

Engage360 Episode 123 | Exploring What It Means to Be Made in God's Image; Dr. David Hionides

Intro Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Angie Ward Hello and welcome. You are listening to the Engage360 podcast from Denver Seminary. My name is Angie Ward, and I am the director of the Doctor of Ministry Program here at Denver Seminary. I am also the general editor of the Kingdom Conversations Book series with NavPress, which is why I have the honor of being a guest host for this episode. The Kingdom Conversations is a three-book series with NavPress, a discipleship focus on different contemporary events and how we think and respond as followers of Christ. I won't say too much about it, but the first book was *When the Universe Cracks Living as God's People in Times of Crisis*. The second one was *Kingdom and Country following Jesus in the land that we love*. And then the third and most recent is the least of these practicing a faith without margins. And so, as general editor of the series, I had the privilege and responsibility of helping to curate the voices that we were going to put together around each of these topics. Each book features ten different contributors, all from a discipleship perspective, and then also with some expertise on whatever the topic is for that particular chapter. And so, when I was putting these chapters together, one of the first people that came to mind for the least of these was my friend and colleague, Dr. David Hionides, or as I know him, David, and would probably prefer to be called, right?

David Hionides Yes.

Angie Ward Yeah. So, David serves as a director of Institutional Research and Educational Systems at Denver Seminary, so I work with him in that context. But he's also an adjunct instructor teaching theology because his training is actually in theology. He received his Ph.D. in theological studies from Dallas Theological Seminary and served there before coming to the beautiful city of Denver where I get to work with him. So, David, it's so good to have you on here as a guest on the podcast and for us to do this together.

David Hionides Yeah, thank you. This is a privilege and a joy. It's always great to sit down and talk theology with you, as we often do in our offices.

Angie Ward We do. Yeah, we come up, bother each other in our offices, keep us from getting work done. And so, David wrote a chapter, chapter two in this book, the least of these, called *Created in his Image*. And so, each of the books in this series has a chapter that's about kind of a foundational theology, whether it's kind of what is what is the kingdom of God or what does the Bible say about crisis and the theology of that. And so, for this one, you start, David, by saying the very first question, what are humans? And you say humanity has pondered this question for thousands of years. What are humans? What makes people human?

David Hionides Well, that's a really easy question to start off with. That question we've long discussed as humans and we're still discussing and still trying to answer. Often, we've done it to try to distinguish ourselves from the animal kingdom and other parts of creation. And often that line has been blurred, especially in today's world, the distinctions are slowly eroding. Yeah, that's a tough question to really get a great answer that encompasses all of what it means. So, I could give you pieces, that we are more than simply a body, that we are more than simply a spirit, that we are a whole unified creation. That's really important.

And for Christians, it's always been especially distinct from other beliefs where there's this idea in other religions that the real me is inside me, this is my body is a shell, that I long to escape it, things like that. That's not a Christian thought. We have always believed that to be a human is to have a body, to be bodied, which raises all sorts of un questions for the Eschaton and the intermediate state and all of that.

Angie Ward Yeah, as well as ethics today.

David Hionides Yeah. So that's part of it, that we are made in the image of God is very much a part of that. And we'll, that's what we're here to talk about. That is such an important and really eye opening, it has such ramifications across our lives. And often we just read those passages in Scripture and think very little beyond, oh, we're made in the image of God. That's a nice thing. But we don't really fully contemplate and really imagine what that means as we walk our daily life. But that is part of being human, that's vital, and that is such a great, great Christian doctrine. So, there's all these little pieces about what it means to be a human.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, let's and I mean, you're right. This idea of the image of God or, you know, theological, I guess, Latin terms, Imago Dei. Right? So, when you use that term, what does that mean? What do we mean? And I think, you know, as I was editing your chapter and we've talked, I mean, there's even different understandings about what that means. So how do you understand that concept?

