

The Mission is Not Added to Your Life

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Adapted from a message delivered at a missions weekend by Dr. Richard Pratt, edited by Copilot AI, as well as the editorial staff at Third Millennium Ministries.

Saturday afternoons aren't usually prime time for a church gathering, but there we were — wide awake, alert, and, thankfully, not in the Sunday-morning "nap zone." I told the congregation how glad I was to be with them, and I meant it. I even confessed, with a grin, that I had turned down Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis to be there. They'll get me next year. This weekend belonged to Oxford.

Before anything else, I was asked to read Scripture. That's when I discovered the print in the bulletin was approximately the size of a fruit fly. You know the struggle. Every pew Bible seems to require either a magnifying glass or the ability to stand five feet back and squint. Still, we made it through Genesis 1 — the very first page of the Bible, familiar to many of us — and heard again the words of God's creation and calling.

After reading, we prayed. We asked Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do: open our eyes to familiar truths, open our ears to His voice, soften hearts that grow hard, and warm hearts that grow cold. We prayed that even through our meager efforts, something meaningful might happen.

Then we turned to a question every person in the room carries, whether consciously or not: How do you see yourself?

Most of us have a mental snapshot of who we think we are — often a younger, slimmer, faster version of reality. And then someone sends us a photo taken at an unflattering angle, and suddenly we're confronted with the truth. The way we imagine ourselves and the way others see us are not always the same.

That tension shows up in church life too, especially during a missions weekend. The flags come out, the dinners are prepared, the announcements are made, and everyone wonders what this year's theme will be. But missions weekends do more than highlight global work. They invite us to see ourselves not as we usually do, but as God sees us.

And that picture may surprise you.

When most of us hear the word missionary, we think of people like Clark — the brave souls who move to far-off places like Ukraine, learn difficult languages, and serve in challenging contexts. We don't picture ourselves. Our grandchildren don't picture us. Our neighbors certainly don't picture us.

But God does.

When God looks at His people — regardless of age, health, occupation, disappointment, or success — He sees missionaries. Every one of us. Not because we've crossed an ocean, but because we bear His image and His calling.

If we begin to see ourselves the way God sees us, everything shifts. Priorities rearrange. Schedules change. Prayers deepen. Even our use of money looks different. God's portrait of us is far more expansive than the one we carry in our heads.

Scripture gives us many snapshots of identity — “my child,” “my beloved,” “my servant.” But the grand portrait, the one that hangs across the whole wall of Scripture, begins in Genesis 1:26–28. There, on the first page of the Bible, God tells us who we are and what we are for.

And that is where our true missionary calling begins.

What God Saw When He First Spoke About Us

If we're going to understand who we are, it helps to catch even a glimpse of what God was seeing the very first time He said anything about humanity. Genesis opens with a portrait — a grand, sweeping portrait — and two features stand out immediately. The first is simple but surprising: what God called us.

Most of us, especially those raised in Presbyterian circles, have a ready-made answer to the question, What are people? We say it almost reflexively: People are sinners. And of course, that's true. You don't have to be an axe murderer to qualify. A little imperfection will do, and that includes everyone in the room — myself very much included.

But Scripture insists there's something else about us, something that makes our imperfections significant in the first place.

To explain it, I sometimes talk about my dog, Princess. You would adore her — and if you didn't, I'd question your sanity. She's magnificent, and she knows it. She's also imperfect. Just the other day she stole a bagel from an office trash can and sprinted away with the guilty enthusiasm of someone who knows she's been caught.

But here's the difference between Princess and you: she will never pay for her sins, and she will never be saved from them. She's a dog. You are something else entirely.

Genesis calls you the image and likeness of God. That's why your sins matter — and why you can be rescued from them. It's an extraordinary privilege, part of the grand portrait God painted of humanity from the very beginning.

We know the phrase "image of God." We've heard it in sermons, read it in catechisms, nodded along in Bible studies. But if I passed around a sheet of paper and asked everyone to define it in one sentence, we'd likely end up with as many answers as people in the room. We know it's true. We know it's important. But what does it actually mean?

To understand that, we need to step into a time machine and travel back — way back — to the world of pyramids and ziggurats, to the age of Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner's Pharaoh, to the days when Moses first wrote these words.

And here's the surprising part: Moses didn't invent the phrase "image of God." Ancient cultures used it long before he did — Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites. They all spoke of the "image of God," the "likeness of God," the "son of the gods."

But in their world, only one person qualified.

The king.

The Pharaoh.

The emperor.

The Yul Brynner figure with the shaved head and the cobra crown.

