

Hot Topics for a Hot Summer
Environmentalism
July 6, 2014

PRELUDE – God’s Not Dead
Worship – Creation Sings / The Love of God

Intro video

Feature – Big Yellow Taxi

Good morning everyone.

As Nathan said, today we are about to take on the first of seven hot topics that we’re going to be addressing this summer. This morning we’re going to be talking about *environmentalism* – concern for and care of the planet and its resources in both the short- and long-term. How should we think and act with respect to the current issues and concerns? How should those issues and concerns impact our daily lives?

- Should we recycle? What should we recycle? How far should we go in recycling?
- Should we try to reduce our carbon footprint – sell a car and take the bus or ride a bike? Change all of our light bulbs to LEDs or CFLs? Hang our clothes outside instead of throwing them in the dryer?

There are all kinds of ways we could take this. These are complex questions and, therefore divisive questions. If you pay any attention at all to the news or to politics, you know that hardly a day goes by without some depiction of the controversy and polarization that results from vastly different political positions or ideological viewpoints. Politicians and members of the media regularly demonize those who see things differently than they do ... which serves only to further polarize the debate.

In fact, I want to do a little experiment here at the beginning of this message to illustrate what I mean. I’m hoping this won’t tank the whole service by making everyone mad but, I want to play two videos for you – one of a politician and one of a media personality – denigrating the “other side” over its position in what is probably the greatest environmental issue of our day: global warming or climate change.

Is the climate changing? Is the planet really getting warmer? If so, are humans the cause? If so, what should be done if anything? I’m sure you’re aware of the controversy and you probably have an opinion on the matter. So, what I want you to do is listen to each speaker and pay attention to how you feel about what they’re saying. OK?

The first clip is President Obama speaking several weeks ago to the graduating class at the University of California, Irvine.

Let’s watch.

Video: “Obama Shames Climate Change Deniers” (3.5 min)

Alright, how do you feel about that? Especially if you disagree with his position? Doesn’t it make you at least a little

angry?

Especially when you're aware that the data show that there has been no increase in global average temperatures for the last 17-and-a-half years. ⁱ

<END SLIDE SET 1>

Climate change scientists have an explanation for why that isⁱⁱ but still the numbers are the numbers.

Now, let's listen to a different perspective. This next clip is part of an interview with syndicated columnist and Fox News contributor George Will. Pay attention to how you feel about what he says, especially if you hold an opinion opposite of the one we just heard.

Here we go.

Video: "George Will – Climate Change is Socialist Control" (3.0 min)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Ok, how do you feel about that? Does it offend you to be called a socialist when you're simply a person who believes that humans *are* having some effect on climate; that we should at least *consider* the impact of that effect and take some kind of action if it is warranted?

Especially when you understand that – as Dr. Waleed Abdalati, Chief Scientist at NASA has put it

...

"If we put heat-trapping gas in the atmosphere, it will trap heat. That's indisputable."

Obviously, the question is how much does it take to produce negative consequences? But the principle itself is not in question. It's not a political statement. It's not socialism. It's just reality.

Ground Rules Review

Now, my intention in all of this isn't to make anyone mad or uncomfortable but simply to illustrate the division and how it often feels to be on the other side of that fence ... *and* to raise the question, first of all, how should *Christians* approach this issue and secondly, how should we relate to other *Christians* who see it differently than we do?

If you were here last week, you know that I spent the entire message focusing on that second question when I gave the three "ground rules" for this series.

How should we relate to other Christians who see things differently than we do?

#1. Never forget whose side you are on.

#2. Recognize – and respect – the freedom of others in "matters of conscience."

#3. Believe that loving one another is more important than being right about whatever issue is on the table.

I won't go back into all of that this morning – the message is posted online in the media section of our website if you missed it or want to hear it again – but I do want to re-emphasize that first principle again because it's foundational to

the other two and it's crucial now that we're actually talking about a specific issue.

If you're a follower of Jesus – if you have received him as your savior and you have invited him to lead you and guide you – your primary allegiance is to Him above all others. You are on *His* side before any other side. You are first and foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven not of the United States or any other country. You are first and foremost a Christian – not a Republican or a Democrat, a Conservative or a Progressive, a Fundamentalist or a Liberal, a Climate Change Believer or a Climate Change Denier.