David Hionides Yeah. So, the big thing that I start with is the distinction between the image of God and being made in the image of God, because often we conflate the two. But Scripture is clear, very clear, on who the image of God is, and that is Christ. And we are made in the image of God. There's less clarity on that, which is, as you said, as Christians, we've had much discussion, lots of differing thoughts. So, when I think of it, I think partially, as a historical theologian, I love the history of the church and of thought. And so, I think of the long conversations and where we are today. But for me, it very much speaks to the value and dignity that we have been made in. And all of that is derived from the image of God who was Christ. So, it is Christ that we derive our value from, that we are more than equal because of that great value that comes from Christ as we are made in the image of God. So, I think of it very much as a value and dignity that is distinct for humanity. Alongside that, we have the familial relationship that we are now, this concept of being a family with God. And we see that in Scripture when we talk about the children of Eve and Adam being made, that they are the image of Adam or made in the image of Adam. And so, it's this family relationship which we often think about as Christians, that we are the part of the household of God, adopted daughters and sons, but we don't think about all of humanity often as having a connection, a family connection with God. And that is really eye opening when we think about what that means for everyone around us, not just Christians, but those who adhere to different faiths or say they adhere to no faith, all of us. And that's really cool, I think.

Angie Ward Yeah, I would agree. I mean, I was a student here at Denver Seminary many years ago, and so I'm sure I had to learn or repeat something about image of God in a systematic paper for a course at some point. And I was able to do that. But it's only recently really through editing this book and reflecting on the least of these and all that, that I started really digging into what this concept of being created in the image of God means for me as a follower of Christ. But also, I think, and I don't think I was taught this as a student at Denver Seminary, but I think my assumption was just, well, yeah, as a Christian, I'm in the image of God. But what does that mean for someone who does not

claim to be a follower of Christ? Or what does that mean? You know, we talk about if God is perfect and what does that mean for the physical body? You know, so one of the chapters in this book is by a man with M.S., and he's talking about what, you know, he had to wrestle with. What does that mean for what he feels is a broken body? Is he still creating the image of God? So, you're saying, though, that everyone, men and women, have this image, even if they're Christians or not? Right?

David Hionides Yes, absolutely. This is the way God created humanity. That is all of humans. All humans. And that's that distinction that humanity has from, we don't read that of anyone else. So, the animals in the creation narrative are not given that distinction. It is just humanity, but it is therefore all of humanity, whether it is a believer or nonbeliever. And that, to me, is really eye opening.

Angie Ward Yeah.

David Hionides As you said, we often think of it, you know, like that family, the household of God, our Christian brothers and sisters. But now we're talking about a family relationship beyond that for everybody. Those that we like, those that we don't like, those that we really don't like, even them, that they are made in the same way that I am made, the same way you are made. And we all have that value that is derived from Christ. We all have that dignity derived from Christ and that really must affect the way we treat everyone. And I mean everyone.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, so what does, in your understanding, what difference does sin or separation from God do to that image? It doesn't erase it.

David Hionides Right. That's another thing that Christians, and we have much disagreement on the extent of the effect of a sin on us, but we all agree that there is an effect, that it has diminished in some sense, in some way that there is a marring but not a full separation. It's not as if we've lost it. It's not as if that is something that was only in the past and will be in the future. This is something that we still have.

Angie Ward Yeah, I think, I mean, for me to really reflect on that, I don't think it's hyperbole for me to say that, really, like you said, it is almost life changing to really think about what that means for all the people that I thought, well, you're just unregenerate or, you know, and so you must not have the image of God or something. I don't know. I just made a lot of assumptions and didn't really think about all the things, like you talked about, dignity and all that stuff. You know, we're talking about a little bit, you know, theological nuance in there. You know, at seminary we have these discussions or people debate or whatever, but to me, as I've reflected on it more, this idea of all humans being image bearers of God, even in a sinful state or separated from God the state, like I said, again, it's just so transformative as to how I view everyone. I just feel like it's possibly one of the most foundational, life changing concepts for us as believers to really think about and to look at people differently. I mean, after editing the series, reading your chapter, reflecting on this, I look at people, everyone, the person who cut me off in traffic, people who are on the margins, or that our society would put on the margins. People who don't believe as I do, you know, who are on the other side of whatever aisle or dividing boundaries that I may put up. And to remind myself first and foremost that they are image bearers first and then all these other categories. That's a whole flipping of the script in a cancel culture, isn't it?

