

“WHAT IS MAN, THAT THOU ART MINDFUL OF HIM?”

As we continue our study of Genesis, we come tonight to the account of God’s creation of man. Despite the popularity of the theory of evolution, which makes man into nothing more than a highly developed animal, there is something deep within all of us that resists such a notion. As Hamlet put it, “What a piece of work is a man!” When we consider man’s remarkable abilities and achievements, we see something of his greatness. And even though we also see countless examples of human depravity each and every day, they too point to man’s greatness. As Blaise Pascal once wrote,

“Man’s greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we call wretchedness in man, thus recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own...Man’s greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness.” [cited in Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 258]

And that is precisely what we find in the biblical account of the origins of man. Genesis accounts for man’s greatness by telling us that he was created in the image of God, and it accounts for man’s wretchedness by giving us the record of the fall.

As I mentioned briefly last week, the structure of Genesis 1 very clearly indicates that the creation of man is the high point, the crown, of the creation week. God began his creative work by setting in order the various realms of creation on days one through three, and he completed that work by filling those realms with the things that govern them on days four through six. And when at last he created man, God gave him dominion over everything that he had made. In the words of Psalm 8, God has put all things under man's feet. The fact that man is the high point of the creation week is further underscored by the repetitiveness that we see in verse 27, where we find three statements about the same event:

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

This kind of repetition has an effect upon the person hearing or reading a passage. It signals us to slow down and take time to reflect upon what is being said. Clearly, God wants us to realize that the creation of man was the climactic event in the creation week.

The account of man's creation begins with God speaking the words, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” The first thing that we notice about this is that God refers to himself in the plural: he says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” Various explanations have been suggested for this, but the most likely seems to be that which sees

it as a plural of self-address. In other words, God is stepping back and deliberating with himself before he undertakes this great task of making man. Obviously, this is another example of analogical language, since God certainly doesn't need to take time to consult with himself before doing anything. This picture serves as an analogy. God is using a human concept in order to convey something important about the creation of man.

Whenever we undertake a great project, we take time to think it through beforehand. We consult with ourselves, and sometimes with others as well. The importance of the task requires that we do so. The fact that God presents himself doing the same kind of thing before he made man places an emphasis upon the honor that God was about to bestow upon man. Notice that God doesn't consult with himself before any of his other creative work in Genesis 1. As good as the rest of creation is, now God is about to do something even more wonderful.

One other thing to notice about the plural pronouns in verse 27 is that they should probably also be understood as a very early foreshadowing of the doctrine of the Trinity. Obviously, this meaning would not have been known to Moses or other Old Testament believers, because God did not fully reveal his Triune nature until the time of the New Testament. Nevertheless, when we look at this passage with the benefit of God's complete revelation in Scripture, we can see that this picture of God deliberating with himself also implies an interaction between the individual members of the Godhead.

Our passage says that God created man in his image and after his likeness. Some ancient theologians argued that the terms 'image' and 'likeness' tell us different things

about man, but the way these terms are used in the rest of the Old Testament indicates that they are generally synonymous with each other. The term 'image' usually refers to a solid representation of something else, like a statue or sculpture, and 'likeness' conveys the idea of resemblance. When used to describe man as God's image-bearer, they are used interchangeably, as we see in Genesis 1:27 and 5:1, where only one of the terms is used in reference to man. Both words convey the same basic idea: God made man as a creature who is a concrete resemblance of himself.

Of course, this raises a host of questions. How do we resemble God? How far does our resemblance to God extend? And what about our sinfulness - do we still bear God's likeness after the fall? With regard to that last question, the Bible still refers to fallen man as being made in God's image. We see this in Genesis 9, where God declares that a murderer is subject to capital punishment due to the fact that he has taken the life of a creature made in God's image. Fallen man still reflects God's image, but it is a distorted reflection, similar to those made by broken mirrors and funhouse mirrors. But even though it is distorted, enough of the image remains for us to realize that we are not what we ought to be.

There are many facets to what it means for us to bear God's image. One of these is what can be referred to as original righteousness, something which was lost at the fall. When God first created mankind, he created us as morally upright. Man had no sin before the fall, and this was one of the ways in which he bore God's image. But that righteousness was lost when man sinned against God.

But other aspects of God's image remain, including: our ability to reason, to appreciate beauty, and to enter into committed relationships governed by love; our spiritual nature; our immortality (in that man was not subject to death when first created); our dominion over the earth; and our use of language. These things set us apart from the other creatures that God has made. There are ways in which we resemble those other creatures, such as the fact that we have bodies formed from the stuff of the earth. But there are also many ways in which we are quite unlike the animals. Man is the only human animal. Man is somewhat like a cross between an animal and an angel, having both body and spirit. As C.S. Lewis' character Screwtape contemptuously says in one of his letters, man is amphibious - half spirit, half animal.

One important implication of man's being made in God's image is that every single human being is vested with inherent dignity. This is why God requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Every person you meet, from the most pleasant and kind to the most offensive and irritating, deserves to be treated with respect, because he or she bears the image of God.

God did not make mankind as the crown of his creation for our own sake. He put us here in order to serve him and to further his glory. That is what we find when we look at the commission that God gave man after creating him. After pronouncing his blessing upon mankind, God commanded them to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." God placed us on this earth so that we might enjoy the benefits of living under his blessing while also serving him as good stewards of the world that he made.

God made man to be the earth's caretaker, the one who bears the responsibility for managing the wonderful resources with which God filled his world.

Verse 28 is sometimes applied by talking about our environmental responsibility. Or it is sometimes referred to in relation to the divine mandate that lies behind man's cultural undertakings - sometimes described as the 'cultural mandate.' These are certainly legitimate, and important, applications of this passage. However, there is more to verse 28 than environmental stewardship and cultural endeavor. The text says that man has been given the task of subduing the earth. He was commanded to reproduce himself, to fill the earth and to bring it under his dominion. And remember, he was given this task as God's image-bearing representative. This means that man's obedience to the commission given in verse 28 would result in the blessings of Eden being spread over all the earth.

[Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 69] In the words of Gregory Beale,

“God's ultimate goal in creation was to magnify his glory throughout the earth by means of his faithful image-bearers inhabiting the world in obedience to the divine mandate.” [*The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 82]

We can better understand what this means when we take into account one of the ways in which the kings of the ancient world expressed their dominion over the lands that were subject to their rule. Sometimes, a king would set up an image of himself in an area that

he conquered so that the image might represent his sovereign rule over the people of that land. Every time the people looked at the statue of king so-and-so, they would be reminded of that king's dominion over them. Similarly, when God created man in his image and then commanded him to subdue the earth, he was commanding man to represent God's dominion over all the earth.

God created man as the crown of his creation, and he commissioned him to reproduce himself, that the entire earth might be filled with others who reflected God's glorious likeness. This was God's plan for how the whole earth, not just Eden, would become the place where man lived under the blessing of God's rule. But Adam failed in that task when he sinned, and we all fell with him. Yet God's purpose for man has not failed. He has sent his Son as the second Adam, the one who is is the perfect image of the invisible God and the exact representation of God's being. Those of us who trust in him have put on the new man, and we are being renewed after the image of our creator. And in Christ, we now have a share in that original commission that God gave Adam and Eve, the commission to be fruitful and multiply; to do the work of passing on the faith to our children and bearing witness to others around us. And this is how God is fulfilling his purpose of using mankind to bring all the earth under his blessed dominion.