

Am I Matter or Do I Matter?

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Preacher: David Nixon

[0:00] Thank you, Derek, and thank you all for coming tonight to think about this interesting topic.! Am I matter or do I matter? Now, let me ask you to put your hand up if you have experimented so far! with AI. You have tried out chat, GTP, Grok or something. Most people in the room have tried AI.

Interesting. I have in the last eight or nine months had a go with it. My kids were coming home from school talking about using it and I'm like, what on earth do they teach them at school these days? But if they're on it, I need to understand it as well. And I've been both amazed by what it can do and also I'm afraid by what it can do. AI is unlike other past technological revolutions.

The invention of the steam engine, the invention of electricity, the invention of the internet, yet all these things have transformed the world. But there were still loads of things that it was assumed that only human beings could do. Only human beings could compose a sonnet or produce a work of art or produce music or a great work of literature. But the thing about AI is it can do all of these things and more. Often faster and sometimes better than humans can do.

And so it's no longer just simply something of nightmares and science fiction movies to imagine that there is a possibility that AI machines might one day be able to replace humans. Certainly, I think, AI is going to force us to re-evaluate some of the big questions of life. Among them, the question that we are looking at together this evening, which is the belief that human beings are special.

[1:35] Now, one of the highest ideals in our society is the belief that human lives are precious and that we should go out of our way to help people who are in need, even if they're on the other side of the world.

But the thing about that belief is it's a belief. It's not a scientific fact. You can't go to a scientific laboratory and look down a microscope and discover that as a fact in science.

And so the question is, where does our belief in the sanctity, the dignity, and the equality of human life come from? If you go back in history, you'll discover that it's a notion that is by no means self-evident. It has not been widely agreed on in different human societies at different times in human history. Instead, it's been our differences that's been the most obvious thing that confronts people. Our differences of sex, our differences of skin color, our differences of mental acuity, our physical ability, all of these differences, they're the thing that's obvious that's in our faces rather than our equality, the sameness that we share. That's why when you go back in history, you go and you look at the Greeks and their great philosophers. You look at Plato.

Plato describes how there are people who are born with souls of gold, souls of silver, and souls of bronze. Plato says that some people are born as kings to rule. Others are born as slaves to be tools.

Aristotle comes along, ladies, you're not going to like this. Aristotle comes along, he says that women are simply deformed men. So you've got to fast forward quite a long time in human history before you get to this idea that men and women and people of all different shapes and sizes, that they are equal, they're the same. You have to look beyond two horrendous world wars and the Holocaust to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Then 1948 announced all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Now that sounds good to our ears, but the question is how do we know that's true?

[3:39] If you go to the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, you'll see it gives no justification for that. It makes this statement that it asks you to accept and believe on faith.

And that puts us in a difficult situation today. That sets us up for a dilemma. We have these convictions of human dignity and human equality, but it's like a house that's been built on a foundation of sand. And now we're confronted by other rising nations in the world that don't share these same ideals with us. China, Russia, India, other places, they don't believe that all human lives are equal and free and dignity and rights. They don't believe that. Even here at home, our beliefs are beginning to erode at the book ends of life. The government are talking about decriminalizing abortion for any reason. They're talking about legislating for assisted dying and euthanasia at the other end of life, endangering the lives of the most vulnerable in human society and in human family. And so where do our beliefs in the sanctity of human life and the equality of all human lives, where do these beliefs come from? How can we justify them? Are they a fiction that we've just invented because they're convenient? Or are they facts that we have discovered as part of the fabric of reality?

