

# Beast or Masterpiece - What it Means to be Human

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[ 0 : 00 ] And I'm not sure if there was a program for this afternoon. If there was, we're running about sort of 10, 15 minutes late. But just to encourage you, this next talk is not as long as an hour. So we should finish on time.

Oh, there's still some music going. That's great. I know I was about to break into karaoke, Martin. I was just tempted to do that, but that would empty the building. So for this kind of sort of second session with you all this afternoon, obviously we look before the break at this very practical set of tools for sharing our faith.

But then as Martin and I were planning this afternoon, he asked if I could sort of take one kind of really kind of hot topic area, and I sent him a list of six or seven, and he picked this one.

So if you don't like it, it's Martin's fault. The very serious thing about this, actually, this connects really interestingly, this next talk that I'm going to share with you, to the last question that we raised in the last session, the have you ever wondered question.

Because the talk I'm going to give over the next 35 minutes or so, actually I gave more or less verbatim, and one of the most amazing places I've ever had the opportunity of speaking at, and it was the headquarters of National Geographic magazine in Washington, D.C.

[ 1 : 07 ] I've over the years become friends with a Christian there who's a commissioning editor. And it's really interesting in terms of, I love seeing Christians reach out in their workplaces, and he and a couple of other Christian friends had this really clever idea of putting on at National Geographic a series of lunchtime seminars, and once a month they invite a Christian in to come to a talk, they bribe colleagues with a free lunch.

Again, food is always the way to get people. And they've been doing that for about ten years now, and they get a really good crowd, and they invited me to come and speak back in November on this topic, a beast or masterpiece, what does it mean to be human?

And it was an incredible privilege, actually, because it's a very secular magazine, a lot of the staff there have got no Christian faith, they're very much operating under the worldview that says science can explain everything, there's no room for religion.

And so I shared what I'm going to share with you this afternoon, and had some fascinating conversations afterwards, as people who said they would otherwise have had no interest in God actually found that maybe there were some things they wanted to talk about.

So to kind of set the scene for where we're going to go over the next 35 minutes or so, let me begin with a story. And the story I want to open with, it took place on the 3rd of July, 1884.

[ 2 : 18 ] And on the 3rd of July, 1884, four English sailors on board a sailing vessel, a yacht called the Minionette, found themselves caught in a terrible storm in the middle of the Atlantic.

A vicious storm, a terrible storm, and their yacht sank, and it left them stranded in a tiny wooden lifeboat out there in the middle of the ocean, and they had very little food and very little water.

And by the 8th day adrift, they were desperate, and they made the fateful decision to kill the cabin boy, to kill the weakest member of the four of them.

He was already sick from drinking seawater, and they made the decision to kill him, and for the next four days until they were rescued, the three surviving crew members survived by eating his body and drinking his blood.

Now, when they returned to England, and that story broke, it scandalized the nation, and it scandalized the world, as that story went around the world. The three surviving sailors were put on trial, they were put on trial for murder, and one of the sailors turned state's witness, and the other two went to trial, and the one who turned state's witness freely confessed, all three of them are, freely confessed that they had killed their crewmate and eaten him, but they claimed they had done

so out of necessity.

[ 3 : 42 ] They said that they hadn't done that, all four of them had died, this way only one of them had died. Now, here's the interesting question this afternoon. If you were the judge in that trial, interesting thought experiment, right?

What would you do? Because the story leads to two possible conclusions, really, what went on there in 1884. Conclusion number one would be purely utilitarian.

You might go, well, okay, one person died, but at least three people lived. And, of course, the person who died was sick already, and the person who died, unlike the older sailors, had no dependents.

So he hadn't got children dependent on him, so there was no grieving widow, no grieving children, and so on and so forth. So that would be one way to go, purely utilitarian. You know, it's okay, he was the weakest, kill him, at least the other three lived.

Now, the interesting thing is, hopefully, most of you this afternoon would probably have a bit of a problem with that opinion. And it would encourage you that actually when I do that thought experiment in very secular settings, most people have a problem with that opinion.

[ 4 : 45 ] You know, I often tell that story in university settings, and when I get a bit more vicious, actually, ask people to vote. Who thought the sailors did the right thing? Who thought they did the wrong thing? You normally get sort of, perhaps, in a class of 30 or 40, three or four, who might sort of go, they did the right thing.

But most people tend to come down on the idea that eating the cabin boy was probably not the best thing to have done. And incidentally, nor did the judge. Actually, from memory, I think they got off a murder trial, but they spent quite a long time in prison for their actions.

