We have been in a short mini-series looking at 5 core beliefs of our Christian faith. This is called "theology" which simply means "the study of God". Some see theology as something esoteric and abstruse – don’t worry if you don’t know those two words they are quite puzzling! But in reality, understanding God and His ways more clearly actually helps us more than we think in our everyday life because God is the creator & sustainer of life and the Universe. Our core Christian beliefs actually help us understand life more than we can imagine – including things in our everyday life. This week we want to delve into who we are – not as individuals, but as humans. With all the claims around us, how can we understand our humanity? We want to go deeper than our personality, interests and cultural differences. We want to understand what is common to every person who has ever lived. Who are we as humans?

PROPOSITION: To better understand what is helpful in everyday life we must remember BOTH aspects of all humans: all are sinful and all were created in the image of God!

I. Who are we as humans?

A. Created in God’s image

To understand who we are as humans, it is helpful to start with where we came from. READ Gen 1:26-27. Here we are told that humans, unlike the other creation, are made in the image and the likeness of God. Now the terms “image” and “likeness” here seem to be referring to the same thing – this is what we call Hebrew parallelism. So be careful of any interpretation of who we are as humans which is based on dividing these two words into separate things – like we have lost the likeness but not the image or vice versa. Our interpretation is confirmed by the way Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 interchangeably use the terms “image of God” and “likeness of God”. Another term used in our day for this image and likeness of God is the phrase “Imago Dei”. As I have often reminded you, theologians are rarely inventive in their words – “Imago Dei” is simply Latin for “image of God”. So if all humans are created in the image & likeness of God …

What is the image of God in people? In what ways are we like God? What abilities do we have that animals don’t? What characteristics of God do we reflect since we aren’t all-powerful or all-knowing? What responsibilities do we have that God has entrusted us with? NOW, if you do not personally have a clear definition of what the image or likeness of God in humans is, don’t feel bad. God didn’t reveal the qualities of this as clearly as some would like and we can only know this information by God’s revelation. Some describe the image of God in terms of our rational and moral capabilities – aspects of our mind, emotion and will that are different from animals which were not made in the image of God. From this perspective we could also say
self-awareness, creativity, and aesthetic sensibilities make up the image of God in us. Others point out that is too individualistic an interpretation given the language in verse 27 – God created “him” (that’s singular) male and female he created them (that’s plural). In fact, God speaks of himself in the plural in verse 26 when talking about making humans. These people claim that it is the unique relational aspects between people that reflect the relationships within the Trinity. What is unique is the level of our relationships which are much more than the instincts of animals. Still others say the primary way that image and likeness are used is in our responsibilities – one sees that in terms of “dominion” or “ruling over” which is spoken about in verse 28.

READ. (As a side note, we showed in our teaching on God’s view of work last year that “dominion” or “ruling over” does not mean that we take advantage of the rest of the creation for ourselves but that we are managing the rest of creation for God’s honor and glory.)

For background, in my first decade or two as a Christian, I was taught some form of the first way of looking at it – the image of God are those differences in our rational and moral capabilities as people which is greater or different from animals. Since then, I have also seen clear evidences in Scripture of the other two aspects being reflected in humans – our responsibilities as God’s agents in this world and the unique aspects of human relationships. And that doesn’t include a fourth area which we call human responsibility or “free will”. Rather than argue one over another, the great part is that we know that if God wanted us to be more clear about the specific nature of the image of God that humans reflect then the Lord would have revealed that to us for we can not know that definitively any other way. The Bible speaks less of the nature of God’s image in us and more about the purpose of God’s image in us. We do clearly know that there is a difference between humans and animals that reflects God. We do clearly know there are responsibilities God has given humans that are different than the animals. We do clearly know that we are currently being transformed into the image of Jesus which refers to moral characteristics of God. We do know that human relationships are to reflect the image of God, especially as Trinity. We do know that humans have been given real choice – sometimes called “free will”. Our world is not determined or preprogrammed in the same way a Monarch butterfly is pre-programmed for its travels. God did not make humans robots, nor do we just function on animal instincts. That is the reason we can’t train humans the same way we train horses. Many a parent has seen their kids turn out very different when they had the same upbringing. And many a sibling wonders how their brother or sister ever grew up in the same household they did because they are so different in thinking, actions and attitudes.

God reveals to us that we, as humans, were created in the image or likeness of God which is different than other creation. **Turn now to Romans 3.** This is not all God reveals to us about our beginnings, for by Genesis 3, the man and woman have chosen to use their **God-given free-will** to disobey God and rebel against His plan for them.
B. Sinners by action and nature

We see the result of this action has continued through all human history. As Romans 3:22b-23 says, "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." God also reveals that ALL humans are sinful. I am sinful. Everyone else here in the room is sinful. Your favorite aunt who gives you great presents is sinful. We disobey, we put "self" first, and we rebel against the ways of our Creator God. Background makes no difference. When these verses were written, the Jews were privileged spiritually — it would be like growing up in an intact Christian home today. They had God’s word in the Old Testament, they rightly believed in just one God, God clearly showed them the right way to live and gave them evidences to prove it. Yet despite all these positives in their culture, all the Jewish people still sinned. By contrast, the Gentiles at this time grew up in a spiritually confused culture like we have today that believed things quite opposite of the Bible. They believed in many gods, were highly superstitious, practiced sexual immorality and slavery, yet were also quite secular in many areas of everyday life. The Gentiles were also ALL sinful. While our culture, upbringing and teaching may have effects on some specific behaviors and beliefs, it is not the cause of our base sinfulness. As v 9 ends “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.”

