**The earth’s environment – worked and kept by faithful stewards**

Text: Genesis 1:28

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 1:24-31, 2:15; Colossians 3:1-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 171, 139, 188, 474, 179

**Series:** Caring for creation (#2)

**Theme:** The creation mandate to subdue the earth and have dominion over the biosphere.

**Proposition:** As faithful stewards of God’s creation we are called to work and keep the natural environment for His glory.

**Introduction**

Do you enjoy being out in the garden? Many of us do. We spend time tending our vegetable patches, flower beds, lawns, and/or indoor plants or going to a park in the city to walk amongst the trees there. Gardening really is the ‘oldest profession’; going back almost right to the beginning of the world when God put Adam in the paradise of Eden to work it and keep it (Gen 2:15). After the Fall, when the ground became cursed as a result of mankind’s rebellion against God, the perfection of Eden was lost, and the work of growing food became arduous in a natural world which had become hostile to mankind (Gen 3:18-19). Any gardeners here will know about the challenges of weeds, pests and diseases as they seek to work and keep their garden environment.

The focus of this sermon is much broader than gardening, it is the environmental task which God gave to Adam and Eve, as representatives of the whole human race. Back then He said, *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth”* (Gen 1:28). This far-reaching assignment is sometimes referred to as the ‘creation mandate’, the ‘dominion mandate’ or the ‘cultural mandate’. The term ‘cultural mandate’ is sometimes used in connection with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) to include striving to affect world culture by proclaiming the gospel and also by influencing public debate and discussion with a Christian worldview.

A further, and much more controversial, extension of the term includes seeking to establish civil governments who will enact explicitly Christian laws in order to subdue society. Variants of this approach include ‘Kingdom Now Theology’, ‘Dominion Theology’ and ‘Christian reconstructionism’. This sermon will not consider the Biblical validity of extending the ‘creation mandate’ to include aspects of human culture, but will focus entirely on our relationship with the natural environment on this earth. We’ll do this under three headings:

1. Mandated to care
2. Working and keeping the biosphere
3. Repentance and sanctification
4. **Mandated to care**

Many Christians are actively involved in caring for others. Some work in the ‘caring professions’ where they look after the needs of others for their health and education. Caring can be defined as ‘serious attention or consideration to do something correctly or to avoid damage or risk’. Christ’s ministry can accurately be described as the greatest of all caring works. He said, “*The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*." (Luke 19:10). The grace of God is a result of His care for what He has made. As we heard this morning, David wrote of God’s care for people in Psalm 8 (v4) “*What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you* ***care*** *for him?”.* The Hebrew word here translated ‘care’ means to ‘pay attention to, observe, visit’. To care for something or somebody means to have an active involvement and to attend to their needs.

The Lord God is not remote and detached from what He has made, He is immanent and active in His providential rule. God is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:6), in Christ, holding all things together (Col 1:17). We see this in His care for His chosen people for example, when the enslaved Israelites were oppressed in Egypt. “*And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob*” (Ex 2:24). ‘Remembered’ here means that God brought to mind His previous promises and determined to act. He cared! Later in history, God brought all His chosen people out of bondage to sin and death through the person and work of Christ. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”. (John 3:16). He cares greatly!

The gracious care of the Lord extends to all people who are blessed to receive the good things of this earth without deserving them. “*He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*” (Matt 5:45). He cares, even for His enemies! The care of God extends beyond people made in His image to all of His creation, both the natural environment and the creatures who depend upon the ecological systems on the earth. He makes ‘springs gush forth in the valleys’ (Ps 104:10). He causes the grass to grow for livestock, that He may bring forth food from the earth (Ps 104:14). When He sent the prophet Jonah to Nineveh He expressed His compassion – not only for the people in that enemy Assyrian city, but also for the animals there (Jonah 4:11).

The multiplicity of species on the planet gives glory to God, as well as providing for His inter-dependent creatures. At the time of the global flood God cared for this biodiversity by acting to preserve creatures in the ark. He instructed Noah: “*And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female*” (Gen 6:19).

All this to say that God’s care is **not just** about people. As creatures made in His image, our care is also **not just** to be about people. We see this truth revealed clearly in the creation mandate: *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth”* (Gen 1:28). The root meaning of the Hebrew word translated ‘subdue’ can be used in the sense of ‘treading down’ as when an enemy is conquered (e.g. Num 32:22,29). The word translated ‘dominion’ usually means to rule over a nation or a group of people (e.g. Eze 29:15) and can also refer to divine rule over the earth (e.g. Ps 72:8; 110:2).

You can see how some people could readily use the ‘creation mandate’ as a licence for unbridled exploitation of the natural resources and environment of the earth. ‘Treading down’ the natural environment and ruling over the remnant that survives. Scripture has been used throughout history to justify many evil deeds including the oppression of people as slaves, ‘religious wars’ and male tyranny over women.

It is **not** the Bible that is at fault, but the sinful desire of people to twist God’s Word to condone and endorse their own desires, agendas and greed. It’s important to notice that the creation mandate was given **before** the Fall and has helpfully been described by Calvin DeWitt as ‘sinless dominion’. It is this God-like rule which we are called to have over the natural environment of this earth. As part of His perfect plan to recover both a people for Himself and a world where they can live forever, we, as His image-bearers, have a mandate to care for His present world by working and keeping the biosphere, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Working and keeping the biosphere**

The ‘biosphere’ is the global ecosystem composed of living organisms and the natural environments from which they derive energy and nutrients. Scientists are understanding in more and more detail the astounding complexity of the inter-relationships between life-forms and natural habitats on the earth. ‘Wild’ ‘untamed’ nature is far more ordered and structured that most people who have grown up in the industrialised world have realised. Indigenous ‘native’ peoples dwelling in their ancestral lands generally live much more in tune with the natural environment than do those of us who inhabit towns and cities.

