

PROTECT AND SERVE

God created humanity in His image, giving human life sacred value.

I have witnessed the wonder of childbirth. As a caring husband and expectant father, I stood at my wife's side to encourage her as she gave birth to each of our three children—one son and two daughters. I held our first two babies in my arms mere moments after their births. At our third child's birth, the medical team even allowed me to snip the umbilical cord. I still get emotional when I ponder those remarkable moments. Each time, my wife and I both sensed that we had participated with God in a miracle—the miracle of life. Remembering my children's births reminds me that “we are remarkably and wondrously made” (Ps. 139:14). Every human being from the moment of conception bears the image of our Creator God (Gen. 1:27)!

Although we are marred by our sin, the sanctity of human life continues from the womb to the grave. The lives of older adults are no less valuable in God's eyes than those of the newest infants. Many churches today establish specific ministry programs for people of all ages, particularly for those who are most vulnerable in a warped, sin-dominated culture.

Today, many parts of our world are torn by racism and other similar forms of injustice. Injustice occurs when we make a value judgment about the lesser worth of people who are different from us, whether in ethnicity, ability, social status, or some other feature. As followers of Christ, we need to continually remind ourselves that God created all human life. Bearing His image makes every person valuable and worthy of respect.

As we study this session and focus on the sanctity of human life, consider the value of human life at every age and among all people. When we as individuals or churches take bold stands against the evils of abortion, child abuse, racism, and social injustice, we are taking a stand for life. God is pleased when we protect the rights of others and when we serve others in His name. Human life of all ages is precious in God's sight.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

GENESIS 1:27; 9:1-7; MATTHEW 5:21-22

Genesis 1:1–2:4 records God’s creation of the universe. God created the universe, including the planet we inhabit, out of nothing by speaking it into existence (see 1:6,9,11,14,20,24). Then God created humanity as His crowning work. He created people—both male and female—in His image (1:26-27). He instructed them to be fruitful and multiply, and to exercise dominion as His representatives on earth (1:28). Genesis 1:31 provides a final evaluation of God’s handiwork: “It was very good indeed.”

Genesis 3 records humanity’s fall into sin. Sin quickly corrupted every aspect of human nature. Adam blamed Eve for their disobedience, and Eve blamed the serpent. Neither the man nor the woman took personal responsibility (3:12-13). God judged the first humans for their sin and banished them from the garden of Eden (3:23-24). Even in judgment, however, God revealed that one day a descendant of the woman would strike the serpent’s head (3:15). Many Bible students interpret this statement as the first Bible prophecy pointing to the coming of Jesus Christ as Savior.

Genesis 6–8 records how humanity became so corrupt that God sent His judgment in the form of a worldwide flood. Despite massive death and destruction, God preserved humanity and animal life by saving Noah, his wife, their three sons, their sons’ wives, and pairs of all animals in an ark. Genesis 9:1-7 reveals that when Noah and his family were finally able to leave the ark, God established a covenant with Noah. Included in this covenant was a divine command to protect human life (9:6).

Matthew 5–7 records Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In this discourse, Jesus instructed His followers to live in such a way that people could see God’s light through them (5:14-16). He also told His followers that their lifestyles must exceed legalistic minimums. He had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not abolish them (5:17-20). In 5:21-22, therefore, Jesus commanded His followers to go beyond the law’s prohibition of murder and avoid the kind of anger that gives rise to harming others.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

IN HIS IMAGE (Gen. 1:27)

Genesis 1:1 records that God created everything that exists—the heavens and the earth. He is distinct from and infinitely greater than His creation;

yet, by virtue of His being the Grand Artist, God has a close relationship with His creation, especially with humans, whom He made in His image and according to His likeness.

VERSE 27

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

God created man in His own image. The Hebrew word rendered *man* (“mankind,” NIV) in this verse literally reads “the man.” That is, the word is the Hebrew term *adam* plus a prefix that designates the definite article “the.” The challenge for Bible translators regarding the main term is its flexibility: *adam* can refer to all human beings collectively (humanity), to one particular male human (the man), or to the personal name Adam. Context influences which meaning best fits in a given occurrence. In the case of this verse, the most likely meaning is the collective idea of mankind, all human beings.

What does the Scripture mean when it refers to all mankind as having been created **in the image of God**? Bible scholars have long debated the question, and the vast majority agree on what the phrase does not mean. It does not mean that human beings are themselves gods, divine beings on par with the sovereign and infinite Creator. In terms of what the phrase does mean, Bible scholars generally point to at least five qualities that allow humans to relate meaningfully and truly with God, although He is infinitely above and beyond humanity in every aspect.

