

God's Good Purpose

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

It's Genesis chapter 1. I'm going to begin reading in verse 26. Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness.

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So, God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them.

And God blessed them. God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

[1 : 17] And God said, behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth. Every tree with seed in its fruit, you shall have them for food.

And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens, everything that creeps on the ground, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good.

And there was evening and there was morning the sixth day. May God bless the hearing and the preaching of his word.

After our image, after our likeness, we saw what that meant in stamping us with intrinsic dignity and value and worth and all those things.

[2 : 19] But it also makes us immediately accountable to God. He is the potter. We are the clay. He is the maker. We are the made.

When we read these verses, we're meant to see that we owe our existence to him and our allegiance. Jesus underlined this in his teaching in a provoking way.

Towards the end of his ministry, as he was approaching Jerusalem, the Pharisees came up to him. They came up to him with a number of tests trying to trap him. Get him to say something against the Mosaic law.

So they said, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? It's kind of a live question nowadays. Jesus said, bring me a denarii.

Then he asked, whose image, whose likeness and inscription is this? On the coin. They said, Caesar's.

[3 : 21] Jesus says, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar and to God the things that are God. Now, a lot of books have been written trying to unpack that statement.

What's Jesus saying? Caesar's image is on the coin, but God's image is on you. Give Caesar your money.

Give him his money. But give your life to God. That's what he's saying. Give your life. Who cares about your money? I'm interested in your life blood.

I'm interested in your life. That's what he's saying. The coins belong to Caesar. You belong to God. He made you and he owns you. And you owe him for it. Psalm 33 helpfully says, the Lord looks down from heaven.

He's the king, remember, the sovereign king. He sees all the children of man from where he sits enthroned. He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth. He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.

[4 : 28] The idea is he's looking out over all that he's made because all that he's made will be accountable to him. There's so much more we could say.

But also, as creative persons, we're not just immediately alerted to our accountability, but also to our call to worship God. You know, just because man and woman were created in the image of God and in his likeness doesn't mean they're immediately welcomed into the presence of God.

God is the creator. Eternal. Uncreated one.

We are the created. God is infinite. He's omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. He's everywhere, always with the fullness of his meaning.

We're so incredibly finite. Finite. Who are we to think we can waltz into the presence of God? The distance between the eternal creator and the creature is infinite.

[5 : 34] In these verses, though, when God is creating Adam and bringing him into his presence, God is making a covenant.

There's no way for us to approach God apart from a covenant relationship. Now, a covenant is an old biblical word referring to a binding agreement between two parties.

So how it typically worked in the ancient times is maybe a larger country would come along and would see a younger country getting kicked around and would say, Listen, we will protect you.

We will absorb you into our domain. We will protect you. We will keep you from harm. But you owe us taxes and allegiance if we do that.

God is doing something similar in these verses. He's making an agreement with man and woman. These verses have all the indications of a covenant. There's two parties.

[6 : 35] So God is there. And man and woman are creating an image. There's two parties there coming to an agreement. There are conditions, as is often. You know, like, hey, you owe us taxes.

There's similar conditions for man in this covenant. Man's commanded to subdue the earth and multiply. He's commanded to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So there's these conditions.

There's things they must abide by. There's laws. But there's also blessings and curses. Man is given the immediate blessing of access to God and the blessing of fellowship with him.

Interesting enough, when the creation account continues in chapter 2, which we'll get to in a few weeks, we'll get to this part in a few weeks.

But when the story of creation continues, God places man in a garden in the midst of creation. There God relates to him.

[7 : 38] The garden is not merely man's earthly home. It's a sanctuary. It's a temple. It's the dwelling place of God. Man and woman having immediate access to him and fellowship with him, where they walk with him in the cool of the day, as Genesis 3 tells us.

So much so that look at the end of Genesis 2. It said, In the garden, man and woman, the man and his wife were both naked and unashamed.

Not ashamed. That's diverse. It makes you squirm a little bit. You know, that's where our children's Bibles get a little creative in their illustrations.

The woman having long hair to cover things up. The man wearing fig leaves before he was supposed to be wearing fig leaves. But let it not obscure the reality.

Man is invited into a relationship with God in which he has nothing to hide from and nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing to hide from, nothing to be ashamed of.

[8 : 50] This is, you know, this is God's doing. This is the blessing of God's covenant with man. This is the purpose of God for man. And the overarching promise of the Bible, I will be your God and you will be my people.