This sin is not just an occasional mess-up, but it is deeper and more pervasive than we usually admit. It has been passed on to us by birth much like our DNA is passed on. As Psalm 51:5 says: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” We have to teach a young child to say “yes sir” & be polite — but we don’t have to teach them to say “no” or have a temper-tantrum. Turn over to Romans 7:18. This deep seated sinfulness is called our sin nature. READ. All humans have a sin nature from birth. The rest of Romans 7 shows how this sin nature is still at work even in the strongest Christian leaders like the apostle Paul. Our sinfulness corrupts what we do so that even the good we do often has mixed motives behind it — like we want personal recognition or some future favor. We freely & sacrificially give presents but then get upset if they aren’t enjoyed or we don’t get thanks for them. Our sinfulness touches every area of our being — our intellect, our will, and our emotions. The fancy term used is “total depravity”. Now that does NOT mean we are all as bad as we could be — but there is no area of our life that can’t be turned towards sin, given the right circumstances. So why do humans do wrong? Ultimately it is because we chose to.

C. Image of God defaced not erased

So how do these two truths work together — the image of God in us and this strong sin nature? I’ve listed two verses in your outline for you to look at later — one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Both say similar things. In Gen 9:6, we are not to murder another person because they have been made in God’s image and in James 3:9-10, we are not to curse other people because they are made in God’s likeness. There is a dignity and value every human on planet earth has right now simply because we were made in God’s likeness and image.
So our sin and sin nature have distorted, marred, and messed up God's likeness in us, but it has not erased it—defaced, not erased. For example, our moral purity was lost & we struggle to always do what is right, but we still have a conscience at work inside. It's been damaged, but it is still active. Our love has been corrupted and becomes very self-serving at times, but we also show actions of incredible self-sacrifice for others. The image of God in us has been defaced, not erased.

Just having that image of God reflected in some aspects of our humanness gives us great dignity even though our sinfulness has so messed us, our culture and our world up. So people around us may be obnoxious, opinionated scumballs but we aren’t to curse them or bump them off because they still have an intrinsic value simply by being human. This value does not come from what we do, but simply because we are made in God's image. And the fullness of God's image is going to be restored to Christians after they die because all true believers will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. God is already starting that process in each one here—it is called spiritual growth and long-term discipleship. Turn to Matthew 7:9-11. (repeat)

D. Not basically good but can do good

Matt 7:9-11

Notice how Jesus puts together these two truths of universal human sinfulness and that all humans are made in God's image. READ Matt 7:9-11. Notice that Jesus openly calls all those who are listening to him, “evil”—they not only have sinned but have this sin nature that corrupts otherwise good thoughts and actions in them. And these people are the “good ones” who have sacrificed something to come out to be challenged by Jesus to live differently. These are the ones who want to obey God and are drawn to Jesus—yet that inward sin & sin nature still corrupts.

On the other hand, Jesus clearly confirms that those who are evil still know how to do some good—in this case, give good gifts to their children. There is good things done by people around. The remnant of the image of God leaves some recognition of right and wrong inside us and calls us to sacrifice for others (it's defaced but not erased). Because we were created in the image of God—we reflect God’s goodness at times. While we are not basically good in our nature (watch out for anything built on that premise) we still can do good. Not perfect, ontological good in the court of the Holy & perfect God—but good towards other people—like good gifts by parents to their kids.

II. How this helps us in everyday life

Do you see how these two truths can really help us in everyday life as we encourage good actions & thoughts and challenge sinful attitudes & deeds. Unlike most weeks where I give you just one or two illustrations, I am going to share 20 so there is no way you can keep notes. I have printed this next part out and you will find copies of it on the corner of the office desk—just grab one if you want to review these.
A. Humans sinfulness calls us to ...

If we do believe God’s evaluation that we all sin, are sinful and have a sin-bent since birth then …

1. We are going to encourage “checks & balances” in society – especially powerful human institutions. This is not because we don’t trust one another, but because we will all lean towards sin in certain circumstances.

2. We are not going to always trust our own feelings or motives. We are more likely to deceive ourselves about what or why we are doing something since the Bible says our hearts are deceitful above all else. Don’t always trust your feelings or believe your thoughts as to why you think you are doing something. They need to be tested.

3. If we do believe God’s evaluation of our sinfulness, then we are going to wait until we hear the second side of a story when assessing a situation. The first person’s version may sound convincing but it can often leave out important details that make the whole situation look very different.

