

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 3

The Image of God

Lesson 10

The Implications of the Imago Dei

Ethics and Human Dignity

“Why the Image of God Is the Foundation of All Christian Ethics”

Key Texts: Genesis 9:5–6; Psalm 139:13–16; Jeremiah 1:5; Acts 17:26; James 3:9–10; Proverbs 14:31

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.”

Genesis 9:6, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The doctrine of the imago Dei does not end in the lecture hall; it ends in the street, the hospital, the courtroom, the family, the congregation, and the marketplace. Lessons 7 through 9 have established the exegetical foundation, the theological architecture, and the historical nuance of the imago Dei as a doctrinal locus; this lesson, the final lesson of Unit 3, draws that foundation out into the full range of its ethical implications. It does so not as an afterthought, not as the “application” section tacked onto a doctrinal treatise that has done its real work elsewhere, but as the necessary and intended conclusion of the entire unit. The imago Dei is an ethical doctrine. From the moment Genesis 9:6 grounds the prohibition of murder in the image of God, to the moment James 3:9 grounds the prohibition of cursing in the likeness of God, the biblical testimony consistently moves from the theological reality of the image to the ethical obligations it generates. What the human creature is determines how the human creature must be treated, and the imago Dei is the most comprehensive and most stable account of what the human creature is that the church possesses.

The ethical stakes of this doctrine in the contemporary moment are extraordinarily high, and the church that has not been formed by a rigorous theological account of the imago Dei will find itself perpetually outmaneuvered in the ethical debates of the age. The questions addressed in this lesson, the sanctity of life, abortion, euthanasia, racism, disability, economic justice, and the ethics of speech, are not merely political controversies to be navigated with pastoral sensitivity; they are theological questions whose adequate answers depend on the precise and comprehensive account of the imago Dei that the preceding three lessons have developed. The culture engages these questions with a variety of competing frameworks, autonomy, utility, social contract, evolutionary fitness, neurological complexity, and none of them provides the stable, universal, unconditional foundation for human dignity that the church’s proclamation of the image of God provides. The church that knows this, and that has been formed by the theological content of Units 1 through 3, has something genuinely distinctive and genuinely necessary to say to each of these ethical debates.

This lesson proceeds through seven specific ethical domains in which the imago Dei has direct and urgent implications, followed by a concluding section that draws the comprehensive ethical framework together. The seven domains are not exhaustive, the imago Dei touches every domain of human ethics, not merely the seven addressed here, but they are among the most contested, the most urgent, and the most theologically illuminated by the doctrine. Each domain is addressed with three elements: the specific ethical question at issue, the specific content of the imago Dei’s application to that question, and the specific biblical texts that ground the application. The goal is not merely to reach correct ethical conclusions but to demonstrate the method by which the imago Dei functions as an ethical foundation, a method that the student can then apply to the ethical questions that this lesson does not explicitly address.

A brief methodological note: this lesson engages the ethical implications of the imago Dei at the level of principle, not at the level of comprehensive policy. The imago Dei establishes the theological grounds on which the church’s engagement with each of these ethical debates must rest; it does not resolve every specific question of law, policy, and pastoral application that each debate generates. The Christian who has been formed by the imago Dei foundation will bring to those subsequent questions the right theological instincts, the right moral convictions, and the right pastoral compassion, but will also recognize that the movement from theological principle to specific policy is a complex hermeneutical and prudential exercise that requires additional discernment beyond what this lesson can provide.

I. The Sanctity of Human Life: The Foundation

Genesis 9:6 as the Charter of the Church's Pro-Life Ethic

A. *The Theological Ground of Life's Sanctity*

The sanctity of human life is not a sentimental preference, a cultural convention, or a merely religious belief that the secular state is under no obligation to recognize. It is a theological fact grounded in the nature of the human creature as made in the image of God, and it carries obligations that flow from that ontological status regardless of whether those obligations are recognized by any particular legal or cultural system. Genesis 9:6 is the foundational text for the church's entire pro-life ethic: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (NASB 1995). The structure of the verse is crucial: the prohibition of murder and its sanction are grounded not in the social utility of human life, not in the personal merit of the individual victim, not in the contractual obligations of civil society, but in the ontological status of the victim as an image-bearer of the Creator. The reason murder is the most serious crime a human being can commit is that it strikes at the image of God in the victim, and to strike at the image of God in the victim is to strike at the dignity and the honor of the God whose image the victim bears.

The implications of this grounding are immediate and far-reaching. First, the sanctity of human life is universal: it applies to every human being at every stage of development and in every condition of capacity or incapacity, because the image-bearing status that grounds it is universal and unconditional. The principle of Genesis 9:6 is not restricted to the healthy, the productive, the articulate, or the socially valued; it covers every human being whose blood can be shed, which is every human being from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. Second, the sanctity of human life is inviolable: it cannot be forfeited by personal sin (the sinner remains an image-bearer), diminished by disability (the disabled person remains an image-bearer), or revoked by social marginalization (the socially excluded person remains an image-bearer). The only qualification the text places on the universality of the image's protection is the judicial exception for capital punishment, and even that exception is grounded in the image: the murderer must be executed precisely because he has violated the image of God in his victim, and the gravity of the violation demands a commensurate response.

The sanctity of human life as grounded in the *imago Dei* provides the church with the most robust, most universal, and most stable foundation for a pro-life ethic available in the history of moral thought. Every alternative grounding, in sentience (which would exclude the pre-sentient embryo and the post-sentient comatose patient), in rationality (which would exclude the severely cognitively disabled), in self-consciousness (which would exclude the sleeping and the unconscious), in relational capacity (which would exclude the profoundly isolated), or in social utility (which would exclude the economically unproductive), generates gradations of human worth that the *imago Dei* excludes. The church that grounds its pro-life ethic in the image of God has the most consistent, the most universal, and the most theologically adequate foundation available, a foundation that cannot be eroded by the shifting sands of philosophical consensus or undermined by the advances of neurological science.

B. *The Sanctity of Life and the Character of God*

The deepest level of the sanctity of human life is not merely anthropological but theological: the life of the human creature is sacred not merely because of what the creature is but because of whose creature it is. Genesis 9:6's grounding of the prohibition of murder in the image of God is simultaneously a statement about the creature (it bears the image) and a statement about the Creator (the creature's life is sacred because it belongs to the God who made it in His image). The human creature does not own its own life in the ultimate sense; it holds its life as a gift from the God whose image it bears and on whose continuing creative sustenance its existence depends (Acts 17:28: "in Him we live and move and exist"). This is why the deliberate taking of innocent human life is an offense against God as well as against the victim: it is the destruction of something that belongs to God, the desecration of something that bears His image, and the repudiation of the claim that the Creator has upon the creature He has made.

