

The Dignity of Human Life: The Jewel in the Crown of Creation

Theme: Human beings have inherent worth and dignity as God's highest and special creation.

Text: Genesis 1:1-31

Series: The Dignity of Human Life

The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, enjoyed taking long walks on summer evenings to meditate on philosophical issues. One evening he was seated on a park bench when a suspicious policeman noticed he has been there for several hours. The policeman came up to him and said, "What are you doing?" The philosopher said, "I am thinking." To which the policeman replied, "Well, who are you?" Kant replied, "That is precisely the problem I've been thinking about. Who am I?"

This is precisely the question that underlies much of the tension in our culture today. What is the nature of human life? Who are we? It has been broadly observed that we are in the midst of a culture war. How we answer this question of human identity will determine where you stand on some of issues of the day. The dividing lines of this battle are fought over issues such as evolution vs. creationism: Is humanity "a self balancing, 28 jointed, adapter-biped, an electro-chemical reduction plant" to quote Buckminster Fuller or are we beings with a divine stamp made in the image and likeness of God; when it comes to abortion we tend to divide into pro-choice or pro-life camps: do we believe that what is growing in a mother is complex fetal tissue or an unborn child who has rights of their own; even when it comes to marriage the issues are fundamentally rooted in the nature of human life: are marriage and family configurations simply an expression of evolving social conventions or is marriage rooted in a fundamental differentiation of the sexes as male and female which is itself an expression of the image of God in humans?

But beyond the acrimony of this social debate, the identity question lurks within us all in the form of what is my purpose in life. Why do I walk this planet? What is the meaning of my days? As evidence that we indeed as a culture have a deep hunger to answer this question is the phenomenal success of Pastor Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*. At last count sales had exceeded 21 million copies. We were made for a purpose higher than ourselves.

Over the next three weeks I want to take the opportunity to take us back to our very roots and explore with you the genius of the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. It has been said that the Bible can be divided in two parts: Genesis 1 and 2, which contains the vision of God for human life prior to our fall from grace; and Genesis 3 through the book of Revelation, which describes the consequence of the fall and God's pursuit of us into a redemptive relationship through Jesus Christ.

Genesis 1 and 2 addresses the basic questions we face: 1. What is the value of human life? Why did God create us? 2. What does it mean to be made in God's image? 3. How are we intended to live together?

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Let me offer a quick disclaimer. Since Genesis 1 in particular covers the six days of creation, you might be hoping that I might answer questions like: should we consider the days as literal 24 hour days or are they figurative? Or if you are engaged heavily in the debate between evolution and creation, you might wonder what light Genesis one sheds on that debate. Those are interesting and important questions, but beyond the scope of my focus. Hopefully we can engage those questions in classes at Christ Church in other contexts.

My concern is to focus on what I believe is the intent of the author of Genesis and that is to show the special dignity and value that humans being have in God's created order and from that understanding to draw some conclusions about how we live.

Genesis 1 begins with the famous phrase, "In the beginning God..." The first subject of Genesis is God. Yet the first object of creation is human beings. What I want you to see this morning is that the entire flow this first chapter is toward the special identity and value that human beings have in God's created order. Let me put it this way. If we were to set Genesis 1 to music, the composition would reach it crescendo at the creation of humans in v. 26, 27, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." If the sound track of Genesis 1 were Tschaikovsky's 1812 Overture, the time for the fireworks to fill the evening sky and the cannons to salute would be during the second half of the 6th day of creation.

Let me see if I can show you through the structure of Genesis 1 what the author is intending to teach us about the nature of human life.

1. Only God creates (bara)

The first clue to man's specialness in all of creation is the word "create". "In the beginning God **created** the heavens and the earth." The word create here in Hebrew is "bara", which is exclusively used of God's and never man's creative ability. Only God "baras", because God creates without analogy. God does something that we could never do. God creates out of nothing. At the time of creation there was only one eternal reality—God Himself. There was no material world that co-existed with God prior to His creation of the heavens and the earth. And they came into being *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. All God had to do was conceive what he wanted and he could call into it reality. In Hebrews 11:3 we read, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." In other words, God did not simply reshape existing formless matter into something with beauty and order. No, God thought it and then spoke into being what He imagined.

Only God "creates" or "baras". The word bara is used two other times in this first chapter. It is used at a crucial juncture in the creation process in v. 21 when conscious life comes into being. "So God **created** the great creatures of the sea...and every winged bird."

But then in v. 27 the word "bara" is used three times at the creation of humans. "So God **created** man in his own image, in the image of God he **created** him; male and

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female he **created** them.” When the Hebrews wanted to make a point or draw attention to something it was often done through repetition. We even see this method with Jesus. If Jesus wanted to say, “Now don’t miss this, listen up”, he would introduce with **“Truly, Truly, I say to you...”** It was like putting the exclamation point at the beginning of the sentence. When something was raised to the third power, then it was earth shattering. The only characteristic of God that comes in three’s is, **“Holy! Holy! Holy! Is the Lord God Almighty.”** This is the defining characteristic of God, for it is what sets God apart from everything else.

