

Series: Our Christian Identity

Sermon 2 (2/14/2016)

I am a Creature in God's Image

I'd like to ask you to turn to Genesis 1. This morning, we're going to look at the first of eight elements of our Christian identity: I am a creature in God's image. Surely that is the most foundational fact about us and our identity. We're talking about something that is true of all people, whether they are in Christ or not. It is the starting point for our discussion, and it is what Christ is working, by the grace of God, to restore totally. That idea may seem very heady or abstract, but it is as practical as anything you will read in the Bible. It has everything to do with our sense of significance and security. Think of it this way: Think about something you have created or obtained. Maybe a room you have painted, or a whole house that you have built. Maybe someone had a great sickness and you, as a doctor, helped them recover and heal. Maybe, for the students, it's a project or paper you completed—or maybe a diploma verifying your graduation.

Now, think about God accomplishing one of His great works. Throughout Genesis 1, God says about His creations that they are good. He is delighted in them; they bring Him joy. Then God creates man, the chief aspect of His creation because he is made in His image. In Genesis 1:31, God says that everything He has made is "very good." We don't want to minimize what the Bible says about sin and how much God hates and is angry against it. On the other hand, we want to grasp the truth that when it comes to His image in man—and particularly in those of us who know Christ, in whom His image is being reconstructed—God said that it is very good. He, in His heart, experiences feelings parallel to ours when we produce something of value, that reflects our effort and creativity and brings us joy. He looks on His image in us and says it is very good.

If we really live with the awareness of that in our hearts, what difference would it make to our self-conception, our attitude, our thinking? God has a sense of delight in us as His creatures. Even more, He created us *in His image*. Think about a picture of a family member or someone else you love deeply. Maybe they aren't here physically, but you have a photo or a whole album of photos. That photo isn't the person, but it shows enough about that person that when you look at it, you think about them, what you appreciate about them, experiences you have enjoyed together, and you feel a sense of delight just at their *image*. God looks at human beings (specifically redeemed human beings) and He delights in what He sees, that even imperfectly begins to reflect something of His glory. He's looking at an image that reflects inherently good qualities of Himself. He delights to see those specific attributes being reproduced, and we are by His grace growing to display them better. Those are just a few of the applications of this concept: that we are created in the image of God.

This truth has two parts. First, that we are creatures, and second, that we are in God's image.

What does it mean to be a creature? That may sound like something out of a horror movie, and maybe doesn't have the most positive connotation. Think of the term as "a created being." That simple truth has enormous ramifications about how we think about ourselves, and how we can go astray if we ignore it. We can think in ways that are beyond our identity. What is it that Genesis 1 reflects about us being creatures? Look at the foundational passage, verses 26-28. There is a lot of repetition in those three verses! Fundamentally, being a creature means that God created us and we did not create ourselves.

We are the product of somebody else. Given that God created us, He also determined our nature and purpose. He is the one who said that we would be different from the rest of His creation and bear His image, that we would have dominion over nature. As far as identity is concerned, you and I are out of place to try to figure who we are and what we're here for through our own ideas. It is "inappropriate" because we are creatures. God rules over men, not just generally giving purpose but specifically giving commands. He has the right to give positive commands and prohibitions. Furthermore, we must look to God for the provision of what we need in order to stay alive and carry out our purpose. And so, in verses 29-30, God gives humans food. He gives us all we need in order to stay alive—even the air we breathe. That basic element is not something we build or provide for ourselves.

These same ideas from Genesis 1 are also described in Genesis 2, although in more detail. There are specific components of what God has in mind for Adam. In Genesis 2:7, we find out what make up Adam: the dust of the ground and the breath of life, which God directly infused into a pile of dirt. There is a physical (dirt) and a spiritual element (which comes directly from God). So, to understand my purpose as a creature, I have to recognize that I have both of those sides. The Bible breaks it down even further later, but basically, I have a material and a spiritual, or non-material, nature. Somehow, both of those must be accounted for in my understanding of who I am. God, in Adam's case, laid out a specific place to live (Eden) and his job (keeping the garden). Later, God gave Adam additional commands prohibiting a certain tree and provided him with a companion (Eve), thus identifying two specific genders. God decides who is male and who is female. We don't decide that! We come into the world with these things "hard-wired," pre-programmed into us. We are out of line to think that we have the right to figure that out. As it relates to companionship, this special relationship of marriage, again God is the one setting up its structure and nature. God determines all of these things, not humans. The human being is being acted upon, not making things happen. Now, it is true that God gave man a will, and we will address that later. But first, we need to emphasize the obvious yet profound truth that we are creatures, beholden to God for everything we are and have—including our will! Even that function is something that was appointed to us by God.