First, humans have intellect, including the power to reason. As they use their rational powers, people reflect God’s image in them. God demonstrated His infinite intelligence by His creation of the universe. Human beings reflect this quality when they communicate, work together, solve problems, make decisions, and make art.

Second, humans exhibit emotions. We experience feelings such as joy, sorrow, anger, and peacefulness. The Bible reveals that God also expresses emotions. He rejoices over His people (Isa. 62:5). He grieves about human sinfulness (Gen. 6:6). He displays righteous anger (Ps. 95:11).

Third, humans have volition—the power to make choices. We can choose between two or more options when we make a decision. We can choose what to eat, what to drink, and what to wear. We can choose to pursue one vocation over another or one path over another to arrive at a desired destination. As we make choices, we reflect a quality that God also employs. Genesis 1 records God’s making many choices in creating the universe.

Fourth, humans exercise dominion over the earth. Humanity’s dominion over the earth is a derivative of God’s sovereignty. That is, God assigned

human beings the important responsibility of being the earth's caretakers. We should never take this responsibility lightly, but should serve humbly as faithful stewards of God's creation.

Fifth, humans are spiritual beings. The Bible says that God is spirit (John 4:24), and we share in His image by having a spiritual dimension to our human nature. We are physical beings to be sure, but each of us has a spiritual dimension as well. The physical death of an individual human being does not end that person's spiritual existence (Luke 16:19-31).

Being created in God's image is both an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility. The Bible teaches us that all human beings are designed for eternity: we will spend eternity either in heaven with God or in hell with the devil and his angels, separated from God (Heb. 9:27). The Bible calls on believers to reflect the image of God as they shine as witnesses to lead others to Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18).

Genesis 1:27 affirms further that God **created** the aspect of gender in human beings—He made us as **male and female**. Both men and women bear God's image as part of the created order and serve Him together as stewards of His creation. The apostle Peter later reinforced this truth as he described wives as co-heirs with their husbands of the eternal life God provided through grace (1 Pet. 3:7).

Believers need to affirm the value of every person because God created all people in His image. People in Jesus' day often failed to value all humanity. Jesus' own disciples tried to keep children away from Him, but Jesus affirmed the value of children (Matt. 19:13-14). Jesus also affirmed the value of women, who were not always valued as they should have been in first-century cultures (Matt. 9:22; Luke 8:2-3). He also affirmed the value of people often despised—people such as tax collectors (Luke 19:9-10).

Like our Lord, we as believers need to value all people. Younger generations need to appreciate the wisdom they can glean from older adults. At the same time, older believers need to reject an attitude that says, "I've done my time, I've paid my dues," and use that as an excuse not to serve Christ inside or outside the church setting. We all bear God's image, and each of us as believers has a God-given role to fulfill.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Image of God" on pages 790–791 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How should the fact that we are created in God's image change the way we think and live? How should it impact the way we treat others?

TO BE PROTECTED (Gen. 9:1-7)

After the waters had receded from the earth following the great flood, God spoke to Noah and told him to leave the ark (Gen. 8:15-19). Noah's first act outside the ark was to make an offering to the Lord (Gen. 8:20). God accepted the sacrifice and pledged that He would never again curse the ground because of human beings or strike down every living thing (Gen. 8:21-22).

VERSE 1

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

God blessed Noah and his sons as they departed from the ark. God's command for them to **be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth** echoes the command given to the first man and woman in Genesis 1:28. In other words, humanity was given a new start after the flood, but God's purposes and instructions for the human family had not changed.

Noah's three sons were named Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 6:10). Genesis 10–11 records the subsequent generations of people who descended from these three men and their wives. The patriarch Abraham would descend from Shem (Gen. 11:10,26); much later, so would Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1).

VERSE 2

The fear and terror of you will be in every living creature on the earth, every bird of the sky, every creature that crawls on the ground, and all the fish of the sea. They are placed under your authority.

Genesis 9:2 highlights a significant distinction between the blessing directed to Adam and Eve from the blessing given to Noah and his sons. God told Noah and his sons that all of the earth's non-human creatures would live in **fear and terror** of humans. The peaceful harmony that existed between humans and other living creatures before the fall was now gone. Many animals would avoid contact with humans, while other creatures would become predatory. Such was the corruption of the created order that sin brought.

Every bird of the sky would now be more cautious in its interactions with humans. Similarly, creatures that crawl **on the ground** and **all the fish of the sea** would react to humans with fear. The text does not reveal the exact purpose of the creatures' *fear and terror* of humanity. Perhaps it was meant to help ensure the creatures' survival, since they would stay away from people. In any case, sin brought about a separation between humans and the animal kingdom that had not existed before. God was giving humanity a new start,

but the relationship between humanity and other living creatures would be different than it was originally in the garden of Eden. Humans would continue to have dominion over animals, but they would relate differently.

