

# The Sacredness of Every Human Life

Genesis 1:24-27

January 19, 2020

*Please read Genesis 1:24-27 before going further in this transcript.*

Today, we are going to take a comprehensive look at “The Sacredness of Every Human Life.” We want to have in mind NOT just one particular group of people, but the lives of all kinds of different people that are often overlooked or mistreated: Whether that human life is someone from an ethnic minority, or someone with a different sexual orientation, or a refugee coming in with only the clothes on their back. Whether someone is elderly or an unborn baby within the womb. Whether they are an orphan, or someone who is poor, or someone with special needs, or whoever else. Let’s take a closer look at what God’s Word says about the sacredness of every human life.

I’m pretty certain it was during my freshman year at NWC when I took my first “Intro to Psychology” class. And I’m pretty sure that’s when I was first introduced to the idea of Utilitarianism. **Utilitarianism** is a belief system that teaches that “actions are right if they are useful for the benefit of a majority” and that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct.”<sup>1</sup> Now at first glance, Utilitarianism seems to have some merit. It portrays a way of thinking that seems to contain a fair amount of wisdom and common sense. And, for any old school Star Trek fans, we flashback to Spock’s famous words from the classic movie, “The Wrath of Khan”: “Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few;” this DOES make some sense. That is, until you start applying it in other situations where it goes from our personal choice to make sacrifices on behalf of others, to our communal decision-making on WHOSE life is included in the many, and WHOSE life should be included in the few. In other words, whose life is deemed more valuable than someone else’s life. 🖐️



Perhaps you heard the illustration of the Life Boat scenario. The idea is to get us to evaluate our moral compass, through the lens of a group of people, who are trying to decide on how to survive being shipwrecked and lost at sea. Picture about 8-10 people adrift in a lifeboat with limited resources of food, water, and medical supplies. While they’re waiting, and hoping to be rescued, they are trying to survive in the open sea.<sup>2</sup> The Life Boat is meant to be an exercise that asks all kinds of ethical decision-making questions. Here are just a few examples: Would there ever be a situation in which it might be ok to deny dying passengers food and water in order to save others who have a better chance of survival? Could we even go so far as to throw a dying person overboard, knowing that they’ll likely die in the next few hours anyhow? After all, this would help us save our precious limited resources and give everyone else a better chance of survival. Especially if food and medicine are already running low. Taking things even one step further, what if this person won’t likely die in the next few hours, but rather in the next few days? Might it be ok to take a little more... initiative and perhaps throw them overboard sooner than later?<sup>3</sup> Ethical exercises like this Life Boat illustration are disturbing to say the least. But they do help us to think through how we value one another as fellow human beings. They force us to speak up against inhumane ways of thinking and treating one another. Against the devaluing of any human life. As Christ-followers, our faith must inform our worldview, regarding the sacredness of every human life.

As we consider this idea of “The Sacredness of Every Human Life,” let’s make sure to define sacredness. **Sacredness**: means being entitled to honor and respect due to one’s affiliation with God.<sup>4</sup> So today, we are going to think about sacredness. Genesis 2:7 teaches us that mankind was made “from the dust of the ground.” And then Genesis 2:19 teaches us that all of the wild animals and birds were also “formed out of the ground.” So we have this in common. And yet, humans are quite unique from all the other animals on this earth, in one VERY special way. We didn’t take time to read

<sup>1</sup> Google “utilitarianism.”

<sup>2</sup> A powerful real-life example of this kind of scenario is told in Louis Zamperini’s story “Unbroken,” written by Laura Hillenbrand.

<sup>3</sup> Learn more at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lifeboat\\_ethics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lifeboat_ethics)

<sup>4</sup> See definition at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sacredness>

all of Genesis 1, but in the first 25 verses, the first 5½ days of creation, everything that God created was good. Even so, one part of God's creation was made with particular distinction. Genesis 1:26-27 says, "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."

The triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) together created mankind in their image.<sup>5</sup> Theologians refer to this as the "Imago Dei,"<sup>6</sup> which is simply Latin for the "Image of God." What this means is that only humans can reflect God's holiness, and only we can be like God in many other ways as well.<sup>7</sup> We are not merely physical animals, but we are uniquely spiritual beings.<sup>8</sup>

Let's consider a few of the ramifications of being made in God's image. First of all, being made in God's image means that...

