

Becoming fully human

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[0:00] That we can hear your voice. We can encounter your living word, Jesus. Lord, through your spirit, we pray we would understand the words that you have for us this morning.

That you would bypass me and bypass our reservations or our resistance. That your word would do your work in us this morning, Lord.

That we would glorify you. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So this first question is really important. Who were we created to be? If we don't understand the answer to that, it's really hard to know or care about what we're becoming.

The first chapter in Genesis, which we heard read a moment ago, is all about God's creation of the world. And it's about God's creation of us. And just to get this out of the way, it's not written as a scientific text.

The point of this chapter is not to tell us how precisely all of this happened. That's for the scientists to figure out. This is a theological text.

[1:03] It's more akin to poetry or liturgy. And it's really focused on a much deeper question. Why? Why did God create all of this? Why did God create you and me?

That's the focus. And it says in verse 26, Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.

This is a profoundly important verse. Human beings, it says, were created for a purpose. To bear God's image and likeness.

And it's easy to read that. Many of us have heard that many, many, many times. And just to sort of skim past it. Oh yeah, we're created to bear God's image. But what exactly does that mean?

What does it mean to bear the image of something? The Bible scholar and historian N.T. Wright uses very often the metaphor of an angled mirror to help us understand what it means to be an image bearer.

[2:06] So we typically think of a mirror as something we look at and we see our reflection in it. Right? It reflects us back to ourselves. But Wright says, what about an angled mirror? Right? So if you've ever had a driveway that goes out onto a narrow road.

Or if you've ever been on a road that has a really sharp turn on it. You know, sometimes if people are thoughtful and they care about preventing car accidents. As you're driving up, you see a mirror. And it's an angled mirror. And that shows you the road around on the other side of the turn. And it's meant to prevent collisions. So as you're driving, you look in the angled mirror. And it shows you whether or not any cars are coming from the other direction.

Very handy. The whole point of an angled mirror is it allows you to see in both directions. So N.T. Wright says, imagine that human beings are angled mirrors. He says this.

It seems to me that God has put humans like an angled mirror in his world. So that God can reflect his love and care and stewardship of the world through humans.

[3:09] So imagine being like an angled mirror and God's love and care and stewardship is being reflected through us into the world. And likewise, he says that our role is to reflect the needs of the world and the prayer and praise of God back up to God.

Right? And so we're like an angle. It's a beautiful metaphor. Another way to think about this is to think of a father and son. Imagine a man who has a father and this father is known for being a very generous person.

There's always an extra seat at his dining room table. He always notices the person standing alone who needs a little bit of attention. He always is able to find a way to help people without them feeling small.

So that's the man's father. And then imagine years later you see that man and he's in the grocery store and he notices a single mom with a bunch of kids and he quietly pays for her groceries in the checkout line.

Right? And imagine a person seeing him do that and saying, you know, I see something of your father in you. I knew your father and just then you reminded me of your father.

[4:23] When you say something like that, what do you mean? You mean something about your father became visible in what you just did. For a second I thought I was looking at him.

Your kindness reflects his kindness. Right? I think this helps us understand what it means to reflect God's image in the world. We were created so that something of God's character would become visible through our lives.

So when we make or create or build or play music or create art, we are reflecting God as a creator. When we stand beside someone who's being mistreated, we give people a glimpse of a God who loves justice. When we make room for the lonely, when we feed the hungry, when we forgive someone who has hurt us, we make God's love and goodness visible.

So we were created to live in such a way that someone could look at us and say, you know, I see something of your father in you. I would say that's what it means to bear God's image.

[5:35] And before we move on, I just want to point this out. We really need to emphasize this. Scripture says that this is true of every single human being. Even for people who are not living it out.

Even for people who don't believe in God. This is still the purpose for which they were created. And there is still a slight resemblance. Every human being bears that reflects their creator.

Every human being was created to bear God's image. It's who we are whether we know it or not. And what this means is that all human life is uniquely sacred. Whether it's the elderly or someone from a different race or the unborn or someone who's immigrated here, right?

Whether or not they have documentation, right? Whether or not there is something sacred about that life. It also means that all human beings have an inherent dignity to them. Regardless of what they believe or how they live.

That this is arguably the single most important idea in all of Western civilization. Because it is the foundation for universal human rights.

[6:49] So even if you consider yourself to be completely unreligious, right? Even if you've never believed in God, think it's laughable that anybody would. If there's something inside you, an instinct that says, you know, there has to be something like universal human rights.

I mean, it's not okay to just treat people like this or that or the other. Right? If there's anything in you that thinks that way, that is really a uniquely Christian idea. It's rooted in the idea that human beings bear God's image.

And this is something that I think we need to come back to again and again. Think of someone in your life. And I know there's somebody that fits this category.

