

A Christian's View of the Environment

PSALM 24:1

Baxter T. Exum (#1362)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
May 8, 2016



I am so thankful for all of you who helped at the park cleanup last week! We have done this for a number of years now. Years ago, I started attending the neighborhood association meetings for this neighborhood, with the idea of looking out for some way we could get involved. As you know, all of us come into this neighborhood for worship, but we don't have anybody who actually lives here! So, we were looking for a way to get involved. And years ago, I heard someone mention at one of those meetings that the parks around here were getting filled up with litter. And there it was! We had something we could actually do! And all of you have been so good through the years, meeting at McGinnis Park, splitting up to clean the three parks in this neighborhood, and usually we do this at some point around Earth Day. A few years ago, it actually snowed on the day we cleaned up, so we moved it to the first Sunday in May.

This morning, in light of what we were able to do last week, I would like for us to think for a few moments about our obligation to the environment. As Christians, what responsibility do we have (if any) to take care of the world around us? And before we get into it, I would like to give just a little background to me personally on this issue. As I look back on my life, it seems that conserving resources is a value that was instilled in me at a very young age.

In some ways, I am reminded of the story that circulated online a few years ago, when a young cashier at a grocery store berated an older woman for not bringing her own bags. The elderly woman replied, "We didn't have this green thing back in my earlier days." So the young cashier shot back, "That's our problem today. Your generation did not care enough to save the environment for future generations." Well, at that point, as the story goes, the elderly woman cut loose with a long list of examples as to how those in previous generations were actually far "greener" than just about everybody these days – everything from returning milk and soda bottles to be cleaned and refilled, to drying clothes on a clothesline (the original wind and solar power), to walking everywhere they went, to not needing a motor on their lawnmower, and on and on.

I read that, and I can say (as some of you can say as well) that I can see myself in some of those things! Like some of you, I have actually been the remote control for the family television! So, this saving of resources hasn't always been about saving the planet, but it sometimes comes from necessity, and this can often go back generations.

Years ago, I remember traveling to Nashville when I was going to school at Freed-Hardeman, and on those weekends I would almost always do some laundry at my grandparents' house. I remember doing one load, and right as I was about to shut the lid on the washer, my grandmother ran over with a dishpan of old dishwater, and before I could say anything, she dumped it in on my laundry! I said, "Granny, what are you doing?" And her explanation was, "There are still some bubbles in that dishwater; therefore, there is still some value to it." She could not dump the old dishwater down the drain, because it was still capable of cleaning. So, that is my background. It goes back many years and continued when I left home.

- I can tell you that I took a leading role in bringing recycling to my college campus for the very first time back in the fall of 1990. I helped start a group on campus advocating for recycling bins to be placed in computer labs to recycle paper, and I volunteered to collect that material to bring it to the recycling plant up in Jackson.
- This continued when we moved to Janesville, as I started collecting office paper and junk mail to recycle, years before those items were collected at the curb.
- We have always recycled as a congregation here in Madison. We have bins upstairs in the cry room and also in the kitchen. In my office, most of the paper we use as a church is actually surplus from the University of Wisconsin. When I have to print something in terms of research for a sermon or class, I almost always print it with four pages up on a page, front and back. So, what might normally take eight pages can actually fit on only one.
- Here at church, most of the furniture and other items in our facility have been purchased used, again, surplussed from the University or state government. The pews in the back room, for example, were salvaged from the old courthouse. If you look carefully, you can even see scuff marks from handcuffs on the pews back in the back room. Downstairs, the whiteboards all came from UW SWAP – nasty and covered in old tape and permanent marker, but they were quality porcelain-covered steel, and for only \$5 or \$10 each we cleaned them up, saving them from the landfill, and saving us from purchasing half a dozen whiteboards at nearly \$500 each. The same goes for various cabinets and shelving here in this building. Our P.A. system is housed in a nightstand that was salvaged from a local hotel. The chairs in the back of the auditorium were salvaged from the Kohl Center here in Madison. The chair we teach from on Sunday and Wednesday was also salvaged for \$5. The wall fans up here were rescued just a few weeks ago for \$5 and \$3 each. The emergency exit light up here is an LED unit salvaged from one of our local Habitat Restores a few years ago for about \$3 if I remember correctly. It uses almost no power and will probably outlast this building. Just here in this building, we could go on and on.
- At home, we were early adopters of the CFL bulbs when they first out, we were some of the first to try the new LEDs.
- If you have been to our home, then you know that we were some of the first here in Madison to install those extremely low-flow, dual-flush toilets.
- We have had a garden since we first got married, we've used shredded office paper as mulch between rows, we've had fruit trees for as long as I can remember. People today talk about "eating local" as if it is some new concept. It is hard to get more local than 20 feet out the back door. The first pear I ever grew I shared with a squirrel. I had been pruning and nurturing this tree for several years, and we finally had one pear. We pulled in the driveway after church one day, and the pear was on the ground being eaten by a squirrel. I jumped out of the car and almost had to wrestle him for it, but I ate the other half.
- At home, we have reclaimed ceramic tiles, bathroom fixtures, light fixtures, hardwood flooring, cabinets, even tools and electric appliances from UW SWAP and Habitat Restore.

