



With our topic today on ecology and the environment, I looked for a green shirt to wear. The nicest green shirt I had was a Green Bay Packer t-shirt, so that's why I'm in blue! It is becoming more and more apparent that our Trending Now topics are really trending now in our world. May God continue to teach us how to engage with each other and with our world with the gospel of Jesus Christ the only source of hope and redemption and power to actually change lives. The Gospel of Jesus is Christ was, is, and will always be our "North Star" to help us understand how God wants us to engage the issues of ecology and the environment in our present world.

I just want to say out of the chute here that it has been a privilege to study these Trending Now topics in greater depth to prepare for these messages. But I also need to tell you that we are pastors, not scientists. Our goal with these messages is to look deeper at how the Bible speaks to these issues of great importance to us.

The late Lynn White is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on the environment and one of the early fathers of the modern ecology movement. He wrote a well-read book in 1967 called, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crises*. In the book White stressed that the main reason we are in an ecological crisis is because of Christianity. He stated that Christian Theology leads to the exploitation of nature. He wrote that Christians interpreted the creation story to mean that humankind is to rule, dominate and exploit nature for their own benefit. He writes that Christians have a superior and contemptuous view of nature and are indifferent to the effects their theology has on nature. Lynn White believed that the world would be a better place if we just got rid of Christian Theology all together. Christianity has screwed things up. Lynn White, a famous and committed environmentalist, sees Christianity as the problem.

Now I give you another name: Stuart Pimm. Dr. Stuart Pimm holds the Doris Duke professorship of Conservation Ecology at Duke University, won the Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences, the Nobel of the ecology world. He has done amazing work to protect and save endangered species. Like Lynn White, Dr. Pimm is a passionate environmentalist. But unlike Lynn White, Dr. Pimm is a passionate Christian. Pimm sees his calling to protect the environment as a calling from God. I pulled this quote from an interview he had in *The NY Times* back in 2008. "I'm a believing Christian. 'God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only son.' That's an injunction from St. John. To me, this says that Christians have an obligation to look after the world — stewardship. We cannot pointlessly drive species to extinction and destroy forests and oceans. When we do that, we are destroying God's creation." Two committed environmentalists—one a Christian, the other an outspoken critic of Christianity—yet both committed to the same goal of caring for the environment.

The first thing we need to do this morning is understand God's view of ecology and the environment. I ask your forgiveness in

advance for any oversimplification, but I want to present three different world views when it comes to the environment and ecology.

The first view is the view that places humans at the center of creation. For the sake of argument we will call this the Ego-Centric view. God may have created the universe, but he did so for our sake and has now handed authority over to humans. He let go of his creation and put us in charge to use it for our own benefit. The idea is that earth, land, air, water and other living animals are given worth only in terms of their value to humans. The idea is that earth is here to serve man. There are no good reasons to limit consumption or put anything back into the planet because the earth is so big and has unlimited resources.

As a young man and as a young Christian I think in my world this view was the most prominent. Christians in my neighborhood virtually ignored creation care as being a Biblical value. Sure, we learned a bit about recycling, we saw the need for better cars because of the smog alerts that kept us from football practice, but we really didn't connect creation care with being a follower of Christ. Our job was to preach the gospel. The environment didn't matter as much. What mattered was to get the message of Christ out as quickly as possible and if earth was not able to sustain itself, well, it was all going to burn at the end anyway. This view didn't put any limits on consumption and greed in my neighborhood. We looked at those who were deeply invested in creation care to have the wrong priorities. We didn't see any connection between being a follower of Christ and creation care. We were all about soul care.

This second view describes much of the modern environmental movement. It's the view that human beings should receive no special status. Humans are just one species among all the others on earth. All living creatures, whether human, animal, fish, tree or insect not only have intrinsic worth, all living creatures have equal worth. For the sake of argument we will call this view Eco-Centric. What does an eco-centric believe about God? If an eco-centric speaks of God at all, they tend to speak of God as indwelling all things, that God was found in trees, animals, rocks, all world religions, the sun, moon and stars, and all the forces of nature. Theologians call this pantheism. Nature itself becomes what is holy, and worship of nature itself becomes the natural response. I read quotes this week from environmentalists like Lynn White who look forward to the next famine to kill off humans who are competing for limited resources. If all life is of equal value, whether human or not, then this becomes an alarming natural response.