Proverbs 14:31 expresses this Godward dimension of the ethics of human life with remarkable clarity: “He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him” (NASB 1995). The treatment of the poor and the needy is simultaneously the treatment of the God who made them, not in the Gnostic sense that the creature is divine, but in the *imago Dei* sense that the creature bears the image of the divine and that the honor or dishonor directed at the image-bearer is directed, in the most ultimate sense, at the Image-Giver. Matthew 25:31–46, in which Jesus identifies Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, “to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me” (v. 40, NASB 1995), is the New Testament’s most dramatic expression of this principle: the treatment of the vulnerable human being is a form of treatment of the Lord whose image the vulnerable person bears. Every act of justice toward an image-bearer honors the Creator; every act of oppression toward an image-bearer dishonors the Creator.

This Godward dimension of the sanctity of life has a specific pastoral implication for the church’s engagement with the pro-life cause: the motivation for the defense of human life must be fundamentally theological rather than merely political or pragmatic. The Christian who defends the lives of the unborn, the disabled, and the elderly because she loves the God whose image they bear will sustain that defense with a consistency, a compassion, and a depth of conviction that the purely political or pragmatic motivations cannot provide. The sanctity of human life is not a cause to be championed as a cultural or political strategy; it is a conviction to be held as a theological reality, grounded in the character of the God who made every human being in His image and who calls the church to honor His image in every human being it encounters.

“For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.”

Psalm 139:13–14, NASB 1995

II. The Unborn and the Elderly: Life at the Margins

Abortion, Euthanasia, and the Image of God in Its Most Vulnerable Expressions

A. Abortion: The *Imago Dei* from Conception

The question of abortion is, at its theological root, an anthropological question: when does the image-bearing human creature begin to exist? If the image of God in the human creature is constituted by specific cognitive or experiential capacities, by sentience, by self-consciousness, by the ability to form relationships, then the early embryo, which has not yet developed any of these capacities, does not bear the image in any sense that generates protective obligations, and abortion in the early stages of pregnancy raises no theological objection. But if the image of God is constituted by the ontological status of the creature as a human being made by God, which is the comprehensive Reformed account this series has defended, then the image is present from the first moment of the creature’s existence, and its protection cannot be withheld at any stage of development.

The biblical testimony on the continuity of personal identity from conception through birth and beyond is sufficiently clear to settle the anthropological question decisively for the faithful interpreter of Scripture. Psalm 139:13–16 is the most personal and the most theologically concentrated statement of God’s creative involvement in the formation of the individual human being from the earliest moment: “For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb ... My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (NASB 1995). The language of God’s personal creative involvement, formed, wove, seen, ordained, is applied to the human being from before

birth, from the stage of the “unformed substance” (golem, גֹּלֶם, the unformed mass) that precedes the full development of the fetus. This is not a creature whose image-bearing status will be conferred at some later stage of development; it is a creature in whom God’s creative and attentive involvement is already fully expressed from the earliest moment.

Jeremiah 1:5 adds a further dimension to the biblical testimony: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations” (NASB 1995). The divine knowledge of Jeremiah as a specific individual and the divine consecration of Jeremiah to a specific calling both precede Jeremiah’s formation in the womb, establishing that the God who knows and calls the individual human being does so not at some point after the achievement of specific developmental capacities but from before conception. The unborn child is not a potential human being who will become a person at some later stage of development; it is a human being whose personhood, whose dignity, and whose image-bearing status are present from the first moment of its existence as a human creature, because its existence as a human creature is the sufficient ground of all three. The church that holds this conviction will defend the lives of the unborn at every stage of development with the same theological confidence and the same moral urgency with which it defends the lives of the born, because the image of God that grounds the defense is the same image at every stage.

B. Euthanasia: The Imago Dei at Life’s End

The question of euthanasia, the deliberate ending of human life in order to relieve suffering or to forestall the deterioration that terminal illness or advanced age produces, is equally an anthropological question: does the image of God in the human creature remain fully operative as a ground of the creature’s inviolability when the creature’s capacities have been severely diminished by illness, disability, or the inevitable deterioration of aging? The culture answers this question by implicitly defining human dignity in terms of quality of life, productive capacity, cognitive function, or the ability to enjoy experiential goods, and concludes, with the brutal logic of its own premises, that the life that has fallen below a certain threshold of quality or capacity has lost the dignity that would otherwise protect it. On this account, euthanasia is an act of mercy: the dignified ending of a life that has lost the qualities that gave it dignity.

The imago Dei provides the definitive theological response to this account of dignity and its implications. The image of God in the human creature is not contingent on productive capacity, cognitive function, experiential enjoyment, or quality of life in any measurable sense; it is constituted by the ontological status of the creature as a human being made by God in His image, and that status is no more diminished by Alzheimer’s disease, terminal cancer, or the frailty of extreme old age than it was diminished by the fall of Adam. The person with advanced dementia who can no longer recognize her family members, who cannot care for herself, who appears to have lost the cognitive and relational capacities that the structural interpretation of the imago Dei prizes, this person remains a full image-bearer of the living God, with all the dignity and all the inviolability that image-bearing implies. Her life cannot be deliberately ended without committing the offense that Genesis 9:6 prohibits, because the image in which she was made remains stamped upon her regardless of the condition of her cognitive faculties.

The pastoral implications of the imago Dei for ministry at life’s end are as urgent as the ethical implications. The church that holds the imago Dei with conviction will not treat the ministry to the dying and the demented as a secondary or optional form of service; it will recognize in the ministry to the most cognitively diminished and physically deteriorated members of the human community the most direct possible engagement with the image of God in its most vulnerable and most dependent expression. The care of the dying is not a form of futile delay of the inevitable; it is the honoring of the God whose image the dying person bears, the acknowledgment that the life entrusted to our care belongs ultimately to the One who gave it, and the trust that the manner of a person’s dying, surrounded by love, sustained by the presence of the community, accompanied by the hope of the resurrection, bears witness to the theological convictions that give that dying its ultimate significance.

