

## Genesis 1:26-28

### Image of God: OT Foundations For Identity

#### Introduction:

- I. Normally, here at ICF we preach through books of the bible or chunks of scripture passages, but occasionally, we need to stop and take a bird's eye view and see what scripture has to say about a particular issue in our culture.
- II. "Identity" is one of those subjects. . . and it is a subject the Bible has much to say about. . .
  - A. . . .but sadly it is a subject that our culture has seriously twisted and misunderstood precisely because our society has rejected what the Bible teaches.
  - B. Identity, who am I, is perhaps the central question of life we all ask and must answer.
  - C. We know the Bible's main storyline is primarily about Jesus. . . but secondarily it is about who we really are in light of Jesus.
    1. As the Prodigal son came to the end of his own search for identity, he found himself sitting in crap with pigs, sharing their food. . . and Jesus says something profound:
      - a) "But when he came to himself, . . ." — Luke 15:17
        - (1) When he came to himself. . .
        - (2) It is at this point he realised who he really was. . . who he was made to be. . . and he returns home, realising he had lost his identity in his search to find himself. . he returns home ready to be a servant, rather than a son.
        - (3) And how does the father respond:
          - (a) But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the

fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' — Luke 15:20-24

2. For 2,000 years, the church has taught that this parable is the essence of the entire Biblical narrative . . it is the gospel in a nutshell. . . and at the end of the day it is a parable about identity. . . who we are in light of the work of Jesus Christ.

a) Spoiler alert: Who are we?

(1) We are sons and daughters of our Father, the creator God of all that is seen and unseen.

(2) when we grasp this, when we live like this. .. then we will be truly authentically ourselves, who uniquely God has made us to be. . .

III. So, in our study, we need to begin at the beginning. . . before we can discover who we really are. . . in order for “you to be you”, one must first understand “what we are as a human being” and “why are here” in the first place.

IV. So, open your bibles to Genesis 1:26-28. . . as we listen to who God says we are.

### **Introduction (after scripture reading):**

I. Pray

II. Before we dive into Genesis 1, we need to understand our contemporary context.

A. Because chances are, you may be more influenced by what the entertainment industry, the news and media have told you about identity than what scripture teaches us about identity.

**III. So, let's do a little "cultural criticism" together and let me give you a brief summary of how our contemporary context understand "identity".**

A. Now we might not right now be executing a passage, but we are so to speak executing our culture, from a biblical perspective.

B. Let me lay out the basic problem which we all struggle with when we attempt to answer the question: Who am I?

1. I am a Son, a husband, a father, a pastor, a friend. . .
2. I'm an American (can't shake it); I'm a foreigner, I am a man, I am 40 something. I come from a family of pastors. I am a Christian.
  - a) Who am I? Am I one of these things more than the others?
  - b) Who am I? Well, I'll come back to this at the end of the message today. . .

(1) but at this point we can see the basic problem behind the question of identity is seeking to answer who I am in light of my own manifold and unique personhood. My roles, my culture, my age, my gender. . .these are all identity markers, making up who I am.

C. The study of "Identity" from the secular perspective is actually the intersection of two main fields of academic study: Psychology and Sociology.

1. Psychology studies the inner self and Sociology studies the complex nature of our exterior relationships (family, culture, etc.)
2. And both of these fields agree on about 10 main identity markers that make-up who we are: and depending on the list you read there are slight variations, but basically you come back to these 10 identity markers:
  - a) Your race, ethnicity, culture and nationality
  - b) Your gender and sexuality
  - c) Your physical and mental capacity
  - d) Your memories
  - e) Your family of origin
  - f) Your age
  - g) Your relationships

- h) Your occupation
- i) Your possessions
- j) Your religion, convictions, values

(1) Your unique identity is formed in how you integrate all these influences into a consistent personality who is sustained and true of you in every setting.

i) Without a logical integration of these influences there would be no “you” just different masks you put on in different situations.

ii) There has to be a core understanding of who you are that is true and consistent that you bring into all the various day-to-day: situations, relationships, settings.

(2) Now, the problem we face as unique individuals is how do we prioritise all these influences and filter all the voices in our head and heart?

#### **IV. Historically, we have seen two main approaches:**

V. Traditional cultures like say for example Asia/India/parts of Africa will order the internal self-identity according to the priorities of your external social roles.

A. Family, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality. . . will take precedence over your age, your occupation, your convictions, you sexuality, etc.

a) So, their duties and priorities are determined by their family and community above their own individual, internal desires. . . sociology trumps psychology.

b) So, self-sacrifice is the highest honour and value in understanding your own identity.

(1) Now, many of you come from such a culture and I’m sure you can agree and relate to what I am saying.

(a) But the reality is we don’t live in such a culture.

