

I Still Have *Questions* About the Value of Women

A DEEPER LOOK AT WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
ABOUT WOMEN AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

BY DR. JOEL MUDDAMALLE, PHD
Director of Theological Research, Proverbs 31 Ministries

From the Therapy & Theology podcast series "Let's Stop Avoiding This Conversation: 6 Topics Women Have Big Questions About"

One of the greatest tragedies we've seen in our culture is the active and passive diminishing of the dignity and value of women. However, biblically, the gospel beckons the family of God to be a witness of unity based on the common dignity and worth both men and women have because they are both made in the image of God and are rooted in Christ. The Apostle Paul makes this clear when he says, "***There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise***" (*Galatians 3:28–29, CSB, emphasis added*).

So where did things go wrong? We may be able to trace the tragedy back to a misunderstanding of the image of God in relation to the fall of humankind in Genesis 3. The image of God is often said to have been broken in humanity as a result of the fall. However, the people of God must see that the image of God was unbroken during the fall; instead *humanity* was broken, failing to meet the standard of the image of God.

We start first with the consideration of the nature of the fall (Genesis 3) and the impact of sin on humanity – namely, the impact on humankind created in the likeness and image of God. (Genesis 1:26–27) Cornelius Plantinga observes that God is in the act of binding together humanity and the rest of creation as stewards and caretakers connected to Himself because humans bear the image of God. As male and female, humans fit together as a harmony, which in itself images God. Plantinga connects this reality with Genesis 3, saying, "Against this background of original separating and binding, we must see the fall as anti-creation, the blurring of distinctions and the rupturing of bonds, and the one as a result of the other."¹

But did the fall break the image of God in humanity? While historically this has been stated in sermons and theology books,² there are some theological consequences to this thought. Some examples, historically, of God's image being broken in humanity include decisions about the dignity and value of certain members of humanity based on gender or ethnicity.

For instance, slave traders and owners rationalized and condoned the selling and buying of Africans because of the claim they were in the image of God to a lesser degree than Caucasians.³ The implication of a "broken image" also works its way into the scenario of humans born with a cognitive delay or disability. The great theologian Martin Luther tragically advocated for the drowning of a "feeble-minded" 12-year-old child because he claimed that evidence of the child's limited mental capacity revealed some sort of corruption of the child's reason and soul.⁴ The Church historically equated the *Imago Dei* with specific characteristics such as rationality, intellect, creativity, and the ability to communicate or relate with each other. Tragically, even the influential early Church father Augustine suggested that women lacked the image of God and that their connection to God's image was through their relationship with man.⁵

However, there is no indication in the biblical text that God created man and woman with different levels or degrees of His image! In Hebrew, the terms used for both "male" and "female" refer to biological gender, (Leviticus 12:2, 5, 7; Leviticus 15:33) which is also true of animals (Genesis 6:19; Genesis 7:3, 9, 16) and therefore establishes sexual identity and gender. (Leviticus 27:3-5, 7; Numbers 5:3) It's important to note here that sexual identity is given by God at creation and is not a consequence of the fall. Kleinig, commenting on the image of God as it relates to both man and woman, says, "So, both their sexual status and their gender are aspects of their creation in God's image. Men and women were designed to reflect God's character, his qualities, and his activity, each separately in their devotion to Jesus and together in their conjugal sexual union with each other."⁶ Fitzpatrick and Schumaker say, "Perhaps the best and most biblical way for us to understand being male and female in God's image is this: God created a being, 'man,' in his image and then divided that being, 'man,' into male and female image-bearers."⁷ I would make one clarifying observation about the nature of the division: This "dividing" is not a reduction of the image, but rather it is a multiplication of the image of God.