This is the kingdom of God. That's why we say it's a sanctuary. This is the kingdom of God. God's people in God's place under the rule of God's word.

This is what we were made for. While there are blessings, though, to this covenant, there are also curses. God said, if you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die.

Adam and Eve, we know, ate of that tree. And while disobeying with God did mean physical death, the first loss was the loss of this unmediated access to God.

They were kicked out of the garden. It's impossible to calculate the confusion and corruption that results from losing access to God. It's what we're made for.

[10 : 05] And the loss of access to God drives us all over the place looking for something to satisfy. The great Chris Christofferson captures it provokingly in his old song, Sunday Morning Coming Down.

This will be where I'm tempted to sing. He says, I woke up, well, I woke up Sunday morning with no way to hold my head that didn't hurt. Now, some of the sinful things he's talking about, I don't condone one bit.

I fumbled through my closet for my clothes and found the cleanest dirty shirt. Every man can relate to that. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I washed my face and combed my hair and stumbled down the stairs to meet the day.

He continues, I smoked my brain the night before on cigarettes and songs that I've been picking. Then I crossed the street, crossed the empty street and caught the Sunday smell of someone frying chicken.

And it took me back to something that I had lost somehow along the way. Somewhere along the way.

[11 : 17] On the Sunday morning, I walked wishing Lord that I was stoned. Because there's something in a Sunday that makes a body feel alone.

What he's capturing is the loss of a relationship with God. I lost something along the way. Sunday suddenly feels so alone, so isolated, so removed from the meaning of life.

What he's saying is no amount of smoking and drinking, no amount of cigarettes and songs, no amount of money and power, no amount of popularity and prominence, no amount of thing can satisfy the longing of the soul.

As Augustine, the man said, You were made for God.

Have you lost it? Have you gotten lost? Do you still sense the wonder of praying to the sovereign, majestic king over all?

[12 : 32] J.I. Packer says, Knowing God is a relationship calculated to thrill a person's heart. Does it still thrill your heart? The wonder of being invited into the presence of this majestic king.

Can you say, what is man that you're mindful of him? The son of man that you care for him. Or is your life filled with the empty cans of trying to find other things to thrill your heart?

Money, sex, possessions, approval, control. They're all dead ends. You were made for God. And this wonder is meant to lead to a life of deep commitment. To the Bible, to meditation, to prayer, to the pursuit of growth and the drive to live before the face of God.

Second word, community. Community. Community. The second thing these verses call us to is community. They're teaching us not merely how to relate to God, but how to relate to one another in this world.

As created persons, we're created in the image of the triune God. Verse 26 again. Then God says, let us make man in our image.

[13 : 55] After our likeness. Who is the us? Some have suggested it's kind of the royal us.

Let us grant your request. You know, come on in. You know, kind of like we use the royal we. Sometimes, could we go check the kitchen and clean up the dishes?

I'm always like, what do we mean by the we? Sounds like you want me to do something. But some have suggested kind of this royal us, this us kind of speaking in a plural form. I don't think that's right.

Others have suggested it's God speaking to the heavenly court of the angels. Let us make man in our image. But why would he talk to the angels that we're going to make man in the image of God?

Not in the image of angels. The most natural reading and the most historical reading is that this is a reference to the Trinity. God asks no heavenly court for counsel.

[15 : 06] God has all the eternal wisdom, knowledge, and power in himself. And so this verse is unveiling to us that there has always been a plurality in the person of God.

Or in the Godhead. There's always been a plurality of persons in God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So, and wonderfully, several weeks ago we talked about how God was eternal before anything that was made.

Now we can add that God was eternally three in one. With the full weight of scripture we can say that. God in three persons. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

That this means we're not merely creating the image of God. Solo, but created in the image of a triune God.

Now I'm going somewhere with this. In addition, man and woman are together created in the image of God. Man is not the image of God by himself.

[16 : 07] With a woman as a humble helper or something. Woman is not the image of God herself. The man is a leader or something.

Man and woman are together. Made in the image of God. God is not a single sovereign ruler. God is a unity of three diverse persons.

So too man and woman can only reflect the image of God fully in a unity of two diverse persons. Or many diverse persons.

Unity and diversity. Unity in diversity. And diversity in unity is at the heart of the Godhead. And so unity in diversity.

And diversity in unity is at the heart of what it means to be created in the image of God. Man and woman can only image God fully together. If we could put it this way, which is a little squishy theologically, we are made in the image of not just a me, but an us.

