

**“HUMAN DIGNITY”**

While I had originally planned on moving on to study the first three verses of Genesis 2 in tonight’s sermon, several things led me to conclude that it would be good to take some more time considering one of the implications that we should draw from the fact that man was created in God’s own image. These verses in Genesis 1 surely imply that every human being is invested with an innate sense of dignity, and this requires us to treat all human life with reverence and respect. Tonight, I want to talk about some of the ways in which this truth needs to be applied in our culture.

The idea that human beings have an inherent dignity is something that is no longer self-evident to many in our society. Everywhere we look, we are confronted by assaults upon the dignity of man. I was reminded of one of the stranger examples of this by a conversation that I had with someone earlier this week. This person told me that they had recently attended a museum exhibit called *Body Worlds*, and they spoke very favorably about it. I had heard of this exhibit several months ago, but in a context in which it received a much more negative review. [*Mars Hill Audio Journal*, volume 88] *Body Worlds* was created by an anatomist named Gunther von Hagens, who invented a technique called plastination, a process in which a dead human body can be preserved from decay by replacing that body’s water and fat with plastic. In the *Body Worlds* exhibit, this technique is used to put real human bodies on display in museums across the globe. While it might sound gruesome, the exhibit has been described as highly entertaining, accessible, and even playful. It features human bodies that have had their

skin removed posed to look like they are playing basketball, or doing handstands, or engaging in numerous other activities. This allows observers to see what the muscles and inner parts of the body look would like when being exerted. There is even a bit of humor in the exhibit, with one body posed holding up its own skin and examining it, as if pondering whether it needs to be taken to the cleaners.

Supporters of *Body Worlds* hail it for its educational value, but what should Christians think of something like this? First and foremost, we should recognize that this exhibit is teaching much more than human anatomy. It is teaching something about what our society believes about human nature. It is saying that the human body is nothing more than a mechanical object, and this is a denial of what the Bible says about the dignity that belongs to man as a creature made in God's image. There is no reverence for human life in an exhibit like *Body Worlds*.

*Body Worlds* is a blatant assault upon human dignity. But there are other kinds of assaults as well, and some of these even claim to be a means of upholding human dignity. There is the practice of genetic screening, in which an unborn child can be tested for the possible presence of certain genetic disorders, so that parents might have the option of terminating the pregnancy should they decide that it would be too cruel or burdensome to bring such a child into the world. There is the push for embryonic stem-cell research, in which human embryos would be created with the intention of harvesting their stem cells for therapeutic and research purposes. There is the discussion concerning the right of

patients, or those who represent them, to refuse medical treatment. And there are many more examples.

What should a Christian make of all of these things? Let's address this by thinking about the debate concerning the right to refuse medical treatment. On the one hand, it is consistent with what the Bible says about human dignity to say that a person should not be obligated to pursue treatments that have no reasonable hope of being helpful or that might themselves be excessively burdensome. In the end, we must allow people to die. However, we also need to recognize that there is a distinction between saying that a particular treatment is too burdensome and saying that an individual's quality of life is too burdensome. Consider this example. Some children are born with an obstruction in their esophagus that requires surgery in order for the child to live. Now, what if a child born with Down's syndrome is also born with a blocked esophagus? Should that child's parents be able to refuse the required surgery on the basis that it would be too burdensome for the child? No, they should not, because that is not what they would be deciding if they refused the surgery. They would be deciding that the child's life was too burdensome, not the surgery. But the Bible's teaching on human dignity does not give us the right to decide whether a particular life is too burdensome to be worth continuing. To take another example, to remove a feeding tube is not to reject a burdensome treatment but to reject a life that we have deemed to be too burdensome. The Bible does not give us the right to do that. Every human life is to be respected, because every human being is created in the image of God. Contrary to the "right to die" advocates who argue that it is

undignified for a person to have to endure pain and suffering or to become a burden upon others, the Bible tells us that there is great dignity in suffering courageously, and it also commands us to bear the burdens of those who are too weak to care for themselves.