Obviously, even as a Christian, you will have opinions that align you with certain groups ... but those groups and opinions are not your identity. Your identity – along with every other believer (including those believers who hold the exact opposite opinion of you on these issues) – is that you are a fallen sinner yet totally loved and completely saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone. By the cross of Christ and resurrection of Christ, you have been adopted into the family of God as a beloved son or daughter because of what He has done ... which means ... not only that Jesus is your big brother, but that all of those “backwards Tea Partiers” who are believers and all of those “wacko environmentalists” who are believers are also your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And it's people like you – and them – that the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote this in his letter to the church at Rome.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

When Paul tells believers to be of one mind and one voice, he's not talking about being of one mind concerning *issues*. He's talking about being of one mind – the word literally means “having the same passion” – about bringing glory to God.

When *that* – seeing that Jesus is known and loved and honored in this world – when that is our primary passion, that's how we can live and love as brothers and sisters even though we disagree. That's how unity of heart is maintained even though there is not uniformity of opinion. The passions we have – legitimate passions – over minimizing our carbon footprint or reducing waste or becoming more energy efficient (*or not doing any of those things!*) becomes secondary to our passions for Jesus to be lifted up as savior.

And if they are *not* secondary it's a sign that we are not mature in our faith.

Paul says that God's desire is that ...

... the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13 (NIV)

Unity in the faith – not uniformity of opinion – is a sign of maturity in Christ.

I just think that's critical to remember as we go forward in talking about how believers should approach environmental issues.

A Confession (and a Warning)

So, what about that? How should being a follower of Jesus affect the lens through which we look at these issues?

Before we get into that, I probably should lay my cards on the table here and make something of a confession on this. *Throughout my life, I have not been an environmentally-conscious individual.* My greatest commitment (if you can call it that) to the environment has been to put some of my trash into a blue bin and put it on the curb once a week so that it can be recycled. And I don't do it every week because I'm not too convinced that it's even worth it or makes that big of a difference.

Part of my approach towards the issue is a result of laziness and part of it is skepticism. Right or wrong, I've always felt that much of the "environmental angst" in our culture is overblown and hype. And that has greatly influenced my thinking and my actions (or lack thereof).

Unfortunately, and this is also part of my confession, what has *not* influenced my thinking and actions – sad to say – is the scripture, and what God says about caring for the environment. So, preparing for this message was not only educational for me personally, it was also a bit of a rebuke. It was a call for me *to repent* which, as we have said on many occasions, means to change the way we think about things; to stop looking at things from a human vantage point and start looking at them from the perspective of God's Kingdom. And that transformation of thinking – that "renewing of the mind" as Paul labels it in Romans 12 – is what brings about transformation of behavior.

Now, before I move on to that, I think it might be valuable for me to share a little more about my reasons for skepticism and hesitancy to embrace any kind of environmental concern. And *I think that* because I suspect that many of you are in the same place as I am because, like me, you come from a conservative evangelical Christian background or you grew up in the Catholic Church which is also very conservative theologically.

If that's your background it's pretty likely that whenever you heard voices in our culture encouraging you to be earth-friendly you were resistant to it for one or all of the following reasons. I say you but, again, I mean me. These are my reasons and I suspect they apply to you, too.

1. I don't want to be guilty of "earth worship" (which is idolatry).

A lot of people who are really big into environmental causes are also literally earth worshippers. And the Bible warns against that not only in the 10 Commandments but throughout the New Testament.

For example, Paul writes:

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, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. Romans 1:20-25 (NIV)

A lot of environmentalist activity comes out of that kind of thinking: worshipping and serving the creation rather than the creator. And that just makes me a little nervous so I haven't wanted to come close to that.

2. I also don't want to be identified with a movement that advocates "saving the whales" or Mother Earth ... but not the unborn.

That's pretty harsh, I know, but this is my confession so I don't need to make it pretty. That's just the plain truth of it.