Think of somebody in your life that you find very difficult to love. Think of the person that it's hardest for you to imagine loving that person. Maybe it's hardest for you to imagine liking that person.

The person that when you think about them, you kind of go, oh. That person bears God's image. They bear God's image. There's a dignity to that person.

[7:55] There's a sacredness to that person. Right? So, being human means reflecting God's image into the world. That's how we might go about answering the question of what is a human being.

Well, a human being is a reflector. We're an angled mirror. We are here to reflect God's image into the world. Now, I don't have to tell you something has gone wrong.

What has gone wrong? What are we becoming instead? Question number two. That's really what Psalm 115 is about. We heard that read when we were singing a little while ago.

Psalm 115 is a kind of warning to God's people. And it talks about people, people of the nations, contrasting that with the people of Israel.

It talks about the people of the nations who, instead of worshiping the God who made them, they've chosen instead to worship things that they've created. What the Bible refers to is idols.

[8:52] Right? So, an idol in the Bible, right, in the Old Testament, it's often something made out of gold or stone or silver. But an idol can really be anything. When we come into the New Testament, we see that an idol can be all kinds of things.

Almost anything can be an idol. We often say they're typically good things that just we allow to become too good and too important and too all-encompassing. So, an idol could simply be an object.

Or it could be an idea. It could be something that you want, like wealth or status or security. It could be a person. It could be a relationship.

Almost anything can become an idol. The thing that makes it an idol is that it becomes more important to us than anything else, especially God. It's something that we love more and worship more than God.

And that tends to be how it works. We attend to something and then we come to love that thing.

And when we become lovers of something, then over time that can grow and actually we become a worshiper of that thing.

[9:59] Right? And it becomes an idol. Now, the warning in Psalm 115 is this, in verse 8. Listen to this. Talking of idols. Those who make them will be like them.

And so will all who trust in them. This reveals an extremely important spiritual principle that, again, applies regardless of what you believe about God because it reflects something of our design.

We become like what we worship. We become like what we worship. Whatever you love most.

Whatever you revere. Whatever you can't imagine living without. Whatever that thing is. Over time, we will begin to take on the characteristics of that thing.

And we will begin to reflect those characteristics into the world instead of God. And I think we've all seen this happen in different ways in our own lives, the people around us.

[11:09] Classic example, right? Jesus talks about this in our gospel reading. If we focus on things like wealth or status. If, you know, a lot of people come to D.C.

or they move to New York, they move to a major city. And over time, you know, your life can really become aimed at accumulating things like wealth and status. The thing we need to understand is that will change us over time.

Year after year, you're living for that. It changes you. So it begins to change how you see other people. When's the last time you went to a networking event in D.C.?

And what's happening, right? People are going around shaking hands, not even looking at your eyes, looking at your name tag to figure out what your title is and who you're with to figure out if you're worth talking to. And if not, they're already looking over your shoulder trying to figure out the next person to talk to you, right?

It changes how we see other people. Instead of being genuinely curious to encounter this other, right, image-bearing creature, we start seeing people in terms of whether or not they add value or how much they're going to cost us.

[12:19] We can start treating people as a means to an end. Maybe we get to a point where we're even able to justify stepping on people here and there in order to get ahead. And it also begins to change our relationship with the world.

Instead of being an image-bearer who is a steward of the world, who cares about the world, who wants to take care of the environment and the things that God has made, we become more willing to exploit, to take what we can, which I think sits behind a lot of the environmental degradation that we see in the world.

Likewise, if you're living for something like approval, and if you say, I can't bear the thought of this person or these people not liking me and approving of me, if they were to reject me, if they were to think that I'm stupid or not worth hanging out with, it would kill me inside.

Right? That's an idol. I can't live without that thing. And so, what happens? You start to shape your life around other people's reactions. And, you know, sometimes people do this for so long that, and they become so good at figuring out, what does this person want me to say and saying that?

What does this person want me to say? You sort of become like a chameleon, just sort of fitting whatever expectations are put on you. And some people do that so much that they actually lose touch with what they believe.

[13:46] And they lose touch with what they want. And if you ask them, well, what do you think?

They don't know. They're like, well, I'm not in the habit of thinking that way. Or if, just a final example, some of us really seek comfort, which is easy to justify.

You know, living in D.C. is hard. There's a lot of white noise. There's traffic. It's stressful. You know, if you have kids, you're like a, you know, Sherpa, just taking them all around the city to all their

things. And you have no free time.

And it's hard to justify just saying, you know, I just want to make my life as easy as possible. I mean, we think this way. I mean, anything that we can do to make our life easier and more manageable, I totally get it.

But that can become the thing that you live for. It can become your highest priority. And then you begin to notice the impact of that in your life. You start to think of other people's needs as interruptions.

