

In His Image

Good to see you all this morning. If you've got a bible, **go with me to Genesis 1**. We'll get there here in just a moment. If you were here with us last week, you know that we kicked off a new series called *Intentional*. It's a series all about how we, as followers of Jesus, think about our *gender*. So if you *weren't* here last week, and this is your first time here on a Sunday and you didn't know this is what we were talking about, **Surprise!?** "Sorry?" Not really sure what exactly to say to you. But it is what it is.

But more importantly, **if that's you**, allow me to briefly recap what we talked about last week so you're up to speed. Last Sunday, **we really spent very little time talking about gender, and instead spent a lot of time just talking about God**. Specifically, we asked and answered the question, *can we trust what God has to say about gender?* And this probably comes as no surprise to you, since this is *church*, but we concluded that we can *indeed trust* what he has to say. For at least *three* main reasons: because he *created* us, because he is *smarter* than us, because he is *for us*. Three pretty solid reasons to at least consider what God has to say on the subject.

But with that established, this week I want to just **dive straight in**. **Last week was about whether or not to hear what God has to say about gender; this week is going to be what God has to say about gender**. And with that said, I just want to warn you: this week is going to be at least **somewhat dense**. Gonna feel a little bit less like a conversation, and a little more like a bible lecture. But that's because this week I need to unpack some big, foundational *ideas*, that we'll then get really practical with for the rest of the series. But I've got faith that we can get through it together. I'm trusting that y'all came in here today ready to *think*. Did you? Awesome, that's a relief ~~to me because I didn't really have anything else planned~~.

Here's **how we're going to go about it**. **Genesis chapter 1 is about as foundational of a text as there is in the bible about humanity**: it's the first moment that human beings appear in the story. And because of that, I think there is a *lot* to draw from it about how we understand ourselves and our identity. And what we find is that **the idea of gender is right at the center of it all**. **Now, I am going to be using the ideas of biological sex and gender interchangeably this morning**. I understand that that's a little different than how our society has begun talking about them recently, and we're going to dive into all of that more in the final week of the series. But for a variety of reasons I think it's simpler if we use them as synonyms today. But that said, I'm gonna read the passage in its *entirety* one more time for us. And then I want to draw out **two very simple conclusions**, that we will spend the rest of our time dissecting together. Make sense?

Okay, here's the passage:

[26] 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."
[27] So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. [28] 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."

There's our passage. Here are the conclusions I think we can draw from the passage. The conclusions themselves probably aren't going to be groundbreaking to many of us. But they are absolutely essential to understanding the biblical teaching about gender. Plus, they give us lenses for understanding where the society around us sometimes goes awry in their understanding of gender. And I'll try to show you that as we go along. Are you ready? Okay, first conclusion from our passage...

Men and women are equal.

More specifically, men and women are equal in dignity, worth, and value before God. In v. 26, it says that God created "mankind" (i.e. man and woman), in his image. And just in case that was ambiguous, it gets reiterated and spelled out even more clearly in v. 27. There, it says "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." So it would seem that this idea is fairly important to the author of Genesis: **men and women are both made in the image of God, equally.** It doesn't say that just men are created in the image of God. It doesn't say that men are created in the image of God, and then to a lesser extent, women are. It says male and female are both created in God's image. Which tells us **they are of equal importance to God, and should be seen as having equal importance by anyone who claims to know God.**

Now, that probably doesn't sound like a very radical statement to many of us living in 21st century America. But you should know that it has been a pretty radical statement to pretty much every other society in existence down throughout history. It absolutely was a radical statement to the original readers of Genesis. You see, other creation accounts written around the same time rarely even mention women, much less state that they are co-image bearers of the divine.¹ If women get mentioned, they are generally very inferior

¹ See, for example, the *Enuma Elish*.

to men, and mainly exist to bear men's children and extend the family line. The author of *Genesis*, however, is making it a point to say that women are not second-class citizens, baby-making machines, or afterthoughts; they are *equal* image bearers of God. Men and women are created *equal*.

We also see equality in the *instructions* given to men and women in v. 28:

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."

Notice the use of the word "them" in this verse. *Who* does God *bless*? *Them*. *Who* does God tell to be fruitful and increase in number? *Them*. *Who* does he tell to fill the earth and subdue it? *Them*. *Who* does he tell to *rule over* the rest of creation? *Them*. Adam and Eve. They are set up in the story as *co-rulers* over creation. *Co-image* bearers of God.