III. Race, Racism, and the Unity of the Human Family

How the Imago Dei Makes Racism a Theological Heresy, Not Merely a Social Sin

A. *The Theological Case Against Racism*

Racism, the systematic devaluation, exclusion, or oppression of persons on the basis of their racial or ethnic identity, is not merely a social sin, though it is certainly that. It is a theological heresy: an implicit denial of the doctrines of creation, imago Dei, and the unity of the human race that are foundational to the biblical account of humanity. The theological case against racism rests on three pillars that the preceding lessons of this series have established. The first is the unity of the human race under Adam: all human beings are descended from a single common ancestor (Acts 17:26: “He made from one man every nation of mankind”), which means that every human being belongs to the same family, bears the same image, and shares the same fundamental dignity regardless of the ethnic, cultural, or linguistic diversity that has developed within the human family since the dispersion from Babel. The racial diversity of the human family is a feature of the created order’s richness, not a hierarchy of worth.

The second pillar is the universal imago Dei: every human being, regardless of race, bears the image of the same God, the God who said “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26) without qualification by ethnicity, culture, or skin color. The image of God is not a property that some human beings bear more fully than others; it is the shared ontological status of every member of the human race. Racism, in whatever form it takes, implicitly denies this shared status: it treats some human beings as less fully image-bearing than others, as less worthy of dignity and respect and protection, on the basis of a characteristic, race, that is theologically irrelevant to the image-bearing status that grounds human dignity. This is not merely a moral error; it is a theological one, a denial of the Creator’s declaration that He made man in His image without racial qualification, and a desecration of the divine image in those whom racism degrades.

The third pillar is the eschatological vision of the redeemed community in Revelation 7:9–10: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” The diversity of the redeemed community in the final state, “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues”, is the eschatological confirmation that racial and ethnic diversity is not a problem to be overcome but a feature of the redeemed humanity that will be preserved in the new creation. The church that holds this eschatological vision will not merely oppose racism as a social wrong; it will actively cultivate the kind of multiethnic community that reflects the diversity of the new creation in the present age, as a witness to the world that the gospel of the Last Adam has overcome the divisions that sin introduced into the human family.

B. *The Practical Demand of Racial Justice*

The imago Dei does not merely provide the theological grounds for opposing racism; it generates specific practical obligations for the church’s engagement with the racial injustice that persists in every human society. Proverbs 14:31’s principle, “he who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker”, applies with equal force to the oppression of persons on the basis of race: every act of racial injustice is an act of contempt toward the Creator whose image the oppressed person bears, and the church that honors its Creator will be the church that stands against racial injustice with the full weight of its theological convictions. James 2:1–9’s condemnation of partiality in the community of faith, the favoritism toward the wealthy and the contempt for the poor that James identifies as a violation of the royal law of love for the neighbor, applies directly to racial partiality: the racially exclusionary church, the church that honors some image-bearers over others on the basis of race, is practicing what James calls a “distinction among yourselves” that renders it “judges with evil motives” (James 2:4, NASB 1995).

The church's engagement with racial justice must be consistently theological rather than merely political. The danger in the contemporary moment is that the church's opposition to racism becomes captive to the political ideologies that have developed around the racial justice question, ideologies that sometimes incorporate assumptions and demands that are not consistent with the full teaching of Scripture. The imago Dei provides a framework for engaging racial justice that is both more comprehensive and more theologically stable than the political frameworks on offer: more comprehensive, because it grounds the opposition to racism not merely in the recent history of American race relations or the specific grievances of any particular racial group but in the universal and eternal dignity of every human being as an image-bearer of God; more stable, because it grounds that opposition not in the shifting sands of political ideology but in the unchangeable character of the God whose image every human being bears. The church that brings the full theological weight of the imago Dei to bear on the question of racial justice will be the church that opposes racism with both the consistency and the compassion that the doctrine demands, refusing both the complacency of those who minimize the reality of racial injustice and the ideological captivity of those who address it in terms that are not accountable to the full counsel of Scripture.

The pastoral application begins in the congregation itself. The church that proclaims the unity of the human race under Adam and the equal image-bearing dignity of every human being must be the community in which that proclamation is most visibly embodied. The deliberate cultivation of a multiethnic congregation, the genuine welcome of persons of every racial and ethnic background into the full fellowship and leadership of the body of Christ, is not merely a strategic priority for community relevance; it is a theological imperative grounded in the imago Dei and the eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9–10. The congregation that is racially homogeneous by deliberate exclusion rather than by demographic accident has failed to honor the theological truth that every lesson in Unit 3 has developed: every human being bears the same image of the same God, and the community that gathers in that God's name must reflect the full human family He has made in His image.

“He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.”

Proverbs 14:31, NASB 1995

IV. Disability and Economic Justice: Image-Bearers at the Margins

The Imago Dei as the Foundation of Care for the Vulnerable

A. Disability and the Full Dignity of Every Body and Mind

The imago Dei has perhaps its most counter-cultural implications in the domain of disability. The culture's dominant frameworks for understanding disability tend to define it in terms of deviation from a norm of typical human functioning, and to measure the value of the disabled person's life in terms of her proximity to or distance from that norm. The prenatal screening industry is predicated on the assumption that the diagnosis of conditions like Down syndrome, spina bifida, or other chromosomal abnormalities is relevant information for the decision about whether to continue a pregnancy, that the anticipated quality of life of a person with a significant disability is a legitimate factor in determining whether that person's life should be permitted to continue. The physician-assisted suicide debate frequently centers on the quality of life anticipated for persons with severe or terminal disabilities as a relevant consideration for the decision about whether those persons should be helped to end their lives. And the social marginalization of persons with cognitive and physical disabilities, from the paucity of accessible spaces and services to the unconscious devaluation of lives that do not conform to the norm of productive independence, reflects a cultural anthropology that measures human worth by human capacity.

The imago Dei speaks directly and unambiguously against every form of this capacity-based evaluation of human worth. The person with Down syndrome bears the image of God as fully as the Olympic athlete; the person with severe autism bears the image of God as fully as the Nobel laureate; the person confined to a wheelchair bears the image of God as fully as the marathon runner; the person with profound intellectual disability bears the image of God as fully as the university professor. This is not a pious sentiment designed to comfort the families of disabled persons; it is a theological fact grounded in the ontological status of the disabled person as a human being made in the image of God, a status that is not constituted by cognitive capacity, physical functioning, social productivity, or any other measurable quality, but by the creative and conferring act of the God who made every human being in His own image.

