



the heart of God

JUSTICE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

PART TWO

Dignity and Responsibility of Being Human Being

GENESIS 1:26-27





Part Two – Dignity and Responsibility of Being Human Being

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Justice and the Image of God

From Tiananmen Square to the protests of Apartheid in South Africa, to recent protests around issues of race, there is a cry for justice in our world. But if those cries were a song, it would be in the same key. The equality of people is assumed in the struggle for justice.

The idea of people being equal doesn't come from philosophers or politicians, it comes from the book of Genesis 1:26-27:

“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.’

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

We can only live justly if we recapture the dignity and responsibility of being made in the Image of God.

The Image of God: Dignity

The idea of the dignity of human people and the sanctity of life comes from the image of God in Genesis. We will explore three aspects of the dignity that comes from the Image of God—it is Inherent, Indelible and Keeps us Humble.

a. Inherent

When facing the phrase ‘the image of God’ the question has become, what is it about people that makes them God’s image?

The answer is not in our physical appearance, physical ability or mental ability. Margery Williams perhaps said it best in *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

“Real isn't how you are made...It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”^[1]

The image of God is an inherent detail born into every human being—no matter the sex, race, ethnicity, or level of ability. It is not reducible to any capacity or ability the person has it is a statement of value made by the Creator over each individual. We are ‘real’ because He loves us.

I forget the source, but someone once said if we could see with heavenly eyes, we’d see an angel before every human being saying: “Behold! The image of God is in your midst!” These trumpets blow in asylums, prisons and ivy league colleges. In hospitals and schools and sweat shops.

It is God’s statement after making humans in Genesis 1:31:

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31)

[1] Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

It was chef's kiss, jump-for-joy, yee-haw good.

b. Indelible

Indelible means not easily removed or erased.

From birth to death and beyond, we are God's image. Perhaps this is why we are warned about judging others (Matthew 7:1-3), because they are God's image.

If people are in God's image, we cannot dehumanize them. There's an old Jewish parable that the angels began to celebrate in heaven after God drowned the Egyptians in the Red Sea as they pursued the Israelites. Instead of joining the celebration, God rebukes them. He rebukes them because those Egyptians were His children too.

While that's not Biblical, we see a similar idea in Ezekiel:

'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:11)

Jesus told us we don't get to move people out of the 'neighbor' category into the enemy category:

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)

The Amish community at the West Nickel Mines in Pennsylvania were attacked by a man who had been their milk truck driver. He shot ten young girls and five died before he turned the weapon on himself.

A grandfather said to boys standing beside the body of one of the young girls:

"We must not think evil of this man."^[2]

The community reached out within hours to express forgiveness and give support to the man's parents. They set up a fund for his widow and children.

They saw him as someone made in the image of God.

c. Keeps us Humble

In the film 'The Matrix' the robotic artificial intelligence tells the captive resistance fighter Morpheus:

"I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species, and I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not. You move to an area, and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You're a plague and we [that is, robots] are the cure."^[3]

There are philosophers who push 'anti-natalism'. They believe it is immoral to keep propagating the species, either because of human suffering or ecological disaster. Many scientists and historians try to remind us we are carbon and chemicals, that human rights don't even exist. Yuval Noah Harari has written:

"Most legal systems in the world today are based on a belief in human rights. But what are human rights? Human rights...like God and heaven, are just a story that we've invented. They are not an objective reality. They're not a biological fact about Homo sapiens. Take a human being, cut him open, look inside...you won't find any rights."^[4]



^[2]<https://web.archive.org/web/20071210073251/http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/04/amish.shooting/index.html>

^[3] Agent Smith in "The Matrix"

^[4] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Sapiens*.

There's a healthy fear here, people have been proud and, in their pride, have damaged the planet and other people. But you don't need to denigrate humans to keep them humble.

In Psalm 8 we are given a poem in which the poet looks out at all creation and sees their insignificance. And yet, they say:

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.” (Psalm 8:4-5)

In all the vastness of the universe, there is an even larger Almighty Eternal Creator, and He cherishes humanity and the universe. As Glen Scrivener has said:

“We are dirt bags kissed by heaven.”^[5]

Humility and importance. Glory and honor and perspective. But also, responsibility. The psalm says we are crowned and as Shakespeare once said of crowns:

“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.”^[6]

Our humility is afforded to us by our place in the cosmos, but also by our great *responsibility*.



^[5] Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, pg. 55.
^[6] Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

2. The Image of God: Responsibility

The word used for ‘image’ in Genesis 1:26-27 is the same word translated ‘idol’ elsewhere. As in Exodus 20:4 where people are prohibited to make ‘idols’ as well as prohibited to make an ‘image’ of God. Why? Well as Tim Mackie once said:

“People aren't to make images of God because God has already made an image of Himself.”^[7]

What is that image?

Us.

