

**Sermon – Stewards of Creation**  
**Sunday February 13, 2010**

This morning, we're going to talk about taking care of the environment. I'm indebted to John Ortberg and Bill Hybels for a couple messages they prepared on this topic. My guess is that probably most of us here don't need much convincing on this issue. In fact, most people in our culture are recognizing the need to take care of our world. We live in a time where we're becoming more aware of environmental issues and the impact both positive and negative we can have on our environment. And we're seeing the need for action to address some of these environmental problems.

In fact, many people are taking positive steps in this area. And there are a number of different reasons people are being motivated to take action.

There are financial reasons for taking care of the environment. During the Christmas season, like many of you, we were out visiting with a number of family and friends. I remember there was a period of two days where we visited three houses. And right when we walked into each of those houses, sitting right there, right in the front foyer were two to three toilets brand new toilets.

The first time I thought it was strange. But after the third time in two days, I was thinking, What kind of gastrointestinal issues are my friends having (that they need three toilets right in their lobby)? But of course, as many of you know, because some of those people are actually at this church, there was a sale on eco-friendly dual flush toilets. And if you bought one of those toilets, you also got a refund back from the government to cover some of the cost. There can be financial benefits of being environmentally friendly.

How many of you now do your laundry on weekends and run your dishwasher late at night to take advantage of the lower energy rates? There are financial reasons to be taking care of the environment aren't there?

Another reason people are taking action is because it's now trendy to do so. In the fall of 2007, hundreds of New Yorkers waited in line for over 3 hours. What were they waiting for? They were waiting in line to buy the latest trend, the "I'm not a plastic bag" canvas reusable bag designed by Anya Hindmarch. You see, this bag isn't just any reusable bag. It's a bag that's been used by celebrities like Jessica Biel and Scarlett Johansson. The price of these bags... any guesses? Over two hundreds

dollars and they were sold out in 27 minutes! It's now become trendy in our culture to be environmentally friendly.

There are also political reasons for taking care of the environment. Every two years now we have to take our cars to get emissions tested. If you've been warming up your car from the cold this winter, you could get a ticket for idling. Governments have been pressured to make laws and regulations to protect the environment. So there are political reasons to act as well.

There are also scientific reasons for taking action. In 2006, former US Vice President released a documentary called *An Inconvenient Truth* where he presents scientific data warning us of the impact of global warming and climate change.

It's possible that in our lifetime, we've never seen environmental issues and this whole green movement attract so much attention and interest among ordinary people from all walks of life. There are many reasons that have motivated people to take action on this issue. But this morning, I'd like to suggest to you the best reason you and I should be motivated to take care of the earth.

Stuart Pimm is a champion of endangered species and a winner of the Heineken Prize. You probably don't even know what the Heineken Prize is but probably all the guys are like, How do I sign-up for that one?

At the end of an interview he was doing with the New York Times, kind of as a throw away question, they asked him are you religious?

And this is his response. He said, "I'm actually a believing Christian and Christians have an obligation to care for the planet because it was made by God and does not actually belong to us. So we cannot simply fail to care for oceans or forests or creatures. That would be to fail to fulfill our obligations to God."

What is the best reason to care for our planet? **The best reason is our responsibility to act as stewards of the creation God has entrusted us with.**

It's very interesting. Did you know in the Bible, that there's no word for *nature*. There's just the word *creation*. The word *creation* makes a theological statement. Because if there is a creation, then there is a what? There is a Creator. And guess what, that creator isn't us.

Throughout the Bible, we see that this earth belongs to God. As we sang this morning, *This Is My Father's World*. (It's not my world, it's my father's world.)

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it;  
Psalm 24:1

For in him all things were created... all things have been created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:16

This morning, we're going to talk about God's creation. What is God's vision for his creation? What is his vision for us? What role and responsibility do we have when it comes to his creation? I think it's very important for us to be thinking about this because God's vision gives us the single best perspective from which we should see the earth and our part in it. And it gives us the single best reason to care for it. We are stewards of his creation.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 1:26-28.

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,<sup>[a]</sup> and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

We're in a series called Made In His Image where we've been unpacking what it means to be made in the image of God. A few weeks ago, I talked about how ancient kings would often set up statues of themselves throughout their empire. Whenever people saw these statues, they would see the image of the king and would be reminded of their rule. These ancient kings referred to themselves as images of God. And by that they meant they were representing the gods or goddesses they served.