See, most people, whether they're Christians, like most of us are here this afternoon, or are coming at this from, say, a secular perspective, most people end up coming to broadly the same conclusion, which is that it's wrong.

It's always wrong. It's always wrong to violate somebody else's, you know, rights, life, value, dignity, all those kind of things.

And what's interesting about that sort of little thought experiment, little story, is whether it's a tiny example, such as, you know, the death of a cabin boy in terrible circumstances 100 years ago, or whether it's something more major and more contemporary, whether it's something, you know, like the Rwandan genocide, for example, where a million people were hacked to death in 100 days, or whether it's Stalin's Russia, 20 million people killed in 30 years, or whether it's, you know, ISIS raping and pillaging their way across the Middle East in recent years.

[ 6 : 11 ] Most people that you meet, most of our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, our classmates, even if they have absolutely no interest, they would say, in Christian faith, would say that it's wrong, that it's wrong, that it's evil, that it's outrageous, that it's, you know, beyond, you know, the pale to violate another person's dignity or so forth.

Now, of course, where are they getting this from? Most people in our society are getting that idea that we have an alienable value and dignity and significance. They're getting it from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It's 70 years ago, actually, just over 70 years since that document was formed and signed on the 10th of December 1948. A hugely important document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has shaped, you know, two generations now of us in terms of how we think about human rights and value and dignity.

Most of our, you know, huge sections of our law here in the UK are shaped and informed by it. But let me read you a few words from the introduction, from the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because the language is fascinating.

It says this, it says, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation, the foundation of freedom and justice and peace in the world.

[ 7 : 38 ] All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. And as I say, people get very excited about this document, very excited about this kind of language. We're passionate about human rights, right?

We award Nobel Prizes for them, we celebrate them, we lock up people who violate them. But I often say to people there's a fairly basic question that's often missed in all this discussion around

human rights.

It was the question I raised in that school in Plymouth that I told you about. It's the question I raise often on university campuses when we cover this topic. And the question is this, these rights, this dignity, this value that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights talks about so eloquently, where is it located?

What does it depend upon? Or to put it more bluntly, however noble sounding these words are, they're beautiful sounding words, are they actually true? And to answer that question, we need to answer a far more basic question, actually.

We need to answer the question of what is a human being? Unless we actually know what a human person is, it's very hard to talk about human rights in any meaningful way.

[ 8 : 47 ] So that leads to the question I want to address over the next 25 minutes or so. You know, what actually does it mean to be human? What is a human person? And can we answer that in a way that gives a basis for value and dignity and significance and rights and justice and so on?

Now, everyone's concerned to answer the question, what does it mean to be human? And our atheist friends are very concerned to answer this question, of course, in purely material ways. My atheist friends who believe in human rights as stridently as you or I, obviously don't want to allow God even so much as a foot in the door.

So they all try and answer this question, what does it mean to be human? Very much purely in material, naturalistic terms. Let me give you an example, an illustration of this. A very famous atheist, biologist, and paleontologist called Stephen Jay Gould died a few years ago.

Lovely, generous man, actually. Not one of the sort of angry atheists that you sometimes encounter, but a pretty robust atheist nevertheless. And this is Stephen Jay Gould's attempt to answer the question, what does it mean to be human as an atheist biologist?

He says, the human species has inhabited this planet for only 250,000 years or so. That is roughly 0.0015% of the history of life, the last inch of the cosmic mile.

[ 10 : 07 ] The world fared perfectly well without us for all but the last moments of earthly time. And this fact makes our appearance look more like an accidental afterthought than the culmination of a prefigured plan.

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures. We are here because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available.

So thank you, all lucky stars, in a quite literal sense. We are here because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age. We are here because a small and tenuous species arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago has managed so far to survive by hook or by crook.

We may yearn for a higher answer but none exists. This explanation, although superficially troubling if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating.

We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers ourselves from our own wisdom and ethical sense. There is no other way.

[ 11 : 18 ] I have to say, Stephen Jay Gould could certainly compose a paragraph. Now here's the interesting thing. That's a very powerful piece of writing, very rhetorically sophisticated piece of writing, very clever piece of writing, but Stephen is playing slightly, just slightly, fast and loose with the facts that he tells you in that paragraph there because if the picture he paints is correct, if that's all there is, if that's the only reasons that we are here, the ones that he lists there, all those various kind of cosmic accidents, then there is no meaning to be found, period.

Not merely no meaning to be found, but no meaning to be made or none to be constructed. To show you what I mean, if I was to throw a group of Scrabble tiles across the floor here at random, you might accidentally end up with a word.