The third world view is what we believe the Bible teaches. We will call this Theo-Centric, or God-Centered. The Theo-Centric view puts God the creator at the center of his creation. God the creator is the center of all value, and all his creatures find their value within God's created community. God is not disconnected from his creation, he is actively involved loving and caring for

his creation, all of it. This view says that when we care for the environment, we are not ignoring God, we are serving God.

The main idea of this message this morning is this: Christians are to express their love for God and their neighbor by being good stewards of God's creation. And we begin in Genesis chapter 1.

## God Designed Us and Placed Us in Authority Over His Creation

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, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (v. 26).

This passage makes it very clear that mankind has a special status among all the rest of creation. We are made in the image of the triune God, while all other pieces of creation reflect God as creator. But God gives us a special relationship because we don't just reflect God as creator, we bear God's image and we have a special role to represent him on earth. We see the word "rule" in verse 26. We will see it again in verses 27-28.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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."

I think we can see how words like rule and subdue can lead to that ego-centric view. All this is for me and I can do whatever the heck I want with it. Words like dominate and exploit come into my mind. This is where ecologists like Lynn White find their ammunition to say that Christians not only have not helped to preserve our planet, their world view has been the primary contributor to ecological destruction.

But we must stop and view this passage in the right context. We are to bear the image of God. I think it is safe to say that the historical church has not bore the image of God well. The role we have as image bearers of God is to view the world as God views his world, with him at the center of it all.

We need to understand the difference between domination and dominion. Throughout scripture we see references to God having dominion. Psalm 22:28 says, "***For dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over nations.***" To rule as God rules is to show dominion. God shows his dominion by showing righteous judgment, not forgetting the needy, ruling over creation with justice and mercy and benevolence. And we, being made in God's image, have the call to view creation as God views his creation. God's perfect plan was to give humanity the authority to have dominion over his creation as God's representatives with God at the center of it all.

If we dominate we exploit. If we dominate nature, we also end up dominating portions of humanity as well. "To rule" as God rules is to exercise dominion not domination. As image bearers we are called to imitate God. And here is what God feels about his creation. May we imitate him.

## God Loves His Creation

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day (v. 31).

The idea is that God made the best and then sat back and enjoyed it. As an artist sits back and enjoys the art he created. As an artist sits back and enjoys watching others enjoy his work too. Art always reflects the heart of the artist. And in the case of God's creation, it was all very good, the best it could ever be.

As an image bearer I am called to imitate God by enjoying his creation. I enjoy the beautiful artwork when I walk through our local Farmer's Market. To me food is art—so beautiful, so diverse and so good for life. While walking home from the market, I look up at a redwood tree and I see its grandeur and then I think of the grandeur of God. This past week I enjoyed the beauty of bass fishing in Wisconsin with my son-in-law. We enjoyed God's creation together. God uses his creation to instruct us about the heart of God. As Jerome shared Psalm 19:1-4 with us, "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*"

## God Commissioned Us as Stewards Over His Beautiful Creation

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen. 2:15).

Genesis chapter 1 teaches us that God establishes human dominion over creation. Chapter 2 teaches how that dominion is to exist on a day-to-day basis. Genesis 2 tells us that the earth exists for us to do things with. "To work it" means that Adam was put in the garden to produce things. "To take care of it" means to preserve it, not ravage it. These Hebrew words mean that we are to serve and protect. This is where our Christian ethic for creation care begins to take shape.

We are like curators of the creation museum displaying the work of God as the artist. We are involved. We are naming, categorizing, working, changing up, and utilizing for the benefit of others. Not just here to observe and admire, but to engage. We are not park rangers. We are gardeners. Gardeners do things with creation. We have a connection with the earth. Adam was the first image bearer. His name "adam" comes from the Hebrew word, "adamah" which means from soil. It's a humbling reminder that we are fundamentally made from the dirt like all the rest of creation and have a deep inter-connection with all created things and therefore as image bearers we have a deep connection with our environment.

But it's also a reminder that this deep connection to creation means that ultimately God doesn't separate man's need for redemption from creation's need for redemption. Both humanity and creation are in a fallen state. God will ultimately restore humanity from their sin, through Jesus Christ, and he will ultimately restore creation from the curse of man's sin through Jesus Christ.

And speaking of fallen state, in order to understand the state of our environment, we need to remember when things went south.

