

Caring for the Earth

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There's a lot of talk in our world today about taking care of the earth. We hear those discussions mostly at a political level. We are familiar with debates concerning the EPA and their regulations. Terms like *global warming* and *climate change* are political footballs that get punted back and forth where, it seems, both sides of the debate struggle with keeping these discussions civil and instructive. One side says their opponents are liberal tree huggers while the other side are accused of melting the polar ice caps for the fun of it.

We are God's children, friends; blood-bought sons and daughters, adopted into the family of God. If there is any group, any family that should be able to rise above the political environment and have honest, reflective, humbling, and instructive conversations about this topic (among all the others) it ought to be us. So, that's what we are going to do today. Our focus today as we progress in our *The Lord, Our Maker* series is discuss our responsibilities to God concerning his creation.

Let me start by trying to wake you up about the importance of our responsibility to God's creation; I know I need that - I often need to be woken up to spiritual things. I can have a *what's the big deal* kind of attitude when it comes to God's creation. Do you know what I mean? If I spill some gasoline in the lake when I'm filling up the boat for more skiing, I might think *what's the big deal?* If I burn some trash instead of recycling it... *what's the big deal?* Do you know why that's a problem? The problem is not so much those relatively small, isolated examples I mentioned: our lakes can handle a few drops of gasoline here or there; burning a plastic bottle or a styrofoam cup isn't going to cause acid rain to fall from the sky. Obviously, we want to minimize those kinds of things, but the real problem is the attitude. The problem is you and me strutting around God's creation like we own it; because, what's true? We don't own it; God owns it. It's not my creation or your creation, it's God's creation. And if we act presumptuously, we'll not just set a bad example with the little things, but all those little things will add up and we'll have some macro level problems. So, I need to be woken up about these things.

Here's a verse that wakes me up to caring for God's creation. Prov. 12:10 says, "Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel." To the original audience, the beast they would have thought of would most likely would have been their ox or their cattle. Maybe their mule or their goat. Most of the original audience had animals for their livelihood, so don't think of a pet so much, though that would apply. And look what that verse says. A righteous person, a wise person (if we could include that major theme from Proverbs) regards the life of his or her animal, his or her mule or ox or goat. She regards its life; she cares for it, she takes it in consideration. The word righteous means good, upstanding, morally appropriate. Now, if I have a selfish, inconsiderate attitude that I mentioned earlier, what might I think? I might think, "This beast is mine? I'll do with it what I want! If I want to kick it, then I'll kick it! What's it to you? It's mine, not yours. What's the big deal? It just an

animal!” When our thinking is wrong, we can justify any kind of behavior, can’t we? A righteous person doesn’t think such things. A righteous person regards the life and care of all of God’s creation.

So, get this, FBC: our treatment of God’s creation is a moral issue. It’s not amoral. It’s not neutral. To be righteous means you do the right thing; wicked people don’t do the right thing. That’s why I say what we do with *our* land, or *our* animals, or *our* lakes (remember, it’s *NOT* ours, but God’s) is a moral issue. My morality is displayed by my treatment of God’s creation. That, friends, wakes me up. We all know, don’t we, that God will hold us accountable. The unrighteousness will experience the wrath of God. That means we want to live righteously to receive his rewards. That wakes me up. I hope it wakes you up, too.

There are two basic mistakes we can make in our relationship to God’s creation. I’ve alluded to it already, but let’s make it clear: the first mistake is *abusing creation*. What I mean by abuse is taking and using God’s creation for my own selfish ends at the expense of creation’s needs. Creation has needs; have you ever considered that? That creation has needs? That doesn’t mean creation is helpless; that’s one of the beautiful things about God’s creation and one of the biggest mistakes of those who tend to make the second mistake I’ll mention next. God has built into creation mechanisms of life even after death. A fire can whip through a national forest stripping it bare, but eventually seedlings will take root and the forest will come back again. But while creation is not helpless, it can be destroyed through abuse.

Where does this abuse come from? I think it primarily comes from a selfish, inconsiderate way of life. Meaning, we are selfish and inconsiderate. Sometimes, we can act with reckless disregard for the needs of creation. And this is a big mistake that we will answer to God for.

The other mistake we are tempted to make in relation to creation is worshiping it. A few years ago, the movie Noah hit the big screen. It’s a very interesting movie where the director, on the one hand tried to follow the biblical storyline pretty closely, but on the other hand, pushed some weird themes that you won’t find in the story. One of them is creation worship. In one scene, Noah is passing on to his family the creation story that’s quite similar to Genesis 1. After he’s done he reminds his family of God’s judgment through the flood, but after he’s done telling this story, he morbidly describes how they will all kill each other off. And why does Noah make this plan? To rid creation of man so it can return to it’s glorious place, the pinnacle of all creation. This veneration of nature is seen throughout the movie.

Of course, the worship of creation is nothing new. Listen to how Paul puts in Romans 1 (READ vs. 24-25). At the heart of our rebellion to God, from the very beginning, is our propensity to worship created things. That temptation is alive and well; it’s very easy to slip into a worship of creation that is at the heart of our rebellion to God. So, we want to avoid these two mistakes. We want to avoid worshiping nature where we see creation as the ultimate good. And

we also want to avoid worshiping ourselves where we are the ultimate good and abuse creation for our good.

The scriptures teach us to be stewards of creation. And we find that teaching in the book of Genesis. Let's turn to Genesis 1 again (READ vs. 26-31). Notice how God entrusts the human race with the appropriate rule over his created world. God did not leave his creation without a hierarchy of structure and leadership. As God's principle representatives on earth, humankind is given the responsibility of exercising authority over the created world. Some of the modern notions proposed in our society that privileges the life and care of animals over human beings, nature over human societies fails to understand God's created order. If it's not obvious enough, let me specify that the reason why you'd save your children drowning before your family pet from drowning is here in Genesis 1. God has subjected creation to the primacy of human beings; he does not subject us to the rest of creation. This is the first thing we learn about our relationship with creation.

