

Title: The Image of God

Scriptures: Psalm 8 and [Genesis 1:26-31](#)

Date Used: October 9, 2022

Focus: What does it mean that we are created in the image of God? How does this inform how we view ourselves? How does this affect how we view others? What does it say about how I am to treat others? To recognize the image of God in ourselves and to act upon the world out of this self-understanding is foundational to the Christian life.

The late professor of Homiletics, Fred Craddock, used to tell of a conversation he had with a restaurant patron while he and his wife were vacationing in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, years ago.

Fred and his wife were eating breakfast at this little restaurant, hoping to enjoy a quiet meal together. While they were waiting on their food to arrive, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired gentleman going from table to table, visiting with the guests. When Fred saw this, he leaned over to his wife and said, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But sure enough the gentleman did. "Where are you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma," Fred answered.

"Great to have you here in Tennessee," the stranger said. "What do you do for a living?"

"I work in a seminary," Fred replied.

"Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a really great story for you." And with that the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with the Craddock's. The professor of homiletics groaned and thought to himself, "Great, just what I need another preacher story!"

The man started, "See that mountain over there," and he gestures to a nearby mountain. "Not far from the base of that mountain a boy was born to an unwed mother." The man telling the story was referring to himself, born in 1870, at a time when children born to unwed mothers were often ostracized. The man continued his story and told the Craddock's that by the time he was three years old, the parents of other children in the community would not allow their children to play with him.

He recalled that as a child when he and his mother took trips into town that people would stare at them. He always figured they were trying to figure out who his father was. At school, the children were cruel to him, so he stayed by himself at recess, and he ate lunch alone.

Now, it was a big event when anything new happened in the foothills of the mountains in eastern Tennessee. When he was twelve years old a new preacher came to pastor the small church in his hometown.

Well, he began to hear exciting things about this new pastor – about how loving and caring he was, how he accepted people as they were, and how when he was with someone, he made that person feel like they were the most important person in the world.

Though he had never gone to church in his life, one Sunday he decided to check this new preacher out for himself. He arrived late to the worship service and then he left early because he didn't want to attract any attention to himself. Well, he liked what he heard, so he went back to church the following week.

He kept going back to church week after week. He maintained that same pattern. He would arrive to the service late and leave early because he didn't want anyone to talk to him and he certainly didn't want to hear anyone talk about him.

Well, one Sunday, he got so caught up in the message, that before he knew it, the preacher had given the benediction and the service was over. He wanted to make a quick escape out of the church, but he couldn't because the aisle was crowded. As he worked his way through the crowd, he felt a hand come down on his shoulder. He turned to see the minister looking right at him. The preacher started to examine the boy's face. He just had this awful feeling that the preacher was going to try to guess who his father was.

A moment later the preacher said, "Well, boy, you're a child of..." and he paused there. Then he continued, "Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance." Then he swatted me on the behind and said, "Now, you go claim your inheritance."

The gentleman sitting at the table with the Craddock's stated that he left the church a different person. In fact, he said, that was really the beginning of his life. He said, "You know, if that preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything."

With that the gentleman rose from the table and went on his way.

The Craddock's just sat there for a moment, processing what they had just heard. Then Fred Craddock called the waitress over and asked her, "Do you know who the man that was sitting at our table?"

The waitress grinned and said, "Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's the former governor of Tennessee!"

In the story about Ben Hooper, did you catch that it was when Ben began to be viewed as a child of God, that he began to view himself as a child of God. When someone looked at Ben and saw the image of God in him, then Ben began to realize and recognize the image of God in himself.

The Christian doctrine of “Imago Dei”, the image of God, affirms that we are all created in the image of God. This doctrine of the Christian faith also affirms that God has given us the ability to not only understanding this, but to reflect this understanding in our lives. We have not only been given the ability to comprehend this, but God has empowered us to be a reflection of the image of God, the very nature of God, who created each one of us.

For me to say that I am created in the image of God is to know that the essence of God is within me.

For me to confess that you are made in the image of God is to realize the essence of God resides and abides in you and in every other person God has created.

When we take the time to reflect and meditate upon what it means to be made in the image of God, we begin to comprehend the implication this understanding, this world view, has upon our lives – it informs how we view ourselves and it informs us about how we are to view one another.

The founder of the Methodist movement in England, John Wesley, used to get into theological debates with the followers of John Calvin – the Calvinists. The Calvinist’s believed that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and fell out of favor with God, they believed that there was nothing of God left within them. They were no longer in any way a reflection of the divine image of God. They, and all their offspring that would follow them, were and would be totally corrupt.

