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Sermon Series: *Show Me Some ID, No. 3*

Above the Rest

January 29, 2023

Genesis 2:15-23 (NIV)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

¹⁸ *The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."*

¹⁹ *Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.*

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."*

We are back in Genesis this morning – the second chapter. You're welcome to join me there if you'd like.

We are investing a few weeks here in the topic of *identity*, since these days, so much of the rest of our American culture, anyway, is in many ways debating the essence of identity.

And we are wading into this – we're getting all metaphysical here – because believers in God and followers of Jesus (the "God world") have something to say to the rest of our world about *identity*.

Now, we speak about this lovingly and hopefully winsomely, not arrogantly and not condescendingly.

But just the same, we speak without ambiguity or doubt, because our world is hurting and needs to hear a better option than what is being offered loudly by the non-God world about how to think about identity.

A couple weeks ago, we defined identity as "a person's sense of self and self-worth," and more or less, both the God and non-God worlds agree with that definition.

From there on though, it gets dicey.

The God world – and I might point out here that this is true not *just* for the Judeo-Christian religion, but really *all* the major religions of our world – has more or less agreed that identity comes to us from *outside ourselves*.

In fact, the biggest part of the non-god world throughout history would also affirm that *identity is not something we can simply choose*.

The fact is, this whole suggestion that we can declare our own identity and that more and more in our culture are affirming: the reality is, that idea is something quite new and largely unique to Western European culture.

It's very much outside of the world's mainstream and history, and we need to understand that.

The God world says that identity comes to us from our Creator. According to Genesis, Chapter One, this is who God says all of us humans are:

- 1) We are made by God in His own image and likeness.
- 2) We are of tremendous value.
- 3) We are ranked above the rest of creation.
- 4) We are made either male or female.
- 5) We have been made to flourish and relate with one another and to lead the rest of creation, and
- 6) We are very good.

We said two weeks ago that this is who we are, who God made us to be.

Last week, we added to that the fact that ever since Adam and Eve exercised their God-given free will and did something that was contrary to God's best, we are *now*, all of us, also *broken* because of *sin*. And that brokenness has caused damage *in us* and in our *relationships* with *everything* and *everyone* around us, including God.

Whether or not we realize it, we are sick with sin, and we cannot cure ourselves.

In fact, the only cure was for God Himself to offer the life of Jesus, His own sinless Son, in exchange for our lives.

The pure given for the impure; the innocent for the guilty, you see?

That's why Jesus died on a cross on Good Friday two thousand years ago – to pay a debt we couldn't pay, so that we might be redeemed and restored.

But that brokenness is part of our identity too.

We can be forgiven in Jesus. And we can then be guided and helped by His Spirit, even to the point that our intentions and motives can be absolutely pure.

But even then, we still make mistakes; we err in our judgment and perception and interpretation of things.

We still get sick. We still need glasses and hearing aids and pacemakers and chemotherapy because we still deal with that sin-caused brokenness in one way or another.

That's just part of who we are.

Made good.

Broken because of sin.

Offered redemption because God loves us so much.

For God so loved the world that He gave...

That's who we are. And you know, until we embrace that, try as we might, we will never fully understand *ourselves* or *God* or *anything else* that happens in our world.

Now, my thinking as of today is to dive a little deeper each week into one of those principles of identity

from Genesis 1. And the one for today is the fact that *we, as humans, rank above the rest of the created order.*

God made us different and exceedingly better than anything else in creation.

Do you believe that? We, simply as people—even with our weaknesses: you and I are above and beyond all else that God made. Do you believe that? It's true!

Why is it important to note this? Is this just to feed our own already over-fed human egos?

No.

Let me suggest *three* reasons that it's important to embrace our place in creation as part of our identity.

The first is simply that it's the clear teaching of Scripture, and so it honors God to affirm it, and it dishonors God when we reject it.

We honor God when we embrace who we are in the created order.

Where do we find this in the Bible? It's all over the place.

We've already talked about how Genesis 1 says God made humanity in *His image and likeness*. That is a claim reserved only for humans.¹ James 3:9 echoes this in the New Testament.

Genesis 1, verse 28, also says, *"God blessed the man and woman and said to them: fill the earth and subdue it—rule over every living creature."* We were made to govern the rest of creation, you see? Genesis 9:1-3 affirms that, too.

Today's passage, Genesis 2, tells us that God charged the man with naming the animals, which implicitly suggests man occupies a position of authority and sovereignty over them.²

Genesis 3:21 even tells us that God used animal skins to clothe Adam and Eve, and in several places, we see God authorizing humans to kill animals for food. Yet we cannot do the same with people.