This is not limited to Adam and Eve, or to any particular group of people. Later, in Acts 17:24-28, Paul says that God gave us everything and determined when and where we all live as individuals and as nations. If I could grasp the simple reality in these verses, that it is in God that I "live, and move, and have my being," what a difference that would make! Here are some applications:

I'd like to borrow two categories from a book by Jerry Bridges titled "Who Am I?" First, if all of this is true, one resulting truth is that of my dependence. There is no such thing as a self-made man. That is sinful thinking, contrary to our nature as creatures. In James 4:13-15, James warns God's people about worldliness. When we think of worldliness, we often think of visibly sinful practices that the lost engage in—lifestyle choices, pursuits, etc. That's not the emphasis of James 4! This passage primarily talks about pride, an attitude that I can live my life apart from the reality of God as the sovereign One. We are not ultimately in charge, or responsible for the outcome of our lives. We don't have the right to make all these decisions for ourselves. If I want to understand my identity, the most foundational fact about me is my "creatureliness." Therefore, I go into life with a sense of humility, recognizing that I am only here because of God's choice and His infinite power. I recognize that whatever I have and achieve is due to His mercy, not forging ahead without considering what His word tells me about areas of my life, and not ultimately taking credit for anything that is good.

That is true regarding any blessing we may receive from God. We obviously think of physical blessings and material goods, but it is especially true of our salvation. God works things out in our redemption from the posture of Himself as Creator and us as creatures, not contributors or producers of salvation. When we talk about our identity *in Christ*, our theme verse would have to be I Corinthians 1:30. Why did God set salvation up so that I am only saved if I am in Christ, attached to Him? Whatever happens with the salvation of my soul must happen in the context of creatureliness, that which is ultimately relying on God Himself. Any approach to salvation that makes man the ultimate determiner runs contrary to the most basic reality of the universe: God is the source of all things and we are only creatures. If we are dependent on God for everything, surely we are dependent on Him for the forgiveness of our sins! How could anyone think that they have the capacity to earn the favor of God? And yet, that is the great deception that carries away so many people. How could we think that we could impress God with our good works? How could we think that we could even do any good works without His enabling? We are creatures and He is the Creator, the sovereign One. Part of responding to this fact of my identity is to look to Him for all things, starting with my salvation and having my sin taken out of the way. Have you done that, or do you continue to think that somehow, independent of God, you can gain enough credit to merit a standing with Him? It is all a gift of grace. Accept your creatureliness and seek salvation only by what God Himself has provided through grace.

A second implication of our creatureliness is *accountability*. Remember that after creating man, the first things God said to him were in the form of commands. They are phrased as blessings, but right away, God told man what to do! Remember as well that when man sinned, God's response was to hold him accountable. "Where are you?" "What have you done?" Give an account for your actions. This is a great implication of our being creatures. The same Moses that wrote Genesis also wrote Deuteronomy—I want to take you, for a moment, to Deuteronomy 8:17-18. The Lord makes a statement there about the idea of dependence, which we've already emphasized. He is giving a warning to God's people about how they will grow (in their spirits, anyway) independent of Him after they are enabled to conquer the promised land. God stresses the idea: you have to work, fight, and gain wonderful blessings, food, and houses as a result, but who gave them that power and enabled them to do it? God is stressing their dependence, but that's not the only thing He's doing.

