

## Radically Made in God's Image Genesis 9:1-7

I want to share with you today what I believe is the most important, most foundational, keystone idea that underlies justice. Where it is believed in and well-practiced, Biblical justice flourishes. Where it is neither believed in nor practiced, injustice flourishes and often tragedy, terror, bloodshed and even worse ensues.

For freedom, justice and human flourishing there is no more important idea.

And this idea is omnipresent in God's Word—championed from the very first chapter and sprinkled throughout every book in some way, shape and form.

The British theologian Os Guinness said:

**There can be no doubt that together the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures offer an account of the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual person, equality before the law is incomparable.**

As a reminder we have said throughout this sermon series on justice that the Biblical definition of justice is a very simple idea. Justice is having right relationships with others. And that right relationship is grounded in what Jesus called the Greatest Commandment. The entirety of God's law, Jesus said, can be summarized in these few words.

The first part of the Greatest Commandment is "You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, mind and strength." And the second part, Jesus said, is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And we might understand why this first part of the Commandment is necessary. It makes sense. The Lord is God. He made heaven and earth and everything in it. He made you and me. Jesus gave His life for us. The Lord holds sits on the throne of the cosmos, He hold the universe in the palm of His hand, He holds all things together. We should love Him with all our heart, mind and strength.

But this second part, for many people, is a little tougher.

Why are we supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves? Why is it so important to have right relationships?

For a very simple reason. God has made us in a very unique, extraordinary and magnificent way.

Every human being is made in the image of God and so every life has infinite value.

There is no more important idea for building a just society.

The Bible tells us two ways we practice this idea.

A lot of you will know the story of Noah's Ark. God saw that the world had become incredibly wicked, that every thought of every human being was constantly only evil. So God

destroyed every living thing—human and animal that lived on the earth—except for a man named Noah and his family and the floating zoo of hundreds of pairs of animals, male and female, who lived with them on a 450 foot long ship for something like 370 days.

When they got off, which was none too soon, Noah built an altar for the Lord and made a sacrifice on an altar of burning wood and God promised never to destroy the earth again and He blessed Noah and his family—meaning that he blessed all of humanity—because Noah and his family were the last people left and so we are all descendants of Noah. And the Lord repeated the charge, the instruction, the command He gave to Adam, the first man. He told Noah and his family to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and He gave them dominion over every living thing—plants, animals—placing them in our hands. And this was all very similar to what God said to Adam after He brought him forth from the ground and breathed life into him.

But then the Lord gave Noah something new, a command grounded in a fundamental truth about humanity—in fact it is a truth grounded in the very first thing we learn about humanity way back in the very chapter of the Bible that humanity—every single individual who has ever lived—is made in the image of God. This is what the Lord told Noah’s family:

**And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.**

#### **Genesis 9:5-6**

And then to make the point that there is something about humanity that God absolutely adores, delights in and values intently, the Lord told Noah and his family again: **Be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.**

So, two things are going on here that emphasize how important, how fundamental this idea is that human beings are created in the image of God.

First, we are told how **the image of God should be protected.**

This is the only place in Scripture where it is commanded for someone’s blood to be shed for their sin—the sin of shedding someone else’s blood. Now, the death penalty is prescribed for sin on a few occasions for various offenses—but shedding of someone’s blood is different. To intentionally spill the blood of another person is a statement of the gravity of their sin. The reason for this is because the blood is sacred, the blood is life. And for someone’s life to be deliberately poured out on the ground as a punishment is reserved for the gravest of offenses. Human beings made in the image of God is that important an idea, so fundamental to our existence, that anyone who violates it by taking another’s life forfeits their own. The image of God should be protected, honored and recognized at that level. And the power to take a life or someone made in the image of God is to be reserved for God alone and only under the conditions He has set.

