



Lesson 3

“In the Image and Likeness of God”

Apologetics Press Intermediate Christian Evidences Correspondence Course

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“And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.’ And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1: 26-27).

The Creator of the Universe has honored mankind by endowing him with certain qualities that are intrinsic to His nature. Through the centuries, many have contemplated the meaning of the phrase “in the image and likeness of God.” Much has been written on the subject, and no doubt much more remains yet to be written. Here, however, we would like to take a logical approach in searching for this meaning. The first step will be to narrow the possibilities by eliminating inaccurate definitions. The second step will be to deal with the actual meaning of the Bible’s statement that man exists “in the image and likeness of God,” and then to investigate the ramifications of that fact for people today who want to build and sustain a rock-solid faith.

“IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD”— WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

Before we examine what being created “in the image and likeness of God” means, it is appropriate to inquire as to what it does **not** mean. First, it does not mean that we are divine. Satan strives daily, of course, to persuade us to believe that we are God (cf. Genesis 3:5). In fact, deification of self is the central message of the New Age Movement. Consider, for example, the message that leaps from the pages of the writings of Oscar-winning actress, Shirley MacLaine. In addressing what she refers to as her “higher self” in her book, *Dancing in the Light*, MacLaine said: “I am God, because all energy is plugged in to the same source. We are each aspects of that source. We are all part of God. We are individualized reflections of the God source. God is us and we are God” (1991, p. 339). In her 1989 book, *Going Within*, she wrote: “I, for example, do a silent mantra with each of my hatha yoga poses. I hold each yoga position for twenty seconds and internally chant, ‘I am God in Light’” (p. 57).

God’s Word does not indicate that He created man in His **essence**, but in His **image** (Genesis 1:26). Only God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. God revealed this truth when He told the king of Tyre through Ezekiel: “You say, ‘I am a god,’ and sit in the seat of gods, in the midst of the

seas, Yet, you are a man and not a god” (Ezekiel 28:2). In the Bible, only the wicked elevate themselves to the status of deity. King Herod flirted with self-deification—and died in a horrific manner as a result (Acts 12:21-23). This stands in stark contradistinction to the reaction of Paul and Barnabas when the heathens at Lystra attempted to worship them (Acts 14:8-18). Had they felt inclined to do so, these two preachers could have encouraged the crowds in Lystra to recognize not only the preachers’ deity but their own deity as well! Yet, consider how they responded: “[W]hen the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God’ ” (Acts 14:14-15).

Second, the description of man being created in the image and likeness of God does not refer to man’s physical appearance. While some would like us to believe that it does, the phrase “image of God” does not refer to the fact that man’s physical being has a form or shape like God. It does not mean that God has two eyes, ears, arms, and legs, for God is not “like gold or silver or stone” (i.e., He is not physical; Acts 17:29), but is a spirit (John 4:24). And a spirit “does not have flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39; cf. Matthew 16:17). Clearly then, man does not bear the image of God in a physical way.

Third, the “image” of God does not refer to something different than the “likeness” of God. The so-called Greek and Latin “church fathers” frequently suggested a distinction between the two words and taught that “image” referred to the physical while “likeness” referred to the ethical part of the divine image. Other theologians, like Irenaeus (A.D. 130 - c. 200), taught that “image” denoted man’s unchangeable essence (i.e., man’s freedom and rationality), whereas “likeness” referred to the changing part of man (i.e., his relationship with God). The first thus related to the very nature of man, while the second was that which could be lost. Despite the influence of those who claim that these words reflect quite different ideas about the image of God, a careful study of Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1-3, and 9:6 reveals that these two Hebrew words do **not** speak of two different entities. Rather, they are used interchangeably. “Likeness” simply emphasizes the “image.” No good evidence exists for making any distinction between the two. In fact, the words are essentially synonymous in this context.

Fourth, the “image” is not man’s domination of the lower creation around him. Although somewhat closely related to the image of God, man’s dominion over the world is a consequence, not the essence, of the Divine image. It is the presence of this image that allows man to exercise dominion over the Earth. Man’s domination over the lower creation, then, is not what constitutes the image.

WHAT IS THE “IMAGE OF GOD”?