The practical implications for the church are specific and demanding. Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the full life of the congregation, not merely their tolerated presence in the back of the sanctuary but their genuine welcome into the fellowship, leadership, and ministry of the body of Christ, is a theological imperative, not merely a pastoral accommodation. The church that designs its worship, its fellowship, its physical space, and its communal life without reference to the needs and the gifts of persons with disabilities has failed to honor the imago Dei in some of its most vulnerable and most distinctive expressions. The gifts that persons with disabilities bring to the community of faith, the patience they model, the dependence they embody, the specific quality of presence they offer, are not accommodations to be endured but contributions to be received, because the image of God is displayed in its most theologically concentrated form precisely in those whose visible capacities are most limited, and whose complete dependence on the grace of God is therefore most transparent.

B. *Economic Justice and the Imago Dei*

The economic dimension of the imago Dei is among the most consistently neglected in the evangelical church, despite the fact that the biblical testimony on the relationship between the image of God and economic justice is both extensive and explicit. Proverbs 14:31's principle, "he who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker", establishes the theological logic: the economic exploitation of the poor is not merely a social wrong but a theological one, because the poor person bears the image of the God who is "taunted" by her oppression. Proverbs 17:5 makes the same point with equal directness: "He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; he who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished" (NASB 1995). The treatment of the economically vulnerable is simultaneously the treatment of the God whose image they bear.

The specific forms of economic injustice that the biblical testimony most directly addresses include trafficking and exploitation, the reduction of human beings to instruments of economic gain that is as ancient as slavery and as contemporary as modern human trafficking, and the systemic structures of economic exclusion that deprive persons of the resources necessary for minimally dignified human existence. Both forms of injustice represent the same fundamental theological error: the treatment of image-bearers as economic units rather than as persons whose worth is grounded in the image of God rather than in their economic productivity. The church that holds the imago Dei with conviction will be the church that takes a strong and consistent stand against human trafficking, that advocates for the economic dignity of the poor, and that structures its own communal life, in generosity, in shared resources, in the care of the economically vulnerable within its own fellowship, as a visible embodiment of the theological conviction that every human being bears the image of God and is entitled to the dignity and the care that image-bearing implies.

The vocational dimension of the imago Dei, developed in Lesson 8, adds a further layer to the economic ethics of the image. Because every human being is made in the image of the God who works, who creates, who governs, who develops the potential of the created order, every human being has a vocational dignity that economic systems have an obligation to honor. The economic structures that deny human beings the opportunity to exercise their God-given capacities for meaningful labor, that reduce workers to interchangeable instruments of production without regard for their personhood and their dignity, or that systematically exclude certain groups of image-bearers from economic participation on the basis of characteristics irrelevant to their ability to work, these

structures violate the vocational dimension of the imago Dei and generate the kind of economic injustice that Proverbs 14:31 and 17:5 identify as an offense against the Creator. The church's theology of work and economics must be grounded in the full account of the imago Dei, not merely in the principles of market efficiency, social utility, or political ideology.

V. The Ethics of Speech: Every Word Toward a Person Is a Word About God

James 3:9 and the Imago Dei as the Foundation of Verbal Dignity

A. Cursing as Theological Contradiction

James 3:9–10 is one of the most compressed and most devastating ethical arguments in the entire New Testament: “with it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way” (NASB 1995). The argument's force comes from the juxtaposition: the same tongue that addresses God in worship addresses His image-bearer in contempt, and the theological contradiction of that juxtaposition is so stark that James can only exclaim: “these things ought not to be this way.” The blessing of God and the cursing of His image-bearer are not two morally neutral activities that happen to sit in uncomfortable proximity; they are theological contradictions, one affirming and the other denying the same reality, namely the dignity and the worth that belong to the One whose image the cursed person bears.

The word translated “curse” (*kataraomai*, καταράσμαι) in James 3:9 carries the force of a formal speech act that calls down divine judgment or harm upon a person, the opposite of the blessing (*eulogō*, εὐλογέω) that calls down divine favor. But James's argument extends beyond the formal cursing of a person to every form of speech that treats human beings with contempt, dismissiveness, or cruelty, because the theological logic, the cursed person “has been made in the likeness of God”, applies to every form of speech that fails to honor the image-bearing dignity of the person addressed. Every word spoken to another human being is spoken to an image-bearer of God, and the way that word is spoken, with honor or with contempt, with care or with cruelty, with truthfulness or with deception, reflects the speaker's actual relationship to the God whose image the addressed person bears.

The practical application of James 3:9 to the speech patterns of the contemporary church is as challenging as it is urgent. The casual contempt that marks much of contemporary discourse, the social media post that dehumanizes political opponents, the gossip that reduces a neighbor to her worst moments, the sarcasm that diminishes a colleague, the silence that excludes a community member, the lie that treats another person's trust as a resource to be exploited, all of these are forms of the cursing that James identifies as theologically contradictory to the worship of God. The church that is formed by the imago Dei will cultivate a different pattern of speech: not the saccharine positivity that refuses to speak honestly about real failures and real wrongs, but the speech of those who know that every person they address is an image-bearer of the living God, and who bring to every conversation the specific quality of respect, care, and truthfulness that the image demands.

B. The Positive Ethics of Imago Dei Speech

The imago Dei does not merely prohibit certain forms of speech; it prescribes a positive pattern of speech that honors the image in every person addressed. Ephesians 4:29 provides the most comprehensive New Testament account of this positive pattern: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (NASB 1995). The three criteria of imago Dei speech, edification, appropriateness to need, and grace-giving, are not merely stylistic preferences but theological obligations grounded in the image-bearing status of the person addressed. Every word we speak to another human being should build up (edify) rather than tear down; should be fitted to what the person actually needs rather than to what we want to say; and should give grace, should

communicate the kind of generous, honoring, life-giving regard that reflects the grace of the God whose image the addressed person bears.

The ethics of speech extends to the digital domain with particular urgency in the contemporary moment. The anonymity that digital communication frequently enables, the distance it creates between speaker and addressee, and the speed at which it operates have together produced patterns of speech in Christian communities that would be instantly recognizable as violations of the imago Dei if they occurred in face-to-face conversation, but that are routinely practiced in the digital sphere without the same level of moral awareness. The social media post that dismisses a political opponent as subhuman, the anonymous comment that mocks a public figure's appearance, the group text that circulates gossip about a mutual acquaintance, all of these are forms of the cursing that James 3:9 prohibits, and they are forms that the imago Dei renders theologically indefensible regardless of the anonymity or the distance that digital communication enables. The church that takes James 3:9 seriously will develop specific practices of digital speech ethics, practices that apply the imago Dei's demand for verbal dignity to every context in which human beings address one another, including the contexts that the Epistle of James did not anticipate.