We have the word, you know, sort of by there on the top of the pile, but that isn't what the meaning of the letters, that's just luck. That's just randomness. I've sort of fished that out of the pile, but it's not the meaning of the pile of letters.

There is no meaning of the pile of letters. There is simply randomness and nothing else. And if Stephen Jay Gould is correct, it doesn't matter how much we may protest, how much we may not like it, but we are biology and nothing more than biology.

Certainly nothing less, but certainly nothing more. And the idea that we're just biology and nothing more is actually expressed a bit more starkly than Stephen Jay Gould expressed it by other atheists.

[ 12 : 45 ] So Richard Dawkins, everyone's favourite cuddly Oxford atheist, who always can find a way of putting things bluntly if there is one, he basically racks up the rhetoric a notch when he wrote this a few years ago.

Richard said, we are survival machines. We are robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. Our genes made us.

We animals exist for their preservation and we are nothing more, nothing more than throw away survival machines. The world of the selfish gene is one of savage competition, a ruthless exploitation and deceit.

I always think that sounds like the cue for the last donut at Starbucks, actually. Savage competition, ruthless exploitation and deceit. Pretty blunt, isn't it, really? And pretty encouraging, really. I hope you're feeling affirmed on a Sunday afternoon.

You can go home and look in the mirror and go, I'm nothing more than a throwaway survival machine. Cheerful stuff. Of course, if Dawkins is right, that raises some pretty profound issues.

[ 13 : 49 ] Think back to that medical student that I opened with the story of that in the last talk. The whole question of is it wrong to be anti-somebody, anti-women, anti-somebody on the basis of their gender.

Well, of course, if Dawkins is correct and we are nothing more than throwaway survival machines, then presumably you can treat people like you like because what's wrong with mistreating a throwaway survival machine?

It raises all kinds of questions if Dawkins is actually correct. And I found it interesting, actually, over the years that when I read quotes like Richard's here to people who have identified in front of me as atheists, they're often the ones to say to me, well, hang on a minute, hang on a minute, I don't agree with that.

And then I just like to gently ask, well, why not? Because Richard's trying to just be consistent. You know, he may not like what he's saying, but I will say this of Richard, I admire his courage, I admire his consistency, I admire his willingness to be willing to try and say, well, if atheism is true, these are the implications.

And even if some of his fellow atheists don't like it, more for them, he would say. But of course, the problem is, if he's correct and if atheism is true, we have a problem because how do we get any meaningful basis to the what does it mean to be human question, any meaningful answer that we could build human rights upon out of something like this or out of something like Stephen Jay Gould.

[ 15 : 10 ] So what's the Christian answer to all of this? How might we as Christians begin thinking about this question? I think, you know, so many people are asking in different ways in our age right now and, you know, often have sort of Christians sometimes say to me, you know, what does it mean to be human?

That's a very intriguing question and I say, isn't it? Because it's being asked everywhere in our culture. It's being asked in discussions around sexuality and transgender. What does it mean to be human lies at the heart of that. It's being asked around technology, questions around artificial intelligence and transhumanism.

That raises the question, what does it mean to be human? And questions around human rights and justice lying behind them is the question, what does it mean to be human? So I think everyone seems to be asking this question in different ways.

So what's the Christian answer to this? If naturalistic atheism, the kind of atheism of Stephen Jay Gould and Dawkins and others can't answer the question, what would we say as Christians?

What does the Bible have to say, for example? Well, the fascinating thing is if you open the scriptures and you turn to the very first page, the very first book, the very first part of the Bible, i.e. Genesis chapter 1 in the Old Testament, you find two short little verses, two wee little verses that are mind-blowing, actually, in their significance and their importance and how foundational they are on this topic.

[ 16 : 23 ] Let me read to you two very famous verses from Genesis chapter 1, verse 26 and 27.

Famous verses, you'll have heard these before, many of you, and they go like this. Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the animals that move along the ground.

And so God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God. He created them, male and female, he created them. And this little claim here in the book of Genesis, these two innocent-looking little verses that sort of introduce the idea that human beings are not just throwaway survival machines, that we're not just physics or chemistry or biology, but we're made in the image of the God of the universe, the God who made us, that we bear the imago Dei, to use a theological term, if you like theological terms, is unique to Christianity.

You won't find anything like that in any of the scriptures of any other religion. For example, my academic background, although I'm a Christian philosopher and an evangelist, my PhD was actually in Islamic studies.

