

This morning, we are taking look at our theology of humanity. At it's very core: **What does it mean to be human, and how should we treat one another?** What does the Bible tell us about humanity, about how God sees people, about how we are therefore to relate to one another, as well? So that's what we'll be tackling.

This is part of a series we've been in since the second Sunday of September, where we are looking at some of the key beliefs of the Christian faith. We started with a few Sundays looking at key beliefs that have to do with who God is, how He's revealed himself to us, how we can know God, what it means to be in relationship with God, and so forth. Beginning with last week's message on the Church, we have taken a bit of a shift to look at our relationships with people, in light of our relationship with God.

And that is one the foundational things to understand: that how we think about people, and how we relate to our fellow human beings, flows out of our relationship with God. This is crucial. John Calvin put it well when he writes in the opening paragraphs of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:  
**“Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...But though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie [earlier, “many ties”], due arrangement requires that we treat of the former [God] in the first place, and then descend to the latter [ourselves/humanity]” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter 1).<sup>1</sup>**

Scripture opens with, “In the beginning, God...” God is the subject, right from the start, before getting to humanity. The Apostles Creed follows suit, “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” So the Bible, the Creeds, our Theology...all of it starts with God and our understanding of Him.

**This is why we can talk about our theology of something else besides**

**God, such as humanity, even though at first, it seems kind of funny.**

“Theology” means “God study.” So to say, “What’s your theology about humanity?” seems a little goofy (“What’s your God-study of humanity?”). It seems more logical to ask, “What’s your anthropology?” (literally: “human study”). But to say “What’s your theology about humanity?” or “This is my theology of humanity,” reminds us that our anthropology is informed by our theology. **Our understanding of humanity is informed by our foundational understanding of God.** We start with God and “descend” (as Calvin put it) to humanity. When we think of it this way, we can have a “theology” of a lot of different things: a theology of the Church, a theology of the end times, a theology of salvation, a theology of sin, a theology of grace, a theology of the cross, a theology of work, a theology of government...I even have a very well-defined theology of coffee. ☺ It is summarized in three points. First, God loves coffee. We know this because it’s in one of the names of God’s people, it’s in the language they used, and there’s a New Testament Book that tells us as well: “Hebrews” (He brews). Second, coffee should ALWAYS be sweetened with sugar and flavored with chocolate, or caramel, or something else to make it taste good, because a loving God would not want us to drink bad-tasting black coffee. Third, coffee should always be caffeinated. Decaffeinated coffee takes away the one benefit God gives us in coffee, which is to wake us up.

Ok, that’s all a little tongue in cheek...and the fact is, I drink far less coffee than the average coffee drinker in America.<sup>ii</sup> But, we can have a theology of a lot of different topics, including humanity. And we want to have a solid basis for our theology of humanity because it has huge ramifications for how we treat other people – from foreigners to family members. So, if we were to summarize our theology of humanity in one simple statement of belief, it might be something like this: **“I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.”** Today we will mostly focus on the first half of this, as we talked more in-depth about salvation a few weeks ago.

We see the Biblical theology of humanity get developed right from the start of Scripture. God creates everything that’s needed for life in the first few days of creation, then on the 5<sup>th</sup> day we see the first of the creatures get created. And then on the 6<sup>th</sup> day more of the creatures. And here’s what we

read about the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day:

**“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” (Genesis 1:26-27).**

This is kind of an aside...but a Bible study I am working through right now asked this question about this passage and the days of creation before it: “Why does God first form the world, and then fill the world?” And I thought: that’s the dumbest question I’ve ever heard. How could God fill the world if it wasn’t created first? Were all the plants and animals and people supposed to just float in outer space while he created a place for them to live? Anyway...right there in these verses is the foundation for our theology of humanity: that God created humankind – both male and female – *in His image*. We won’t get into all that being created “in God’s image” means here this morning though I’ve addressed that previously, but I will say that I have yet to read *anything* from *any* theologian, even those who got their theological education off the back of a cracker jack box, who ever who believes it means that we look physically like God. God doesn’t look like you or me – except taller, stronger, more handsome, and a fuller head of hair or whatever changes you might make if you went down that line of thinking. Regardless, humans are the only ones with this designation, setting us apart from the rest of creation.

The point to take away from this, in terms of our theology of humanity is that: **People are created in God’s image. All people. And as such, all people are worthy of being treated as image-bearers of God.** For those of you who are married, how much would it transform your marriage if you woke up every morning and remembered right from the get-go and then throughout the day...that your spouse is an image-bearer of God? It’s not that they’re perfect...they’re not...and neither are you...but your spouse is an image bearer of God. Your kids are, too. Your siblings are. Your nieces, nephews...even your mother-in-law and father-in-law. I know that might be

hard for some to fathom. Your neighbors, your co-workers. Republicans. Democrats. Skiers and snowboa...snowboar...snowboarders. Oh, that one's tough. ☺ The people who aren't helpful when you call for tech help about your computer; the barista who serves you your coffee – caffeinated and flavored with caramel and sugar, of course; the person who cuts you off in traffic; people who went to the UW, to WSU, or who dropped out of High School...people who were born into upper class wealth here in America, people who are born into the slums of Rio De Janeiro, people who suffer from starvation in Africa; Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists...I mean, we could go on and on with all kinds of labels that we put on people, but: **The one label that we all have that overrides all the others and ought to dictate how we treat people is that they are created in God's image.**

And I'm as bad at living that out as you probably are, too. This can be so hard to do sometimes. A weak theology of humanity will lead to being impatient and unkind toward others, or to being inhospitable, judgmental and prideful toward others. That's not how God calls us to treat other human beings, because they're all created in His image.

This "image bearing" from Genesis 1 is foundational for our theology of humanity, and ought to inform how we treat others. And from there, we see God's love for people regardless of their societal status expressed throughout Scripture. For instance in Luke 6, we read: **"Looking at his disciples, Jesus said:**

**'Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now,  
for you will be satisfied.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh'" (Luke 6:20-21).**

Who are the ones blessed? The rich, the wealthy? The educated? The ones with power and prestige? No. It's the people on the margins, who are down and out. Now, we don't want the pendulum to swing too far and come away with a theology of humanity that if you're well-off or well-educated that you're not loved by God. That would be wrong as well. My senior year of

High School I had a deep disdain for wealthy people, because my dad was laid off in a downsizing and cost-cutting move from the company where he had worked for the previous 25 years or so. And one of the people who helped make that decision was the father of a classmate of mine, and they clearly lived in a different economic sphere. I was reminded every single school day, simply by seeing him, that his dad had been a part of the decision to let my dad go, in a cost-cutting move. And so I just lumped everyone together who I thought was “rich” and harbored this disdain toward them. So we don’t want to end up there, as though God doesn’t like wealthy people. But the people who are poor, who hunger, who weep...elsewhere it’s widows and orphans and other descriptions of people who are on the margins or don’t always fit in our boxes of what it means to be human...they are nonetheless created in God’s image, and they are blessed.

Then a bit later Jesus says, **“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them...Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:27...36).**

Love who? Your enemies! Why? At least in part because they’re created in the image of God as well; God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. They’re created in His image as well.

In the NT book, “Philemon,” which is a one-page letter from Paul to his friend Philemon and to the church that he’s a part of, Paul writes some earth-shattering and groundbreaking sentences. Let me share some of it with you: “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love...I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

**“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you...Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me...Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask” (Philemon 8...21).**

This is Paul sending back a slave, whose name is simply “useful.” It’s not really even a proper name, as slaves often didn’t have proper names, which we’ll see in a moment from another passage of Scripture. And Paul is sending him back to Philemon and all but demanding that he receive Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord, as Paul’s own son, as if he were receiving Paul himself. Paul’s theology of humanity compelled him see Onesimus as an image-bearer, and he is imploring Philemon to see him the same way.

In Romans 16 we have a long list of greetings from Paul to the church in Rome. From the names listed, we can see that it’s a wide range of people: Names that were associated with the upper crust, and names that were clearly for slaves and servants. Even the scribe who was writing for Paul writes, “I Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord...and our brother Quartus send[s] you [his] greetings” (Romans 16:21-23). **Tertius and Quartus aren’t proper names. They mean “third” and “fourth.” They were probably the third and fourth kids born to a mother and dad who were slaves for a well-to-do family.** And here they are sending their greetings as co-workers in Christ, on equal footing as fellow brothers in the Lord, because they’re created in God’s image.<sup>iii</sup>

The parable that Jesus tells about the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go seek out the one who’s lost is exactly because of this principle, and ties in with the second half of this morning’s key idea – that we humans need Jesus as our Savior. It’s a parable about how God seeks out lost people, to save them and bring them back into the sheep pen, back into the family of God. God will go

to great lengths to do this. It's not that the 99 sheep are left unprotected. It's a parable, and Jesus doesn't give the details, but they would have understood that the other 99 would be left in the sheep pen, and under the watch of other shepherds. In the Christmas narrative, it's multiple shepherds who were together keeping watch by night when the angels visit to announce the birth of Jesus. This would be a very common way to do this. So it's not one shepherd who leaves the 99 in danger to seek for the one. But the one is important enough that he heads out, none-the-less, to find the one that's lost and save it.

This is what Jesus does, because all people are created in God's image. John 3:16 puts it well, **“For God so loved the world [and not just part of it] that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).** God has gone to great lengths to show His love for all humanity, as He gave His one and only Son, and gave him up on the cross so that we might be saved. He's the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep to bring them back into the fold. Whether or not we believe it is up to us – that's the “believe” part. It's up to each individual. But God still loves his image-bearers. God still seeks them out. God created them – you, me, each person who is born – in His image. And He invites us to see all people as Created in His image as well, no matter how different from us they may be.

To affirm this, I invite you to join me in this statement of belief as we close this message together: **“I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.”** Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.ii.html>

<sup>ii</sup> In case you're now wondering: the average coffee drinker in America drinks 3.2 cups of coffee per day, with the average cup size being 9 oz. I average between 5 and 6 per week. © <http://www.e-importz.com/coffee-statistics.php>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://qideas.org/videos/overcoming-our-greatest-affliction> Thanks to Andy Crouch, Christianity Today editor, for his observation of the meanings of names and what we learn about society from them. I highly recommend this 18 minute video if you want a deeper dive into this theology of humanity.