The positive ethics of imago Dei speech reaches its highest expression in the ministry of the Word. The preacher who stands before a congregation of image-bearers is engaged in the most urgent and the most consequential form of speech available to human beings: the proclamation of the Word of the God whose image those image-bearers bear. The preacher who understands this will bring to the pulpit not merely the skills of communication but the theological conviction that every person in the congregation is an image-bearer of the living God, equally worthy of the careful, honest, grace-giving proclamation of the Word, and equally in need of the Word's transforming power for the renewal of the image that the Spirit is accomplishing in those who receive it. The imago Dei is not a doctrine that the preacher preaches to her congregation; it is a doctrine about her congregation that shapes every dimension of the way she preaches.

“With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”

James 3:9–10, NASB 1995

VI. The Comprehensive Ethic: Every Moral Question Returns to the Image

The Imago Dei as the Organizing Principle of All Christian Ethics

The seven ethical domains addressed in this lesson, the sanctity of life, abortion, euthanasia, racism, disability, economic justice, and speech, are not seven separate moral questions that happen to share the imago Dei as a common reference point. They are seven expressions of a single ethical reality: the reality that every human being bears the image of the living God, that this image-bearing status is the ground of every ethical obligation the human creature owes to every other human creature, and that every moral question, without exception, ultimately returns to this foundational question: what does it mean to treat an image-bearer of God rightly? The imago Dei is not one ethical principle among many; it is the architectonic principle of all Christian ethics, the foundation from which every specific ethical obligation derives its ultimate grounding and its ultimate motivation.

The comprehensiveness of this ethical framework has two important practical implications. The first is consistency: the church that grounds its ethics in the imago Dei will apply it consistently across the full range of ethical questions, without the selective application that characterizes much of contemporary evangelical moral engagement. The imago Dei demands the protection of the unborn and the protection of the refugee; the defense

of the disabled and the defense of the economically exploited; the opposition to abortion and the opposition to racism; the honor of the elderly and the honor of those whom the culture stigmatizes and excludes. The church that invokes the image of God selectively, to protect those whose protection fits its political preferences while ignoring those whose protection is inconvenient, has not understood the comprehensiveness of the image's claim. Every human being, in every context, at every stage of development and in every condition of capacity or incapacity, bears the image of God and generates the full range of ethical obligations that image-bearing implies.

The second practical implication is motivation: the church that grounds its ethics in the imago Dei will be motivated by something more durable and more personally transforming than the political urgency, the social pressure, or the cultural momentum that drives much of contemporary moral activism. The motivation for honoring the image of God in every human being is the love of the God whose image is at stake in every act of honor or contempt directed at a human being. Proverbs 14:31 and Matthew 25:40 converge on the same theological reality: to honor the image-bearer is to honor the Image-Giver, and to honor the Image-Giver is the deepest and most enduring motivation available to the human creature. The Christian who is driven by the love of God will honor the image of God in every human being she encounters, not as a political strategy or a social obligation, but as the natural and joyful expression of the love that the gospel has produced in her toward the God whose image every human being bears.

This lesson closes Unit 3, which has traced the imago Dei from its definition and its Hebrew vocabulary (Lesson 7) through its six dimensions (Lesson 8) through its fall-damaged and Spirit-renewed character (Lesson 9) to its comprehensive ethical implications (Lesson 10). The unit as a whole has demonstrated that the imago Dei is not an abstract theological doctrine but the living, breathing, daily, urgent center of the church's understanding of what human beings are and how they must be treated. Unit 4 will turn from the image of God to the constitution of human nature: what the human creature is made of, how body and soul relate, and what the intermediate state and the resurrection of the body require us to believe about the perdurance of personal identity through death and into the eschatological future. The foundation laid in Unit 3 will undergird every subsequent unit of the series, because the doctrine of the imago Dei is the doctrine that makes every other anthropological affirmation theologically meaningful and personally urgent.

“The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’”

Matthew 25:40, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Sanctity of Life	The theological conviction that human life is sacred, set apart, inviolable, and protected, because every human being bears the image of the God who created it. The sanctity of life is grounded not in the qualities or capacities of the individual human being but in the ontological status of every human being as an image-bearer of God (Genesis 9:6). It applies universally, to every human being at every stage of development and in every condition of capacity, and generates absolute prohibitions of murder, abortion, euthanasia, and every other form of the deliberate taking of innocent human life. The sanctity of life is both an anthropological doctrine (about what the human creature is) and a theological doctrine (about whose creature the human creature is).
Pro-Life Ethic	The moral framework, grounded in the imago Dei and the sanctity of life, that holds the deliberate taking of innocent human life to be always and everywhere morally wrong. The pro-life ethic applies to the full continuum of human life from conception to natural death, and it requires the protection and care of every human being at every stage and in every condition. A biblically grounded pro-life ethic is distinguished from its political expressions by its comprehensiveness: it defends not only the unborn but also the elderly, the disabled, the economically vulnerable, and every other class of human being whose life is threatened by the culture's capacity-based evaluations of human worth.
Prenatal Personhood	The theological and anthropological affirmation that the unborn child is a full human being, a person bearing the image of God, from the moment of conception, and therefore entitled to the full protection that image-bearing implies. Prenatal personhood is grounded in Psalm 139:13–16's account of God's personal creative involvement in the formation of the individual human being from before birth, in Jeremiah 1:5's account of divine knowledge and consecration of the individual before formation in the womb, and in the biblical testimony's consistent use of personal language for the unborn (Luke 1:44: the unborn John the Baptist "leaped for joy" in his mother's womb).
Euthanasia	The deliberate ending of a human life, typically by a physician or a caregiver, in order to relieve suffering or to prevent the anticipated deterioration of a terminal illness or advanced disability. Euthanasia is prohibited by the sanctity of life and the imago Dei: the life of the person with terminal illness, advanced disability, or diminished cognitive capacity retains the full dignity and the full protection of image-bearing regardless of its quality, productive capacity, or anticipated duration. The church's opposition to euthanasia is grounded in the conviction that the life of the human creature belongs ultimately to the Creator who made it, and that the deliberate ending of that life is an act of usurpation that no assessment of quality of life can justify.
Racism (Theological Definition)	The systematic devaluation, exclusion, or oppression of persons on the basis of their racial or ethnic identity, constituting a theological heresy against the doctrines of creation (all human beings made in the image of God), monogenism (all humanity descended from one man), and eschatology (the redeemed community drawn from every nation and tribe and people and tongue). Racism is a theological heresy because it implicitly denies that every human being bears the

