The world around us is changing – and it is changing rapidly. Whether it is in technology, your body mass index, relationships, sexual morals, class distinctions, family instability, antagonism, the place of faith in life or what is truth – we are living in a time where there is a lot of turmoil & strife. There are major divisions confronting our culture that aren’t going to disappear any time soon!

That can be very unnerving. That can be very disheartening. That can make us wish we could just escape to another place or time. This isn’t new. 3,000 years ago these words were recorded in what today we call the “Old Testament” of the Bible.

- “Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” For it is not wise to ask such questions.” That is Ecclesiastes 7:10 in the NIV – the Bible in the chairs in front of you.
- A paraphrase of this in the Living Bible says “Don’t long for “the good old days.” This is not wise.”
- The NKJV reminds that we can’t even think about this question wisely “Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.”

A lot of people in our day, especially older people, are lamenting the changes happening around us and wishing they could go back “to the good old days”. Don’t go there! God warned us 3,000 years ago that it is not wise to think this way. So, we have been looking at the Bible’s counter-cultural ways to face some of the challenges we are going through around us. We are simply taking well known, texts of the Bible and seeing 9 ways we can respond Biblically to the trends shaping our culture today, instead of wishing we could go back to the good old days. We are exploring how to stand true for Jesus in a post-truth, post-Christian society. How to be an overcomer instead of being overcome! How to live with Christian courage and compassion in a time of turmoil and strife?

We started way back on January 6 with an introductory message on fear and what we can & cannot control. We saw we can control far less than we think we can. Fear will always keep us from being an overcomer. We don’t want to put fear before faith, truth and love. After that we tackled the first 3 of 9 ways we can respond to these very same concerns in a Biblical way.

1. In a world where truth is feelings-based, we will remain rooted to the Christian Scriptures and their life-giving direction. Joshua 1:1-9. Of course, things are going to look unsteady in changing times, especially when they are going away from God’s truth. Hold on to the truths of the Bible!

2. In a society of educated ignorance and blindness, we will train our young in the freedom, knowledge, and power of Christian truth. Deuteronomy 6. Instead of being
continuously frustrated with what is happening in the culture around, put genuine positive effort in training young people of the power, knowledge and freedom of following Jesus!

3. In a world where Christians are labeled as bigots or backward, we will be known for doing good, serving the least of these and loving our neighbors. Romans 12:14-21. That is what we looked at last Sunday.

PROPOSITION: In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, we will dignify all people as image bearers of God.

I. Our culture is flooded with hate, scorn and disrespect

Let's come to another challenge and concern we face in our culture today. This has to do with how we treat other people, especially those who oppose us, and how they treat us. I am not going to take time to give you evidences — but our current culture is flooded with hate, scorn and disrespect — and a bunch of it is negative towards Biblical faith and Bible-believers. Instead of giving many examples of this, I simply want to point out two ways our culture is treating other people — and you have probably felt both of these.

A. People are treated as opponents

An old friend posted on FB this week: "Being taught to avoid talking about politics and religion has led to a lack of understanding of politics and religion. What we should have been taught was how to have a civil conversation about a difficult topic" Avoiding talking about controversial issues has not led to a more peaceful world, but a more divided one where it is difficult to discuss disagreeable subjects with civility. What is happening all around us, and I can guarantee it has also infected every one of us, is that popular culture is encouraging us to treat anyone who disagrees with us in some area as our opponent. In sports terms, it is to work up a 'hatred' for people on the other team simply because they are on the other team.

I think it is self-evident that we currently have large-scale disagreements in this country — abortion, guns, gender, immigration, national budget, etc., etc.. Very few of those disagreements are rooted ORIGINALLY in hatred — meaning we didn’t hate the people first because of some physical conflict and then went on to hate the things they stood for. What our culture is encouraging in our day is to treat ALL disagreements as hate-based (because it has been so effective & we’ve bought into it). If you disagree with me, then you must hate me! You must be a miserable, degraded person. All one needs to do to get people to hate people in another group is to share one of their beliefs in a sensational way. People today are quick to label people and agree to assassinate that person’s character when they have never personally met them.

B. People are treated as commodities

A second way people are treated in our day is as commodities. We value people by what they can do for us or what we can get from them. We value people by what they can add to our lives, our happiness and our prosperity. Once they are no longer
producing, they can be discarded, ignored or looked down on. In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, we will dignify all people as image bearers of God.

II. Our choice of words as an example of dignifying all people as image bearers of God.

In James 3:9-12 we have an incredible example of how God wants us to treat ALL people and the difference it should make in our words. It is all based on the truth that all humans are made in the image of God, rather than on just their actions or words. READ.

A. Even sinful, corrupt humans bear something of God’s original image

The first thing we notice in this passage is that it is wrong to curse human beings because they have all been made in God’s image. This truth goes back to how God originally made humans Genesis 1. God intentionally created us “in His image”, God made humans – male and female – in His image. Later, the first man and woman, Adam & Eve, listened to satan & their feelings instead of trusting God. They disobeyed the only prohibition they had at the time. This led to sin which has corrupted all human nature and brought in death, pain, major frustration, & broken relationships since.

