

Image Bearing and Ethics

Is murdering another person okay?

Hopefully you answered “no.”

But why did you answer “no”? Take a moment to think about it: “How would you explain murder is wrong?”

Have your answer?

I had the privilege of sharing a conversation with a young man who at the time described himself as an atheist and a man of logic. In the course of our discussion I posed this same question: Is murder wrong?

He answered that it is. I then asked, “Why?”

“Because it is,” he replied.

“But, why?” I again asked. “How do you know it’s wrong?”

He went through a list of answers: “I grew up in a family who believed it is wrong.” “Everybody knows it’s wrong.”

I continued to respond with questions, “What about someone who grew in a family that believed differently? Why is your family right and theirs wrong? Is the majority always right? What if the majority of a country believed in murdering for ethnic or religious reasons or feelings of superiority? Would they be wrong for acting on their ‘truth’? And would their action square with philosophies of survival of the fittest if they were able to carry it out? What about other philosophies like Utilitarianism, which states that the correct moral action is that which its outflowing consequences maximize the happiness of the community? Say there is a single person who annoys everyone in his neighborhood, and the community decides the greatest good in terms of the community’s happiness from killing the man outweighs the value of that man’s life. Would they be wrong to do away with him? If so, on what grounds would you argue that utilitarian philosophy is wrong?”

We are now in the thick of the woods of ethics.

My point in this line of questioning with the young man was to nudge him back towards the biblical narrative and worldview. Addressing him as person of logic, I wanted to suggest to him that the Judeo-Christian worldview as revealed in the Sacred texts of the Bible is the most reasonable and plausible foundation for his belief that murder is wrong.

What does this have to do with image bearing? Just about everything. It is because God has created each human individual as His own image that murder is wrong. As those made as God’s image, each human creature is bestowed with the highest dignity, value, and worth. To murder one made as the image of God constitutes a high-handed offense against the Creator God Himself in whose image each individual is created. Without the Judeo-Christian teaching and truth that everyone is made as

the image of God, arguments against murder struggle to find solid moral ground to stand upon and quickly unravel.

The *Imago Dei* (Latin for “image of God”) in humanity, however, does not just inform ethical issues of murder, but extends into almost every arena of life. It speaks into the heart of the issues we are facing today, especially that between those arising due to any difference between human creatures. These differences can include, but are not limited to the color or shade of one’s skin, nationality, religion (or denominations or sects within religions), sex, age, diversabilities, socio-economic status, education, zip code, weight, marital status, political affiliation, differences of opinion on any given topic, style of hair, style of clothes, and so on and so on. Any area of life where there is a difference between two human individuals or communities, there is the potential for looking down upon and marginalizing the other. Even the differences between two individuals of the same family and household can be great due to the care God has taken in magnificently crafting every creature unique.

So, how are we to relate to our differences? Are they something to be canceled and eradicated? Are we to marginalize them for a false sense of “unity” or “peace”? Or might we celebrate and lean into them as gifts of the Creator, YHWH Elohim?

I want to suggest when we consider our differences in the light of being made in God’s image and likeness and God’s creative artistry (when He *forms* the man in Genesis 2:7 the Hebrew verb is *yatzar*, a word used of a potter forming clay into a unique masterpiece – they didn’t have mass production in those days!), we are right to conclude our differences are designed to refract the infinite beauty and creativity of God while stirring a sense of awe and wonder within us.

But when was the last time you looked at someone different and were immediately struck with wonder (the good kind of wonder – not the wonder at how stupid they are for not agreeing with you)? Unfortunately, that which is most beautiful in this world, the evil one most seeks to ruin. And given our differences are endless, the potential for evil to exploit them is rife. If we are not on constant guard, we are all too prone to view our differences as threats to be destroyed versus possibilities to be embraced.

What if we began all of our encounters by approaching others as made in the image and likeness of the Most High God? How might that change things? When we surveyed cultural backgrounds to the image of God, a prominent theme in the ANE was that to insult or commit violence against the image, was to insult or commit violence against the god or ruler in whose image the image bearer was made. Two places in Scripture explicitly say the same applies to the YHWH Elohim and human creatures as His image bearers.

“Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.”
(Genesis 9:6 ESV)

In its context, the principle here is that man is made in the image of God. As such, violence against a human creature is a capital offence against God. In such cases, God authorizes another properly functioning image bearer to exercise God’s judgment in taking the offender’s life as his just deserts.

In the New Testament, James writes:

“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.” (James 3:5–12 ESV)

Implicit in James’ argument is that to curse another human creature who is God’s likeness is to curse God Himself.¹ What if we paused before opening our mouths or letting our inner monologue run free against another, and first asked God to help us see the other as His image and likeness – and then, once God has granted us that grace, we engage in listening to another and exploring our differences?

I also want to suggest that any society or community that does not do this cannot last and will ultimately become tyrannical and oppressive before its own demise, for it will recommit the sins of Babel. Pope Benedict XVI has expounded commenting on Genesis 9:6:

Human life stands under God’s special protection, because each human being, however wretched or exalted he or she may be, however sick or suffering, however good-for-nothing or important, whether born or unborn, whether incurably ill or radiant with health—each one bears God’s breath in himself or herself, each one is God’s image. This is the deepest reason for the inviolability of human dignity and upon it is founded ultimately every civilization. When the human person is no longer seen as standing under God’s protection and bearing God’s breath, then the human being begins to be viewed in utilitarian fashion. It is then that the barbarity appears that tramples upon human dignity.

There is a word here for us today inviting us to consider our posture towards the lives of the innocent unborn who are in the image of our God, socialized medicine that trends towards marginalizing care for the elderly, the disabled, and children with diversabilities, all who are the image and likeness of God, relationships between male and female who both reflect God’s glory, the scaremongering of media and politician who seek to exploit our differences – Image bearing should inform every aspect of life. But it must start with those relationships and encounters closest to us. What would it look like to mediate on the image of God in those around you – your family, friends, co-workers – in strangers you see throughout your day – take in the beauty of all the different shapes, laughs, colors of our physical features – the creativity and achievement of mankind working together? My hope and prayer is that as we get better at this, we might once again be awed by God

¹ This of course would not apply to the Church’s corporate use of the Imprecatory (“Cursing”) Psalms. Sadly, however, this is not an issue in the West, as I have yet to witness a church employ these Psalms. We are content sipping our coffee on Sunday mornings, or donning our masks (interesting imagery), while our brothers and sisters abroad are beheaded or sold into slavery for our faith.

praising Him for His creativity opening ourselves to experience the rich blessing He wishes to pour out on us, as we unite around Him and our common humanity as those made in the image and likeness of the Most High God, YWHH Elohim.