As men and women made in the image of God, you and I were made to represent God on earth. If you take a look at our Imago Dei solar system image, it's a picture of growing in the image of God and reflecting Jesus in all of life. And one of the spheres in this picture has to do with creation. **Being God's image-bearer, being God's representative means that you and I have the responsibility to take care of his creation.**

How do we do that? Two words in this passage, give us clues to what that means. We are to *subdue* and *rule*.

The word *subdue* is used throughout the Old Testament. **It means to bring something under control.** For reasons, only God knows when both my daughters were young, they had hair that was "out of control." No matter how much water we used, or how much we patted it down or combed it – it just wanted to do its own thing.

Abby who's three years old, has been growing her hair long. As a guy, I never knew the problems of having long hair. It's always in her face when she plays, it gets into her mouth when she eats. When she wakes up, her hair gets all knotted. No kidding - we've actually broken a hairbrush trying to get the knots out. Her hair was getting out of control.

As many of you know, hair doesn't just take care of itself. Just like creation doesn't run by itself. Humans have the responsibility to take care of creation and subdue it. To bring it under control. This past Wednesday, we actually took Abby to get her hair cut – we subdued her long knotted hair.

Not only are humans to subdue the world. We're also to rule over it. **To rule means that we are to exercise authority over creation.** We're to play an active role, we're to engage, we're to own the responsibility that's been entrusted to us.

The problem is that when people hear this, many think it's a license to abuse creation. Instead of their faith being their reason to care for it, it becomes the justification for exploiting it.

In 1967, a Princeton professor wrote an article that became a watershed piece in the field of environmental studies. His thesis was that the real problem, the real danger to the environment actually comes from the Christian faith. He said that the Christian idea of dominion and ruling over the earth gave Christians a sense that the earth isn't really sacred, it's just disposable. Resources are just a thing to exploit.

People aren't really part of creation, they're above it so it just kind of exists for us to use.

Is that really God's vision for us and his creation?

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Genesis 2:15

These two phrases in this verse give us insight into *how* we are to rule over creation. And it's far from the idea of exploiting and abusing.

The first phrase is "work it". Doesn't that sound like something you'd hear in an exercise video or in hip hop song? That verb is often used in the Old Testament to refer to tilling the soil. The idea is that we're supposed to work it. For those of you who are gardeners, you know the hard work involved in growing stuff in your garden. If it's going to grow and produce, you have to till it, plot it, seed it, weed it, water it, work it.

But the verb is also translated in other places as, *to serve*. It's used to describe people worshipping God or performing duties around the tabernacle.

The other phrase "take care of" is also translated in a number of others ways in the Old Testament. It's used to describe a shepherd watching over the flock, a watchman caring for the city. It's also translated as *to guard* or *to keep*. In fact, this same word is used in the benediction we use from the book of Numbers: "The Lord bless you and keep you." What God does for us in this great blessing, we are to do for God's creation.

As stewards, we aren't to exploit, consume and destroy. Does that mean we can't use the resources on this planet? God said, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, except of course the forbidden tree. We are invited to use these resources in responsible and God-honouring ways to sustain life.

But our responsibility is to make the garden flourish, to make it beautiful. To take care of the earth. We do this by subduing it. The earth isn't going to just take care of itself. We need to bring things under control. We also do this by ruling over it. We exercise our God-given authority, we take a proactive stand.

We're also to "work it" and "take care of it". We are to respect the ecological limits of the environment. We beautify the world by keeping it from harm and pollution. We protect the planet by considering the impact of our lifestyle and consumption.

It's not a coincidence that God's instructions for how we are to treat creation are the exact same words that describe our service to God, our worship to God and our obedience to His word. **That's because our stewardship of God's creation is an expression of our love and obedience to Him.**

One Old Testament scholar wrote: "The church in its mission must bear witness to the great biblical claim that the earth is the Lord's and must care for the earth as an act of love and obedience to its creator and redeemer." Christopher Wright, "The Mission of God"

The earth doesn't belong to us. This is My Father's World. We're stewards, we're custodians, we're guardians. Just think, How do you treat those things that someone lends you or puts in your care? You most likely treat them with honour, with care and with respect.

God has entrusted us with the care of his creation which he loves.

Some of you know that in the Old Testament a rainbow is a sign of the covenant God makes. It's a binding promise of care. It's a relationship. It's someone saying, I'm going to take care of you. Now does anyone know Who did God make a covenant with that the rainbow is a sign of? Well it was Noah, but it wasn't just Noah.

In Genesis 9, God says "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you..." But then he goes on. "...and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth." This is amazing. God makes a covenant, a promise not just with human beings but with all of His creatures.