He alone was the image of God. Everyone else was something far less — which is how you convince people to build pyramids in the desert. You wouldn't volunteer unless the "son of the gods" told you to.

Why did they call their kings the image of God? Because ancient rulers believed their job was to learn what the gods wanted in heaven and then use their power to make it happen on earth. They represented divine will. They shaped cities, laws, and cultures based on what they believed the gods desired.

And then Moses came along and said something utterly radical:

Everyone is the image of God.

Everyone bears His likeness.

Everyone carries a royal calling.

Not just kings. Not just elites. Not just the powerful.

Everyone.

For former slaves who had spent generations being told they were worth nothing, this must have been almost impossible to believe. Honestly, even in America — where we claim to believe in equality — many of us still struggle to believe our lives matter.

Think about how we talk about the President. We assume his decisions shape the course of history. His choices matter. His headaches matter. We don't want him to have a sinus infection because the stakes feel too high.

But Genesis insists that your life carries weight too — not because you sit in the Oval Office, but because you bear the image of the One who spoke the universe into being.

That's the first thing God ever said about you. And it changes everything.

The Red Button, the Headache, and the Dignity You Forgot You Had

Picture this: the President goes home after a long day, and he and the First Lady get into one of those marital arguments that every couple has from time to time. In a moment of exasperation he says, "Oh, you didn't like that? Watch what happens when I hit this red button." One push, and the whole world goes up in smoke.

Do you want that? Of course not. You don't want him to have a headache, the flu, or a bad mood — and you certainly don't want him anywhere near a red button.

But let's turn the camera around for a moment.

Someone in this room has a sinus headache right now. The pollen is blowing — I noticed it the moment I drove into town. Someone else is fighting the flu, and frankly, we're all a little irritated you came out tonight instead of staying home under a blanket.

And if you go home tonight and have a fight with your spouse, you can hunt all you want for a red button — nothing's going to happen when you push it.

Deep down, we all know why. Somewhere in the back of our minds, we've absorbed a quiet, corrosive belief:

Some people matter, and some people don't.

Some people's choices shape the world, and mine barely ripple the surface.

And if you believe that about yourself, you are exactly where the Evil One wants you.

Because once you're convinced your choices don't matter — how you spend your time, your energy, your money, your attention — you begin to waste them. And then you numb the ache of that waste. Some numb it with sports fanaticism. Some numb it with alcohol. And we wonder why our grandchildren numb it with marijuana and other drugs. It's all the same ache: Surely my life must matter... right?

And God's answer — from the very first portrait He painted of humanity — is a resounding yes.

"This is my image."

Everyone in this room knows disappointment. Everyone knows failure. As the years go by, many of us feel the pull toward resignation — the temptation to drift quietly into the dark night.

But listen again to what God says about you:

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

And then, as if to underline the point:

"Male and female He created them."

Unthinkable in the ancient world — even the women bear royal dignity.

For me, that's astonishingly good news. I believe it so deeply I can hardly express it: that this little hillbilly from Roanoke, Virginia carries a dignity equal to the greatest king or queen who ever walked the earth. I like that. And if you embrace it, you'll like it too.

But a title is only as good as the job description behind it. I once learned that the hard way.

When I was seventeen, I'd been teaching guitar at a music studio for years. I needed real money for college, so I asked the owner, Mr. Euer, for a full-time summer job. He thought for a moment, then said, "How about we call you... the assistant to the owner?"

At seventeen, that sounded glorious. I imagined sitting in his chair, feet on his desk, running the place whenever he disappeared for hours — which he often did.

A week later, reality arrived.

"Assistant to the owner" meant doing everything no one else wanted to do. Cleaning windows. Cleaning toilets. Delivering a grand piano up a flight of stairs by myself. (I did that. I also slipped, and the piano went tumbling down like a Laurel and Hardy sketch. They glued it back together with Elmer's and sold it the next week. So check your grand piano.)

The title sounded impressive. The job... not so much.

So when God calls us His "image," is it like my glamorous-sounding teenage job — a title with no substance? Or is it something real, something weighty, something good?

Look at what God says next:

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion...'"

Be fruitful.

Multiply.

Fill the earth.

Subdue it.

Have dominion.

We sometimes imagine the whole world in the beginning looked like Eden — lush, perfect, glowing with God's presence. But only the garden was like that. The rest of the world needed work. A lot of work.

And God's command to Adam and Eve was not, "Stay here where it's nice." It was, "Go. Fill the earth. Shape it. Cultivate it. Bring order, beauty, and goodness to every corner."

Why?

Because God's purpose for humanity was never private comfort or quiet retirement. His purpose was — and still is — to turn the entire earth into a place fit for His glory. A world so radiant, so whole, so alive that God could dwell everywhere, not just in one garden.

