

I'm excited to be able to share with you this kickoff message for the New Year. Not only will I be introducing a brand-new sermon series today; in the latter part of the message I will also be explaining Cornerstone's overall ministry theme for 2011, along with a number of ministry highlights that you can look forward to in the year ahead. As we get started, I'd like to ask for some prayer support. Would 2 or 3 of you be willing to hold me up in silent prayer as I share this morning? Thank you very much.

Here's a picture of my kids. Each of my children, in their own way, reflects something of my image. Nicole, my eldest, reflects me the height department, without a doubt. At the rate she's going she may even surpass me someday. She's only 11 and she's already as tall as her mom. Nicole also reflects me when it comes to her love of reading and writing.

Matthew, our middle guy, reflects me the most of all my kids in terms of appearance. I mean, this boy is *handsome*! Seriously, though, when I look at photos of Matthew, I feel like I could be looking at childhood photos of myself.

Ryan, our youngest, reflects my image in his sense of humor. I wrote in our annual family Christmas letter this year that he has now officially eclipsed me as the family comedian. Ryan's always joking, coming up with these one-liners, making funny faces, just cracking us up.

I often update my Facebook status with quotes from Ryan. Like the conversation he and I had in the car the other week:

"Dad, who's God?" he asked me from the back seat.

"God's the Creator," I responded.

"Who's Jesus?"

"Jesus is God's Son."

"Yeah," said Ryan. "Just like Boba Fett is Jango Fett's son."

If you didn't get that joke, you need to catch up on your *Star Wars*. I guess that's another area where my sons reflect my image—I've always been something of a *Star Wars* fan.

There are other physical features I have that all three of my children reflect. There's the Shaw front-tooth gap. Jan doesn't have a gap, but all three of my kids do. Along with me, they look like they could be related to David Letterman! Then, of course, there's the Shaw cleft chin. True story: One little girl was once studying my face intently when I was at her house visiting her parents. After a period of very careful observation, the girl suddenly announces, "Steve... your chin looks like a bum." I mean, how do you respond that? Well, Nicole Matthew and Ryan all have the Shaw bum-chin. It's a dominant gene.

Interestingly enough, I was speaking with my father the other week, and he had just received our Christmas letter, which includes a picture of Jan and me with the kids. Dad was saying that when he looked at the picture of me, it was like he was looking at a picture of himself when he was my age. So clearly, the family image gets handed down. It gets reflected from generation to generation.

Of course, sometimes this is for the better, and sometimes, it is for the worse. Most of us are the inheritors of both treasure and trash from our families of origin. In my own children, for example, I notice that each one is beginning to reflect certain character traits—some positive, some not-so-positive—that I'm pretty sure they've learned from my example—not unlike I've picked up a mixed bag of character traits from my own parents.

But, to whatever degree we reflect our family image—all of us are *fundamentally created* to reflect the image... of God. At the core of your existence and mine, is the fact that we have been created in the image of God. At the heart of your purpose and mine, is the fact that we are called to reflect God's image in every aspect of our lives. That's what we're made to do. Inasmuch as we come to reflect the image of God in which we have been created, we fulfill our reason for being. Inasmuch as we come to reflect the image of God in which we've been created, we live up to what it means to be truly human. And we do not inherit a mixed bag of character traits from God like we do from our earthly parents. No. The more we grow to reflect God's image, the more beauty, truth, wisdom and love will shine forth from our lives.

This theme—the creation and subsequent restoration of human beings in God’s image— is like a primary artery that flows throughout the Bible, from its beginnings in Genesis, to its final pages in Revelation. Today we begin a 9-part series on the image of God, which is going to launch us into a full year’s emphasis on the subject. This new series is called, *Made in His Image: Becoming the Person God Intended*, and over the next several weeks, we will begin to explore this grand theme of scripture, including questions such as:

- What does it mean to be made in God's image?
- What implications does it have for the kind of person you are meant to be and become?
- What significance does it have for the choices you make each day, in every area of your life?

