

# Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

## Day 13

### What Does It Mean to Be Human?

There are many issues surrounding us these days that make it all the more vital to understand what the Bible has to say about being human. For example, evolutionary theory says there is really no fundamental difference between humans and animals; humans are just more highly evolved animals with only minimal differences in DNA. If so, one implication might be that since humans are only animals, then human euthanasia can make sense. After all, we “put down” animals to alleviate suffering. Why not human animals?

We could carry that argument further by asking, *Will exponential advancements in computers (e.g., artificial intelligence) and robotics “inspire” us to no longer distinguish between people and machines? Is a day coming when the latter will be able to do all the former can do? Do we then treat humans like instruments and appliances and devices—that is, throw them out when they don’t work as well as they once did?*

#### **Made in God’s Image**

What can we learn from the Bible about questions like these? As we’ve seen, humans are created beings and therefore need to relate to the rest of creation. This means we are dependent upon God for our ongoing existence and that our purpose, like the rest of creation, is to bring glory to him (Isaiah 43:7). This purpose, then, gives our lives meaning.

We are not an accident of nature; we were intentionally and purposefully created by God. More than that, we are valuable to him. He cares so much for us that he knows the number of hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30; and he knows that for some of us that number decreases daily!).

Even though as created beings we relate to the rest of creation, we are distinct within the created order. Humans are the pinnacle of God’s creation; everything else was put here for our well-being. This brings us to probably the most important thing the Bible has to say about people: We are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7;

James 3:9). This is crucial because it seems essentially to be a biblical definition of “humanity.” *To be human is to be a divine image-bearer.*

However, even though this concept is key to comprehending humanity’s significance, the Bible does not explicitly clarify what it means. The texts cited above say that this is so but do not explain it much. A variety of explanations have been put forward.

### **How Do We Bear God’s Image?**

**First, the substantive view** suggests that the image of God means humans share certain characteristics with him. So in this sense, the image has to do with something that characterizes who we are—our being. For example, God has rationality, or reason, and humans do as well (*Homo sapiens* means “thinking being”). God is a moral being as are humans; we have consciences and think in terms of right and wrong. God is relational; so are humans. This has been the main view of Christians for a long time. One weakness is that it is largely speculative, without much explicit biblical support.

**Second, the relational view** suggests that the image of God means humans experience a relationship with God primarily, and secondarily with other humans. So this view is that rather than being something we are, the image is something we have—relationships. This reflects the relationships within the Trinity.

One of the strengths of this view is that it does capture something unique about humans. Plants and animals do not and cannot have this kind of relationship with God. One weakness is seen in regard to the image and unbelievers. The Bible says that apart from Christ, all people are separated from God. That is, non-Christians have *no* relationship with him. Would this mean they also do not bear his image?

Another weakness might be that this view seems to assume something in the substantive view, namely, that humans are relational beings. We cannot have relationships without being relational. So even though this view gets at something important, it is really based on something more fundamental in our *being* as humans.

**Third, the functional view** suggests that the image of God means humans are given a function. Rather than being something we are, or something we have, the divine image is

something we do. A clear strength of this view is that certain texts could be used to support it. For example, **Genesis 1:26–28**:

*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.*

*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

The image, accordingly, is that humans rule over, fill, and subdue the earth. This passage does indicate a close connection between the image and the responsibility, yet it does not necessarily equate them. Also, this view likewise seems based on something more fundamental about the being of humans, namely, that we can do what God has told us to do because of who he made us to be—our *being*, once again.

So as we assess these views, clearly they all point out important factors about humans that set us apart from the rest of creation, but the relational and functional views seem to be based on aspects of the substantive view. The image of God, then, apparently refers to those characteristics within humans that we share with God—how our being overlaps with his being.

### **What It Means to Bear God’s Image**

#### **What are some implications?**

For one thing, even though we do share some characteristics, only God is infinite and unlimited. A fundamental part of being human is to be finite and have limitations. We will have these limitations forever. Again, this means that we always will be—and should always acknowledge that we are—dependent upon the infinite and unlimited One.

For another, since humans bear the image of God, human life is sacred (Genesis 9:6). This also has implications for any violence against unborn children and for all forms of abuse—physical, verbal, sexual, emotional. All of these violate God’s image in the individual.

Furthermore, since *all* humans bear the image of God, all forms of racial, ethnic, age, economic, or gender prejudice or supremacy are wrong. All humans come from the same place (God) and have the same being (God's image). We must treat all people with dignity, equality, compassion, and care.

Finally, reflecting the image of God is the primary way humans fulfill their purpose to glorify him. He created us for this purpose, to represent him to the rest of creation. We are not God, but we are mirrors of God and his glory.

### **TRAGIC FACT**

If God created us in his image to reflect his glory, there is a problem: Our mirrors have been distorted by sin. Apart from his help, we cannot accurately and fully reflect God's glory. We will take this up in a few chapters. The solution is God's salvation through Jesus Christ.