

## Identity

Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image.’”

**Question:** What does it mean that I am created in God’s image?

**Key Verses:** Matt 5:48; Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:6-8

### Who we are in relation to creation

After God created the heavens and earth, the seas and its creatures, the birds and the beasts, God capped off creation by shaping a human being from the dust of the earth. This singularly important moment in human history is described in detail in Genesis 1:26-27, “Then God said, ‘**Let us make mankind in our image**, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; **male and female he created them.**”

This statement identifies who we are as humans. We have a divine nature. CAUTION: We do not share divinity. That is to say, we are not eternal. We are not above judgement. We are not omniscient, omnipresent, or omnipotent. We are not demi-gods. However, and let’s not miss this, *we do share God’s nature*. Our genetic makeup is creaturely; our spiritual makeup is largely divine. This extraordinary observation has massive implications. It will change how we view virtually every human activity we participate in as well as those we participate with. Our view in the mirror will determine how we manage relationships, vocations, entertainments, stewardships, compassion, and worship. So let’s parse this verse to mine it for meaning. We will lift three words from this passage as banners to highlight our divine nature.

**Us:** God said “Let us make man in our own image.” Though the Trinity is a mystery we will never fully grasp, the least we can say is that God is community. The differentiated portions of the unified God—Father, Son, Spirit—work in concert to accomplish creation. Their different personalities and penchants, powers and responsibilities make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Now, the temptation is to chase this rabbit into a hole too deep to plumb just now. Perhaps I should apologize for bringing up a subject and then asking you to drop it. Nonetheless, the subject on the table is not God, but you. So could we agree just now to chase one simple point: Since God is community, so too are we.

You will never know your whole self in isolation. We know who we are to the extent that we are known. We become who we will be by become a part of community. As I sit here typing in the sunshine of Scottsdale, AZ, I’m a pastor of a church, a husband to a wife, the father of two grown children, the Papa to six, the son of two, brother of two. The list goes on but the point is sufficiently clear. Who I am is defined by my external connections not by my inward reflections. My characteristics are uniquely individualistic; my character is forged only by the anvil and iron of others with whom I come into contact.

The myth of millennials that they must leave community and traditions to find themselves is heretical nonsense. Our “self” is in community—abandon your community and you will lose something essential in your identity. This is why Scriptures use every earthly relationship as a metaphor for our connections with God. We learn to relate to God through fathers. Wives and husbands practice the relationship of Christ and the church. Brothers and

sisters portray Christians in action. On it goes: family, enemy, foreigner, lover are all theological metaphors in the Bible. God gave us earthly relationships (every one) to learn how best to relate to him. Mastery of human relationships facilitates community with the Divine. You are community; community is theology.

Whether we are willing to admit it or not, our self-identity is not in our individual characteristics but in our community. “Mirror, mirror on the wall...” tells me little about who I really am. Rather, I see myself through the eyes of others. What they value and celebrate determines my priorities, passions, and pastimes. Think of the child who routes for the Cubs. He doesn’t really care for the Cubs. He cares for his father’s approval who cares for the comradery of his childhood friends, who were looking for affirmation playing stickball and imagined themselves as part of a legendary team.

Why does this matter? Personally, it matters because each of us is seduced in our society to individual achievements and entertainments when they seldom produce the mental or even physical health that leads to happiness. In terms of the church, it matters because we try to connect with God as individuals when we were genetically designed to meet God in community. Here are some examples of how we’ve missed the mark. (1) We ask people to accept Jesus as their “personal” lord and savior without realizing the Bible calls us to a kingdom—to become conjoined in the body of Christ. (2) Communion is the most individualistically oriented time of the service when the name itself betrays a communal celebration. (3) Bible reading is practiced as a solitary discipline when, in fact, all sixty-six books were written to groups not individuals. (4) Prayer is preceded with “every head bowed and every eye closed,” even though the Psalms were public prayers for the community and Paul exhorts Timothy to tell men to pray everywhere with hands held high. Our individualism is a denial of our identity. God created us in community for community. Without the circles God placed us in we will have a shrunken view of self and a self-absorbed view of our purpose and place.

**OUR IMAGE:** A second idea that looms large over this passages is “God’s Image”. What precisely might that mean? God is spirit, not flesh. So what kind of characteristics has he placed in us that might define our identity. In order to tease this out with integrity, let’s identify the five primary life forms in the cosmos: Divine, angelic, human, animal, plant. Each has its own set of attributes and abilities. We can, for now, ignore the plants and angels since they are not the direct comparison at this point. The chart below, though incomplete, shows a range of characteristics that are shared partially across life forms.

Divine	Human	Animal
Emotion	Emotion	Emotion
	Body	Body
	Cravings	Cravings
	Shame	Shame
	Guilt	
Honor	Honor	
Time	Time	
Beauty	Beauty	

Language	Language	
Love	Love	

Animals, humans, and God all share emotions: joy, fear, affection, sorrow, compassion, etc. Animals and humans share a number of attributes such as a body that has cravings and a soul that feels shame when it doesn't live up to other's standards. The feeling of guilt is proprietary to humans. God certainly feels no guilt; nor do animals. They cannot meditate on the past, hence, apparently lack the capacity for guilt. There are, then, a range of capacities that humans share with God but not animals: honor, time, beauty, language, and love. Herein, I believe, lies the "image of God" in us. For the sake of clarity, let's explore those listed, recognizing there are certainly others.