Psalms 8 is a song about humanity ruling over the rest of creation.³

There is also a whole raft of verses in the Bible that talk about the fact that humanity is more intelligent than animals,⁴ to the point that God communicates with humanity through written words; something He never does with animals.⁵

Also, unlike animals, humans are responsible to study God's word and obey it, according to Job, Zechariah, the Apostle Paul and others.

Romans 2 is an example of the many places in the Bible that remind us that humans, unlike animals, are responsible moral creatures who will be judged and will receive eternal rewards according to their lives.

And then, of course, Jesus, in several places, affirms humanity's inherently higher value to God than that of animals.

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Genesis 2:19

³ Psalm 8:4-8

⁴ Job 35:10,11; Psalms 73:22; Hosea 7:11; Psalms 32:9

⁵ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

In speaking about our tendency to worry about what's to come, Jesus reminds us, *"Look how well God provides for the birds and the flowers of the fields, and you're way more valuable to Him than these... so how much more will He provide for you!"*⁶

In His defense of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus speaks of how someone would work to save their sheep on the Sabbath if it were to fall into a pit, and then asks rhetorically, *"And how much more valuable is a man than a sheep?"*⁷

Also, Jesus mentioned to the Canaanite woman how, *"It's not right to take the food of children and give it to dogs."*⁸

We could go on and on, but all this is to say, we do both God and ourselves a grave injustice to imagine that animals are anywhere near as important as people are.

Now, in saying this, I certainly don't mean that we shouldn't appreciate animals for what they are.

I'd imagine most of us appreciate them as pets.

We grew up having a pet dog. Today, my mom has a dog. I'm glad she has a dog. She lives alone and he's company to her.

Animals are a source of a measure of affection and they can bring calm and companionship to people.

Some are trained for all sorts of special duties.

Some can offer protection, like those specially trained attack guinea pigs—did you ever see those?

No, I'm just making that up.

Animals bring all sorts of good to people's lives—and that's important. Most of us can appreciate that.

Just the same, most of us also appreciate animals contributing in some way to our breakfast, lunch or dinner.

That's the old joke about the big difference between being *involved* in something and being *committed* to something, you know? For a bacon and egg breakfast to happen, the chicken can be involved, but the pig has to be committed.

Now, some don't appreciate animals that way, and that's OK. That's not a salvation issue. We don't judge each other for that.

So, we appreciate animals as pets.

We appreciate animals as sustenance.

Most of us probably appreciate them in both ways to some degree.

And, let me also add that simply because we rank *above* them, we do *not abuse* animals, any more than we abuse any other part of creation.

God charged us to be stewards, not abusers.

If you or I were to make something and give it to someone to care for, and they abused and wrecked it, we wouldn't appreciate that.

Well, neither does God.

⁶ Matthew 6:26-30; Matthew 10:29-31

⁷ Matthew 12:11-12

⁸ Matthew 15:26

God made animals, just as He made everything else, for *His* pleasure and for *our good, not* for our *abuse*.

God's word says that we are the pinnacle of His creation, and that is good news to people today who wonder who they are, so that's reason enough to talk about it.

But there are *two other reasons* I bring all this up, and both have to do with a perspective that the non-God world is trying desperately to sell.

One is the assertion we hear more and more that humans are essentially equal in value to animals. It's usually not presented quite as starkly as that, but when taken to its end, that's where it goes.

Why is it so important for some to affirm, and to try to convince everyone else, that humans are nothing more than slightly more advanced animals?

They say it's about the diminishing of faith and the advancement of science and reason, but you know, I think, in reality, it's more about fear and control.

The truth is, it's far more reasonable to believe that something as marvelously complex as a person was intentionally made by an intelligent creator than it is to believe we just happened into existence.

It takes more faith to believe we're accidents than it does to believe in a Creator God.

People say that it's all about time, you know? But that's neither scientific nor reasonable.

You can leave a pile of logs in your backyard for 20 years or 200 years or 2000 years and that pile of logs will simply never just become a stack of 2 x 4s, or a picnic table, or a piece of furniture like this.

It's not about science or rationality. It's about *control*.

You see, affirming the happenstance appearance of humanity allows *us* to keep control of *us*. That's the true, non-negotiable behind humanistic evolutionary thought: we must remain in control – because the alternative is just too frightening for the non-God world.

You see, if we dare to let God – any god, even the *idea* of God – into our realm of possibility, well then, *we lose control*. Because with the notion of God comes the inevitable questions: "If God *is*, then, what *else* might that God be about? What might He *think*? What might He *want* – from *me*?"

What can we remember about a world, that is, about people broken by sin? To such persons whose thinking is skewed toward rebellion against God (which is precisely what happened to us all back in the Garden with the sin of Adam: rebellion against God, doing as we like), belief in *almost anything* works as long as they can stay in control.