Now, this, though, is where you might feel justified with an abusive mindset. Just look at the text: *We have dominion! We rule over the fish of the sea and the beasts of the earth!* And we have this wicked temptation to think that anytime we are entrusted with authority means we can do whatever we want to do. We're in charge, right? But let me ask you: is God in charge of us? Of course. And does he exercise benevolent dominion or oppressive dominion? God is kind. God is loving. His kindness and care is so amazing that even though we deserve to die for breaking his law, he sent his son to save us from our sin. He patiently waits for us. God doesn't treat us oppressively at all. God never exploits our weakness. And we represent God. That means we should never oppressively relate to creation. God has subject creation to our authority, but we exercise a kind rule over the created world.

This is obvious, too, from our next important passage, 2:15 (READ). Genesis 2 is like Genesis 1 in that it records important theological information related to the origins of our world, but it has a different focus; chapter two's focus is on humanity. Vs. 15 let's us know how God defines the relationship between Adam and the world he created. It says that God puts the man in the garden "to work it and keep it." Those are important purposes, so let's make sure what we are talking about.

The first word we see is *work*; God made humanity to work his creation. It's interesting, that word *work* has the connotation of *serve*. It's the same word found in Exodus 1 where we are told that Pharaoh made the people of God, the nation of Israel, work as slaves. But Pharaoh didn't just want their work, he wanted their service. He demanded their service to him, service as the true king of all the land. In a similar fashion, when God puts Adam in the garden to work it, he's looking for Adam to serve creation. Yes, we work it, but our work is a kind of work that also serves the good of creation.

The second word is *keep*; humans are to keep God's creation. The word *keep* means to *care for* or *guard*. It has this protective connotation. God put Adam in the garden to *look after it*.

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 121; see if vs. 7-8 sound familiar, “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” The Lord being our keeper means he is our protector and caretaker, right? God will keep us from evil, meaning, he will guard us against evil. It’s the exact same word in Genesis 2. That would mean we are creation’s keeper; God has entrusted to us the protective care of his creation.

So, it seems pretty clear from Gen. 2:15 that God expected man to have special care, special regard for his created world. The regard we are to have doesn’t mean God’s world is not a resource for our good. Back in Genesis 1 God says, “I’m giving you this creation for your own good, for food to eat.” So, there’s no reason for us to feel guilty in seeing God’s creation as a resource for the good of humanity. Yet, at the same time, we don’t use creation for our good with disregard for creation itself. God has given us the responsibility to work for, serve, and keep his created order.

This is what being a steward looks like. So, let me try and summarize that. *God is calling us to worship him by gratefully using creation for our good while ensuring its good.*

Notice a couple of my words; worship and gratefully. I include this, friends, because this is our motivation. This why we do what we do with creation; it’s why we relate to creation as we do. We are principally motivated by our worship of God. We don’t relate to creation primarily as a resource for our good (though it is that). And we don’t relate to creation principally as keepers and servants looking to ensure it’s flourishing (though that is what we aim to do). We are governed and motivated by our God; we want to honor him and worship him.

You know, this fits the exact model we see in every other relationship we have. We work hard at our jobs and for our employers because God told us to work heartily at our places of employment as if we are serving the Lord Christ. When we do, we worship him. We submit to the governing officials at a local, state, and national level, not because they do everything right, but because our God has told us to and we want to worship and obey him. Husbands lay down their lives for their wives even though their wives sometimes sin against them and take them for granted because we husbands want to worship God. And wives respect their husbands and are willingly to follow their leadership, not because they are always respectable and that they always get it right, but because, I know, you ladies want to worship God. And we protect and care for God’s creation because he is telling us to; he has given us this responsibility and we want to obey him. This what is means to live a life motivated by worship.

I use the word gratefully, too, because God’s creation is a gift, right? One of the things I love about NC Wisconsin is that so many appreciate God’s creation; many of us live close to the earth. Some of you make your living straight from the earth in farming or logging. Many of us love hunting, fishing, hiking, or bird watching. We love seeing wildlife. Many of you have pets. Many of us have a close relationship to God’s creation. What are some specific reasons you appreciate creation? Well, don’t forget to thank God for that; he’s our Creator! And include that

in your stewardship of creation. Because here's the deal: stewardship will require sacrifice. It will cost us money, time, and energy. As a church family we had to make concessions and sacrifices to the design of our new church facility because of the wetlands located on our property. Honestly, we didn't like hearing that so much at first. I had what I described earlier; a *what's the big deal attitude*. But, friends, when we have a grateful attitude in our stewardship, that carries us and moves us through the obstacles we feel. It compels to make the necessary sacrifices that are required of us to be good stewards.

There's one last question that I won't answer this morning; here it is: what are some ways I can be a good steward of the earth? Some of the things our government does through the various regulatory agencies can feel far away from us. But there are things we all can do. I've asked Ryan Stockwell, our own brother here at FBC, to write an article about this very thing. Ryan has been a study buddy with me about these topics and has done a lot of reading and thinking about what it means to be a good steward of creation. Look for that on our facebook page; that will also be published in the December edition of our Body Lifeline newsletter.

I hope you're still awake to the important role our God has given to us; let us worship him by obeying his call on our lives.

Key vs. Genesis 2:15

Questions for the week

- Has God's word changed your mind today about how you should relate to creation? Share with someone how so.
- Are you more tempted to abuse creation or worship creation? What did you hear today (or in this series) that helps you fight this temptation?
- What are things you could do to fulfill God's call on us to steward his creation well?