I accidentally ticked the wrong box on university application form and I was three years in before I figured out this was Arabic, not Greek, I was reading and I thought I paid half the fees then, so I may as well finish. Not true, probably not funny either.

But anyway, seven years studying the Quran in Arabic and one of the things that fascinated me was the Quran borrows quite heavily from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament and when it retells stories in the Bible it often changes them a little bit and the Quran retells the story of Adam and Eve in the garden but this bit gets dropped entirely.

[18:02] The Quran has no time for the idea that human beings are any more than slaves. God is the master, we are the slave, there is nothing more than that and the idea that we obey the image of God is alien to Islam.

It's an idea found in Judaism and Christianity. Nor will you find it in Hinduism, you won't find it in the Bhagavad Gita, you won't find it in the texts of Buddhism or any other religious text. Only the Bible pays you the compliment of saying you are made in the image of God.

It's your unique biblical claim, staggeringly high claim. But of course, it's not just a theological claim, it's not just some nice idea that's interesting for people who are preaching sermons or writing theological textbooks.

It's an idea of huge significance because it gives us foundations for two things. Genesis 1, 26 and 27 gives us a foundation for human value and it also gives us a foundation for ethics and how we treat one another.

Let's just look briefly at each of those for a moment. In terms of value, the first thing that this idea that we're made in the image of God that Genesis chapter 1 introduces is it gives us a rock solid, firm, concrete, unyielding, unshakable, objective, ontological, if you like, philosophical words foundation for your value and identity as a human being.

[19:21] According to the Bible, it doesn't matter your gender or your race or your sexual orientation or how much you earn or how old you are or how tall you are, thankfully, or any number of things.

It doesn't matter what your background is, it doesn't matter what you've done or what your record is, every human being is created in and bears the image of God, has the stamp of the creator as it were, put upon us.

Now, at this point, if I'm doing this to more secular audiences, like when I was at National Geographic, for example, I like to say, let's just engage in a little thought experiment for a moment. Let's throw that out. Let's imagine that we live in an atheistic universe and we're not convinced by Stephen Jay Gould, we're not convinced by Dawkins, but we haven't given up.

Maybe there's something else we can do to try and replace the Bible to find a basis for human value. How could we find, if we were atheists today, and if there was a godless universe, how could we find human value?

Well, four possibilities in our little hand of human value poker. How could we find value for human beings this afternoon? Well, maybe we might have another go if we were chemists, for example. Maybe we might try the material route just for a moment.

[20:26] Maybe that could work. So what we'll do, we might grab Martin back there, who's innocently sitting reading the program, and I'll clobber Martin over the head while he's not looking and we'll drag him off to my secret laboratory buried in the catacombs here underneath St Silas Church.

You didn't know they were here, but every Episcopalian church has catacombs and crypts and things. I've got a secret lair down there. We stick him in a test tube. We boil him down to his constituent parts. So much sodium, so much potash, so much iron, so much phosphorus, so much salt, so much fat, so much fat, and all of those things.

And we take the chemicals that comprise Martin and we put them on eBay and we see what somebody will bid us for the remains of the vicar. And this experiment, this experiment hasn't been done, sorry, this experiment's been calculated.

The average human being, you'll be intrigued to know, is worth £2.73 in terms of the chemicals that make you up. And that's before Brexit. So that's going to go down.

So if you were going to boil somebody down to their parts, do it before March 29th, or the end of June or goodness knows when. But probably does tell us that's not the way to go in terms of human value.

[ 21 : 35 ] I hope most of you here, as you look at the person sitting on either side of you, will not conclude that your neighbour is worth £2.68. I hope we realise that human beings are worth more than that, which means the chemical route is not the way to go.

So how else are we going to do it? Well, again, if there is no God, we're atheists, we're racking our brains. Okay, maybe if we are psychologists, we could measure how smart you all are.

And we could measure all of your IQs this afternoon. We could do a little IQ test to do in the next coffee break. And if your IQ is north of 100, you're worth a certain amount. If it's between 80 and 100, it's something else, all the way down to, you know, traffic wardens on the end over here or something.

And, you know, you're worth a certain amount of money based upon your IQ. And I'm going to see how many different people I can offend, by the way, over the next half an hour or so. Doing well so far. But again, probably most of us are not comfortable with the idea that we start rating the value of human beings, how much they're actually worth based upon how intelligent they are.

That is a fairly monstrous approach to human life, to construct a society like that. I don't think many of us would want to live in that kind of world. Not least because however smart we think we are, there's always going to be somebody who's smarter and that has some implications for us.

