

Being Human (Part One)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I thought we would open tonight with a question, and that question is this. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be a human being?

Related to that, what does it mean to be a person? I was thinking about that question over the last few weeks, and looking around at the ways different people have answered it, I recognized or read about the Bill Gates Foundation, which gives money to this organization called the Big History Project.

You've probably heard of it. Gates co-founded it, and they've actually done, over the course of this year, a video competition where you could submit a video, 60 to 90 second video, answering this very question.

What does it mean to be human? And they got all kinds of submissions from all different kinds of people. They offered cash prizes, and so there were a lot of submissions, and it's kind of fun to flip through and look at the different ways that people have attempted to answer this question.

It tells you a lot about how we are thinking in 2015, in our country, about what it means to be human. It's kind of a nice sample of where people are at with this question, and, you know, Gates himself recused himself from the competition, of course, but he did submit a video, and his answer is essentially that what makes us human, and thus different from the animals, is that we have developed the capacity to pass knowledge to the next generation.

[1 : 3 2] And it's this cumulative increase in knowledge over time that sets us apart. The winning submissions were various in how they approached this question.

One person talks about the circle of compassion, the fact that human beings are capable of having compassion for all creatures, not just other human beings.

I thought that was a very optimistic view of human beings. I love that vision of humanity. Other submissions were very different. One person said he didn't think there was much, if anything, that made humans different from animals at all.

He said essentially that what the difference is, is that humans are people, but that he didn't really define what people are, or what constitutes a person.

But he won some money, so I suppose that must have been a better answer than some of the other ones that were submitted. There were lots of different ways at approaching this question. What becomes clear when you look at these videos is there's an enormous amount of disagreement over what it means to be human.

[2 : 3 5] We can't really seem to achieve any kind of consensus. Which is very interesting considering that this question and our beliefs about how we answer this question literally undergird everything else.

Everything flows from how we answer this question. How we treat other people is directly related to what it means to be a human being.

Who do we consider to be people? Who merits the status of human or person? Is there some line of demarcation?

And will we ever extend that to animals? Will we extend that to artificial intelligence? It's here. Eventually we will have to decide.

Do we confer the status and the rights of personhood on an artificially intelligent being? These are the questions that our generation is attempting to answer. It all comes back to what does it mean to be a human being?

[3 : 42] What do we desire to become in our lives? What's your aspiration? What are you hoping to be in 20 years or 30 years? Should God willing you live that long? Well, what does it mean to be a human being?

Wouldn't you hope that after 30 years you're more human than you are now, if anything? How we approach everything from education to poverty to politics to sexuality to identity.

It all flows out of this question. And yet there's very little agreement on what it means to be a human being. So this question is a part of our series that we're looking at Genesis, the opening chapters, and we're asking foundational questions.

And so this is our question for tonight. Few could be bigger than this. And we're going to look at this question in two parts. And, you know, we could look at it in 20 parts if we wanted to. But tonight is part one of trying to answer this question of what does it mean to be human.

And we're looking at Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 to 31. And we're going to get started tonight by looking first at the fact that we're made to reflect the image of God.

[4 : 50] And then we're going to look at, after we look at what that means, we're going to look at the three implications of that for us to consider in our time today. I will say this probably will get a little more political than is typical here at Advent.

And that's not out of an attempt to be political. We try to avoid the culture war as much as possible here. We don't toe any party line here. We have people on both sides of the issue, whatever that issue is, probably sitting in the pews right now.

So it's not about that. It's just about the fact that this question has inherently political implications. And so to try to avoid that would be dishonest.

But that being said, I think we'll see that the implications cut straight through party lines. So let's pray for the Lord to help us and then we'll get started. Lord, we come to you with this question because we recognize that you're the one who made us.

And our hope is that through your word we would come to discover who we are and what we are created to be. And we know that there is no better being to ask than our own author, the one who made us.

[6 : 03] So Lord, would you speak to us through your word tonight because of your son Jesus. Amen. So the first thing we want to do is just look at this passage and particularly this verse, this opening verse, and consider what it means.

It says, Then God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness. Now next week we're going to consider the plural there, the us, the our, and what that says about human beings and the fact that we were created for relationships.