That's why Scripture ends the way it does: with the whole earth filled with the glory of God, every inch made new.

And that mission — that breathtaking assignment — was given to humanity from the very beginning.

Not only does God call you His image; He entrusts you with a royal task:

Make the world so wondrous that it reflects My glory.

That's the job description.

That's the dignity.

That's the truth about you.

Clay Images and the Mission We Forgot

One of the great ironies of the Bible is how God chooses to work. The Creator who could have spoken a single word and transformed the whole earth into a radiant palace filled with His glory — just like that — chose a very different strategy. Instead of overwhelming the powers of darkness with sheer force, He determined to defeat them through... clay.

Clay images.

People like you and me.

That's why Paul can say in Romans 16 that when Jesus returns, God will "crush Satan under your feet." It's astonishing. God has ordained that the downfall of the evil one will come through human beings — fragile, flawed, earthen vessels. It's fantastic, really.

The First Commission

In Genesis, God gives humanity five commands: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion. We could spend a week on each one, but they fall

neatly into two categories. First, God wants more of us. “Be fruitful and multiply,” He says, “fill the earth.”

Even in the pristine world of Genesis 1, after God has declared everything “good” and finally “very good,” the first “not good” appears in chapter 2: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Why? Because one human being cannot carry the weight of the world. The mission requires many — a growing, multiplying community of image bearers.

Had Adam and Eve remained faithful, the task would have been simple: have children, reflect God’s image, fill the earth, and watch the glory of God spread from Eden to the ends of creation. That was the potential.

The Complication

But something happened — something that starts with an S and ends with an N, and you and I are right in the middle of it.

Sin entered the world, and the mission became infinitely more complex. Children no longer grow up naturally inclined toward the things of God. Now they must be formed, taught, disciplined. That’s why parents and grandparents pour so much time and heart into the next generation: we’re not just raising people; we’re raising redeemed image bearers.

God doesn’t merely want more humans.

He wants more holy humans — more faithful servants who reflect His character in a darkening world.

A Culture in Decline

If you’re anything like me, you’ve watched the last several decades unfold with a growing sense of grief. I’m old enough to have seen the shift — not just in politics or economics, but in the moral and spiritual fabric of American life. What once felt like a broadly shared moral consensus has evaporated. God, Christ, and the church have been pushed to the margins.

I believe America is becoming one of the most pagan nations in the world — not in the academic sense, but in the raw, visceral way ancient paganism expressed itself: eroticism, violence, and a rejection of transcendent truth. And it’s swallowing up our children and grandchildren.

My wife and I watch the news at night. I tend to sink deeper into the chair, quiet and discouraged. She tends to yell at the television. I keep reminding her, “Gena,

they can't hear you." She replies, "I don't care. I just need to say it." If she ever picks up a shoe, I'll intervene. But you know the feeling — some of us get depressed, others get angry.

Light in the Darkness

But every so often, a truth breaks through the fog:

How can we be angry at the darkness... when there is no light?

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Light behaves strangely — in a bright room, a cell phone flashlight looks weak. Dim the room, and suddenly that tiny light seems brilliant. Darkness doesn't diminish light; it reveals it.

So here's the uncomfortable question:

As Western culture has grown darker over the last fifty years, has the church grown brighter?

Are Christians more committed to the mission?

Or have we dimmed our lights and slipped them quietly into our pockets?

In nature, the darker the night, the brighter the flame.

In American Christianity, the darker the culture, the dimmer the church seems to become.

The Temptation to Huddle

Some Christian traditions respond to cultural decline with renewed urgency — more prayer, more evangelism, more investment, more mission. But our branch of the church? Our Presbyterian family? We tend to huddle. We retreat. We protect what we have left.

I say this as a Presbyterian by choice — a real one.

And this is family talk.

When the world grows darker, we often shrink back, clutching our little lights instead of lifting them high.

A Lesson From Business

A friend of mine owns a small business. Things weren't going well, and he told me they were cutting their advertising budget.

I said, "Excuse me? That should be the last thing you cut. If sales are down, you advertise more. You push harder. You get everyone talking about your product. Everyone becomes a salesperson."

He looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. "Well, that's weird," he said. "We figured since things weren't going well, we should cut back."

Welcome to the church.

Recovering the Mission

God's plan has always been the same: multiply faithful image bearers who shine His light into the world. The darker the culture becomes, the more radiant the people of God are meant to be.

Imagine living as if your primary purpose on this planet were to multiply faithful servants of God.

Imagine believing that nothing — absolutely nothing — matters more.

