



# It Is Not Good That the Human Is Alone

*TEXT*  
*Genesis 2:4b–9, 15–25*  
*Philippians 2:1–8*

September 11, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**W**e are beginning a sermon series for the next several weeks that we will reflect on our life together. All of us live with neighbors and nations, with friends and sometimes foes, with families and, for us, with church families. We live life together.

Shirley Guthrie, longtime theology professor at Columbia Seminary and former colleague of Rodger Nishioka's, once said, "It is impossible to be Christian by yourself." If the central tenet of this faith is to love, then there has to be someone we love. We can't love in isolation. So Christian faith is unavoidably life together.

I want us to think a bit about why life together is so important.

We begin with creation. There are two creation stories in Scripture. They are both helpful. The first one is a story of word. God speaks life into being. That story was not intended to be read in high school science classes. No, it is not science but a testimony to the truth that life — all of life — depends on God's word. It is less a story of *how* the world was created and more a story of *why* the world was created. It is a love story because

God desires that there be light and stars and plants and birds and fish and horses and hippos and you. And it is all good. As the work of God's creative heart, creation is good. And the human being is very good.

But the story continues with a second story. In this story, some things are different. God creates not by speaking, but by kneeling in the dust and breathing into the dust the breath of life. And the order of creation varies, but again, this story is not intended to be taught in a science class. This story tells us not *how* but *why* we are created, and even more than that, it tells us *what* we were created for. This story offers a testimony to what it means to be human in this world.

In the first story, God said, "Let there be ... and there was ... and it was good." Over and over and over, it was good, it was good, it was good. And then, for the first time, we get, "It is not good." It trips us up like a speed bump. The first thing the Bible says is not good: "It is not good that the man should be alone." This is important. Human life is life together.

This passage is often lifted up as a passage to support marriage. That is appropriate. The text says the man leaves his

mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

But to limit this to a story about marriage is too narrow in interpretation. Those who are not married might assume this passage has nothing to say to them; or worse, they may feel that this passage somehow indicts their life as lacking in some fashion. But that would be a flawed interpretation of this story.

This is a passage about what it means to be a human being. It doesn't declare to be human you have to be married. But it does state that human life is life in relationships. It is not good to be alone.

Throughout the generations, theologians and philosophers and even thoughtful high school students have wondered: What does it mean to be human? What makes us human? Like all of God's creatures, we are creatures, not the creator. We are animals, but what separates us from other animals? What sets us apart as human beings?

There have been many theories offered. Some, talking like Charles Darwin, say it is our capacity to protect and advance our own life: the survival of the fittest. Some have said it is our capacity to choose the good, to be moral. The most common

response in the western world is we are human because we can think. Reason sets us apart. This belief has a long history

The ancient philosopher Plato wonders what makes us human. His answer? The capacity to observe the world around us and, from these observations, to understand the ways of God and, through *reason*, apply those ways to ourselves.

In his work *Timaeus*, Plato writes, “Let the philosopher’s mind learn and follow what he sees; let the philosopher’s mind imitate ‘the absolutely unerring courses of God,’ thereby attaining the good life”<sup>1</sup> ... the human life. Reason or philosophy is what makes us human, says *Timaeus*.

Of course, there were some problems with this assessment. What about those who are not philosophers? The truth is, we don’t all have the same capacity to think. *Timaeus* acknowledges this: Those with lesser capacity to think — the nonphilosophers — are less human.

*Timaeus* also said this included women. They, too, are less human. This shows maybe the philosopher is not as smart as he thinks.

The problem with saying we are human because of reason is that it becomes just another form of Darwinism: survival of the smartest. To say we are human because we are strong or because we are good or because we are smart inevitably raises the question of how to categorize those who lack these attributes. How human are the weak, the evil, the unintelligent?

In *Timaeus*, Plato said the nonphilosopher can wish to be human, but this lament is a lament in vain.<sup>2</sup>

Why am I dragging you through your “Intro to Philosophy” class? Because Scripture provides a different way to look at this. The Scripture says human life is not strong or good or smart, but rather human life is life together. It is not good to be alone. This is a truth we know in our bones.

Carol and I were at dinner the other night. I could not help but notice: In this crowded restaurant, with stories being told, laughter shared, children wanting more, my eyes were drawn to a gentleman, dressed in coat and tie, alone. No conversation. There was no discernible joy at his table. We have all been there.

I have watched on my Facebook feed the pictures of some of our students going or going back to college in recent weeks. Whether it is the first or the last time this happens in the family, it is significant.

