

The Sanctity of Life, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Made in the Image of God

Genesis 1:26–28

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this opening lesson establishes the foundation on which the entire study stands: human beings are made in the image of God, and therefore every human life possesses a God-given dignity that nothing can cancel. Genesis 1:26–28 sets humanity apart from all the rest of creation. Three times in two verses the text insists on the word “image,” and it grounds human worth not in capacity, contribution, or condition, but in the deliberate act of a Creator who chose to make us like Himself. Make sure the class hears that this dignity is conferred, not achieved. The man and the woman bear God’s image before they have done anything at all.

The image of God is the hinge on which every later lesson turns. If worth is given by God rather than earned by us, then the smallest unborn child and the frailest dying saint possess the same essential dignity as the strongest and most accomplished person in the room. Genesis 9:6 will show that this image survives the fall and still grounds the seriousness of taking human life. The teacher should help the class see, early and clearly, that any ethic which prices human life by usefulness, intelligence, beauty, or “quality of life” is already at war with the first chapter of the Bible.

At the same time, this lesson is not merely about establishing a doctrine; it aims at the formation of the student. Most of us carry a quiet habit of valuing ourselves and others by performance, appearance, and usefulness. The formational target this week is twofold: that students would rest in the unshakable worth God has given them, and that they would begin to look at every person, especially the overlooked, the irritating, and the powerless, and see the image of God. Send them home not only believing the doctrine but beginning to treat people, and themselves, as image-bearers.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 1:26–27. God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” What does it mean that human beings, alone among all God made, bear the image of God, and why does the text repeat the word “image” three times in two verses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sheer distinctiveness of the claim. Through the first chapter of Genesis God speaks creation into being with a word: “Let there be.” But when He comes to humanity, the language shifts to deliberation and intimacy: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

Nothing else in creation is described this way. The animals are made “according to their kinds”; humanity is made according to the likeness of God. This is the Bible’s first and deepest statement about who we are.

Help the class feel the weight of the threefold repetition. In verses 26 and 27 the word “image” (and its partner “likeness”) appears again and again, as if the Spirit will not let us miss it. To bear God’s image means, at the least, that human beings are made to reflect God, to represent Him, and to be capable of relationship with Him: rational, moral, relational, and entrusted with responsibility. We are like God in a way that nothing else in the visible creation is.

Stress that this is true of humanity as such, not of an elite subset of humanity. The image is not located in a particular skill, a level of intelligence, a stage of development, or a degree of health. It belongs to the human being. This is why the doctrine is so powerful for the rest of the study: it cannot be lost by becoming small, weak, old, unborn, or impaired. A newborn bears it as fully as a philosopher.

Finally, point the class to where this leads. Because we bear God’s image, every human life carries a worth that comes from outside itself, conferred by the Creator. That is the seed of everything this study will say about conception, suffering, despair, and death. Get this verse deep into the class, and the hardest later lessons will have a foundation to rest on.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unique creation of humanity in the image of God, set apart from all other creatures (Genesis 1:26–27).
- The image of God as the ground of human dignity and worth, conferred by the Creator rather than earned.
- The image belongs to humanity as such, not to any subset defined by ability, age, or condition.
- Human worth comes from outside ourselves; it is given by God and therefore cannot be revoked by men.
- The foundation this lays for the sanctity of every human life from conception to natural death.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the language of Genesis shift from “Let there be” to “Let us make” when God creates humanity?
- What does it change to say that human worth is conferred by God rather than produced by us?
- How does the image of God being true of humanity as such, not a select few, shape this whole study?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think of a person you find it hard to value, someone who irritates you, someone society overlooks, or someone who can do nothing for you. How would actually believing that this person bears God's image change the way you spoke to them or about them this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and its aim is honesty rather than information. It is easy to affirm the image of God in the abstract and deny it in practice with a sigh, an eye-roll, or a cutting word. Genesis 1 will not let us keep the doctrine theoretical. The person who annoys us, the person the world overlooks, the person who can do nothing for us, each bears the image of the living God.

Help students see how often our valuing of people is really a valuing of their usefulness to us. We are warm to those who serve our interests and cold to those who do not. The image of God cuts straight across this. It tells us that a person's worth has nothing to do with what they can give us, because their worth was settled by God before we ever met them.

Be concrete and gentle. Invite each person to picture a specific face, not a category. Then ask what would actually be different, in tone and word and attention, if they truly believed that face was an image-bearer of God. Often the change begins not with grand gestures but with small mercies: patience, courtesy, a refusal to speak contemptuously.