[ 22 : 45 ] So, okay, if we can't do it with chemistry, we can't do it with psychology, maybe I guess we could do it, maybe if we were anthropologists. If I was an anthropologist this afternoon, I could count up how the community values you.

We could count up how many friends each of you have, both the real variety and the pretend ones you accumulate on social media. And again, we could say the more popular you are, the more you're worth, and the less popular you are, the less you're worth, and so on.

But again, it's interesting, you could very quickly see people think about this and go, I'm just not sure that's a good idea. And again, what does a society look like that says if you're popular, you know, if you've got lots of people on social media, following you, you're worth something, and if not, you're for the chop.

So we're running out of options now. We can't do it with science and chemistry, we can't do it with psychology, we can't value people based upon anthropology. Maybe the last thing we might do, and arguably, you know, society has in some ways tried this at times, we value on how much you're worth and how much you earn.

We could look at the size of your bank balance, we could look at how much you earn. If you're a student, we might look at your earning potential. You know, if you're going into, I don't know, into medicine, you've got quite a lot. If you're going to go into English and you're worth less, and so on and so forth, but again, most of us get quite uncomfortable.

[ 23 : 55 ] And what's interesting, it doesn't matter what audience I present this in front of, you know, friendly Christian audiences or hostile, sceptical audiences, most people have the same reaction. It's abhorrent, actually. It's not actually, well, you laugh at it, but it's actually not funny to imagine what a world would look like that tried to value people based on the chemicals that make them up, how smart they are, how many friends they have, or how much money they earn.

Because quite frankly, unless you're a grossly overweight lawyer with great social networking skills, we're all in trouble. So if those ways don't work, where do we go? And I say to sceptical audiences, to more hostile audiences, look, outside of the Christian answer that human beings bear the value of God, bear the stamp of their creator, as Genesis tells us, I don't know of one.

And I've tried pretty hard, and I've read some pretty widely in atheism. There are no answers, really. If we genuinely want to believe, as the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tells us, that human beings have value and dignity, and we want to build things like human rights out of that framework, and I think we do, then really the biblical answer is looking pretty compelling and pretty rock solid out there.

In fact, it stands alone, really, unsurrounded by competitors. So Genesis has a lot to tell us about human value. It's also, interestingly, a wonderful foundation for ethics.

Because one of the big questions of our age is not just how we find value for human beings, how we can actually genuinely say that every human being has value and significance and worth and dignity is the related question of how we treat one another.

[ 25 : 29 ] See, we live in an age that encourages us to treat other people as numbers, parts of a process, you know, as things, as data points on the social graph, you know, sort of digital monstrosities and like Facebook and the such like encourages us to think of other people just as numbers, just as sort of, you know, little sort of blips that appear on our feeds from time to time.

But of course, if that's all human beings are, then what's wrong with treating other people as such? What's wrong with treating those around you just as means rather than ends? It's just seeing your friends and your colleagues as people who can help you get something but not as having any value in and of themselves.

How do we find a basis? How do we find a genuine basis for treating all people with generosity and compassion? Not just our friends but also our enemies or people who, you know, instrumentally have no value to us at all.

How do we find that kind of basis? And that's a hugely important question, actually. More important than you might realize. Among all the world's peoples, the Dalits of India have experienced some of the world's greatest tragedy and suffering and sadness and pain.

The Dalits sit at the bottom of India's highly stratified caste system and are considered quite literally untouchable in their culture. And Dalit women often bear the brunt of this and two-thirds of Dalit women in India have been sexually abused.

[ 27 : 00 ] 750,000 have been trafficked into sexual slavery yet the conviction rate for crimes against them is 5%. Just 5.3%.

That raises a fascinating question. How do you change the mindset? How do you change the mindset of a culture that says that a person is quite literally worth less and can be treated as scum because of where she is born, because of her caste, because of her family, because of her birthplace?

How do you change that? It's all very well to come out with high-sounding platitudes like all people are born equal or to start quoting bits of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights around the place.

But those are just fine-sounding platitudes to people like the Dalits who on a daily basis face the kind of persecution they do. And I remember being very struck recently reading an interview with a Dalit religious leader in a newspaper who'd gone out and done some work on this people group. And in this interview he said something fascinating. He said, you know the problem we have in our culture he said, the problem we have in our community is that by the time a child is 14 it's too late to change anything. Because for all of their life they've been told since they were old enough to think and speak they've been told for 14 years all of their life that they're worthless that they're worthless they have no value they're just scum.

