

Humanity

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Date: 18 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] I'm pleased to have a seat and let me invite you now to grab a Bible if you have one there or look it out on your phone or whatever you need to do to get God's Word open in front of you and turn to, I guess we're going to be in Genesis 1 and 2 and 3 this evening. We might dot in and around elsewhere as well, but it's so important we have God's Word open in front of us. So tonight we're going to be thinking about what the Bible teaches about human beings. As we continue this series that we've been in over the last few weeks, and I really hope you found it helpful to think about some of these things, to think about what the Bible teaches us about humanity. And I guess since the idea of this series is it's designed to help us think biblically about some of the big issues of our day, as we unpack what God says in His Word, what I want to do as we think about humanity is through that lens. I want us to think about this whole issue of racism, to think biblically about it so that we are equipped both to understand it and then be able to articulate to the watching world our Christian response to this issue as it's presented itself in our day, right?

And in so doing, offer to the world a beautiful picture of Jesus Christ, who is the great lover and transformer of human hearts. Because here's perhaps, just give you a little insight into my thinking behind this, what I've become increasingly convinced of over the years as I've journeyed with Jesus, is what the Bible says about human beings is both wonderfully dignifying and its holy realistic. And the gospel which we encounter, as we encounter Jesus in the Word, is the hope for our nation, is the hope for the people that we rub shoulders with every day, is Jesus Christ.

So you with me on this one? Okay, you can give me some kind of nod or a, yeah, this has really excited me this week as I've prepared for it. So I really hope this thrills your heart as well as we think about humanity and what the Bible says about humanity. But let me start by taking you to the city of Rome. Okay, I don't know if any of you ever been to Rome. I've never been, it's on my kind of bucket list to go to. But by far the most famous landmark in that city that I reported 6.4 million people visited last year is the Roman Colosseum, right? I'm sure some of us in this room may be watching this online. I've been to the Roman Colosseum. Incredible when you think about it.

Constructed in 70 AD, right? That is an old, old building. 70 AD. And in its heyday, it held something like 50 to 80,000 people, which is a huge number of people when you think about it.

No wonder it's one of the most iconic structures ever built in human history, right? Incredible feat of architecture. But if you travel to Rome today, what you'll see, I guess, is what they call a glorious ruin, right? A glorious ruin. Because despite retaining the essence of its original beauty, the Colosseum has been marred to the extent that what exists today is but a shadow of the glory that it once had. And it's interesting because that is what C.S. Lewis, who's one of the great Christian thinkers from, I guess, the last few hundred years, C.S. Lewis, the great Christian thinker, as he observed people, said that we are exactly like the Roman Colosseum, right? Human beings. We are a glorious ruin.

[3 : 5 2] And so what I want to do tonight is just kind of latch onto those two words, that Lewis uses, and unpack a little bit of what the Bible story says about these things. A glorious ruin.

And so here is what the Bible teaches us about humanity, right? Friends, we are glorious. Human beings, glorious. If you've got it there, Genesis 1 and 2, the opening chapters of the Bible exclaim this at us, that human beings are glorious. So we kind of tap into the Bible story at Genesis 1, in the beginning was God, this God who has eternally been there, this God who has chosen to reveal himself to us. We're introduced to this delightful God that we get in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, who eternally exists as a community of one God in three persons, Father, Son, Son, and Spirit, who have always been eternally and lovingly delighting in one another.

Okay? Our God is triune, right? He is three in one. And because he is three in one, he is relational. It's who he is. He's relational. He is love.

Okay? Now, it's so important to park these kind of theological ideas because they're so important to what we'll come on to see in a little while. Okay? Our God is triune. He is relational. He is love.

And this God creates the world. He didn't need to create the world. He wasn't lacking in anything. This God spoke and things came into being. This God spoke and beauty happens.

[5 : 30] Of an overflow of who he is, he creates the world. Days 1 to 3 that we get in the Genesis 1 and 2 account, God forms the world. Days 4 to 6, God fills the world.

