

“The Image – The Holy”

Joshua 20

May 18, 2003

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Human life is being devalued in our culture.

- The state of Oregon has a law that allows physician-assisted suicide.
- I think there are still over a million unborn children killed each year in this country.
- Violence against humans seems to be the entertainment of choice in video games and motion pictures.
- The formerly unthinkable, euthanasia and infanticide, are increasingly not only thought about but, I’m told, practiced.

As Christ-followers we can’t “buy into” this devaluing of human life and neither should we simply acquiesce to it unwittingly.

All life has value but human life is **sacred** in a way that no other life is.

In saying that it is sacred, we are saying it is holy.

We are specifically saying that human life is uniquely connected to God.

For example, we call the Bible “holy” because it is the expression of a holy God.

We call human life “sacred” because it is uniquely connected to that holy God.

How we think about human life and especially how we treat human life affects God himself.

And it reflects either our ignorance about God or worse yet, our attitude toward God.

I introduce this subject today because of Joshua chapter 20 to which we come next in our continuing study of this Old Testament book.

Under Joshua’s leadership the people of Israel have conquered the land of Canaan – the land promised to them by God 500 years earlier.

After they subdued their enemies they parceled out the land to the large family groups descended from the twelve sons of Jacob.

Jacob had 12 sons:

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. Levi (The Priests)
4. Judah
5. Dan
6. Naphtali
7. Gad
8. Asher
9. Issachar
10. Zebulun
11. Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh)
12. Benjamin

The descendants of one of the sons were not given territory but were given specific cities in which to live.

Those were the descendants of Levi – and these people were designated as the priests of the nation.

Among the cities allocated to the Levites were six cities that were called cities of refuge.

Joshua 20:7-9 Cities of Refuge:  
 West of the Jordan:  
 V7 Kedesh in Galilee of Naphtali)  
 V7 Shechem in Ephraim  
 V7 Hebron in Judah  
 East of the Jordan:  
 V8 Bezer in Reuben  
 V8 Ramoth in Gad  
 V8 Golan in East Manasseh

Let the text tell you what these cities were about:

Joshua 20:1-6 "Then the LORD said to Joshua: "Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. "When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them. If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. He is to stay in that city until he has stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then he may go back to his own home in the town from which he fled."

Imagine with me, an example:

A man is building his house on the side of a hill when one of the large rocks for the foundation gets away from him and rolls down the hill, hitting and killing a passerby.

As was the case when any person was killed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, a close relative, the next of kin, was responsible for avenging that death.

So precious, so sacred, was life that justice was not served until the life that took life was also taken.

God had established that principle immediately after the flood in Genesis 9:5- 6

“And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed;  
for in the image of God  
has God made man.”

And so the next of kin, the “avenger of blood,” as he is called in our text, is responsible for administering justice.

The Hebrew word translated “avenger” is elsewhere translated “kinsman redeemer” as when Boaz, the next closest relative of Ruth took responsibility for her after her husband died and the closest relative refused to do so.

This relative, this “avenger of blood” did not have a personal psychological obligation for revenge but he had a legal obligation to carry out justice.

But if the death was accidental, the killer could run to one of the cities of refuge where he would be safe until a trial could be arranged.

If it was ruled that the killing was **not** accidental, the killer was released to the “avenger of blood” for execution.

If however it was ruled “accidental” or “unintentional”, then the killer was required to live in the city of refuge until the high priest of the land died.

I wouldn't spend a lot of time on this text and I certainly wouldn't attempt to preach from it except for a couple of reasons.

First, it can't be ignored that the author of Joshua felt it was important enough that he spells this system of justice out in detail, not only telling us what the cities were for but naming the cities twice, once in chapter 20 and again in chapter 21.

The second reason for camping on this issue is that this teaching on the cities of refuge is repeated four times, once each in Exodus 21, Numbers 35 (in great detail), Deuteronomy 19 and now in Joshua 20 and 21.

I don't have the time to show you how extensive the attention given to this issue is but I would encourage you to see if for yourself later.

What's the "big deal"?

The "big deal is that these cities of refuge were central to the whole system of justice in Israel.

Think of it this way: The ultimate penalty was death, the loss of life. But life is so sacred that the penalty of death could not be exacted except under very tight controls.

Justice does not come naturally to humanity – we first of all think of revenge.

Revenge (not justice but revenge) had been around from the very beginning.

