

We're continuing in our series *Made in His Image: Becoming the Person God Intended*. We've been talking about how we've been created in the image of God, and the implications this has for the direction our lives are meant to take, and the choices we make each and every day.

I've loaded this morning's message with a fair amount biblical and theological content; some good meaty stuff that I trust you can really sink your teeth into and be nourished by. At the end of the sermon, I'm going to share a special challenge to apply to your life.

Let's get started with a little Bible quiz to challenge those of you who have some familiarity with scripture. The quiz consists of a single question: **What was the very first crisis recorded in the Bible?**

What do you think? Raise your hand if your first instinct is to think of Adam and Eve's fall into sin, as recorded in Genesis chapter 3? You're not alone, because when thousands of church leaders were asked this question at a conference, about 70% of them responded with that answer. The other 30% pointed to Genesis chapter 4, which records the first murder in human history—Cain killing his brother Abel.

While both of these events are pivotal crises from the very early chapters of scripture, neither constitutes the first. The first-ever crisis recorded in the Bible can be found in Genesis chapter 2, verse 18, where God utters the following words: *"It is not good..."* This is the very first time in the Bible that anything in God's creation is said to be less than good. Up to this point, as I shared in my sermon a few weeks ago, every phase of God's work of creation thus far had been followed by this refrain: "And God saw that it was... *good*." Throughout the whole narrative of creation in Genesis chapter 1, this refrain gets repeated no less than six times. And then, in Genesis 1:26, God proposes the crowning act of his creation:

<sup>26</sup> *Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness..."*

<sup>27</sup> *So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

If you jump down from there to verse 31, you'll read that once he had made human beings in his own image and likeness:

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good...* (emphasis added)

So in Genesis chapter 1, the rhythm of creation is, "And it was good, and it was good, and it was good," six times over, topped off by, "And it was *very* good." When we get to Genesis chapter 2, the story of creation is told over again, but this time from a different perspective. Whereas Genesis chapter 1 speaks of the creation of human beings—male and female—in general, overarching terms, Genesis chapter 2 zooms in to focus on the details of that part of the story. There we read about how the first man was actually created *before* the first woman. Genesis 2 lets us in on the fact that there was a period of time when Adam was on his own in the Garden of Eden. Strictly speaking, of course, Adam wasn't altogether alone. God was with him. He also had the company of lots of animals. But in terms of *human* companionship, Adam was flying solo, because so far, he was the only human being that had been created. And it was this state of affairs that prompted God to say, "It is not good... for the man to be alone."

The suggestion here that something is "not good" is meant to arrest our attention. I used to have a Spanish teacher, Mr. Valerio, who loved to keep students on their toes by shouting at totally unexpected intervals during the course of his lectures: "Good morning class; please turn in your textbooks to page 127." Every time he did that we would nearly jump out of our seats. No one ever fell asleep in Mr. Valerio's class, let me tell you. The author of Genesis is trying to startle his readers in a similar way. Just when we have comfortably settled into chapter one's refrain that everything in creation is good, we suddenly hear the words "it is *not* good" This is meant to snap us our attention, like a loud shout when we least expect it. What? *Not* good? What could possibly be "not good" about the Garden of Eden, where Adam, the first human being, lived? It was paradise. Sin hadn't even entered the world yet. Adam was still completely innocent, pure in heart and mind, altogether untainted by selfishness or unrighteousness. All his physical and material needs were perfectly supplied—the bounteous garden was his to use and enjoy. He had the ultimate career as CEO over *"the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that moved along the ground,"* as described in Genesis 1:26. Above all, Adam had an intimate, face-to-face relationship with God. He had the privilege of walking and talking with God every hour of every day without hindrance of any kind. Can you imagine what that must've been like?