To me, it seems hypocritical that you would value plant life or animal life above human life but, to the people who think that way, it's not inconsistent or hypocritical because a lot of environmentalism is rooted in the belief that human beings are just one more rung on the evolutionary ladder and nothing special.

But I just can't go there.

Jesus once said ...

Not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.
Matthew 10:29-31 (NLT)

The clear witness of the Bible is that the natural world is made for man, not man for the natural world. Humanity is the crowning act of creation, and it is to humanity that God has joined himself, once and for all, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, I'm hesitant to get too interested in a movement that believes otherwise.

The third reason I have been resistant is that ...

3. The primary concern of the Bible is culture not nature.

The scriptures – and Jesus himself – have much to say about how people are supposed to relate to one another and to God. And much of what is said in that regard is very direct. It's clearly a priority.

In addition, the stories in the scripture are about primarily about people and relationships not about nature. And so, I – and probably many other believers – have tended to minimize and even overlook what it does say about caring for the creation.

One more reason that I have been skeptical and resistant:

4. I believed that Christians are going to spend eternity in Heaven (plus, doesn't the Bible say that the earth is going to be destroyed by fire?) so why bother?

Why get all worked up over pollution or the long-term quality of water and air? Why be concerned about the kinds of natural resources we depend on and the consequences of that dependence if our ultimate destination as Christians is an

eternal spiritual existence in the presence of God – a permanent melding of our spirits with His spirit?

I think a lot of Christians have been influenced by this misinterpretation of the Bible and have been affected the same way that I have been: “*why bother?* This physical earth just doesn’t matter that much. It’s more important to save people than to save the planet.”

But as followers of Jesus we simply cannot ignore the great social issues of our day. God’s Spirit constantly calls us back into the realm of the real world, where there are real pains and real struggles and real issues.

I’ll have more to say to say about this in just a minute but I hope you see the point of what I am getting at. Some of the things I have believed – right or wrong – have had a huge impact on my thinking in this area and, quite frankly, have caused me to overlook some of what God *does* say about the environment.

- See, even though most of the Bible does deal with culture instead of nature, there *are* parts that do deal with how we are to interact with nature.
- Even though humans are the crown of creation, biblically speaking, creation itself matters to God, too.

And it is sinful – it falls short of the glorious purpose for which God has created humans – to overlook those things.

Now, lest anyone think that I intend to chastise only the conservatives (or maybe I should say the environmental agnostics or environmental skeptics) this morning, *that is not the case* because the truth is – and again, I am speaking to Christians here (people who have believed that Jesus is their savior and have received his grace and forgiveness and his Spirit and are his children) – the truth is that some of you who are, shall I say, “environmental enthusiasts” ...

- Are dangerously close to idolatry. You believe that God is in everything and that by caring for the environment you are somehow connecting with God.
- Some of you are convinced that human beings are a blight on creation; that the world would be so much better off without us. You are dangerously close to denying and minimizing the truth that God put his image in human beings and that, because we have that quality, we are special with respect to the rest of creation.
- Some of you have become so concerned about nature that you are dangerously close to overlooking what Jesus says is the greatest commandment: to love God and love people.
- And some of you have become so concerned about the condition of the earth and its need for salvation that you are dangerously close to losing sight of the condition of people before God and their need for salvation.

Ok, now that I’ve met the goal of offending everyone here this morning, let’s move on and talk about a biblical perspective on the environment.

A Biblical Framework

And I’ll just say right up front that this is not going to be very heavy on application. I’m not going to tell you “10 things you can do to integrate this in your life” because it’s going to be different for different people.

What matters is that you listen to God as He speaks to you and guides you within this framework that I'm about to give you ... *and* ... you respect the freedom of other believers to do the same – even if their conclusions and applications look different than yours. You don't look down on anyone because they don't do what you do in what is clearly a matter of conscience.

I think there are four critical parts to the framework and I should say that I am indebted at this point to Dr. Tim Keller, who is the pastor of Redeemer Church in NYC, for the way these are expressed. If you've heard me speak for any time at all, you know that he is one of my favorite authors and Christian thinkers. He's been very influential in how I personally understand and apply the gospel in our current culture.

