

Bearing the Image

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 2:15

In Genesis 1, we see a God who cannot help but create; who cannot help but pour his love outward and to make order out of chaos. We see a God who revels in the goodness of the created world well before humans are ever on the scene, recognizing it as good over and over again—and he saw all that he had made, and it was good, and it was good, and it was good...”

And then we come on the scene. In one of the most beautiful, theologically rich passages in all of Scripture, we find this creative, order-out-of-chaos God fashioning a unique kind of creature: bearers of his own divine image.

Now in the ancient world, a king fashioning images of himself was rather common. Well before television or the internet or digital cameras, new rulers and kings of large empires would often erect statues of themselves throughout their territory after their coronation. The purpose was to communicate their power and authority to the subjects of their far-flung provinces—many of them thousands of miles away from the capital city. It was a way to both announce the coronation of a new ruler to help his subjects learn to recognize their new king.

Obviously, the statues of these rulers were not the rulers themselves but were intended to point to the ruler; to remind the subjects who their true king was.

And this is how Genesis understands our image-bearing role as well: to bear the likeness of—and to point toward—creation’s true king; to mirror the image and nature of our loving, order-out-of-chaos God to the rest of creation. Not to usurp the authority of the true king; not to use our status as a license to abuse and exploit, but to remind the created world—and ourselves—who its true ruler is.

Many throughout church history have taken words like “dominion” and “rule” in Genesis 1:26-28 as license to do whatever we want with creation; to usurp the authority of the true king. This perspective, though, forgets the lesson of Genesis 2.

Because Genesis 2 tells us exactly how we are supposed to rule over the works of God’s hands.

In Genesis 2:15, we find two Hebrew words that are crucial in understanding the full meaning of our awesome call to bear the image of the Creator and to “rule” over

creation: *avad* and *shamar*. These words are often translated as “to till” and “to keep” respectively, but the true Hebrew meaning goes well beyond this limited rendering.

Avad is used all over the Old Testament and is most often used in the context of service or even slavery. This is precisely how it is used in another familiar passage, Joshua 24:15: “As for me and my household, we will serve [*avad*] the Lord.”

Shamar is also used a lot in the Old Testament, and it means to actively guard; to proactively and preemptively protect from harm. It’s used six times in the eight verses of Psalm 121 to describe the God who guards Israel so closely that their foot will not slip, and that sun will not harm them by day nor the moon by night. This is the kind of obsessive, active protection described by the word *shamar*.

Taken together then, these two Hebrew words in Genesis 2 are much closer to something like, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden to **serve and to protect it.**”

To serve and to protect creation.

This is the proper shape of our relationship to the rest of creation, this is what it means to rule over the fish in the sea and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground: to be in a special relationship of service with the earth and all its creature, and to actively and jealously protect it with the same tenacity that God protects his people.

Sample discussion questions:

- What does our identity as image bearers of the Creator mean for how we live our lives on the Earth?
- What does Jesus’ example of rulership (i.e. Phil. 2:6-11, John 13:1-17) have to teach us about our call to rule creation?
- What are some concrete ways that you can “serve” and “protect” creation in the coming week?