**1. ...every human being has a shared identity...** Every human being is alike to one another in that our identity comes from One and the same Creator.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we tend to think vertically, about what it means for our individual selves to be made in God's image. However, there is also a horizontal and corporate aspect to being made in God's image. In other words, being made in His image also impacts how we are related to one another as fellow human beings. Being made in God's image grants us a shared identity. By the way, being made in the image of God is true for both Christians and non-Christians. In other words, "The image of God has not been lost as a result of sin."<sup>10</sup> Certainly sin has marred this image and has left each of us needing that image renewed, but that likeness is still there.<sup>11</sup> As one theologian explains, "...the very greatness of [any person's] sin, consists in the fact that [he or she] is still an image-bearer of God."<sup>12</sup> In other words, being made in God's image magnifies the tragedy of our sinful behavior. However, even though that image is marred by sin, that does not mean that that image has been undone. Nor does it mean that the image is prevented from continuing to call us back to our God-given POTENTIAL. Our potential to be something so much more than many of us have even begun to realize. To put it another way, "The image of God is what makes humans human."<sup>13</sup>

Back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, an early Christian author named "Lactantius"<sup>14</sup> argued that being created in the image of God established the common identity and dignity of all human beings."<sup>15</sup> He also taught that: "The strongest bond which unites us is humanity. ...it was from the one human being that God created us all, so that we are all of the same blood... [He then goes on to say] if we are the work of the same God, what else are we but brothers and sisters? The bond which unites our souls is therefore stronger than that which unites our bodies."<sup>16</sup> To put it another way, every human shares not only a blood relation but also a creation relation. We are all pots created by the same Potter, the same Creator. This unites us and gives us a common humanity and a shared identity. This shared identity means that every human being therefore has an intrinsically equal worth.

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<sup>5</sup> See John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:16.

<sup>6</sup> "ih MA go" "DAY"

<sup>7</sup> The moon reflecting the sun can be a good word picture for this. We have no intrinsic light of our own, but we reflect the light (righteousness and holiness) and take on certain properties of the sun (and the Son). Being like God includes things such as being moral, rationale, social, artistic, and spiritual. See Ephesians 4:24 and *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, pp. 72-73. "No distinction should be made between 'image' and 'likeness,' [because they are synonymous]." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> This "image bearing" is unique to humans. There is something very, very special about human beings. Indeed, the Psalmists ask the question in 8:3-4, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" Then the Psalmist reminds us in 139:13-14, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

<sup>9</sup> Put another way, we have a common ancestry through Adam/Eve.

<sup>10</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, p. 532.

<sup>11</sup> See Colossians 3:10.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Hoekema (*Created in God's Image*, p. 85) quoted in *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 75 footnote.

<sup>13</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, p. 518. We could put it another way by answering this question: what does it mean to be human? To be human means to bear the image of the likeness of God.

<sup>14</sup> "lack TAN she us"

<sup>15</sup> Alister E. McGrath, quoting from *Divine Institutions* (c. 304-311) in *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2001, p. 441.

<sup>16</sup> Alister E. McGrath, quoting from *Divine Institutions* (c. 304-311) in *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2001, p. 442.

## **1. ...every human being has a shared identity... and therefore has an intrinsically equal worth.**

One theologian points out that the image of God is “inseparably connected with [our] humanity” and “There is no indication that the image is present in one person to a greater degree than in another.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, being made in the image of God “refers to something a human is rather than something a human has or does.” Let’s think about that idea carefully: the image of God “refers to something a human IS rather than [to] something a human HAS or DOES.” This means that despite things like someone’s mental capacity or physical ability, they are equally human. They are no less made in God’s image than someone who may have a very high intellect or a very impressive physical prowess. Every human being has an intrinsically equal worth.

This is why the Bible instructs us, as believers in Jesus, that we “must not show favoritism.” In fact, showing favoritism to one person over another is considered a sin. James 2:8-9 states this plainly, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.”<sup>18</sup> Any separation or sub-grouping that we might try to rationalize, will quickly fall away under a right theology. A right understanding of our common origin should erase all of our racism and egotism, and any lack of empathy for those who are different from us. Different, by the way, in ultimately very minor ways. As fellow humans, we are SO MUCH more ALIKE than we could ever be different. We would do well to remember just how MUCH we have in common. This being said, we dare not think in terms of that Life Boat. We dare not judge another life as less important than our own life, or than our own children’s lives, or than the lives of people from our own ethnicity, and so on. Every human being has a shared identity ...and therefore has an intrinsically equal worth.<sup>19</sup> Being made in God’s image also means that...