**Honor** is that internal drive to be significant. It is an underlying factor of virtually all our attractions, distractions, vocations, and hobbies. It is why we dress up, work hard, route for the right team, mow our lawns, and brush our teeth. We need (I don't use this word lightly) to be well thought of. This should come as no surprise since the driving force of God's creation was his need for honor. One recognizes, of course, that this inherent drive, gone bad, is the fountain source of all other sins. We call it pride. Our divine nature, out from under divine sovereignty, will always result in idolatry. Always.

**Time**, or the awareness of time, a uniquely human trait in the world that derives from the very nature of God. Though he is eternal, he brokers in time. That's why he has dreams, patience, and strategies. He was aware of the past and has his eye on the future. He makes plans, writes histories, and lays the foundation for a future. Sure, God is able to live above time, always present in both past and future. So, in a sense, God doesn't predict the future but relates his experience of it in the present. Likewise, he never lets go of the past because he is still experiencing it. Nonetheless, God is and has been, acutely aware of time. Therefore, when we set a date, make a plan, execute a vision, schedule something on the calendar, look at a watch, or anticipate an event we are exercising a divine nature in us. Unlike God, we can never escape time; like God we always experience it.

Like God, we appreciate **beauty**. From colors to geometric shapes, from light to taste to sound and smell, we recognize beauty. Other animals recognize colors, but they don't decorate with them. We are the only animals that make art, set a table for dinner, rearrange the furniture. No other animal sings (birds and whales call, they don't create music). Not only do we create beauty, we constantly create it. We change styles of hair and dress. We write new songs and periodically invent new instruments and genres. We don't just tell stories, we create new mediums for those expressions from books, film, plays, musicals, cartoons, sitcoms, etc. Look around you right now. Unless you are in the wild, there is art in some form right now at your fingertips. We seem to be incapable of living without it, so the archaeological record would suggest.

**Language** is another uniquely human feature. From poetry to prose, physics to mathematics, logical arguments to legal documents, we broker in the abstract. A child can imagine a friend who isn't there and invent a conversation. This ability is why we fall in love and talk about babies yet unborn. This is the engine driving companies into the future. It inflames our passions, runs the printing presses, builds societies, and causes wars. Our imagination is a direct reflection of the divine spark in us.

Finally, there is **love**. Now, some will argue that animals love and they are not wrong. Of course an animal can protect its cubs. Pets can bond with owners. But no animal would sacrifice its life for someone it has never met. No animal has ever given sacrificially to victims of an earthquake. No animal empathizes with the loss of a stranger. When the Bible says, “For God so loved the world” (even his enemies), every human can grasp that while no other animal can. Why? Because our capacity to love the stranger, the alien, and our enemy is the noblest feature of our divine humanity. We are not God but we can love like him. In fact, that is precisely the prescient command of Jesus if we are to be sons like our Father in Heaven (Matt 5:48).

At this point, it bears mentioning that the characteristics of God are distributed to both male and female. Remember, “Male and Female he created them.” If we agree that God is Trinity, then it is no far stretch to say that some subset of his characteristics were embedded more in male and some more in female. In another place and time we can unpack that further. This much is necessary here: The Father embedded more of his characteristics in the male part of humanity—honor, provision, justice. The Spirit leaned into the feminine—new birth, communication, protection and creation of family. A robust theology naturally connects easier with men. A robust spirituality naturally connects easier with women. Both male and female can connect with God but the onramp for each might lean at a different angle. What this means, however, especially in light of what was written earlier about community, is that we had better pay attention to each other and leverage our differentiated strengths to fully connect with our creator God. Prioritizing men over women or women over men in the Christian Community will likely leave consequent gaps in our worship of God and our treatment of fellow humans.

**RULE:** Finally, the word “rule” expresses humanity’s obligation over creation. King David composed an entire song about it:

“LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set our glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1-9)

We are caretakers of God’s garden. Our created purpose is to improve what God made. We add our creativity to his creation. We have done that in many ways through agricultural development, art, industry, education, medicine, and technology. God’s creation was an environment perfectly designed by God for us but it was not complete without us. It will, in that sense, never be complete. Each of us has a plot, a gift, a vision of how to delight God by adding to the creation of the cosmos. Thus, every creative act, whether musical, architectural, athletic, or intellectual, is theological. We participate with the Father who is the architect by utilizing his raw resources to a greater end. We participate with the Spirit by engineering environments that

sustain and celebrate life. We participate with the Son by redemptively restoring people and the earth which is God's gift to his children.

When we fail in this vocation as stewards of God's earth, we find ourselves gravitating to our animalistic attributes of lust, greed, fear, and violence. Consequently, through addiction, poverty, pain, and alienation, we are ruled by the earth rather than being rulers of it.

Human beings were divinely designed to steward the earth in partnership with God. Our own creative acts of language, music, architecture, nation-building, etc. augment the glory of God's creation. He allows us not only to organize and protect his original creation, but add to it our own creative fingerprints. Our families, vocations, entertainments, and hobbies are actually daily acts that extend and glorify God's good creation. That is our birthright.

**Key Points:**

- Our true identity is found in community not individualistic characteristics.
- The image of God in us—language, art, time, community—is expressed in the most mundane actions of our day. These simple perpetual acts have potential eternal impact because they are more spiritual than natural.
- Our divine design enables and requires us to participate with God in the ongoing act of creation.

**Action Step:** Identify one “normal” activity you are involved with that has spiritual implications. Can you restructure or augment that activity to have greater spiritual impact in your circle of influence?

**Further Resources:** John Piper, [\*Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist\*](#) (Multnomah, 1986)