

Genesis 1:26-27 *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

<sup>27</sup>*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

## Alignment – Self Part 1, Genesis 1:26-27

The Church in America is having a bit of an identity crisis. Mainline denominations are in rapid decline.<sup>1</sup> While the population of Americans who do not identify with any religious group, the 'nones', is rapidly growing, making up 23% of our country.<sup>2</sup> Christians find themselves more and more difficult to describe, after a long period of being able to take our identity for granted. Even the word, evangelical, carries with it all sorts of ambiguous connotations.<sup>3</sup> In this series we are seeking to bring the fundamentals of our faith back into alignment. So that the first things remain first. This series will be in three parts, just two weeks each. Two weeks on the Bible, two weeks on understanding ourselves, and two weeks on understanding our mission.

The past two weeks we have been dealing with the question of how we can know anything. Is there any meaning in the world, or is that just an illusion? We saw that it is in seeing God clearly, as he has revealed himself to us, that true meaning finds its source. Meaning can be accessed because God has built it into the fabric of creation by speaking and revealed himself to us by his word. We grow to see that all creation is attesting to God's divinity and power. This week we are dealing with the question of how we can know ourselves. These questions could be the very thing that brought you in here. Who am I? Perhaps there is meaning in the world, but does my life have any meaning? This question is so prominent in our cultural moment because our one truly unquestioned value is authenticity. The one truly unquestioned piece of advice is to "be yourself." With that as our guiding ethic, we have a lot of pressure to know what our *self* is and then to adhere to that, so why is it so difficult?

Step back and consider how strange it is that we are all so comfortable with the question "who am I?" Shouldn't we of all things, at least, be experts on ourselves? But

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<sup>1</sup> Ipka, Michael. "Mainline Protestants make up shrinking number of U.S. Adults" *Pew Research Center* <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/> (Accessed on 1/1/18)

<sup>2</sup> Cooperman and Smith. "The factors driving growth of the 'nones' in the U.S." *Pew Research Center* <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/> (Accessed on 1/1/18)

<sup>3</sup> Keller, Timothy. "Can evangelicalism survive Donald Trump and Roy Moore?" *The New Yorker* 12/19/17 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/can-evangelicalism-survive-donald-trump-and-roy-moore>

the self, is a mysterious thing. We cannot turn inward and gaze directly at ourselves to describe *me* objectively. This means that we first need to get clear on how it is we know ourselves, before we answer what we know about ourselves.

## 1. How do we know ourselves?

*Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

There are certain things that you can only teach in Genesis. This verse has such depth of meaning, that if apprehended, would upend sexism, and racism, and feelings of uselessness, and meaninglessness. This is not exactly our purpose for approaching this verse this morning, but it is worth pointing out. Our consideration first of all is the position that humanity holds within creation. We are created in the image of God, and the first thing to notice about that is we are *created*. This means we are creatures, as in, created things. Therefore, we have deep similarities with the rest of creation. But unique amongst creation, we are in the image of God. Therefore, as God is over creation, so too are we, in a sense, over creation. We are these brutes from the dirt, yet in the image of God. We are in creation and over it, continuous and discontinuous with the rest of creation. This has direct implications for how we should expect to know ourselves. John Frame says,

*Human beings are, first of all, creatures of God and therefore part of the "world." We are among the "facts" to be learned. And as part of that created system of facts, we come to know ourselves as we interact with other persons and things, especially with God and His Word but also with other creatures.<sup>4</sup>*

We can only truly be known in our proper context. Because we are not God, self-existent beings, we require a context in order to be understood. We therefore come to know ourselves, through interaction. We find meaning in our context as we explore. This is important, because we cannot be known separate from creation, simply because we are not separate from creation, there is no us apart from creation, we have been created in it. It is tempting to desire a kind of detached pure understanding of ourselves. Like what would I be if I had no culture, or gender, or disposition towards certain things and away from others? And the answer is, you wouldn't, you wouldn't be. Part of

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<sup>4</sup> Frame, John. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1989. p. 69

our creatureliness means understanding our truest selves in *relation* to God and to the world. We require a relation to be known.

But we are not just creatures, but also bearers of the image of God. As all that is required for God's knowledge of everything is his knowledge of himself and his ideas, similarly, knowledge of ourselves is also required for our knowledge of anything. John Frame lays this out,

*We know because someone outside of us - God - has given us revelation. Still, because we are God's image, there is a sense in which all knowledge is self-knowledge, even for us. All our information reaches us by our own faculties- our eyes, ears, brains, intuition, and so forth. To know a fact is to know something about the content of our own experience, our thinking, our capacity to understand.<sup>5</sup>*

If we were to ask, what comes first, knowledge of ourselves or knowledge of God? We can't really answer the question, because they seem to happen simultaneously. God in his grace only requires us to know him as his creatures, and another way to put that is that God requires us to humbly know him as his creatures, not as though we are other gods. You can hear this in our language and the descriptions that we give to God. God is infinite. This word is meaningful to us because we are finite. So, when we encounter an infinite being we are also encountering our own finitude. His limitlessness exposes our limits.

Okay, this has been pretty heady, but were uncovering something that really isn't. You know this, because you understand when someone says, "I know a lot about her, but I don't know her." What is the difference between those two things? Why is knowing about someone not equivalent to knowing someone? Because to know someone, we need to learn what that person's presence does to us. We need to become acquainted with the experience in ourselves of that person.