That's the mission.

That's the calling.

And that's the light the world is waiting to see.

A People on Mission: Rediscovering Our Calling in Columbus

There was a time — and some of you remember it — when you could walk down a street in Columbus, say something openly Christian, and hear nothing but agreement. Heads nodded. People smiled. "Yes, that's right. I believe that too."

Try that today at the W.

Try it in Starkville.

Even here on Main Street, I'm not sure you'd get the same response anymore.

We all know why. There are simply fewer of us — fewer believers, fewer voices, fewer lights. And the only way that changes is if there are more of us. More

witnesses. More courage. More ordinary Christians living out an extraordinary calling.

This is not the moment to huddle.

This is the moment to lean forward — to reach out to friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members; to imagine new ways of loving the lost; to take seriously the mission God has given His people.

Because what a mission it is. Light of the world. Image of God. Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. That's not small. That's magnificent.

But God didn't stop with "multiply." He added, "Build the earth. Subdue it. Have dominion." In other words: "I want there to be many of you because I want you to shape this world into the kind of place I intend it to be."

That's why Christian mission has always had two sides. Yes, we long to see people come to Christ — not one or two at a time, but in great numbers. But we also build. We serve. We heal. We protect.

That's why this church founded Palmer Home.

That's why you have a pregnancy counseling center.

That's why Christians have started schools everywhere the gospel has taken root.

That's why the best hospital in downtown Jackson — the one you actually want to go to — is Baptist. (Trust me. I've been in both.)

Our calling is not merely to hand out leaflets saying, "Come to Jesus." Our calling is to transform Columbus, Mississippi — to become what Jesus called a "city on a hill." A place where justice is real, mercy is practiced, the vulnerable are defended, the unborn are protected, education is offered, and every person is treated with the dignity of bearing God's image.

Imagine a world searching for such a place and saying, "We know where it is — little old Columbus, Mississippi."

That is your calling.

And let me confess something: I'm no different from you. You might think that after a hundred years of being a "professional Christian," I leap out of bed eager to evangelize the world. No. What I want most is to sit in front of a television and fall asleep. That's the truth.

So why do I keep going?

Because I know why I breathe.

I know why my heart keeps beating.

I know why my neurons — slow as they are — still fire.

I was made in the image and likeness of God.

I was commanded to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion.

That calling stays on my mind.

And sometimes God uses that calling in the most unexpected places.

A few months ago, I was in Indonesia — a place that reliably makes me sick. I've come home with typhoid before. This time, the group I was serving tried to treat me well and gave me a weekend in Bali. Everyone wants to go to Bali, right? Don't. When I hear the word now, I start to shake.

During that trip, I had lunch with a Christian family — a mother and her 18-year-old son. They told me about the father: a former American Jew, raised in the Northeast, who left home in search of truth, became a Buddhist, and eventually settled in Bali. He wasn't neutral toward Christianity. He hated it. Hated God. Hated Christians.

Later that day, the son took me for a drive to see "real Bali." I asked him to stop if he saw a public restroom — the joys of being an older man — and he said, "My house is close. Just come there." So we went. I shook his father's hand. He pointed me to the guest house. "Go ahead, you crazy Christian preacher."

And then I got violently sick.

So sick I nearly died.

That man — that pagan, God-hating man — got down on his hands and knees in the water I had created on his bathroom floor. He put his face close to mine as I drifted in and out of consciousness and said, "Brother, you're not going to make it."

Now, normally, when someone tells you that, you panic. But God, in His mercy, brought to mind my calling: Be fruitful. Multiply. Build the earth. Subdue it. Have dominion.

So I opened my eyes, looked at him, and said, “That’s okay. I’m ready for this. Bring it on.”

A month later, he texted me from Indonesia:

“Can I talk to you about becoming a Christian?”

We spent two hours on the phone. He knew nothing — absolutely nothing — about Christianity. He was a blank slate. But by the end of that call, he professed faith in Christ.

Tonight, as I sat here, he texted again. His name is Charlie. He told me he’s been praying constantly — even half-awake on his way to the bathroom — giving thanks for the love of Christ. His son can hardly believe it. The man who hated God now loves Him.

Friends, that’s not a hero story about me. That’s simply a moment when God gave me the grace to remember who I am and why I’m here.

And now I think about you.

Your children.

Your grandchildren.

Your neighbors.

Your city.

Columbus needs you — not a smaller, quieter version of you, but the full, God-made, Spirit-empowered you. The one called to shine, to build, to multiply, to bless, to transform.

The world is waiting for a city on a hill.

Why not here?

Dr. Richard Pratt is President of Third Millennium Ministries.

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