When Cain killed his brother Abel, he knew he was the target for revenge as he says in Genesis 4:13-14. "Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear... whoever finds me will kill me."

(Why God intervened for Cain is a subject for another time and with someone smarter than I am.)

Cain was wisely fearful because of sinful human nature.

He knew that blood revenge was the law of the land – each person taking revenge as he or she saw fit.

Also in Genesis 4, a man named Lamech knew that he was in serious trouble when he killed a man for injuring him.

Genesis 4:23-24 "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."

Vengeance prevailed, not justice.

And by Genesis 6 God described the world this way:

Genesis 6:11 "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence.

Bloodshed was pandemic and for any cause.

But God brought that indiscriminate killing under indictment by a major principle.

We read in Exodus 21:23-25 "But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

That law is sometimes criticized for its severity.

I think it is Tevya in "Fiddler on the Roof" who humorously says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" – if we did that it wouldn't be long before the whole world would be blind and toothless."

But in fact this law does exactly the opposite – It's not severe, instead it **limits** the penalty, making the penalty fit the crime.

It's not "life for burn" or "eye for bruise", but "life for life" and "bruise for bruise".

Even when Jesus cites this law in the Sermon on the Mount he is not being critical of justice; he was being critical of the perversion of justice into revenge.

Now the "cities of refuge" further limit the penalty and remove revenge:

The cities of refuge make clear that **the killer's intention** must be factored into the punishment.

If the killing was unintentional, justice is served differently.

The cities of refuge institutionalized a system of "due process".

Now none of that is very revolutionary to our way of thinking about justice.

In our culture we believe that whether someone **intended** to kill or killed **accidentally** makes a huge difference in punishment.

Isn't it at least interesting how similar our own system of justice is to this system established 3500 years ago?

What **is** remarkable about Israel's system of justice is that an accidental killing should result in **any** punishment **at all**.

What we don't understand is why anyone who committed an accidental killing was not simply acquitted.

But instead he was consigned to live out the rest of his life in the city of refuge, away from his home and probably away from his family.

And the only thing that could change that was if the high priest died.

If the high priest died, then the one who killed accidentally could return to his own home with no further punishment.

Why isn't the man simply excused? The killing was accidental.

**This begins to make the point that I think is so applicable to us today:**

So precious, so holy, is human life that God will not overlook a death, even if the death is accidental.

Human life is holy and the taking of a life must be atoned.

Let me show how consistent the Scripture is on this matter.

First of all see again the principle set down by God in Genesis 9:5-6

"And from each man, too, **I will demand an accounting** for the life of his fellow man.

"Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed;  
for in the image of God  
has God made man.

That principle of **a life for a life** was so consistent that even if an animal killed a person, the animal was to be killed.

Exodus 21:28-29

"If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death.

See also that the principle was so consistently applied that if someone was killed and no assailant was caught, the death still had to be atoned by means of a blood sacrifice – a life for a life.

Deuteronomy 21:1-9

If a man is found slain...and it is not known who killed him... then the elders of the town nearest the body shall **take a heifer that has never been worked and has never worn a yoke** and...they are to **break the heifer's neck...** Then all the elders of the town nearest the body shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken... and declare: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. **Accept this atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, O LORD, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent man.** **And the bloodshed will be atoned for.** So you will purge from yourselves the guilt of shedding innocent blood..."

Do you see it?

God takes bloodshed so seriously that the taking of a human life, willfully or even accidentally, creates a guilt that must be atoned; must be satisfied.

So seriously does God take life and death that in our Joshua 20 passage it took the death of the High Priest to atone the death of the man who died even by accident.

In fact God takes violence so seriously that here is what he says in Numbers 34:33-34 “Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites.”

To pollute or defile the land was to make it uninhabitable for God. He cannot live in such a place; it is a contradiction of who he is – holy.

- What is it about human life that causes God to declare that he won't remain where the innocent are killed?
  - What is it about human life that causes God to say that even accidental death at the hands of another must be atoned?
    - Why does God put such a premium on human life?

I don't fully understand all of what it means but I can show you from the Bible what God says about human life.

It starts with what God says about how he made human beings:

Genesis 1:27 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

It has to do with being made in the image of God.

Look at the rationale God gives in Genesis 9:5- 6

“And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”

Why must there be an accounting for human life, why must a life be given for a life taken?