And yet, even in a setting so pristine, something was still "not good." What could it possibly be? It was the man's aloneness: *"It is not good for the man to be alone,"* said God—and then God did something about it. Let's read about what God did. Please open your Bibles—whether yours is in app form, or if, like me, you prefer to kick it old school with the classic bound paper form— and let's look at Genesis chapter 2 verses 18-25. Please follow along as I read:

*The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the*

*livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused him to go into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and felt no shame.*

This is a foundational biblical text for marriage, and also for a whole slate of issues having to do with roles and relationships between the sexes. However, that will be the focus of Pastor Kevin's message next week. This passage also has tremendous implications for human relationships in general, and that's what I'd like us to consider this morning.

Human beings are not made to fly solo. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God said. The first crisis recorded in the pages of scripture is a crisis of community—or the lack thereof. Adam was lacking a human counterpart, and therefore, human community was not yet possible. You need to have at least two persons to enjoy the oneness of loving community, right?

To rectify this, God creates a woman out of Adam's rib. All other living creatures, including Adam, had been made out of the dust of the earth. But the woman is special, made *from* Adam to be compatible *with* Adam. As he rapturously declares: "*This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man.*" Bill Cosby once joked that we got the word "woman" from Adam. He took one look at Eve and he said, "Whoa, man!"

Let's peek back at Genesis 1—which, again, tells the creation story from a more overarching perspective than chapter 2 does. There's something I want you to notice. We've seen how God declares in chapter 1 that is he going to create human beings in his own image. Then, verse 27 says: "*So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*"

Notice that the text emphasizes how God's image is made complete once there is a "them"—once a human community has been formed. Only then do we hear the glorious declaration in verse 31 that, "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*" Contrast this with Genesis chapter 2, which recounts the period of time when Adam was still alone in the garden. This situation was not good, according to God. Why? Human community did not yet exist. But upon the creation of Eve, what happens? The two can now become... one. In Adam and Eve's case, the verse about the two becoming one flesh does have marriage in view, and sexual union in particular. But again, Kevin will cover those topics next week. Kevin, we're leaving it to you to do the sex-talk, okay bro? But today I want you to note that even above and beyond sexual or marital union, God's primary goal for humanity is for the many to be as one. His goal is community. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard puts it this way: "God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself as its primary sustainer, and most glorious inhabitant." And here in Genesis, as Adam and Eve form the first human community, God can now upgrade the status of creation from *not* good to *very* good. Why? Because now his image is now present in humanity. You see, **when God creates in his image, he creates community.**

And if this is the case, it implies something very important about God's nature—about the *kind* of God he is. God is a relational God. Therefore, **we're made for loving relationships, because we're made in the image of a relational God.**

On the basis of the careful study of a wide variety of New Testament passages, early Christian theologians articulated the doctrine of the Trinity. This is the foundational Christian teaching that God exists in a loving community of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We've talked about this important doctrine often over the years at Cornerstone. There is one God, but his oneness is not solitary or singular. Rather, the oneness of God is the oneness of community—of loving, relational unity between three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I like how one theologian puts it. The language he uses is perhaps a bit lofty, but incredibly meaningful nonetheless: "Like Christians," he says, "Jews and Muslims also believe in one God. However, because their God is one person within one being, he is the prisoner of his own limitation. Frozen within the singularity of his transcendence, he can never experience community. Not so for the God revealed by Jesus Christ. Although one being, he is eternally three persons within [that] oneness. He values community supremely because he experiences the dynamics and the synergy of the three in one. Thus, when God creates in his image, he creates community... Since God is Trinity, he is plurality in oneness. Therefore the creation of persons in his image requires the creation of a plurality of persons."

This is why we are not made to fly solo. This is why it was not good for the man to be alone. Before humanity could truly be said bear God's image, there needed to be someone else with whom Adam could share the oneness of community.

Scripture makes it clear that God's most fundamental attribute, his most defining characteristic, is what? It's love. The Bible says in 1 John chapter 4 that, "God is love." Love isn't just something God does; love is who God is— from eternity past to eternity future. Why? Because God exists in a loving, Triune community of oneness—Father, Son, and Spirit. God. Is. Love. And because God is love, he treasures relationships.