Therefore, before the fall, both man and woman (together) were made fully in the likeness and image of God. This is seen in three ways:

First, God exclusively creates both man and woman in His likeness and His image. The two terms in parallel to describe God's creation of humans are "image" (**עֵדָה** (*še’-lēm*)) and "likeness" (**מִלְמָתָה** (*demūt*)).⁸ The language presents Adam and Eve in a royal lineage, as they are granted the image of the King.⁹

Second, Adam and Eve are told to "rule" creatures (**רֹאשׁ**; Genesis 1:26, 28, CSB) and "subdue" the creation itself (**שָׁבֵכְךָ**; Genesis 1:28, CSB).¹⁰ The command and commission given to Adam and Eve by God are rooted first in the divine King's active work in creation – namely, taking the chaos of the earth and providing order, naming and creating, and then giving the right to reign and rule to humanity, whom He created in His image. (Genesis 1:26)

Finally, both man and woman are equal partners under the divine rule of God with a particular destiny to cultivate and develop the earth for the benefit of humanity and unto the glory of God.¹¹ Again, as a point of emphasis, we must note that all of this takes place prior to the fall. God's intended desire for Adam and Eve (together) was for them to rule and reign, to subdue and take dominion over the earth and multiply the image of God throughout the earth.

The Impact of Sin on the Image of God:

Upon sin entering the world in Genesis 3, what is the impact on humanity? Sin indeed has an impact on humanity. However, we must consider the impact of sin within the framework of separation. First, sin separates God and humanity. As a result of sin, humans are unable to enjoy the presence of God

through communion. Sin makes it impossible for us to express the full intent and purpose of our existence – namely, to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds. Francis A. Schaeffer says, “When man sinned, the purpose of his existence was smashed.”¹² Second, sin separates humans from themselves. Sin compels us not only to deceive others but also to deceive ourselves. Therefore, humans have been lying to themselves ever since the fall.¹³ Finally, sin separates person from person. This sociological separation is seen immediately as Adam and Eve attempted to blame each other for the consequence of their actions.

Adam and Eve longed to be what they could not be as creatures (like God), and in so doing, they ended up losing what they could and should be.¹⁴ In all of this separation, there is one unbroken thing: the image of God.

Humans (men and women) are still made in the image of God, and they do not stop being human. Humanity, though fallen, retains dignity because the image of God did not break. However, humankind is hijacked and detoured from its intended destiny. Therefore, we are left with a separation in relationship, which has humanity stranded and distant from God. Possibly the most conclusive evidence of the unbroken image of God is the scriptural evidence after the fall. Before the fall, all humans were made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:26-27) Throughout human history after the fall, humans are still said to be image-bearers of God. (Genesis 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9) Finally, in the eschaton, upon consummation, humanity will still be reflective of the image of God. (1 John 3:2) Therefore, Scripture is clear when it comes to the ontological status of humanity made in the image of God. The image of God is “permanent, unchangeable, and incapable of being lost. It is of the essence of who we are as humans. This status has been graciously and irrevocably given to all human beings, precisely because they are human.”¹⁵ Ultimately, the status of the image of God is bestowed rather than appraised. In other words, the status of dignity is a gift given, not achieved.¹⁶

The Image of God: Status and Standard

While the Scriptures do not teach that the image of God in humanity is broken, something goes tragically wrong as a result of the fall. Humanity (both men and women) is broken. Plantinga suggests that the human is “stripped” or “despoiled,” referring to sin as corruption that “disturbs shalom – twisting, weakening, and snapping the thousands of bonds that give particular beings integrity and that tie them to others.”¹⁷ Therefore, the corruption of sin seems to be specifically connected to the human. John F. Kilner argues that the image of God is the standard we were made to reflect. In the same way, a building has a blueprint; if the building breaks somehow, this does not mean the blueprint was broken.¹⁸ Similarly, sin does not damage the image of God; sin’s impact is upon the person who fails to meet the standard yet fully maintains the status of the image of God.¹⁹

All humans, regardless of their gender, race, culture, education or socioeconomic status, are fully, in terms of this status, bestowed with the image of God. Bavinck notes, "Nothing in a human being is excluded from the image of God. While all creatures display vestiges of God, only a human being is the *image of God*."²⁰

"Standard" refers to the expectation placed on humans to act in obedience and accord in light of their bestowed status as image-bearers.²¹ Every human action and interaction with other image-bearers must meet the standard of the image of God. Therefore, during the fall, the image of God stayed unbroken. The image of God is graciously bestowed upon humanity as the status that separates all humanity from any other thing. Humanity is then given a standard to meet the status. During the fall, because the human has broken, he or she is unable to meet the standard and therefore truly reflect the status of image-bearers of God.

