

First Stage: Purgation

**Sin as Alienation from God
and the Distortion of the Divine Image**

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September 13, 2009

A. Introduction

Last week, Lois began our series on the Three Stages of Spiritual Growth: Purgation, Illumination, and Unification.¹ During September we will talk about the first stage, purgation.

Purgation refers to purging ourselves of unwanted thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. That is, getting rid of habits and behaviors that harm us and others, that make us miserable, unhappy, and un-Christ-like. In a word, purgation refers to getting rid of sin. We need to know what sin is before we can get rid of it.

Today, we are going to talk about "sin".

- When you hear the word "sin" what comes to mind?
- Why is "sin" not a popular word?

Today, I'm going to talk about sin as the alienation from God and the distortion the divine image. We are created in the image of God, but sin alienates us from God and in the process the divine image is effaced. I will correlate my analysis with text we read this morning, Eph. 4:17-24.

B. Image of God: Male & Female

Genesis 1:26-27. ²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image (צֵלֶם; *tselem*), according to our likeness (דְמוּת; *demuth*); and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

¹ See the article on our website: <http://www.mcswichita.net/Teaching/Three-Stages-of-Spiritual-Growth.pdf>.

What is the image of God? Throughout the centuries, there have been many ideas about what the “image of God” refers to, including functional views (e.g., human’s have dominion over the earth), relational views (e.g., Karl Barth’s view), and substantival views (e.g., the rational soul, intelligence, self-awareness, language capability, moral responsibility, etc.).² Each view tries to distinguish what makes humans distinct and divine-like. Each of these views has merit. However, for our purposes here, I want to highlight two aspects stand out to me.

a. Image = God’s Representative

Both male and female comprise the divine image. The word “image” (תְּצַלֵּם; *tselem*) literally means “a statue” (cf. Num. 33:52; Dan. 2:32) and metaphorically means a copy or representation of something (cf. Psa. 73:20).³

“In the ancient world a king erected images of himself throughout the empire to establish his authority to rule. The author of Genesis appropriated this ancient sense of *selem* to conclude that man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth.”⁴

b. Image = Covenant Relationship

Notice that the image of God is both male and female. There is no mention of hierarchy, of superior or inferior. We are simply told that male and female together constitute the image of God. The image of God is a relationship.

Human beings have been created to relate to one another in mutually cooperative and beneficial ways. It is an image of “commitment to life together” with full respect for the other.

A relationship requires people to be distinct from each other and yet interdependent. It requires trust (loyalty), freedom (non-coercive), and cooperation (reciprocal mutuality).

C. Image of God, our True Self

The text we read this morning functions as a comment on the image of God.

² For example, see James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005) 141-47.

³ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person* (2005) 148.

⁴ So Gerhard von Rad as quoted by Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person* (2005) 142.

Eph. 4:22-24. ²² You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self (κατὰ τὴν προτέραν), corrupt and deluded by its lusts, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to clothe yourselves with the new self (τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον), created according to the likeness of God (τὸν κατὰ θεὸν) in true righteousness and holiness. (NRSV)

Let me make three proposals regarding “the image of God” or what I call “the true self.”⁵

1. True self responds freely to God

To be created in the image of God means that human beings have the capacity to respond to God:

- To be human is to respond (in obedience) to God’s grace and calling
- Humans have the capacity to freely respond to God
- God wants us to respond freely without coercion
- We are created not to be “egocentric,” but to be “exo-centric,” to transcend ourselves, going beyond ourselves to meet the Other

2. True self is discovered in co-existence

To be created in the image of God means that human existence is not individualistic but communal:

- Together, man and woman, reflect God's image
- It was not good for Adam to be alone
- We are born into community, shaped by community
- We are made for dialogue, not isolation
- We learn love only in co-existence with others

3. True self is open to the divine future

Augustine wrote that: The human heart is restless until they rest in God.

- It is simply that human nature to never be completely satisfied
- Once we have attained one thing, we look for new goals to achieve
- Humans have an "openness to the future" (Pannenberg's language)
- This quality enables us to be open to the coming reign of God

In sum, the image of God refers to the fact that humans have the capacity to freely respond to God, they discover their true selves in co-existence, and they are open to the divine future. That’s the true self. That’s the image of God. Let’s keep that image in mind as we recall the story of Adam and Eve.

⁵ The three proposals for understanding “the image of God,” follow Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 142-49.

D. Alienation from God: Adam and Eve

The story about Adam and Eve in the Garden is a story about alienation from God and each other. It's a story about all of us. We are the Adam and Eve of our own soul. We experience the story to some degree every day.