Our common ancestor Adam, the first gardener, was called to be in tune with the environment of Eden. God took him and put him there to work and keep the garden that He had made both for His own glory and man’s good. The Hebrew word translated ‘keep’ means to ‘watch over in order to preserve something or somebody’. The biosphere which the Lord God had created in Eden was naturally productive and resilient, but clearly required ongoing work to maintain it in a sustainable ecological equilibrium. The work which God had prepared for Adam to do had purpose and value.

Adam was designed to be a student of nature. As well as being the first gardener, he was also the first naturalist, carefully naming the other creatures which God had made. To name a creature was to observe and understand its unique anatomy and place within the biosphere (Gen 2:19).

God had provided natural resources that were to be worked with to produce output which would be of benefit, not only for Adam and Eve and their offspring, but also for other creatures for whom God also cares. As Jesus illustrated in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), God-given resources are not to remain untouched and ‘hidden in the ground’; as the unfaithful steward did with his one talent. However, natural resources are not to be used and then discarded to the detriment of others. Polluting lifestyles, if sufficiently damaging, can break God’s great commandment to care for fellow image-bearers.

We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matt 22:39); to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil 2:4). People in many poorer nations suffer from the effects of pollution, loss of soil fertility, species extinction, deforestation, depleted fish stocks, lack of clean water, hunger, starvation and destructive weather events. The lifestyles of those in richer countries like our own can result in damaged environments for others. God cares for the vulnerable – therefore so should we. As a nation, was our exporting of plastic waste up until 2017 to China in keeping with the creation mandate? Now we export our waste plastic to the poorer nations of Indonesia and Malaysia. Is this right in the eyes of the Lord?

There are some patterns of godly rule which God has revealed to us in His Word which help us to understand what working and keeping the natural environment by exercising caring dominion looks like:

* A king in submission to God was not to exercise his dominion for personal gain (Deut 17:16-17).
* A good shepherd was not rule harshly (Eze 34:4).
* A faithful steward does not waste the owner’s possessions (Luke 16:1) but as we’ve already seen uses them wisely in productive endeavours (Matt 25:16).

When we, and others, live in an environmentally irresponsible way we do not reflect God’s image, but are like wicked kings, bad shepherds and unfaithful stewards. The Bible does give us clear principles for how we should work and keep the natural environment. These are topics about which the church must speak out about. Silence can imply that we do not care about the ‘groaning creation’ of which we, together with the whole of humanity, are a part.

The practical credibility of the Christian worldview depends on its ability to relate to the issues of daily life in a meaningful way. For us, brothers and sisters in Christ, caring for the earth’s environment is a topic which relates directly to our repentance and our sanctification, which brings us to our third point.

1. **Repentance and sanctification**

We believe that all of life is to be lived in worship before our Lord. This truth is expressed in 1 Cor 10:31: “*Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*”. Caring for the natural world is part of ‘whatever you do’! We all make decisions about which products we will purchase and how we will dispose of waste materials. Have we made these decisions with the creation mandate in view?

We all have opportunities to speak to others about the natural environment from a Biblical worldview. Do people know that God has a plan to fully restore this earth to a permanently sustainable habitat for His people? How will they know this if we don’t tell them?

It is wise to consider whether there is a need for personal or collective repentance. Have we been faithful stewards of this earth? God says in 2 Chronicles 7:14 “*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land*”.

There is an end-time (eschatological) focus in Scripture. We know that this first earth will pass away when Christ returns (Rev 21:1). In faith we do desire a better country, that is a heavenly one (Heb 11:16). However, the Lord has not given us this knowledge in order to give us an excuse to ignore the creation mandate. Sanctification – growth in godliness - has purpose in this life even though we know this does not save us and that it will not be completed until we are glorified on the New Earth. Likewise, God calls us to faithful environmental stewardship now, even though we know that this earth will not last.

Just as our progress in sanctification glories God and is His purpose for us in this life, so our progress in understanding and obeying the creation mandate also glorifies our Lord and is part of His will for us in this life. When Paul wrote to the Colossians saying, “*set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*” (Col 3:2), he did not mean that we are not to care about the physical earth. Rather we are not to be ‘earthly’ in our attitudes and behaviour.

The call is to put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator (Col 3:10). The new self is a person with a godly character; someone who ‘thinks God’s thoughts after Him’ and who joins with Him in His plans and purposes. This new self is ‘*created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*’ (Eph 4:24).

As we’ve seen, God cares for the world He has made, not only people but also other creatures and the environment in which they live. Here’s an opening for a conversation which you or I could have in the weeks to come: “I am an environmentalist” To which you might get the response, ‘O, so you’re a tree-hugger”. Then we can explain why we value trees, but that we don’t worship them or anything else apart from God! We can speak of the hope that we have in Christ who is coming back to this earth to make this planet new again. It’s a conversation you can have with your neighbour when you are putting out your rubbish bins, or when you are in the garden, working and keeping it. “*In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*” (1 Pet 3:15).

AMEN.