

In June of 1964, a man took the pulpit of a church and prayed this prayer:

"Oh God, our Heavenly Guide, as finite creatures of time and as dependent creatures of [Yours], we acknowledge [You] as our sovereign Lord. Permit freedom and the joys thereof to forever reign throughout our land. May we... forever have the courage of our convictions that we may always stand for [You] and our great nation. May the sweet cup of...fraternity ever be ours to enjoy and build within us that kindred spirit, which will keep us unified and strong. Engender within us that wisdom kindred to honorable decisions and the Godly work. By the power of [Your] infinite spirit and the energizing virtue therein, ever keep before us our... pledges of righteousness. Bless us now in this assembly that we may honor [You] in all things, we pray in the name of Christ, our blessed Savior. Amen."

This is a prayer that, for that day, could have been prayed in any church in America. I did update the language a bit to take out the Thines and Thees. It may be a little more formal than we are used to, but it could be appropriately prayed today.

I removed a few words not to give away who prayed it, but this was the prayer of the Grand Chaplin of the Ku Klux Klan in Raleigh, Mississippi, where within one month of praying this prayer, three black civil rights workers were murdered execution-style.

How is this possible? They prayed to God, acknowledging his majesty and sovereignty. They prayed, as we do, asking for wisdom and courage. They even closed in Jesus' name, referring to him as their blessed Savior. How is it possible that a group of men who could pray a prayer like this could be so full of hate could and do what they did?

This is a great question and the topic of today's message in our series called "You've Been Lied To (and we're sorry about that). Today, we look at the lie, God is a white, male, Republican. I realize this statement is controversial and even inflammatory for some. Because there may be some people who think, why would you call this a lie? And there may be others who put off by the fact they know there are those who don't believe it is a lie. But it certainly grabs your attention.

It is certainly easy with the current state of politics to understand why some might believe that God has been coopted by one political party over the other. But before you check out on me thinking I am about to rail on some parties political platform for the next 25 minutes, not so fast. To be honest, we could have called this message God is a Black, female, Democrat, and that would have been just as much of a lie.

Let's break down this statement, but more importantly, let's look at what is behind this statement that is even more dangerous and damaging than this statement itself.

Let's start with the idea that God is white. If he were, he would be Casper the friendly ghost. No, God is not white. Neither is God black or brown. Behind this statement is more than an identity of color but an attempt to identify God with one ethnicity, race, or nationality. But God is not Anglo-Saxon, Caucasian, Indian, Asian, Hispanic, or any other ethnicity.

We want a God we can look in the face. So we construct an image we can understand. But as we learn in the Bible, God is not limited by a single race. John 4:24 tells us, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

God is not limited by one race, ethnicity, or nationality. God has always desired to be known not just by a single race of people, but by ALL people. This is why when he chose the Jewish people so that they would reveal God to the world, to all nations. And that is also why in the end, when there is a new creation, it won't be occupied by only one kind of people, but by every tribe, nation, and tongue.

In John's Revelation at the end of the Bible (4:9), we read, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." What were they doing? Worshipping THEIR Savior. The Savior of ALL the world.

We could also address the idea that God is a man. Yes, we do refer to him with male pronouns. He is referred to as Father in the Bible. But we cannot dismiss the femaleness of God as well.

The femaleness of God is seen in Genesis when we read that both male and female were created in the image of God. There is something in both sexes that reflects the character of God. Some of the pictures we see of God in the Bible are more feminine in nature. Job 38:29, God gives birth to creation from his womb. In Isaiah 49:15, God's love is like a mother who could never forget his child.

Even in some of the analogies Jesus used to describe God and the Kingdom of God, there are female references, the woman who lost a coin and the woman who kneads bread; all used to describe God and his kingdom.

Even the way we come to faith in Jesus is described as being born of the Spirit. I've got seven kids, and I can tell you that I gave birth to none of them. All that credit goes to my amazing wife, who if you were wondering, is a woman. We cannot lock God input our gender norms. Again, God is Spirit. As one pastor put it, God is the Father God with a Mother's heart.

What about that last description? Republican? Not to get too far into politics, but God isn't locked into our two-party system. Neither political party can say he's ours and ours alone because there are positions in both parties that don't align with him or the words of Jesus. And God isn't looking to restore one political party or the other. The entire reason Jesus came was to establish a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, where King Jesus reigns, and we all follow him. And those of us who follow Jesus need to remember this above all else.

When we get wrapped up in our political parties and make that our primary rallying cry, we have our priorities in the wrong place. Jesus didn't come to elect your man or woman as president. We are citizens first and foremost of the Kingdom of Jesus. He's the one we follow first. And that needs to shape everything else we say or do in the political sphere.

Now, why would we make such an incendiary statement? Was it just to get a rise out of you? Well, yes, but not only that. It was also to address a much bigger issue at hand.

The issue behind a statement like this is how we view God, what we believe about him. Often, when we think we know God or speak for God, the God we know is one that looks, believes, votes, and acts a lot like you or me. As it is credited to Voltaire as saying, "In the beginning, God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since." We create an image of God that looks more like us and our preferences than the God of the Bible.