The answers to these questions have tremendous bearing on the direction your life is meant to take. So what are we waiting for? Let’s roll up our sleeves, and start our study of what it means to be made in the image of God. My goal in today’s message is to demonstrate to you from scripture the simple yet profound fact that **human beings are God’s most special creation.**

We will begin at the beginning. Would you please turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1, verses 26-31? This is the first of a few scripture passages we’ll be looking at today, as we take the first steps in a journey toward more fully discovering what it means to be made in God’s image. I’ll be reading this from *Today’s New International Version* of the Bible:

²⁶ *Then God said, “Let us make human beings 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 human beings 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.”*

²⁹ *Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.”³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.*

³¹ *God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

This account of God’s creation of human beings in his image comes as the climax of the opening chapter of the Bible. Up to this point, the chapter has described God’s work of creation according to a predictable rhythm. Each aspect of creation is described, and then followed by this statement: “And God saw that it was good.” This pattern repeats itself six times in the narrative, as God first creates light; then sky; dry ground and seas, then vegetation; sun, moon, and stars, then fish, birds and animals. The refrain at each stage is, “And God saw that it was good. . . . And God saw that it was good. . . . And God saw that it was good.” But verse 26, where we started reading, breaks this rhythm with these words: *Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness. . . .”*

The breaking of the story’s thus-far predictable rhythm is a technique used by the author to bring attention to the fact that something new, something very special is about to happen here. God is now going to create human beings in his own image and likeness, that they may be caretakers of his creation. “*So God created human beings in his own image,*” says verse 27, “*in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*”

Take a close look at this verse. A particular word is repeated three times in this one verse. Do you see what it is? It’s the word “created.” For those of you who are Bible study geeks, this is another literary technique used in the original Hebrew to call attention to the fact that something very important is going on here. Each repetition of the word “created” in this verse is like an arrow that points to the uniquely special work of creation that God has done in making human beings in his own image and likeness.

And finally, there's this, in verse 31: "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*" What stands out in this verse? Well, all along, the refrain so far has been, "And God saw that it was *good*." But now, after the creation of human beings in his image, God beholds his handiwork and declares that it is what? *Very good*.

What does all this show us? It shows us, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that **human beings are God's most special creation**. While we must never forget that the rest of creation is of tremendous worth—indeed, as we'll see in weeks to come, God calls us to be caretakers of his creation—the fact remains that human beings are the crown jewel of God's creation, the only creatures made in his image.

The writer of Psalm 8 (*New Living Translation*) celebrates and marvels at this fact. Listen to the words he prays to God:

³ *When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—
4 what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?
5 Yet you made them only a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
6 You gave them charge of everything you made,
putting all things under their authority—
7 the flocks and the herds
and all the wild animals,
8 the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
and everything that swims the ocean currents.
9 O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!*

He looks up at the night sky. He sees the vastness of the expanse above him, unending, illumined brilliantly with constellations, ten thousand pinpricks of light on a canvas of black. When was the last time you really looked up at the night sky, and allowed yourself to be filled with wonder at the immensity of it all? The psalmist recognizes this immensity as the work of God's fingers. In contrast to the greatness of God, the heavens are tiny, having been pushed and prodded into shape by divine digits.

The psalmist suddenly finds himself feeling quite tiny, quite insignificant. In the face of this heavenly panorama, and the God who made it, he cries out in prayer, "*What are mere mortals that you should think about them [God], human beings that you should care for them?*"

Nevertheless, the psalmist is intimately acquainted with the creation account that we read in the book of Genesis—how God broke the six-fold predictable rhythm of his creation with the announcement that he would create human beings in his own image and likeness. The psalmist knows full well that it is the creation of the image-bearers that caused God to upgrade the status of his creative work from "good" to "very good." So the psalm writer continues his prayer with these words: "*Yet you made them [human beings] only a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority...*"

The Bible teaches that there is a dignity—a God-given royal dignity—to being human that perhaps few of us have really grasped. But the writer of another psalm—Psalm 139—grasped it. The words he wrote hold true for each and every one of us:

¹³ *For you [God] created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
16 your eyes saw my unformed body.*

In the medieval guild system, an aspiring craftsman would first become an apprentice, sweeping the floors and learning at the feet of the master craftsman. After some years, the apprentice would graduate to the status of journeyman, entitled both to wages, and to the task of creating a piece of his finest work—something good enough to prove to the elders of his guild that he was ready to assume the title of... master of his craft.

