

Creation Care = Neighbor Love

April 23, 2023

Galatians 5:13-15

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Yesterday, April 22, 2023, was Earth Day. It was a day established in 1970 to raise awareness of environmental devastation and to mobilize individuals, the government, and corporations to change the production and consumption practices that are detrimental to us all. Fifty-three Earth Days later, here we are, fast approaching a point of no return.

The statistics are readily available. Just type "climate change" or "global warming" into any search engine and you will read about global temperatures rising, ice caps melting, sea levels rising, and extreme weather events around the globe. The even more disturbing news is that we have known about global warming, and the carbon emissions that cause global warming, since the 1960's.

Darrell Burch, a beloved member here at FCCO, received his Ph.D in physics at the Ohio State University and had a distinguished career as a research physicist at Ford Aeronutronics in Newport Beach. His principal interest centered on optical transmission in the atmosphere, with a particular interest in carbon monoxide and dioxide absorption. It was this interest that led to his lead authoring of a famous paper in 1962 that made detailed measurements of CO₂ absorption in the atmosphere, measurements that would later be used to support the theory of global warming...which is no longer a theory, but a disturbing reality.

While most people agree that global warming is real. Not everyone agrees that our production and consumption cause it.

One spring afternoon, my uncle dropped in to visit on his way home from a job. Well into his 80's he was still drilling wells and installing geo-thermal heating and cooling systems for people. It was something that he was passionate about, not for environmental reasons, but because it can save you money. He grumbled about all the red tape he had to endure and all the regulations he had to put up with in his business. He then went on to suggest that the blame lies on all these environmentalists who are making it hard for little guys to do business.

I asked if he thought there was any validity to the claims of environmentalists. And then I asked, "Don't we have any responsibility to care for God's creation?"

For the next hour I heard about corporate conspiracies that conjure up hysteria to sell more products or manipulate markets. I heard about “tree huggers” and their worship of nature. There was a long rant about a certain political party buying in to ridiculous claims. Then he went Biblical. Quoting Genesis 1, he said, “God gave us dominion over the earth. It exists to serve our needs. It is ours to use.”

“And abuse?” I questioned. He found this all to be quite amusing.

He went on, besides God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. This world will pass away. This world is supposed to pass away.

To be truthful, I didn’t have the heart to argue with him. He was a dear, sweet, man, albeit talkative, that read his Bible, attended church, loved God, and served his community. And yet, as I heard him ranting/preaching – I started to wonder if we read the same Bible.

What does the Bible have to say about environmentalism? The honest answer is nothing - and everything.

There are the standard verses that people reach for occasions like Earth Day. Passages that speak of God’s handiwork and the wisdom that can be gleaned from those who observe creation. There are verses where the land becomes desolate and where all creation groans. There are the creation stories. One where God speaks our natural world into existence and declares it good, and a second where God puts humans in a garden to tend.

Yes, the Bible celebrates creation, and with some effort a case can be made using these verses to make creation care our utmost concern. But there isn’t that one verse that gives it to us plainly. The Bible was written by people who lived close to the land and to animals, long before humans conceived ways to exploit it and destroy it on a massive scale, long before industrialization, engines, nuclear weapons, factory farming, and synthetics, long before Amazon, Roundup, Dollar stores, and energy sucking lifestyles...long before we became so removed from the land we don’t even know the source and true cost of most of our food and conveniences. We shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible isn’t sounding the alarm on the environment.

But the Bible says enough to create a chasm of difference in how Christians understand their responsibility to creation.

A website known as “Got Questions?” gave this response to the person asking if Christians should be concerned about recycling:

“From a Christian perspective, we know that we are called to be good stewards of the earth. God created the earth and gave man dominion over it ([Genesis 1:26-28](#); [Psalm 8:6-8](#)), and we are to be responsible caretakers of it. Christians should be concerned about clean air, clean water, and the preservation of natural resources to the best of our ability. But Christians

understand that the Bible tells us the earth is temporary. No amount of recycling or “thinking green” will forestall the end that God has planned for the earth. Despite all the best plans of men to preserve the planet, there will come a time when the earth and all He has created will be destroyed. “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:10). The earth itself is winding down in preparation for that cataclysmic event, one that will cause man’s destructive behaviors toward the environment to pale in comparison. Romans 8:20-22 speaks of a creation which groans in anticipation of the time when it will be set free from the bondage to the principle of decay. This is the end we should be looking to and planning for and which should make our evangelistic efforts all the more urgent. Soda cans can be recycled; people cannot. Therefore, our greatest efforts should be toward saving souls, not the planet.”¹

There are several things I could say about that so called “Biblical” response. I could unpack the word “dominion” or say a few things about apocalyptic passages in scripture. But my time is better spent focusing on the conclusion. If you believe the end is destruction it will inform how you live in the present. Jesus envisioned a different end for earth, called the Kingdom of God; an end that includes the healing and wholeness of humankind, which includes creation. In fact, that healing cannot happen without the healing of creation, because the two are inseparable.

Jesus cared about physical bodies...not just souls. The word “salvation” means wholeness. And it is this vision of a healed earth that is to guide our actions in the present. We have placed such a high value on freedom, and individual rights, and prosperity that we have forgotten that our lives are interconnected. Our choices have consequences, sometimes devastating consequences for the most vulnerable and impoverished people in the world, not to mention plants and animals.

“While the impacts of climate change affect every country on every continent, they don’t do it equally. People already burdened by poverty and oppression often suffer the harshest consequences, while having the least ability to cope. Their struggle to earn a living, feed their families and create stable homes is made more difficult every day the climate crisis continues.”²

Behind China, the United States is the second largest contributor to greenhouse emissions, while our population is only 4.25% of the world’s population.

While the Bible may not speak directly to our current ecological crisis, it has much to say about exploitation, arrogance, greed, calloused indifference to the poor, and selfishness. This is why this is a spiritual issue.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/recycling-Christian.html>

² <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/climate-change-poverty>

One pastor summarizes the problem this way. He writes, “I don’t think it is not that we have not learned the lessons of Jesus, it’s that we value our own personal comfort and gain over the survival of the world, even beauty and life itself.”³

What do you think?

The Apostle Paul writes:

¹³ For you were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Living in one of the world’s wealthiest nations, we have the freedom to make choices that many of our global neighbors does not have. We can choose to love our neighbor by learning how to care for creation and by supporting efforts that contribute to the healing of this planet.

Now I am not naïve enough to think that our singular actions have a huge impact on global warming – but I do believe that our singular actions are a matter of spiritual discipline – each choice changes us and makes us more mindful. Each choice for good is an act of neighbor love – neighbors we don’t know – neighbors yet to be born. Whether or not our actions have an immediate impact should not discourage us from choosing to love our neighbor.

It is easy to get overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems we are facing. It is easy to get cynical by the politics of environmentalism. It is easy to embrace a “what’s the use attitude.” It’s easy to say, “next time I’ll do better.” It’s easy to live in denial. It’s easy to say, “it’s not my problem,” or “some scientist will figure it out.”

Yet, for those of us who hear loud and clear the call to love our neighbor, we can choose love over easy. We can humble ourselves and collaborate with nature. We can be stewards and caretakers. We can both grieve and act. We can stand with and for those most impacted. We can do something. We can choose to embrace the summation of Christian teaching to love our neighbor.

Every day is Earth Day – Every day we make choices – May we choose love.

³ Rev. Matt Syrdal, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ogbl#inbox/FMfcgzGsmDsbXmLkGsfhxVgtJcqkXxvZ>

