

The Image Given

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Series Introduction:

Just last year, John Lewis passed away. He was a pastor, a civil rights leader, a United States Representative, and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And, he said this about the work of seeking racial justice and equality.

Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.¹

This I think is true. I especially think it's true for those of us who follow Jesus. It's part and parcel with what we call sanctification—our work in step with the Spirit of God towards greater and greater Christlikeness. And, for those of us who've been at this work of sanctification for any extended period of time, one thing is for certain: *It's a lifelong struggle.* It will not be finished until we enter God's glory.

The next four weeks are simply a small step towards our racial sanctification. At least, that's my prayer. That's my hope.

It can't end with this sermon series. It has to be part of a lifelong commitment to our work of becoming Christlike. We must be longsuffering, gracious, and humble in our commitment. We must take the long view. And, our aim must be nothing less than seeing Jesus Christ glorified in and through us. That's our goal.

Elisabeth Elliot writes this about sanctification.

One does not surrender a life in an instant. That which is lifelong can only be surrendered in a lifetime. Nor is surrender to the will of God (per se) adequate to fullness of power in Christ. Maturity is the accomplishment of years, and I can only surrender to the will of God as I know what that will is.²

Friends, it is my hope that this short series will begin to reveal to each of us what God's will is when it comes to the questions surrounding race. That's our aim—

¹ John Lewis, *Across the Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*.

² Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: the Life and Testament of Jim Elliot*.

to see what God has to say to us. So, let me pray for his Holy Spirit to begin to reveal and to apply his purposes in and among us.

Well, let's begin at the beginning. Today's Scripture is from the first chapter of the Bible. Let's take a look back at our creation.

Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

So I want to focus on two questions. (**1st**) What does being created in the image of God teach us? What does it teach us about being human? What does it teach us about racism? In short, what are the implications of this doctrine for believers today? (**2nd**) Where was the first mission of God going? What would it have meant for Adam and Eve to "increase in number" and "fill" and "subdue" and "rule" God's creation? If we hadn't sinned, where were we headed?

Let's look at each question in turn.

1. What does the image of God teach us?

So much ink's been spilled trying to identify what the image of God in us is. There have been a multitude of suggestions put forward.

- Perhaps it's the human conscience—that we're essentially moral creatures. We develop ethics of right and wrong. Maybe that's God's image in us.
- Perhaps it's the human soul—that depth, personality, and passion we have. It's seen in our feelings and emotions. Maybe that's his image in us.

- Perhaps it's human reason—that ability to use logic to solve our problems and create new things. Maybe that's God's image in us.

Yet—though we have these many suggestions as well as countless others—real certainty (concerning what precisely the image of God in us is) remains elusive. The text simply doesn't tell us. God didn't intend to. As one scholar explains:

It's clear that [the text] is not interested in defining what is the image of God in man. [It] simply states the fact, which is [then] repeated.... [It] is simply saying that to be human is to bear the image of God. This understanding emphasizes man as a unity....³

Now, since this is the case, since God didn't intend to communicate precisely what it means for us to be his image bearers, we should ask why he tells us we are. You see, there are no wasted words in Scripture. God has a reason for revealing this to Moses and to Israel and to us. Thus, we have to ask what God's reason might be. And when we do, we discover something brilliant and beautiful.

As Moses is leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, we must remember that they had been living in a pagan context for over 400 years. That's a long time. That's a long time to have your thinking formed by the dominant pagan philosophies and cultural norms. One of those norms would have concerned the rulers in Egypt. You see, it was common for ancient Near Eastern cultures to talk about God's image when it came to a pagan pharaoh or a king but not when it came to common people. They didn't use that terminology when it came to a local artisan or to a rural farmer, but most especially not when it came to a Hebrew slave.⁴

So, you might say there was an inherent racism in ancient Egypt specifically and ancient Mesopotamia generally. You might say that they thought of their rulers as image bearers of the gods—kings were of the highest quality and highest value—while thinking of commoners as lesser beings—of a lower quality and a lower value. Friends, this was the context into which Moses was inspired to compose the account of God's creation. And, what a sharp contrast he records!

³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

- People say: “Only a few, very powerful rulers bear the image of the gods.”
- God says: “No! The first man and woman were both created in my image, and therefore every human being equally bears my image.”

There’s an innate and universal equality being preached in these three verses. An equality which still stands today. Someone’s politics cannot erase God’s image in them. Someone’s religious views can’t eclipse their status as God’s image bearer. Someone’s skin color does not alter their value as those created in God’s likeness. This is the biblical truth in regard to the image of God. This is where the Bible starts, and thus it’s where we as Christians must also begin.