Why is God so serious about human life?

Because humans are made in the image of God.

What does it mean to be made in the image of God?



Old Testament scholar Ron Allen, Craig Allen's father, writes, "The image of God describes man in his whole being (including body), in his relationship as male and female, in his potential for relationship with God his creator... The image of God in man is inclusive and descriptive of his entire being. It is the essence of what man is." Ron Allen *The Majesty of Man* 84

Others see the image of God reflected in our personality, spirituality, rationality, morality, authority, and our creativity – and even in our body.

Philip E. Hughes [The True Image](#) chapter 5

It is not just humanity as a whole that is made in the image of God but that each person is made in God's image.

R.C. Sproul in his book [In Search of Dignity](#) writes, "Man's dignity rests in God who assigns an inestimable worth to (each and) every person. Man's origin is not an accident, but a profoundly intelligent act by One who has eternal value; by One who stamps His own image on each person. God creates men and moves heaven and earth to redeem them when they fall. Our origin is in creation and our destiny is for redemption. Between these points every human heartbeat has value." R.C. Sproul *In Search of Dignity* 94

Why does each person have immeasurable value?

God says, because he or she is made in God's image.

Here's the way Charles Swindoll describes it:

"As lovely, beautiful, colorful and full of variety as the plant or animal kingdom may be, none of that has been created in God's image...only human life. Therefore, only human life can walk with and talk with and fellowship with the Creator. Animals cannot. Plants cannot. The fish cannot. Only human beings enjoy this privilege because only they possess God's image... In God's estimation (human life) is so precious and so unique that He commands that it must be protected, it must be preserved. It alone represents the image of God... Simply speaking, it is God's way of saying, 'Life is so important no one has the right to murder it. Don't end it. Let it live. Because all humanity represents my handiwork; it is mine to do with

as I please. My image is, in mysterious ways, stamped into human life.” Swindoll in The Sanctity of Life 16-17

Ray Anderson states, “God does not pronounce a judgement on murder because it involves the killing of a creature, but because we encounter the image of God in another person... In the NT Jesus teaches that hatred of another person is tantamount to murder because it “despises” the image of God in another.”

Ray Anderson On Being Human 74

When we take human life, we violate God.

Worst of all, when we take the life of a human being, we show contempt for God.

Whether capital punishment can be fairly administered in our judicial system is a debate for another time and place but to say that capital punishment depreciates life is contrary to God’s Word.

**Capital punishment according to God doesn’t threaten the value of human life but instead honors human life.**

Capital punishment was God expression of wrath against anyone who would deface or profane the sacred, the image of God in us. (See Kenneth Matthews NAC Genesis 406)

Among other things, what the Joshua 20 text does is impress upon us the high value God places on humans.

So what are some possible implications for us?

What does the fact that each person is made in the image of God say about the way we treat others?

Your husband, your wife, each child, your neighbor, each person you work with, the guy driving the car ahead of you – each carrying “the holy” in his or her very person and body.

Can we ever again treat another human being as a thing, as a disposable commodity, as anything less than holy, as made in the image of God?

Those pictures in the magazines and those images in the movies of real people, each carrying “the holy” – made in the image of God.

Does God say that how we treat others is an expression of our attitude toward and even treatment of Him?

Every person we know and meet – made in the image of God.

Let me suggest another implication:

What about violence in entertainment?

Are we finding amusement in what God finds abhorrent?

Are we complicit in devaluing what God says is holy?

Are we treating as disposable what God says is sacred?

And all for our entertainment?

I don't have simple answers for my next questions but as a father I have to ask them.

Should we encourage our children to play, to make entertainment of killing something that is sacred?

Does a child's delight in pretending to kill come from a harmless propensity for action and an innocuous fascination with blood or does it come from a sin-nature that naturally devalues the sacred?

Most of us would have difficulty intentionally ripping up a Bible, throwing it on the ground and grinding our muddied feet on its pages.

Why?

Because we think paper and ink are too precious to profane?

Of course not.

We find it abhorrent because of the connection between that particular paper and ink and the Holy.

Most of us were deeply offended when federal money was used to support so-called "art" that depicted a cross in a jar of urine.

Why?

Because of the connection of the symbol of the cross with the Holy.

In ways far deeper, more intrinsic, a human being (body and soul) is connected to the Holy God.

We are made in the image of God.