4. We are going to encourage taking personal responsibility for our own actions first & foremost instead of instinctively blaming others for the decisions we make. This is really a challenge our culture has forgotten in our day.

5. Because we are all sinful, we are going to practice and teach real confession & repentance rather than hiding, blame and excuses when we haven’t done right. If there are excuses in our apology, if we are unwilling to sacrifice in our regret, if there is accusation or telling others what to do in our confession THAN it isn’t real confession or repentance and it won’t free us.

6. Remembering that all humans sin and have a sin nature helps us to understand why it is so hard to publicly stand for God’s truth. The truth will always make someone upset. And believing falsehoods will lead to conflict.

7. Since we all are sinners by nature we are going to need boundaries both in our lives & in society. We are going to need to put intentional effort into self-control and practice sacrificing things we like for a greater good to break the hold of our sinful desires.

8. Because we are all sinful, we must intentionally stand against arrogance, sinful pride, self-boasting & self-exaltation. These should concern us in our day more than they do! They always bring more problems than what is gained by them.

9. Recognizing our own sinfulness leads us to see that we all have obedience barriers we can’t get over by ourselves – we need others to help us. As believers we can all point to areas God has blessed us in and given us renewed victory over – but we also all have what I call “besetting sins”. These are temptations and challenges we are going to face all our life. Knowing that, we want to be in community with others because we are going to need their help to overcome.

10. And we need to apply the same criteria we use on others to ourselves. Currently Americans tend to judge others by their actions but excuse themselves of those same actions because of perceived motives. We also attribute motives to others when we can’t even rightly identify our own motives because of the corruption of our sinful nature.
Because of our sinfulness, it is wrong to think that problems will just go away by themselves.

We can go on with this list but you see how many areas of life this simple truth of human sinfulness helps us in daily situations. *Who we are as humans* affects a huge amount of our life and interactions. But it is also important to remember the second half of who we are—the image of God has not been erased in our life even as sin has defaced it. So we must combine these two. We must encourage people to do good, even as our sinful nature can corrupt things.

B. The image of God in all calls us to ...

12. So we don’t make the checks and balances in society overly negative or cynical otherwise it discourages those who are trying to do good and right. If a good response becomes too hard just because of fear or worry, then people will just wisely back away from doing what is good.

13. Because God is always at work and remnants of His image remain in us, we can always carry hope that even the most wayward and worst can still repent & respond to God’s call in their lives or do good actions in unexpected situations.

14. We see the importance of encouragement in all areas of life—*we don’t assume people should do good, we encourage them to do it*. That also means we don’t rely on punishment alone for people to keep the rules which we might tempted to do if people didn’t also have the image of God in them. *Instead, we seek to encourage and reward those who do good*. We’ve steadily lost this in society—when was the last time you were rewarded for doing your taxes on time or being honest? Interestingly, the Barre police understand the importance of this as, for many summers, they hand out free ice cream certificates to those kids who are doing what is right and good.

15. The image of God in all humans also calls us to make any encouragement we give to be honest and for actual achievement, not just blanket awards for all so no one feels bad. We are encouraging things that are against our sinful nature!

16. The image of God in all humans also calls us to value team, work together and give up for the common good. As President Kennedy said when I was a young kid, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

17. This combination in all humans reminds us to appreciate people for what they actually do without expecting perfection or always reminding them of their shortcomings. Encouragement with admonition will not overcome.

18. We want to discourage our own self-focus by looking for what we can do for others instead of thinking about what others can do for us.

19. The fact the image of God is still in all humans reminds us to see the positive side of discipline, not just the punishment side. This involves education, training, practice, encouragement, & development of new skills & self-discipline.

20. We value human life in and of itself and not just what people can do. We value the handicapped, elderly and babies.
I’ll bet if you think about it you can add scores more to each of our lists – and a copy of these lists are on the corner of the office desk. We are going to skip the last two sub-points in your outline and simply end with this. It is the combination of recognizing that there is both a sin nature in everyone from birth AND there is still good remnants of the image of God designed into us from creation, that allows us to rightly understand who we are as humans and how best to respond to the endless interpersonal situations we face. The Bible strongly emphasizes the sin part because no one can come to Jesus and be forgiven without acknowledging our sinful thoughts and actions. Because of our sinful nature, this is the hardest area to humble in ourselves. Because we have real evil spiritual forces around, there is never a time we aren’t being encouraged to ignore this truth and think we are the exceptions. Because of human comparisons, we can easily discount the awfulness of what we have done or thought in light of true holiness, justice and righteousness. But as Jesus said, as evil as we are as humans – as impossible as it is to get to heaven without Jesus dying for us, we can do good for another person. God has designed us to reflect God in a number of ways – thinking, morals, caring relationships, greater responsibility, creativeness, etc. That image may be defaced by sin, but it has not been erased. God is challenging our sinfulness, but He is also encouraging virtues, morals, cooperation, obedience and love!

C. 

D. No environment determines a person (if time)