Ok, here's the first element of the framework.

1. The goodness of creation.

According to Genesis, when God created the Earth and all that is in it, including humans, He pronounced it "good." And part of its goodness is that it reflects the glory of who God is.

*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.
Psalm 19:1-4 (NIV)*

I think this is a good way of avoiding the trap of thinking of nature as being one with God. It reflects God; it is not God. It is sacred but it is not divine. It's kind of like an artist and a painting. The painting isn't the artist; it reflects the artist.

To push the analogy a bit further, when we read in Genesis that God puts man and woman in the garden to tend it, that's kind like the curator in the art gallery. The artist creates the paintings but the curator manages the collection. He or she decides where and how to display the pieces so that they can be experienced and enjoyed at maximum effect.

That's our job as humans. God is the artist; the world is his gallery and we are the curators. We help the art – nature – do what it is supposed to do – praising and reflecting God's goodness – by letting it be what it is supposed to be.

And that kind of leads to the second element of the framework that we find in the scripture:

2. The stewardship of creation.

This piece causes a lot of consternation because it comes from the passage in Genesis where, at the crowning moment of creation, God creates humans. Then, the Bible says ...

*God blessed them, and God said unto them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."
Genesis 1:28 (KJV)*

It's the word "dominion" that causes a lot of consternation for people because, in some cases, Christians have used it as a justification for domination – of animals, of resources and even other human beings created in the image of God. And so, that leads some to want to throw this out completely.

But that's not necessary because domination is a poor understanding of the word picture in Hebrew. The word translated as dominion actually carries with it the idea of *dedication* not domination. Humans are to be dedicated to the proper management and appropriation of what God has created. That's what stewardship is.

The biblical picture is that human beings, as image bearers of God, are placed as stewards over the created order. So, we bear a responsibility for how we treat and use it. God intends for us to use and transform the natural world around us for good purposes. Proper use is not misuse.

In fact, God specifically speaks against misuse and abuse of creation. For example ... in the law of Moses we read the command:

"You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." Deuteronomy 25:4 (NLT)

Some of you farmers probably know how this works. But I believe what they used to do was to hook up the oxen and the oxen would walk around in a circle on this circular stick and the oxen would walk on the grain and smash that grain down.

Now, if you were a farmer and you wanted to maximize your profit, you would muzzle the oxen because you really don't want to give your oxen 3-5% of your grain. You want to maximize everything so you're going to put the muzzle on it. But God says "no." It's a mistreatment of the animal and inappropriate stewardship.

Proverbs 12:10 says ...

The godly care for their animals, but the wicked are always cruel. Prov 12:10 (NLT)

To keep the earth from being exploited by profiteers is a mark of righteousness, according to the Bible.

Of course, where this stewardship principle has the greatest challenge of application is in trying to balance the need for economic prosperity verse protecting the environment. "How much should we sacrifice one in service of the other?" the question goes. It's a hard question.

So, we have the goodness of creation (in that it reflects God but is not God) and the stewardship of creation as the first and second elements of our framework. Here's the third:

3. The fallenness of creation

I don't understand why this is, but for some reason because you and I and all of humanity are fallen (sinners), nature is also marred. Nature didn't sin, but nature bears the consequence of our sin. God did not make this world to be full of disease and death and destruction.

When Jesus in John 8 says "before Abraham was I am," He is saying "I am god." Then a short while later, in John 11 at

Lazarus; tomb he was furious at the devastation of nature - he knows this isn't the way it was supposed to be. And he does something to change the course of nature.

Now, obviously, we cannot do what He did - raise the dead - but we can attempt to bind up the wounds of creation and its impact on humans. If we see things in nature that aren't what they should be - if they need repair, we can do it. God expects us to do it. And, in many ways we *have* been doing it and need to keep on doing it.

Did you know (and I am quoting from an amazing article from the Acton Institute) that ...