[ 28 : 17 ] If they've been told this until they're sort of 14 years old it's almost too late to change anything. But he didn't stop there. He said that the only way we found to correct this as Dalit people is from a very, very, very young age to begin speaking a different reality into the minds and ears of our young people.

We've had to start speaking a different worldview into their lives and surprise, surprise, the Dalits are finding that it's the Christian worldview with its teaching that human beings bear the image of God that you are not untouchable that you are not worthless because of where you were born but that you bear the Imago Dei and if you Google them and look them up you'll discover that hundreds of thousands of Dalits in recent years have become followers of Jesus Christ largely out of this issue because they found a worldview and a belief that gives them value and identity and significance because Jesus died for them as much as he did for somebody who would claim to be high class.

So if you tell a child all of her life or his life that they are worthless, that they are worthless, they have no value, there are going to be implications. Interestingly, here in the West we are arguably trying a slightly different sociological experiment discovering what happens if you raise a generation or two of young people to believe that they are just tormented atoms in a bed of mud or an accidental collocation of atoms or robotic genetic vehicles dancing to their DNA or nothing but a

pack of neurons or a 1% bit of pollution in the universe.

All atheist answers from leading atheist thinkers over the last couple of centuries or so. I often find myself thinking, I wonder what's going to happen when some of the young people whose ears that we're speaking that worldview into, what happens when they grow up and become our future leaders and start acting that philosophy out?

I'm not so sure I want to be part of that kind of world but a sobering thought experiment. Well, the question of what it means to be human is profoundly important and I hope I've given you some food for thought as to why I think the Christian worldview stands alone and unique actually in terms of being able to answer that question in a meaningful way telling us that we are not reducible to atoms and molecules or psychology or our earning potential or these things.

[ 30 : 33 ] But there is another side of the question that I think is really interesting for us to think about as Christians and then think about how we can weave into conversations with our friends and neighbours and colleagues because here's the thing, as we think about the question what does it mean to be human, yes we need something that addresses our nobility, the fact that we have value, we have dignity, something that addresses the fact that we are masterpieces, to use that part of the title from this talk, but we also need something that addresses the fact that we are flawed, the fact that we can be beastly, the fact that we go wrong in so many ways.

In fact, one of the challenges for secularism is the fact that human beings go wrong in so many ways. It's fascinating if you read the writings of atheists from sort of 50 or 60 years ago, you can find lots of really smart men and women, you know, intellectuals at the top of their field who were looking forward to this point in time, 50, 60 years forward, were predicting at this point in the 21st century would be a utopia, there'd be no religion left, there'd be no war, everyone would be living in happiness and equality and it would be a wonderful generous equal society.

What the heck happened, eh, if that was the story? You see, it seems to be the case that it doesn't matter how much education, money, politics, science, health care that you apply, we don't arrive at secular utopias.

In fact, as the American poet Randall Jarrell once famously put it, he said, most of us know now that Rousseau, who was one of these secular thinkers who thought that, you know, if you set mankind free, everything would be wonderful, he said, most of us know now that Rousseau was wrong, that man, when you knock his chains off, sets up the death camps.

Soon we shall know everything the 18th century didn't know and nothing that it did and it will be hard to live with us. I often say to, you know, more secular audiences when I do this talk, if this is true and most people instinctively know he's onto something, why is it true?

[ 32 : 30 ] And after all, for Christians, we've got to think about this too. If we are made in the image of God, as I've been asserting this afternoon, why are we so often beastly to one another? Well, here it might be worth thinking about the nature of the word image for a moment this afternoon.

You see, inherent in the word image is the idea of reflection. The word image has the idea of reflection based into it. You look in a mirror and you see your image reflected back at you. So if human beings were made in God's image, that presumably means that one of the things we were designed to do was to image God to the world, to reflect God, to reflect God's glory to the world. Genesis is saying that people should be able to look creation, look at human beings and see something of the nature and character of God reflected, just a little bit of it, in the beings that he's made to bear his image.

But of course, that raises an interesting question. If we choose not to, as we can as human beings, people can choose to walk away from God and turn their back on him. If someone chooses not to reflect God with their life and their soul and the very heart of their identity, what do we choose to reflect?

Because every human being has to, as it were, angle the mirror of their soul at something and if it's not going to be God, what's it going to be? Well, it often ends up being things like work or money or performance or image or academic success or so on or so forth or even, heaven forbid, something like the Narcissus of Greek legend, ourselves.

[ 33 : 55 ] Narcissus was the chap, if you remember your Greek mythology, who was so obsessed with his own image that one day he was walking past a pool of water, caught sight of his own reflection and was so beset with what he saw that he fell to his knees and stared at his own reflection and didn't move and starved to death.