Out of the overflow of the profound, loving community experienced in the Trinity, God says, I want to broaden the circle. This idea of community is so good, so rich, so beautiful, that I will create human beings in my own relational image and invite them to bask in loving community with me and with each another. Friends, this is what you and I have been made for.

And when you listen closely enough, don't the whispers, the pangs, the yearnings of your soul testify that this is exactly the case? Professor Gilbert Bilezikian describes it with the following words, so evocative they're worth quoting at length. Before I read this quote, I'll pause briefly, and after I read it, I'll pause briefly again, just to allow your soul a bit of listening space:

*The silent churning at the core of our being is the tormenting need to know and be known, to understand and be understood, to possess and be possessed, to belong unconditionally and forever without fear of loss, betrayal or rejection. It is the nostalgia for our primal oneness, the silent sorrowing for paradise lost, the age-long pursuit after the encompassing embrace for which we know we were created. It is the search, however wanton and sullied, for release and repose in the womb-like safety of unalterable acceptance and of overarching love. When we take time to become silent and to listen, we may hear the scream from the depths of our being, the clamor to bare our souls and to reveal the mystery of our true selves. Just listen... listen closely... It is the distance echo of the wail in the garden at the loss of innocence, of grieving after a remembrance of shared freedom, the release of body and soul to the embrace of absolute oneness. Our mourning is for the closeness that was ours by right of creation. Our grief is for the gift lost in the turmoil of [human] rebellion [against God]. And now, wherever there is hope, our hope is for paradise regained, for human destiny made in the redemptive restoration of community...*

There is both a beauty and a sadness to these words, isn't there? The sadness comes from the effects that humanity's fall into wilful rebellion against God. We will more fully unpack the implications of the fall later in this series, but many of you are familiar with what happens by the time Genesis chapter 3 rolls around. Adam and Eve choose independence and self-sufficiency over trusting and obeying God. When we last left the primordial couple, they were both naked and unashamed. More than a matter of dress, this speaks of how they were fully free to be their authentic selves in relationship with God and with each other. They were delightfully unselfconscious. But in Genesis 3:7-8, once they had fallen into sin, it says, "*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves and made coverings for themselves. Then, the man and his wife heard the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*"

Notice that the first consequences of humanity's fall into sin that the Bible records are relational. Human community, once innocent and perfect, is now disrupted. As the couple's eyes are opened, trust and authenticity flee, and for the first time ever, they feel shame. They feel the need to protect themselves. They cover up; they hide from each other, and from God. And as Pastor Jeremy was sharing last week, on the heels of the fall the Bible also records the first signs of relational conflict. The people shirk their own responsibility and point blaming fingers at others. Eve blames the serpent for convincing her to eat from the forbidden tree. Adam blames Eve for convincing him to eat from the tree, and then he even has the audacity to blame God for creating the woman in the first place! Already, God's dream of creating a community loving relational oneness has suffered a devastating setback.

The image of the relational God, while not destroyed in us, has become distorted because of sin. And this distortion impacts us still today. It is why we find ourselves yearning for the community on the one hand, and hiding from it on the other. Our hearts tell us that we were created for loving relationships, but our fallenness compels us to shrink back.

Even when we are fortunate enough to get tastes of authentic loving, Christ-centered community—where soul touches soul—it often serves to amplify the ache within us for unbroken community. Especially in the western world, we live in a society that, for all its benefits and conveniences, militates against community life in a thousand ways. Even in the church of Jesus Christ—where you would expect loving relationships to have the best chance of flourishing—the cultivation of community remains a constant challenge, requiring tremendous effort. It's lots of plain hard work and sacrifice, and quite frankly, it's risky.

And so, an obvious question arises: Is community worth pursuing?

The answer is yes, because God's dream has not changed. To use the words of Dallas Willard again, "God's aim in human history remains the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself as its primary sustainer, and most glorious inhabitant." The way there may be fraught with peril, because the possibility of love requires free will, which means people can reject it, spurn it. But God's dream of community will most certainly be realized. In fact, the closing chapters of the Bible paint this glorious picture of the end of time, after Jesus has returned to earth: "*Now the dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*" (Revelation 21: 3-4). This is a picture of God's dream of community fully realized. This is where history is heading. If you choose to align your life with Jesus Christ, you'll be in on God's dream. Your soul's hunger for perfect unbroken community, where you can love and be loved, will be completely and eternally satisfied.

We've seen that both the opening and the closing chapters of the Bible have God's dream of loving community in view. God creates human beings in his relational image, and he will ultimately redeem fallen human beings, fully restoring his relational image in us. In between those opening and closing chapters, the rest of the Bible tells the story of how God is working to redeem his dream of community.

The signature of God is oneness. He exists in a loving community of three persons, where one, plus one, plus one, equals one. He creates human beings in his image, in which the two become... one. Later in the Old Testament, God builds raises up Israel, twelve tribes that comprise... one nation. Later in the Psalms it says, "How good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in..."

unity.” And later, in the New Testament, Jesus would pray on the eve of his crucifixion: “Father, may all those who come to believe in me be... one, even as you and I are... one.” And then Jesus died for us, that the relational image of God, in which we were created, might be restored, renewed, and ultimately, made perfect again. Later still in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul would write these words, urging the Ephesian church to, “*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is over all, and through all, and in all*” (Ephesians 4:2-6).

God’s math is easy, you see. The answer is always... one.

And you and I, as human beings made in God’s image, are called to pursue a life of oneness today, even though we haven’t yet arrived at the end of history where there will be perfect and eternal community. God calls us to live today as if that future is already here.

In fact, the church of Jesus Christ is God’s chosen body of people to demonstrate to the rest of the world a blessed foretaste of what eternity is going to be like. Above all else, the church is to be marked by that characteristic that most defines God himself—love.

God’s purpose, God’s agenda for your life, if you accept it, is love. What does love look like? Love looks like Jesus, who lays down his life for others. Loving God with all you’ve got, and loving others as yourself—these are the greatest commandments, says Jesus. If we love, we fulfill all of the commandments of scripture. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, that without Christlike love, our life—no matter what else we may accomplish—amounts to zero.

And so, as I close this message by sharing a few life applications with you, the first step I want to encourage you to take is this: Resolve, right here and now, and then again at the start of each and every new day until you die—is to **make Christlike love the goal and signature of your life.**

Andrew challenged us the other week to write our own eulogies. Over the years, I’ve often found myself wondering what might be said about me when I’m gone. Will people say, Steve preached well? If so, fine—preaching is something God has called me to do. But oh, how I pray that if those who knew me say anything at all, they would say that I loved well. I have a long way to go to get there, but above all else, I have resolved to make Christlike love the goal and signature of my life, because according to scripture, “If I have not love, I am nothing.” Life minus love equals zero. “Above all else,” says the Bible in Colossians, “put on love” (3:14). “Above all,” the Bible says in 1 Peter, “love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” Cornerstone’s mission statement is, “Creating space for Jesus to shape people together in God’s love.” We have been created, and are being redeemed in the image of a relational God who is love. Will you make the space in your life for Jesus to shape you in his love? Because he is the source; you can never do it in your own strength. But resolve now—with Jesus empowering you—to make Christlike love the goal and signature of your life. Get really, really clear on that. Write it down; keep it consistently in front of you. Your purpose in life is love, because that’s God’s purpose for you. Will you align yourself with that purpose this morning?

There are many, many other applications I could talk about this morning when it comes to living out your life in line with the fact that you’ve been created and are being redeemed, in God’s relational image.

I could talk about how it’s important—no essential—to **connect in community with other Christians.** Small groups are a great way to do that. If you aren’t part of a group at Cornerstone, I would encourage you to sign up for one of the Winter Semester groups that’s being offered now, or speak to Pastor Jeremy about other possibilities. The Christian life is a “we” life, not a “me” life. There are so many “one anothers” in the New Testament. Our life is to be a “one another” life, a “together” life, because we’ve been created, and we’re being redeemed for community. We’re not made to fly solo. So I encourage you to get in a group.