[17 : 11] So that we will not understand who we are until we understand ourselves as not just a me, but an us. We were made for community. Just a few verses later, the Lord famously says, there's one thing not good in the garden.

It's not good that man is alone. Then the Lord created woman, gave her the man and the kind provision of marriage. But we must not conclude that marriage is the community that we were born for.

As if those unmarried are outside the purpose of God and the image of God. No, it is not good for the man to be alone. It's also not good for the woman to be alone.

It's not good for the man and the woman to be alone together. It's not even good for the man and the woman and their children to be alone together. God calls man and woman to be fruitful and multiply.

God doesn't tell them to move out to a rural county and build the kingdom for themselves, but to be fruitful and multiply. Because the image of God is meant to flow out to billions of people of all races, backgrounds, languages, and nations who fill the earth and subdue the earth for the glory of God.

[18 : 21] We were made for community much deeper, more significant than a spouse or a family. We'll only be able to understand ourselves when we discover ourselves, not just be a me, but an us.

Several years ago, I listened to an interview with Daryl McDaniel. I doubt anybody knows who that is, but he's one of the founding members of the hip-hop group Run DMC. Much of the interview revolved around a friendship with Sarah McLachlan.

Now, Sarah McLachlan and Run DMC are not just in different worlds. They're in different planets. Sarah McLachlan, a 90s artist, was easy listening.

You might do a bubble bath and listen to Sarah McLachlan or something like Run DMC. You'd go to the club to listen to him. But it talked about this story. Daryl McDaniel is going through a season where he was battling intense depression.

He was on tour. He told this gripping story of being on top of a building and running to the edge multiple times, just barely ready to jump off to kill himself.

[19 : 28] Self-murder. He said he got in. He flew back to New York, I guess, from tour, got into a cab, a New York cab.

The cab guy was talking about Run DMC. Then he said, change this channel from hip-hop. I want to listen to something else. And it landed on Sarah McLachlan's song, Angel, in the arms of an angel.

Just kind of a breathy, beautiful, simple ballad. And McDaniel said, suddenly, like, I felt changed.

Now, this is Run DMC, you know. Suddenly he talked about, I felt changed. I felt blown away by this song. I felt comforted. I felt known. I felt seen by this song. He said that for several months, maybe even a year or whatever, he'd listen to this five and ten and fifteen times in the morning to get up and start his day.

The story, though, with him and McLachlan continued to develop. He said he was at an award ceremony out in California. He was sitting there at this pre-party for the award ceremony. He was, again, very depressed.

[20 : 41] And Sarah McLachlan walked in. And he walked over to her and said, your song, it changed my life. It saved me. It helped me. All this stuff. She's like, you are a weird human being, you know.

And so, yeah, yeah, he's just gushing all over, crying. This Run DMC leader crying all over. And, you know, so they became friends, exchanged numbers.

A couple years later, he was talking to his parents. And he said, suddenly they told him that they're not his real parents. He was adopted.

And again, crushed again. Listened that song again. Reached out to Sarah McLachlan. Said, can we make a song together about being adopted?

They flew up to Canada. They made this song together. And when he got done, he's telling her about all that's happened, how he found out he'd been adopted. She said, I was adopted too.

[21 : 40] You know what he said? This is what I quote. The whole thing. It made me not feel alone anymore. God had brought this person from another planet into his world randomly?

I think not. To communicate to him that he was made for community. You're the same way. Your life is like that.

Have you made the same discovery? Tragically, when we sin, we not only lost access to the presence of God, our relationships with others became difficult.

Ed Welch, in his book on counseling, says relationships are the best and the worst of life. You know, there's no season you remember or no worse moment that you remember that's disconnected from relationships.

Apart from the grace of God, we pass our days. Scripture tells us in malice and envy, gossip and slander, hated by others and hating one another, biting and devouring one another. But wonderfully, when the grace of God appeared in Jesus Christ, he didn't just come to reconcile us to himself.

[22 : 54] He came to reconcile us to a people, to one another, to restore access to him in community. The purpose of God in creation and redemption is the same of people in which God is their all in all.

Until we find our place in the numberless people of God of every tribe, tongue, and nation in the life to come, we're meant to find our place in the numbered people of God in the local church.

That's the point. It's the church, what they say in the New Testament, that is God's temple, his household, his dwelling place, his body. It's the church that is his bride and his flock.

And right now, there's widespread individualism that's tearing at the fabric of community. It says you've got to be true to yourself. You've got to do what makes you happy.