We also see equality in *Genesis 2*, where the story zooms in a bit.² We're told *there* that God creates *Adam* and gives him the task of working the garden and taking care of it. But he says it's "not good" for Adam "to be *alone*." Adam needs *help*—the task he's been given is too *great* for him to complete by himself. So there's this really peculiar passage where God brings a series of animals before Adam as potential partners in the task. Adam names (and dismisses) each of them. *None* of them are fit co-laborers for him. But then God creates *Eve*, brings her to *Adam*, and Adam says this about her:

"This at last is *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*; she shall be called *Woman*, because she was *taken out of Man*."³

Do you hear what Adam is *saying there*? He's saying essentially, "this one is like *me!*" "Bone of *my* bones, *flesh* of *my* flesh!" In other words, the *similarity* between him and the woman is what prompts him to realize that they were meant to be *together*. The fact that they are on the same level as one another. She's not *like* the *animals*; she's like *Adam*. Which Adam takes to mean that they were made to be with one another, and *partner* with one another. Precisely because of their *similarity*. They are *equal* image bearers of God.

And there's likely at least one *more reason* in *Genesis* for concluding that men and women are equal. It's actually back in v. 26. Look back there with me:

² What follows is a synopsis of *Genesis* 2:15-23.

³ *Genesis* 2:23

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...”

Do you hear **how God refers to himself** in that verse? It’s *plural*. Let us...our image...our likeness. He’s speaking in the first person *plural*. So who is this “us” he’s referring to? The most *plausible* explanation is that this is the first reference in the bible to what we call **the Trinity**. The idea that God eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **So there is something about man and woman, that is representative of the Trinity**. Each member of the Trinity is *different* from the other, and yet is *equal* in their divine identity. So follow me: wouldn’t it make sense, then, for God to create multiple types of humans, who are *different* from each other, and yet *equal* in being *image bearers* of God? To me, that would make a lot of sense. That would be *very* similar to the dynamic within the Trinity.

So from a variety of different angles, and for multiple different reasons, I think this passage teaches us that men and women are created equal by God. That’s the first conclusion. Here’s the *second* one, which I’ve already alluded to briefly...

Men and women are *distinct*.

So although men and women are considered *equal* in the biblical storyline, there’s **something very important for us to realize** about that equality. **Being equal is not the same as being identical. Or interchangeable. Two things can be equal in value and worth, while also being different and distinct from one another.** I’ll illustrate this with something completely *unrelated* to men and women, just so we can see how it works. Let’s say you **roll up to the local Target** this afternoon (as one does), and they have a table where they’ve got some classic pocket t-shirts on sale. There’s a sign on the table that says “All pocket tees, \$9.99.” And since they’ve been on sale, there are only two left in your size: a *blue* one, and a *yellow* one.

Question for you: are those two shirts *equal* in value? *Yep, sure are.* (Now you might say you personally *like* one of the colors better than the other—but that’s *subjective* value. I’m talking about *objective* value.) Are they *objectively equal* in value? Yes. *Undeniably equal* in value. You take them up to the register, and they will both be rung up at precisely nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. Those pocket tees are undeniably *equal*. *But...* does that mean that they are *identical* to each other? No—unless you’re colorblind, they *aren’t identical*. Blue is a very different color than yellow. If you told a friend of yours to pick you up a blue shirt at Target, and they came back with the yellow one, you would be very concerned for them. Because a yellow shirt is not identical *to*, or interchangeable *with*, a blue shirt. So two things being *equal* apparently does not *require* that they be *identical*.

So I would insist, then, that **we can simultaneously affirm that men and women are equal in value and worth, while also affirming that they are different and distinct from each other.** Despite what you may have heard, those are not contradictory ideas. Now here's what's fascinating to me about this. **Scientifically, quite a few studies** have now shown that the more *equality* there is between men and women in a particular society, the more measurable *distinction* we begin to see *between* men and women in that society. One reporter called this phenomenon "...one of the best *established findings* in psychology, even if no one can properly *explain* it."⁴ But I think we *can* explain it: **it's because God created men and women to be both equal, and also distinct from one another.**

But I **also** want you to **see this in our passage.** If God just wanted there to be two human beings in the story, because *two* people were needed to complete the task God gave them, **he could have created two men or two women—two identical humans.** But God doesn't do that: he creates a *man* and a *woman*. God *could* have created two *androgynous* humans that had more *arbitrary* differences, just for variety's sake: **one with green eyes and one with brown eyes. One with blonde hair and one with red hair.** But he didn't. **God creates one human who is anatomically and biologically male, and another human who is anatomically and biologically female.** So why is *that* distinction the one that gets emphasized in the story?