- Personally, I cannot remember the last time I bought a new piece of clothing. It might have been a decade or so ago. Everything I wear comes from Goodwill or St. Vinnies.
- In terms of transportation, I learned only after we purchased our car several years ago that it was LEED certified as a low-emission, fuel efficient vehicle. I saw the special parking spots at Hy-Vee, I got a little bit jealous, so I looked it up. Our make and model was listed, but only the 5-speed manual transmission, which is what we have! But again, we didn't buy that car to save the earth, we bought that car because we were cheap, we bought that car because it was efficient, we bought that car to get mileage in the low 40's, which is almost unheard of these days without some kind of hybrid technology. And if you want your kids to know what it means to "roll down the window" in a car, send them to our car, and I would be glad to let them try it out!
- Instead of piping in natural gas from Canada or the Gulf of Mexico, we heat our home almost exclusively with wood from local farmers. The best wood we've ever had has been black locust, an invasive species that farmers love to get rid of. It actually has more BTU's than oak and is the ultimate renewable resource. Our woodstove is one of the most efficient ever made.
- In terms of shopping, we will often take a backpack with us as we walk to one of the grocery stores near our home. Target, by the way (if you didn't know this), will give you a 5-cent discount on every purchase if you bring your own bag (but you have to tell them to scan the coupon for it, which is basically a little sticker on the counter somewhere near their scanner). At many places, though, I just don't get a bag. I remember buying an item at Farm and Fleet down in Verona. I've learned to say even before they scan the item, "I don't need a bag." One time the cashier said, "But it is our policy that you must take a bag." I very politely said, "It is my policy not to take that bag."
- I have a long history of rescuing items from the side of the road. When the church here met at the school, I remember leaving the school after worship one Sunday morning, seeing an office chair (or something like that) out for the trash over on Painted Post Road, so I pulled over to go put it in our car. Right at that moment, though, I noticed that another car had pulled over ahead of me, and Kathy Hyatt beat me to it! I had to wave, and admit defeat, and move on.
- In the garden, we have composted before composting was cool, and when the City of Madison asked for volunteers for their new curbside compost program, we were some of the first to volunteer. I was on a first name basis with George Dreckmann before he retired just recently, and when Isthmus wanted to do a story on the program back in 2012, Mr. Dreckmann gave them our name for the interview. Basically, we have almost no trash in our family anymore. It is minimal. We now compost everything from Q-tips, to used Kleenex, to bones, to pretty much anything that rots. The commercial composter they use gets to a much higher temperature than the average garden compost, so they can take pretty much anything that ever has any chance of ever decomposing. For our family of four, our actual trash only goes out to the street every 3-4 weeks and consists primarily of a few food wrappers and used Ziploc bags. My granny would be so embarrassed by that – as she used to actually wash out her Ziploc bags to reuse them! So I guess we are, indeed, somewhat failing the previous generation!

What I find interesting about all of this is that whenever our kids have studied some of these things in school, and when the teachers have pushed composting (or whatever) our family is regularly one of the only ones to actually do it. Our daughter went to an environmentally focused charter middle school here in Madison. And those things they were teaching, we were some of the only people who were actually already doing what they were promoting. I say these things simply to give you some idea where I am coming from. With all of this as background, I want us to do just a brief overview of the environmental issue from a Christian perspective.