One pastor reflects on this—the image of God—as our biblical starting point when it comes to discussions of race. He writes the following.

There is not a white nature, black nature, Asian nature, or Hispanic nature. There is a human nature. Any notions to the contrary only reinforce the sort of racialized ideas we are trying to overcome. When we start with black or white instead of the image of God, we shut each other out of our shared humanity, conducting ourselves as if we can hardly speak to one another, learn from one another, or love one another across the racial divide. When you meet someone of a different race, you should look at that man or woman as someone more like you than different—someone who, deep down, has the same sorts of fears, sins, needs, and aspirations. We ought to think, This is my neighbor with an immortal soul.⁵

Friends, can we say amen to that?! Amen! Amen! The doctrine of the image of God in us all—this great biblical truth—must be the foundation on which we build (*with love and with humility!*) our racial reconciliation efforts. We must begin there because it is where God began. *Praise him for that!*

Well, we need to get after our second question.

2. Where was the mission of God going?

Let me just admit from the get-go that this will be some theoretical theology. We will see next week that Adam and Eve interrupted God’s mission with their sin.

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, *Thinking Theologically About Racial Tensions: The Image of God*, July 2020. You can read his entire blogpost [here](#).

So, to ask what might have happened if they had not sinned, if they had both walked with the Lord and spread-out upon the earth—multiplying and subduing and ruling as God commanded them to do—is a bit hypothetical to say the least. Nonetheless, I think it’s worth doing here for a few moments.

Where were we headed before sin interrupted and diverted and perverted us?

Well in short, we were set upon a great expansion plan—a plan to fill the earth with men and women who reflected the glory of their Creator. There was the garden, but it was simply a small heavenly corner of the globe. God commanded mankind to push the borders of that garden outward across mountains and forests and seas. That was our original mission—to be little creators walking in step with *our* Creator in order to bring his glory to all the earth.

Greg Beale explains it this way.

Being “fruitful and multiplying” in Genesis 1:28 refers to the increase of Adam and Eve’s progeny, who were also to reflect God’s glorious image and be part of the vanguard movement, spreading out over the earth with the goal of filling it with divine glory. Thus, Adam and Eve and their progeny were to be viceregents who were to act as God’s obedient children, reflecting God’s ultimate glorious kingship over the earth.⁶

Friends, what if you attempted to summarize this original mission from God in one sentence? What would it be? What would your one sentence description be? Think about it for a second.

- Maybe you would say to expand the garden on the earth—to create heaven on earth more and more.
- Maybe you would say to walk with God and enjoy him—to worship him as we work with him more and more.
- Or, maybe you would say something completely different. That’s alright. Just use your imagination.

Here’s what my sentence description would be—*Mankind’s original mission was to expand God’s image throughout creation for ever and ever.* It’s that simple.

⁶ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 37.

God is seen everywhere and in everything more and more and more. In geography, reflecting God to the ends of the earth. In creativity, reflecting the Lord to the ends of the earth. In diversity, reflecting his image more and more to the ends of the earth. This, friends, was (in my estimation) the original mandate.

Picture our first mother and father expanding the garden with their children and their children's children across the globe. Days become weeks and those weeks become years in this worshipful and fulfilling work of reflecting the image of God into all creation. Across Africa, Asia, Europe as well as the Americas and Australia! Across every continent and island on this planet!

- Think of the diversity of cultures that would emerge. Unique and beautiful without any taint of sin! Food and music and customs reflecting the image of God throughout creation more and more and more.
- Consider the variations of types of skin and hair colors as people acclimate to their places in this world. All made in God's image with distinct features and shapes and sizes! All expanding God's glorious image across the face of the earth more and more and more. *God's beauty expands!*

This (I believe) was God's original mission. However, I don't just believe it because I want to or because I personally think it's a neat. Why would that matter? What would make my thoughts better than any others? No. I believe this to be true because God doesn't get stopped. I believe this was God's original mandate to us because the Lord always gets what he wants. And, we know that this is precisely where human history is headed—*the redemption of the image of God in all peoples!*

Here's a sneak-peek of where we're headed in the fourth week of this series as well as where we're headed for all eternity.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will

ever enter [the city]... but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:22-27).

Friends, Christ has purchased with his precious blood those from every nation. He has redeemed and fulfilled God's original plan. Jesus has perfectly accomplished what Adam and Eve failed to accomplish. Amen.