And those are two very different answers that come to us through two very different stories to make sense of our lives in this world. There's the one that we're going to look at first of all, which I'm going to call the secular story of human rights. And then there is another one which I call the biblical story of human rights. And today I want to just compare and contrast these two and leave it to you to decide which makes more sense, which rings more true to you. So let's think first of all about the secular human rights story. Scotland is widely recognized to be the birthplace of the Enlightenment. I work on the Royal Mile, so almost every single day I walk past David Hume's statue on the Royal Mile. And as you walk past his statue, you'll see he holds two tablets in his hands. And if you look really closely at those tablets, you'll see that they are blank. You see, David Hume is one of the leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment. It was an attempt to try and recreate society and its rules, its laws, its rights, purely on the basis of human reason, rather than on the basis of religion. And so David Hume's tablets, tablets, they are blank because he says, our rights, our laws, they do not come written from the finger of God in heaven. No, they are written on earth by us and we can write what we want on those tablets.

That's the belief of the Enlightenment. And the Enlightenment brings then the secular humanistic worldview. It is built on this belief that the world that we now live in is all that there is.

[6:31] There is nothing beyond this physical universe that we now inhabit. Human beings, we exist in the physical universe by virtue of time, chance, and natural selection. Like David Hume's tablets, that means that humanity comes into this world as a blank slate, which many people think is a wonderfully freeing thing, because then we can write on the state whatever we want. We can define life for ourselves. We can write our own script in life about how we should live and how we should behave and what we can and can't do. It's up to us. Like Francis Snatcher's song, I did it my way. That's the freedom it brings us. But at the same time, those blank tablets, that blank slate of humanity, also means that human beings have no actual inherent meaning, value, no ultimate destiny. You and I, we are just globs of carbon flowing from one meaningless existence to another. That's what we become in the secular worldview. Someone who acknowledges this stark reality is the writer

Noah Yuval Harari. He's written in his best-selling book, *Sapiens*, that human beings are an animal of no significance. He goes on and he writes, most legal systems in the world today are based on a belief in human rights. But what are human rights? Well, human rights like God in heaven are just a story that we've invented. Take a human being, cut them open, look inside. You will find the heart, the kidneys, neurons, hormones, DNA, but you won't find any rights. The only place you find rights is in the stories that we have invented and spread. Harari's not the only person who thinks this way. London School of Economics professor John Gray has written in one of his books that human beings are of no greater significance than a slime mold. It makes you feel good, doesn't it? Someone else, Princeton ethicist Peter Singer, he argues that not all human beings are worthy of dignity and respect. Peter

Singer argues that actually a newborn child has less of a right to live than a rat because a rat has more self-awareness than a newborn child. Singer suggested we should be able to perform medical experiments on patients who have dementia. He also believes that we should prioritize euthanasia for the elderly because that will free up more resources for the younger.

Now you, like me, may not like what these people have said, but it is very hard to fault their ruthless intellectual consistency. Their worldview says human beings ultimately mean nothing, and they're prepared to put their money where their mouth is. In a purely secular universe, human beings have no inherent value, no ultimate purpose beyond survival and reproduction. We just matter. That's it. You are your biology and nothing more.

But here's the thing. People don't want to live that way. People can't live that way. That's not going to get you out of bed tomorrow morning. You need something more than that. And so alongside this, there has been a quest through the enlightenment to find an alternative basis to believe that there's something special about human beings. Two attempts, let me walk you through them here. [10:04] One is to try and identify there's something in humanity, some special characteristic in humanity that means that we are special, that we are worthy of more than just being treated like a slime mold.

And so often people will single out human intelligence or human ability to communicate or human ability to be creative, all these different things, and say, well, that quality that human beings have, that means that we should honor that and respect that, not just in ourselves, but in others who have that.

But there's a problem with trying to base our rights, our dignity, our value in special characteristics. And it's because these special characteristics don't just divide us from the animals, but they also divide some humans from other humans.

So what are you to do if the special characteristics is your intelligence, if it is intelligence that makes us worthy of rights and respect? Well, then what do you do with someone who has a mental incapacity?

Or what do you do with someone who has been born with a below average IQ? Are they worthy of less rights and protections? It's funny because our intuition would be, actually, they're the ones who most need those protections.