When three times in one sentence humans are said to be created in the image of God, the writer is saying, we have reached the climax here of God’s creative work. Can you hear the flourish in the musical score? The violin bows are racing across the strings, the tympanis are rolling, and God the conductor is waving his arms in ecstasy. He has reached the pinnacle of his creative power.

2. The Benediction Pattern—“It was good...very good”

In addition to the exclusive work of the God alone “baras”, this entire section is structured around a benediction pattern. In v. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25 at the end of that day of creation, God pronounces a benediction, “And God saw that it was good.”

What does this mean? It means that God is having a blast. He is taking great joy and pleasure in his creative work. The Lord spoke to Job about his pleasure at creation, **“The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.”** It is as if the Lord is saying, **“I am doing a great job. This is turning out just the way I intended.”** Dallas Willard, whom we have coming to be with us in November, puts it like this, **“We should think that God leads a very interesting life and is full of joy. Undoubtedly he is the most joyous being in the universe. All the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness.”**

One of my favorite plays made into a movie is *Amadeus*. Tom Hulce played the impudent man-child, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. One of his compositions was played before the stuffy musicians of the royal court. One person criticized Mozart’s work with the comment, **“Too many notes.”** Mozart replied as if perfection had been tampered with, **“These are exactly the notes that I heard in my head. Every note belongs there.”** This is the Lord’s attitude, **“And God saw that it was good.”**

But wait, the jewel has not yet been set in the crown of God’s creation. Note that after man is created the benediction changes slightly. In v. 31 after God has set the jewel in the crown, the Lord pauses, takes it all in, **“And God saw all that he made, and it was **very** good.”** I like Eugene Peterson’s translation: **“God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good!”**

Do you see the fireworks lighting the sky, and the smoke wafting from the cannons adding their flourish?

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3. The Creation Formula—"Let there be...let us make man in our image, in our likeness."

The third sign that all of this passage flows toward the culmination of human life, is the creation formula that is used. During the first six days of creation we find a repetitive impersonal formula. You can easily see the pattern: v. 3 "Let there be light and there was light"; v. 5 "Let there be an expanse between the waters...so God made the expanse"; v. 9 "Let the water under the sky be gathered...and it was so." You see the formula. God speaks and there it is. "Let there be...and there was."

But with the creation of humans the formula dramatically changes. It moves from the impersonal to the personal. "Then God said, Let us make in our image, in our likeness..." Next week we will explore what exactly is this image of God in humans, but suffice it to say today, whatever it is, the image of God in man qualitatively sets humans apart in value from the rest of creation. There is something in people that reflects the Creator that is not shared with the rest of His creation. The Lord God has put his personal stamp on us, and we bear a likeness to God.

We can all appreciate this to some extent. As an author I have had the privilege of seeing books in print that are an expression of my creative work. Somebody thought I had something worth saying. I can only wish it would be a few more. But bringing a book into the world pales in comparison to the holy moment that occurred at 5:16AM on August 31, 1975, when our daughter Aimee came into the world. Making a child who expresses personhood and making a book are hardly of the same order. God made things and creatures, but they can't be compared to human beings who are an expression of His personhood.

4. Creation Was Made for Man—"Let them rule..."

As if we needed more evidence for the place of humans in God's creation, it appears that all of the created order that came into being prior to the creation of man was essentially for the benefit and setting for human life. The environment of the physical world, the pristine nature of the beauty, the plants and animals were created for human enjoyment and our stewardship. "Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...I give you every seed-bearing plant, etc...." (Gen. 1:26, 29) The creation sustains the human body, its beauty enhances the soul, and it is the place where humans partner with God to govern and bring order. In other words, God would not have expended his creative energy with the rest of creation, if God had not had human beings in mind as his end product. It is for humans that creation came into being and with humans that God is concerned.

It was the shepherd king David, who understood the significance of human life. David is the author of the beautiful 8th Psalm. It most certainly was formed during his youthful years as a shepherd when he bedded down the sheep for the evening. On many a solitary night he stared into the navy blue sky alive with its twinkling light. As he listened for predators, he stared into the vastness of space, and must have felt very small against this expanse.

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So he wrote,

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3, 4)

Lord, I feel so insignificant. How do you know that I even exist? But David concludes, "Yet, You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:5) There is a scene from Alex Haley's book *Roots* that powerfully underscores the glory of human beings. In an African village, Omoro takes his newborn son to the edge of the village on a moonlit night. Omoro lifts his baby up with his face to the heavens toward God and says, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself."

Genesis 1 is teaching us that humans being are the jewel in the crown of God's creation. The question is--what are the implications for our how we are to live?