## **2. ...every human being should be treated with dignity and respect.**

Human dignity “is a derived dignity, a God-given greatness.”<sup>20</sup> Scripture clearly states that this derived dignity, carries with it some very important consequences. For example, Genesis 9:5-6 teaches us, “...I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. ...for in the image of God has God made mankind.” And in the New Testament, James 3:9 scolds us, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” Every human being should be treated with dignity and respect.

Back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a man named “A tha NAHsius<sup>21</sup> taught that God created human beings in the ‘image of God,’ thus endowing humanity with a capacity which was granted to no other creature – that of being able to relate to and partake in the life of God.”<sup>22</sup> Being made in God’s image means that humans can partake in the things of God, which no other part of His creation can. This is why it is so important that we do what we can, to make accommodations that ensure that each and every person has the opportunity to worship God and grow in their faith. Therefore, one of the key ways that we treat people with dignity and respect, is by helping others take part in the life and ministry of our church.<sup>23</sup> This would include things like;

- Making accommodations at our church, for people with special needs or for anyone who needs special handicapped access around our building.
- Serving the needs and interests of the entire age spectrum from our youngest to our oldest.

<sup>17</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, p. 532.

<sup>18</sup> Romans 12:16 says, “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps you remember “The Island of Misfit Toys” from the story of Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer? See the video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr6GbKciNCY> This island was a place where all of the rejects and the misfits were set aside. One toy was a Jack in the Box... named Charlie. One toy was a toy train... with square wheels. Rudolph was a reindeer... with a bright red nose. And that nose cost him his dignity. He was embarrassed and he was treated as a lesser reindeer. At least until the end of the story when he saves the day! The point however, is that we need to make sure that, as those who believe the Bible’s message about the image of God, we love, accept, and accommodate those with special needs. We need to make sure that we don’t fall into the practice of anything even mildly resembling an island where we send away the misfits. Where we ostracize or make to feel less important, those who are challenged or limited in some way. Every life matters. Every life is important.

<sup>20</sup> *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> “A tha NAH see oos” 4<sup>th</sup> Century Christian theologian and Church Father. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius\\_of\\_Alexandria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius_of_Alexandria)

<sup>22</sup> Alister E. McGrath, quoting from *Divine Institutions* (c. 304-311) in *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2001, p. 442. Consider also 2 Peter 1:3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, this should also include inviting other people to participate in our own personal lives and in the life and work of our community at large.

- Intentionally making others feel welcome who are different from us ethnically, socially, economically, or otherwise.

As we fully embrace the worth and dignity of every human being, it will propel us forward, into being considerate as we care for one another, according to each person's particular needs and challenges. A third ramification of being made in God's image is that... **3. ...every human being should be provided for and protected.** Since you and I are created by God, we are responsible to God. We stand under His authority and we should obey His commands.<sup>24</sup> One of His commands is for us to provide for and protect those who can't provide for and protect themselves. Those who, like us, are made in God's image. As we follow our mandate from Genesis 1, to fill the earth and rule over it, we have access to all of the resources necessary to care for everyone on the planet. One example of this, is the Old Testament practice of leaving some of the crop out in the field. This isn't about wastefulness or a lack of efficiency, it's a call to care for the poor and a reminder to help the marginalized. Consider God's command to His people in Leviticus 23:22, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God."

We are called to care for our fellow human beings. Not just ourselves and our own relatives and our own kind, but any and all who need our help. Even foreigners. Even foreigners who today we call refugees. When we honor God's image, we honor God.<sup>25</sup> That is, when we honor another human being, who has been created in God's image, by direct affiliation, we honor God. This concept is stated pointedly in Proverbs 14:31, "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God."<sup>26</sup> Once again, when we honor God's image, we honor God. We cannot treat the image badly and then say that we love the One that that image represents.<sup>27</sup> This entire sermon could be summarized this way: "There is nothing more valuable in all of God's creation than a human life."<sup>28</sup>

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on January 19, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

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<sup>24</sup> *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Consider also Proverbs 19:17, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD...."

<sup>27</sup> Consider 1 John 4:20. *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 75.