David Hionides Yeah, it's incredibly eye opening. It's incredibly life changing. And the one thing that is really interesting, so in our world, the concept of equality, that all humans are created equal, that's something we say in public schools constantly. That's just the way we think and talk. We struggle with it, to be perfectly honest. I mean, we still struggle with proper equality, but for Christians, it's not simply equality. This is now, what we're talking about now is beyond, it's well beyond, it's incredibly beyond this. Now we are more than equal. We are equal, yes. But we are equal in an incredible value that is derived from Christ. As you said, we're talking about perfection. So not just perfection, infinite perfection. So really grasping that in a certain sense is beyond what I'm capable of doing. But that's just how much value everyone and again, everyone has. Even those that I really disagree with, especially in our country right now, we are very divisive and it's just awful to see the division. But it's even more awful to see the way we treat those we disagree with. Because these are people who were made, just as I was, just as you are, we are all made in the image and likeness of God. And that is incredibly wonderful. There is incredible value in everyone. Those that we drive by on the street, those who are asking for help, those that we think, we often sadly, we have this thought that, oh, they can help themselves and so on and so forth. But regardless of your view on any of those issues, you have to start as a believer in recognizing that person is incredibly valuable, valuable beyond what we can even grasp, as I said. That is the value that person has. And so, when we ignore each other, when we just go right past another person and don't have any time for them or anything like that, where we don't want to give them any time, we don't want to give them anything. That's how we're treating someone who has just as much value as us. But that value is incredibly high. The dignity that is given to us by God, that value that God has given to us, we are mistreating when we mistreat other people.

Angie Ward Yeah, the word keeps coming to my mind is worth, like this inherent worth. Or I've heard of the imago Dei, the image of God. It's a status, a royal stat, you know, it's a status that's not just an external. Like, back to the question we started with, what makes someone human. It's not just our ability because then disability would mar that image or it's not a belief system or whatever. It's a foundational created inherent status.

David Hionides Yeah. And that's where we've gotten through our history into problems in understanding the image of God. Long ago we started the idea that we can reason. That's what it means to be created in the image. And that caused all sorts of issues that led to literal oppression. And that is where often as Christians, we know that our theology can be twisted, and we see it in the world around us today just as it was thousands of years ago. And it's something we have to be on guard for. And the image of God, being made in that image, has that history. And so that's really important to recognize and reject some of these thoughts, that it's not simply my ability to reason because there are other people who can reason far better than me. Yeah, and then there are some who have less ability when it comes to reason than I do. That has nothing to do with being made in the image of God more or less as some have tried to argue. And it's this broadness of it that is for all humanity. And we all have it. Not more or less. We all have it. We are given this by our Creator. It's this special design in his creation that he has for humans. It's so cool. It really is. I mean, it's such an even trivial word. Cool. Like how amazing this really, really is. And we don't grasp it well, and often we'll think about it. Oh, it sounds great and move on with life and forget about it. But again, this should be affecting how I treat every single person I come into contact with.

Angie Ward Yeah, it's really the, if you make this the first lens, it really is reorienting. For you personally, you know, you're trained and studied as a theologian like me. You know, you could write papers about this. Was there a moment or a series of things? How did this

become real to you as a disciple, as a follower of Christ? Was that a process? Or is there an aha story you can share?

David Hionides So for me, it was something I learned growing up in a Christian home. My father was a pastor, so I've heard that language, that we're made in the image likeness of God. And then I went to seminary, and for me the aha moment was when I read in Scripture that the image of God is Christ. That was a big shift because I had often thought and even probably said many times that, well, I'm the image of God because that's how I was made, rather than I'm made in the image of God and that Christ is the image of God. So, then that was a big eye-opening thing. We're talking about Christ. And as Protestants, as evangelicals, we always love to talk about Christ. Our focus is very much on Christ, and rightly so. But then that affects this concept of being made in the image and likeness of God, because that is Christ. So that was, for me, that was a big aha moment when I was in seminary and that really started me thinking down this path. Because I had heard the idea of reason as being the thing, the other idea that we are able to reign, that this royalty, that our ability to govern over creation. But that also has problems because not all of us are.