But tonight our focus is on this word, image. Likeness. The word there for image is the Hebrew word, salem.

Salem. And salem is a fascinating word. In the ancient Near East, it was inconceivable to have a temple, or rather it was inconceivable to have a god without a temple.

And it was inconceivable to have a temple without a god. In other words, temples were the dwelling places of gods and goddesses. And a typical ancient Near Eastern temple would be a building and you would go into that building and you believed that god lived there.

[7 : 17] And in the middle of that building, at the place of the focal point of attention, would be the salem. The idol. The representation of the god.

And so you would go in and to worship or to do commerce or to have some kind of exchange with this deity, you would go into that deity's temple and go to the salem. And when we say idol or representation, it's not necessarily a physical resemblance we're talking about.

John Walton, the Old Testament scholar, says, The image, the tzalem, is a physical manifestation of divine essence that bears the function of that which it represents.

So he says, This gives the image bearer the capacity to reflect the attributes of the one represented and act on his behalf. So that's a tzalem.

That's an ancient Near Eastern temple. Now Walton, when he's looking at the creation story in Genesis, he helps us to understand that when we're reading this story, what we're really seeing is not just that there is a god who's creating heavens and earth and all of this stuff, but that there's a purpose for creation.

[8 : 35] And that purpose is this. God is building a temple. And you say, Well, where's that temple? It's everywhere. Everywhere. The heavens and the earth, the mountains, the fields, the grass, the trees, the rivers, the oceans, the valleys.

It's all the temple. That all of creation is this cosmic temple. Which begs the question, Well, if all of creation is the temple, then where is the idol, the image, the tzalem?

And the Bible would say, Well, you're looking. You're looking at it. That every person in the pews here, every person, every man, woman, and child in creation is the tzalem of God, the image bearer of God.

Not necessarily in physical resemblance, although that's a whole entirely different sermon. But just what Walton says, The capacity to reflect the attributes of the one represented.

So when we talk about human beings bearing God's image, there are essential aspects of God that are embodied and reflected in human beings, in you and in me.

[9 : 52] Each and every human being reflects God's likeness or God's essence. And so when you think about that statement, you've got to realize that the implications are vast for what this means.

They're vast. We can't even begin to consider all of them. I do want to consider three implications of the fact that we bear God's image and represent God's essence.

Simply by being human. Simply by who you are. You do this. So the three implications I want to look at are this. The nature of human life, the sanctity of human life, and the dignity of human life.

So first, the nature of human life. When we talk about nature, we talk about what essentially defines you. What defines you. And we need to think, what does this tell us about the nature of being a human being?

Most people, when they think about human nature, they think about, and they think about the world, they think in what you might call dualistic terms. They think that there's the material, and there's the spiritual.

[10 : 57] And that a human being, I'm a body, and I can choose to do spiritual things, or to not do spiritual things. Some things I do, like coming and sitting at Church of the Advent, that's a spiritual thing.

But when I go ride my bike, or when I go for a walk, or when I go shopping at the store, or hang out and watch TV, that's not a spiritual thing. We think in terms of external definitions, and context.

And we think of ourselves as being a body, maybe with a soul, or maybe if you, a related view is to say, I'm a body with a soul and a mind, or a body and a heart and a mind.

There's lots of different ways that we define this. Now, we use a lot of this language kind of, to express things as euphemisms, to try to get across concepts.

Psychologists use this kind of language a lot. But the Bible actually says that they are one. In other words, there's no such thing as the material and the spiritual, that material and spiritual are the same when you're talking about a human being.

[12 : 01] When you're talking about a human being. So it says, human beings are not like the animals, created each to their own kind, which it says earlier in Genesis.

That human beings are not merely a body with a soul. We're not a body with a soul. We're not a soul trapped in a body, hoping to escape. That human beings are, that you are a body soul.

You're a body soul. One. A union of essences, spiritual and material, as one.

And where do you see this most clearly? In Jesus himself. Right? When Jesus was born, he was fully divine and fully human.

When Jesus lived and worked as a carpenter, he was fully divine and fully human. When Jesus taught in the synagogues and on the streets, when he slept in the alleys, when he put his head on the rocks, right?

[13 : 00] When he was spit on, when he was yelled at, he was doing so as both fully human and fully divine. When he died, he was fully human and fully divine. When he rose from death, he was fully human and fully divine.

He was both at the same time. There wasn't a part of him that was material and part that was spiritual. It wasn't half and half. It's not 50-50. 100% divine, 100% human.

They make special emphasis of this in the resurrection, that he still had the holes in his hands, that he still had the wound in his side, that he still got hungry, that he wanted to eat broiled fish.

These are details that tell us this isn't just a spiritual image of Jesus. This is Jesus' flesh and blood and spirit as one. And in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul actually says the same will be true of us.

These bodies, in some glorified way, now maybe you think that's great, maybe you look at your body and you say, well, that's kind of a bummer. In some glorified way that makes sense, that's amazing and beautiful, these bodies are designed for eternity.

[14 : 08] The eternal life is a physical, material life. So we're not souls with a body, we are body souls and we need to understand the implications of this, what this means for us.

What this means is simply this, everything we do is both physical and spiritual as human beings. This isn't something that is true for animals, it's not true about rocks, but it's true about human beings.

Everything you do is spiritual and physical. So your diet and your exercise, the way you take care of or don't take care of your body, that's a spiritual thing as well as a physical.

Right? When you eat well, that's a spiritual choice that you're making. Right? When you eat junk, that's a spiritual choice. When you go for a run, when you bike, those are spiritual things that you're doing. They're inherently so.

This is also the foundation for how we think about sex and intimacy. Right? Paul picks this up in the New Testament and this is really the root of the entire Christian understanding of sexual ethics.

[15 : 14] And this is why Paul at several places makes such a strong connection between sexual immorality and idolatry. Because what we do with our bodies is spiritual.

It has spiritual ramifications. So you can't put yourself in a spiritual mode and meditate or go to church or do yoga or read a self-help book or something spiritual and then you cut that off and you go and you do something with your body or to your body with somebody else and think that that doesn't have any connection to your spiritual life.

The break there is only something that we're doing in our mind. It doesn't represent reality. There's a continuity between all of it. Because we're body souls.

Lastly, this influences the way we worship. Right? Especially here in this church when we raise our hands when we're singing, that's not just about enthusiasm.

Right? There's like two of us that raise our hands when we worship. For those two, for those two, it's not just because you're enthusiastic.

[16 : 22] Right? Now, you are enthusiastic. That's great. But it's not about that. When we kneel, it's not just about the pretense of a contrite heart. Right? What we're doing when we raise our hands when we praise and when we kneel when we confess our sin.

Right? When we extend our hands like this to receive the body and blood. When we hold our hands out like this when somebody's praying. What we're doing there is we're making our body congruent with our soul.

We're making them congruent. We're saying, my soul is praising God. I want my body to be congruent with that. My soul, my heart, is broken over my sin. I want my body to be congruent with that.

And if you don't understand the power of this, just try it. Try confessing, standing with your hands in your pockets or leaning up against the wall and then try getting down on your face and confessing.

And tell me if there's a difference. Tell me what it feels like when your body and your soul are congruent rather than being incongruent.

[17 : 28] So the first thing that we see is that we are body souls. This is an implication of the fact that we're created in the image of a God who, when He made Himself known to the world, came as a divine human being.

So bearing God's image means something about our nature. We're not merely animals. We're not merely spirit. We're body souls. The second implication of bearing God's image is this, that there is a sacredness to human life.

the word that we often hear is the word sanctity. There's a sanctity to human life. Every human life is sacred simply by virtue of being human because it represents and reflects God in ways that no other creature does.

So that image exists in every human being. It's passed from parent to child. And there's no point at which you begin to bear God's image.

It's not just the good people. It's not just people of a certain age. It's everybody bears God's image to every human being. So what this means is what? There's no such thing as three-fifths of a person.

[18 : 44] Right? Like our forefathers said back in the late 1700s, the three-fifths compromise. How do you deal with slaves? How do you figure them into the population?

Well, you count them as three-fifths of a person. It's very easy, a lot easier to justify chattel slavery where you consider another human being to be your property if that isn't a human being but rather just three-fifths of a human being.

Right? This would say absolutely not. That person bears the image of God. They're a person, not a fraction. In Stalinist Russia in 1937, something happened called the Great Terror.

And the Great Terror was essentially the government either executed or imprisoned close to half a million people. And you think about somebody doing this in their own country.

How do you execute or imprison half a million people and get away with it? And it's because the government had created a category years ago, the category of former person.

[19 : 55] So some people went from being persons to being former persons. This was conveniently a very broad definition. Anyone who obstructed, anyone who got in the way, anyone who was educated enough to question what the government was doing, anyone who owned land or was wealthy enough to push against the socialist regime, anybody that, anybody that in any way was an obstacle to the agenda that the government was putting forward was categorized as a former person.

So it's a very intentional way to do what? To make sure that empathy, that public empathy, doesn't get in the way. Because empathy is really problematic if you're shipping people off to a labor camp or shooting them in the street.

You want people to look the other way and so what do you do? You say, well this isn't a person, it's a former person. Oh, in that case. So you have a government that deals with people who are inconveniently standing in the way of the agenda by removing their status as human beings and then killing them and you think it's unbelievable that anyone could let this happen.

It's still happening. It's still happening today. It's still happening in our country. Roughly 3,000 deaths per day in our country which is like 9-11 every day.

But again, we don't use the word human beings to describe these people. They're unwanted pregnancies. You know, it sounds more like a medical condition when you put it that way.

[21 : 38] It sounds like an illness that needs to be cured. And it helps us deal with the whole empathy problem. It helps us to look the other way and to flip to the next story in our news feed.

Now, you know, I know when I bring this up it makes you recoil. Most people who come to this church come to the church because they're trying to get away from the culture war and now you're thinking what's happening?

What's happening? Why are we talking about this? And there's a lot of anxiety and rightly so because the culture war is mind-numbing. Nobody wants to get into that.

Some of us instinctively hate that. Some of us, I know a fair number of us, have had abortions. And so this comes up and immediately your walls come up and you just want to shut it all out and go to the bathroom and just not come back.

And I understand that and I want to address that this way and basically say there's no thing that we've done, there's no act, there's no choice, there's no thought that is more powerful than the cross of Christ.

[22 : 44] There's nothing that we can do that is more powerful than that. And so because of that at the foot of the cross there is no place for shame. There's no place for guilt. They don't belong there. They don't exist there.

They can't because of the cross. There's so much abundant grace and mercy there. There's no place for shame and guilt. There is only the hope of the newness of life that comes when we fall before Christ.

And we know it is ours for the taking. So that's not what this is about. This is not about shame. But here's what it's about. We cannot talk about the sanctity of human life without talking about this issue in our culture.

It would be criminally negligent to do that. And here's the thing. Even if you're not a believer and some of you are not believers and some of you maybe are and maybe you have very different thinking on this.

And again, that's a great thing about Advent, right? But even if you're not a believer, even if you believe there's no God, the science compels us to talk about this.

[23 : 53] You know, since Roe versus Wade, there have been more than 58 million abortions in our country. 58 million. Since then, that was a long time ago, we've learned a lot about what goes on in the womb.

For instance, we didn't used to have, when Roe versus Wade was passed, we didn't used to have 3D sonograms. Right? So we couldn't see the face of an 8-week-old child smiling at us.

We couldn't see that years ago. We just didn't have the technology. We couldn't see a child at 8 weeks sucking their thumb. We weren't even sure if they had thumbs, much less thought to do anything with them.

They do. But we couldn't see that. Right? We couldn't see that a child at 8 weeks, when the doctors go in with a needle to try to extract fluid, that the child, if that needle touches the child, that the child will actually at 8 weeks instinctively recoil and get away from the needle because that child can feel pain.

We didn't know that back then. Science has told us that now. We're learning things like this. And yet, right now, 95% of abortion providers will perform an abortion at 8 weeks.

[25 : 19] So now, I know that there are situations of rape, horrible situations, incredibly complicated, 1% of those situations. Right?

1% of abortions due to those situations. And that's an unspeakably horrible, an unspeakably complex situation. Right? And I know for a lot of people, you know, the health of the mother is of some concern.

Very complicated issue there. 12% of abortions. Health of the mother is a concern. But statistically speaking, the majority of abortions, the vast majority of abortions that are performed every year are not because of these issues.

They're primarily for convenience. I wasn't ready to have another one yet. I thought it would interfere too much with my work. I thought it would interfere... interfere too much with where I'm hoping to go in my job.

I thought it would interfere too much with where our family is and the lifestyle that we've gotten used to. I thought it would be too hard and demanding. I'm having some marital issues with my spouse and I'm not sure if we're ready to add that to our plate.

[26 : 23] These kinds of issues, the vast majority. And we're lying to ourselves if we think this is primarily a medical issue. It's about the exaltation of the self.

It's about, I'm going to do my life my way. Don't get in my way. So when we think about this, we look at Stalinist Russia and anybody who gets in the way, they label a former person and they do away with him.

How are we any different? Now I know some of you are hearing this. You're writing all of this off even as I say it. The walls are up and you're saying, well this is just another conservative and this is just another pro-life rant and that's not me and that's not what I'm about and there's lots of things that aren't being said and so I'm just going to shut this out.

I'm glad you're here. But I'll tell you something. I'm not pro-life. I'm not pro-life.

I'm not pro-choice. I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. Okay, I'm not a pro-lifer. I'm not a pro-choicer. I'm a Christian.

[27 : 38] It's not enough for you to claim a camp. It's not enough for you to say I'm just pro-life and this is what I think and we need to take Planned Parenthood out and that's the solution.

It's not enough for you to say I'm pro-choice and I disagree with all that and these are more complicated and I'm for the rights of the woman and I think that's more important. It's not enough to claim a camp.

Frankly, it's lazy. But here it's dangerous. Why? Because our culture has created a false dichotomy. A false dichotomy. You're either for the rights of the child to survive or you're for the rights of the mother to choose and you have to decide.

You're either going to fight the war on women or you're going to fight the war on the unborn. You have to choose. And as Christians, listen friends, we don't get the luxury of choosing. Our faith, our God, our Savior doesn't let us off that easy.

We can't just pick a side and check a box and be done because when we look at this we see what's really happening. Do you know what's really happening? Our culture, our culture has pitted the widow against the orphan.

[28 : 53] It's pitted the widow against the orphan. We're told to choose. Do you fight for the rights of the child?

I pick the orphan. An orphan in the biblical time is just any unwanted child. Born or unborn, unwanted makes you an orphan.

Parentless makes you an orphan. And you either say I choose to support the orphan but I do so knowing that there are a lot of women out there primarily, primarily single women.

The vast majority primarily African American women, women of color are still five times more likely to get an abortion. The vast majority of, or the majority of aborted children in our country are African American babies.

Babies of color. So you say black lives matter? Yes, including unborn black lives. They all matter. So you choose, you know, you choose the orphan and you say well I'm going to choose the orphan but I know that it's going to take people who are impoverished and don't have education because they can't go to school because they're caring for multiple kids and it's going to add another kid on there.

[30 : 11] It's going to maybe make them more poor. It's going to make them more vulnerable. It's going to make their life that much harder. It's going to make them more vulnerable to exploitation and you're going to do that because of a baby?

Because of a fetus? Or you say okay well I choose the widow. A widow in the Bible is just a vulnerable woman. Right? A widow in the biblical times was the most vulnerable person there was.

Somebody who has no power, no resources, no rights. That's a widow. And you say well I choose the widow and I'm going to fight for the widow but at the expense of what? Countless image bearing human beings lost.

When I read James 1 27 I don't see that we have a choice. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this to care for orphans and widows in their affliction.

To care for orphans and widows. Both. It's not one or the other. It's both. And unless we're doing both it's insufficient. It's insufficient. Amen.

[31 : 24] Unwanted children, vulnerable women, orphans, widows. What does this mean friends, Christians? We need to be involved at every stage.

At every stage. church. You can't just rant against Planned Parenthood. We've got to be doing everything we can as Christians, as a community, to love and to support and care for the single moms.

We need to be doing everything we can to resource, to make our community the kind of place where, as it was in the early church, a widow with children that she couldn't care for on her own could come in and know that her needs would be met there, that they would be her family.

We need to be doing everything we can in the area of prevention, preventing unwanted pregnancies from occurring. We need to be doing everything we can in the areas of foster care and adoption.

We need to be doing everything at all levels to make sure that we are holistically caring for both the widow and the orphan. Nothing less will do, and we shouldn't stop. We cannot stop until the number of abortions in our country is zero.

[32 : 30] Nobody that I know likes the idea of abortion. The most staunch pro-choice person doesn't love the idea of abortion. Maybe some people are out there, maybe they do exist.

I don't know anybody like that. We probably wouldn't get along very well. But we cannot stop until the rate of abortions is zero. Because if we're made in the image of God and every life is sacred, this needs to radically impact how we think about everything from slavery to abortion to the death penalty to euthanasia, everything.

The last point I'll make is this, and it's very short. It's not enough just to talk about this from a rights perspective. The third and final implication is simply this, that by virtue of the fact that we're human beings, not only does that speak to our nature and to the sanctity of human life, but it speaks to human dignity.

Human dignity. Bearing God's image confers a basic, undeniable dignity to human life. Every human being bears God's image, and although it's become distorted in us, it's still there, but we cannot deny the worth of every human being in every human life.

What this means is simply this, that Christians should be the greatest champions of human dignity in the world. The greatest champions of human dignity. A lot of you are here because you care about rights.

[33 : 53] A lot of you are here because you fight for rights for other people who don't have them. That's amazing. Christians need to be doing that. And a lot of you are passionate about that. But here's the thing. You cannot have human rights without human dignity.

The whole concept of human rights flows from the belief of the inherent worth and dignity of a human being. Where does that come from? The belief that that human being is created in the image of God.

Because we as Christians believe this, we should strive to protect the dignity, the inherent worth of every human life. And I'll put it this way. Rights are not enough.

Rights are not enough. Right? Fighting for the rights of minorities to work is necessary, but it's not sufficient. Fighting to ensure that women are paid as much as men equally, that's necessary.

Christians need to be doing that, but that's not sufficient. Right? Fighting to make sure people are not discriminated against based on color or gender or sexual orientation or religion, that's necessary.

[34 : 55] Christians should be doing that, but it's not sufficient. Christians should not only lead the change in all of these areas, we should go way beyond it, way beyond it.

And here's why. Rights are medicine, but they're not food. Rights can protect you against harm and discrimination, but they're not generative.

They don't build you up. They don't create something in you that's more than there was before, but guess what? Dignity can. Rights don't make you more human, they just try to prevent you from becoming less human.

But dignity can make a person more human. Dignity is humanizing. It has the power to humanize people, to remind them that they are more than meat, more than cosmic accidents, to remind them that they have an inherent worth.

So as Christians, we more than anyone else should strive to ensure that everyone is treated not only in a way that upholds their rights, but with dignity and the respect that they deserve simply by virtue of being human beings.

[36 : 12] So we've got to close here. I told you there was two parts to this, and this has been the first part. I'll just end by saying this. What does it mean to be human? For starters, it means that we're created in the image of God, which means in our nature we are body souls.

Everything that we do is not only physical but spiritual. It also means that there is a sanctity to human life that Christians need to be fighting for at every level within every issue.

And lastly, it means that there is a dignity within every human being that cannot be taken away. There is a worth, and as Christians, we need to recognize that and fight for it wherever we see that that is threatened.

And if you ever were tempted to doubt in the value and the worth of a human being, you need only look at Jesus, who when he looks at you, sees someone who is so incalculably valuable that it was worth him giving up everything to have you for eternity.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we recognize that as we delve into this, it raises all kinds of things.

[37 : 22] And in many of us, there may be struggle or wrestling happening right now. We pray that whatever is not of your truth and your word and your grace and your love would be stricken from memory.

We pray that whatever it is that you are desiring to tell us, that we would hear it loud and clear. that we would fall into open and fertile hearts. And that you would deepen our understanding of what it means to be created in your image.

And that we would see that not only in ourselves, but in all people. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.