And as the climax of God's good design, he creates human beings. And he breathes life into them. He creates them, body and soul. He creates them intentionally and complementary as male and female.

Friends, meaning that our bodies, our very bodies, carry inherent and wonderful dignity. Right? Have you ever thought about that? The body matters.

Matters. Because, and this is the key phrase, God made us in his image. If you remember one thing from tonight, and I really hope you remember more than one thing, but if you're going to pick one, pick that one.

Okay? God made us in his image. Here's what we get in Genesis 1.27. Here's our first pit stop tonight. So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them.

[6 : 37] Male and female, he created them. It's a wonderful bit of intricate Hebrew poetry there. God made us in his image. And of no other created thing, in the opening account of the Bible, is that said to be true.

No animal is made in the image of God, yet human beings are. And here's what that means. That means that human life, marvelous, every human life, marvelous, valued, known, bestowed with dignity, that is inherent, right, rather than earned.

Why? Because each and every life, from the moment of conception, no matter how good or how bad, we might deem somebody to be, no matter how responsive, or useful, we might think someone is, is a life that is made in the very image of God.

So the Bible teaches about what it fundamentally means to be a human being. Right? Maybe you're here tonight and you're thinking, I don't know, am I really worth anything?

Is my life worth anything? Is it worth carrying on going? Because life's hard. We'll see that in a minute, why it's hard. But friends, this bestows, or pronounces dignity over you that is inherent.

[7 : 56] Right? This is who you are. You are fearfully and wonderfully made in His loving image. And it's no wonder, isn't it, that many of us have struggled during this season.

Because if we're made in the image of our relational gods, friends, it shouldn't surprise us that we are made for relationships with one another. It's been difficult, hasn't it? But this is who our God is.

And He pronounces dignity over each and every single human life. And from that, friends, I hope you can see why any kind of racism in our society, any kind of prejudice, any feeling of superiority, any mindset that devalues human beings for whatever reason that is, and fails to see all human life is precious.

But as you see, it is so stomach-wretchingly wrong. It is sinful, it is sinful, and it's a very insult to our Maker who made us in His image.

Because all life matters to God. all life matters to God. And do you know what that means? I was thinking about this week, if that's the kind of pebble in the ocean, if you like, in the pond, and all the ripples are coming out from it.

[9 : 14] If you think about what that means, friends, it means that when any human life is under threat, when inherent human rights are being overlooked, when people are hurting, when people are struggling, for the many, many reasons that you and I do in life, that we as Christians, friends, we should be the first ones on the scene to help.

And speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, and act with compassion and love, because we have this understanding of what human life is.

And we have this understanding of who our God is. You know, it's a conviction like this that prompted William Wilberforce to make a stand for people trafficking.

Well, at the end of the 18th century, he said this, this is his famous line, God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade, and the reformation of manners.

Don't know how he got on with the second one, but he certainly succeeded with the first. You know, let's make it our prayer from tonight, that God would grant us something more of his heart for human beings.

[10 : 25] You know, recently Tim Farron, I don't know if some of you maybe picked this up, it was an interview that he did, Tim Farron's the MP for Westmoreland and Lonsdale, and from what I can understand, he's a believer, and he made what I thought was a huge challenge to the church in an interview that he gave recently, right?

He said that too often, the only time that he hears passionately from Christians in his region, in his constituency, the only time he ever hears from them, is on the issues of abortion or euthanasia, right?

Now, good and right that we have convictions about the beginning of life, and the end of life, but then he said, if only I heard from the same Christians on issues to do with child poverty, or single parents struggling to put food on the table, or families struggling to make ends meet, or people breaking down with mental health, all these different issues concerning humanity as they arise in my constituency, if only I heard from those Christians then.

I think that's a huge challenge to us. Do you not think? As we think about what it means to shine forth the love of Jesus in our community, I think that's a huge challenge, to take our understanding, our biblical understanding of humanity, and our love for human beings made in God's image, and look for ways to apply it consistently across the board, as we serve our community, to think about how we could be salt and light in this city of ours.