Admittedly, it is much easier to speak of what the “image of God” is not than what it is. The simple fact is that in most cases the wrong answers are easier to eliminate than the right ones are to choose. It is somewhat difficult to define the “image of God” because the Bible does not state explicitly what it is; it simply states the fact that to be human is to bear the image of God. Hence, whatever meaning is ascribed to it must be derived from its usage in Scripture.

When Moses wrote of the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27), he did so in the context of man being different from animals. It can be seen clearly from the text of Genesis 1 and 2 that the creation of man differed greatly from that of all other life in at least the following ways.

1. A divine conference preceded the forming of man. God said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness” (Genesis 1:26, emp. added). Such is not said of animals.
2. Man is said to have been **formed** by God, rather than being commanded to appear. Animals then are represented as the effect of God’s **word**, whereas man is the effect of God’s **work** (God “formed man”—Genesis 2:7).
3. Man’s creation was unique in that God “breathed” life into him (Genesis 2:7).
4. The sexes of mankind were not created simultaneously, as in the case of the animal world. Rather, the first female was “built” from a section of the first male’s flesh and bone.
5. Unlike animals, mankind is not broken down into species (i.e., “according to their kind” or “all kinds of”), but is designated by sexuality. God created them male and female (Genesis 1:27).
6. The psalmist (8:5) spoke of man as being created a little lower than the angels (ASV, God—*elohiyim*). Such never is said about animals.
7. Finally, the text of Genesis 1 explicitly states that man was created in the image of God. Nowhere is such a statement made concerning the rest of Earth’s life.

Unlike the other creatures God created, man alone bears a special resemblance to Him. Of all the living beings that dwell on planet Earth, one solitary creature was made “in the image of God.” What is it that makes up the critical essence of man that distinguishes him from all of creation, and what are the ramifications of this distinction? It is unwise to attempt to restrict the meaning of the “image of God” to one particular “feature” as some have done. The apostle Paul declared that man is “the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29). Such a concept certainly would consist of more than just a single bond of similarity. What, then, are the characteristics peculiar to man that liken him to God, differentiate him from members of the lower creation, and allow him to subdue the Earth?

First, **man is capable of speaking.** Although some may consider this to be a somewhat trivial feature in man's likeness to God, the creation account reveals otherwise. "And God said" appears ten times in Genesis 1. God **spoke to create** the "heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them" (Exodus 20:11; Psalm 33:6-9), and He **spoke to communicate** to man (Genesis 1:28). Then, on the same day that God created Adam, He expected him to name the creatures brought before him (Genesis 2:19). This implies that man was created with the ability to speak. Although he was unable to create anything by speaking, he was able to use words creatively. He named the animals of the Earth; he spoke of the helper God created for him as "woman"; and later, when attempting to justify his sinful actions, he "creatively" offered excuses and placed the blame on others (Genesis 3:9-13).

No animal is capable of speaking. The Bible mentions only two (supernaturally caused) exceptions to this rule: the serpent in the Garden of Eden and Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28-30). However, unlike man, both of these animals were controlled externally; Satan controlled the serpent, and God controlled the donkey. It is plainly evident that only man was given the gift of speech. It is a fundamental part of his nature that associates him with God and separates him from the rest of creation.

Second, **man is creative.** In Genesis 1-2, the words "created" (Hebrew *bara*) and "made" (Hebrew *asah*) are used fifteen times in reference to God's work. His omnipotence is seen in His ability to create something out of nothing simply by speaking it into existence. The amazing and intricate design of His creation testifies to His creative prowess. Like God, man also is able to create and to invent, although he does so on a distinctly different level. Consider, for example, the creativeness in Picasso's paintings, Goethe's writings, and Mozart's music. Man has built spaceships that travel 240,000 miles to the Moon; he has made artificial hearts for the sick; and he continues to construct computers that can process billions of pieces of information a second. Animals cannot do such things because they lack the inherent creative ability with which God endowed man. Beavers may construct huts, birds may build nests, and spiders may weave webs, but they are guided by instinct. Exhaustive attempts have been made to teach animals to express themselves by speech as well as in art, music, writing, etc., yet none has produced the hoped-for success. There is an enormous gap between humans and animals in the realm of creativity and aesthetics.