Like an idol is supposed to be the place people meet the god, we are supposed to represent and be the meeting place of the Living God with creation and each other. We are supposed to show the world what God is like and care for the creation He has entrusted to us.

a. Creation Isn't Finished

After making people, God blesses them and gives them a mission:

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.” (Genesis 1:28)

In making people, God created co-creators. Like a chef who doesn't want to cook for himself or a painter who wants to share his work, God has started a project that He is inviting us to participate in. He made waves to surf. Ingredients to be experimented with. Sound waves to be manipulated into music.

Biblical scholar Robert Alter says the word translated ‘rule’ in Genesis 1:28 is a term used to describe mastering something.^[8] A word for domesticating horses or nailing that 360.

^[7] The Bible Project, ‘The Image of God’: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/image-of-god/>
^[8] Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, pg. 19.

As we see in Genesis 3, however, people choose to go their own way. We decide to use the world rather than care for it. And we see in the poetry of the text that there are real consequences for our evil toil replaces enjoyment in work, the lush garden is left for a dry desert.

Our responsibility means there are consequences, real consequences, when we fail to image God properly. Consequences for us, but also for others and the planet.

b. It was Waiting for Him

In Colossians 1:15-20 Paul quotes a worship song that calls Jesus the ‘Image of the Invisible God.’

Jesus is presented as the one who lives the responsibility of being God’s image properly. He restores *wholeness* wherever he goes in all aspects of people’s lives. He brings what the Jews called ‘shalom’. Healing physical illnesses, correcting misunderstandings about God, and forgiving sins.

c. Now It’s Waiting for You

Paul also wrote:

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.” (Romans 8:19)

As humans we can relive our responsibility to Image God by following and imitating Jesus, the true Image of God.

Which means joining His mission to bring *wholeness* to all people. Yes, bringing people to Jesus is a priority. But we are also called to heal diseases like he did—with miracles or medicine. We are called to restore justice and treat people as God’s image. Called to work for the flourishing of the world, to rule over it like benevolent kings and queens.

Whose Hands Will Your Hands be?

In the novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, a young and talented painter looks at his hands:

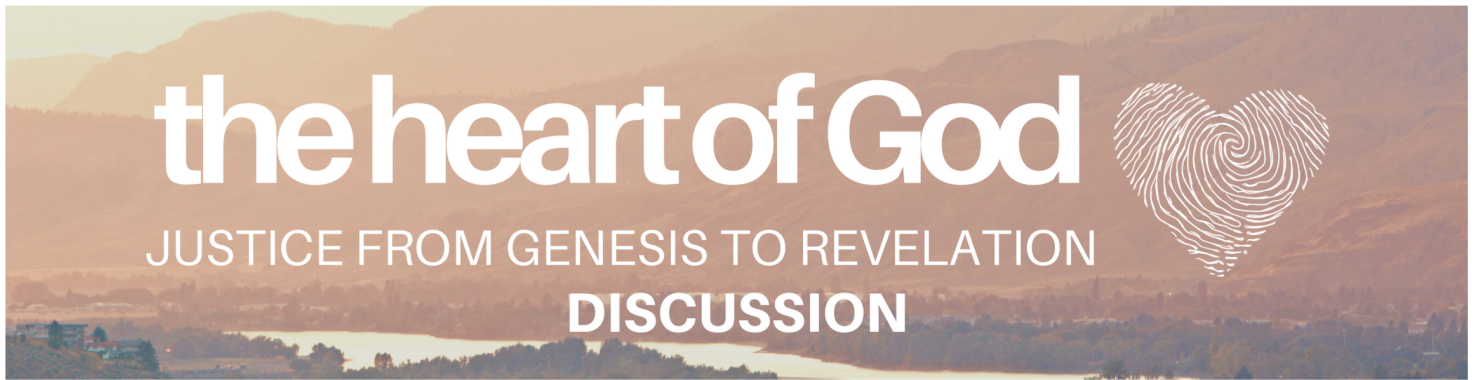
“I looked at my right hand, the hand with which I painted. There was power in that hand. Power to create and destroy. Power to bring pleasure and pain. Power to amuse and horrify. There was in that hand the demonic and the divine at one and the same time.”^[9]

What image will we show the world? Whose hands will our hands be? Will we bring the wholeness creation longs for by being God’s Image—by living that dignity and responsibility? Or will we use our hands for our own selfish and destructive ends?

Whose hands will your hands be?



^[9]My Name is Asher Lev, Chom Pottock.



Open Up

What makes it hard for you to believe that you are God's Image? Where does that story come from?

Dig In

Read **Psalm 8**

1. What places or experiences have put your life into perspective for you?
2. If a crown is a responsibility, what area of your responsibility as God's image do you feel challenged to step it up in?
3. Who are you prone to dehumanize or treat as less than? How may the Image of God challenge that for you?

Prayer

There are many issues of justice in our world that are a function of a loss of the dignity and responsibility of being human. Which of these issues strikes you? Pray into that issue.