This passage actually starts in verse 11. One part of forgetting God would be attributing your successes to yourself, but another part is in verse 11: We can forget our creatureliness by dismissing the commands of God. Don't forget God by disobeying Him. We can shut out of our minds the idea of our accountability to God. To disobey God is a practical denial of our creatureliness. It is to act as though we govern ourselves and know better than God what is good. Imagine inanimate objects for a moment. What if they had life and a will, and were trying to do something different than what they were designed to do? What would it look like if you saw a tree trying very hard to break out of the limits given to it by God and trying to produce light like the sun? Then, over here, the sun is trying to meow like a cat. The ocean is trying to lie still and be moldable like the sand. Maybe that gives us some idea of the folly of trying to live life outside the parameters that God has put on us. Man does have a will and can act contrary to God's purposes for him; my point is to emphasize how foolish and arrogant that is—how out of place we are when we do that. In the end, God will prevail and His plan will be accomplished.

Foundational to my identity is that I was created for God, He has authority over me, He is the one who calls the shots, and when I turn away from His command, I may feel like I'm being an individual, really exerting myself, being true to myself, and not letting anybody tell me what to do. But inevitably, that

kind of attitude leads to *identity crisis*. You're trying to be something you aren't. We are not the masters of our fate. We are creatures under authority.

Here's an extreme example: someone just sent me a picture of Ellen Degeneres, a self-proclaimed lesbian, presenting a courage award to "Caitlyn" Jenner, who supposedly changed her gender because "he" thought "her" identity was female. It's confusing to even try to explain that! We look like something like that, and it seems so obvious: both cases are so contrary to the structure of how God set things up, you don't even need a Bible to know it. It's just built into nature. Here are people fighting against the way things are, and the authority of God over them. We see it obviously in cases like that, but that's not really my main point. My main point is to realize how likewise foolish I am being whenever I resist God's commands and do things against my nature as a creature. The only way I can be true to who I am is to submit as a creature and obey God's will for my life. And there is something liberating about that, something satisfying. That kind of humility—"You're a creature, you're below God, God's in charge"—that could sound very demeaning and crushing to your identity, but in light of the *second* part of this element of our identity, it is actually something glorious.

I am not just a creature—I am a creature *in the image of God*. Let's explore that! This passage in Genesis 1 uses two words: "image" and "likeness." They are roughly synonymous throughout the Bible; they both carry the idea of a kind of copy, or something similar to an original. Particularly with the word "image," there is a further thought: that of representation. It's not just that one thing looks like another, but also that it is designated as a representative of the other. For example, in a pagan religion, a statue looks like the god that they think they're worshipping. In that one spot, that image is taking the place of their god. It's an image representing it. In this culture, when a king would conquer a new territory, in order to remind everybody of what had happened, to communicate who was in charge, he would set up a statue of himself—like in a school or university, when you have a picture of the president. There are some countries in which almost every building you enter has multiple pictures of the country's dictator! Why is that? They are trying to convey that they are in charge. They aren't there physically, but the image is a reminder that represents them.

That's kind of a negative idea, but the idea of a statue for a king fits perfectly what we're talking about. The stated purpose of our being in the image of God is what it says in verse 26: more literally translated, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, *that* they may have dominion." In other words, this image is expressly set up for the purpose of representing God in a royal position, to govern the rest of creation. It is the reason we have all these capacities to reflect God; it's really the main point in this passage. We have been appointed as vice-regents of God, on behalf of the Creator! We aren't just like ambassadors or designated messengers. We actually have delegated authority to rule over this realm. In Genesis, that is first displayed when Adam names the animals and tends the garden, bringing glory to God. He is ruling over this realm, making it more useful, bringing out its potential, harnessing its resources to make it as productive as possible to the glory of God. We are not just creatures; we are actually "little kings." Later, we'll talk about our identity as children of God, "children of the King." In this sense, though, we are kings ourselves! We are actually ruling, along with other human beings, under God's rule and for His glory. What are the implications of that?

They are stunning. Here are three words. If it is true that I am made in God's image, then there is a lot of **dignity** associated with that. What higher status could I possibly desire than to have so many points of similarity to God Himself, and to be put in this position? There are so many ways in which we can mirror

the character of God; it's going to take the entire Bible to tease out this concept. Our personality, our mind, our moral faculty, our spiritual dimension, our capacity for fellowship with God and other image-bearers, our immortality, and even our physical functions. I have verses for all those points, demonstrating the many ways in which we are like God and can reflect the glory of our Creator.