### **The Problem of Making God in Our Image**

How we view God shapes our behavior. It shapes how we interact with the world around us. It impacts everything from how we feel about our jobs, to how we interact with our neighbors. It affects how we share or don't share Jesus with the world around us, and welcome or don't welcome those who might believe differently or live differently than us.

Even from that prayer I read, you can see where our belief about God can lead us down very destructive paths and do so with us feeling very spiritual and righteous doing those heinous acts.

When we create God in our image and leave no room for mystery and possibility, we begin to see everyone else as wrong. We believe we have the full truth, and everyone else is just ignorant. It creates an us-versus-them mentality, and "those people" that aren't like us or with us become the enemy.

This mentality then leads us to a feeling of superiority. And when we feel superior, we act superior. We grab for power because we feel entitled to it. We have been chosen by our view of God to do so. And our power grab coupled with seeing others as the enemy leads us down a perilous path of devaluing people.

When we forget that those around us are also made in the image of God, and we see them as the enemy, we believe we are justified in calling them names, ignoring their needs, treating them inhumanely, and doing precisely what the Ku Klux Klan did in the name of Jesus. Hanging, killing, torturing and tormenting black men, women, boys, and girls.

I know we all think, "Not me. I would never." But when we create God in our image, whatever image that may be, we find justification for our actions regardless of how good, right, and Christlike they may be.

Before we think, "Not me," we need to be honest enough to admit that to shape and form God into our image is deeply embedded in the human condition. We all see God through a lens. It is natural for us to want to do this.

We must be aware that if you were born in the United States in a middle-class family with freedom of religion and an education system that ensured you got at least a high school diploma if not a college degree, you might see God through a bit of a different lens than someone born in a third world country into poverty with no chance of an education.

In the Old Testament, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, we read the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The second commandment listed says, "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..."

The temptation for the children of Israel was to build images out of wood and stone, covered in gold and silver, that resembled animals. They did this to have a picture of a diet they could see and so they could bow down and worship them.

We are WAY too sophisticated for this today, or so we think. We may not make idols out of wood or stone or precious metals, but we worship the image of God we've created. We must ensure our image of God is in lines with the image of God in the Bible, not just the one we want it to be.

We want a God we can understand. But whatever image we have created, whatever idol it may be, it will always be short of the real thing. As I heard one pastor say recently, a more complete view of God causes us to give up our exclusive hold of him.

## **How Do We Know Who God Is?**

How do we know who God is? What can we do to keep ourselves from crafting an image of God that looks more like us than the God of the Bible? We are told in a few places. Let's just look at a couple. Hebrews 1:1-3:

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

Colossians 1:15, the Apostle Paul makes this statement, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

Two verses that both say that Jesus is the image of God, the exact representation of his being. The word translated image is "eikon." The word picture here is a stamp that is shaped and formed, and that stamp is pressed into wax. The stamp on the wax seal will bear the same image as the engraving on the seal.

Jesus gives us a true and trustworthy picture of God. Jesus himself said if you have seen him, you've seen the Father.

### **Who Is Jesus?**

We might ask, what is the correct image of God that we need to see in Jesus? That's the wrong question. We must be careful about how we construct our view of Jesus. Is he sentimental Jesus? Teddy bear Jesus? Middle-class Jesus? Meek and mild Jesus? Revolutionary Jesus?

Jesus was God in the flesh, come to the earth to do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves, to make us right with God. Instead of us having to do the impossible, to become good enough religiously, God is pursuing us. What is impossible for us is possible for the sinless Son of God who went to the cross, died, was buried, and rose to life so that we might experience new life in him.

In Jesus, we see a God full of compassion. Compassion for the needy, the oppressed, the outcast, those that society said weren't worth it, Jesus said I have come to die for them. For the foreigner and the stranger. For the religious and nonreligious. Jesus came offering life.

But we also see a Jesus who calls us to a high standard. To sacrifice our own lives so that we can have his. He was someone who got frustrated and angry when people missed what he was trying to do and say. He called us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, and to place our allegiance to God and his kingdom above all other loyalties, including our race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or political party.

When we look into the face of Jesus and see this, we see a more complete picture of who God is. This picture doesn't remove all mystery. We still do not have full knowledge. But it moves us closer to understanding who God is and what living as one of his children means.

No matter how clear a picture of Jesus we get, there will always be some mystery of God. After all, what type of infinite God can be fully known by finite humanity? He is the God most nigh, near to us, as seen in the life of Jesus. But he remains God most high, often beyond our comprehension.

While we long for certainty and full understanding, the moment we think we have it, we settle for an incomplete picture of who God really is. He is the transcendent God, unable to be contained by any box we want to place him in.

I want to challenge you. How do you view God? Is there room for God to be more than what you might think of him today? Do you live in an echo chamber that just reinforces your view, or are you willing to be challenged in your understanding of who God is to see he might be more than you ever imagined?

Let's acknowledge that we all have a lens through which we see God and ask God to broaden our understanding of him to see the beauty of His diversity, the fullness of His character, and the essence of his kingdom.