Angie Ward It's more like a positional status, as opposed to inherent.

David Hionides Exactly. And that's the big thing. This is inherent that we all have not more or less amongst us. We all have it. And so those were the big eye-opening things for me that made me realize, yeah, this really is a life changing understanding. And this has changed the way I look at the world around me.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, so do you have along those lines, specific examples of how it changes you or causes you to stop short and go, oh, wait a minute.

David Hionides Yeah, part of that is for me, understanding the reality that there are many people around me who don't understand that and don't have that inherent understanding of themselves as valuable. So unfortunately, in our world, there are many people who really have a hard time coping with the hardness and difficulties in life, and they take it upon themselves and view themselves as worthless. So, eye contact with another person, even if they're doing something that's annoying to me, so to speak. Saying hello and speaking to people, that is in reality a huge thing for many people that someone actually recognizes them, and they have the value that I will stop and say hello. It doesn't have to be a long conversation, but just that I acknowledge another person's, almost in a sense, I acknowledge their existence because they have not been acknowledged by so many people. That's one aspect that has really driven me to make sure that I do that.

Angie Ward Yeah.

David Hionides Unfortunately, I'll admit I don't always do it, but it's something that I strive to continue to get better at.

Angie Ward Yeah, me too. I mean, I just continuing to reflect about this book, the least of these, and this concept, I've been aware of how ignorant I am of the people around me, just oblivious. I'm just so focused on my destination, my work, my things in front of me that I don't even notice people, or anything about them, like you said, looking them in the eye or I've been trying to, you know, each person has a name, you know, and just kind of, what are the things that give people that dignity, you know, or ways that I can recognize that dignity and other people.

David Hionides Yeah. And the other thing, my wife is a social worker. So, this is something I learned through her, that she worked with those that don't have homes and they're on the streets. People don't even look at them. We just go right by, and we don't want to be bothered by them.

Angie Ward Not just not look, we avert or avoid. Yeah.

David Hionides And so doing the opposite. Yeah. Acknowledging that they are a human being, acknowledging that they have value is a big thing to do. And it seems small, but because they are not given that by the world around them, that really does matter. Of course, we also need to help provide for their other needs, for their actual physical needs in shelter and food. Those things are very, very important as well. I don't want to diminish those. But it's the small thing that has always intrigued me because, like you said, we just avert our eyes, and we don't think anything of it. We go about the rest of our day, but for that person, we have diminished them. And that is something as Christians we know that we should not be doing.

Angie Ward Because it's not Christlike because we're denying their inherent dignity or worth or value or status.

David Hionides Yes. We should be celebrating that.

Angie Ward Yeah, my hope for this chapter in the book and in this conversation is to remind you and me sitting here, but also those listening that imago Dei is not just some highfalutin theological concept. It's like a grassroots discipleship orientation.

David Hionides Yeah.

Angie Ward So, you know, you've mentioned a couple different practices. You know, people who are listening. What other things can I, can we be doing to kind of check ourselves and to be more mindful of that concept?

David Hionides Yeah, I think particularly that our country is so divisive. And so when we're having disagreements with people, especially on something that we have very strong opinions on, and so does our quote unquote opponent, we need to have those conversations with believers and nonbelievers with that recognition, and we need to share the reality that we believe in their value, not just by telling them we view them as valuable and have worth and dignity, but by showing it in our disagreements. And that is really hard because when we're disagreeing, we really disagree. And that, I think, is if we're able to do that, that is huge, because that's in a moment of our own weakness as we're getting angry, as sometimes we do in arguments, to be able to show and express, not just by saying the words, but in actual the way we are disagreeing, the words of disagreement, that we are doing it in a way that shows the love of Christ, that shows that this person, that even on something that we disagree with, we are not going to diminish them as a person. If we can all do that, this country would be a much better place.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, let's turn that mirror, that image on the reflection of God and that inherent worth and status on each of us. And so, you know, the other side of this is reflecting that I have value. The home I grew up in was a lot of trauma, a lot of abuse. I mean, I grew up with a message that, you know, don't be a bother kind of thing. And so, this is still revolutionizing my life, that it's not about my performance, professional, my grades, my achievements, that just by being me, I have this value and worth. I mean, how

about for you and your own, just your own life? It also makes me feel, bigger is not the right word, but also small. I feel more united. I'm like, oh, we all are. I am. But not more so. But not less than.