Human beings are glorious because they're made in God's image. Now, here's a thing to think about just as we park this, maybe sit on this for a moment. Here's the thing. Human beings are glorious, but I'd imagine that you and I will be hard-pressed to find people in our day-to-day lives who wouldn't affirm everything that I've just said there, regardless of whether they're Christian or not.

[12 : 23] Probably true, isn't it? Don't need to be a Christian to believe a lot of what I've just said. And we recognize, don't we, and we're so thankful for many non-Christian people and organizations who are doing wonderful work the world over.

We're so thankful for everything that they do to help in so many situations. I remember when we traveled to Mozambique when I was a student, in the middle of nowhere, seeing Oxfam doing their thing, thinking that is brilliant.

It's brilliant. So thankful for what they do the world over. But perhaps increasingly, in my conversations with people, having explained my Christian moorings, friends, here's how I always gently and lovingly probe people to think about their worldview and how they think about human beings.

Just to ask good questions, lovingly. Okay? So, that sense of right and wrong that exists inside each one of us, that sense of right and wrong, we know that things are right, we know when things are wrong.

Friends, where does that come from? Where does that come from? Human life, what is it? What is it? These human rights that we speak of, that are so important, I remember studying them in my legal days, these human rights that we speak of, when does somebody qualify for them?

[13 : 59] And when does somebody disqualify for them? And who decides that? And on what grounds do they decide that? She's just asking questions of people's worldview.

How do we know? These are big questions, right? These are big, big questions, but it's so important that we think about these things, think about these things. You know, I find it fascinating, you know, you've heard of a guy called Jordan Peterson, right?

It's big in our culture at the minute, Jordan Peterson, who, by his own admission, is not a follower of Jesus, but he was asked recently in an interview about this whole idea of human dignity, and he made this fascinating observation about the image of God.

He said really simply, and I've kind of shortened it down, he said simply, this is the cornerstone of civilization, and we ignore it at our peril.

It's not fascinating for somebody that doesn't believe in God at all, but understands that our Western culture, friends, is built on this understanding that human beings have an inherent dignity because they are made in the image of God.

[15 : 07] I find that incredible to think about. We've got to move on, our time is kind of speeding on. Friends, never lose sight of the fact that human beings are made glorious.

They are glorious because they are made in the very image of God. Isn't that a wonderful worldview to have as a Christian? I think we should go on the offensive with that more.

I'm trying to help people understand this is what the Bible teaches about human life. Human beings are glorious, but then think about the flip side of that, what I said earlier about the C.S. Lewis quote.

It also teaches us that we are a ruin. We're a ruin. In the Bible story, after Genesis 1 and 2, we get Genesis 3. Adam and Eve in the garden, one rule.

Don't eat from that tree. Don't eat from the tree. And unpack that. We really need to see what's going on there. God's saying to them, it's only by trusting me, by submitting to my gracious and my good kingship over you.

[16 : 14] In relationship with me is the place where you'll flourish, right, as human beings. It's in the sphere of grace that you will find your purpose and you will find joy as my creatures.

Friends, which is why if we're looking to know blessing in our lives, we're looking to know what life to the full is. Do you see how it's to be found in exactly the same place here in a sphere of grace and relationship with this good God?

But Adam fails to lead as God told him to. Eve fails to listen as God told her to. They believe the whispers of Satan who would just say, did God really say?

Did God really say? Which underneath it is this question, is God really good? Is he really good? What happens?

Eve takes the fruit and friends, it's an act of deliberate rebellion against God. It's the very definition of sin as it enters the human condition and mars each and every human heart.

[17 : 21] We are by nature rebels against this God, against our creator. We don't want his rule in our lives. We want our rule. And all of a sudden, after Genesis 3 and the Bible story, you start to get words like shame and guilt and anger and envy and murder and pride.

These weren't here in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. The writer trying to show us the ripple effects of sin as it's affected each and every single human being and affected our world. And you get death.

Death. It seems to me that we need to maybe re-grasp a sense of the fact that death wasn't the way that it was supposed to be.

You know, each and every time figures are read out to us on our news at the minute, we should be grieving. Right? We should be thinking about those who have lost loved ones because death is anything but natural.