Tie this to the tongue. James says we bless God and curse people made in His likeness with the same mouth, and calls it a contradiction that ought not to be. A practical first step toward honoring the image of God is to stop speaking of certain people, or to certain people, in ways that deny their dignity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to honor the image of God in people we find difficult or useless to us.
- The difference between valuing a person and valuing their usefulness to us.
- The sins of contempt, dismissiveness, and cruelty as denials of the image of God in practice (James 3:9–10).
- Love of neighbor as the practical outworking of the doctrine of the image of God.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose image-bearing dignity do you find hardest to remember, and why?
- How does our valuing of people often hide a valuing of their usefulness to us?
- What is one specific way you could honor the image of God in a difficult person this week?

Question 3**Student Question:**

God blesses the man and woman and gives them dominion over the creatures (1:28). How is the dominion God grants different from the careless or cruel use of power we so often see, and what does it teach us about the dignity and responsibility built into being human?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move now to the calling that accompanies the image. God blesses the couple and grants them dominion: “fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” over the creatures. Dominion is part of bearing God’s image; we are made to represent God’s rule within His creation. But this is rule of a particular kind, and the class needs to see it clearly.

Contrast godly dominion with the abuse of power we see all around us. The dominion God grants is not license to exploit, waste, or destroy. It is a stewardship that mirrors God’s own care for what He has made. To rule as God’s image-bearer is to rule as God rules: with wisdom, provision, and care, not with cruelty or carelessness. Power is given to serve, not to devour.

Draw out the dignity and responsibility this gives to being human. We are not merely one more animal among the animals. We are entrusted with a charge, accountable to the One whose image we bear. This responsibility itself testifies to our worth; God does not entrust His creation to creatures He regards as worthless.

Apply this toward the heart of the study. The same God who entrusts us with care over the creatures most certainly intends us to care for one another, the weakest members of our own kind. A dominion that cherishes the creation while discarding vulnerable human beings has badly misunderstood the charge. Right rule begins with reverence for the Ruler and for those who bear His image.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Dominion as part of bearing God’s image: humanity made to represent God’s rule in creation (Genesis 1:28).
- Godly dominion as stewardship and care, not exploitation or cruelty.
- The dignity and responsibility built into being human, accountable to the Creator.
- Care for the vulnerable as the natural extension of God-honoring dominion.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the dominion God grants different from the way power is usually wielded in the world?
- What does it say about our worth that God entrusts His creation to us?
- How should a right understanding of dominion shape the way we treat the most vulnerable people?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where are you tempted to measure your own worth by what you accomplish, how you look, or how useful you are? What would change in your heart if your value rested instead on the unchangeable fact that you were made in the image of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the doctrine inward, toward the restless way we measure our own worth. Many sincere believers live as though their value rises and falls with their productivity, their appearance, or their usefulness on a given day. The result is a life that is either anxious (never enough) or proud (better than others), and rarely at rest.

Help students name the particular scale they tend to weigh themselves on. For one it is achievement, for another beauty, for another being needed. Each of these is a way of trying to earn what God has already given. Genesis 1 announces that our worth was settled before we did anything; it is conferred, not constructed.

Be careful to distinguish worth from calling. The point is not that work and effort do not matter; later lessons will show that we are made for purposeful living. The point is that our fundamental value does not depend on them. We work and serve out of a worth we already possess, not in order to manufacture one.

Aim at a concrete shift in the heart. Invite each person to identify the scale they live on and to practice, this week, receiving their worth as a gift. The person who knows they are an image-bearer can fail without being crushed and succeed without being inflated, because their identity rests on something steadier than performance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Human worth as conferred by God, not constructed by achievement, appearance, or usefulness.
- The difference between our fundamental worth and our God-given calling to work and serve.
- Freedom from both anxiety and pride for those who rest their identity in the image of God.
- Identity rooted in the Creator rather than in fluctuating performance.

Discussion Prompts

- What scale do you most often weigh your own worth on?
- How does resting your worth in the image of God free you from both anxiety and pride?
- What would change this week if you received your value as a gift rather than a project?

Question 5**Student Question:**

God created humanity “male and female” in His image (1:27). What does it tell us that both the man and the woman, equally and fully, bear the divine image, and how does this ground the worth of every person regardless of strength, age, or ability?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul of Genesis, so to speak, makes a point we must not rush past: “male and female he created them.” Both the man and the woman, equally and fully, bear the image of God. Neither is more an image-bearer than the other. This is a remarkable claim in any age, and it grounds the equal worth of every human being at the most basic level.

Help the class see what this does and does not say. Scripture elsewhere teaches that men and women have different God-given roles, especially in the home and the church, and this study upholds that. But difference in role never means difference in worth. In their essential dignity as image-bearers, the man and the woman stand on perfectly level ground before God.

Press the implication for the sanctity of life. If the image of God is borne equally by both halves of humanity, then worth is plainly not a matter of strength, size, or capacity, for the man and the woman differ in many such things and yet are equal here. Worth attaches to the human being as God’s image-bearer, full stop.