Conclusion:

This begs the question of how we treat women, who are fully in the image of God (status). Any degrading or subjugation of women is in fact evidence of humanity's inability to meet the standard of being in the image of God. Throughout this discussion we have clearly seen that Adam and Eve both were made in the image of God prior to the fall. God had expectations for Adam and Eve, who served as His royal representatives to take care of and subdue the earth for His glory. (Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:15) The impact of the fall brought destruction and stripped, despoiled, broke and separated humans from God and each other. However, in Christ, all that had been separated was brought together through the cross.

We started with this verse, Galatians 3:28-29, and now I want to return to it. This is why Paul is able to say, "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, **male and female**; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise" (CSB, emphasis added). In Christ, we return to the ideal of Eden. We are called to reflect the image of God, which is a status that is gifted to us and therefore requires us to live up to the standard that accompanies it. One of those standards is the respect, value and dignity that we show women.

Joel's Video Notes:

Important women mentioned:

Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus - Luke 10:39

Woman at the well - John 4

Women who stayed with Jesus at the cross - Matthew 27:55, John 19:25, Mark 15:40-41

Women who were eyewitnesses of the resurrection - *“Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”* (Luke 24:10-11, ESV)

Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus:

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42, ESV)

Jesus makes a revelation to Martha: Redemptive Reversal

“Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (John 11:17-27, ESV)

The women named and unnamed:

- Mary Magdalene, a woman from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; John 19:25)
- Salome, the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John, the “sons of thunder” and two of Jesus’ disciples (Mark 15:40-41)
- Mary, the mother of James the younger and of Joseph (John 19:25, Mark 15:40-41)
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her sister (John 19:25)
- Many other Daughters of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31), unnamed women (Mark 15:41), and acquaintances of Jesus (Luke 23:49)

Footnotes:

1. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 29.
2. See C. H. Spurgeon, "And It Was So," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 53 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1907), 530. Spurgeon said, "The likeness and image of God was broken in them immediately, and we are dead in trespasses and in sins by reason of their death." See also Arthur Walkington Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 139. Pink states, "Originally, the Moral Law was imprinted upon the very heart of man. Adam and Eve were made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), which, among other things, signifies that they were morally conformed unto their Maker. Consequently, the very "nature" of un fallen man caused him to render loving and loyal obedience to his King. But when he fell, this was reversed. The "image" of God was broken and His "likeness" was greatly marred, though not completely effaced."
3. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 556.
4. John Frederic Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 20.
5. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7.7.10; see Kari Borresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 15–34.
6. John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 28.
7. Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher, *Jesus and Gender: Living As Sisters and Brothers in Christ* (Bellingham, WA: KIRKDALE Press, 2022), 89.
8. James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). In the LXX, *tselem* is translated by *eikon*, and *demut* is translated by *homoiosis*. These Greek terms carry over into NT usage.
9. F. J. Stendebach, "צָלֵם," ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 389.
10. Peter J. Link Jr., "Searching for the Second Adam: Typological Connections between Adam, Joseph, Mordecai, and Daniel," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 128.
11. Francis Geis, "The Trinity and the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *Priscilla Papers* 27, no. 4 (2013): 27. Geis explores this subject in good detail. This author does not hold to a position of the Son being ontologically subordinate to the Father. Rather, the Son shows deference to the Father economically while ontologically maintaining oneness in essence.

12. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 2 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 69.
13. Ibid., 69.
14. Ibid., 70.
15. Steven C. Roy, “Embracing Social Justice: Reflections from the Storyline of Scripture,” *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 1 (2009): 10–11.
16. In the language of “gift” this author agrees with Irenaeus and Athanasius (see: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 16, 2; Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, II, 59; idem, *Against the Heathens*, 2; idem, *On the Incarnation*, 3.). However, I differ with their conclusion that this gift can be lost because of sin.
17. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 32.
18. Kilner F. John, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, pg. 134.
19. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 193–194.
20. Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 555.
21. Steven C. Roy, “Embracing Social Justice: Reflections from the Storyline of Scripture,” *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 1 (2009): 13.