Doesn't that give you a sense of dignity? We are not trash! We are sinners, and we have marred the image, but even in the case of sinful people outside of Christ, Scripture says that you are not allowed to kill people. That is punished by death, because to kill someone is to attack the image of God—whether or not they are Christian. There is an inherent worth, value, dignity in being a human being created in God's image.

The second word is **purpose**, a sense of mission in the world. One theologian, writing on this topic, says "What a privilege it is to be a person and not wallpaper!"¹ What greater purpose could we desire than to rule over some corner of the world on behalf of God? This is how we need to view the different dimensions of our lives. As a student, it is your schoolwork. As an employee, it is your job. As a parent, it is your children, your family. It might be a church ministry—what are you doing in those realms? You are representing God in heaven by maximizing some dimension of His creation, bringing out its capacities as best you can. You are making it more useful and productive. Yes, it is true that sin has made this whole business a very toilsome, heavy thing, but that makes it an even greater opportunity to exert influence on behalf of God. The creation is in rebellion against us and God, and we are commissioned, empowered by God, to subdue it for His glory.

The point is, God has not just thrown us out into the world to wander aimlessly. He has put into our hands things to manage, harness, and advance. We should have a profound sense of nobility, not because of the specific things we do, as if my job in society is more respectable or looks better than some other job. The point is that whatever God has been putting into your hand, you are doing that work as a vice-regent of God. We need to elevate our conception of what goes on from eight to five! It is not just making a living, putting bread on the table. These things are valuable in themselves. We are representatives of God in that realm, exercising dominion over what He has appointed us to manage and steward. Any calling is a glorious calling.

Number three, the last word is **satisfaction**. When we see the fear, misery, and suffering that resulted from Adam and Eve's sin, when we reflect on how hard things are now, it gives us a window into how glorious life must have been before the fall. To think that whatever problems we face each week are not inherent to this world; they are consequences of the curse of sin. Here's what it was like before: perfect peace between God and man, perfect peace between men, between man and the rest of creation, and perfect delight and joy because everything was in its proper place. Everything was perfectly aligned under God, enjoying His fulness and blessing and presence. We will not regain all of that until we are in the new creation, but our salvation in Christ has begun a process through which that is being restored. C. S. Lewis used to talk about getting "pangs of joy" when something about life, some experience, some sense of glory hits you and it's just like a little taste. We wish it were all the time, but that experience of temporary satisfaction in this life, entering into being in His image, points to all that lies before us, all of it restored in the new creation. To the degree that we are yielded to God and viewing our lives in the

¹ Lewis and Demarest, 2:174

light of these things, we come to know the delight for which we were created, and which we will someday enjoy completely.

The Puritan commentator Thomas Gataker said, "The soul of man bears the image of God; so nothing can satisfy it but He whose image it bears." Now, today is Valentine's Day, and I am being "counter-cultural" to not dwell on that this morning! However, it does tie in to the sermon. Recently, I saw a little cartoon about love. First, there are two teenagers, and the boy says, "I like you." She says, "What? Really?" And he says, "Yeah!" In the next frame, they are getting married and at the altar, she says, "Are you sure you like me?" He says, "I do." In the next frame, she is holding a baby and he is reading the paper, drinking coffee. She says, "So you're not going to change your mind?" He says, "No." In the fourth frame, they are elderly. He's pushing her along in a wheelchair and she says, "You don't think I'm weird, do you?" He says, "Nope." In the last frame, there are two tombstones and two ghosts hovering over them. The lady is still asking, "So you definitely like me?" He says, "YES."

You know, we struggle so much to really believe that God loves us and is not going to change His mind. We struggle like humans do on their own level as we think about the Lord. There's much more to come to assure us of God's love for us, but for today, the point is that our being created in God's image ought to convince us: God loves me, not because I am so special in myself, but because it's His own character that He put in us. It's His own glory that He is delighting in when He creates man, saves him, and is restoring him. To reject me would be to reject His own character, His own image! May the Lord give us a growing sense of our security, for many reasons that we will see, but starting with the great truth that we are created in the image of God.