This wasn't the way God designed it. And it seems to me that as Christians we should be modelling to the world what real joy looks like. What real joy looks like. And we should be modelling to the world what it is to truly mourn.

[18 : 28] Right? Truly mourn. And grieve. That death isn't the way it was supposed to be. None of these things, friends, were in God's good design. And so here, and I think this is really important if you want to grasp this for what we'll come back to in a minute, there's a three-way disruption going on here as sin enters the world.

A three-way disruption to the harmony that exists in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Think about it in three directions. Okay, there's an upward disruption that our sin has caused that severed the relationship between us and our Creator.

There's an outward disruption between us and our fellow human beings. And there's an inward disruption in our hearts and in our minds as the whole of creation suffers the effects of the sin sickness.

Okay? I find it amazing how many of these themes, there's only one of you that's ever thought about this. And once I've mentioned this you'll start seeing them everywhere, right? How many of these themes are reflected in some of our culture's most loved stories?

Okay, do you know our girls love to watch, they love to watch Beauty and the Beast. You ever watched that, Beauty and the Beast? Okay, it's a catchy tune or two, Beauty and the Beast. If you haven't watched it, okay, Disney Plus, seven-day free trial, you can get it over half-term, knock yourself out, okay?

[19 : 48] Beauty and the Beast. The whole story is about this prince, who fails to be the person that he's called to be.

And there's a curse over him and the castle. Right? The castle, him, and everything in it, all of the people are under this dark cloud of her curse.

Why? Because of the beast's failure to be the person that he was called to be. And everything and everyone in the castle is longing one day to be freed from the curse. And the only way that that will happen is by an act of sacrificial love.

And you begin to see these themes everywhere in our stories that we love in our culture. It's exactly the same with the sin sickness that the Bible is talking about. Friends, it's how we make sense of a world full of pain and hurt.

Death, as I said, was never the way it was supposed to be. Friends, when it comes to racism, when it comes to prejudice, when it comes to sin, have you ever asked yourself why it's even here in the first place?

[21 : 00] You know, in a big lens, understanding of things, friends, these things exist. They originate from the sin in every human heart against God or sin against Him.

Right? It's really popular for people to say, I cannot believe we're still talking about these things in 2020. And you know what they mean. Right? You know what people mean. And we're so thankful for the developments that we have made as a culture over the last kind of few decades on a lot of these issues.

But in another sense, friends, heartbreakingly with this worldview, the fact that we are still talking about a lot of these things in 2020 I don't think it should surprise us. Because the issue, the core of the issue, right, it's not primarily an educational one.

It's not primarily about money. It's not a legal one. It's not about power. The heart of the issue, and these are all great secondary things that we want to use to see these things stamped out of our society.

But the core of the issue, the Bible says, is the human heart. That's the problem. Human beings capable of tremendous goods and yet capable of terrible evil.

[22 : 16] And we know these things are true in our own hearts, but we know these things are true as we look out on the world. You know, I still remember the day that my dad first brought home our first family PC, right?

Great day. We were growing up, right? We had dial-up internet, remember those glorious days, only one person on the phone at a time? Great days. But the internet is a case in point about what I'm talking about here, about humanity, right?

Amazing invention. How would we have coped over the last six months without the internet? Think about it. What would we have done? I don't know. Send carrier pigeons to one another? I don't know what we would have done, right? How would we have coped?

Amazing invention that human beings are using for incredible goods. But is it not true to say that the internet is the very source of some of the worst things about our world today?

It's true, isn't it? Pornography and cyberbullying, money laundering, people trafficking, on and on and on the list could go. Human beings, friends.

[23 : 16] You see what the Bible is saying? A glorious ruin. A glorious ruin. Which is where the story would have stayed if this God isn't who he is.

This is where the story would have stayed if it wasn't for this God who is in the habit of loving his enemies, of pursuing people who want nothing to do with him.