Nobody has a right to tell you what is wrong for you. Frozen captured it so well, as Disney seems to do. Let it go.

[23 : 59] There's no rights, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. What happens when this individualism touches down in the church? The church is only valued when it meets my needs.

When messages help me feel fed. When relationships aren't too messy and give me peace. When serving opportunities feature my gifts. When the obligations don't make me too busy and don't disrupt my plans for work, adventure, homesteading, travel, sports, family gatherings, or whatever.

Do you see what happens when this individualism touches down in the local church? The church becomes something that serves you only when it puts you front and center. When it's only all about you.

But the whole point of community was that it's not about you. It's not about me. So don't be true to yourself. Go to church. And you're here. Praise the Lord. I'm not trying to rail on you.

Commit to the community. Even when it hurts. Commit to the people of God. Be reliable. Be dependable. Be faithful. If I was a politician, my slogan would be, make missing church unthinkable again.

[25 : 16] Make missing church. Figure out a way to get that on a hat. I'll wear it. Make missing church unthinkable again. Not because we want to pad the numbers.

We could care less. Because you were made for. Third word, work.

Third word, work. Third thing these verses call us to is work. Sorry about that.

All right. All right. Sorry about that.

Tucking in my pants. The third thing this calls us to is work. Look in verse 28. It says, God bless them.

[26 : 22] God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over all these things. There's five commands in this single verse. And all of them have to do with the work we're called to do.

One of the most remarkable things though in Genesis 1 is that our God is a God who works. In most religions, the gods don't work. Ancient religions, the gods didn't create the world.

The world came about accidentally and the gods rule over them. The Greek gods, they didn't work either. They didn't create the world. They were the unmoved mover of the world. And in most of ancient cultures, the sought after positions of power and prominence were defined by not working.

They sat and discussed the philosophy of life. They were fat and sleek, not wiry and worn like those who work. They were fair, not dark like those who work.

But the God of the Bible is a God who works. The heavens are his handiwork. The moon and the star, the works of his fingers. Man is formed. God takes him up from the dust, forms a body and breathes life into him.

[27 : 30] A couple thousand years when God the Son comes to the earth, he doesn't come as a king. Or a Caesar, or a ruler, or a CEO. He comes as a carpenter. Comes to work.

God of the Bible enjoys his work as well. God saw that it was good. We see that again and again throughout Genesis 1. So work is not and cannot be a necessary evil.

It was in paradise. In the garden. It's not bad. We're called to work because we're called to be like God.

Look in verse 26. Let us make man after our likeness. Let him have dominion. Again, verse 28. All those commands. And then have dominion over the fish of the sea.

Verse 29. I have given you these things. Verse 30. I have given you every green plant for food. The idea is that God is the eternal king and he's placed us as little kings.

[28 : 30] If you can put it there. Put it that way. He's little rulers who rule over what he has made. He's given us authority over nature. Of the birds of the heavens. Of the fish of the sea. Animals of the earth.

We're called to work it like him. Four commands define this work. Fruitful. Multiply. Fill. And subdue. All of that unpacks what it means to have dominion.

In the same way that God filled the seas. And all that's in. Filled the sea with fish. The heavens with birds. The earth with animals. We're commanded to be fruitful and multiply.

We're called to get married. Have children. Raise families. Build communities. That's the most obvious takeaway. We're called also to subdue the earth.

In the same way that God took formlessness and made it into form and emptiness into fullness. We're called to work like him in this way. And so it's a beautiful thing when a young mom tames the kitchen cabinets into order.

[29 : 34] Or an hourly employee arranges a warehouse. A teacher takes a child from ignorance to understanding through an arrangement of curriculum. When a mechanic raises a broken car back to life.

And into proper working order. When a chemist takes raw materials and makes a drug that heals and helps like ibuprofen. When a chef throws out the kale and takes all the other vegetables to make something delicious.

When a photographer. So I share an office with Ben Finch who's a photographer in town. You know, I thought about writing a book at some point. Things I Hear at Work. This week he was doing headshots. And he said, is there a side of your face that you prefer?

I just thought that was great. Is there a side that's ugly? Because we don't want to get that one in the picture. Turn and show us your good side. I was like, you know what? No, there's not. They're both pretty terrible.

And so things I hear at work. But he's taking these pictures. They capture a God-given moment. Is that just, what is that?

[30 : 42] That's amazing. You look back and say, man, remember that. Remember the flood of God's goodness and kindness that would fill in our minds and heart.