	same image of the same God, it treats some human beings as less fully image-bearing than others on the basis of a characteristic that the Creator declared irrelevant to the image-bearing dignity of every member of the human family.
Disability Theology	The theological framework, grounded in the imago Dei, that affirms the full dignity, full humanity, and full image-bearing status of persons with physical, cognitive, or neurological disabilities. Disability theology holds that disability is not a diminishment of the image of God or a reduction of the worth of the person who has it; it is a particular form of creaturely existence in which the image of God is displayed in its own distinctive and irreplaceable way. The practical implications include the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the fellowship, ministry, and leadership of the church; the cultivation of worship practices and communal environments that honor the presence and the gifts of disabled persons; and the opposition to every form of discrimination or exclusion based on disability status.
Economic Justice (Imago Dei Foundation)	The theological conviction that every human being's economic dignity, including her access to meaningful labor, her protection from exploitation and trafficking, and her entitlement to the resources necessary for minimally dignified human existence, is grounded in her image-bearing status as a creature of the living God. Proverbs 14:31 establishes the principle: to oppress the poor is to taunt the Maker whose image the poor person bears. The church's engagement with economic justice must be grounded in the imago Dei rather than in the competing political ideologies of the contemporary moment, both of which tend to instrumentalize the poor in the service of their own agendas rather than honoring them as image-bearers of God.
Ethics of Speech (Imago Dei)	The moral framework, grounded in James 3:9–10 and Ephesians 4:29, that holds every word spoken to a human being to be simultaneously a word addressed to an image-bearer of God, and therefore subject to the theological standard of image-honoring speech: speech that builds up (edifies), that addresses the actual need of the person (appropriateness), and that communicates the generous, honoring regard that reflects the grace of the God whose image the addressed person bears (grace-giving). The ethics of imago Dei speech prohibits every form of verbal contempt, deception, or exploitation, and positively requires the kind of speech that honors the image of God in every person addressed, in face-to-face conversation, in written communication, and in digital discourse.
Lese-Majesté	French for "injury to majesty," the legal term for an offense against the dignity or authority of a sovereign. Applied theologically to the imago Dei, lese-majesté describes what every act of contempt, violence, or oppression directed at a human being does to the God whose image that human being bears: it commits treason against the divine King by desecrating His royal image. Genesis 9:6's grounding of the prohibition of murder in the image of God deploys this logic: to shed the blood of an image-bearer is to commit lese-majesté against the God whose image was shed with the blood. The theological concept of lese-majesté provides the deepest motivation for the comprehensive ethic of imago Dei: every act of honor toward a human being honors the Creator; every act of contempt toward a human being dishonors the Creator.
Matthew 25 Principle	Jesus's teaching in Matthew 25:31–46, in which He identifies Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them,

you did it to Me” (v. 40). The Matthew 25 Principle is the New Testament’s most explicit statement of the theological logic of the imago Dei for ethics: the treatment of the vulnerable human being is simultaneously the treatment of the Lord whose image that person bears. It grounds the church’s ministry to the most marginalized and most vulnerable members of the human community in the conviction that such ministry is not merely humanitarian service but a form of service to Christ Himself.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the imago Dei is the organizing principle of all Christian ethics, the foundational theological reality from which every specific ethical obligation derives its ultimate grounding and its ultimate motivation. This is not a merely academic conviction; it is a conviction with immediate and pervasive practical implications. The Christian who has been formed by the imago Dei as an ethical foundation will approach every moral question, from the most private to the most public, from the most personal to the most political, with the same foundational question: what does it mean to treat an image-bearer of God rightly in this specific situation? And she will bring to that question the full theological weight of everything this unit has established about what it means to bear the image of God: the structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological dignity that makes every human being inviolably and unconditionally worthy of honor, protection, and care.

We must also believe the comprehensiveness of the imago Dei's ethical claims with enough consistency to resist the selective application that characterizes much of contemporary evangelical moral engagement. The imago Dei makes no exceptions for inconvenient image-bearers. The political opponent who infuriates us bears the image of God. The criminal who has committed terrible acts against other image-bearers bears the image of God. The person whose lifestyle we regard with theological disapproval bears the image of God. The person whose ethnic identity or national origin is different from ours bears the image of God. The person whose cognitive and physical capacities are severely limited bears the image of God. The child in the womb bears the image of God. The elderly person whose final days are marked by suffering and diminishment bears the image of God. The poor person who inconveniences our comfortable life bears the image of God. There are no exceptions. The church that holds the imago Dei with genuine theological conviction will honor it without exception, and will challenge itself and its surrounding culture wherever either fails to do so.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the Matthew 25 principle produce in you the specific quality of attention to the image-bearing dignity of the most marginalized and most vulnerable human beings in your context. Jesus's identification of Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me", is designed to produce in the believer a quality of attentiveness to the vulnerable that is motivated not by duty or social obligation but by love for the One whose image the vulnerable person bears and with whom the vulnerable person is identified. The believer who genuinely loves Jesus will find in the Matthew 25 principle not a burden but a gift: the knowledge that every act of service to the most marginalized image-bearer is an act of service to the Lord Himself.

Desire the consistent and comprehensive ethic of the imago Dei over the selective and politically convenient ethic of cultural accommodation. The comprehensive ethic is harder, it makes demands on every side of every political and cultural divide, and it refuses to exempt from its scope any class of image-bearers whose protection is inconvenient to the ideological commitments of any particular community. But the comprehensive ethic is also truer, it is more faithful to the full theological weight of the imago Dei, more consistent with the character of the God whose image every human being bears, and more adequate to the full range of human suffering and human injustice that the gospel addresses. The church that desires this comprehensive ethic will find itself perpetually in tension with the selective ethics of every political faction, and will recognize in that tension not a failure but a sign of theological fidelity.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Conduct a comprehensive audit of the ministry context you serve in light of the seven ethical domains addressed in this lesson. For each domain, sanctity of life, abortion, euthanasia, race, disability, economic

justice, speech, ask: what is the congregation's current level of theological formation, pastoral engagement, and practical embodiment? Where is the imago Dei most adequately honored? Where is it most neglected or most violated? Identify the domain in which your congregation most urgently needs theological formation and practical engagement, and commit to one specific initiative that begins to address it.

- Practice the James 3:9 self-examination in your own patterns of speech. Over the next week, pay deliberate attention to every conversation you have and every digital communication you send, asking in each case: am I speaking to this person, or about this person, in a way that honors the image of God they bear? Am I building up (edifying), addressing their actual need, and giving grace? Or am I speaking in ways that treat them with contempt, dismissiveness, or cruelty, in ways that constitute the cursing that James says "ought not to be this way"? Keep a brief daily journal of your observations, and bring your findings to the Lord in honest confession and petition for the renewal of your speech patterns.
- **Engage at least one of the seven ethical domains at depth.** For the sanctity of life and abortion: Randy Alcorn's *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments* (2000) provides the most comprehensive engagement with the full range of pro-choice arguments from a biblical and pro-life perspective. For disability theology: John Swinton's *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (2016) offers the most theologically rich treatment of disability from a Christian perspective. For economic justice: Tim Keller's *Generous Justice* (2010) provides a pastoral and biblical account of the church's responsibility toward economic injustice. For race: Esau McCaulley's *Reading While Black* (2020) offers an exegetically grounded engagement with the racial justice question from within the evangelical and Reformed tradition.
- Identify the specific ways in which the congregation you serve either embodies or fails to embody the comprehensive ethic of the imago Dei in its communal life. Are persons with disabilities genuinely welcomed and included? Does the congregation's ethnic composition reflect the deliberate pursuit of multiethnic community, or the comfortable default of ethnic homogeneity? Does the congregation's economic life, in its generosity, its care for the poor within and beyond its walls, its advocacy for economic justice in the broader community, reflect the imago Dei's claim on every economic encounter? Where the congregation fails, commit to one specific act of institutional repentance and reform.
- Spend time this week in the presence of the most marginalized image-bearer in your immediate context: the person whose disability most severely limits her social participation, the person whose economic poverty most acutely marks her social exclusion, the person whose racial or ethnic identity most consistently subjects her to the contempt or the condescension of the dominant culture. Spend time with that person not as a ministry project but as a fellow image-bearer of the living God, in whose presence the image of God is displayed in its own distinctive and irreplaceable way. Let the encounter form in you the specific quality of theological attentiveness to the image of God in the vulnerable that the Matthew 25 principle calls for, and let it produce in you the specific motivation, the love of the God whose image you have just encountered, that sustains the comprehensive ethic of the imago Dei over the long term.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Of the seven ethical domains addressed in this lesson, which do you find most theologically illuminated by the imago Dei, and which do you find most challenging to engage from an imago Dei framework in your specific ministry context? Where do you feel most equipped to bring the imago Dei to bear on a contested ethical question, and where do you feel most uncertain or most inadequately formed? Share your responses and identify one specific step you will take to deepen your formation in the domain where you feel least equipped.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 9:1-7 in full. What is the context of the prohibition of murder in verse 6, and how does that context (the Noahic covenant, the renewal of the cultural mandate, the institution of capital punishment) shape the theological weight of the imago Dei grounding of the prohibition? What does the juxtaposition of the prohibition of murder (“whoever sheds man’s blood”) with the sanction of capital punishment (“by man his blood shall be shed”) reveal about the theological logic that the image of God generates?
- Read Psalm 139:13–16 carefully. What specific stages of human development does the Psalm’s vocabulary encompass, from the “unformed substance” (golem) of verse 16 to the fully developed person addressed throughout? What does the vocabulary of God’s action, “formed,” “wove,” “seen,” “ordained,” suggest about the character of God’s involvement in the formation of the individual human being? And what is the relationship between the Psalm’s account of God’s formative involvement and the imago Dei’s grounding of prenatal personhood?
- Read Acts 17:22–31. How does Paul’s assertion that God “make[s] from one man every nation of mankind” (v. 26) relate to the theological case against racism? What does the divine determination of “appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (v. 26) suggest about the value and the purpose of the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterizes the human family? And how does the call to repentance in verse 30, addressed to all people without ethnic qualification, reinforce the universality of the imago Dei’s claim on every member of the human family?
- Read James 2:1–9 and James 3:1–12 together. What is the specific relationship between the partiality that James condemns in chapter 2 and the cursing that James condemns in chapter 3? How do both forms of sin represent violations of the same theological principle, the failure to honor the image of God in every person encountered? And what does James’s description of the tongue as “a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (3:8) suggest about the seriousness with which the ethics of speech must be taken?
- Read Matthew 25:31–46 in full. Who are “the least of these brothers of Mine” in Jesus’s account of the final judgment? How does Jesus’s identification of Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned function as a theological argument about the relationship between the treatment of the vulnerable and the treatment of the Lord? And what does the response of the “sheep” in verse 37, “Lord, when did we see You hungry”, suggest about the character of the service that the Matthew 25 principle calls for?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the imago Dei provides the most robust and most stable foundation for universal human dignity because it does not ground dignity in any measurable capacity or quality. Do you find this argument persuasive? Are there forms of the capacity-based argument for human dignity, grounded, for example, in the capacity for rationality, in potential rather than actual capacity, or in species membership, that you believe are adequate to ground universal and unconditional human dignity? If so, how do they compare with the imago Dei grounding in terms of stability, universality, and theological adequacy?

