

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

How often do you consider your body? And I mean beyond what our bodies force us to consider: when we are hungry or in pain or tired. How often do you examine the truth about your body instead of taking it for granted? This is not a matter of theory for reflection and speculation but a very practical matter that determines the course of our lives. It's hard for us not to overlook our body as it is our constant companion, always with us wherever we go. Yet our opinions and attitudes toward our body, whether we're aware of them or not, govern how we live and act every moment of our lives, even how we treat our bodies in death. Our beliefs about our bodies are always in play because our bodies are part and parcel of who we are.

Think of all the disagreements and issues in society over sexuality and gender, marriage and divorce, same-sex intercourse and a one-flesh union, artificial reproduction and genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery and gender reassignment, pornography and prostitution, abortion and euthanasia, overeating and malnutrition. Think, too, of disagreements in the church over creation and evolution, the incarnation of God's Son, His bodily resurrection, the ministry of the church and its use of spoken words and physical objects like water, bread, and wine as the means of the Spirit, the resurrection of the body and bodily participation in eternal life with the Triune God. All these conflicts stem, in large part, from confusion about the body.

We seldom consider how we relate to our bodies and what they are meant to be. But Scripture shows how much the human body matters to God and why. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture paints two pictures of bodily life on earth. On the one hand, it shows us how God regards the human body that he creates in His image, redeems by the incarnation of his Son, and sanctifies for life with him through the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it shows us how completely it has been corrupted by rebellion against God, how badly it has been misused to damage other people and the world around it, and how tragically it is doomed to die. Yet it would be wrong to give equal weight to these portrayals, for the bright vision of its glory far outweighs the gray vision of its misery.

Our vision of the human body cannot be separated from what God himself tells us about its creation. Moses writes that on the sixth day, God looks over His creation as a master artist and gives it a nod of approval. He then moves to add the finishing touch. *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" What does that mean? God created Adam and Eve to reflect and project Himself into His creation. To be sure, they themselves were not created as the image of God, but in His image. They themselves are not divine, but their humanity resembles who God is and reflects Him in what they are and do.*

In other words, we represent God, created to *"have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."* We are God's agents, created to know Him and to exercise His will from within creation as part of creation. Humankind was to be like God by serving as good stewards of the earth and its animals. Just as God maintained the whole cosmic order and supervised its proper orientation, all human beings were to maintain proper order in plant and animal life on earth so that all life would thrive on earth together with all humankind.

And so, within Adam, God unites heaven and earth. The human body was made to bridge the invisible, eternal realm of God and the visible, temporal realm of His creation. We are not souls with bodies or bodies with souls. We are embodied spirits designed by the living God to reveal himself. The visible disclosure of God's glory in human terms. That is what human bodies were designed to be and do. That is His mandate for people created in His image: to use our bodies to work with God on earth and to participate in his own eternal life. That is why He has created each one of us. *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"*

That divine decree, that performative word, makes each one of us what we are. The worth of our body, our being, is conferred upon us by our divine Creator. He determines our status and purpose as human beings. Our nature and identity are obtained from God. We cannot appreciate the complexity, beauty, and mystery of the human body unless we realize that it is given to us. We do not make our own bodies; they are made for us. We receive them as a gift. And with our bodies, we receive our identities from God. Moses accounted, *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* Our whole selves are created in the image of God. The mention of sexuality shows that even our bodies reflect God's image.

And male and female describe the most fundamental layer of our identity. They describe not only our physical anatomy but our whole self. We were designed to reflect God's character, His qualities, and His activity, each separately in our own devotion to Him and together in the sexual union between male and female. We are

individuals, but we also depend on one another in body and soul. As men and women join in marriage, we reflect our living and life-giving God here on earth. We participate in His creative, life-giving process.

But our sexuality is only the beginning. Through the physical union of our parents, God gives us a unique body. Our self, our identity, is something given to us by God through our body to distinguish us from other bodies. Each body receives different characteristics and abilities and plays its own part in the work God has given us to do. Through our bodies, God places us within a specific time and a specific place. He also gives us preferences and personalities in our bodies. For example, our tastebuds and neurons determine if we like sweet or spicy foods. These various idiosyncrasies make up who we are. Each layer of identity shows a different characteristic aspect of a person. Taken together, this rich mix makes each of us a unique individual.