God, of course, is the Master Creator. And these verses in Psalm 139 make it clear that you—YES YOU!—are a marvelous expression of his creative mastery. As a member of the human race, created in the very image of God, you—YES YOU!—are his living masterpiece.

I believe that a few of you here—maybe even more than a few—find this very hard to accept. Maybe there have been people in your life who told you that you're no good, that you're a failure, that you're a disappointment; that you'll never amount to anything. Perhaps popular culture has burned diabolical ideas deep into your psyche that only those who are rich enough, skinny enough, talented enough, good-looking enough, smart enough, and popular enough have any real worth as people. Believing this, you may even do things to hurt and abuse yourself, or you may spend all your energy trying to prove to yourself and to others that you have value, that you have worth as a person.

But I'm here to declare God's Word to you this morning, dear friends. You've got nothing to prove. You are fearfully and wonderfully made by the Master himself, and even though his image in you has become marred by your own sins and the sins of others—a theme I'm going to touch on shortly—the Master sees your value as such that he gave his one and only Son to die on a cross so that your precious life might be redeemed, his image in you restored, your gifts and potential, realized. So friend, no matter what the voices of your past have told you; no matter what the voices in your head are telling you; no matter what the television commercials say—not only do you have worth, you have unsurpassable worth, because the Master created you in his own image, and paid an inexpressibly staggering personal price for your redemption. Do you think he would pay that much for us if we had no worth to him?

Therefore... stop dissing yourself. Therefore, stop thinking of yourself, and treating yourself as if you have no value, because to do so is to place yourself fundamentally at odds with God, who has created you in his image, and declared you to be a person of unsurpassable worth—his very masterpiece.

Recognize not only that you are God's masterpiece, but recognize the same of everyone else around you, no matter how damaged or rough-around-the edges their fallenness causes them appear. Your spouse is God's masterpiece. Your children and grandchildren are God's masterpieces. Your parents and grandparents are God's masterpieces. Your co-worker is God's masterpiece. Your boss is God's masterpiece. Your neighbor is God's masterpiece. The homeless person sleeping on a heating grate as you pass him by in the winter is God's masterpiece. Even your enemy is God's masterpiece, so before you devalue another person in thought, word, or deed, think twice, because God is relentlessly and jealously passionate about his masterpieces. We, like the psalmist, need to say to God, "People are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful; I know that full well." Turn to the people sitting next to you right now, and tell them, "You are God's masterpiece!"

With this basic exploration of key passages in Genesis chapter 1, Psalm 8 and Psalm 139, I think we've quite readily established from scripture that **human beings**—including you and me and the people all around us every day—**are God's most special creation**. This much is crystal clear from scripture. But what we haven't yet begun to explore is what in particular this "specialness" means for our lives. What are its implications when it comes to the direction and shape our lives are meant to take? What does it mean when it comes to the choices we must make each and every day, in each and every area of life?

The remainder of this series will flesh out these important issues pertaining to our creation in the image of God. Next week, Pastor Andrew will discuss how we human beings have eternity in our hearts. Of all God's creatures, we alone are designed for intimate relationship with God. This is a vital aspect of what it means to be made in his image.

The week after that, we will consider how human beings alone have been uniquely vested with moral responsibility—the knowledge of right from wrong—a knowledge for which we are held accountable. This is another vital aspect of what it means to be made in God's image.

Then, we will examine the fact that you and I are not made to fly solo. Rather, we are created for relationships with other human beings, because we are made in the image of a relational God, who himself exists eternally in a loving community of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We will move on from there to explore one the most fundamental human relationships—the male-female relationship. As we read today in Genesis 1:27, "*So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*" What implications does the creation of both genders in God's image have for men, women, and the relationship between them?