This is why, the person who knows God the most, is not necessarily the person who has the most scripture memorized, or has the most biblical education, but is the person who has allowed themselves to be affected most deeply by their knowledge of God. It is one thing to realize that God is holy, it is another thing to allow that to expose the depth of your brokenness. Yet you can't know the one if don't let yourself know the other. If the brute fact of God's holiness, doesn't become the personal sadness over your own brokenness, then you cannot be said to know God, or yourself. Knowledge as a creature in the image

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<sup>5</sup> Frame, 69

of God is deeper than just reciting brute facts. Don't be deceived, by the practice of pure intellect, you think you know, but you don't.

Our doubts about God manifest in doubts about ourselves, likewise doubts about ourselves manifest in doubts about God. And we live in near constant doubts about ourselves.

## 2. Do you find yourself or make yourself?

*Genesis 3:4-5 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. <sup>5</sup>For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Satan's offer of initial rebellion against God, is a move that simultaneously casts doubt on our identity, as in the image of God, while casting doubt on who God is as our law giver. Satan exploits this very connection to breach the closeness between God and ourselves, and in our sin we plunge into alienation from the truth of God and simultaneously the truth of ourselves. In this fallen alienated condition, the question "who am I?" feels normal and inevitable. If God is no longer a trustworthy source by which we can come to know ourselves, then where else do we turn? Our culture has two options, the first of which treats us as purely gods, who need no context to inform their being. The second of which treats us as merely creatures, who's inner being doesn't matter in their identity it is only their external presentation.

The first we can call expressive individualism. The truth of who you really are rests within you, and all you need to do is look inside and then express what you find there as your truest self. Honest introspection, followed by real self-expression means you will live an authentic life. Don't be moved by what you see in the external world perhaps even on your own body, these do not inform who you truly are, instead turn inward to discover your truest and best self then live from that. Heather Havrilesky writes in her advice column in *New York Magazine*,

*If there's a mass religion of global culture, it's the belief . . . that by believing in yourself (without fail!) you can get everything you've ever dreamed of. Everything depends on your faith and your ability to*

*quelch the doubts in your head that arise when yet another glamorous on-brand winner pops up in your Instagram feed.*<sup>6</sup>

The issue of course is that this is impossible, we aren't designed to know ourselves just by looking in ourselves. We aren't God, we can't simply know ourselves sans-context, knowledge of ourselves always takes place in our relation to something else. We're creatures remember? We are constantly gaining information about ourselves with every interaction we have outside of ourselves. Countless people are turning inward, only to become depressed and confused as to why they don't really know themselves. Or realize that their internal self is as much of a moving target as the external world they're judging themselves against. So, the chase is on, I am what I happen to be feeling now.

In expressive individualism, the highest value is authenticity, and the constant feeling is one of hypocrisy. You lack, because you doubt yourself. But as you get to know yourself, you realizing there is a lot worth doubting. So, our culture is plagued with guilt and anxiety.

Secondly, we treat ourselves as purely creatures. The self is not something that is to be discovered as we relate to God and things in the world, but it is rather to be made. The self is located completely in our context. We realize we require external validation to truly know ourselves with any consistency and we therefore locate ourselves completely outside of ourselves. What makes you you, what gives you value and meaning? Perhaps it's the success of your children, perhaps it is the success of your business, recognition for your brilliance, your group identity. You turn completely outward, so that knowledge of yourself is located totally outside of yourself.

The difficulty is this is just as fickle, just as much of a moving target as your internal self. The ethic of achievement leaves you just as anxious and guilt ridden as the ethic of self-expression, because there is nothing you can rest your identity on in the world that can hold that type of weight. You will crush your children, your business will never be enough, you'll always find a group

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<sup>6</sup> Havrilesky, Heather. "Its Never Been Harder to Be Young" *New York Magazine*. July 2016. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-exhausting-task-of-finding-yourself-and-your-best-life-now/>

more persecuted than yours, you'll always find someone smarter. We must return to our creator to see how we are truly defined.

### **3. How does your creator define you?**

*John 1:12-13 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

The Gospel offers us a way to know ourselves accurately in the very way we we're created. As creatures in the image of God. As creatures, we can't simply look inside to know who we are. We live in a time and place and context that is constantly informing our identity, we are designed to be told who we are. But in our sinful fallen state, we turn off God's voice telling us who we are, and we look for our identity only in the fickle voice in our heads, or the fickle voice of other's praise. The only being in existence that is capable of providing you with a meaningful answer to who you are, is also the very voice we turned away from. The voice of God.

As image bearers, however, we know that listening to this voice, means seeing who God is, and our own true selves being exposed. Our sinfulness, and brokenness, and fickleness, and deceitfulness, will all be laid bare before a Holy God. We can't know him, the only source of our identity, without realizing the brokenness of our identity.

This is why the Gospel is such good news. God, did not leave us in our state of brokenness alienated from him and ourselves. Instead, he took our brokenness upon him. In Christ, God restores us to a place beyond image bearers, but in fact to become the very children of God. As this verse in John 1 says, we are given the right to become children of God, born not of blood, meaning this is not our family identity or group identity that ultimately provides us meaning. We are not born of the will of the flesh, meaning it is not our own achievements that provide us with meaning. We are not born of the will of man, meaning it is not the approval of others that ultimately provides us with our meaning. We are born of the will of God.

In the same way we were created initially, only by the will of God, merely receiving our identity not finding or making it, so too in the gospel we can be recreated, to receive the identity we were made for.

Only in hearing God's voice declare your identity in the gospel, can you truly begin to know yourself. You can turn inward, and see a brokenness that won't crush you, you can turn outward and create good in the world that doesn't define you, but only if you can hear God tell you that you are his child.