This might come as a bit of a surprise, but the Bible is full of instructions on how to care for God's creatures.

The righteous care for the needs of their animals,  
but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.

Proverbs 12:10

<sup>4</sup> If you see your fellow Israelite's donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help the owner get it to its feet. Deuteronomy 22:4

<sup>10</sup> “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, <sup>11</sup> but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left.

<sup>12</sup> “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest.

Exodus 23:10-12

In other words, if you're a donkey living in biblical times, you hope your owner gets converted.

God has great concern over how we treat animals. God has instructions on taking care of donkeys, how we are to treat mother birds and their eggs, and how we should be generous with providing oxen with grain while they work.

God loves his creatures. That's why he gave us the Sabbath so that humans *and* animals could have rest. But God loves his creation too. When he created the Sabbath, God designed it so that the land would also have rest.

“When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. <sup>3</sup> For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. <sup>4</sup> But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD... The land is to have a year of rest.

Leviticus 25:2-5

And how 'bout this. I bet you never thought there was a verse in the Bible about how we are to treat trees.

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?

Deuteronomy 20:19

It's like God is saying, I know you guys are a violent people. And if you're going to fight each other, could you at least not touch my trees? They're special. They're mine.

When we take care of the creation that God loves, we're expressing our love and obedience to God.

But not only that. **Taking care of creation is also a way of loving our neighbour.**

One Christian author who's made it her mission to encourage others to care for creation writes: "Loving others depends on our attending to creation because people's well-being depends on a healthy planet." Lisa Graham McMinn "Walking Gently on the Earth"

We all depend on our planet for survival. We need clean water to drink. Food to eat. Trees to breathe.

Living in North America, perhaps some of us here aren't aware of how our mistreatment of the earth affects the poor. But the poor in developing countries suffer disproportionately and exponentially when we neglect to take care of the world.

One author writes: "At its core, creation care is about loving our global neighbour, because the poor suffer the most from the degradation of the earth and the struggle for clean water."

Did you know that our energy consumption in the western world has risen dramatically in the past few decades? When our energy consumption goes up, what do you think happens to energy prices all over the world? They go up too! That's why we complain about our electricity and gas bills going up every year.

But when prices go up, who do you think can't afford to pay for it? The poor.

Next month, I'll be going with the missions team to Nicaragua. Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in Central America. Our long term partners there, the Verbo School own a beautiful piece of virgin rain forest property. Among other things that grow there, there's a cluster of mahogany trees.

Mahogany isn't just known for its beauty but also for its value. It's a reddish-brown wood that's very durable and ideal for making high quality and expensive furniture. It generally takes 20-50 years for these trees to grow.

Now because of the poverty in that area, squatters have been found on the property. And these squatters have been cutting down these beautiful mahogany trees. Not to sell them and make a profit. But so that they can use it as fuel for cooking and staying warm.

When the poor get to the point where they can no longer afford energy prices, they go outside and cut down trees. I mentioned that Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in Central America. Anyone know what the poorest nation is? It's Haiti. And if you've ever been to Haiti, you probably know that almost the entire island has been deforested. It's destroyed their country. And this happens all over the world.

Another way the poor get affected by our neglect is through our pollution. Many companies set up factories in developing countries because of the cheap labour costs. But what do you think happens when these factories set-up shop? Many of them cause a lot of pollution. And if you're poor and live downstream from a factory. You probably can't afford to dig a well, you probably can't afford to purify your water. So you drink this polluted water. Tens of thousands of children die because some factory upstream is polluting their water source. And while these factories are creating products for us to consume and while the owners get richer and richer, somewhere these poor people are dying.

When we take care of creation, we're loving our neighbours because people's well-being depend on a healthy planet. The poor especially are usually the ones who pay the highest price, often with their lives because of our ignorance, our neglect and our greed. And when you read the Bible, you'll find the harshest rebukes reserved for those who fail to care for and protect the poor.

Camden, New Jersey is rated one of the worst places to live in America. More than half the children have chronic asthma. A group of Christians though moved into the neighbourhood and helped plant urban gardens to reconnect the children with the beauty of the earth. Kids saw grass pierce through concrete. Their eyes lit up as they pulled a carrot out of the ground and dug for potatoes. For many kids in the concrete jungle of the ghettos and slums, there can be such a disconnection from creation that they feel disconnected from their Creator.

Our well-being as humans and our dependence on our planet aren't just based on survival needs. But there's also **something about creation that connects our souls with the Creator.**

The psalmist puts it like this.

<sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Psalm 19:1

The Apostle Paul also believed we experience God through His creation.

<sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,

Romans 1:20

There’s something about trees and gardens and mountains and oceans and animals that take our breath away. It’s beauty in creation that sparks wonder and awe and worship. It reminds us that there is a Creator and he is a good God.

This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,  
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.  
This is my Father's world: He shines in all that's fair;  
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass;  
He speaks to me everywhere.

And as beautiful as creation is, there’s something about it that the Bible teaches. We read in Genesis 3 that there were consequences for Adam and Eve after they disobeyed God. But did you know that there were consequences for creation as well?

“Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.

<sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.

<sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food...

Genesis 3:17-19

We see great beauty in creation. But there’s also a curse. We also see earthquakes and tsunamis and floods. Creation isn’t working the way it’s supposed to.

But then the Apostle Paul says these remarkable words.

<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Creation is waiting for the children of God to be revealed. It's waiting for God's image-bearers, God's representatives on earth, it's waiting for you and me and all of us together to step up. To subdue and rule the world. To work it and take care of it so that it flourishes and thrives and grows.

Francis Shaeffer said that as Christians "we should look for substantial healing in every area affected by the fall. Part of our job is to help nature flourish as God intends it to flourish. We are to honour what God made in the right way."

Why? The Bible teaches that along with us, God is also redeeming creation.

<sup>21</sup> that<sup>[a]</sup> the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Romans 8:19-21

A lot of Christians think that when we die, we're going to float up to heaven and leave the earth behind. Some take this a step further and think that because the earth will be vacated and destroyed, it doesn't matter how we treat it.

But is that what the Bible teaches? The Bible says that God isn't going to destroy creation. He's going to redeem it. He's creating a new heaven and a new earth for us. And that has tremendous implications for how we treat our planet and take care of creation.

What are some ways we can do that? I've taken some ideas from a book by Greg Boyd to share with you here.

Consume less and waste less

- Don't print on paper when you don't have to
- Use both sides of paper
- Recycle
- Take advantage of the recycling boxes at our each of our exit doors and put your unused bullet and inserts in there so we can reuse some of the forms and recycle the rest
- Don't buy things you don't need

- Buy refilled printer cartridges instead of buying new ones
- Compost food scraps
- Have them fill up your coffee mug at Tim Horton's rather than waste a paper cup

### Be energy-wise

- Use less energy at home
  - Turn off lights when you're not using them
  - Use energy-saving light bulbs
  - Use eco-friendly toilets
  - Take shorter showers
  - Lower the heat a bit in the winter and wear sweaters
  - Run the air conditioner less in the summer
- Consider how you use your car
  - Drive less
  - Carpool
  - Take transit
  - Ride your bike
  - Walk
  - Consider buying a fuel-efficient car

### Educate yourself on environmental issues

- Buy environmentally friendly products ([www.ecomall.com](http://www.ecomall.com))
- Consider buying organic food
- Consider buying products produced on free-range farms rather than on factory farms where animals are abused and packed in overcrowded warehouses
- Become a student of environmental issues and learn about what some Christian environmental groups are doing (Evangelical Environmental Network [www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org); Restoring Eden [www.restoringeden.org](http://www.restoringeden.org))

Support global organizations that are dedicated to bringing clean water to the poor. Many of these organizations are saving lives by providing (among other things) wells and irrigation for needy villages.

- Lifewater International – [www.lifewater.org](http://www.lifewater.org)
- Africare – [www.africare.org](http://www.africare.org)
- Watercan – [www.watercan.com](http://www.watercan.com)

- Blood Water Mission – [www.bloodwatermission.com](http://www.bloodwatermission.com)

Many of you are already doing a lot of these things. But I want to encourage all of you this week to think of one or two ideas you're not doing and to consider doing them this week.

I want to close by praying together. The prayer is up on the screen. It's a prayer written by Rev. Ken Carter for a Christian Earth Day conference in 2009.

*O God, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen:  
You place us in your creation, and you command us to care for it.  
Your works declare glory and splendor, and you call us to praise and reverence.*

*Where we have degraded or destroyed earth's bounty, forgive us.  
Where we have taken beauty and majesty for granted, have mercy upon us.  
Where we have become estranged from the creatures with whom we share this planet, grant us your peace.*

*Renew us in the waters of baptism,  
refresh us with the winds of your spirit,  
and sustain us with the bread of life.  
In the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of the new creation, we pray. Amen.*