Thus far, the examples that we have discussed are things about which most Christians would agree. But I want to turn now to an area where this is probably not the case. I want us to think about the implications of the Bible's teaching on human dignity for how we should deal with a person's body after they have died. In other words, does the Bible have anything to say about the choice between cremation and traditional burial? I realize that this is a touchy subject, especially since most congregations are bound to have someone with deceased loved ones who have been cremated. But I think that it is a subject that should be addressed, because we want to be able to approach a decision like this from a biblical perspective.

On the surface, we could say that the Bible does not prohibit the practice of cremation. Strictly speaking, this is true. However, we have to remember that a great deal of the guidance that we derive from the Bible is drawn by means of implication. This is certainly the case when it comes to something like embryonic stem cell research. And the same is true when it comes to the subject of cremation.

The chief argument made in favor of cremation, and to my knowledge it is the only argument, is that it is more affordable than traditional burial. It is an economic argument. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with trying to be thrifty. The question is this: is

this cheaper option as consistent with what the Bible teaches about life after death as more traditional ways of dealing with the bodies of the deceased?

For one thing, we should note the significance of the fact that the Bible never speaks about a body being consumed by fire in a positive light. There are no instances in which fire is used as a symbol for life beyond the grave. In several Old Testament passages death by burning is a punishment for particular sins [see Josh. 7:25; Lev. 20:14; 21:9]. And in the New Testament fire is an image for the eternal torment of hell. The Bible is very consistent in using fire as a symbol of judgment.

Of course, this does not mean that cremation could in any way disqualify a believer from the resurrection. We know that we will see Adam, and Noah, and Abraham at the final resurrection, even though their bodies disintegrated long ago. God does not need an intact body in order to raise someone from the dead. If he did, then a Christian whose body is incinerated in an explosion would have no hope of bodily resurrection. So we can certainly rest assured that God's power to raise his people from the dead is not inhibited in any way by cremation.

Nevertheless, our way of handling the bodies of the deceased should be guided by our theology. Is cremation a practice that adequately represents what we believe about human nature? Is it reflective of what we believe about what is in store for human beings after their bodies die? I do not think that it is. The Bible does not encourage us to think of the body as an insignificant and unnecessary component in what it means to be human. It does not say that the body is a temporary shell that is shed by the immortal soul at

death. It does not teach us that life after death will be an eternally disembodied existence. Instead, the creation account tells us that this creature that God formed from the dust bore his likeness. The Bible has a very high view of the body. It tells us that all people, both the righteous and the wicked, will be bodily resurrected on the last day, as the prophet Daniel wrote when he described the final judgment by saying that “those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” [Dan. 12:2] To be human is to be embodied, and this will remain true throughout eternity.

Because of the Bible’s high view of the human body, Christians should deal with the bodily remains of our loved ones in a manner that exhibits honor and care for the body. We find an example of this in the burial practices of the Jewish people in biblical times. Cremation was practiced in the ancient world, but not by the Jews. When an Israelite died, his body was wrapped in a cloth with perfumes and spices and then placed in the family tomb. Later, after all of the flesh had decomposed, the family of the deceased would go back into the tomb, remove the bones from the burial clothes, place them in a box called an ossuary, and place it alongside the other ossuaries in the family tomb. Why did they bury their dead in this way? They didn’t do it because there was a specific biblical passage that commanded them to do so. Instead, it was their theology of the afterlife that led them to develop this practice. They believed that God would raise his people up from the grave on the day of resurrection, and they treated the remains of their dead in a manner that testified to that expectation.

Whether we are talking about how an unborn human life should be treated, or the obligation that we have to those who are dying, or how we should care for the bodies of the deceased, or the respect that we owe those who live around us, the fact that man is made in the image of God should cause us to treat every human life with a great degree of reverence. C.S. Lewis reminds us of this in the concluding words of his famous address, *The Weight of Glory*:

“There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... [I]t is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously.” [46]