Third, closely related to man's creative ability is his gift of **reasoning.** Admittedly, animals possess a measure of understanding. They can respond to commands and signs, and in some cases even be trained to use minimal portions of sign language. But even though apes, dogs, and birds can be "trained" to do certain things, they cannot employ reason to communicate ideas with others so as to have true mental communion. The intelligence of animals is unlike that of humans. As biologist John Moore explained:

The purest and most complex manifestation of man's symbolic nature is his capacity for conceptual thought, that is, for thought involving sustained and high order abstraction and generalization. Conceptual thought enables man to make himself independent of stimulus boundness that characterizes animal thinking. Animals, especially primates, give undeniable evidence of something **analogous** to human thought—analogous yet medically different in that their thought is bound to the immediate stimulus situation and to the felt impulse of the organism. Animal thinking, too, is riveted to the realm of survival (broadly taken) and therefore encompasses a variety of needs pertinent to the species as well as to the individual. These differences account for the distinction between **conceptual** thought, which is the exclusive prerogative of man, and **perceptual** thought, a cognitive function based directly upon sense perception, which man shares with other animals (1983, p. 344, emp. in orig.).

Thus, the issue is not “can animals think?” but rather “can they think the way humans do?” The answer, obviously, is “No.”

In further examining the intellectual capacity of God's creation, one of the most obvious differences between humankind and animals is that animals do not possess the ability to know and love God. They do not look at the heavens and understand them as God's handiwork (cf. Psalm 19:1); they cannot perceive that there is a God based upon their surroundings (cf. Romans 1: 20); nor can they understand God's written revelation. For this reason, animals are neither righteous nor sinful. Although it is unwise to limit the “image” to reason alone, it most assuredly plays a major role in man's rule over his creation and in his unique relationship to God—a relationship in which animals cannot participate, partly because they lack the intelligence for such.

A fourth characteristic included in “the image” is man's capacity to make rational choices. As a **volitional creature**, man is capable of choosing his own destiny. It is an undeniable fact that animals lack the freedom of choice with which man was endowed “in the beginning.” Whenever animals react to their environment, they are guided by a “built-in system” known as “instinct.” The Arctic tern travels from the Arctic to the Antarctic and home again every year—a round trip of 22,000 miles—without concern for changes in either climate or environment. Salmon are able to find their way back home through thousands of miles of trackless ocean to the same river and gravel bed where they once were hatched. These creatures are guided by the amazing instinct that God gave them.

Unlike animals, man does not rely primarily upon instinct for his survival. Rather, God gave him the ability to plot the course of his own life and then to carry out such plans rationally. Adam and Eve freely chose to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, even after being instructed otherwise (Genesis 2:16-17). Joshua challenged Israel to serve either Jehovah or false gods (Joshua 24:15). **But the Israelites did have a choice!** Today, each person has a choice as to whether or not he or she accepts the invitation of

Jesus (Revelation 22:17; Matthew 11:28-30). Unlike all of God's other creatures that act primarily on instinct, human beings can use the freedom God gave them to act or react on account of their ability to reason.

Fifth, another part of the image of God given to man would be his **immortal soul**. Just as God uniquely "formed" man's physical body from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7), He "**forms the spirit** of man within him" (Zechariah 12:1, emp. added). The Hebrew word *yatsar* (form) is used in both Genesis 2:7 and Zechariah 12:1, and is defined as to form, fashion, or shape (as in a potter working with clay). Thus, God molded and fashioned both man's physical body and his spiritual nature. Only man is endowed with an immortal soul; animals do not possess such. Unlike animals, man possesses a God-given spirit that returns to Him when man dies (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Such never is affirmed of animals. Scripture refers to Adam, the first man, as the son of God (Luke 3:38), and to mankind in general as "the offspring of God" (Acts 17:29). No animal ever was described by such language. Man is the only living being upon this Earth that possesses an immortal soul given to him by God—the Father of Spirits (Hebrews 12:9). Such an immortal spirit most assuredly makes us divine image-bearers. It likens us to God, separates us from the lower creation, and gives us a reason to live—and to live in accordance with God's will! In addressing this, G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

What is man essentially, for it is in his essential nature that he is in the image of God. Man essentially is spirit, his present body being his probational dwelling place, that through which he receives impressions, and that through which he expresses the fact of his own being.... The essential fact in man therefore is his spirit, and it is in spiritual essence that man is made in the image of God. ... God is a Spirit, having intelligence, having emotion, having will. Man is in the shadow of God. He also is a spirit, having intelligence, having emotion, having will (1903, pp. 26,27).