If it weren't for the gospel, the message of Christ crucified, that God has acted in Christ out of his great love for a world lost and reveling in sin and darkness, offering great hope for humanity.

humanity. Right? And there's two sides of this transforming hope that we have in the gospel. If you remember back to our kind of three-fold disruption, remember God, outward, inward.

Right? Think about those things. Here's what the gospel does. Friends, there cannot be an act that more rubber stamps the dignity of humanity than the incarnation. That God would come down in the person of Jesus.

[24 : 24] that Jesus Christ, God eternal, took on flesh. And he is the very embodiment of perfect humanity, which means to be transformed more into his images, to become more human, as it were.

He is what it means to live life to the full. He is what it is to live a fully joyous life. He is the true and better Adam, whose life would end at the cross where he takes the place of sinful humanity.

Friends, we're all those who would trust in him for the forgiveness of their sin. How does this king conquer? He conquers through humility.

And we in turn, friends, as we turn to him, are clothed with his perfect righteousness. We know mercy, we know grace, we know love abounding. You know, I was chatting to my friend Paul Rees, who's down at Charlotte Chapel.

He was telling me a story recently about a funeral he took over the last couple of months for an older man and his congregation and just family clearing out the house and they found his old Bible, right, and gave it to Paul and Paul opens it and there was a huge circle around the opening verses of Psalm 130.

[25 : 35] Huge circle in this guy's Bible around the phrase, if you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you, there is forgiveness so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

And Paul said, that man knew the joy of sins forgiven, of being right with God. Friends, Jesus heals our upward separation.

Heals our upward separation. We are reconciled to God. We are justified. We are adopted into his family because of his great love for us. And now, God has sent his spirit into our hearts to know his fatherly love.

Jesus has reconciled us that way and he's reconciled us internally, transforming us internally by his grace as God breathes into us into spiritually dead corpses and is transforming us more into the image of Jesus.

Jesus. Friends, it's almost like God is declaring over us that I made you, I created you in my image and I've redeemed you from the power of sin and death and I am transforming you more into the likeness of Jesus so that you can come increasingly to bear that image once again to the watching world.

[27 : 05] Jesus has reconciled us to God, transforming us internally and it changes us corporately as the church and here's the logic of it and follow with me if you're still tracking here, right?

If the very core of who our God is is that he is triune, okay? He is loving unity in diversity. If that is who our God is, as this God claims for himself and changes his people, friends, not only should we expect to see something of that being reflected in the church, but surely it makes sense that we best image him to the world when we live out loving unity in diversity.

And we have a saviour, don't we, who is all about crossing divides, who crossed the Jew and Samaritan one to reach the woman at the well, who crossed the clean versus the unclean one when he touched the leper.

We've got a God, a king, who is all about crossing divides, who is all about bringing reconciliation. Friends, all of that is to say that reconciliation is the very heart of the gospel and the church is called to reflect it to the world.

And that's why when it comes to displaying that unity and diversity, friends, I think we need to take more seriously the call to actively pursue it for the glory of God.

[28 : 31] Right? Particularly when it maybe comes to social and racial unity, friends, we need to get better at listening. And we need to get better at learning and entering into other people's stories and adapting.

Right? Not the gospel, but entering into other people's lives and thinking, how can we help introduce these people to Jesus and love them and hearing from other people's experiences.

And I think it might mean us needing to get a bit better at being uncomfortable. As we seek to display and take seriously what God has done in Jesus, as we reflect this God to the watching world, loving unity in diversity.

And I love that picture that we get at the end of Revelation. Right? Chapters 4 and 5. You can check this out in your own time. Who is gathered around the throne worshiping God? Friends, it is a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

[29 : 45] And this is what he is doing in the gospel. We saw that in Ephesians 1, didn't we? Chapter 10. About God's plan. God's plan. And how he is displaying his glory to the world.

It is beautiful, isn't it? Friends, a glorious ruin. We started in Rome. Let's just finish in Geneva. Okay? Not too far from Rome, I guess.

Right? It was a city's motto. Right? If ever there was a sentiment that captured the mood of our world right now, I think there it is. Right? After darkness, I hope for light.