I. And I'd like for us to start at the beginning (literally), with a reminder that **THE EARTH BELONGS TO GOD: THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S.**

And the first passage I'd like for us to consider is found in Psalm 24 (p. 876). And this is actually the first line of King David's psalm that was read for us earlier. Notice, please, Psalm 24:1, where King David said, ***"The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it."*** He goes on to question: Who can stand in God's presence? In light of the fact that God is our creator, who can approach him? And the answer is: The one who has a pure heart! What a fundamental truth! So much of the Bible goes back to the fact that God created this world and everything in it. Paul quotes this Psalm in 1 Corinthians 10:26 as he helps a church struggling with division over the eating of meat offered to idols. He quotes this Psalm as a reminder that since God created everything, a small part of his creation is not really worth fighting over. God created us. Therefore, the earth and everything in it belongs to God. Even the worship we offer is tied to God being our creator. We think of those words in Psalm 95 (p. 950), and I can hardly read these words without singing them, but in Psalm 95 the Bible says,

- ¹ ***O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.***
- ² ***Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.***
- ³ ***For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods,***
- ⁴ ***In whose hand are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are His also.***
- ⁵ ***The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land.***
- ⁶ ***Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.***
- ⁷ ***For He is our God...***

In the Old Testament, the fact that God created this earth and owns it is given as justification for God's various rules concerning the eating of certain animals, the mining of certain minerals, the use of trees for lumber, and on and on and on. All of this goes all the way back to the beginning in Genesis 1, ***"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."*** And this is the first principle we need to keep in mind on this issue: The earth belongs to God.

II. There is a second critical idea we need to keep in mind when it comes to a Christian's role in the environment, and that is: **THE EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US TO MANAGE.**

And again, this goes all the way back to the beginning – Genesis 1. Just like God's teaching on marriage as well as God's teaching concerning the role of women in the church and in the home, the fact that we were given the earth to manage goes all the way back to the creation itself. Notice what the word itself says in Genesis 1:28-30,

- ²⁸ ***God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*** ²⁹ ***Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you;"*** ³⁰ ***and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so.***

And then, in the next chapter, we come to Genesis 2:15, where we find that ***"...the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. The Lord God commanded the man, saying,***

'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.' Adam was given some responsibility as a steward of this new creation, and his stewardship, in fact, was a test. Adam was basically given one rule: Take care of this garden, but do not eat of this one tree over here! Of course, Adam failed that test. But the point is: Adam was given some management responsibility over God's creation as he was commanded to rule over it.

At first, by the way, human beings were to be vegetarians. I don't know whether all of you caught that, but back in Genesis 1:29-30, God gave them permission to eat plants. Only after the flood are people given permission to eat animals. But it is interesting to me that in Genesis 9, when God allows the eating of animals, God also gave the animals a certain built-in terror of human beings. And so to this day, when I walk out into my garden and see a rabbit, the rabbit does not just come running up to me. That animal is scared, and for good reason.

So, starting in Genesis, mankind is given management responsibility over the earth and all of God's creation. And from time to time, God will step in with various rules or laws to keep things on track. In terms of the land itself, for example, the people were commanded to let their land rest every seventh year, so that the land would have some time to recover (Leviticus 25:3-4). We also see various rules for the care of animals. ***"You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing"*** (Deuteronomy 25:4). In the Ten Commandments, the people were told to rest on the seventh day of each week, just as God rested after the creation week. But what we might not realize is that even the cattle were to rest on that seventh day (Exodus 20:10). We even have Proverbs as a reminder, ***"A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal..."*** (Proverbs 12:10).

Throughout the Bible, we see an emphasis on conserving and not wasting various resources. In the wilderness, for example, the people were told to pick up only enough manna to eat in one day. In the New Testament, we have Jesus feeding thousands of people miraculously, and do you remember what they did afterwards? They picked up the leftovers. Nothing was wasted. Those who waste, in fact, are painted in a rather negative light. We think of the Prodigal Son who ***"squandered [wasted] his estate with loose living"*** (Luke 15:13).

In the New Testament, the emphasis (in terms of commandments) seems to shift a little bit. Instead of detailed rules, we have some larger concepts at work. And so for Christians, we are called to live lives of contentment, unburdened by the constant struggle of getting more and more. We think of what the Lord said in Luke 12:15, ***"Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."*** There is more to life than stuff. The main idea here, though, is that we as human beings have been given the earth to manage. We might compare it to going out of town and leaving the keys to our house with a neighbor. While we are gone, we might want them to water the plants or whatever, but we certainly do not want them to trash the place. The same goes for the world around us – we are stewards or managers of God's creation.