Wesley did not agree with this. Wesley said that even though Adam and Eve messed up, even though they had fallen from grace, the nature of God did not totally leave them. There was still some essence of God left within them.

In defending this position Wesley would point out that we as people intuitively know when we do something wrong. We have a little voice that tells us that we messed up. And we get a certain feeling in our gut when we are even thinking about doing something wrong. Wesley would say, that is evidence that there is the part of God that remains with us.

When I was serving Main Street UMC in Mansfield, a middle-aged man named Gilbert began to attend the church. He eventually became the director of our outreach ministries. Gilbert's life story was very different from the life stories of everyone else that attended the Main Street Church.

As a child, in order to provide extra income for the family, his mother turned their home into a gambling house. He told me that as a teenager his mother employed him to help her. He said he made some pretty good money dealing cards. About that same time in his life, he began to use drugs and then as a young man he began to sell drugs. To increase his revenue even more, he eventually became a pimp as well. Again, his life experience was vastly different from the rest of people who attended that church.

One day as he and I were talking I asked him, "So how did you end up here? How did you end up in the church? What change took place in your life that moved you to abandon that lifestyle and eventually become the director of outreach ministries at this church?"

He told me about the day he went to the home of a man who owed him some money for some drugs the man had purchased from him. Gilbert recalled that as he entered the man's home, he saw not only the man there but the man's wife and the couple's two young children. He recalled that as soon as he entered the house the woman grabbed her purse, she began to clutch it against her body as she begged her husband not to take the money. She pleaded, "We need the money to feed our babies." The man began to engage in a tug-if-war with his wife, trying to get control of the purse.

As they engaged in this tussle for control of the purse, the two children who were watching this scene began to cry and scream. They watched as their father struck their mother and took the purse out of her arms. Then they watched as their father rummaged through the purse until he found the money he owed to Gilbert and paid him.

Upon receiving the money he was owed Gilbert quickly exited the home. He said he walked around the corner of the house, and he just broke down into tears. He said he knew in that moment, his life had to change.

Wesley says that what kept Gilbert and what keeps us from ever being totally lost is the work of God's preventing grace, or prevenient grace, in our lives. It is that part of God that even when we are at our very worst, when it seems we couldn't be further removed from the will of God or more removed from the ways of God than we currently are, when we are the most distant, we can be from God, it is that part of God that is still present within us. It is the essence of God that never leaves us.

Wesley says, it is that part of God that as we begin to pay attention to it, as we begin to focus upon it, it begins to grow within us. It keeps growing in us until we come to the realization that we need to experience God's life saving grace, or as Wesley called it, God's justifying grace.... Justifying grace, in Wesley's theology, is what God does in us and for us by bringing us to the realization that we need a Savior. It is what God does for us by bringing us to the realization that we need to become a new creation in and through Jesus Christ. It is what God does in us to bring us to the realization we need to be saved.

Prevenient grace brings us to the realization we need to receive God's justifying or saving grace. But it does not end there.

Upon being saved, upon experiencing Christ's justifying grace, Wesley notes that the presence of God within us continues to grow. And this spiritual growth is accompanied by a growth in our understanding of what it means to be made the image of God. And we not only grow in our understanding of what it means to be the image of God, but we continue to grow into the image of God in our lives. Wesley refers to this ongoing spiritual growth, the movement into God's sanctifying grace. We continue to grow more and more into the image and likeness of God. Wesley believed that we grow in this likeness to the point that we become perfect in love as God is perfect in love. We are sanctified.

When we become aware that we have been created in the image of God, and we continue to increase our understanding of what it means to be made in God's image, we come to understand that we have been engaged by the movement of God's grace in our lives to continue to grow into the divine image within us, to be moved and molded by God's Spirit and be sanctified – to be made perfect in love as God is perfect in love.

So why is this so important?

When we look at the way people interact with one another in our society, when we really examine how we interact with others, what do we see? When you reflect upon the conversations you engage in, or others are engaged in; when you look at what is posted on social media and what you post, does it reflect the image of God in you? And does what you share in posts reflect that you see the image of God in others?

It seems to me, if we want to make our society more civil, we need to begin by changing how we see and understand one another. That change in understanding begins with the realizing of what it means that you and I have been created in the image of God and the understanding that all those we encounter, and all those people God puts into our path, have been made in that same image.

As we live our lives and we allow our lives to be a reflection of the image of God at work in us, the essence of God that is transforming us and moving us toward sanctification, God will use our words and God will use our witness as a way of helping others to come to the awareness that they too have been created in the image of God.