I sadly meet people a bit too like that in our culture today, so obsessed by our own beauty and cleverness and reputation and so forth. But of course, those things will ultimately destroy us if we try and make them ultimate because no mirror can be the source of its own light.

You know, one of the people who has written the most profoundly in some ways on the whole question of what it means to be human from outside the Christian perspective is a gentleman called David Foster Wallace.

David is a very famous novelist, writer, Pulitzer Prize nominated novelist actually until sadly he took his own life in 2008. Brilliant, brilliant man but also a very troubled man.

Committed atheist, absolutely committed atheist but also asked brilliant questions and in an essay he wrote near the end of his life he made an insight about human beings and what we orientate our lives around that could in some ways have been written by a Christian actually.

[ 35 : 07 ] It's really, really interesting and I'm just going to read this to you. I often read this on university campuses and get interesting results actually. I read David's quote that I'm about to read you at the University of Dundee at their Mission Week last year and just as a result of this it led to a young man there after in a conversation with one of the CU actually coming to the Alpha course of becoming a Christian and he said because I was so struck by what David said and realising he was an atheist and he was on my team that actually I realised he was right and I had to do something.

So I love the idea of a dead atheist leading an under university student to Christ. What did David say that really shakes many people up? Well let me read you his words. He writes in the day-to-day trenches of adult life there is actually no such thing as atheism.

It's an atheist writing this. There is no such thing as atheism in the day-to-day trenches of adult life.

There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody. Everybody worships.

The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things if they are where you tap real meaning in life then you will never have enough. Never have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and when time and age start showing you will always feel ugly and when time and age start showing you will die a million deaths before they plant you.

[ 36 : 45 ] Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid. You will need ever more power over others to keep that fear at bay. Worship your intellect. Worship your intellect being seen as smart and you will end up feeling stupid a fraud always on the verge of being found out and so on.

And what all this is nudging out there in that incredibly honest profound little paragraph is that whatever is the source of your meaning your significance your value your joy your energy whatever is the thing that gets you out of bed in the morning that gets you through the day the thing that you're living for the problem is you have to have it.

You're like an addict. You have to have it. And if you don't have it life isn't worth living. And therefore because of that the prospect of losing it if your life is based on your academic reputation or some particular relationship or your job or your standard of living or even something that's pretty good like your family and your kids and those kind of things if they're what you're living for it ends up controlling you because you're afraid that one day you won't have it.

And the problem is if you try and serve your career or success and you fail then that failure will end up crucifying you inside with self-hatred with anxiety and with jealousy it will destroy you and actually it will probably destroy the thing that you love.

By contrast complete 180 degree reversal at the heart of the Christian faith stands the news that Jesus was crucified for you. He doesn't expect us to crucify ourselves for him he was crucified for us.

[ 38 : 27 ] So what's the solution to all of this the tendency that many of us as human beings have for our lives to be cracked and broken the mirrors of our souls distorted reflecting the wrong kind of thing. Well of course the biblical theme of the image of God that we began with 25 minutes ago there in the book of Genesis is a major theme in the Bible it runs through the whole of the scriptures begins in Genesis 1 runs right the way through the Bible and one of the places it lands in the New Testament it lands in a place where it answers this very question of what do we do about the mess and the brokenness the fact that the image is looking a bit dusty.

Listen to these words as we come towards an end from the Apostle Paul Colossians 1 verses 13 through 20 Paul says for God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and he's brought us

into the kingdom of the Son he loves in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sins. Son is the image that's that word Son is the image of the invisible God the firstborn over all creation for in him all things were created things in heaven things on earth visible and invisible whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities all things have been created through him and for him he is before all things and in him all things hold together and he is the head of the body the church he is the beginning the firstborn from among the dead so that everything he might have supremacy the God was pleased to have all of his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross and according to the Bible Jesus of course was the perfect image of God and was willing to be broken and trampled on and rejected broken for us so that our broken images might be remade forgiven restored and redeemed and of course the story of what Jesus did there on that cross for us is a story about restoration among other things the promise and the power to restore that broken image of God that we've allowed to become twisted and distorted in each of us and I always say it's interesting if we only had the book of Genesis we would know that we were made in the image of God we'd feel guilty that we didn't measure up to that and we'd have no way of knowing how to get back to the place in which we've fallen it'd be a tragic story with no happy ending thankfully the Bible gives us the other half of the story in what God did through the perfect image of God and through Jesus telling us that we are made in God's image but also dealing very honestly with the way that's gone wrong and offering us the power to put it right and I say to sceptical audiences I say the great thing about this is if all of this is true then we were made with a purpose you know we are not just random atoms dancing in the void we're not any of those misanthropic answers that we heard from atheists over this talk we were made with a purpose we were made for something we were made what does it mean to be human well we were made for love we were made to discover God's love and to love in return and if Christianity is true then at the heart of what it means to be human is love love is the supreme ethic that God is wired into the universe that's what it means to be human and that gives a direction and a purpose and a significance to human life at so many levels I want to end by just illustrating this with one of my favorite stories and it concerns the gentleman on the screen behind me not many of you in the room may know the story of Maximilian Kolbe he's a gentleman who I wish his story was a bit more well known than it is because he's certainly one of my heroes of the faith who was he well Maximilian was a Polish Catholic monk arrested by the German Gestapo in 1941 in Poland because like many Christians he'd been helping to rescue Jews and other victims of the Third Reich and smuggle them to safety across the border and out of the country and he was arrested by the Germans discovered by the Germans arrested in 1941 and for his work human rights work was flung into the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp one year after he was imprisoned three other prisoners escaped from Auschwitz and of course this infuriated the Germans and to deter future escape attempts the commander of the camp the commandant of the camp had all of the prisoners gathered together in the prison yard and he announced that he was going to read the names of ten men at random and those ten men would be taken away and locked up in an underground cell with no food no water and just left to die in other words sends a message to the prisoners if you escape this is what we do to your friends so don't escape and those the names were read out and one of the names on the list of prisoners was a friend of Maximilian's and when his friend's name was read out his friend fell to the ground in the prison yard there and began weeping hysterically as one might imagine actually having received this kind of death sentence he began crying out but my wife my family my children what will become of them on seeing that reaction hearing those words

[ 43 : 34 ] Maximilian stepped out of the crowd of prisoners and looked the commandant squarely in the eye and said sir may I take the place of my friend and the commandant agreed his friend was released back into the crowd of prisoners and Maximilian was taken away with his nine others and locked up in that small underground cell and where they took ten days to die there in the dark and his friend survived the war incidentally which is why we know the story because his friend spent the rest of his life telling the story of the love that his friend had shown him and of course why did Maximilian do this because he had a deeply committed Christian faith he was a devout follower of Jesus and he believed that love was the supreme ethic he believed that love was what it meant to be human and he gave his life living that out and of course he was acting on the words of Jesus right who said greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends and of course Jesus demonstrated this himself when he went to the cross to deal with the kind of brokenness and mess ups in our lives and I always want to say particularly when I speak to secular

audiences that's an important point to land on because if we say to our friends human life has value and significance only if God exists that's a brilliant answer in so far as it goes but it leaves just one question unanswered which God are we talking about because there are different conceptions of God out there and they're not all the same in Jesus on the other hand we have a God who looks very different you know it's interesting we talked about ways to value human life earlier and I mentioned you know economics and monetary theory and so forth and economic theory is interesting in fact there's an idea in economic theory that says that objects and things don't have inherent value but they're valued by what someone is prepared to pay so yeah sure I paid 450, 500 pounds whatever I paid for my iPhone here because it's valuable to me the ability to play

Angry Birds 2 while sitting in the toilet is very very important I've got a high score to beat but glad at least one other person is nodding and they do something similar if I was to take my iPhone there to a desert island with no wifi no cell phone reception and no electrical power what would somebody pay me for it probably not very much because it might make a nice chopping board for shellfish or something but not a lot of value interestingly what value is conferred by what someone is prepared to pay not by what's inherent interesting when you apply that analogy to human beings and you say well we've talked about human value what was someone prepared to pay for you and I and the Bible answers that question very directly when it says God demonstrates his own love for us and this that while we were still sinners Jesus died for us that was the value God paid for you and for I that was the value that God paid for our atheist friends our Muslim friends our Hindu friends that's why all human beings whether they discovered who this God is and what he's done for them in Jesus or not have value and significance and dignity and self and worth and so forth human beings are not just atoms and particles we're not just matter we are more than the stuff of which we are made we are more than our economic transactions we are more than our relationships more than our biology more than our psychology more than our moral performance we are image bearers every one of us who carry incredible value and significance value so high that Jesus was willing to give his life for you and I to restore and to put right that broken image so that the mirror of our souls might be reflected at him the true image as it was intended that is what it means to be human thanks for listening applause applause when the American water is not yogi thank you and talk to him we don't know how much industry who has been amazing I I and the orange store and the oftentimes short happens imagine