David Hionides Right. Yeah. And that's a really, really good point. Thank you for bringing that up. I know for myself, my parents, I'm very thankful, I grew up in a very loving home, so I was just given that understanding that I am of value, that I have value for my parents. But that's not true of everyone. And we all need to recognize that we have value because that's the same value that we're seen in other people. But as you said, we have it ourselves, and if we don't recognize that in ourselves, it's going to be very difficult to then give other people that proper value. So, yeah, we must recognize that in and of ourselves that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that God loves us. In our creation, he gave us something. He made us really, really special. He gave us immense value, immense dignity that is something that we actually have, regardless of my ability to do math.

Angie Ward Or inability.

David Hionides Or in any ability, regardless of that, that I have that thanks to God, that is what I am, because that is how he made me.

Angie Ward Yeah.

David Hionides For many of us, that's a tough thing because we didn't have that given to us by those around us. And so, we need to recognize that and feel that and fully embrace that in and of ourselves. And as you said, it doesn't make us better than everyone else. It doesn't make us worse than every else. We are all made in this together. We are all humans, all created in the image and likeness of God. And that includes me. And it includes you.

Angie Ward Yeah. It's still just blowing my mind and my heart open, you know, to really reflect on what that means. And as I said, as a fundamental discipleship context. Was there anything new as you were writing this chapter? I mean, you've reflected on that before. I asked you to contribute because I thought you'd do a great job with this chapter. I knew that already. But anything else that just kind of reminded you or opened up for you?

David Hionides Yeah. One thing, and it's related to what we're talking about, it's that this recognition helps my motives for helping other people. We're commanded. We're told, these are the mandates, to help those that don't have whatever it is, we are to help others, to treat others as we treat ourselves. But this doctrine, this gives in a real sense for me that motive. I want to help other people because they have that value, they have that dignity. They have that God given worth. And so, I then have that motive to give something, whatever it is, time, money, food, acknowledgment, even time sitting with someone and talking to them. For many, that's huge for a lot of people. All of that I'm giving because I recognize that they are made in the image and likeness of God. So that motivates me to then share in that with them.

Angie Ward Yeah. My hope and prayer for my own life and for you and I as we're talking and as we do our work together at Denver Seminary, and those of you who are listening, that you can just really chew on this and think through what a difference that makes to really view someone as that made in the image of Christ and having this worth and dignity inherent, not more than not less than not because of anything that we've done. We just have it.

David Hionides Yeah, it really is, as you said, this affects all that we do. It really, really does. And we need to spend a few moments to actually contemplate this and think through this. Because we, as you said, we've heard this, we who grew up in Christian homes, we hear this, but we don't really understand the fullness of it until we sit back and contemplate.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, I'm so grateful to work with you, a fellow image bearer at Denver Seminary and also grateful for your contribution to the book and to the series. For those of you listening, I'll do a little shameless plug. It's Kingdom Conversations, it's a series with Nav Press. Again, I was honored to be general editor. David is a contributor to a chapter in the third book. You can check that out. And thanks for being a guest. It's always just fun to talk with you. And this time we just hit record, basically. These are things we really do talk about sometimes, moments over lunch or in our office or on the softball field.

David Hionides Yeah, that's right. The privilege that we have working at Denver Seminary. Yeah, it's been wonderful. I love it. Thank you so much for just being here and having these conversations. They are really, really important and wonderful.

Angie Ward Yeah, for sure. Thanks, David.

David Hionides Thank you.

Angie Ward We are so grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us if you get the chance, leave us a rating or a review and please send any questions or comments to us at podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. Our website, denverSeminary.edu has other resources you can explore, including events, degree programs, and more episodes of Engage360, including full episode transcripts. We are so grateful for your interest and support and prayers. May the Lord bless you. Take care.