We will then consider how our creation in God's image is comprehensive—he created us as whole beings— and we are designed to reflect his image in every aspect of who we are—mind, body, and soul. Reflecting God's image, therefore, isn't just a religious thing, a Sunday thing. It's a whole-life calling. If we are to fulfill our purpose and potential, then we must learn how to reflect God's image in every dimension of our lives— work, play, family, community, finances, the way we spend our time, steward our abilities, and so on.

Speaking of stewardship, we will also explore how our creation in God's image means that we are called to be stewards of this earth, which I briefly touched on earlier this morning. This is something many Christians have not understood all that well over the years, but if our theology is going to be faithful to the Bible, then Christians should be among the greenest citizens of this planet.

Of course, the image of God in which you and I are created is an image that has been distorted—terribly distorted—by sin. In willfully putting self on the throne of our lives, instead of submitting to the rightful king— God—his image in us has become marred, defaced, and broken, although never entirely erased. The wonder of our glorious potential as creatures made in God's image has thus been matched by our nightmarish capacity for evil and destruction. All creation has been subjected to decay and frustration because we, the image-bearers, have fallen into sin. No wonder the Bible says that all creation groans, waiting in eager expectation for our redemption.

At the end of February, the final message of this series will bring the remainder of 2011 into focus for Cornerstone. Because it is through one name and one name only that the image of God, in which we have been created, will be fully and gloriously restored in us. That name, of course, is Jesus Christ. The New Testament is replete with verses describing how Jesus himself is the express image of God, and that through his incarnation, death, resurrection, and the work of his Spirit in our lives, we can, if we are willing, be re-created in his image. *"God knew what he was doing from the very beginning,"* says the Bible in Romans chapter 8. *"He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him."*

When you and I stay close to Jesus, his image—God's image—gets reflected in every area of our lives. This, in fact, is Cornerstone's overall ministry theme for 2011: ***Imago Dei: Reflecting Jesus in All of Life.***

Imago Dei is a Latin term which means, "Image of God," a subject which we've already been learning about this morning. This diagram that kind of resembles a solar system—which, by the way, was so wonderfully designed by Grace Cheng— is a diagram that you're going to see here at Cornerstone all year long—on the bulletin and church directory covers, on the music and sermon slides, on the website, and so on.

As Cornerstone continues preparations for a new community centre style facility in the not-too-distant future, one of our main priorities over the next couple years is to lay the strongest biblical and theological foundations possible for personal and congregational transformation. This diagram is a pictorial illustration of the fact that only as we remain close to Jesus can we become the kind of people that will impact the Markham community and the world for Christ. *"Those who remain in me, and I in them,"* says Jesus, *"will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). We must take these words of Jesus seriously.

This diagram shows that when we order all the dimensions of our lives around Jesus, keeping him at the center—as if each dimension of our lives was a planet orbiting the sun—if we posture every aspect of our lives toward Jesus through "prayer-infused, moment-by-moment living with Jesus"—then his image and likeness will be increasingly reflected in our work, in our family & friendships, in the way we take care of our body and soul, in our care of creation & involvement in global missions, in our local neighbourhood and faith community interactions, and in the way we steward our time, talent, and treasure. As Jesus gets reflected in all of our lives, we become more fully restored in God's image. We become more of the people God intended us to be.

Throughout the year, we will be offering a variety of resources and opportunities that will help you assess and take ownership of your spiritual growth and development, as God shapes you to more brightly reflect Jesus all areas of your life. There will be special sermon-based semester groups you can join. We will post special resources on our website, and we will offer events and tools to help you grow in prayer-infused, moment-by-moment living with Jesus. This includes special quarterly Friday night prayer and praise gatherings—you'll be hearing about the first prayer and praise gathering soon. A key tool we're offering this year is the "Reflecting Jesus in All-of-Life Assessment Tool"—a personal survey which we've custom-designed to help you evaluate your growth needs as you seek to reflect Jesus more brightly in particular areas of your life.

I hope that whets your appetite, not only for the "Made in His Image" series which we launched today, but for all that lies ahead of this church in the year ahead, as we seek to more fully reflect Jesus, for the sake of the world.

CONCLUDED WITH CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER