

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 16, 2025

Being Human

Jeremiah 17:1-10

There's lots of conversation these days about what it means to be human. What is a human being? What makes humans distinct within the larger world? What does it mean to be a person? What are the best ways to promote human flourishing? Maybe these kinds of questions are getting more attention and discussion, in part, because of rapid developments in technology, especially the emergence of artificial intelligence. As hi tech expands further and further into more and more dimensions of daily life, we begin to think more about our identity and role as living human beings in a world increasingly filled with automation. Or perhaps our expanding awareness of the natural world in which we live, including issues of climate change and environmental damage, motivates us to consider the place of humans in God's creation.

We're certainly not the first people to reflect on these kinds of issues. The psalmist raised similar questions: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (8:3-9). So this psalm ends, as it began, by proclaiming God's sovereignty. True, human beings have some sovereignty too, but it's God-given. Humanity certainly has a central place in God's purpose for his creation. But we have to recognize that our will is bounded by God's will. When we try to leave God out of the picture, or ignore his claim on us, we violate our vocation, and wickedness and unrighteousness follow.

This idolatrous move from God's rule to self-rule is the kind of thing that Jeremiah warns against in today's Scripture passage. When it comes to gaining insight on what it means to be human, we might think that the psalms are one of the best places to search. And while that's true, today we're actually going to listen to one of the prophets, Jeremiah, especially the wisdom he presents in verses 5-8.

When it comes to trust, Jeremiah lays out two options: Trusting in human resources or trusting in the Lord. "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord" (v. 5). The word "cursed" doesn't mean that someone has had a hex or a spell put on them, or that there's no hope for change and redemption. It's simply a way of describing how God denounces sin or pronounces a judgment upon sin. In other words, God opposes and actively works to rid us of those things that keep us from being in right relationship with him and with one another. Things that hinder us from fulfilling our God-given vocation.

According to Jeremiah, turning away from God and turning inward to our own resources or to the strength of other mortals is like being a piece of dry scrub in the desert. It bears no fruit because it has no source of nourishment. It's deprived of the resources it needs for life and flourishing. Considering our levels of precipitation over the past few days, it may be

hard for us to imagine such a thing as a thirsty tree. But Jeremiah calls upon us to stretch our imaginations and picture a plant that desperately needs to be revived. This is what happens when we don't stay connected to the life-giving power of God.

By contrast, trusting in the Lord is the way of blessedness and fruitfulness. "But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him" (v. 7). This person, says Jeremiah, is like a tree that has been transplanted from the desert to a spot beside a stream. It sinks its roots deeply and becomes productive, even under conditions of adversity. So the choice is very clear. Turning away from the Lord and trusting in human resources, which disconnects us from the source of life and invites the power of death. Or turning to the Lord and trusting in him, which connects us to our Creator, and brings the power of life and flourishing.

Let me shift from an agricultural image to a mechanical one. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes human beings by comparing us to a car. Lewis says,

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.¹

Being human, as God intends us to be, is impossible apart from trust in him. That's because our identity as human beings is relational. As the poet John Donne famously put it, "No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Being human doesn't mean pursuing complete autonomy, self-sufficiency, and absolute freedom from restraint. It doesn't mean detaching yourself from God and neighbor so that you can look within yourself and find yourself. No, being human means living outwardly in relationship with God and others, in a state of connectedness that shapes who you are and how much you flourish. You're not simply a list of qualities or attributes, like rationality, self-awareness, race, gender, economic standing, and so on. You're a person, a human being, by virtue of the fact that God made you, is lovingly "mindful of you," and has redeemed you through Christ. This is why faith, trust in God, is what makes you truly yourself, truly alive.

And part of what it means to be alive is to be growing and moving forward. As Jeremiah says, the tree planted by the water isn't idle and inactive, as if its job is just to occupy some space. No, it's sending out its roots, drawing nourishment from the ground, and bearing fruit. It's in the process of both being and becoming. In our own day and time, a lot of the hope of humans becoming more than we presently are is driven by technology. As with many other things, we look to technology to help us improve ourselves. The possibilities seem staggering, and in some cases, troubling.

Think, for instance, of how technology is already being used in the field of medicine to fight disease and to promote healing. But what about using technology not only for therapeutic purposes, but to actually augment and enhance our bodies? What about tools that can help us improve our performance, in both body and mind? For example, devices that could generate new connective tissue for arthritic joints. Devices that could replace or repair damaged brain cells in someone who has Alzheimer's disease. Cybernetic implants that would allow our brains to access vast amounts of information. Some anticipate a time when we can use bioengineering, nanotechnology, and cyborg technology to forestall the aging process or perhaps even to pursue immortality. Others, who subscribe to a philosophy called transhumanism, go a step further and maintain that we'll be able to enhance

ourselves, or upgrade ourselves, to the point that a posthuman species will be created, superior to who and what we are now.

As I said at the beginning of today's sermon, the pace of technology continually challenges us to think more, from a Christian perspective, about what it means to be human. In one respect, technology has improved and enhanced human life in countless ways. But at the same time, we who affirm that "blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord" also know that technology is not our salvation. God is our salvation. And in today's Scripture passage, God reminds us that in the midst of all our discussions about technology and the human future, we dare not lose sight of the reality of sin, and its corrupting power. In fact, the opening verse of our text says that sin makes its mark upon the human heart, like the force of an iron pen or the depth of a diamond point. As a result, only the action and power of God can ultimately fix what's wrong with humankind. As one person, using a computer image, has put it, what's necessary is "God reprogramming the hopelessly compromised human hard drive."²

In a radio interview, author Rosaria Butterfield said that being born with a sinful nature is like inheriting a garden:

Let's say that you inherited an enchanting garden. And for 10 years, you just let it thrive. You let it do anything it wanted. You never pruned back the weeds. You never got rid of the pests. You never worked with the roses. You just let it quote-unquote "thrive."

And after 10 years, what is it? It's a disaster. It might even be way past the point of no return. And you go to a master gardener and you say, "Hey, this is not fair. I want my money back. I just did everything I could to let this garden thrive. I let it do exactly what it wanted." You know, the master gardener's going to laugh at you and say, "Buddy, gardens come with weeds! It's part of its nature and by failing to deal with that, *you* destroyed it."³

Thankfully, God has a different vision of what it means for us as human beings to "thrive." Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has acted to forgive us and make us new. He has shown us that we are claimed by him and redeemed by him, that we belong to him, and that being fully human is about being in relationship with him and one another, as his people. That's one of the reasons we come together again today, so that we can turn again to the Lord, and re-source ourselves, reconnect ourselves with God and with one another in a relationship of blessedness.

"Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord." That's the definition of human flourishing, human thriving. Note that blessedness, or flourishing, doesn't primarily mean abundance as regularly defined by this present world that's passing away. Being in a state of blessedness isn't about having material prosperity, career advancement, good health, freedom from harm or injury, and plenty of "success" in life. No, human blessedness is about being remade in the likeness of Jesus Christ, whose life is our picture of human flourishing. Human blessedness is about living in faithful relationship with God and bearing fruit that enables others to be blessed, flourishing, and fruitful.

¹ Lewis is quoted by Scott Swain, "Psalm 19 and Human Flourishing." Reformation 21 website. August 27, 2015. Accessed February 13, 2019 <<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/08/psalm-19-and-human-flourishing.php>>.

² Lisa D. Maugans Driver, *Christ at the Center: The Early Christian Era* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 222.

³ Interview with Rosaria Butterfield, "Navigating Your Sexual Sin to Find Your Identity in Christ, Part One." Focus on the Family (January 10, 2017).