

THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

by Tim Crutcher

Focus

It is the age-old question: “Who am I?” Sometimes it is easy to look at the vastness of the ocean and say with the psalmist, “What is man that you are mindful of him . . . ?” (8:4).

Many young adults are looking for identity. Some suffer from low self-esteem because they grew up in a church that zealously stressed the evilness of humanity. Others may have been raised to believe as their culture believes—humanity is good and getting better all the time. Some have grown up with the idea that all that sinful humans can do is try their best and hope to get to heaven. Others believe that you need to grab all you can in this life because you only go around once. And then there are those who have rejected all of the above and are seeking new answers to their questions about human nature.

Whatever your young adults’ understanding may be of who they are, challenge them with a thorough, biblical understanding of human nature.



BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Genesis 1:1—3:24; Romans 5:12-21



COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

Who Are We?

Humankind as a Special Creation

The creation narratives found in Genesis 1 and 2 set the stage for the entire biblical story. It is here that we first encounter God and humankind and so get our first glimpse of the nature of each.

There are two creation narratives in the first chapters of Genesis, each with its own story to tell. We will focus on the first, found in Genesis 1:1—2:4. Here we see the creative acts of God, which begin with a shapeless and empty earth and end with God resting from His labors. This passage also gives us our first view of the importance of humankind in creation.

The writer of this creation account uses two very distinct words to talk about God’s creative activity. The first word is *‘asah*, translated “make” or “form.” It refers to the

activity of fashioning something out of raw materials. This is what a craftsman does when he creates a table or a basket. The second word is *bara’*, translated “create.” This is a theological word that is only used with God as the Creator. It denotes a new creation; the creation of something that did not exist before. Where once there was nothing, not even raw materials, now there is something entirely new. Only God can do that.

This second word is used in only three verses in chapter 1. The author uses it to announce God’s creative act in verse 1. After that, the word does not occur again until verse 21, when God creates living creatures in the water. This signifies a different kind of action by God, which makes these creatures fundamentally different from lights or waters. In God’s created order, animal life is more special than the rest of creation before it. Finally,

the word is used in verse 27 to refer to God's creation of humans, His crowning achievement. By using this word, the writer affirms that humans are fundamentally different from everything else that was created. The human is the last thing to be made, the very pinnacle of creation.

As such, humans are not simply a higher form of animal. People are not controlled by the same kinds of instincts that govern lower animals. The Bible affirms humankind as unique, and decidedly above the rest of creation. The human is endowed with reason and the capacity for a spiritual relationship. This brings us to a second factor that we must consider when talking about human nature.

The Image of God

When God created the fish of the sea and the creatures of land, He said, "Let the water teem" (1:20); and "Let the land produce" (v. 24). When God created humans, He said, "Let us make" (v. 26, emphasis added). The creation of humans was a personal action of God, and they were endowed with something that no other aspect of creation had: the image of God.

There has been much debate through the centuries as to exactly what the Scripture means by "the image of God." Some have seen it as referring to our spiritual dimension; others as a reference to reason; and others to our capacity for moral freedom. These all seem to be specific manifestations of a broader idea: humankind reflects something of the character of divinity.

Suppose that a great artist made a statue of you. That statue is made in your image, but it is not you. It cannot do all of the things that you yourself can do. It cannot talk, walk, or hear, yet the statue shares some of your characteristics. When those who know you look at that statue, they recognize it as a representation of you, a mirror image. That somewhat describes the relationship of humans to God. Humans are not God, but there is something about us that can be recognized as divine and reflects God's nature.

We are given personality. We are self-aware and have the ability to reason and make choices. We are given the commission to rule over the earth and so share some of God's capacity as a caregiver. We have the ability to love and have personal relationships, both with others and with God. In short, God created a picture of himself that reflected His glory.

"If this is true," one might ask, "then why are people in such a mess? Surely our present state is not what God intended." Sadly, that is true. Though humankind was created to reflect God's image, we don't seem to reflect it very well. This raises the question: What is it that mars the image of God in humans?

[Man] will fall,
He and his faithless progeny. Whose fault?
Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me
All he could have; I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood but free to fall.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

The Fall and Original Sin

The second chapter of Genesis tells us about the creation of the Garden of Eden, the naming of the animals, and the creation of the man and the woman. It ends with the man and the woman alone in the garden with God, naked and unashamed. In 3:8, we find God has come to walk in the garden with them. The original language suggests that this was something they did often. The man and woman enjoyed perfect communion, both with each other and with their God. They are described as living up to the full potential of their natures, and fully reflecting the image of God. But something has happened.