**VI. Now, we live in Frankfurt Germany, a decidedly post-modern, secular, democracy, where identity formation is exactly the opposite of what you would find in a traditional culture.**

A. Here, the individual is more highly valued than the society at large. . . psychology trumps sociology.

B. Robert Belleh, in his pioneering work, Habits of the Heart writes as termed our identity formation as “expressive individualism”:

1. “Each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individual identity is to be realised.”

a) In contrast to a traditional culture, we find our identity by looking within. .. by detaching and leaving behind family, culture, religion and any other external influence.

b) The cultural message is:

(a) "Be true to yourself" .... "You, be you!" .... "Express yourself" . . . "Follow your heart" . . . "Be real and authentic"

**NEXT SLIDE**

(b) "It's time to see what I can do. To test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free! . . . Let it go, let it go."— Elsa, “Frozen”

C. Western culture’s fascination with the “self”, has only been intensified by consumerism and social media where every individual is the main character in their own movie.

1. And what we have as a result is a degenerative, broken society. . . a society that is fractured and breaking apart (like the EU)

a) Social ties and institutions are experiencing decline, marriage and family are under attack, society is fragmenting into warring factions, where even political parties are divided and in-fighting dominates discussion across the aisle.

b) And we have the rise of “identity politics”: an ideology which reduces human beings to a certain set of distinguishable identity markers where some identity markers (gender, sexuality, race) are more prized and valued than other markers (religion, family, history). Essentially, establishing a basic understanding of human

identity based on our **differences** rather than on what is held in common.

(1) So we find ourselves in this extremely divided culture. Where we are no longer forming our identity out of a wholistic view of those influencing components, but rather individual identity markers are warring for priority over other valid identity markers.

(a) So, you have, white-nationalists who have prioritised ethnicity and country above all other components warring with feminist lesbians, who have prioritised gender and sexuality above all other components who make us who we are. . .

i) This is the sad state of contemporary western society.

(1) Expressive individualism has given birth to identity politics which has created a fractured, broken democracy.

## **VII. So, what does the Bible have to say about all of this? What does God have to say?**

A. You might assume, the Bible teaches that we have go back to a rigid traditionalism. . . but it doesn't!

B. In scripture we will find that the bible doesn't teach us to find our identity by looking outside ourselves to our family and community: for this leads to oppression and abuse.

C. But the Bible also doesn't teach that we look inside ourselves to find our identity as this will inevitably creates disunity and the god-like elevation of self over others.

1. So, what does the bible teach? As Tim Keller, so eloquently say, "The bible doesn't teach that we look outward nor does it teach that we look inward, rather the bible tells us to look upward"

a) The bible teaches that we find our true identity in the fact that there is a transcendent, personal, God who know us and loves us and has a unique plan for each of us.

- (1) If there is a creator God, then the individual cannot take precedence over the group NOR can the group take precedence over the individual.
- (2) What matters is not what society says about me, nor what I think of myself, but all that matters is what God thinks of me. . . who God says I am is infinitely more valuable than who I say I am or who you say I am.

### **VIII. The Biblical teaching on who God says we are begins in Genesis 1:26-28 with this idea of the image of God.**

A. 26 Then God said, “Let us make man 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.” 27 **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.** 28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” — Genesis 1:26-28

1. So, here is where we each have to begin in our search for our own unique identity. . . our story begins here at the beginning.
  - a) Here we see that we were created by a personal God, who knows us and loves us.
  - b) That we were created for a purpose that is bigger than each one of us, yet also necessarily includes each one of us.
2. There is a designer and we are HIS design. . . meaning there is a transcendent God who knows us better than we know ourselves. . . and has graciously revealed to us His blueprint for a joyful, meaningful, fulfilling and uniquely beautiful identity.
  - a) If we want to find out who we are. . . then we need to humbly listen to our creator, God, who tells us who we really are.

### **IX. The first lesson here, particularly, here in verse 27: **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.****

A. A couple of key points that give us a starting place for understanding our identity: We have to start with what this tells us about God. . . the main character here.

1. **God is creator and we are creation, which implies that God is other/transcendent:**

- a) We are created beings . . . which means God is other, outside of us and outside of creation.
- b) This is massively important to recognise and it protects us from looking for meaning and purpose inwardly within ourselves or to try to seek our meaning and purpose outside of ourselves in creation/society/family, other people. . .
  - (1) The creation narrative prevents us from looking for God within creation as pantheism teaches because God clearly stands over and above outside of creation. God is other. . . he is not like us.
    - (a) So God is not found in some generic feeling/emotion within us, a vague feeling of love and beauty is not God; nor can we find God looking outwardly to the trees and mountain or our meaningful relationships and .
- c) If God is creator and transcendent, then our ultimate meaning, purpose and identity is found in looking upward to the transcendent creator.
  - (1) If we can find our origin, then we will find our ultimate telos/ goal or reason for existing.