So what happened to this specialness – this image of God – that the Lord designed into each human? Did sin completely destroy it? Not totally according to this passage. Even the most atrocious person who no one can stand & you simply want to curse – even that awful person still has some marks of God’s image in them and therefore is to be treated with a certain level of decency and respect.

Let’s compare a Rembrandt painting with one of my paintings (I have only painted one original painting and another handful of ‘an old thing’ we used to do called ‘paint-by-number’ pictures – oh the good old days! ©). So while my works of art are far scarcer than Rembrandts, his are worth astronomically more than mine. Doesn’t seem fair does it! You could think of my paintings as ones only a mother could love and even she didn’t save them. So if a painting has Rembrandt’s genuine signature on it, it is worth millions of dollars, while my signature on art is basically worthless. The primary reason Rembrandt’s paintings are considered so special is not because he has a cooler signature than I have, but because his paintings have a craftsmanship that has been recognized as truly special in the field of art. Now what happens to a Rembrandt painting when it is cut, messed up or marred, like sin has done to the image of God in each of us? The painting is worth far less, but it is still worth far more than any painting I’ll ever do. Why? Because you can still recognize some of Rembrandt’s unique style in it. I’ll be glad to take a messed up Rembrandt and highlight just a small part of it. That is similar to what the Bible clearly teaches us about the foundation for all human dignity. While sin has marred, messed up and damaged the image of God in us, it has not destroyed it. There are still aspects of the uniqueness of God’s image in us. That is why God calls us to show respect to all humans. The basis of human dignity is NOT what a person does or says, the basis for human dignity is...
the special design of God duplicated in every human. The scripture makes it clear here that the original stamp of the likeness of God in the human beings is still present. It is to be respected and blessed.

B. We can choose words that heal or hurt

James 3:9a

So how does the fact every human is made in God’s image – and that image still exists even after the corruption of sin – how does that affect how God wants us to treat others, especially our enemies or those we might think are below us? READ v 9-10.

“Praise” here (and its sister word ‘bless’) is when we speak, sing or pray the greatness of God – to God or to others. There is no more exalted use of our tongue. This morning we did that together in our singing. “Curse” here is not just to hurl swear words at another human, it is those words, thoughts, feelings or actions which show we want that person to be cut off from God and experience eternal punishment. “Go to hell” is such a curse. It is those times when you just wish the worst kind of evil on a person. Jesus prohibited his disciples from cursing others. In fact, Jesus told us ‘bless those who curse you.’

What makes cursing other humans particularly atrocious is that the one whom we want “damned” has the very image of God in them whom we just praised. “We curse human beings who have been made in God’s image.” Can we really say, “God you are great” and then turn around & wish eternal harm on the very ones who still have God’s image in them, whom God is in charge of, and whom God is still seeking to bring to repentance so they can be transformed. That would mean we don’t care as much about God as we claim to.

C. Our words represent who we really are

James 3:10-12

What comes out of our mouths (or the feelings of hate that arise within us) represent who we really are deep inside. We are shown this in two ways in v 10-12. READ.

1. Take springs of water which were so essential to life in a country that doesn’t get rain for 6 months. The people rely on life-giving springs to pour out fresh, drinkable water. But some springs in Israel are salty – that is why the Dead Sea is DEAD – these pollutants flow down into that lake and accumulate until they are deadly for most life. Normal living creatures can’t live in the Dead Sea nor can they live if they drink that for water. The type of water that comes out of a particular spring doesn’t change from one day to the next, but what comes out of a spring is set by what is deep inside.

2. Or take the fruit of vines and trees. An apple tree produces apples, not grapes. Grape vines produce grapes not olives. It is absurd to think one thing can produce something of an entirely different kind. Which is why salvation through Jesus is such a miracle no matter how outwardly nice and good you were before you surrendered to Jesus! We all have major corruption inside and to think God can call us to show respect to those who naturally deserve no
respect means the power of the Holy Spirit, the grace Jesus shows us and the new nature we are given after being reconciled to God!

Christians who have been transformed by the Spirit of God and say they love God should show some evidences and efforts. Only a renewed heart can produce pure speech; and consistently (though not perfectly) pure speech is to be the product of the renewed heart.

D. Treat other humans as bearing the image of God

And since we are all sinners by nature, we will never get to the point where we never want to curse someone that has hurt us, our loved ones or fellow-believers until our final transformation in heaven. So God gives us a very clear standard, seen again and again in scripture “Treat ALL other humans as bearing the image of God”. God tells us there is an inherent value in every human that goes way above anything they have done, said or identified with. A primary way we do that is by showing respect for humans and treating humans with dignity.