Genesis 3 opens with a conversation between the woman and a serpent. They are discussing the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There are three things about their discussion that give us good insights into human nature and our relationship with God.

First, note that the woman is talking *about* God. God has become a third person in her conversation. She is no longer talking *to* God, asking Him for guidance and information. Instead, she is relying on sources different from Him: the snake and herself. She seems to have taken herself out of complete dependence upon God and has become self-sufficient.

The second point to recognize is that the woman knows she is doing wrong. In verse 2, she clearly states God's prohibition against eating of the tree and recognizes the punishment for violating it. She makes her decision with all of the facts in front of her. She knows the truth but allows the serpent to persuade her otherwise, which brings us to the final point.

Third, the woman's action is selfish. She eats of the tree because it looks good to the eye and because she thinks she could gain something from it (v. 6). She willfully violates a known commandment of God. The word we give to such disobedience is "sin."

This is the essence of original sin. It is part of human nature to have communion with God. But when we step out of that communion and start to rely on ourselves, we make self-oriented decisions. Another word for self-orientation is pride.

When Adam behaved selfishly, his actions ceased to be in line with the character of God. They became selfish instead of loving. When God confronted him with his sin, he tried to put the blame first on Eve and then even back on God: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (v. 12). God is not that way, and the man's sin has caused the

image of God in him to be marred. The statue, to borrow our analogy from above, is no longer recognizable as an accurate reflection of God. Humanity has fallen from the state in which we were created.

We often tell the story of Adam and Eve as if it were something that happened a long time ago, and it only affects us because we inherited the consequences of their actions. However, the story of Adam and Eve is really our story, for it reveals the most basic tension of human nature. We are creatures created with the freedom of choice. *And* we are asked to choose what God wants.

In this way, we are no different from Adam or Eve. We share with them that same tendency to take matters out of God's hands and into our own, even when God has made His desires perfectly clear. When we do this, we sin and must each bear the responsibility and the guilt for making our own selfish decisions. Our nature, which was created to reflect God, becomes wrapped up in selfishness, and from that trap it cannot escape.

Prevenient Grace and Holiness

We know that we were intended to bear the likeness of God. Instead we forsook our relationship with God and so found ourselves alienated from Him and wrapped up in our own selfishness. Since that is the case, how is it possible for anyone to do any good at all?

It's All Up to God?

One answer to that problem was proposed by Augustine and later adopted by the Swiss theologian John Calvin. They said that humanity is incapable of doing anything good and is, therefore, incapable of saving themselves from sin. It is up to God, then, to save humanity. To this point, the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition is in agreement. Those who follow Augustine and Calvin go on to say that if God is the only One capable of saving us, and if there are unsaved people (which is obvious), then it must be because God has chosen not to save them. Salvation becomes a decision of God in which we have little or no part.

Wesleyans view human nature a bit differently by balancing selfish human nature with the belief in God's prevenient grace (the grace that "comes before"). Wesley admitted that humans, in their natural state, are theoretically incapable of doing good. But Wesley also claimed that in reality there is no such thing as a natural state because God gives His prevenient grace to all. He does this because of His great love (in harmony with 2 Peter 3:9—"The Lord is . . . patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"). This frees us from our natural selfish nature, at least enough for us to realize that we are selfish and to turn to God. This grace does not save a person, but it does enable a person to turn to God for salvation. (For Calvin, prevenient grace was God's activity to restrain evil in the world.)

We are all sinners because we have selfishly marred the image of God in our own lives. But God has provided a way for us to escape our self-centeredness and restore that image. Jesus Christ is that way.

The death and resurrection of God's own Son provided the opportunity for God's grace to reach out to all people in all times, enabling us to make a choice to come back into a relationship with God. In so doing, we can be formed once again to His character and image. The reestablishment of the relationship with God is called salvation; the restoration of the image is called sanctification or holiness.

As we accept in faith God's provision for us in Christ, we begin the process of becoming more like Him. He develops His love, patience, peace, and a whole range of godly characteristics within our lives. As we continue to grow in faith, He restores our capacity to reflect the image of God that selfishness has marred. In short, Christ makes us holy. Paul brings this out in his comparison of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21. Throughout the passage, he affirms that Christ can undo what Adam did. Through Christ—and only through Christ—can we be the people God intended us to be.