**B. Secondly, to really understand our Identity then we need to grasp the term: Image of God: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them"**

1. What does this mean?

- a) The word itself in hebrew (tse-lem): means likeness, representation, reflection, resemblance.
- b) There are three implications for us that this means:
  - (1) **God made us to somehow resemble him.**

(a) Theologians have noted many aspect in ways we differ from animals and therefore those distinguishable traits must somehow reflect the nature of God.

(b) So there are a few ways we resemble God in this world:

i) **Rationality:** Obviously, God created the universe in a logical form and fashion with clearly discernible mechanisms and laws of nature. Likewise, humanity's rationale capabilities uniquely separates us from animals.

ii) **Relational:** God exists in perfect relationship of persons: Father, son and Holy Spirit. Likewise humanity is uniquely relational with the unique capacity to speak and relate to each other.

iii) **Ruling Stewards:** As God rules over creation, he has tasked humanity to steward and rule over creation. So, humanity is at the top of the food chain so to speak ruling over and supposed to care for the created order.

(1) So these are all potential ways we image or resemble God in this world.

(a) But there is more to this idea of imaging or reflecting God the Bible gives us. . .

(2) Another key aspect about the fact that we are created in the image of God is found in the fact that all humanity has an inherent worth and equality.

(a) The idea that each and every human being is created in the image of God is the basis for the modern concept of equal justice for all.

i) Whether your race, ethnicity, class, gender, handicap or whatever might distinguish you from others. . . there is no partiality. . . every single human being has equal worth/value.

ii) Genesis 9:6: The image of God is the basis for God's prohibition against murder:

(1) “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, (why?) for God made man in his own image. - Genesis 9:6

(b) Or look at James 3:8-9, which speaks about the violence of our tongue:

i) It (our tongue) is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.— James 3:8-9

(c) So, each human being's inherent worth and equality is not determined by our inward value nor by our outward social standing, but rather on account of our upward origin.

(3) This brings us to third aspect about what it means that we are created in the image of God . . . and this specifically help us understand our identity. . . . being created in God's image also means we are his beloved children.

(a) One way to figure out the meaning of a word is to see how it is used in a different context:

i) The bible uses this idea of “image” to describe our unique relationship not just that we are relational like God is relational, but that we were made to have a unique relationship with God Himself. . . as a child relates to his father.

ii) As Paul will later say in Acts 17, “we are his offspring”.

(b) The usage of this the Image of God terminology a bit later in genesis is particularly interesting for figuring out our identity.

i) Look at Genesis 5:1-3:

(1) When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. 2 Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man (Adam) when they were created. 3 When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. -Genesis 5:1-3

- ii) So, here we see one key aspect of being created in the image of God is comparable to how a son images and relates to His father.
- iii) Theologian Brian Rosner helps us see the implication of this aspect of the image of God,

(1) For our purposes, recognising the sonship dimension to the image of God has great potential for a more unified biblical theology of personal identity. . . Our very identity as human beings is tied up with being children of God made in the image of God. And the story of redemption is one of God choosing to bless Abraham and the children of Abraham as the restored children of God. - Brian Rosner, "Known By God", p 84

## Conclusion:

**X. So as we lay the first building stone in finding our true identity, we must begin with this biblical truth: *We were created, in the image of God, in the image of God we were created.***

A. So, there are three implications for our identity resulting in the fact that humans bear the image of God:

1. Our value, meaning, and purpose are found by looking upward not inward nor outward.

a) traditional cultures look to find identity in their outward network of relationships. . . family, tribe, tradition, which has lead to oppression, abuse, and the negation of the individual for the sake of the group.

b) Western, expressive individualism: seeks to find their identity inward. In gender, sexuality, education, achievements, possessions, which has lead to materialism, crushing anxiety, and the fragmentation of our society.

c) Being created in the image of God challenges both of these attempts to seek identity, reminding us that our value is not found outward, nor inward, but rather upward.

(1) We all have inherent value and worth and meaning, neither because of who we are in relation to others, nor who we have

created ourselves to be through our own achievements. . . but rather we have value and worth and meaning because God has given us infinite value and worth as our heavenly father.

(a) What matters is not what we make of our own identity what matters is that God knows us and loves us. . .

## 2. God as creator, means there is an external standard against which we can order our various identity markers.

a) If we are indeed created in the image of God, then this means . . . our ultimate identity is found in Him. . . NOT in any one of the 10 identity markers laid out for us by sociology and psychology.

(1) If God is the cloth from which we were cut, the stone out of which we were carved, then it is only IN GOD that we find out who we really are.

