

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD + -

THE COURSE SESSION 2 RIGHTS + WRONGS

cpx.video/group2

STARTER (5 minutes)

For most of human history, and across most human cultures, individuals were valued on the basis of things like their status at birth, their skills and capacities, and their usefulness to society. As a result, societies tended to honour the smart, talented, strong, or beautiful, and discard the weak and useless.

- a. How common do you feel this perspective is still today?
- b. Leaving aside any theology, how could we argue against this view, in favour of absolute human equality?



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences, and/or throw it open for discussion

PART 1 (approximately 30 minutes total)

WATCH



The Image of God: The concept (cpx.video/image1) (7 minutes)

The Image of God: The impact (cpx.video/image3) (5 minutes)

And if you have time ...

The genesis of human rights (cpx.video/humanrights) (7 minutes)



Discussion (10 minutes)

1. What are your initial impressions from this clip? Was there anything that surprised you? Was anything unclear?



Some participants may feel surprised, or doubtful, that the equal and incalculable worth of every human life was not always assumed throughout history. Such reactions are welcome and worth discussing.

2. The documentary connects our modern understanding of human rights to the ancient concept of “the image of God”. At the very beginning of the Bible—from the very first chapter—all human beings, men and women, are described as being in a special relationship to the Creator. They are his “image”, just as we might say today that our children are in our “image”. Read the texts below:



Genesis 1:24-28 *And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make mankind 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.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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.”*

The point is reiterated a few chapters later, where it is also clear that the expression “image” or “likeness” refers to a kind of family relationship to the Creator:



Genesis 5:1-3 *When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.*

If the Creator of the universe thinks of every human being as his “offspring”—regardless of their capacities or usefulness—what does that say about the intrinsic value of those around us?



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation

3. The New Testament was written at a time when Christians had no power in the Roman Empire. They approached the problem of slavery not by trying to overthrow it—they had no way to do so—but by trying to work within the structures of the day, and with the people with whom they had influence (i.e. the infant Christian church). The apostles asked that masters treat their slaves with dignity and gentleness, knowing that they, too, were ruled by a heavenly Master, who did not play favourites.



Ephesians 6:5-9 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that*

the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

How does this New Testament text counter the general attitudes to slaves in the 1st century?

Does this text actually provide theological support for slavery?

Further Thoughts: Christians were also taught to show honour to the Roman authorities and to pray for them. This does not mean the Bible supported that specific form of government (pagan hereditary despotism); it just means Christians were eager to find ways to work within the system. Something similar might be said about slavery; Christians did what they could with what they had. This might seem feeble to us but it flowed out of the “image of God” ideal, and resulted in a much better treatment of slaves than they otherwise might expect. It was also an early part of the “long fuse of argument and discovery” (in the words of Rowan Williams) that changed things like exposure and slavery in the ancient world.

PART 2 (approximately 30 minutes total)



WATCH *The Image of God: The future* (cpx.video/image4) (4 minutes)



Discussion (25 minutes)

1. You don't have to believe in God to treat people with dignity, but are there dangers if society drifts from the Christian idea of the value of life?



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Further Thoughts: The clip included the disturbing but clear insight of Nietzsche that a society cut adrift from the Christian view of humanity, a view which “preserves what is ripe for destruction”, risks descending into being ruled by the law of selection. The documentary was not optimistic about our ability to carry on with a robust view of human rights, unless it is anchored to the divine, as human rights then just rely on the (majority) opinions and desires of other humans. This might become especially dangerous when we think about how to treat people with significant impairments to their bodies and minds.

2. Jesus tells a famous story, often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, to illustrate the way God thinks about all human beings, even those who disobey him. According to Jesus, even those who do not live as God's image-bearers are still regarded by God as his children—disobedient children, but children nonetheless—who are being called back into their proper position as members of God's family.



Luke 15:1-2, 11-24 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”



The parable continues with a comment about the older brother, which could be read if facilitators feel there is time:



Luke 15:25-32 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” “your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Jesus tells this story with a theological point. What does it tell us about the nature of human beings, and about the character of God?



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation.

The Judeo-Christian view has maintained a belief about human beings that ascribes each person infinite worth, because each has been made in the image of God. This led early Christians to work against dehumanising practices like exposure of children and the ancient slave trade, at least in the limited ways that were open to them. While it is true that the Bible has been used or misused to sustain evil practices, it has also been a power that has fuelled others to overthrow those evil practices. The biblical concept of the image of God upholds a high view of the dignity of each human life. It also calls each one of us back into a family relationship with the Creator.

EXTRAS

For further investigation:

- To view an occasion when the Bible was a player for both good and ill,
WATCH Slavery in “Christian” America (cpx.video/slavery)
- To view a story about one Christian person’s fight against the slave trade in Britain,
WATCH Am I not a man and a brother? The abolition of the slave trade (cpx.video/abolition)
- To discover how a high view of every person shaped the English and German languages,
WATCH Power to the people: Luther, Tyndale, and the road to democracy (cpx.video/literacy)