III. **As we continue in our study, I would summarize another idea we need to keep in mind here, and that is: AS WE LOOK AFTER GOD'S CREATION, LET US BE SURE THAT WE DO NOT WORSHIP THE CREATION.**

In other words, let us always keep this issue in the proper perspective. Let us not put such an emphasis on the earth that we neglect some of those other things that are even more important. I would direct your attention to Romans 1 (p. 1758). As you are turning to Romans 1, I'd like to share that earlier this year, Barna Research Group did a study where they found that teens and young adults view "not recycling" as more immoral than viewing porn. This is what they found: 32% of teens and young adults say that viewing porn is "usually or

always wrong,” compared to 56% who say that not recycling is “usually or always wrong.” In the eyes of this current generation, then, not recycling is worse than viewing porn. I hope we can let that sink in a little bit. And I hope we can see that we are living in a messed up world. Somehow we have some priorities mixed up. There is a danger in raising the earth up almost as an idol, as we neglect some more important issues of the heart. Nevertheless, in Romans 1, Paul was addressing a society that had almost completely turned away from God, even to the point where they got just about everything turned around completely backwards. Notice, please, Romans 1:18-25,

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

If we were to continue reading, Paul goes on to outline how those in that society had continued to spiral downward into what we have referred to before as the “deepening darkness.” They became obsessed with homosexuality along with all kinds of other sins like greed, envy, murder, strife, and so on. But the point I want to make is that one symptom of this downward spiral is mentioned in verse 25, where we find that they ***“worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”*** In verse 20, Paul says that since the creation of the world, we can know something about God through what has been made. We look at the field of biology, for example, and we see God’s amazing design and creativity. We think of those displays at various zoos, where the signs say, “The Lion was DESIGNED to kill,” and so on. Yes, we would agree with that! We do see design in the world around us. But sometimes a culture will get to the point where they worship the creation itself instead of the Creator. And that is certainly a danger when it comes to respecting the earth. We need to keep everything in perspective. The world itself is not god, but it should point us to God.

IV. And that leads us to a final observation, and that is: Let us remember that this world and everything we see around us is TEMPORARY.

We cannot forget, then, that this world is basically a tool, a means to an end. We are here on this planet for a rather brief period of time, and our purpose for being here is to learn how to obey God. And so we need to try to keep everything in perspective. The earth and everything we see around us is quite temporary. Several months ago, we studied that passage in 2 Peter 3 where we have the reminder that God has promised to bring his creation to an end at some point in the future. Just as he destroyed it with water back in Genesis 6, the next time he will destroy the entire creation completely with fire, even to the point where the elements themselves will dissolve with intense heat. Along with the bulletin last night, I sent an article by Bret Carter, a friend of mine who is an English teacher and a Christian school administrator out in Colorado. For those of you without email, I have put a copy in your cubbyhole this morning (on paper rescued from the University, by the way). But his article makes this point, that we are only on this earth for a very short time, and our main job here is to get ready to move on.

Conclusion:

And that is where we leave our study. As Christians, we understand that the earth belongs to God, he is allowing us to manage it for a very short time, we are not to worship the earth, but instead, we must realize that our time on this earth is fairly short. So, we conserve, we do what we can, but we do not get discouraged. We do not worry about what the future holds. We have a powerful promise from God right after the flood. In Genesis 8:22, God reassured Noah after that global catastrophe. God gave the rainbow as a reminder, and then the Lord God made a promise, ***“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.”*** To me, that is comforting, especially in light of some of the panic we see around us on a daily basis.

I don't know about all of you, but back in my day, my elementary school had us absolutely terrified that we were heading for the next ice age. We had just come out of the winter of '78-79, and I remember in the early 80's we had the cover of one of the news magazines framed and posted inside the entrance to our school (Time or Newsweek or one of those), and the cover warned about the coming ice age and how we were all about to be buried under 5,000 feet of ice. Dr. Spock even got in on it. Some of you might remember Leonard Nimoy (who played Spock on Star Trek) and how he narrated some show in the late 70's about how a number of climatologists were saying that we would all be freezing to death in the near future. When you are 6 or 7 years old and Dr. Spock comes on the TV telling you that we are all going to freeze to death, it has an impact! That is probably what scared me into recycling! I put a link to that video on the church's Facebook page last night. We have the reassurance from God, though, that we will have seasons for as long as the earth stands. Let us not get overly discouraged, or overwhelmed, or distracted, by the condition of our environment. We have this assurance from God that it will last just as long as He wants it to last.

We do what we can to take care of the earth we have right now, but our real concern (our number one priority) is to be preparing for the next life. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter used the global flood during Noah's time to make a point, and this is Peter's conclusion, ***“Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*** Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he came back from the dead. We accept his offer of salvation through repentance and baptism. If you are ready to take that step, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com