## The “Fall” Broke All of Creation

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Gen. 3:17-19).

The first man to sin was our parent Adam. We know the tragic effects of sin. We know the tragic effects of that sin on humanity as well as on our environment. We know that sin is disobedience to God. We know that we can link our sin to pride. And from pride comes greed, from pride comes not loving our neighbors, from pride comes poverty. From pride comes every form of injustice and all its tragic effects on human kind and our environment.

In Genesis 6 in the time of Noah, we read that God regretted making human beings on earth and his heart was troubled. So the Lord said, *“I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds, and the creatures that move across the ground – for I regret that I made all of them.”* See how interconnected man and creation were in God’s heart? When Adam, the first image bearer willfully sinned, the whole creation house collapsed and needed the cleansing flood.

This may seem like an odd question, but I am going to ask it anyway. We know that Adam sinned first and the rest of us followed, but did the earth sin too? No, the earth doesn’t sin. But the earth feels the effects of sin. Let’s be clear, not every negative effect on our planet is directly tied to man’s poor stewardship of the planet. Yes, creation is broken and continues to suffer because of man’s sin. But we would be pretty narrow in our thinking to conclude that all disturbances on this earth are 100% due to us behaving badly. We are wrong to think that every volcanic eruption, every earthquake, and all changing weather patterns are all man-caused, and if man just disappeared from the planet, earth would become Eden again. Earth is broken and it needs redemption.

But on the other hand we are pretty narrow in our thinking to conclude that after a long history of dominating and exploiting, we are not responsible for some of the environmental problems we see in our world. We must accept that poor creation care has consequences. How much does our poor creation care have to do with changing temperatures, sea levels, weather patterns, and our ozone layer? We can debate how much. And we do. But there is no debate that poor creation care has consequences.

After the fall of humankind, God put into action his plan to save. And God, being deeply connected to us as his image bearers and to his creation that he loved, he committed to ultimately save us and creation. Look at what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:19-21. Paul gives a brilliant analysis of this idea starting in verse 19. *“For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”*

Then in verse 22 Paul says, *“We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”* We will struggle, creation struggles. We will struggle until Jesus comes to restore and renew. But we are wise to look at what God wants between now and his second coming. Where did Paul get his brilliant analysis in Romans 8? I think he remembered God’s covenant to Noah. In Genesis 8-9 we read that after the flood God made a covenant with Noah and also to all his creation.

## God Made a Covenant with All of His Creation

**I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth (Gen. 9:13).**

So after the flood, God establishes a covenant between “Him and the earth.” This is an astounding statement. His covenant is not just with humankind, his covenant is with the entire earth. He is committed to save us and the creation he loves. This is a key verse to help us grasp the theological foundation for creation care.

**I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth” (Gen. 9:15-16).**

God is committed to humanity. We are to imitate God and care for humanity by caring for our neighbor in need by sharing the gospel with our words and actions. But it also tells us that intertwined with God’s commitment to humanity is his commitment to all living creatures on the earth. So as imitators of God we are to accept the call to care for our neighbor by caring for living things that he loves on earth.

We can look deeper into what it means by caring for our neighbor by caring for our environment when we look at some of God’s commandments to the Israelites. In Lev. 25 God commanded Israel to care for the land by letting the land have one year of rest after six years of producing. He tells them in Deut. 25:4 to not muzzle the ox while he is treading the grain. Back in chapter 20 of Deuteronomy, God was talking to the army, and he tells them not to destroy the trees because they provide food. All this was to preserve creation so creation will be sustained to provide for God’s people.

One of our seminar speakers, Scott Sabin, spoke to us about the effects of deforestation and how there is a direct link from the loss of trees to increased CO2 levels to a warming planet, to soil erosion, to drought, to farmlands that stop producing, to poverty, to forced immigration. And God talked about the effect of deforestation back in Deuteronomy. Care for the land he says. Cultivate but don’t exploit.

One of the traditions in middle America is deer hunting. To me it’s an example of cultivating the land. The land produces more deer than food available for them. If the deer population isn’t thinned every fall, many of the deer would suffer painful slow starvation. It’s a beautiful thing to see people fill their freezers with fresh venison, locally produced, super healthy and an inexpensive source of protein for struggling families. It’s local, healthy, and sustainable management of God’s creation.