So, those in our world who think that way: they are not God's enemies, nor ours. Not at all.

They are simply acting out of the broken nature into which we were all born, and the Christian position has to be one that comprehends that and then makes a loving, compassionate and winsome effort to present a better argument – a more sensible solution, actually.

And then, we prayerfully leave it to God's Spirit, if they'll allow it, to make an opening in their heart.

Now, to those folks, this sounds condescending and judgmental. I realize that. That's not our intention, but the fact is, we don't really have a choice.

We have to hold our ground in asserting that not only does God's word say, but also human experience says, common sense says, biology says, science and reason say, and the vast preponderance of human history affirms: humans are fundamentally different from animals and all other creation.

That's just the fact of it. We are above the rest in God's eyes, and we have to lovingly hold that line of truth in our society.

And just quickly here, the *third reason* I bring up this ranking of creation as part of identity is because when this gets out of order, all sorts of things that are *not good* begin to creep into society.

Valuing trees above people (whales above people, pet cats above people, that sort of thing) leads to bad places; the worst being that it leads to the systemic devaluation of human life – the very life God values the most.

There's a reason that *most* of the most vocal people (*not all*) who stand up for *non-human* life are *also* the *first* to *devalue human* life.

Let people kill unborn babies *and* old, inoperable geezers and other "non-useful" people, but don't you dare chop down that tree. And we have to pay whatever it costs to keep those baby ducks alive.

Now, it's great to like trees and ducks: God made them and He likes them too. But can I say to you, you're not going to get on well with God if you value *them* over *people*. We have to realize that.

Forgetting about the ranking of creation also causes confusion, especially in the lives of young people.

Treating animals like people, and I mean *just* like people: that sends wrong messages about worth to those who look on.

Again, there's *nothing* wrong with *appreciating* animals.

But when animals, or anything else, begin *replacing people* in our social connections, then it's time to re-evaluate, because eternally, *people* are what matter.

Now I know people can be cruel and hurtful, and because of that, some who've been on the receiving end of that sort of treatment have responded by immersing themselves either in nature or in relationships with non-people.

You know, you see those people on TV who wind up as recluses with a bazillion cats or whatever: we need to understand that most likely, those folks, at some point, have been badly hurt by someone, and they're responding by essentially rejecting human relationships.

Christ-followers can't do that, because, Jesus needs us and He's called us to engage with people.

Keep your pet, sure, but engage with people, because both our Christian brothers and sisters *and* those

around us who *don't* yet know Jesus need our encouragement and engagement and friendship.

The fact is, there are all sorts of things (both real, imaginary, *and* electronic) that can become relational substitutes for actual, real people in our lives – more today than ever before, and it's easier to slide into those patterns than ever before.

But all of those things are poor substitutes for the human relationships God made us to have. They make us less than what we really are.

Those things aren't real people.

Animals are not people.

Avatars are not people.

AIs are not people.

They don't have souls.

They don't need to be redeemed.

They are not made in God's image.

And for all of those reasons, we who follow Jesus cannot give up on people, and we cannot give in to any societal pressures toward allowing animals, or anything else in creation, to replace people or to become people to us.

We have to keep the created order straight, because there is nothing that would please our enemy more than to succeed even further in upending the created order.

Because that brings chaos.

God calls us to push back against chaos.

God calls us to stand as instruments of peace as we remind our world of His way and His order and His love.

Do you know that God made *you* in *His* own image?

Do you know that you, as a human, are *far above* all other created things?

Do you know that God *loves* you, in *spite* of your brokenness?

And do you know He gave His own Son, Jesus, so that you could know Him and live as He made you to live?

If you would just admit you need it, you can receive God's forgiveness and mercy through Jesus today, and you can begin embracing *who you really are* according to the God who made you.

Closing Prayer:

Father, would you come and help us today? Help us, first, to *receive who we are* as the pinnacle of Your creation, but then beyond that, help us take all the joy and peace in that truth that You intend for us to feel. You want us to know how special we are to You. Help us to know that and stand unashamedly in that.

And then, help us to steward that gift of Yours responsibly, lovingly and faithfully sharing the truth of who You are and who we are with an increasingly lost and searching world.

We want to be – and we want all around us to be – all You intend for us to be. Help us work with You in making that so. Amen.

Closing Song: *Lord, Thy Church on Earth is Seeking*

Benediction:

May the Lord powerfully convince and confirm in us *all* that He says we *are* and *all* that He *made* us to *be*.

And as He does *that*, may He also plant within us an urgent and compassionate concern to share who we are in Him with those around who don't know Him and so do not know themselves.