(2) Our identity is hidden in Him. . . and as we learn more about God we will learn more about ourselves. (not outward, nor inward, but upward)

b) And so, this truth helps us order, prioritise and engage with those traditional identity markers.

(1) I am only being true to myself, when I live these things out according to God's principles and standards:

(a) for my family, possessions, education, sexuality, occupation. . . when I live those out the way God's designed them to be lived out, then and only then will I truly find them satisfying. . . but if any one of these become ultimate things. . . then they have become my god that I serve and worship and they will crush us.

i) The bible actually affirms the importance of the 10 traditional identity markers, but it denies them ultimacy. .

(1) If I am PRIMARILY defined by my occupation, then I will worship and serve my job and it will suck the life out of me.

- (a) Think of an artist that never hits it big. ..never gets that part, if that is my ultimate source of identity, then I will be absolutely crushed when fame alludes me.
- (2) If I am PRIMARILY defined by being a mother, then I will crush my children with the weight I place on them to meet needs where only God can meet.
- (3) If I am PRIMARILY defined by my sexuality, for example identifying as a homosexual or lesbian, then I will never find sex truly satisfying because I have divorced sex from God's wholistic purpose for sex.
- ii) So, the bible actually affirms the importance of all 10 of traditional identity markers and has so much to say about each one, but the Bible denies any one of them ultimate value.
- iii) God's word actually helps us live out our true identity by rightly living out and engaging those traditional identity markers.
- (1) God as creator, means there is an external standard against which we can order and prioritise and rightly enjoy these various identity markers.

### 3. Affirms both the importance of community and the unique worth of the individual

- a) So, here is an extremely important consequence of assigning our ultimate identity in God.
  - (1) God calls us into a family, where each person is equally valued and loved and uniquely made, but also part of a larger family to whom we must submit and give others priority.
  - (2) We'll talk more about this point in coming weeks. . . but when we locate our identity in the infinite, eternal God. . . rather than in the finite, transient then there is infinite room for uniqueness.
- (a) What does that mean?
  - i) Think about it. . . if we all image/reflect the infinite, eternal God . . . then there are infinite eternal possibilities

for unique reflections. . . meaning we all image God uniquely. . . we all reflect God differently and uniquely.

(1) I have three boys who are very, very different (AND EQUALLY LOVED AND VALUED), yet, they all reflect different parts of melanie and myself.

(a) God calls us into a family, where each person is equally valued and loved and uniquely made.

(2) So, there is infinite possibilities to be unique in God. . . . but if we locate our identity in something finite and transient here in this world, then there are only so many ways to be a “businessman” or a “mother” or a “homosexual” or a “human rights activist”

(a) So, the irony of expressive individualism is that it actually chokes out and limits the possibilities of individual uniqueness. . . and assigns individuals into sub-cultures of “like-minded groups” warring against each other.

(b) Thereby, devaluing the uniqueness of each individual and fracturing our unity as a society at the same time. . . . just look at brexit. . . or the rise of white nationalism. . . these are actually products of Expressive Individualism.

(b) Locating our identity in the image of God: affirms both the importance of community and at the same time the uniqueness of the individual.

4. “Image of God” as a paternal feature, means our primary identity marker is found in being a child of God.

a) Like the prodigal son “came to himself” and realised he was a son of wealthy lord. .. he realised his true identity.

(1) That is what Jesus does, when he comes to us and tells us to call God “our father in heaven”. . . WE are children of God, you are sons and daughters of a great king.

**You have heard of the fable of the eagle raised as a chicken?**

A chicken farmer found an eagle who fell out of his nest. . . he took the eagle home and raised it as a chicken.

So it was that the eagle grew up with its brother and sister chicks. It learned to do all the things chickens do: it clucked and cackled, scratching in the dirt for grits and worms,  
Who am I. . .

It believed resolutely and absolutely it was a chicken.

One day, late in its life, the eagle-who-thought-he-was-a-chicken happened to look up at the sky. High overhead, soaring majestically and effortlessly on the clouds with scarcely a single beat of its powerful golden wings, was an eagle!

“What’s that?!” , cried the old eagle in awe. “It’s magnificent! So much power and grace! It’s beautiful!”

“That’s an eagle”, replied a nearby chicken, “That’s the King of the Birds. It’s a bird of the air... not for the likes of us. We’re only chickens, we’re birds of the earth”.

With that, they all cast their eyes downwards once more and continued digging in the dirt, clucking and cackling, scratching in the dirt for grits and worms.

**Where you locate your identity matters. . . not inward, not outward, but upward. . . *We were created, in the image of God, in the image of God we were created.***

I am a father, a son, a man, a 40 something pastor, etc. . . . but above all I am a child of our creator, king and heavenly father.

Do you know who you are?

pray