However, it is not enough just to protect the image of God—like a museum piece that we keep under UV protected, unbreakable glass. **The Bible also tells us how the image of God should be propagated.**

Jesus is a God of absolute abundance. He is God who provides. And He is a God who is passionately, madly, deeply in love with the humanity He made in His image. So His

command to the family of mankind is “Be fruitful, increase greatly and fill the earth” with your kind. This is God’s command, He wants to see the earth full of the image of God, overflowing with the sanctity, the beauty, the mystery, the joy, the splendor, the blessing of human life.

Now we are told the earth is overpopulated—mainly by people who live in big cities on top of each other in buildings 40 stories tall. But just drive about 15 minutes west or north of here and keep driving for hours and hours and even days and you tell if there is room for more people. I once traveled through the Midwest with someone who spent their entire life living in and around New York. They had never driven through Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas et cetera and all they could say over and over again was, “Where are all the people?”

But this command to “Be fruitful, multiply, and increase greatly” underlies the idea that God seeks to provide abundantly for those people who are made in His image and He has our welfare in mind because He we are fearfully and wonderfully made in His image—everyone, all of us and God wants to fill the earth with what He finds beautiful. We find nature beautiful and glorious and it is of course—but God sees even more beauty and glory in a single human being than in all the snow-capped mountain peaks, rosy-fingered dawns and shimmering lakes and streams in the world.

So if we are going to be just, carry out justice, love our neighbor as ourselves and honor, respect, and cherish the image of God in other people we must do these two things—we must protect and propagate that image of God in other people.

How do we do that?

Let’s talk about protecting the image of God first.

We already have a well-known legal device, well-known to all of us here, written into the foundational documents of our nation and many others that can be a strong protection for the image of God in our society.

They are called ‘rights.’

What is a ‘right?’

A right is permission to act that cannot be taken away. A right is an entitlement for someone to do something or receive something no matter what. For example, in our country we have historically said we have the rights of life, liberty, speech, pursuit of happiness and the right to own property. And our foundational documents have said no one can take those away unless we break the law by denying other people their foundational rights.

No one can take those things away from us because the one who gives them to us is God. They are not given to us by the government. They are not given to us by our fellow citizens, they are given to us by God by virtue of the fact that we are made in His image. Those rights are present in our lives in order to safeguard the image of God in us from what other people may do to not recognize that image or even damage or destroy it. In free societies, rights are a safeguard. And some of have said that rights are the secular expression of the primacy of the image of God and not only that rights are the secular expression of the primacy of God Himself. Charles Malik was an ambassador from Lebanon. He was one of the first Secretary Generals of the United Nations. He was also a distinguished Christian theologian and one of the chief authors of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. Here is what he said about the relationship between rights and the state:

**But if these rights and freedoms belong to man as man, then the state or the United Nations, far from conferring them upon him, must recognize and respect them, or else it would be violating the higher law of his being. This is the question of whether the state is subject to higher law, the law of nature, or whether it is a sufficient law unto itself.**

**Ambassador Charles Malik**

So rights are intended not only as a way that we protect the image of God in our relationships but also as a way that we hold the state accountable to a higher power. It often does not go well when any government, be it dictatorship or democracy or monarchy, comes to believe they do not have to answer to God. Those governments automatically become unjust.

There are two ways that Christians misunderstand rights.

First, we misunderstand rights as something that is selfish—something that if we insist that we have, then we are sinfully self-interested or narcissistic. There has been a lot of discussion about this idea particularly around COVID restrictions, vaccines and masks. And it has been a common Christian refrain that it is selfish of Christians, in particular, who should be willing to make sacrifices to accommodate and serve others, to insist upon their rights. We are told that if we love our neighbor, we will readily give up our rights.

If we love our neighbor, we will serve our neighbor, we will recognize the image of God in them, we will sacrifice for them—but that doesn't necessarily mean we allow the government or anyone else to revoke anyone's rights.