I remember my mother driving me to Presbyterian College. It was August 1978. We found my dorm from the map of campus printed in my college handbook. I made my way to my room: Spencer Hall – 215. Spencer Hall is a building that no longer exists, and there are good reasons for that.

We moved my few possessions in — no microwave, no fridge, no computer, no telephone, but I did have a nice collection of 8-track tapes.

It was only after I had moved in that I discovered the school

assigned me to a room with two other students: Jim, a junior, and Dave, a sophomore, and neither of them knew that I had been assigned to what they clearly understood to be *their* room. An extra bed and extra desk was brought in for the third student.

The first night I overheard them saying: “We can’t just kick him out, but he can’t stay with us. Look around tomorrow. There has to be an empty room somewhere on campus; we can move him out before the weekend. He’s not going to ruin our year by living here.”

As it turned out, I did stay, and we became friends. Dave and I were in each other’s weddings. But that night, I felt alone ... unwelcomed. And the wisdom of the text rang true; it is not good to be alone.

The teaching of this text is that to be human we have to be in relationship with others. Human life is life together. This is the attribute that makes us human. And here is where this teaching diverges from the suggestions that we are human because we are good or strong or smart. Those theories immediately create an alternative group of those who are weak or bad or lacking intelligence and therefore somehow not human. But the biblical teaching is that my humanness is only fully known when I see your humanness.

The long history of human communities is shaped by the assertion that my community, my family, my tribe matters more than yours does.

Steve Inskeep wrote *Jacksonland*. It is about Andrew

Jackson before he was president and how he worked to push the Cherokee Indians from Georgia. On May 17, 1830, a congressman from Georgia named Wilson Lumpkin (I do not know anything else about him) stood before the Congress and gave voice supporting what was called the Indian Removal Act. What struck me were his reasons. Not for the sake of Georgians — oh no, they could take care of themselves — but for the sake of the Cherokee. For as a lesser people, they would not benefit from increasing contact with the superior white race. And the good people of Georgia could only be expected to extend benevolence for so long.<sup>3</sup> Make them leave; it's for their own good.

He expressed racial prejudice and made it sound morally superior at the same time. History is littered with such speeches.

And at its worst, we have moments like we remember again today, the horrors of this date 15 years go.<sup>4</sup> We all do this.

I was having lunch with a friend, and somehow we got on the conversation of extended family. He said, “Yeah, my brother’s wife, she’s crazy!”

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, we just can’t figure her out. Of course, she’s from the South, and you know how those folks can be.”

I said, “Yeah, I do.”

Of course, it reminded me of the time, years ago, when Carol and I told our dear friends in Florida we were moving here. They said, “Tom, we are happy for you, but why would you move to Kansas?”

We all have a list of “those people” that we know how they are. We talk about “those flaky people out West” or “those elitists from the East.” Or in Kansas, we talk about “those backward people in Missouri.” Or in Missouri, we talk about “those crazy people in Kansas.” It is just another way of being alone.

The Scripture claims that Jesus was human, truly human. He shows us what it is to be human. Paul says Jesus’ humanness is seen in his humility. He emptied himself to become human, humbled himself. There is something essential in being human that is tied to humility.

What does humility look like? You have heard me say for the longest time I thought humility was thinking less of myself. You know, don’t draw attention to myself; keep my eyes averted. Don’t you worry about little ol’ me! I’m just fine here in the shadows. You go on and live life; I’ll just stay down here on the bottom.

That’s not humility. That’s just high maintenance. And it’s not Jesus.

Humility is not thinking less of ourselves; humility is the fruit that results when we see the good in others. Humility results when we see something beautiful in others. When we see the beautiful in others, we want to be with them, to share life together.

I have run you through a lot of Bible study to set up this series, but I want to invite you to do something this week: Practice relationship. Pay attention to your friends. Take a moment and think about who needs you to do that.

Send a text. Write a note. Make a call. Share a cup of coffee. Let your heart be reflected on your calendar.

But do this also. There are people who are regularly in your life that you may not really see: a clerk, a server, a colleague at work, a neighbor who you have never said more than “hi” to. Practice noticing them. Say a prayer for them because our humanity is caught up in recognizing the humanity of others — and not only for that reason, but also because all of us know what it is to be alone sometimes. And it is not good.

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground* (2003), p. 29

<sup>2</sup>Lathrop, p. 30

<sup>3</sup>Steve Inskeep, *Jacksonland* (2015), pp. 229–230

<sup>4</sup>This sermon was preached on September 11, 2016.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.