

Understanding Love through the Lens of Human Dignity

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We talk about love a lot, but do we understand it? What does it mean to love another? John 13:34-35. How do we love as God loves? 1 John 4. God loves by bestowing dignity or worth, but that kind of love is beyond human capacity. Perhaps we can say that we love when we recognize those whom God loves and strive to treat them as God treats them. Certainly, we can imitate the love of God when we value what he values and abhor what he abhors.

Genesis 1-2. Most people believe that human beings have worth because they were created in the image of God. This may be associated with thinking, rationality, or with community. The Bible never explains what "image of God" means. Generally lost in the discussion is the relational aspect of "image of God."

When we lose sight of relational aspects, we focus on inherent characteristics that are the same with or without God, and if human dignity rests on such qualities, then some humans may possess more dignity than others. Such is the result when we exclude God from the formula, and that is the situation in our culture and society generally. We live in a society that demands dignity for human beings but has no basis for the demand. The mirror can have no image or reflection without the reality. We are image of God, just as Jesus is image of God (Col. 1:15).

Traditional Christian thinkers have understood human dignity as rising from three sources: excellence of nature, moral excellence, or belovedness. Humanity's excellence of being is finite and we can think of more excellent beings. With regard to moral excellence, we are fallen creatures. But the dignity that comes from belovedness offers exciting understandings.

Dignity relates to worth. Because dignity is a measure of our worth, it is a relative term. It is a kind of relation or comparison. Gold has value either as a means or as an end. It should be clear that means is always subordinate to end. To be valued as a means can even be demeaning. To be valued as an end is the ultimate compliment. We are given higher dignity (worth) if we are valued as an end rather than a means to other ends. To be valued as an end is to be loved. This is the highest dignity we can bestow on another, to value and love other people as ends and not as means.

But note also that human love cannot be a secure foundation for human dignity, because human love is unreliable. Human dignity is something to be recognized, founded in God's love for his creation.

Dignity, worth, and love come from relation to God. As God is community joined in love, we see a feature of what it means to be God. God does not love his children because of their inherent nature or dignity, nor because of their moral excellence. God bestows dignity, the dignity of belovedness.

As disciples we are compelled to recognize the dignity of others. We exist because God loves us and wills our existence. From this foundation, we can ask about the biblical understanding of love.

Our dignity derives from God's love for us, and since God is the greatest possible being and his love for us is the greatest possible love, the dignity he bestows is the greatest possible dignity. Eph. 3:18-19; 1 John 3:1. Nothing greater can be given than that we have status as God's dear children.

God's love gives dignity higher than we can imagine. Remember the three ways human beings can possess dignity: excellence of existence/being/nature, moral excellence, belovedness. Excellence implies comparative measurement. But in comparison to God, we are nothing. Dignity is not deserved, it is not merited. Dignity is our belovedness before God.

Further, God bestows on us the same dignity that he bestows on himself, for he loves us just as he loves himself. This dignity is grounded in the love of F,S,HS. The central thrust of the incarnation is that God loves us just as much as he loves his Son.

This is also an explanation of God's grace—the existence Jesus experienced is a possibility for all humans. Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:1,2. We are counted as worthy of God's love. He gave himself.