

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

I. Set Up:

A. Last week we began the Fall series in earnest by looking at the first of the four big ideas that should shape our understanding of who we are. This week Mike continues with the second of the four. He will move us from the good news of Genesis 1 to the bad news of Genesis 3.

II. Intro

A. Who are you? That's the question I opened with last week. Who do you think you are? Who do you think you should think you are? Who are you, or maybe, what are you?

B. In last week's sermon - which set up this series on Renewal - I noted:

1. That, our self-understanding is not a small matter. It shapes how we live, how we define success and how we treat others.

2. That our identity can be confusing because we have so many roles – I am a husband, father, son, brother, pastor, sinner, saint, 60-year-old, reader and many other things. I need to play many roles and sometimes prioritize among them.

3. I noted that this is a confusing moment because in the relatively recent past our culture has shifted. Whereas identity used to be something assigned to us by the group (our families or tribe) the expectation now is that we will look inside ourselves and then tell people who we are.

4. I also noted that there were four big worldview narratives about who we are floating around out there: the Naturalist, Idealist, Mystic and Christian worldview. And then we looked at Genesis 1:26f to talk about the fact that we are creatures made in the image of God.

C. As topics go, identity is a big one. Which means there is a lot of information we are not looking at - both from a contemporary and from a Biblical angle.

1. In terms of the first.

a) I think it's worth noting how many people end up being defined – and then shaped – by things no one really thinks of as ultimate: by sport's teams, consumer products, by brands. A few weeks back, in The Friday Update I recounted Phil Knight's realization that Nike didn't sell shoes, they “established emotional bonds between people and their logo.”

b) I think it's worth noting that today – during this time of heightened acrimony - some people are defined not by what they like but by what they dislike.

c) I think it's worth noting that some of what is being advocated by society about identity is wrong, but not all of it. There is a lot out there we can learn from.

2. And, of course, there is also a lot about identity in Scripture. Once you start looking, you realize how right Calvin was in saying: knowing God and knowing yourself are the two ways we grow as a disciple.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

a) I was at a lecture this week at Trinity, it was by Russell Moore, the new “public theologian at Christianity Today, and it was called Paradise Lost: Longing, Alienation, and the Mystery of Humanity in a Technological Age.

b) In Psalm 8, King David famously – and somewhat rhetorically - asks, “What is man that though art mindful of him? He is asking the Creator of all of everything, “why would you care about us?”

c) The writers of Hebrews brings the same question forward in chapter 2 of his letter. Almost the same words. He asks: “What are mere mortals that You should think about them.”

d) Both passages - and dozens of others - point out how much attention is given to questions of identity.

3. When I was trying to figure out how to approach this question – where to look to frame our thinking about ourselves – I thought about a study on the different things we get called. But I quickly decided there were way too many allusions. We are alternately referred to as: sheep, trees, clay pots, exiles, children, members of the covenant, sinners, royal priests, saints, prodigals, ambassadors and a few dozen other things as well

D. So, there is a lot we could discuss about identity from culture and a lot of things the Bible serves up as well. But for this series I want us to focus on what I think are the four big identity changing ideas from the Bible.

1. The first - as we noted last week - came from Genesis 1:26f: That passage read: 26 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,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” 27: So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. are creatures made in the image of God.

2. Based on this passage I noted that we are “creatures made in the image of God.”

3. And I then noted that this points to two issues:

a) That we are creatures, which means we are not the top of the food chain, we are owned, dependent, limited, accountable. We can talk about being self-made, but in the most important ways that is not true. God made us. We depend on him and are accountable to him.

b) The second point made by this passage is that we have been created in God’s image. Which means that we are altogether different from every other living thing. We are not just a Stimulus Response machine, we are not just a naked ape, we are not just the temporary pinnacle of the evolutionary process, we are the image bearers of God. And this means we have value. It comes from God.

E. Today I want to drill down on the second big, defining idea.

1. My shorthand for point one is that we are highly valued.

2. My shorthand for point two is that we are deeply fallen.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

3. To that end, we move from Genesis 1 to Genesis 3.
 - a) In Genesis 1: 26 and 27, we are created, and it is good.
 - b) In Genesis 2 we get the creation story from a different angle.
 - c) In Genesis 3 we get the fall. We are given an account of the introduction of evil and its massive implications.
4. Genesis 3 is passage that raises lots of questions. Let me encourage you to focus on the obvious point that is being made.
5. The chapter opens with the serpent tricking the woman, who in turn deceives her husband - who comes across as an irresponsible and dimwitted lout.
 - a) Indeed, after Eve is deceived, Adam disobeys God openly, then they run and hide and, when - shortly after that - God confronts them, Adam starts blaming everyone else: the woman you gave me did this.
6. What follows that is the curse - the punishment.
7. I am reading from Genesis 3:14:
 - F. So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring[a] and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”
 - G. 16 To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”
 - H. 17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.
 - I. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