[11:20] And so that's, this doesn't work. An alternative quest through the Enlightenment to try and find a basis for human rights and dignity has been instead to look for a thing called the social contract.

And to say that, this imagines that in the past, human beings, they realized that life was pretty short, nasty, and brutish. Until we realized that we just live together and work together, actually, we could make a society together and live happier, longer lives.

And so we have invented the social contract to live together. And in this social contract, we've agreed to give each other certain rights and respect. Now, here's the thing about the social contract.

What is to prevent a future society rewriting the social contract? What if a future majority of people votes to strip the minority off their rights, to enslave them, or to exterminate them?

This isn't just theory. This happened in 1930s Germany. This can happen in societies. And so, special characteristics, social contracts.

[12:30] None of these things actually provide us firm, strong foundation on which we can build the house of human rights and human dignity and human value and human equality. It doesn't work. This is why Notre Dame professor Alastair MacIntyre has famously declared that the Enlightenment has failed.

It doesn't work. It does not. These beliefs that we have, they do not fit in a secular, godless, humanistic universe. They don't fit there. They don't work there.

Instead, there is a better story that makes sense of these things, these beliefs, these intuitions that we have. I call it the biblical story of human rights. And that's what we're going to go on to look at now. Now, it's been a surprise to many people in our generation to realize that the flower of human rights comes from a seed that's found in the Bible.

But you don't have to be a Christian to recognize that and admit that's true. There's a secular historian called Tom Holland. He's written in the last few years that every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth.

The origins of this principle lay not in the French Revolution, nor the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible. Even our earlier friend, Noah Yuval Harari, our atheist friend and sapiens, even he admits that these things come from the Bible.

[13:51] He writes, the liberal belief in the free and sacred nature of each individual is a direct legacy of the traditional Christian belief in free and eternal individual souls.

These beliefs that we have about everybody being free, everyone being equal, everyone's life being worthy of value and respect, they come from the Bible.

They're written on the very first page of the Bible. If you look at Genesis chapter 1, verse 27, that's where you will find the seed. There we read, so God created mankind or humankind in his own image.

In the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them. At this point, this is the pinnacle of all of God's creative work, all of his creative endeavors.

God's crowning glory in all he has made. It's not the stars in the heavens above. It's not the majestic mountain peaks. No, it's you and me. Human beings, yes, made from the dust, but made in his image, in his likeness.

[14:55] That's where the glory is found. It's a little bit like what happens whenever you get a piece of paper, and you look at it, and you see the image of our sovereign printed on it.

And suddenly, that piece of paper is no longer just a piece of paper. Suddenly, it is transformed into currency, and it has value because it bears the official image of the sovereign. In the same way, God has created us from the dust, but he has stamped us with his image and his likeness.

And that's where our value, that's where our meaning, that's where our worth comes from. Yes, we're made from the matter, but we're stamped with God's image and likeness, and that's why we matter. In his sight, we're loved, we're precious, unlike anything else in all of creation.

But it's not just on the first page of the Bible that you discover that human beings have dignity and worth and value, because at the very center of the Bible is the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, come into this world.

And nothing brings greater dignity to the human race than the fact that the living God has become one of us. He stepped down into human history as one of us. It's what we're all going to be singing about and celebrating in a few weeks of Christmas.

[16:12] And so, Derek read to us Mark chapter 5 a little bit earlier on. And just very briefly, I want to walk you through this story to point out to you that in Jesus' eyes, we're not just matter.

No, we're loved. Now, there's two people in this story. Both of them are women, interestingly. That's going to be important. One of them's a 12-year-old girl.

She's dying. One's an older lady. We're not told how old she is, but we're told that she has been sick for 12 years. Now, what's important about this story is that both of these characters are women. They are in a society that is... What's the world? It's a man's world. That's the world that they're in. In first century law, they were property.

The property of the men in their lives. Their fathers. In their cases. Their husbands. They're not significant. But in Jesus' eyes, they are.