You know, the lonely neighbor who you know, you know, they're older, and the kids never come visit, and they live alone because their spouse passed away.

[14 : 49] And that lonely neighbor just takes too much time, so you just don't think about it. You don't visit because you don't have the time. Or the friend who is struggling, they're just too emotionally demanding.

I don't have the time. Or the suffering in the world is just too much to think about. So we arrange our lives to avoid whatever might disturb us.

And slowly your heart becomes less responsive to the very people that God is calling you to love. You become like what you worship.

You are what you love. The things we value most right now are changing us. They are conforming us to their image and likeness.

And here's the problem with this. It doesn't just hurt us. It doesn't just hurt our relationships. The Bible actually says this dehumanizes us. It dehumanizes us.

[15 : 50] There's this place in Daniel where Nebuchadnezzar is. God responds to King Nebuchadnezzar's idolatry by causing him to go out and live like an animal. Right?

And that's a picture in the Bible of what idolatry does to us. It makes us subhuman. Because instead of reflecting God's goodness and truth and beauty into the world, we become reflectors of other lesser things.

One of the reasons that God gives the great commandment to his people in Deuteronomy 6, I believe that Pastor Hillary might be talking about this in more detail next week. He says, Why does he do that?

Yes, it's because God deserves that. Absolutely. But there's another reason. It protects us. It is a protective commandment.

Right? It's for our own good. Because God knows if you love anything else with your heart and your soul and your strength, it will rob you of your humanity.

[16 : 57] So it's worth reflecting on this. You know, I've been doing a lot of reflecting as I was preparing this week. What are the things that tend to displace God in my life?

The things that I chase after and that I allow to become more important than anything else.

Whatever that is for you, how is that changing you?

And if that's been the case in your life for years, how has that changed you? Who have you become because you've been chasing that thing? So if we were created to reflect God's image into the world, and yet we tend to worship other things, and so we reflect other things into the world, we're becoming something else.

The third and final question is this. How do we find our way back to being what we were created to be? And friends, this is the great purpose and aim of the Christian gospel.

This is the entire reason that Jesus Christ has come. It's amazing to think about what we've just said, and then to realize that the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, refers to Christ as what?

[18 : 13] The image of the invisible God. The image of the invisible God. So if you say, well, what does a human being look like who is faithfully bearing God's image in the world?

A perfect angled mirror who's reflecting all of the characteristics of God into the world. What would a human being look like if the fall had never happened? If human beings had never started worshipping other things?

Paul says, look at Jesus. That shows you what a human being looks like. Because he shows us what God is like. So look in the gospels, right?

When Jesus touches a man who has leprosy, he shows us a God who's compassionate. When Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus, he's reflecting a God who goes after and loves the very people that we're most tempted to write off.

When Jesus weeps with Mary, he shows us a God who cares about our pain, who weeps when we weep. When Jesus confronts religious hypocrisy, he reflects a God who wants our hearts, not just our performance.

[19 : 32] Right? When Jesus washes his disciples' feet, he shows us a God who intended power and authority to be used very differently than we often see it used in the world.

He's reflecting the heart of God. And when Jesus goes to the cross, and when he prays for the very people who are persecuting him, and when he gives his life for the sake of the world, Jesus shows us God's unfathomable love and mercy for this world and for us.

So if you ever wonder, what is God like? Does he care? What does he think of me? Paul would say, look to Jesus. He's the image of the invisible God. This is what God is like.

So why did Jesus die on the cross? Many of us were raised, if you're raised in a kind of Christian or Christian-adjacent home, it's so that we could get saved.

Right? Get your ticket to heaven. I would argue that this is showing us it's much bigger than that. It's much bigger than that. Jesus came to restore our humanity.

[20 : 45] He came to restore our humanity. His death on the cross sets us free from sin and death, the things that rob our humanity, but that's just the beginning.

And this passage in Romans 12 is maybe one of the most important passages for understanding what the Christian life is all about. Paul says here, Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, there's a strong urgency here, in view of God's mercy.

So, your response to the cross. Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice. Give yourself wholly and completely to God.

Holy and pleasing to God. He says, This is your true and proper worship. Worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will. Will. If we understand what He's saying, we understand this.

[21 : 50] Spiritually speaking, there is no such thing as neutrality. There's no possibility of us being spiritually neutral in this life.

We are either becoming like something in the world, or we are becoming more like Christ. It's one or the other. You're becoming like something in the world, or you're becoming more like Christ. Because God has created human beings as reflecting beings. We must reflect something. It's intrinsic to our created nature.

So, as Christians, when a person comes to faith in Jesus, at that moment, you are forgiven, you're adopted, you are declared righteous, you're made a child of God.

But that, friends, is only the beginning. Then, in response, as Paul says, in response to Jesus' mercy, we begin the long work of refocusing our love and refocusing our devotion away from idols and back to God.