III. As you may know, in classical literature:

- A. A tragedy is a story in which the protagonist ends up in a worse condition than where they began.
- B. And a comedy (classically defined) is the opposite. It’s a story of ascent in which the protagonist ends in a better place than where he began.
- C. And... Americans prefer the later.
 1. Our imaginations are shaped by rags-to-riches stories from the time we are children. Our favorite characters are almost always nobodies who rise from obscurity to become heroes: Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen, Peter Parker and on and on.
 2. Some of these characters are complicated - they are a bit conflicted. They have some scars and some demons. Perhaps even some bad motivations. But they overcome all of that. Their inner goodness and resilience carries them forward.
- D. The story line of the Bible doesn’t line up with this narrative.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

1. When we look to Scripture, what we find is both a comedy and a tragedy – it depends on which character you are focused on, but the characters are too broken to save themselves. They must be rescued.
 2. Tim Keller states it this way: “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”
- E. Here is the point, we get to the good news - and it is gloriously better than we dare hope. But the bad news – which comes first – is worse than most of us are willing to face.
- F. Frederick Beuchner said it this way:
1. “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob.
 2. He will go on and say, “That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy.”
- G. The Christian message is a mix of good news and bad news, of tragedy and comedy. But – today we are focused on the bad news, and I think it is much worse than you think.
- IV. Let me note that Genesis 3 is not the only place in which the Bible highlights how broken we are. It’s just the first one.
- A. In the Bible, every person other than Jesus is broken, even those who do a lot of good - like Abraham or David or Peter.
1. Abraham tries to save himself by passing along his wife as his sister.
 2. David may be faithful when he is young – he kills the lion and slays Goliath and has a heart for God. But then he commits adultery, lies about it and then murders to cover his tracks.
 3. Moses is brilliant in some moments, but also a hot head who kills a man.
 4. Solomon starts well but then fades - as does Asa and Jehosophat and Hezekiah.
 5. Peter is bold one minute and cowering the next.
- B. The Bible makes it clear that we are broken, sinful, dead in our transgressions. Not – just to be clear – as bad as we could possibly be.
1. That is what theologians call utter depravity. The claim is not that we are evil personified but that evil has corrupted every part of us. The glass is not one-hundred percent poison, but poison has been throughout the drink.
- C. This is the message that runs throughout the Bible.
1. We find it in Genesis 3 – where we looked last week. And also Genesis 4-11.
 2. And then it’s in Exodus and it’s the basis of Leviticus and, well, our sinfulness is pretty much on display on every page after that.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

3. In Jeremiah 17 we are told that our heart is more deceitful than anything else
 4. In Psalm 14:7 we read that “all have turned away, all have become corrupt: there is no one who is good, not even one.”
- D. The Bible does not suggest that we are good people who make a bad choice every now and then, it says that we are sinners.
1. The suggestion is not that we are called sinners because we sin - but that we sin because that is our nature.
- E. If you want more chapter and verse, try Romans 3:23. Or 6:23 or Romans 7 – where Paul notes that the things he wants to do he can’t seem to do.
- F. The Bible states that we are more than victims of evil. We are, in fact, agents of it. And it calls on us to accept as much.
1. To repent – which means to agree with God about who we are.
 2. To be like G.K. Chesterton, who, when asked by the London Times what was wrong with the world wrote back, “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton
- V. By the way, the idea that we are broken is not just a Biblical narrative, it an historical one.
- A. As you may know, I’ve been doing a history podcast. Last Saturday was an overview of the 18th century – and I noted how exhausting it is to try to document all the wars.
1. I have this massive book that lists everything that happened every year. It’s a big chart. And I noted that in the political column there are always wars.
 2. I read this week that during the last 3,500 years there have been wars during 3,128 pf them.
- B. Yesterday I was looking at and comparing the French and American Revolutions.
1. The US had a view of mankind that we are broken – needed a system of checks and balances. And you get all kinds of comments from the founders about the need for religion in order for virtue in order for government to work.
 2. The French went the other way. Get rid of the church. Seize it’s property.
 - a) They followed people like Rosseau – who was a scoundrel.
 - b) And they ended up moving into the Reign of Terror and cutting everyone’s head off
- C. And as we look ahead I know that as we move into modernism there is this belief that with a bit more time and education we will fix all of our problems. But in addition to all the good science has brought, it has also brought bigger bombs.
1. As anyone who was honest could see, the progress of progress was limited by the heart of man.¹
 2. And then as we get into the last thirty years, fifty years, we pivot again.
- D. There is less talk about Utopia anymore. Nor do people argue for the perfectibility of mankind.² Instead, the is a move to deny sin by reject truth and any kind of moral absolutes.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