As Christians we should recognize that we can struggle for rights and insist upon our rights not only for ourselves but for others as well—including those who are not born yet, even generations to come. And we do it not so we can merely do whatever we please (and we'll get to that in a minute) we do it because we see rights as an important safeguard for the image of God and we know that in a broken world rights are always hard won, most often by blood.

In fact, there are some theologians, including Martin Luther King Jr., who have said that when a law is unjust, it is our duty, as followers of Jesus Christ, to defy it

**How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. ... An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.**

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

Although some misguided people said it at the time, there was nothing selfish about the people in Montgomery, AL refusing the ride the city busses when the law said they had to give up their seat for a white person. There was nothing selfish about getting sprayed with firehoses or bit by police dogs in Birmingham. Indeed, you even saw people in their 70's and 80's marching, protesting, speaking out, going to jail and breaking unjust laws and what you often heard was, "I am doing this so my grandchildren can live in a better world."

Second, we misunderstand rights as something we may do rather than something we should do. Rights give us permission but rights do not determine what is morally permissible. Because I have a right to do something does not mean that I am right to do something. Merely having the right does not mean that I am justified.

For example, I once had a man who came to me with a problem in his marriage. He had a friend who was female. He and this friend went to lunches together, occasionally dinner without their spouses. His wife objected and this was difficult for him. I believe him when he said the relationship was not physically intimate. But he justified his behavior saying, "I have a right to have friends."

And with that I could not argue. Being married does not preclude having friendships, including friendships of the opposite sex. But, I told him just because he has a right, it does not mean that it was proper for him to cultivate that kind of relationship.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in a hurry and I, along with several other people at the event, parked in a church parking lot where there was plenty of parking. Pretty soon an announcement came over the loudspeaker saying that the Church was telling all of us who parked in their parking lot to move. So, I left the event, moved my car at great trouble about a half-mile away from the empty church parking lot. Now, that Church was within their rights to ask us to move. But, was it proper? Was it morally correct?

The British philosopher John Locke made a distinction between liberty and license.

Locke said:

**But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license...no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions. For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker.**

Our liberty comes from our rights. But license comes from God's law. It is not enough to have a right, God's Word must also tell us we are in the right. There is no surer, quicker way to put the rights of everyone at risk than to act immorally, selfishly, greedily or venally. Justice and freedom demands a moral, selfless people. We cannot expect justice and freedom when we live simply to serve ourselves and do whatever is right in our own eyes.

Second, how do we propagate the image of God in the world?

God's promise about the urgency to propagate humanity, to be fruitful, multiply and the fill the earth is undergirded by God's promise of abundance, the principle that God's provides.

As we once again look at Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, we see this principle of God's abundance at work. As the Samaritan rode down a lonely and dangerous road, he saw a Jewish man, a man from a race that hated people like him. This man had been beaten, stripped, robbed and left for dead. Two holy men, men of his own race passed by, and they determined that God would not provide for this man through them. But the Samaritan stopped to help him. He trusted God to provide. He trusted God had made this world big enough. He bandaged his wounds and poured oil and wine on them. He placed the man on his own animal and carried him to an inn. And there he cared for this foreigner, this stranger for days. And when the Samaritan left, he told the innkeeper, you take care of him and whatever more it costs, I will repay.

The Samaritan saw the image of God in a man who hated him and he cared for him abundantly.

The great struggle to justice most communities have, the great challenge faced by most nations is “How do they create a society that champions all people? How do we not have a culture that allows one person to define themselves against another or allows discrimination against one group of people so that only some can live abundantly and freely?”

America is no stranger to this struggle.

For most of our history we have not sought abundance for everyone, the abundance God seeks for everyone created in His image.

And in the mid to late 1960's, after centuries of discrimination, we said legislatively as a nation that we will no longer discriminate against people based on the color of their skin, that we will rise up and live out that meaning of creed, “That all men are created equal and they are endowed with the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

It marked a major turning point for our country, where we said, “We are going to live out of abundance for all. We are going to

It only lasted a few years.