Or at that wedding or that baptism or whatever it is. Wonderfully, in Genesis 1, there's no work worth doing is bad work.

There's obviously some work that's not worth doing. But that's not what I'm getting at. I've come to believe that one of the greatest tricks the devil ever pulled was convincing Christians that some work is sacred. It's that division we talked about last week.

Body and soul and this harsh division that makes a separation between all these things. In Genesis 1, there's no distinction. All the earth is entrusted to humankind. And all work is good that's done unto the Lord.

It's entrenched in our thinking, though, that there's a line between sacred and secular. There's sacred music, secular music. Sacred work, secular work. We consider certain occupations as sacred, contributed into the greater good, while others simply not.

[31 : 53] My guess is somewhere in your thinking it's more spiritual to be a missionary or a pastor. It's more noble than selling insurance or stocking shelves or crunching numbers or providing security or teaching school.

But you can't say that from Genesis 1. You can't. One can certainly choose bad work, selling drugs, making pornography.

That's bad work. One can certainly choose to do work badly, selling bad insurance plans, falsifying dividend reports, financial investment, not reporting taxes, all those types of things.

Shoddy work is a sin, in my opinion. But no work worth doing is bad work. Jordan Groom says it provocatively. If God has called you to be a king, don't stoop to be a missionary.

But if God's called you to be a missionary, don't stoop to be a king. If God has called you to be a mechanic, don't stoop to be a missionary. Don't stoop. If God's called you to be a teacher, don't stoop to be a pastor.

[32 : 55] No work worth doing is bad work. All work can change others and change lives. Remember, we're created persons. We're not merely creatures. We're not stuck in the matrix or in Loki or something like that where we live in a prearranged and preordained life.

We're persons. We're given freedom and independence. We have talents, gifts, influence, opportunities that are unique to us. And unlike any person that has ever lived, there will never be another you.

We're created with unique chances and the ability to make decisions. There's no way to calculate the value of our work. One U.S. senator in the graduation speeches he does throughout the country says, your happiness will largely depend on Monday morning questions and Friday morning questions.

On Friday evening questions, Monday morning and Friday evening. On Friday evening, are there family and friends waiting for you to show up? Yearning for you to spend time with them.

On Monday morning, do you have work to do? Do you know what your neighbor needs from you? There's no way to calculate the value of work. It helps others, serves others, provides for others, blesses others, builds up others.

[34 : 10] Martin Luther and his whole understanding of work was to say, love God and love others. That's what work comes down to. Find a way to love others in an industrious, productive way.

You'll have a great life. You may have come from an abusive home, but through your work, you can build a home where little children are nurtured, like what Casey's working for.

You may have come from a materialistic home, but through your work, you can cultivate a home that treasures the things that really matter. You may have come from loud, shouting parents. You just don't want to hear anymore.

Through your work, you can learn to seek forgiveness, resolve conflict, forbear and love. Your life can change. There's no way to calculate the value and potential of what you can do with your life with God's help.

But work does something to you. It gives you a purpose, a sense of worth, a mission, a drive. It makes you lean and mean. So don't wait for the perfect job. Go to work.

[35 : 05] Go to work. Let our lives. Let these words, man, these words, the most valuable, three of the most valuable things, these commitments that we must hold on to, worship, community, and work.

It's a threefold cord that's meant to keep us lean and mean towards the purpose of God. One author has said that the right words and the right order can nudge the world.

The right words and the right order can nudge the world. What he's kind of getting at is that words are significant. They're important. Proverbs would say they have the power of life and death.

Don't just throw them around. But the right life and the right order can nudge the world too. The right life and the right order can nudge the world.

It can make the world a little more beautiful, a little more safe, a little more God-honoring. It can fill the world with echoes of Eden, of a world where everything was good.

[36 : 18] It can fill the world with a longing for that day when all who trust in Christ will be with God's people and God's place under God's rule forever and ever. A dear friend used to say to me, based on that quote, Go out and nudge the world a little bit.

Go nudge it. Don't, in this day of exceptional evil and exceptional concern, don't just be content to live this ordinary, uncommitted life.

Devote yourself to these things and nudge this world. God, it's by God, it needs nudging. And do it with a smile. May God help us.

Father in heaven, we thank you for the privilege of sitting under your word. Pray that you'd help us. Pray that you'd direct our hearts into the steadfastness of Christ and keep us.

We thank you. We praise you. We hide in you this day and forever. In Jesus' name, amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

[37 : 31] For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com. Thank you. Thank you.