Extend this to every person the study will consider. The unborn and the aged, the able and the disabled, the celebrated and the forgotten, all bear the image equally, because the image does not run on a sliding scale. This verse quietly dismantles every attempt to rank human lives by their measurable qualities.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Male and female created equally and fully in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).
- Equality of worth alongside difference of role, both taught in Scripture without contradiction.
- Human worth grounded in image-bearing, not in strength, size, or capacity.
- The equal dignity of every person regardless of age, ability, or condition.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that both man and woman bear God’s image equally and fully?
- How can we hold together equal worth and different God-given roles?
- Why does equal image-bearing rule out ranking human lives by their measurable qualities?

Question 6

Student Question:

Honestly consider the labels you have let define you or others: too old, too young, too broken, too far gone. Which label do you most need to surrender to the truth that the image of God is not earned and cannot be erased?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question invites students to surrender the labels that quietly govern how they see themselves and others. We are fluent in such labels: too old to change, too young to matter, too broken to be used, too far gone to be loved. Each one is a verdict on a human life, and each one collides with the truth that the image of God is not earned and cannot be erased.

Encourage honesty about which label each person has internalized. Some have been told, or have told themselves, a story of worthlessness so long that they no longer question it. The gospel does not merely soften that verdict; it overturns it. The image of God in you was placed there by your Maker, and no failure, no aging, no diagnosis, and no sin can unmake it.

Be a careful pastor here. For the discouraged, this is comfort: your worth is intact even on your worst day. But do not let the truth become an excuse for complacency; the same God who gives us worth calls us to live worthily. The aim is not pride but rest, the settled rest of one who knows their value is secure in God.

Move toward release. Invite each person to name one label, about themselves or about another, and to consciously surrender it to the truth of Genesis 1. Honoring the image of God often begins with refusing to believe the lies we have accepted about whose life counts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The image of God as unearnable and unable to be erased by failure, age, or condition.
- The overturning of self-condemning verdicts by the truth of our creation in God's image.
- Assurance of worth grounded in the Creator, not in our circumstances or successes.
- The difference between resting in God-given worth and presuming upon it.

Discussion Prompts

- What label have you most let define you or someone else?
- How does the image of God overturn the verdict of worthlessness?
- What is one lie about whose life counts that you most need to surrender this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Genesis 9:6, written after the fall, still grounds the seriousness of taking human life in the fact that man is made in God's image. Why does the image of God survive the fall, and what does that mean for how we are to regard even sinful, broken people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take the class forward to Genesis 9:6, spoken after the fall and after the flood, into a world now marked by sin and death. Remarkably, God still grounds the gravity of taking human life in the image of God: “for God made man in His own image.” The fall damaged humanity, but it did not erase the image. This is a crucial doctrinal point for the entire study.

Explain why this matters. If the image had been lost in the fall, then human worth would now be a matter of degree, and we could argue about who has enough of it to count. But Scripture says the image persists even in fallen, sinful people. That is why murder remains the gravest assault on a fellow creature: it is an attack on a being who still bears God’s likeness.

Guard against two errors. On one side is the idea that sin makes a person worthless, which would justify treating the wicked, the criminal, or the enemy as less than human. On the other is a sentimentality that denies the reality of human sin altogether. The biblical balance is sober and steady: people are deeply fallen and still bear God’s image. Both truths must be held.

Apply this toward compassion and conviction together. Because the image survives the fall, we owe respect even to broken and sinful people, including those we are inclined to despise. And because the image survives the fall, the taking of innocent life remains a serious matter before God, a theme this study will return to in the lessons ahead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The persistence of the image of God after the fall (Genesis 9:6).
- The seriousness of murder as an assault on a being who bears God’s image.
- The rejection of the idea that sin makes a person worthless or less than human.
- Compassion and conviction held together: people are fallen and still image-bearers.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that God grounds the seriousness of murder in the image of God after the fall?
- How does the persistence of the image guard us against treating sinful people as worthless?
- How can we hold together the reality of human sin and the dignity of the image of God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Whose life have you been tempted to treat as less valuable, perhaps without saying it out loud, because of their condition, their politics, their past, or their usefulness to you? What is one concrete way you can begin treating that person as an image-bearer of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question moves from the doctrine of the persisting image to the quiet ways we deny it. It is uncomfortable but necessary. Most of us harbor a category of people we treat, even silently, as less valuable: those whose politics we despise, whose past appalls us, whose condition unsettles us, or whose usefulness to us is nil.

Help students surface this honestly. The denial of the image is rarely a stated belief; it shows up in our inattention, our contempt, our willingness to write someone off. Naming the specific person or group is the first step toward repentance, because we cannot turn from a sin we will not see.