But our bodies also reveal our dependency upon each other and all creation and especially upon God. But He has given us all creation to support and sustain our bodies. And He has placed us in a particular family and given us specific relationships. It is through our whole being that we relate to one another and to Him. Our eyes see, our ears hear, and our brains process so that our spirit understands and connects. Without our body, we could not relate to one another.

Our proper response to God for the creation of our bodies and for the provision of our bodies is thanksgiving. But unfortunately, we do not respond as we should. In our sin, we learn to despise the bodies God has given, and we seek to create for ourselves our own identities. That's what Adam and Eve did. They were tempted to believe they could transcend the identities that God had given them, shedding their humanity to become divine like God; that they would go from people in His image and under Him to equal to Him and no longer dependent upon him. They would become their own gods transcending the limitations of their bodies.

Instead of creating a new identity for themselves, however, they corrupted their old ones. When Adam and Eve rebelled, they lost the image of God and severed their connection to Him. They no longer had the spiritual life that comes from Him and is with Him. And that scars and mars the whole being. Nothing in them is quite as it should be. They became less than human, diminished in body, mind, and spirit as they were no longer perfectly attuned to God. Life became one full of hardship, disease, and suffering. Instead of transcending their bodies, they injured them and became self-consciously aware of not only their own limitations but now of their sin. And so they sought to hide the twisted creature they had become.

And our flesh is of theirs. When they rebelled, we all became carnal creatures. Our bellies and our passions of the flesh became our gods. Even though we were kept alive by the living God, we set our minds on earthly things. We lived an earth-bound life like an eagle shut up in a cage. Consequently, we were no longer spiritually alive but became spiritually dead in trespasses and sin. Disconnected from the spiritual life, we also became disconnected from our body, feeling uncomfortable and estranged from it. And so we try to hide our corruption, disassociating from our bodies by trying to create new identities for ourselves to hide behind. But each time it ends with the same result.

This disconnect has led to all the conflicts we see regarding current thoughts and attitudes of the body. A problem has arisen for us because many people now seem to seek their identity in only one aspect of themselves and reject other people who have a different identity or one that seems to negate theirs. But underneath the other layers of identity, we all share the same common human identity as people who have been made in God's image. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all share the same humanity, an innate identity that is granted in our conception and cannot be taken away from us. No one, or nothing, can unperson us and cancel our human identity. That foundational identity does not threaten the other layers of identity; instead, it confirms them all by giving each its proper due in its proper place in the hierarchy of identity. When we build on this common identity that we have with all other people, we can much better negotiate the antagonism of politics, the cross-currents of culture, and the conflict of identity.

But to do this, we need Jesus. He empowers us. Whereas we were made *in* the image of God, He *is* the image of God. The fullness of God and His glory in human flesh. In the human body of Jesus, we see the excellence of God the Creator mirrored for us. He is the true bridge between heaven and earth. Only He can make us at home in our bodies once again and at home with each other and God. Through His body, He reconnects us with whom we were created to be. He restores our identity. By His body, he discloses the glory of God the Father and the glory of humanity. With his human body, He overcomes the sin that alienates us from God, from one another, and from our own bodies. With his human body, he undoes the damage done by our rebellion against God and

restores God's good order on earth. Through faith in Him, we regain our worth from God, and our bodies receive their full worth, their glory, from their union with Christ. For each human body was made to be part of His body.

Our bodies were created to live in harmony with God and His Holy Spirit. They were created for eternal life with God, not merely temporal life on earth. No matter how damaged it may actually be, every human body is designed for perfection in eternity. And as we are united with His body here and now by faith, His image is remade and restored within us. And as shrines where God resides, our bodies share in His hidden glory and display it by word and deed to the world. So, through our bodily union with Jesus, we are filled with all the fullness of God. We glorify God and honor Him with our bodies. Through Him, our bodies once again become what they were meant to be: agents of God and instruments by which he shows himself and gives himself to all the people on earth.