The image of God involves many things, but surely the essential point is that man has an immortal spirit that is capable of fellowship with his Creator. This is why man is fitted to have communion with God—something no animal can ever do.

Sixth, man alone possesses an **inherent religious inclination**. Regardless of how "primitive" or "advanced" he may be, and despite living isolated from all other humans, man always has sought to worship a higher being. And even when man departs from the true God, he still worships something. It might be a tree, a rock, or even himself. As one writer observed, evidence reveals that "no race or tribe of men, however degraded and apparently atheistic, lacks that spark of religious capacity which may be fanned and fed into a mighty flame" (Dummelow, 1944, p. ci). However, no chimp or dog ever stopped to build an altar, sing a hymn of praise, or give a prayer of thanks. Surely, man's unique inclination to worship someone or something is a part of the image of God that he bears.

Finally, of all the creatures upon the Earth, only man has a **conscience**. Only man possesses a concept of morality that allows him to distinguish between “right” and “wrong.” Animals have no sense of moral “oughtness.” A dog might be taught by his master not to do certain things, and even may fear punishment, but he does not possess a conscience. A Doberman Pincher does not feel sorry about biting the paperboy; nor does he feel guilty after eating his master’s birthday cake. There is simply no evidence to suggest that beasts have any sense of ethics.

While writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul argued that even the ancient Gentiles, who had no written law from God, had a type of law “written in their hearts” (Romans 2:14-15). They thus possessed an awareness that certain things were right or wrong. Hence, their consciences either accused them or excused them. When man violates his conscience, he feels guilt. Although one’s environment plays a major role in his concept of morality, the **need** for morality is universally acknowledged by man. How does one explain all of this? It is because man was given a conscience “in the beginning.”

CONCLUSION

The Bible paints a picture of man as a being that stands on a different level from all other creatures upon the Earth. He towers high above all earthly creation because of the phenomenal powers and attributes with which God Almighty has endowed him. No other living being was given the capacities and capabilities, the potential and the dignity, that God instilled in each man, woman, and child. Indeed, humankind is the peak, the pinnacle, the apex of God’s creation. Man did not evolve from an “imageless” lower creation. Rather, God created him with the unique inherent abilities that allow him to rule over the created world.

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Questions—Lesson 3

TRUE OR FALSE

DIRECTIONS: Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- _____ 1. Man is created physically after God's image.
- _____ 2. The creation of man differed greatly from that of all other life.
- _____ 3. The presence of God's image in man allows him to exercise dominion over the Earth.
- _____ 4. Every living being was created in God's image.
- _____ 5. Animals possess an immortal soul.
- _____ 6. Animals are capable of perceptual thinking only.
- _____ 7. Being created in the "image of God" means that humans are divine.
- _____ 8. Only man is created with the ability to speak.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

1. God is not:
(a) Omnipotent (b) Wicked
(c) Omniscient (d) Loving
2. When Moses wrote of the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26-27), he did so in the context of man being different from:
(a) Animals (b) God (c) Aliens (d) Angels
3. Animals have no sense of:
(a) Direction (b) Taste
(c) Smell (d) Moral "oughtness"
4. Whenever animals react to their environment, they mostly are guided by a "built-in system" known as:
(a) Reason (b) Instinct (c) Intelligence (d) Logic

5. Which of the following characteristics differentiates mankind from the lower creation?
- (a) Desire to worship someone or something (b) Mobility
 (c) Ability to make noise (d) Ability to reproduce

FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. Deification of self is the central message of the _____ .
2. _____ and _____ discouraged the heathens at Lystra from worshipping them.
3. Only the _____ elevate themselves to the status of deity.
4. Unlike animals, man possesses a God-given _____ that returns to _____ when man dies.
5. Only _____ can reason abstractly and _____ ideas with others so as to have true mental communion.

COMPLETE THE BIBLE VERSE (NEW KING JAMES VERSION)

1. John 4:24: "God is _____ ."
2. Luke 24:39: "A spirit does not have _____ and _____ ."
3. Genesis 1:26: "Let ___ make man in Our _____ , according to Our _____ ."
4. Acts 17:29: "We are the _____ of God."
5. Genesis 9:6: " _____ sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the _____ of God He made _____ ."

NOTES/COMMENTS

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