Respect is simply a way of treating or thinking about something or someone which shows there is some value. If you respect a person, then you admire her and treat her well. Even if you don’t agree with someone in authority, God calls us to show respectful actions and words. While it is easier to define or recognize a “lack of respect”, God frees us from deciding whether someone is WORTH respect by their actions, words or attitudes and instead gives us a different basis which is based on Him. We are to simply show respect to all other humans because God’s unique imprint is in them. That respect doesn’t mean wrong isn’t punished, error isn’t challenged, injustice isn’t confronted or inevitable death isn’t allowed. Closely aligned is the word “dignify”. To dignify is to grant respect to something. Treating people with respect brings dignity to the situation. Ever wonder why we treat a dead human body with such respect even though it is now just a bunch of decaying atoms? Why do we go through such efforts to find all the body pieces of those who died? Why not throw the dead body into a trash can? God asks us to see people in a counter-cultural way – as ones created in the image of God. Even after the real person is gone, we still honorably bury them.

In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, we will dignify all people as image bearers of God.

III. Treating people as ones made in God’s image

Let’s end with some additional thoughts that can help us treat ALL people with some level of respect simply God has told us they are made in His image and there is a value in that.

A. Grace and truth

The Bible tells us that our real enemies don’t have physical bodies, satan and the demonic are our real enemies. Humans & cultures, who do the work of the devil, are
slaves of those demonic forces whom Jesus wants to set free, just as He set us free
from sin, the demonic and worldliness by His death on the cross to pay the penalty of
our sins. It is grace & compassion, which allows us to see human enemies, not as just
those who malign us, falsely accuse us or even persecute us, but as people Jesus died
for. They are eternal souls whom God loved so extravagantly that He came down and
allowed Himself to be tortured and killed to bring this offer of salvation to us. In some
ways, there is a part of life that is like rescuing a drug overdose with narcan. When
someone has overdosed on an opioid and at risk of dying because they have stopped
breathing, a shot of narcan can save their life. But in attempting to rescue that person,
there is a good chance they are going to be mad at you, curse you, swing a fist at you
as the narcan immediately releases the opioids from the brain and it can give the side
effects of instant withdrawal. That can get discouraging for one who is just trying to
help someone. Unless we see the situation in a bigger way!

What we need to keep growing is in BOTH grace and truth. Grace without truth is a
harmful sentimentalism. Truth without grace is harsh. In one sense, it seems like we
have to keep balancing the two. But Jesus is full of BOTH grace and truth in the
strongest senses of these words at the same time! For each of us, grace and truth are
not just something we are to balance, but something we are to grow deeper in. We
want to get stronger in BOTH truth and grace WITHOUT sacrificing the other area!
That is part of what God is developing in us as we walk through an unfair world so we
can enjoy heaven more.

B. Challenge our unseen attitudes and potential prejudices

If we are going to see people around us as “made in God’s image”, then we also need
to regularly challenge our own unseen attitudes and potential prejudices.

1. People are more than their immediate value physically (materialism)
   People are more than their immediate value to us right now. But since our
culture encourages materialism, we naturally extend that view to people around
us. It is easy to value people by what WE get from them. I’m sure you have had
times where it feels like another person was using you. They like you when you
can give them something and then go crazy when you can’t or won’t. In a world
where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, let’s dignify all
people as image bearers of God.

2. People are more than their hostility towards us (enemies)
   People are more than their hostility towards us. They may be our enemies, but
they are also ones made in God’s image, whom Jesus died for. Challenge this
idea that because someone treats you as their enemy, that they are just your
enemy! In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents,
let’s dignify all people as image bearers of God.

3. People are more than their actions (we are all sinners)
People are more than their actions. We all have certain actions we consider really bad – and that is good. It is easy then to see someone who does a certain actions as JUST that action. The action is wrong – really, really wrong and must be confronted. But each person is MORE than just their actions. We are ALL sinners and we ALL fall short of the glory of God. It is good to challenge ourselves at those times, with the idea “except for the grace of God I may have done that.” In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, let’s dignify all people as image bearers of God.

4. People are more than “their group” (sterotype)

And people are more than “their group”. It is easy to stereotype people because of the group they are in. If we don’t challenge that in our own life, we have no right to get upset when others do that to us – which will surely happen. In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, let’s dignify all people as image bearers of God.

C. All people are worthy of dignity simply because they bear the unique image of God in them

Simply put: All people are worthy of a certain respect, a certain dignity, a certain value SIMPLY because they bear God’s likeness in them. They are of value to God. It doesn’t matter how we may naturally view a particular person, ALL humans are made in God’s image and that brings them a value that is beyond any race, background, country of origin, creed, faith, ability, disability, gender, self-identifying label, overt sin, covert sin, IQ, education, strength, looks, popularity or any other factor!

Let’s continue to strive, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to have a bigger picture of the people around us – especially those antagonistic towards us. And we do that simply for Jesus. In a world where people are treated as commodities or as opponents, let’s dignify all people as image bearers of God.