N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. The Search for Personal Meaning

Poetry, music, literature, and other art forms often reflect the desire of humans to understand who they are, what they are about, why they were created, and how they are to live.

Clip from a newspaper or magazine or go on-line and find a list of the top 10 songs in pop culture. (If you can't find a listing, have your students create their own top 10 list.) For each song, ask: **What does the message teach us about human nature? Do you agree with the message? Why, or why not?**

Then ask: **If you had to describe one characteristic that identifies humans as different from all other living things, what would you say?**

2. Agree or Disagree?

Read the following quote from Karl Marx's *Humanist Manifesto II* to your class, but do not tell them its source. As a class, or in groups, discuss whether they agree or disagree with the statement. Be sure to have them give reasons for their agreement or disagreement. After they have discussed the matter, tell them where the quote is from. Ask them if this changes their opinion in the matter.

“These are the times for men and women of goodwill to further the building of a peaceful and prosperous world. We urge the use of reason and compassion to produce the kind of world we want—a world in which peace, prosperity, freedom, and happiness are widely shared. We are responsible for what we are or will be. We believe that humankind has the potential intelligence, goodwill, and cooperative skill to implement this commitment in the decades ahead.”

—*The Humanist Manifesto II*

3. What Made Me Do It?

Ask your students to think about a time when they did something that they knew was wrong. Without ask-

ing them to reveal the incident, ask them what it was that made them act the way they did. If this is too personal, you may want to propose a hypothetical situation in which someone sins, then ask the class what makes us act against the will of God.

4. A Picture of Human Nature

If you have a really creative class, ask them to get into small groups (try to put at least one person with artistic talent in each group), and create a picture that symbolizes human nature. Is it full of goodness and love, or is it inherently selfish and unable to turn to God, or both? When the pictures are completed, discuss them.

RESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

1. Who Can Be Good?

Ask your class if non-Christians can be good. If they agree that they can, ask them how. If they believe that they cannot, ask the class how someone who is evil can become a Christian if he or she is incapable of doing anything good (including turning toward God).

Share some of the insights that God has given you regarding this dilemma. You may also want to share some of the information found in the Commentary section under “Prevenient Grace and Holiness” with your class.

Next read Romans 5:12-21. Ask: **What are the differences between Christ and Adam? What has Christ done for every single person in the universe? What is each person's required response? What does this passage teach us about human nature?**

2. What Is Holiness?

Ask your class what holiness means. Have them throw out several responses.

Next, have volunteers read the following passages aloud: Genesis 1:24-26 and Romans 5:12-21. Ask them to offer more insights into the meaning of holiness.

Now ask them to create an acronym from the word “**HOLINESS**,” which describes what holiness is. (Use *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A* as a work sheet or overhead for this activity.) See if anyone comes up with “Image of God” for the letter “I.” If no one does, suggest it.

Finally, discuss with the class what they think is involved in having the image of God.

3. Is There Anything Christ Can't Do?

Read Romans 5:12-21 aloud. Use the following questions to discuss the implications of the fact that Christ came to undo the work of the old man, represented by Adam:

- Is there anything that Christ cannot do for a person?
- Is there anything that a person can do for himself or herself that will lead to salvation?
- Is a holy life possible? If so, what is the key?
- What does this passage teach our culture about the nature of human nature?

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and to give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Just like Christ

Prepare *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B* as an overhead. Display it, but cover up the verse and everything else below it. Ask your group to list the characteristics of Jesus. Stick to the ones that can be verified biblically. Once your students have compiled a good list, uncover the scripture passage:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me

will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

—John 14:12

Remind your students that God wants to form them to the image of Christ. The things that they have listed are the things that they, with Christ's power, have the potential to be and do. Fill in the bottom half of the trans-

parency with suggestions for things that class members can do to be like Christ.

2. Summary

Close with a few simple questions to help your students summarize the thrust of the lesson.

- What are different non-Christian views of human nature?
- What are some Christian views of human nature?
- How are the Christian views more realistic and positive than non-Christian views?

- How is the Wesleyan-Arminian view distinct from other views of human nature?

- Based on today's passages, what have you learned about God? About yourself?

3. Directed Prayer

Close your class with a prayer asking God to re-create and restore His image in the lives of your students.

Here is a prayer starter you can suggest to your class members for 30 seconds of silent prayer.

- Thank God for the great hope He has given us to become more than what we are right now.

Use *INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters* to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

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