God told Noah and his sons that all other creatures were **placed under** human **authority**. This same expression is used later in Scripture to designate conquered people groups who fell under the control of a foreign power (see Dan. 1:2). God placed humans in this leadership role even though the animal kingdom would not necessarily comprehend that fact.

VERSE 3

Every creature that lives and moves will be food for you; as I gave the green plants, I have given you everything.

Genesis 9:3 includes an expansion of God's provision of food that was first given to humans in Genesis 1. Genesis 1:30 records that God gave the first humans vegetation and plant life to eat as food. Now, God directed Noah and his family that **every creature that lives and moves** would **be food for** them. We might imagine that God's provision referred primarily to smaller animals, but this was not necessarily so. Further, certain types of creatures would later be prohibited as food in the Law of Moses (see Lev. 11:4-7,10). The words **I have given you everything** reminded Noah (and remind us) that God has graciously provided everything we need for surviving and thriving as His people.

The apostle Paul would later challenge the believers in the Corinthian church with this question: "What do you have that you didn't receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Some Corinthian believers were boastful about their self-reliance, but Paul reminded them that everything they had came from God. In Old Testament times, Moses reminded God's people that even their ability to earn wealth came from God (Deut. 8:17-18). When we face the temptation of pride, remembering that all we have comes from God helps us maintain a spirit of humility. Everything we have is a gift of God's grace.

VERSE 4

However, you must not eat meat with its lifeblood in it.

Noah and his descendants could now add animal meat to their formerly vegetarian diet, but they were not to eat **meat with its lifeblood in it**. The Law of Moses would later provide further explanation of this command. The life of the flesh was in the blood; thus, people were to treat blood with respect (Lev. 17:11). Later, Jesus' shed blood would pay sin's price and secure our salvation (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:12). Even at this early stage of God's redemptive plan, He was teaching His people about the value of life—all life.

VERSE 5

And I will require a penalty for your lifeblood; I will require it from any animal and from any human; if someone murders a fellow human, I will require that person's life.

The statement **I will require a penalty for your lifeblood** affirms the sanctity of human life. God said that He would require a penalty **from any animal and from any human** who disregarded the precious value of human life. Probably, the impact of this declaration was to safeguard against both the indiscriminate slaughter of animal life and the intentional taking of human life. All life is valuable, especially human life since it bears God's image.

The remainder of 9:5 sets forth the consequences of wanton disregard for life. God made clear that **if someone murders a fellow human**, He would **require that person's life** in return. The Hebrew text in this part of verse 5 literally reads "at the hand of every man his brother will I require the life-breath (Hebrew, *nephesh*) of the man." Human life is precious, a gift of God; He alone gave it; only He has the authority to say that life can be taken away.

God's covenant with Noah included this command to protect human life by requiring the life of any creature that took human life illegitimately. Again, the fact that humans bear God's image is the principle behind the protection of human life. We need to respect the sanctity of life because life is God's precious gift.

VERSE 6

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood will be shed, for God made humans in his image.

Genesis 9:6 stresses further the prohibition against murder. God declared that **whoever sheds human blood** illegitimately would be subject to just and proportionate punishment: **by humans his blood will be shed**. In Romans 12:19–13:4, the apostle Paul built on the foundation of Genesis 9:6 to teach that Christian justice rejects acts of personal vengeance yet recognizes the divinely appointed role of "governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1) to carry out the just punishment of wrongdoers.

The rationale God gave for His declaration about those who shed *human blood* was that He **made humans in His image**. God is the Creator of all life, and He created human beings in His image. Consequently, we are stewards of God's creation and exercise responsibility for the earth. This responsibility demands that we value and protect human life, not harm it.

These words of prohibition obviously apply to murder but apply to other areas too. For example, abortion disregards the value of human life

in the womb. Euthanasia and assisted suicide both issue a judgment about human life that Scripture nowhere makes. Verse 6 reminds us of humans' sacred stewardship to value the image of God not only in ourselves but also in others. How we treat others is a reflection of our relationship with God.

Throughout church history, believers have held a range of views regarding the issue of capital punishment. Some Christians appeal to Genesis 9:1-7 as clear biblical support for the government's authority to impose the death penalty for heinous crimes. Other Christians have reservations about the potential misappropriation of capital punishment and appeal to the New Testament's emphasis on grace to oppose its use. Both points of view appeal to the image of God in humanity to make their case.

VERSE 7

But you, be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it."

God then returned to His original command to Noah and his sons to **be fruitful and multiply**. The wording is exactly the same as in Genesis 1:28 and 9:1. Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated **spread out** is the word used in Genesis 1:20 of living creatures in the water ("swarm"). The emphasis is that God desired for Noah and his descendants to populate all of the earth. God wanted them to enjoy and care for all of His earth, not just one area.