Well, at least **one reason is readily apparent** from the passage. God tells the man and the woman in Genesis 1 to **"be fruitful** and increase in number." Now, I don't mean to be *crude* here, but there's pretty much only one way that can happen. And it requires a biological male, and a biological *female* for it to happen. Is everybody with me? **If you're not following, I don't know that right now is the time to explain it to you, but I'm sure someone can at some point.** But hopefully most of us are tracking there. So that's one *vital*ly important distinction between men and women, and one reason that sexual *difference* is actually *essential*—not just to *God*, but to the human race and its survival.

But even from **more of a literary perspective** in the passage: if you know the story of Genesis 1, you know that up until now, God has been creating things essentially in corresponding "*pairs*." **He creates the heavens, and the earth. He creates the day, and the night. He creates the sea, and the land.** He creates the entire world in these *mutually corresponding* pairs. Not *identical* pairs, mind you, but equally *important* pairs, that are intentionally *different* from one another. So when we come to the *apex* of God's creation (humanity), we read that he once again creates a corresponding *pair*: a *man*, and a

⁴ You can read more about these findings [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) (the reporter quote is from the third link).

woman. These two categories aren't *arbitrary*, nor are they just *one of many* ways of categorizing human beings—they are *important* categories that are meant to correspond to, and *complete*, one another.

Put slightly differently, **we need both men and women** to show the world what God is like. Remember, it said “male *and* female, he created them.” So evidently, *men alone* can't fully communicate to the world what God is like. Neither can *women alone*. For the world to truly see what God is like, we need both men *and* women serving as image bearers. In fact, this **may come as a surprise** to some of us, but **throughout the bible, masculine and feminine imagery is used to describe God**. To be sure, God is always referred to as a *he*. But **when communicating what he is like, the bible constantly draws on both masculine and feminine metaphor**.

God is a **husband** to Israel, and a **father** to Jesus. He is described repeatedly as a **king** and a **warrior**—both *masculine* metaphors in the day and age in which they were used. God comes to earth as **Jesus, a Jewish male**. But at the same time, God isn't *afraid* to use *feminine* language to describe what he's like (and especially, his heart for people). In Isaiah 42, he comforts Israel like “a **mother comforts her child**.”⁵ In Isaiah 49, he says he can no more forget Israel than a **nursing mother** can *forget* the child she's feeding.⁶ **In the gospels, Jesus** says he longs to gather God's people together like a mother hen gathers her chicks to herself.⁷ *And* just in case you thought all the feminine imagery in the bible was loving, gentle, *nurturing* imagery, there's **Hosea 13**, where God says he will act as fiercely as a mother bear robbed of her cubs.⁸ **Have you ever seen how a mama bear responds when you mess with her cubs? It's not pretty.**

And I **could give you even more** examples. **But my question is this: why would the Scriptures feel the need to use both masculine and feminine imagery to describe the heart of God for his people? Might it be because men and women are both made in the image of God?** And might it be that we *need* both men *and* women to fully show the world what God is truly like? Sure does sound like a plausible reason to me. You see, if all we have is a world full of *men*, we miss out on key aspects of what God is like. If all we have is a world full of *women*, we *also* miss out on key aspects of what God is like. **We need both.** *And* if we erase and collapse all the *distinctions between men and women*—if we pretend as if they're identical—we *also* miss out on key aspects of what God is like. **The distinctions between men and women aren't just essential from a**

⁵ Isaiah 42:14

⁶ Isaiah 49:15

⁷ Luke 13:34 cf. Matthew 23:37.

⁸ Hosea 13:8

biological perspective; they're also beautiful and helpful from a *theological* perspective.