[23 : 02] The good news is, we're not alone in this struggle. Many of you were here yesterday for the seminar on the Holy Spirit. And the good news is that for Christians, we have the Holy Spirit to help us in this.

But the journey is a journey toward re-humanization. We are being re-humanized by becoming more like Jesus. And another word for this is sanctification.

So, I want you to connect the dots here, okay? Everything we do on Sunday morning serves to re-humanize us.

Every single thing. So, you know, I grew up going to church occasionally and in a church where you would sing a couple of songs and you would hear a sermon and that's fine, that's great. But there are centuries, generations of saints who have contributed to what we do here on a typical Sunday morning thinking through the lens of that question.

Who are we becoming and how does what we do together encourage us to become more like Christ? Right? So, everything we do here on a Sunday morning is meant to re-humanize us.

[24 : 17] Every part of our liturgy. And that's important to think about because, you know, if you were to get a physical injury, and you were to lose the ability to walk, and the doctor were to come in and say, you know, you're going to be able to walk again but you have to go to rehab, you have to go to a lot of physical therapy, but over time, if you go to physical therapy, you're going to be able to walk again.

I have no doubt you would go. You would look at your calendar and you'd probably rearrange things. Well, I've got to go to physical therapy because I want to learn how to walk again. What we're doing here is like spiritual rehab.

Learning how to be fully human together. Right? So, just a few examples of this. When we sing and we pray and we hear God's word, we are retraining our hearts.

We're refocusing our hearts. You know, when I walk in here, I'm not thinking about God most of the time. I'm thinking about are the slides done? I'm thinking about is the power on? I'm thinking about is it a little too hot in here?

Right? I'm thinking about, you know, where my kids are and making sure they're not wandering the streets of Shaw. You know, I'm thinking about all those things. Right? But at some point when we come in here and I sit down and I'm looking up here and we begin to sing, I feel my heart pulled back and reoriented toward God.

[25:29] It happens every time. Right? That's why we do it. When we gather in a little while, we're going to pray the prayers of the people. When we pray for the needs of the world and those who are suffering and those who have passed away, that is retraining our hearts to be more compassionate and aware of the needs around us.

That's what a human being does. Right? In order to know what to pray during the prayers of the people, you have to be thinking about the needs of the world. Like, what should I pray for? Oh, I should probably think about that.

When we confess our sin, which we'll do in a little while, that trains us to be willing to admit our sin. It trains us to admit when we're wrong.

The world needs more people who are willing to admit when they're wrong. And it makes us more likely to be willing to apologize, to take responsibility in our relationships when we hurt other people. It's training us. That's what a human being does. When we pass the peace, that's not just a get-to-know-you time. Right?

[26:34] When we say, the peace of Christ be with you. Right? And we are shaking one another's hands. Right? What we're doing, what we're enacting is, this is what people look like who are committed to forgiveness and reconciliation.

And we're training ourselves to pursue forgiveness in our own hearts and to seek reconciliation where possible. And we're reminding ourselves that actually that we were created as human beings to live in harmony with one another.

When we give an offering, right, when we're invited to give an offering, that's a part of our liturgy. That challenges directly my greed, my fear of scarcity and not having enough.

I have to stop and I have to remember, oh yeah, all of this belongs to God. It's His. I'm just the steward of it. And it reminds me that I'm called to be more generous because God has been unfathomably generous to me.

And so giving that is training my heart toward generosity. When we share in this Eucharistic meal around this table, that's a picture of the world as it should be.

[27:44] Human beings together as one in perfect relationship with God and one another, receiving everything we need from the hand of God depending entirely on Him, sharing our food and drink with one another, ensuring that everybody has enough.

That's the way the world should be. That's what a world full of fully formed human beings would look like. So in every way we are retraining our hearts and minds, these practices rehumanize us. And it's worth asking, where else in my life would I be able to do that? Where else am I being influenced in these ways? Imagine if more people in the world did this on a regular basis.

Imagine how that might change our society. reality. So here's the question that I want to leave you with. Who are we becoming? Are we becoming more like Christ or are we becoming something else?

That's the question that's going to follow us out of this room. But the good news is until Christ comes again we're never going to get it perfect. And so that's also the question that brings us back again and again and again to the mercy of Christ.

[29:00] Christ. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it doesn't just depend on us. We thank you that before we even knew we were sinners you had forgiven us, Lord, that you were doing the work of forgiveness.

Lord, and we thank you that we have the Holy Spirit, that we don't have to do this alone, that Lord, you are working in us always, that as your word says you will bring to completion the good work that you have begun in us.

And also your word says that when we see you we will recognize you because we will be like you.

We thank you for these promises. May we trust in them. We pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen.