

In His Image: Holy & Loving

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[0 : 00] Well, I had something interesting happen to me a few years ago. I went to my son Connor, lots of you know him, went to my son Connor's school one day. And he was in high school, he's graduated now.

But I went to bring him his lunch bag because I was at home and he had forgotten it and texted me and said, I need my lunch, Dad. So I went over to the school office and said to the lady at the desk, the administrator, I'm here to bring something to my son.

And so the lady behind the desk said, well, what's your son's name? And I began to say Connor.

And she jumped in enthusiastically immediately and said, Dixon.

And she said, he looked like me. She said, poor guy. She said, but I look like my father, so it's only fair.

But my sense of humor, she said, reminded her of me, just in the brief interaction that she and I had. He reflected in some way who I was, who I am.

[1 : 07] And whenever people have met me as I grew up, people who knew my parents, knew my father, said that I reminded them of my father. Now, Marg Johnson is not here this morning, but Marg, it's creepy.

Marg grew up across the street from my grandparents. So when I first came to Braymar, she said, Kent, I know you. And I said, well, that's awfully sweet. And she said, no, I know you.

And I said, oh, dear. And Vern Castle's mom also knew me from, so I haven't grown a lot, of course. But they said, no, all good things, all good things.

But so people have reflected that I remind them of my parents. And now that I've become a preacher, people who heard my dad preach as a lay preacher, my dad was a pharmacist by trade, but he was very involved in our church growing up.

And so he would narrate Christmas and Easter productions, or he would preach at times at our church. And people who have heard me preach have reflected that my preaching reminds them of my dad.

[2 : 19] Certainly it has its own style, its own I'm a different person in a lot of ways, but there is a reflection there as well. And we share the character traits, we share often many character traits, with people with whom we have genetic ties, don't we?

We reflect the people with whom we have connections. As married couples are together, more and more over longer periods of time, they begin to also share traits, share expressions.

Michelle has stolen some of her greatest expressions from me. But other things as well. People literally begin to reflect one another, don't they?

And hopefully they even begin to compliment one another. And I mean that in both senses of that word. Literally compliment each other.

And also bring strength where the other has weakness, and vice versa. As created beings, it makes sense then that we should also naturally reflect the one who created us, right?

[3 : 28] We should reflect many qualities of God himself. Well, how is that possible though? Well, because we were created, as scripture tells us, in his image.

As Genesis recounts the acts of God's creation, we hear over and over, God says, let there be, right? And things came into being.

But there's a noticeable change on day six. Because God suddenly says, let us make. And he says that when it comes specifically to humanity.

The broad strokes of creation, those broad strokes, suddenly become very specific and personal. And the Bible says in Genesis 1.27, so God created man in his own image.

In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. As we learned in our last series that we just finished last week, God has no physical form, right?

[4 : 44] So we can't understand being created in his image in the same way, to the same extent that I touched on with Connor and me and my dad.

In God's image is slightly different. And some feel that our reason, our sense of wisdom and understanding come from God and reflect him.

Some that our sense of creativity, the way humans are creative and skilled, the way our speech or the way our self-awareness exists, reflect God.

But it's more likely that our whole being, which bears the imprint, which bears the thumbprint, the signature, the artistic flair of the one who created us.

And because we bear the image of our creator, we have an inherent value. And not just us, but other created things, other people, other human beings, other things that God has created also have value.

[5 : 56] Another aspect of being created in God's image is the fact that we exhibit exhibit many qualities and characteristics of God himself. That we can see in God.

That we can see as God, part of his character throughout scripture. So I saved this from the last series. Everybody's going, I don't care, I don't remember the last series.

But, I saved this distinction. I was going to bring it up in our last series. But God has two kinds of attributes. There are those that are unique to God alone, which we looked at in our last series, many of them.

And they are known as incommunicable attributes. Use that at the lunch table. You know what I learned in church today? God has incommunicable attributes.

Great. But that just simply means that we have no experience with them. We have no full conception of them. And you'll recognize that we looked at that over the last five weeks.

[7 : 00] But starting this week in our new series, In His Image, Reflecting God, we'll be looking at the other group of attributes.

The communicable attributes. And those are the traits of God that can, and hopefully do, become true of us as well.

or are true of us. Because God is holy. He's loving. He's good. He's merciful and gracious. He's faithful and truthful and patient, thankfully, and wise.

And those things, you're going, not of me, but those things can be true of us as well. And we'll look at that together. So over the coming weeks, we're going to be exploring those communicable characteristics to each week, as we did last, with our last series.

And we're going to look at the ways we can reflect those more ourselves. As Christians, and maybe you can relate to this, I believe one of the most common questions we ask ourselves is, ready, what is God's plan for my life?

[8 : 16] Can you relate to that? We just want to know the end of the story, right? We want it, the whole plan unfolded before us. Because we don't want to make the wrong decision or pick the wrong direction.

It's okay. God's got it. Don't panic. But we agonize over what God wants us to do, don't we? Lots of times. We presume that God must be telling us what to do in every moment of our lives.

Telling us where He wants us to go, who He wants us to marry, what kind of car He wants us to buy. Lord, Lincoln or Buick?

Lincoln or Buick? God will let me know. Maybe neither. Maybe you're a Ford person. What kind of sandwich we should have for lunch? Lord, should I have Subway or McDonald's?

You got to tell me, Lord, I can't decide. And I'm not trivializing, not intending to trivialize, that genuine nature that we need to have and many of us do have to know God's will.

[9 : 23] To pick the way that God would have us go. But I have a challenge for us. In seeking God, what if we recognize that God is ultimately more interested in who we are than what we do?

Does that make sense? Sure, the things that we ultimately do reflect who we are as people. Absolutely. They display our priorities, our focus, where we spend our time and our talents.

But the things we do are ultimately secondary because it's who we are that really matters. So as we seek to reflect God in our lives, how can we best do that?

Do you remember that over the course of our previous series, we considered that while God is unchangeable, God never changes, we must change.

Do you remember me saying that? We are called to be more like Christ. And it's a lifelong process for us. It is called, heavy theological word, sanctification.

[10:46] It's not a process that's done one day, done, finished, checked off the list. It is an ongoing development, an ongoing journey to become more like Christ in our lives.

Have you ever considered the way that Jesus talked, the way he spoke, the way he treated people, the way he focused his life on the will of God?

Do you recognize that in scripture? That, my friends, is what we are called to do as well. Have you ever wondered what, let's say, Garden of Eden didn't happen.

Sin never entered humanity. What did God's plan for humanity look like? What is a perfect human? Jesus. Yeah, Pastor Kent, but he was the son of God.

Yes, but look at his humanity, his human behavior, his human action, his human choices. That was the plan. And sanctification is the process of returning us to that plan.

[11:59] Jesus modeled the same attitudes and behavior and focus in his life that we are called to do in ours. And as so, that's a big intro, right?

But that's where you have to start with the series. So as we begin to look at these qualities now, his communicable qualities, the qualities that can become true of us as well, we're going to approach it a little differently than we did in our last series because as we consider those qualities that we cannot aspire to because they are other, right?

We concluded with God being omnipotent and sovereign, all powerful and ruling over all things. And we saved in a lot of ways the most significant for last in that series.

But in this series we're going to start with this quality of God that we should consider most important, most significant because it's the foundation for the others.

And the songs we sang this morning were a giveaway because that was the plan. Holiness. Holy.

[13:16] Audience participation time. What does that mean to you? To be holy or to consider holiness. No wrong answers. Pure.

Blessed. Perfect. Others. Obedient. Reverent.

Very good. Well, not surprisingly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary has a definition and it defines holy as exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness.

Divine. Having a divine quality or to be venerated. And that fits with our understanding of God, doesn't it? That God is worthy of devotion and praise.

Veneration. God is sacred. But still, what does that mean? Are you kind of scratching your head still?

[14:33] people? Because, think about human language. We use expressions like, holier than thou. Right? Ever used it?

Ever had it used on you? We use that expression to refer to someone who is self-righteous or judgmental. whether they're Christian or not.

And that expression has its origin in Isaiah 65 verse 5 where some translations actually say, don't come too close or you will defile me.

Sounds pandemic-ish, doesn't it? Don't come too close or you will defile me. I am holier than you. And Jesus himself drew attention to that behavior.

He had a specific way of referring to it, in fact. He called people with that attitude hypocrites.

Another definition I read this week defined holiness as the sum of all moral excellence.

[15:42] Someone said perfect. The antithesis of all moral blemish or defilement. That's heavy, right? But it also sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn't it?

So how important friends in our young adults group have said to me they've noticed as they've listened to sermons over time, my sermons over time, that I love stats and I love words and I love, so here comes more.

So how important is that concept of holiness in scripture? Well, the word holy appears in the Bible almost 700 times.

700. Sanctify or to make holy, and that's the verb form of holy, appears an additional 200 times.

Kind of important, maybe? holy. So these are examples of the concept being used to relate to people, to places, to things. So it's clearly a theme of scripture.

[16:51] God's name is God's name. God is tied as directly to him as is holiness. The Bible mentions the words, his holy name, referring to God, 29 times.

And God is called the holy one of Israel, 25 times in the book of Isaiah alone. the holiness of God sets him apart also from the character of other ancient gods.

Because the gods of Rome and Egypt and Mesopotamia and Assyria and other cultures, it was more about how their gods boasted about their attributes, their exploits.

And most of those exploits, if you study mythology or other world religions, not that holy, some of those things. And they certainly, those stories, did not reflect the nature of a sacred text like the Hebrew scriptures did when they spoke of our God being holy.

So the Hebrew God was clearly different, set apart, from other gods. The Bible says in Exodus 15 11, who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?

[18 : 18] Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? And in 1 Samuel, we read, there is none holy like the Lord, for there is none besides you.

And you've heard this in worship songs before, there is no rock like our God. just compose myself again there for a sec.

So you may have heard at some point, even from me, that it's important to recognize repetition in scripture, right? We've talked about that before. Because that's intended to tell us, pay attention.

This next thing is really important. You've probably heard that. And there are several times when Jesus spoke when he said, truly, truly, I say to you.

He was drawing attention and he was emphasizing the importance of what was to come. Jesus was saying, okay, pay attention, everybody lean forward, I'm about to tell you something important.

[19 : 31] And it's important to recognize that the word holy is repeated three times in scripture. It's the only word repeated three times for emphasis.

And only in relation to God. So consider the way the angels praise God in Isaiah 6 verse 3.

They constantly declare, holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. theologian R.C. Spruill, who I love his writing, here's a quote from him, only once in sacred scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree.

Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not merely that he's holy, holy, holy.

[20 : 37] He is holy, holy, holy. We also need to recognize the Bible doesn't ever say that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, wrath, wrath, wrath, justice, justice, justice.

It does say that he's holy, holy, holy, and the whole earth is full of his glory. As Christians, and maybe you can relate to this, we may tend to focus on God's love, or God's mercy, and make those the core of our understanding of him.

And I think that it's because they're more comfortable, they're more relatable, right? They're more humanish. But those qualities, friends, all stem from, are directly anchored in, his holiness.

If we classify God's love, or mercy, or justice, apart from first seeing his holiness, and recognizing it, they become little more than human versions of these other qualities.

In light of God's holiness, his other qualities become, someone said earlier, perfect. And I would even suggest eternal.

[22 : 07] This concept of holiness includes the idea of something being, and I said it a minute ago, set apart. And folks, this is the place where holiness relates specifically to us.

because through Christ we have been redeemed, but we've also been called to be set apart, to seek holiness in our own lives.

Our sanctification, our journey towards becoming more and more like Christ in our lives, our words, our attitudes, our focus on God, God.

This is the pursuit of holiness. And scripture is not vague on our calling to be holy. The Bible says in Leviticus 11, 44, and 45, message received.

this directive to us as God's people is repeated over and over in the book of Leviticus. And people could probably easily dismiss this as Old Testament stuff, right?

[23 : 50] That's Old Covenant. Messianic Covenant, Jesus, perfect. I'll go forward from there, and the rest is none of my business, or somehow irrelevant.

But, Jesus himself refers to this directive in Matthew 5, 48. Peter obviously got the message from his master as well, because he repeats it again in 1 Peter 1, 14, and 16.

The apostle Paul repeats it again in 1 Thessalonians 4, 3, and 7. He reminds us that we are called, Paul reminds us, we're called to be set apart.

We're called to live holy lives. And that call to be holy, to live holy lives that are set apart and sanctified, is a journey, as I said before.

don't beat yourself up over it. It's a journey, and every day is a step. And as we recognize the behaviors that we're drawn to that are selfish and self-interested, we need to recognize that we're called to seek to love what God loves and hate, not just dislike, eh, I don't really like that, but hate what God hates.

[25 : 26] Hate sin. What's God's will for your life? He's calling you to be holy. He's calling you to live differently from the world around you, so that people notice, so that people are drawn to God.

God's love. Let's talk about love. Do you want to talk about love? That word, the emotions that surround it, oh my goodness, they have become watered down over time, haven't they?

we love, I love pizza. I meant to bring a can of grape crush up here because I love grape crush.

We love lots of things. We love that someone liked our Facebook post. Oh, people like me. People like our tweet, our Instagram post.

People send us a card. Oh, they liked me enough to send me this. They must love me, truly. We've got an entire retail gift-giving season devoted to L-O-V-E love.

[26 : 51] That concept of Valentine's Day, the season where florists and chocolatiers and card stores rejoice, celebrate, and count their cash and everyone else agonizes over.

What do I get? I won't get anything. What should I get? What do I deserve? Roses or carnations? White or dark chocolate? Our society seems to be focused on love.

There's a film genre dedicated to it, rom-com, romantic comedy, chick flicks, people like to call them that. I like them, doesn't make me less of a man, just so we're clear.

There are romance sections in bookstores and libraries, right? Romance novels, they're a big deal. Let me get serious for a split second, not long enough to make you truly uncomfortable.

Pornography is a multi-million dollar industry based on the many ways that love can be twisted and perverted capitalized upon.

[28 : 04] We even seem to focus on love as one of, if not the most popular quality of God. And I touched on this a little while ago. Even people who don't recognize God, who have no relationship with God, would recognize the three-word phrase, God is love.

Right? Many worship songs tend to lean so far forward into the idea of personally loving Jesus that it gets uncomfortable at times.

A pastor friend of mine refers to them as Jesus is my boyfriend songs. Because that level of love and familiarity and intimacy transcends and seems to sideline his power.

his holiness, his authority. There's an awkward, fumbling sense of familiarity, I feel, at times. And people are even encouraged to fall in love with Jesus.

Love him? Just be careful. Welcome to the English language, though, right? And I've said this so many times. We can dilute the original intent or meanings of words so much that they begin to lose the depth of meaning that they were originally intended to have.

[29 : 33] Do you know that the Greek language, some of you will know this, the Greek language in which the New Testament was written has four words for love. Very specific words.

Eros. Eros. You can tell what words come from that. erotic. It's used to describe romantic love.

Philia, which is used to describe brotherly or sisterly love.

Storge, which is just a fun word to say. It's used to describe a parent's love for a child. And, any guesses? Agape.

Awesome. Agape, which is also, if mispronounced, agape, which I wonder, you ever thought of that? Agape and agape are spelled the same way. Interesting.

But, it's the word used in the New Testament to describe specifically the love of God. And, so, in its noun or verb form, the actual action form, philia, which is brotherly, sisterly, is used 54 times in the New Testament.

[30 : 45] Not surprising because the disciples talked about loving one another. Paul would talk about loving people in the church and so on. So, that would be that brotherly or sisterly love. Storge or eros, romantic love or parental love, is mentioned zero times.

Oh, that's what I thought. But, agape? Any guesses? Yeah, all the rest. That's right, Bill.

And, all the rest is 259 times. So, gee, I wonder where the writers of the New Testament expected or thought or wanted to direct us to our understanding of love.

So, I want to look at three, quickly, three passages of Scripture that are hopefully familiar to you, and then I'm going to put in another word. So, listen for this.

In Romans 5, 8, Paul describes why God sent Jesus. But God demonstrates his own agape for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[32 : 00] Agape is the word that Jesus uses to reflect how his disciples should treat those who mistreat them. God's agape for us.

God's love, God's agape for us. But agape your enemies, Jesus says. Do good to them and lend to them without expecting anything back.

Then your reward will be great and you will be sons of the most high, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. God's agape for us differs from human love.

I'm going to suggest a few ways. Human love is based on need. Do you recognize that? We need others to love us.

We need others to accept us. And there's a sense of that transactional quality to human love. God's love, though, requires nothing.

[33 : 01] God has no need to fill. Do you see that? Do you recognize that? He loves us because he created us. And that's it. He loves you because of who you are.

He has no expectation of you. As a transaction, earthly love also has an inherent expectation for it to be reciprocated, right?

I love you. And there's no response. Oh, thank you, Bill. Oh, Bill does love me, see?

But do you see that, though? Like, I've been married to Michelle for 24 years, and sometimes you go, I love you. And silence, right?

She, I know she loves me. Thank you. Thank you, dear. Fa-boom, fa-boom, fa-boom. But do you see that, though? And it's not, it's not a bad thing, but it's transactional.

[34 : 04] I give you this, and I have an expectation. I have a need that I need you to fill. I need to feel loved and wanted. But God's love doesn't, God doesn't love us on the condition that we love him back.

He doesn't need our love. He loves us with no strings. Can you imagine that? A relationship that has no strings? Even the best relationships, even the healthiest relationships.

I'm doing premarital counseling with a couple right now. Even perfect, somebody said, oh, but even perfect relationships still have strings because we're human, right?

We have needs that we have to fill. But I've said this before in the past. If God loved us based on what we deserve, what do you think we deserve?

Don't have to answer. I think you know where that goes. So this agape love, the way that God loves us, is the same way he calls us to love others.

[35 : 18] Without hesitation, without deliberation, well, yeah, I gotta think about it, I'll get back to you, without weighing what's in it for us, unconditional.

We're called to reflect God's holiness, here's where they're connected, by loving as God loves.

Agape love is also an intentional love, love.

It's not passive. It's a love that seeks out people who might be considered unlovable by someone else. An agape love for someone else never counts the cost.

Through Jesus' death on the cross, God demonstrated that he loved us, he agape-ed us, so much that no price was too high, no cost was too great.

He did not hesitate and Jesus obeyed. Can you be willing to ask God to let you love the people, help you love the people that he wants you to love?

[36 : 37] can you trust that any price that you have to pay, being the one who reaches out from a group of people, whether you lose your pride or your status or anything like that, is not too high a price to pay because your Father is calling you to do it?

do you remember what the Apostle John said in 1 John 4:19? We love God because because he first loved us.

And friends, do you recognize that right there we've landed on the great commandment? We are called to love God because he first loved us and then, it's not even a big gap, and then love others with that same agape love.

Can you do that? Can you try? Ask God for his power to love those that you may previously have deemed unlovable because that is what we are called to do.

This morning, we've begun to look at these communicable attributes of God, the ones that we can exhibit ourselves as a reflection of his son. Can we be sinless?

[38 : 17] No, not this side of heaven. But we can seek to be people who choose holiness over the ways of the world.

And we can also love with that same unconditional, unexpected, never-ending agape love that God pours out on us, on you, every day.

May we be transformed more and more each day into the people who God is calling us to be. Let's pray. Let's pray.