1. Debates about truth have been replaced by agreements that “your truth” and “my truth” might be different, and that’s o.k., as long as you do not suggest that your truth is better.
2. It is as if, having grown tired of poor test scores, we’ve decided to say that every answer is right.³
3. Of course, this doesn’t work. Not for long anyway.⁴ Nor does it make sense. Neither sincerity nor personal preferences can change ultimate reality. (But then, that’s just “my truth” trying to assert itself.)

VI. This is a hard sell, in part because we do not want it to be true. And in part because we do not see ourselves clearly.

- A. 93% of us say we are better than average drivers.
 1. By the way, we also think those who drive more slowly than us are idiots and those who drive faster are reckless.
 2. Those 93% of people also say they are modest.
- B. And those in prison say they are more moral than most people.

VII. I could go on but I don’t think I need to. I have three recommendations.

- A. Read *The Truth About Ourselves* – it is laugh out loud funny
- B. Think about the cross. It is our guide for the first two ideas about who we are: highly valued and deeply fallen.
- C. And then repent. I am going to invite you to stand now and join with me in this corporate prayer of confession.
 1. Almighty and most merciful Father, we are thankful that your mercy is higher than the heavens, wider than our wanderings, and deeper than all our sin.
 2. Forgive our careless attitudes toward your purposes, our refusal to relieve the suffering of others, our envy of those who have more than we have, our obsession with creating a life of constant pleasure, our indifference to the treasures of heaven, our neglect of your wise and gracious law.
 3. Help us to change our way of life so that we may desire what is good, love what you love, and do what you command, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ The situation led General Omar Bradley to state, “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount...the world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.” Speech given on Nov. 11, 1948. Reproduced in Omar Bradley’s *Collected Writings*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1967). A second related quote comes from Winston Churchill in remarks he made at the Mid-Century Convocation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: We thought that with improving transportation nations would get to know each other better. We believed that as they got to know each other better they would like one another more and that national rivalries would fade in a growing international consciousness. We took it almost for granted that science would confer continual boons and blessings upon us...In the name of ordered but unceasing progress, we saluted the Age of Democracy expressing itself ever more widely through parliaments freely and fairly elected on a broad, universal franchise...The whole prospect and outlook of mankind grew immeasurably large, and the multiplication of ideas also proceeded at an incredible rate.” Unfortunately, as Churchill confessed, this vision was not accompanied by any substantial advance in the stature of man’s “mental faculties or moral character.” Quoted initially Roger L. Shinn, *Christianity and the Problem of History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953), p. 4.

Renewal - #3 – Deeply Fallen

² *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently noted that “the belief in the natural human goodness” has almost disappeared. In a Feb. 18th column Brooks noted that the view most often associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau – i.e., that “‘everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things: everything degenerates in the hands of man’ – has faded. Parents and educators are not likely to allow children to ‘be liberated to follow their natural instincts’ any longer, instead they coach, supervise and instruct every element of their life. Self-discipline has become as important as self-esteem. We are disciplined so that they might learn right and wrong.” (*Human Nature Redux*, *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2007)

³ In his 1973 book, *Whatever Happened to Sin*, psychologist Dr. Karl Menninger chronicled the United States slide into moral confusion. He began with our founders who - he believed - structured our government’s checks and balances around a realistic view of evil. From there he notes how evil slid from being “sin” defined theologically, to being a “crime” defined legally, to being a “sickness” defined only in psychological categories. The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan noted a similar descent. His famous phrase, “defining deviancy down,” was based on the idea that what was “deviant” fifty years ago is today just par for the course.” One is also reminded of Dostoyevsky’s famous line in *The Brothers Karamazov*. If God is dead, and there is no future life, then “nothing would be immoral any longer, everything would be permitted.” (For more on this see Ken Meyers, *Time for Truth*, page 28.)

⁴ Setting aside the obvious irony that people are absolutely certain that there are no absolutes, few are willing to deny evil when it is afflicted upon them.