Anchor the correction in the gospel. Christ died for the ungodly, for people at their worst. If God so valued image-bearers as to give His Son for them while they were enemies, we cannot justify treating any of them as disposable. The cross is the final answer to every attempt to rank human worth.

Press toward one concrete action. Honoring the image is not a feeling but a practice. It might mean speaking respectfully of someone you usually mock, showing attention to someone you usually ignore, or serving someone who can never repay you. Ask each person to choose one such step and take it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle denial of the image of God through contempt, inattention, and writing people off.
- Repentance as beginning with honestly naming the people we treat as less valuable.
- The cross as God's valuation of image-bearers even at their worst (Romans 5:8).
- Honoring the image of God as a concrete practice, not merely a sentiment.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose worth have you been tempted to discount, and on what grounds?
- How does the cross confront every attempt to rank human worth?
- What single concrete step will you take this week to honor the image of God in that person?

Question 9

Student Question:

Trace how the image of God in every person becomes the foundation for the entire sanctity of life. If every human being, from the smallest unborn child to the frailest elderly person, bears God's image, what follows for how we must regard life from conception to natural death, and why does this leave no room for any "quality of life" standard that treats some lives as disposable?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it asks the class to trace the line from the image of God to the entire sanctity of life. Gather the threads: humanity uniquely made in God's image (1:26-27), male and female equally bearing it (1:27), the image persisting after the fall (9:6). Put them together and the conclusion is unavoidable. Human worth is conferred by God, borne equally by all, and unable to be erased.

Draw the line explicitly across the lifespan. If worth attaches to the human being as God's image-bearer, then it is present wherever a human being is present: in the womb, in the cradle, in the prime of strength, in the confusion of dementia, on the deathbed. The image does not switch on at some threshold of development or switch off at some threshold of decline. It is there as long as the human being is there.

Now confront the rival ethic directly, because the class will meet it everywhere. The world increasingly prices human life by "quality of life": by intelligence, productivity, independence, pleasure, or the absence of suffering. On that scale, some lives are judged not worth living, and therefore disposable. Genesis 1 stands flatly against this. Worth is not a quality we possess in measurable degrees; it is a status God confers. The smallest, weakest, least productive human being bears the image as fully as the strongest.

Be both clear and compassionate as you land this. Clear, because the doctrine has hard edges: it forbids us to treat any class of human beings as disposable, however inconvenient or impaired. Compassionate, because many in the class will carry private grief or guilt connected to exactly these questions, and the same image-of-God doctrine that convicts also dignifies and welcomes them. The foundation laid here, every human life bears God's image, is the rock on which every later lesson, including the hardest ones, will stand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The image of God as the foundation of the sanctity of all human life, from conception to natural death.
- Human worth present wherever a human being is present, not switched on or off by development or decline.
- The rejection of every "quality of life" ethic that treats some lives as not worth living (Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13-16).
- Worth as a status conferred by God, not a quality possessed in measurable degrees.
- The doctrine that both convicts every devaluing of life and dignifies every devalued person.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the image of God lead directly to the sanctity of life at every stage?
- What is wrong, biblically, with measuring a human life by its "quality"?
- Why does grounding worth in God's image leave no class of human beings as disposable?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Genesis 1:26–28 as a whole. Name one specific way the truth that you, and every person you will meet, are made in the image of God is reshaping how you see yourself and others, and one concrete step you will take this week to honor that image in someone.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the whole lesson and asks for a personal response. Have students look back over Genesis 1:26–28 and the truth it has opened: that they, and every person they will ever meet, are made in the image of God. The aim is not that they admire this doctrine from a distance, but that it begins to change how they see, speak, and act.

Resist letting this stay abstract. Ask each person to name one specific way the truth of the image is reshaping how they see themselves: perhaps an end to measuring their worth by performance, perhaps release from a verdict of worthlessness, perhaps a new steadiness in God's love. Self-respect rooted in the image of God is not pride; it is honoring what God has made.

Then turn the same truth outward. Ask each person to name one person whose image-bearing dignity they will honor this week, and one concrete way they will do it: a word, an act of attention, a refusal to despise. Spiritual formation happens in specifics, and the love of neighbor that flows from this doctrine is meant to be visible.

Close by setting the trajectory of the whole study. Everything that follows, the unborn child, the suffering, the despairing, the dying, the vulnerable, grows from this single root: every human being bears the image of God. Send the class home not merely informed but reverent, having begun to see the worth that God has placed on every life, including their own.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The personal appropriation of the image of God as the ground of identity and of love for others.
- Healthy self-respect as honoring what God has made, distinct from pride.
- Love of neighbor as the visible fruit of the doctrine of the image of God.
- The image of God as the foundation for the entire study that follows.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way the image of God is changing how you see yourself?
- Whose dignity will you deliberately honor this week, and how?
- How does this foundation prepare us for the harder questions still to come in this study?