the name of Christ for the good of the community and the glory of God?

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