1. Human life is sacred. When we think of the phrase, "the sanctity of human life", the first issue we think of is abortion. I believe it to be the tragedy of our times. When it comes to how we think about this issue, the question that precedes all other question is--what is the nature of life in the mother's womb? Is this simply complex fetal tissue or an unborn child? I believe the clear teaching of Scripture is that this is a separate human life conceived in the heart and mind of God and therefore should be afforded the protection of the innocent. It is hard to overestimate how this one issue alone has done more to devalue human life than any other.

Yet let me offer immediately a pastoral word. Even as we stridently attempt to protect the unborn, we offer a word of grace. Do we condemn those who have made the tragic choice of having an abortion? No! Instead we offer the hand of God's accepting grace, because we know that this type of personal violence against one's own must leave a residue of guilt. I remember when Sheila walked into my office weighted down by a decision to abort a child years before under pressure from the father and her parents; and I also remember her walking out of my office that day knowing that this was exactly why Jesus went to the cross for her. I say to all who have made this tragic choice, you are welcome here and a new life free of guilt awaits you in the embracing love of Jesus Christ.

2. All human life is sacred. If you listen carefully to our public discussion you would get the impression the sanctity of human life related only to the numbers on either side of the dash: birth and death. If we applied *sanctity of human life* solely to the unborn or the protection of the dying, would be miss the *dash* and quite frankly miss the biblical agenda.

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The sanctity of human life is what motivated Mother Teresa to rescue the indigent from the gutters of Calcutta. When asked why she wasted time with these human discards, Mother Teresa said, "They must know before they die that they are created in God's image and that God loves them." This has strange echoes of Jesus' words, "As you have done it under the least of these, you have done it unto me." Jesus was referring the hungry, the thirsty, the alien, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. In other words--the dash.

Sanctity of all human life means that Christians are engaged in addressing the tragedy of 30,000 children who die daily across this globe from preventable causes.

Sanctity of all human life was the core issue behind the abolition of slavery. We Christians have a great heritage on this issue. Truly it was Christians who led the charge against the trafficking in human cargo. John Woolman, a Quaker, and William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament in Great Britain, both in the late 1700's were only two of many who placed their lives, resources and reputations on the line to rid the world of this scourge.

There was a song in the Christian renewal movement of the 70's entitled *They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love*. It contained the memorable line, "we will guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride." Each time we see the face of racism rear its ugly head, we must see this as assault against all human beings created in the image of God. This means that Iraqi life is as important as American life. Sometimes I think we forget that.

Our *Declaration of Independence* begins with noble ideal, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights and among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." What good theology! Unalienable rights come from the Creator, not some social contract. Rights are built into the design of human life. Since these words were written in 1776, African Americans have asked, "Me, too?" Women have asked, "Me, too?"

The issue of the sanctity of human life is what causes all people to aspire to freedom and dignity, to be released from under the heavy hand of oppressive tyrants.

This is only a sampling of implications of what it means to be the beings who reflects the very life of the creator in a qualitatively different way that the rest of creation. Let's not forget the dash—what comes between birth and death.

3. We live with Immortals. To bring this down to the moment to moment life, I want you to look around you in the pews this morning. What do you see? Or better, who do you see? Ordinary people? People from many walks of life, social-economic levels, professions, ethnic backgrounds, etc. Yes. But not ordinary people. C. S. Lewis put it this way, "There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal." We rub shoulders with immortals. We were made to last forever. These are eternal beings with whom we live. The holiest object presented to our senses every day are our neighbors, the person who may have cut us off on the freeway, etc.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it a little differently. He said that all of our relationships are “mediated” relationships. What he meant by that was that Christ stands between us and everyone else. Through Christ’s death and resurrection he has determined the eternal value of everyone with whom we associate. We were so valuable to Him that it was worth his life.

The message of Genesis 1 and 2 is about who we are as beings created in his image and likeness. The message of Genesis 3 through Revelation is the message of redemption. We are doubly noble. When we tarnished the image of God in us through our attempted coup against God and no longer reflected him as we should, God did not give up on us. The Creator became our Redeemer. The Redeemer never negates our worth. The Christian message has at times been wrongly stated as if in our sinfulness we are worthless, wretched worms. Helpless—yes; worthless—never; unworthy—yes; valueless—never. As the poster says, “God don’t make junk.” And we don’t share life with junk.

“Who am I?”, asks Immanuel Kant.

We are the jewel in the crown of creation. We are created in his image and apple of his eye. We as his sons and daughters are his priceless treasure. It is with us that God is concerned. Yes, there is the breath taking beauty of the Grand Canyon and a hush that comes when you enter Yosemite Valley, but all of that pales in comparison to the wonder of human life. Hear the music; see the glee on the conductors face—it is very good. Beloved, you are treasured and loved by the Lord and Creator of the universe. That is why He created you.