That's what we're hoping for, isn't it? Vaccine found. Friends, in the gospel we have a better hope that's available to us now. And do you know what? The people of Geneva encountered it.

Why? Well, the Reformation had at its heart all, it was all about heralding the glory of Jesus, how you can be made right with your creator.

[31 : 56] Jesus Christ is the great hope for the church, the beautiful community that we are called to be, that displays the power of God as we come together in unity and diversity, as we reflect him to the world.

You know, what I want to do just as we respond to this tonight, I realize there's been a lot of big things in there, and I definitely felt the pressure of not being able to do any of that justice in, what, 25, 30 minutes?

And so, friends, I just want to maybe just pause for a moment and allow us just in our own, our own quiet, perhaps just to respond to this. Maybe you want to, you're thinking of particular issues or particular people in your minds or maybe something that's going on in your own life as we thought about what the Bible says about humanity.

So why don't we just have a moment of quiet and then I'll bring us back and we'll pray.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Matthew chapter 9, verses 35 to 38. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. May we just spend a few moments in prayer as we respond to this. Heavenly Father, we would pray tonight as your people here for Christ's heart for the people of our city.

[34 : 33] As we read there in Matthew 9 of Jesus having compassion as he looked on the people who made up the crowds.

Father, that they were lost and that they were desperately in need of our shepherd. And thank you that he didn't just look and leave, but he looked and went to the cross so that the universal call of the gospel could go out to people to come to him and to have life in his name as they know forgiveness of sins.

And we just praise you, Lord, for who you are. Thank you just for the short time tonight gazing upon who you are, the God who is loving unity and diversity.

And so, Father, we would just maybe want to bring to you our own prayers this evening. Father, for the times perhaps in our lives where we have got this wrong, Lord, we pray that you would help us, Lord, to grasp what you say is true of human beings.

Father, we think of our own city this evening and we would pray for Edinburgh. And we think of the many different people that we know in our circles, the many different people who live in this city.

[35 : 52] Father, we'd want to pray maybe tonight for the most vulnerable in our city as we think about what you have said is true about every single human being as being made in the image of you. Lord, we would pray tonight for those who are on our streets and who are homeless.

Father, we ask that they would get the support and the shelter that they need. Father, we pray for different organisations working so hard there that you would help them, Father, to provide social care and to provide physical help.

Lord, that we might see people not having to resort to homelessness in our city. Father, we pray for those who are struggling with unemployment just now. Lord, we know the times in which we live, the recession in which we are currently in.

And so, Father, we pray for those who are finding themselves out of work that you would be near to them. Father, they would know you as the great provider. Lord, we would think of those in our city who are struggling with loneliness and depression.

Father, who are struggling with this season as a thought of perhaps another lockdown looms large in the mind. Father, we pray that you would be near to these individuals, that you surround them with people who can care for them well.

[37 : 05] Maybe particularly those, Father, tonight who are struggling with the very thought of keeping on going in life. Father, that you would put people around them who can speak the truth of your word into their lives, that they are of value, that they are known, that they are loved.

Father, we would think of the many children in our city, Lord, who find themselves in poverty, those who are struggling, Lord, to go to school. Father, we pray for them and particularly, Lord, we maybe pray for half term this week that you would give them rest and you would give them a break.

And Father, that you would help provide for families, so that children can be brought up well in this city. Father, we think of those who find themselves in care homes as well.

Lord, realizing the heartbreaking statistics that we've maybe heard over the last number of months as we thought about those in care homes, Lord, we pray that you would just be near to them. Father, for those who are struggling with pain and with hurts, Father, those who are grieving the loss of both family and friends.

Lord, that you would be known as the great comforter in those situations. And so, Father, we would just pray tonight that you would help us to love people well.

[38 : 26] And so, Father, we just praise you for your words, your precious words. Father, where would we be without your words? And so, Lord, we just commit ourselves to you tonight. and we just praise you that you hear us, that our words don't just bounce off the ceiling, that they don't just echo around the room, but Father, you hear us because we pray in Jesus' precious name.

Amen.