Man and woman are put in the Garden. They are told by God: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). God has given Adam and Eve an abundant garden, but told them not to eat of a certain tree in the middle of the garden. Adam and Eve have a choice to either keep a good relationship with God or not.

What happens next? The serpent comes and entices Eve, and then Adam, to eat from the forbidden tree.

How does the serpent tempt them? The serpent asks a question that throws doubt on God. He asks: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (3:1b).

Eve replies, but then the Serpent says: "Surely, you will not die, for God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:4-5).

In this way, the serpent suggests that God is a liar and God would be jealous that Adam and Eve would become *equal* with God--they would become like God.

What happened? Adam and Eve eat from the tree and immediately their eyes are opened and they realize they are naked (3:7). They feel guilt and shame at their nakedness.

Next, the man and his woman hear God walking in the garden. They become fearful and hide from Him (3:8). When God questions them, what do Adam and Eve do? They blame someone else. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. In other words, they fail to take personal responsibility.

As a result, God metes out sentences. The serpent is condemned to crawl on its belly and eat dust all of its life. The woman is to experience pain in childbirth. The man is to endure hard labor working for food. Even worse, there will be *separation* between the man and the woman. She will desire to control the man, but the man will rule over her. Finally, God banishes man and woman from the Garden (3:22-23).

Adam and Eve die on that day. Look at what happens to them. They broke their relationship with God, who is the Source of Life. As a result, they experienced guilt, shame, fear, blame, irresponsibility, pain, and separation from the divine presence.

Human beings *failed to let God be God* and took matters into their own hands. Humans ignored God and did their "own thing".

Without mentioning the word "sin," the story is a classic statement about sin and its consequences. This story is a powerful story about *human alienation from God, each other, and the created order*.

The story of Adam and Eve tells of that the image of God has been severely distorted. Their responsibility to God was shirked; their co-existence together has been undermined; their openness to the divine future has been cut off.

E. Alienation from God and the False Self

The text we read this morning in Ephesians 4 is really making a comment on human beings who are living life in alienation from God and in solidarity with Adam and Eve. The Ephesians 4 text highlights the false self.

Eph. 4:17-19.¹⁷ Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (NRSV)

When we embrace a false self, what happens to the image of God?⁶

1. False self denies responsibility to God

If being created in the image of God means responding to God's grace:

- Then sin is the denial of our responsibility to God
- Sin is the denial that we are related to God who is made in God's image
- Sin is opposition to God's grace
- Sin is the refusal to be thankful to God
- Sin is the rejection of God in word, deed, or disposition

Two Symptoms:

Pride

⁶ The three negative statements follow Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (2004) 149-54.

- Absolutizing oneself.
- Making one's own experience the standard of right/wrong, good/bad.
- Individually, pride manifest as narcissism, centering on the self-satisfaction to the exclusion of others
- Socially, pride manifests as a willingness to sacrifice other groups for the exaltation of one's own group--tribalism, ethnocentrism, nationalism,

Self-hatred

- It is ignoring God's grace.
- It is to deny that one has self-worth and purpose from God
- It is to deny God.

2. False self denies co-existence with others

If being created in the image of God means we are communal:

- Then sin is a denial of co-existence
- Sin distorts our relationships

Two symptoms:

Domination

- It is elevating oneself over others as objects of our own ends.
- It is the spirit of racial and national superiority.
- It is the will-to-power that ends in holocausts, genocidal war, and destruction of entire species of creatures.

Passivity

- It is to have the attitude and behavior of a slave.
- It is a denial of freedom and self-responsibility.
- It is the trivialization of the self.

3. False self denies the divine future

If being created in the image of God means that we are open to God's kingdom:

- Then sin is the denial the coming Reign of God
- Sin is a denial that we will eventually be conformed to the image of Christ
- Sin is a denial that God will have victory in our lives

Two symptoms:

Presumption

- It is open despair about God's effectiveness.

- It is the attitude that "We cannot wait for God to change the world; we must change the world now, even if we do so violently."

Resignation

- It is indifference or abdication to the hellish forces of human history
- It is cynicism about the possibility of really changing for the better
- It is the attitude of "What's the use of trying to confront injustice, war, and oppression; the future will be the same as today."

F. Reflections

Today I talked about the importance of purgation of sin by talking about what is sin. I have proposed that sin is alienation from God and, as a result, the distortion of the image of God.

The image of God (true self) refers to the human capacity to respond freely to God, live in cooperative and helpful community, and embrace the divine future.

In contrast, sin alienates us from God and thereby distorts the divine image. Sin destroys our ability to respond to God (faith), subverts our capacity to live in helpful and cooperative community (love), and undermines our openness to God's future (hope).

For these reasons, it is important to practice purgation, which can restore and protect the image of God.