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So, in Genesis 1 we see that men and women are both *equal* in value, dignity and worth before God; *and* we see that men and women are different and *distinct* from one another. Now, I'll **be the first to admit** that these two ideas *can be difficult* to hold in tension with one another. We often have a hard time figuring out how to appreciate both the *equality* and the *distinction* between men and women at the same time. To the point that often, instead of holding those ideas *together*, we've often formed entire teams—especially in the Church—based on emphasizing *one* of those ideas over the other.

In the Church, we've **given names** to these two teams. If you've been around the Church long, you may have heard these. If not, no worries: they're really easy to learn. **One camp** refers to themselves as **egalitarian**. *Egalitarian* comes from the Latin word meaning “equal.” *Egalitarians* tend to emphasize the *equality* between men and women. The other camp calls themselves **complementarian**. *That* word emphasizes the idea that men and women *complement* (with an “e” in the middle) one another. In other words, they *differ*. *Complementarians* tend to focus mainly on the *differences* between men and women.

Now, these two *teams* **often present their positions** as two very different ways of *understanding* the relationship between men and women. **Sometimes they do that nicely, and sometimes they do it quite passive-aggressively. Sometimes they do it aggressive aggressively.** There's a whole genre of Christian publishing where these two camps write *books* at each other to argue for their respective positions. Now, as a pastor, I understand the value of giving *names* to different theological positions. Names *can* be helpful as a kind of “shorthand” for understanding people's perspectives.

But all *my* cards on the table, I do find **the names of these** particular camps a little **disorienting and unhelpful**. And here's why: because **these two camps often seem to split apart two beliefs that I believe God meant to be held together.** *Egalitarians* want to make sure we know that men and women are *equal*; *complementarians* want to make sure we know that men and women are *distinct*. But think back to earlier: which one of those ideas is *true* from the bible's perspective? Are men and women *equal*, or are they *distinct*? Yes. So perhaps you see the issue with the camps.

To me, being asked if I'm complementarian or egalitarian **is like someone asking me** if I'm a Tennessee football fan or a Tennessee baseball fan: “you have to pick one.” *Well I like both.* “Nope can't like both—gotta like one or the other.” *Do I though? It's not like they*

ever play each other. I don't think they're in competition with each other. Sure does seem like I can like both. That's kind of how I feel about picking the label *egalitarian* or *complementarian*: it feels like I'm being forced to pick between two things that are *both* good and important to God.

But there's **also a functional reason** I find those labels unhelpful. **Often, when you separate people into teams, we start focusing way more on distinguishing ourselves from the other team, than on aligning our team with the bible.** Contrast with the other team becomes the goal, instead of biblical *accuracy*. And eventually, people start moving towards the extreme *edges* of their team, just because they want to *distinguish* themselves from the other side.

And **indeed, this is often what happens** with egalitarians and complementarians. People who are passionate about *equality* feel like they have to *overstate* their position to make sure it gets *heard*. So **in order to make sure that men and women are equal, they end up communicating that they're identical or interchangeable.** And on the *extreme* end, people in this camp will end up saying that the *idea* of gender is entirely socially *constructed*.⁹ That in reality, there are no actual distinctions between men and women at all; just the distinctions we made up.

But **the other side does this** too. Sometimes people who are more *complementarian* get so alarmed by people trying to *erase* gender distinctions, that they start *overstating the distinctions* for effect. **They write books about how "men are from Mars" and "women are from Venus."** That's how different men and women are—they're actually from different **planets!** And that seems harmless until you realize that it *impacts* how men and women relate to each other. We end up feeling like it's *hopeless* to find anything in common with each other; we just have to learn how to cope with our differences, which usually looks like rolling our eyes and growing exasperated at how much of an alien they are to us.

But I want you to see: **God didn't ever intend for us to have to choose whether we think men and women are equal, or whether they are distinct.** Both can be true. And both *are* true, according to the Scriptures. **But as always, what God meant to be held together, Satan loves to tear apart. And he uses our sin to do that. So we end up with a world where many are trying to make men and women identical in the hopes of showing that they're equal, and a world where many are trying to insist that they are complete opposites just to communicate that they're distinct.**

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler are two proponents of this view, which is becoming increasingly mainstream.

So listen, because of all that. This means **you're not crazy if** you're looking at parts of our society right now and thinking to yourself, "it seems like we need more *equality* between men and women here. It feels like *here*, men and women are not being treated equally and that needs to change." There are quite a few places in our society where, *I would argue*, that is a very *accurate* assessment of the situation. It is not wrong for a follower of Jesus to push for more *equality* between men and women. As long as when you say "men and women should be *equal*," you *don't* mean "they should be *identical*."