I could talk about how vital it is to **protect church unity.** Do nothing, whether in thought, word, or deed, that would compromise the relational unity of this local church. Vow now, with God’s help, to love this church family as it is, and not as it should be. Because that’s how Jesus loves you—as you are, and not as you should be. This is Christ’s body, so to do anything to compromise the unity of this church is to set yourself up against Jesus himself. Thank God for the unity we’ve enjoyed over the years—one of our stated core values in Unity-in-Diversity—and thank you for your part in upholding it. Bearing with one another in love, forgiving each other, love covers a multitude of sins. Be patient, supporting one another in practical ways. We’ve grown so much as a church in that; praise God. Satan loves to divide and conquer. Let it never happen here, brothers and sisters. May the humility and patient, forgiving, reconciling love of Jesus mark this local church for as long as it exists, amen?

The last thing I want to talk about before I finish that’s going to apply to some of you today is this: **Become a part of God’s family by putting your faith in Jesus, and being baptized.** Every human being was *created* by God, but not every human being is a *child* of God. The only way to get into God’s family, God’s community of oneness called the church, is by being born again into it. You became part of your human family by your first birth. You become part of God’s family by your second birth—a spiritual rebirth, as it were—being “born again” as Jesus puts it in John chapter 3. Scripture says God “*has given us the privilege of being born again so that we are now members of God’s family*” (Galatians 3:25, NLT). How do we become “born again?” It’s a phrase that gets abused

quite a bit, but it's still a good, biblical phrase. How do we get there? We put our faith in Jesus Christ. We trust in the work that he accomplished on the cross, and through his resurrection, so that our sins may be forgiven, and so that we can be put back into right relationship with God, because we all bear responsibility for that fall that happened way back in the Garden of Eden. You can't live up to your own standards let alone the standards of God, but Jesus takes care of that by dying on the cross for you. Do you believe it? Not just intellectually, but do you believe in relational terms, because God is a relational God. Jesus doesn't just ask us to assent to propositions. He asks us to trust in him. So will you put your faith, your trust, your belief in Jesus? Will you invite him to enter into your life and begin a relationship with him? That's how you get "born again." That's how you enter into the family of God, into his dream of community. Outside of faith in Jesus Christ, you're outside of God's dream. God desperately wants you in on his dream; he gave his Son so that you could be. But if you've never yet said, "God I want to make sure I'm on the inside of your dream of eternal, loving community with you and others, I'd like you to take one of the white welcome cards from the seat pouch in front of you, fill it out, and check on the back, "I'm committing my life to Christ." Or below that, you can check, "I'd like more information on how to begin a relationship with Christ," if you want to know more about what that means before you decide. Please put your cards in the offering bag when it goes around later.

Some of you may be hesitant to fill out a card. We can all get so shy, so scared, so timid. But this is God dream for you! "Someone might see me." So be it. Because you know what? God will also see you, and he'll say, "Way to go; way to go."

But it doesn't end there. Because baptism is a vital expression of joining God's family. On that white card, there is a box you can check that says, "I'm interested in being baptized." There are also these tall, blue baptism cards, that give info about baptism and include a tear away section you can fill out and drop in the offering bag.

We haven't set the date for our next baptismal service yet, but we will before long, so if you haven't been baptized yet—which is an outward expression of joining God's family—I would encourage you to indicate your willingness or interest to follow through with that crucial step of obedience using one of these cards. Jesus commanded baptism, because it is so important to our faith formation: "Go and make disciples of all nations," he said, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

A lot of Christians hold off on being baptized, but Rick Warren writes, "Your spiritual family is even more important than your physical family, because it will last forever. Baptism is not an optional ritual to be delayed or postponed. It signifies your inclusion in God's family, and publicly announces to the world, 'I am not ashamed to be a part of God's family.'" Have you been baptized?

Faith in Jesus so that you're born again, followed by baptism; that's the 1-2 combination that sets you solidly with the family of God. If these are steps you still need to take, let me challenge you by asking, "What are you waiting for?"

**Closing prayer and song of response: "One Voice"**