[17:09] Jesus relates to and treats these women in a radically counter-cultural way. They matter to him. And so, first of all, this first girl, we're not told her name, this young girl.

She is the daughter of Jairus. We're told his name because he's the VIP. He is one of the elites in town. He is the synagogue ruler. He is a man of prestige and status.

And he is racing against the clock to get Jesus from wherever Jesus is all the way across town back to his house where his little girl is lying and she is dying. He is desperate for Jesus, the healer, to come and heal his daughter.

But the thing about first century Jewish towns is that they have narrow streets. They're busy. Maybe market day. They're thronged with people.

And so it's very hard to get through. They don't have the ambulance with the blue lights and the siren to make way. So they're pushing through the crowded streets and here in the crowd, we're told there's this second lady.

[18:09] Again, we're not told her name. She's socially ostracized. She spent 12 years on the margins of society because everyone is afraid that her sickness, her uncleanness is contagious.

It will make them sick. It will make them unclean as well. And so this is a lady who has lost everything, lost her friends, her family, her community. She lives on the margins. She desperately wants to be near as well.

And she has heard that Jesus has the power to do things that no one else, humanly speaking, can do. And as Jesus pushes through the crowd, he walks right past her.

Just quietly, she reaches out her hand. She touches him. Just touches the hem of the throat. And we're told she was hit in that moment. 12 years of being rejected.

12 years, Luke's gospel tells us, seeing every doctor who couldn't help her. 12 years, nothing worked. One touch of Jesus. And she is healed.

[19:16] And that's when Jesus stops. Jairus wants to pull him on, get him home. Jesus stops. And he says, verse 31, who touched me?

And he leaves this woman nowhere to hide. He gives her no choice but to reveal herself, to identify herself. She must have been thinking to herself, I have done something wrong here. I am about to get in so much trouble.

But she steps forward. She identifies herself. It was me. And then she hears these words from Jesus, words that she was not anticipating.

Verse 34, daughter, your faith has healed you. See, Jesus has time to stop for this nobody.

There's other things other people have got for Jesus to do, but Jesus has time to stop for her. No one has stopped for this woman and paid attention to her for 12 years. But Jesus wants to stop and pay attention to her. He wants to see her.

[20:20] He wants to know her. And when she's lost everything, her friends, her family, Jesus' first words out of his mouth are, daughter. Jesus wants her to know that she has a father in heaven who loves her, who is for her.

And then he announces in the hearing of everyone in town who's gathered around, you're healed. So she can go back and have her friends.

She can go back and have her family. She can go back and have her community. She's safe. She's clean. She's well. Jesus has utterly, radically transformed her life in just this little encounter.

But all as this is happening, Jairus is standing here. He is anxious. He is desperate to get Jesus back to his house, to his little girl. The news comes, two of his, we're not told how many servants come from his house, but some people come from his house with a message, the worst possible news, every parent's worst nightmare, daughter's dead.

Don't bother the rabbi anymore. But then Jesus reaches out his hand to Jairus, verse 36, and says, don't be afraid.

[21:34] Just believe and she will be healed. You see, all this time, Jairus has been thinking, if he can only get Jesus to the house before she dies, Jesus could save her.

What Jairus is about to realize is that even after she has died, Jesus can still save her. And so Jesus sets off with Jairus and team through the crowds.

Arriving at the house, they go in, they go past the mourners. They go up the stairs to our little girl's bedroom. Sees her lying on the bed. She looks like she's asleep. But no, she's sleeping the sleep of death.

But then Jesus goes over to her. We read verse 41. He takes her by the hands. He says, my child, get up. I love how in the Jesus storybook Bible by Sally Jones, he says, Jesus reached down into death.

And in that moment, her eyes open, she gasps for breath, her heart start beating again, and she is alive again.

[22:37] And then don't miss the end of verse 43. Just as earlier, he did the thing that the woman needed, telling everyone, she's clean, you can have her back. He also pays attention to this little girl's need.

Give her something to eat. She's going to be hungry. She's not being well. She's not eating in days. Give her something to eat. Jesus, Jesus cares about people in all of their needs. Social, physical, everything.

So this is an incredible story. This is an incredible story where Jesus makes time for and treats with incredible dignity and respect people whom other people didn't have any time for.

Children. Sick, ostracized women. They matter to Jesus. And Mark tells us this story because he's actually telling us a number of stories in this section where he is revealing Jesus's power. Because sickness and death, they are two of the great enemies of the human race. Two of the things that afflict the human race, that ruin our lives. And Mark wants you to know that the greatest enemies of your life and my life, that Jesus has the power to defeat them.

[23:51] That Jesus has the power to save you from your greatest problem. Your greatest problem is actually not sickness. Your greatest problem is actually not death. Your greatest problem is not that you're on the margins and you're lonely.

No. The greatest problem is this thing the Bible calls sin. Human beings, yes, we've been made in the image of God.

We, if you like, bear something of the glory of God. The problem is human beings have not lived up to our privileges. Instead, Romans chapter 3 verse 23 tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

If this is where the glory is, all of us live down here. We live woefully short of it. We have not lived up to our God-given privileges, rights, responsibilities. Instead, we have turned our backs on God, the source of life.

We have descended into sin. And that is why we get sick. That is why we die. That is the source of all of the misery of this world. That we have turned our backs on God, gone our own way. And we've made a mess of it in the process.

[24:59] Sinners were like cut flowers. Or, with Christmas on the horizon, we're like Christmas trees. We've been cut down. We've been brought into the house.

We've been dressed up. We look nice for a time. But we're slowly fading and wilting. We're starting to lose our needles. And one day soon, they're going to take us out and throw us out in the compost.

That's what it means to be human. As sinners. Romans 6, 23 tells us, the wages of sin is death. That's our true problem. Our sin.

Our sin that separates us from the God who made us and loves us. But that's the reason why Jesus came. Jesus came into this world to deal with our sin. To bring us back into the Father's arms of love.

And that's why at the center of Christianity, the symbol that defines what it means to be a Christian is the cross. The place where Jesus came to offer his life in our place.

[25:58] The place where Jesus took upon himself our sins and their consequences. All that separates us from God. He has suffered that in himself. He himself has died.

Bible tells us that this was to demonstrate the love of God. Romans 5, 8. God demonstrates his love for us in this. That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The cross of Jesus Christ shows us that in God's eyes, you and I, we are not just meaningless matter. No, we're wonderfully loved. God has become one of us.

He has suffered as one of us. He has died for us. That's how much you mean to him. But Jesus didn't just state it. History records how he rose again. Demonstrating that he really is who he said he is.

Showing that he has the power to save us from our sins. Showing us that he has the power to transform lives. Just as surely as he transformed those girls' lives on that day in Capernaum all those years before.

[27:00] He has the power to change your life and my life. In fact, he has the power to change this world. Because ever since Jesus' time on the earth, he has left behind on the earth his followers, Christians, his church, to go about the work of beginning to transform the world.

To make it more the way God wants it to be. There's a secular sociologist called Rodney Stark who spent his career researching how the Christian church revolutionized the world.

He explores how in a society that left unwanted babies out to die, Christians adopted them and formed the first orphanages. In a society that prized the strong and despised the weak, Christians provided for the poor.

They created hospitals for the sick and hospices for the dying. In a society that bought and sold human slaves, humans bought their freedom and campaigned for its abolition twice. And they did all these things because they believed that every single human individual is precious. Every human life is precious in the sight of God.

[28:08] So much so that God himself in the person of Jesus Christ would come from heaven and earth and die on a cross to save us. And he was back to himself. So that's the answer to our question, am I matter or do I matter?

You matter. You matter in the sight of God. The question that you've got to answer tonight is does Jesus matter to you?

Because you certainly matter to him.