In the last three centuries, life expectancy in advanced economies has risen from about thirty years to nearly eighty. Cures have been found to once-fatal diseases, and some diseases have been eliminated entirely. Famine, which once occurred, on average, seven times per century in Western Europe and lasted a cumulative ten years per century, is now unheard of there. While the average Western European family in A.D. 1700 lived in a hovel with little or no furniture, no change of clothing, and barely enough food to sustain a few hours' agricultural labor per day -and, of course, they also lacked electricity, plumbing, water and sewage treatment, and all the appliances we often take for granted -today the average family lives in a well-built home with all those amenities, along with enough food to make obesity, not hunger, the most common nutritional problem even among the "poor."

The article goes on to say that...

These advances have also given rise to a laudable expansion in people's focus on the need for environmental stewardship. For as people come to feel more secure about their basic needs, they begin to allocate more of their scarce time, energy, and resources to attaining formerly less urgent ends. Consequently, the movement for environmental protection has grown as Western wealth has grown, giving rise to a strong environmental consciousness and to protective environmental legislation.

Again, getting back to what is the relationship between environmental protection and wealth because a lot of times there's a thought that there's a clash between the two, that you can't have the two at the same time. And the article goes on to say ...

This false choice not only threatens to prolong widespread poverty, disease, and early death in the developing world, but also undermines the very conditions essential to achieving genuine environmental stewardship.ⁱⁱⁱ

I thought that was interesting and may provide some insight into the question of balance between economics and environmental protection.

One more piece of the framework; the final piece at least for this discussion ...

4. The future restoration of creation.

God is so committed to this material creation that he is someday going to heal it finally, for good. The book of Revelation doesn't have believers going up to heaven but has heaven coming down to earth. We're going to live in a material world forever. No other religion says that.

- Secularism says the world is going to burn up

- Other religions say the world is going to go into a spiritual existence
- Only the bible says this world is so permanent that god will heal it; that Jesus died to redeem it.

But until then ... you and I are to be busy taking care of the place. The Apostle Paul made that quite clear to in his second letter to the church at Thessalonica. In his first letter, he gave them lots of info about what Jesus' return would look like but it had a really bad effect.

So he had to write another letter (2 Thessalonians), which said, in essence: "I've heard that you've been quitting your jobs, you have been laying around and doing nothing, because you think that Christ is returning and the world is ending." But Paul serves up a rebuke. "Get a job, support yourself and your family, care for others—again, the poor and the vulnerable who can't care for themselves—and do what you can while you have time, essentially, to make the world a better place, because nobody knows when that's going to happen."^{iv} And I think that's good advice for all of us as well.

Conclusion

So - goodness of creation, stewardship of creation, fallenness of creation and the eventual future restoration of creation - what does all this mean in practical terms? Honestly, I don't know!

But that's how repenting works. You change your mind – you open your mind to the possibility – no, the reality – that you have been wrong – and then God begins to change it even more. And when that happens, you change how you live.

I can tell you that, for me at least

- I think I'll pay a little more attention to the blue recycle bin.
- I'll try to be a bit more conscious about how much water I use.
- Maybe I'll go ahead and switch the rest of my lights to LED.
- I'll probably pay a bit more attention to where the politicians stand on issues related to the environment.
- I'll certainly be following the data on global warming.
- And I'll be very concerned that we not burden those least able to afford it by adopting policies that end up penalizing them as we try to be more efficient.
- The last thing for me is if I do all these things, what difference is it going to make? Very little in the overall picture of things. But sometimes it's about the principle more than it is about the effect. I think that this is one of those things where you say, "I'm going to do this because God says so. Whether it has a huge effect, that's secondary."

And I'm sure God will show me more in the coming days how this will work out in my life, how this should work out in my life.

I'll pray He does the same for you.

In fact, let's do that right now!

<PRAYER>

Feature – What a Wonderful World

CLOSING COMMENTS

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.climatedepot.com/2014/03/04/updated-global-temperature-no-global-warming-for-17-years-6-months-no-warming-for-210-months/>

ⁱⁱ Interesting video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W705cOtOHJ4>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.acton.org/public-policy/environmental-stewardship/theology-e/biblical-perspective-environmental-stewardship>

^{iv} http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/climate_desk/2014/05/conservative_christians_and_climate_change_five_arguments_for_why_one_should.2.html