The greatest commandment is this: Love God and love your neighbor. When we humbly practice creation care we are



expressing God's love to our neighbors. When we humbly practice creation care we are loving God and loving our neighbor. So let's land on a challenge this morning. This subject of creation care goes right to our hearts and should cause us to evaluate. Jesus' words get right to the point. We can't serve ourselves and God. Then he looks in our hearts.

### **Caring for Creation is a Practical Way to Love God and Love People**

*"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"* (Matt. 6:22-23).

A greedy eye will consume more every year and take more and more from God's limited gift called earth. Jesus is saying we cannot pursue greed at breakneck speed and at the same time love God and love people and care for his creation. When we allow greed to consume us, we are showing that we love short-term wealth and hate God's care for creation. *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money"* (Matt. 6:24). We can trust God as we let go of greed and make our priorities right. When we let go of greed, we will become generous with others and generous with the environment.

Engage with people who love the environment who are not Christians. Talk to those who see Christianity as the problem. Realize that they may have ideas on how to shrink our carbon footprints, but they have no idea how to change a heart that is full of greed, selfishness and pride. Be encouraged that you have a message for them. You have the gospel to share. Only the gospel can change the heart behind the behavior.

Think honestly about what being a good steward of your environment looks like for you. As stewards of creation we are held accountable by God. We are to be responsible to manage well and learn how to put people first and still care for the environment. Good stewards work to maintain. They protect from loss. They are caretakers, not owners. My sister is a financial planner. She is a caretaker of other people's money. She's not an owner. She is a steward to care for her clients' estates. She cares for it by making sure it remains safe and that there is no loss or damage. My role as a steward of creation is to care for God's estate so there is no loss or reduction or damage done to it. To make sure what God loves is healthy and sustainable for the next generation.

Honestly evaluate. Ask yourself the tough questions, "When was the last time you gave more to creation and its health and welfare than it has given to you?" With all respect to John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your environment can do for you, ask what you can do for your environment."

Do I spew too much CO2? Some environmental policies seem strange. I admit I don't want to buy my family lightweight cars because they seem unsafe even though they burn less carbon

fuels. I don't like using environmentally friendly low wattage light bulbs that don't burn as brightly and if you break one it requires a Haz Mat suit to clean up. I don't like my shower showerhead being regulated down to a trickle. I know that my environmental footprint is smaller than it was 10 years ago. But it wasn't until this study that I was able to connect that I am a better follower of Christ when I care about creation.

I have enjoyed watching for and buying more locally grown food that is better tasting, more nutritious, has less chemicals, and is easier on the environment because it wasn't freighted in from long distances. I am more conscious about recycling, public transportation, etc. These kinds of issues we can all discuss and improve upon. As imitators of God we are not only called to fight for those who God loves who have yet to receive Christ, we are called to fight for the creation God loves by caring for it. And when we care for creation we are loving God and our neighbor.

As we move into communion on ecology Sunday it's a good Sunday to think about trees. Out of all of the trees in the garden, there were two specific trees that God wanted us to know about. One was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This was the one tree that God told Adam he could not eat from. We know he willfully disobeyed God and the curse came on him and then on all of us who followed.

There was another tree in the garden called the Tree of Life. This is the tree that symbolized eternal life. The idea was if you ate from this tree you would live forever. After Adam disobeyed God he was banished from the garden and God called in angels to guard the opening to the garden so Adam couldn't come back into the garden. The tree of life isn't mentioned again until the very last chapter of the very last book of the Bible. Revelation 22 tells of the New Heaven and New Earth in the future where there is the river of life and the tree is on both sides of the river bearing fruit every month and its leaves bringing healing to the nations. It's a promise that the curse will be lifted.

But in the middle of the Bible there is another tree. On this tree the curse was lifted once and for all. In Galatians 3:13 Paul says, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" The tree that Christ hung on was the cross. And on that cross Christ took upon himself the curse that was on us and on all of creation because of our sin. Jesus Christ, the innocent lamb of God, sacrificed his life, gave up his body as the penalty for our sins. And his blood was shed as the only perfect sacrifice that could wash away our sin and remove the curse and bring us forgiveness and eternal life. The bloody cross at Calvary became to us the Tree of Life so that one day in our future, if we have put our trust in Christ and his work on the cross, we will one day see the Tree of Life in the New Heaven and New Earth.*

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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