- The lesson describes racism as a theological heresy rather than merely a social sin. Is this characterization exegetically and theologically warranted? What specific doctrines does racism implicitly deny? Is the description of racism as a “heresy” appropriate to the severity of the theological error involved, or does it overstate the case? How should the church distinguish between racism as a theological error and racism as a pattern of personal sin, and does the distinction matter for the church’s engagement with the racial justice question?
- The lesson argues that the comprehensive ethic of the imago Dei, applied consistently across all seven domains and beyond, will put the church in tension with every political faction, because every faction selectively applies the ethics of human dignity in ways that serve its own ideological commitments. Do you agree? What specific examples, in the current political landscape, illustrate the selective application of the ethics of human dignity on both the political left and the political right? What would a genuinely comprehensive imago Dei ethic require of the church in the specific political context you inhabit?
- James 3:9 identifies the theological contradiction of blessing God and cursing His image-bearers with the same tongue. Is this merely a matter of inconsistency, or does it represent something more seriously wrong? Does the practice of speech that fails to honor the imago Dei in the persons addressed actually affect the speaker’s relationship with God, does it constitute a form of dishonoring God Himself? How does the answer to this question affect the urgency of the ethics of speech for the Christian?
- The lesson closes by noting that the comprehensive imago Dei ethic is grounded ultimately in the love of God rather than in duty, social obligation, or political urgency. Can the love of God function as a sufficient and stable motivation for the comprehensive ethic, including the honoring of image-bearers who are personally repugnant, politically opposed, or culturally alien? What is the relationship between love for God and love for the neighbor in the motivation of the imago Dei ethic? And how does the Matthew 25 principle, the knowledge that service to the neighbor is service to Christ, function as a practical bridge between the two?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the pro-life ethic of the imago Dei is comprehensive, extending from the defense of the unborn through the defense of the disabled, the elderly, the economically vulnerable, and every other class of human being whose life is threatened by the culture’s capacity-based evaluations of human worth. Evaluate the comprehensiveness of the congregation’s pro-life engagement. Does the congregation’s commitment to the sanctity of life extend consistently across the full continuum of human life and the full range of threats to it, or is it selective in ways that reflect political preference rather than theological principle?
- The lesson’s treatment of disability calls for the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the fellowship, ministry, and leadership of the church. What specific barriers, architectural, cultural, liturgical, or attitudinal, prevent the congregation you serve from fully embodying this inclusion? Identify one specific barrier and one specific step toward removing it. And what would it look like to move from the inclusion of persons with disabilities as recipients of the congregation’s care to their recognition as contributors to the congregation’s common life, as persons whose distinctive experience of image-bearing offers the community something it cannot receive from its more typically functioning members?
- The James 3:9 self-examination in the application section calls for a week-long audit of speech patterns. What specific patterns of speech in your own life, in conversation, in writing, in digital communication, most consistently fail to honor the image of God in the persons addressed or discussed? What specific accountability structure, confession practice, or community commitment would be most effective in supporting the renewal of those speech patterns? And how does the renewal of speech patterns connect to the broader renewal of the image that 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10 describe?
- Matthew 25:40, “to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me”, grounds the service of the vulnerable in the love of Christ rather than in humanitarian duty.

How does this theological grounding of service change the spirit and the character of the service that the congregation offers to the marginalized? Does the congregation's service to the vulnerable, in its food pantries, its prison ministries, its care for the homeless, its advocacy for the poor, reflect the quality of service that the Matthew 25 principle calls for: service offered to the Lord Himself, in the person of His marginalized image-bearers?

- This lesson is the final lesson of Unit 3 and the tenth of twenty-six lessons in the Anthropology series. Looking back over the ten lessons completed, from the prolegomena of Unit 1 through the creation of humanity in Unit 2 through the image of God in Unit 3, what is the single most significant theological conviction you have developed or deepened? How has it changed the way you understand yourself, your congregation, the people you serve, or the God you worship? And what do you most anticipate, or most dread, about the eleven remaining lessons in Units 4 through 9?

Prayer Focus

Open this tenth and final lesson of the series' first half, and the capstone lesson of Unit 3, with a slow and meditative reading of Matthew 25:31–46 in full. Read it not as a passage to be exegeted but as an examination: allow the Lord's words to function as the mirror in which the quality of your engagement with the image of God in the marginalized is most honestly reflected. Where have you seen the Lord in the hungry, and where have you passed Him by? Where have you encountered the Lord in the stranger, and where have you been unable to recognize Him? Where have you ministered to the Lord in the sick and the imprisoned, and where have you found the claims of those ministries too inconvenient to honor? Read the passage not in the spirit of self-congratulation or of crushing self-condemnation, but in the spirit of honest self-knowledge before the God who sees, who judges, and who also redeems, the God whose image every marginalized person bears and whose face every act of genuine service reveals.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the comprehensive ethic of the *imago Dei* to deepen your gratitude and your worship. Begin with the Father, the Creator who made every human being in His image, who said "Let Us make man in Our image" without racial qualification, without capacity qualification, without developmental-stage qualification, without any qualification except the shared humanity that makes every human being His creature and His image-bearer. Adore the Father who sees the image in the most marginalized and the most broken human being with the same clarity and the same love with which He sees it in the most gifted and the most celebrated, because the image He sees is the image He placed there, and its dignity does not diminish with the diminishment of the creature who bears it. Move to the Son, who became the image incarnate, who identified Himself with the hungry and the thirsty and the stranger and the sick and the imprisoned, and who by His death and resurrection both atoned for every violation of the image in the history of the human race and secured the final glorification of the image in every member of the redeemed community. Conclude with the Spirit, who is even now at work in the hearts of believers, producing the love that honors the image in every person encountered, renewing the speech patterns that honor the image in every word spoken, and forming the comprehensive, consistent, theologically grounded ethic of the *imago Dei* that the contemporary church so urgently needs.

Pray together for the church's witness in the seven ethical domains addressed in this lesson, and for the specific context in which this community serves. First, for clarity and courage in the pro-life witness: that the congregation would hold the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death with the theological comprehensiveness and the pastoral compassion that the *imago Dei* demands, and would bring that conviction to bear on the specific life-and-death questions that arise in the community, in the crisis pregnancy, in the deathbed, in the legislative debate, in the medical consultation. Second, for the genuine welcome of the marginalized: that the congregation would be transformed from a community that tolerates the presence of persons with disabilities, the economically vulnerable, and those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds into a community that genuinely welcomes them as full participants in the life of the body, recognizing in their presence the distinctive and irreplaceable expression of the image of God that only they can display. Third, for the renewal of speech: that the Lord would produce in every member of the congregation the specific quality of speech that honors the image in every person addressed and discussed, speech that builds up, that gives grace, that tells the truth in love, and that never treats another image-bearer as less than the creature of the living God that she is. And fourth, for the doxological integration of the entire unit: that the study of the *imago Dei* across Lessons 7 through 10 would produce not merely better ethics but deeper worship, the worship of the God whose image every human being bears, whose Son restored the image by His obedience and sacrifice, and whose Spirit is even now renewing the image in those who belong to Christ, toward its eschatological perfection in the beatific vision of the glory of God.

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”

Revelation 7:9–10, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 9:1-7; Psalm 139:13–16; Jeremiah 1:5; Proverbs 14:31; 17:5; Acts 17:22–31; James 2:1-9; 3:1–12; Matthew 25:31–46; Revelation 7:9–10; Ephesians 4:29*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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