Believers are to protect human life and should serve as advocates for those who cannot speak for themselves. In today's world, some view children as a distraction. However, Jesus affirmed the value of children, as did King Solomon (Matt. 19:13-14; Ps. 127:3). The Israelite prophets chastised God's people for taking advantage of widows (Isa. 1:17,23). Today, some elderly church members need special care and have no family members to help them. Churches can step up in such situations and show honor to those in need.

If we truly value all human life, we should be committed to help those who cannot advocate for themselves. How could your Bible study group provide such help to vulnerable people in your community?

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Capital Punishment" on pages 263–265 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What information in the article helps solidify your understanding of the issue? In your understanding, how does the issue of capital punishment relate to the sanctity of human life?

IN ACTION AND ATTITUDE (Matt. 5:21-22)

Matthew 5:21-48 comprises a section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that some theologians refer to as "the six antitheses." Six times in this section, Jesus contrasted His teaching with a legalistic, self-righteous understanding of various Old Testament commands and principles. In making these contrasts, Jesus was in no way undermining the Old Testament Scriptures (see 5:17). Rather, He condemned the Pharisees' legalistic works-salvation. In His teaching, Jesus went beyond the letter of the law to the spirit—the requirement of a transformed heart and will.

VERSE 21

"You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment."

Jesus challenged His hearers to reflect on some familiar scriptural teachings. His listeners were no doubt well-versed in the law, particularly the Ten Commandments. The sixth commandment was **do not murder** (see Ex. 20:13). The additional words **whoever murders will be subject to judgment** were not part of the original commandment. Rather, these words reflect later application emphasizing that those who break the law will be held accountable. Sinful actions have consequences!

VERSE 22

But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister, will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire.

The words **but I tell you** point to the authority Jesus had as He taught (Matt. 7:28). Jesus taught as one whose authority lay within Him. The scribes of Jesus' day constantly name-dropped famous rabbis of the past rather than teach what God said in the Scriptures.

Jesus provided a threefold application of the commandment against murder, giving examples of sinful attitudes and actions that, while not murder, deeply damage people and have serious consequences. First, Jesus affirmed that **everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment**. The spirit of the commandment that condemned murder also condemned the root attitude behind murder: selfish, destructive anger. Jesus declared that in God's kingdom such anger expressed toward a fellow believer (**his brother or sister**) would **be subject to judgment** just as the overt act of murder would be judged.

Second, Jesus declared that **whoever insults** (“shall say ... Raca,” KJV; “says ... ‘Raca,’” NIV) **his brother or sister** would **be subject to the court** (“the council,” KJV; ESV). The term rendered *insults* is an Aramaic word of derision meaning “empty,” “worthless,” or “idle.” Using this loaded word about someone was meant to demean, offend, and damage. It could easily evoke violent reactions. The word rendered *the court* literally is “the Sanhedrin,” the Jews’ highest court in Jesus’ day. Jesus’ point was that such demeaning, insulting speech also was sinful. Offenders would be held accountable.

In His third example, Jesus condemned anyone who cursed another person by saying, **“You fool!”** We get our English term *moron* from the Greek word rendered *fool*. In these three examples, Jesus described an escalation from anger (an emotion or attitude) to a demeaning insult (Raca) to a bitter, unfair pronouncement that another person was a godless nobody. Likewise, the consequences escalated from being subject to judgment to being subject to the high court to being **subject to hellfire** (“in danger of hell fire,” KJV; “liable to the hell of fire,” ESV; “in danger of the fire of hell,” NIV)! One view of this consequence is that the offender by his actions reveals himself to be an unbeliever and thus in danger of suffering everlasting punishment in hell. At the very least the phrase underscores Jesus’ point that God holds people accountable for their treatment of others. This particularly includes the way we value and treat vulnerable groups of people.

Today, God expects His children to demonstrate that they value others by showing respect to all people. We should not look down on people who are of a different ethnic group or socio-economic status. Jesus is our standard of righteousness, not other people and not cultural traditions. We must look to Him and ask Him to shape our attitudes and actions. When we look to Jesus as our standard of righteousness, we recognize quickly that we are all in need of His grace.

God created humanity in His image, and when He did so, He ascribed to human life sacred value. Today, consider one way in which you will boldly demonstrate that human life is precious and needs to be respected. Resolve to put your decision into action this week.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sermon on the Mount” on pages 1431–1435 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How can believers today move to a deeper relationship with the Lord that includes a changed heart and attitude? How can we better live by the Spirit, striving for Christlikeness in the way we value and treat others?