And: you're not crazy if you're looking at parts of society right now and going, "it sure does seem like we could use more meaningful *distinction* between men and women here. It seems like here we're trying to erase the beautiful difference between men and women, and we don't have to do that." There are many places where, *I would argue*, *that* is a completely accurate assessment. So it isn't wrong for followers of Jesus to push for appreciating the *differences* between men and women. As long as when you say "men and women are *different*," you don't mean "one is *better* and more *important* than the other."

But I'll also say this: if you're looking around our world and only ever see *one* of those things as the problem—and never the other—I would argue you may not be looking close enough. You may be overlooking at least *half* of the problem. **You may be looking through the lens of your personal "team" and not through the lens of the Scriptures.** And more importantly, you may be neglecting a significant piece of the heart of God. **If God intended men and women to be both equal and distinct, it would follow that the Enemy would want to distort that understanding on both ends of the spectrum—not just one end or the other.** Chances are there are ways that our world needs more equality, and there are ways that our world needs more distinction. It's so important that we learn how to hold those two ideas in tension with one another.

But all of that said, I actually want to give you **one last conclusion** from the pages of the bible about men and women. And this one, believe it or not, is even *more important* than the first two. You ready? Here it is...

Conclusion #3:

There's something more *important* than equality and distinction.

As important as *equality and distinction* are, neither of them are of *ultimate* importance in the bible. They both *matter* deeply. And because they matter to God, they should matter to us too. But neither of them are *ultimate*. **They're not the ultimate aim of following Jesus. The ultimate aim of following Jesus, for men and women, is Christlikeness.** In the bible, we're not *primarily* encouraged to be formed more into a certain

defined image of our gender. We're *primarily* encouraged to *all* be formed into the image of Jesus. I'll give you a few examples:

Romans 8:29

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (that's Jesus), that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his (Jesus') image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Colossians 3:10

...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Ephesians 4:24

...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

So **these passages were** *all* written to men *and* women. And in *all* of them (and really, in the entire New Testament), the ultimate aim seems to be growing in **Christlikeness**. If masculinity or femininity is *there*, it's at best, **secondary**. What's **primary** is being made and remade in the image of God—and demonstrating to the world *what* God is truly *like*. So listen: **whatever your personal definition of masculinity or femininity currently is, I would hope that it has not become more important to you than Christlikeness. I would hope that, as a follower of Jesus, you are at least more focused on helping men and women around you become like Jesus, than you are on helping them become more masculine, or more feminine.**

Now, is being formed into the image of Jesus **going to look a little different** for a *man*, than it does for a woman? I would *imagine* so—because men and women *are different*. They're *distinct*. It'll probably look *different* in some ways, and *similar* in other ways. But **the ultimate goal for all of us is Christlikeness**. If for no other reason than **the more we all are formed into the image of Jesus, the more accurately we will reflect what he thinks about men and women. About equality and distinction**. If equality and distinction are embedded within the heart of *God*, they will become *more and more* a part of *our* heart as we are formed into *God's* image. Make sense?

So **the next two weeks**, we're going to talk about how we view *ourselves* as men and women. We're going to dig into some *specifics* about masculinity and some *specifics* about femininity. The two weeks after that, we're going to talk about how we approach our *relationships* with *each other* as men and women—both *friendship* and *marriage*. But today I just want us to end by thinking about *Christlikeness*. Because no amount of increased masculinity can make up for a lack of *Christlikeness*, and no amount of increased *femininity* can either. Whether it's how we view *ourselves*, or how we view each other, it all has to start here: *am I becoming more like Jesus?*

So in a moment, all of us who are followers of Jesus are going to approach the tables to take communion. And **as we do that**, that's what we're saying. We're asking Jesus, by the relationship made possible through the cross, by the power of his Spirit in dwelling us, to *make us more like him*. As we eat of the bread and drink of the cup, we're remembering that this whole thing is ultimately about *him*. It's not ultimately about gender or masculinity or femininity—those things are *important*, but they're also *secondary*. It's primarily about knowing, and becoming more *like*, him.. *Jesus* is most important. All of this is all about him.

Let's pray.