

**Series: BETWEEN THE TREES - March 7, 2010**

**IS GOD...GREEN?  
Genesis 1:26-31**

1. Over the past 30 years I've done a *lot* of talks and studies and seminars, but there's one subject—to my own embarrassment--I've *never* spoken on. The *environment*. I can't explain why the *silence*--except that it's an issue that God has been stirring my heart on more recently.

-As I thought about it, speaking before this would've been like someone who sees people horking down hamburgers and fries and milkshakes at McDonald's and snorts, "Don't they have any *self control*?" when, truth is, before they started their diet 2 days ago, that's what *they* were doing!

-And the question I've been working through is, **What does God think about environmental issues?**

- a. Like many of you—I *love* the outdoors and the wonder of mountains, streams, lakes and forests. As a kid, my Dad used to take us out and point out all the different kinds of roots and trees and nuts in the forest—and I treasure those experiences. The thought of losing any part of that beauty and wonder hurts.
- b. Recently, I've thought about how differently I was raised—as opposed to how I'm raising my children. We heated our house with a coal furnace, we never had TV—or much electronic stuff at all. We had one bathroom—with a *bath tub*—no 20 minute hot showers! And we had one car. To get somewhere, I walked, rode my bike—or, when we moved to Erie, took public transit. Pre-packaged and pre-cooked foods weren't even available—or affordable.
- c. And I've thought about what I've *seen*—but didn't pay much attention to. Like fishing with my Dad on Lake Erie—and seeing all this brown junk pouring out of a paper mill into the lake. The pollution and dead fish on the beaches. And when we lived near Pittsburgh, I saw the rusted brown hulks of defunct steel mills on the Ohio River. I used to water ski on it—and you had to watch out for all the junk floating on it.

-Then I lived just outside of NYC for 4 years—and saw the brown haze hanging over the city, the decaying inner city—right on the Hudson River—so polluted you could sit on the bank and watch the animal tracks float by.

-But—just being vulnerable here—when Ralph Nader began his *green* campaigns against environmental pollution and damage—I dismissed him as a *tree-hugger*. I thought—probably like a lot of followers of Jesus did back then, "Hey, with all the brokenness in the world—this is the *least* of our worries. And to be honest, I felt helpless in the face of the whole environmental mess.

-What I've realized over the last number of years is how much God loves and values *all* people—and *all* He has created. And I want to publicly apologize to

you for not being a better leader in this area. Some of you are so far ahead of me in this stuff—you just need to know, I'm the little dot in your rearview mirror! So, I have some catch-up to do.

2. What you read at the beginning of everything is that God created both the **place** and the **people**—and He declared both, **very good!** And God's mission is about rescuing, redeeming and renewing both the **people** He created—and the **place** He created. This earth, this universe—is not some kind of a throw-away envelope. At the end of this era, when God's Kingdom comes—and his loving, wise reign is finally realized over everything, the One sitting on the throne says:

**“Look, I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:5 NLT)**

-When you go back to the beginning and read about God's **joy** in what He created - and the responsibility He gave to us to care for it, it's quite sobering. In the opening song about Creation, there's one phrase that gets repeated over and over again for emphasis. **God saw that it was GOOD!** Earth, sky, land, seas, lakes, rivers, trees - all the animals from insects and birds to mammals to the great sea creatures - even snakes and spiders -- **“It's VERY GOOD!”** Then these words:

**Then God said, "Let us make human beings 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." So God created human beings 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." (Genesis 1:26-28 TNIV)**

- a. Look at the wording here. God creates humans—us—**in his own image**. This is repeated all through this story. And this gives us both dignity—and **incredible** responsibility. Think about the vastness of all that God has made. David writes in Psalm 24:

**The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. (Psalm 24:1 NLT)**

-He created everything, it belongs to Him—and He has placed it in **our** hands to manage it; to care for it—not just for ourselves, but for people yet unborn. Let's take a look at some of the words describing what that involves.

-The first word is to us: **Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth.** Would anyone agree that we've pretty much nailed that one? But then the language changes to refer to **how** we manage what God has made so that our fruitfulness—the **increase in numbers** doesn't destroy it. The first word is, **Subdue.**

-As I've mentioned before, some of Lori's ancestors—some of **your** ancestors were the first to settle the Markham area. And not too far north of us are the

same fields they worked. How many of you think the land just **came** that way? It didn't. I remember hearing a story about a pastor who visited an old man's farm—and saw acres of corn, soybeans, and wheat growing in perfect rows. He said, "My, look what the Lord hath made!" The old farmer drawled, "You shoulda seen it when He had it all to himself!"

-The word **subdue** is about clearing rocks and weeds. It's about training a horse to pull a plow. It's about training your puppy not to use your rug for a latrine. It's about trimming wild grapevines and putting up fences so the animal population doesn't harvest your crops before you do. God says, "It's okay. Go ahead. Subdue—**control** the earth so that it's useful and safe and productive.

- b. The second word God uses in his initial instructions is **rule over it**. And it's clear from what God is saying here that He has given us authority over it. -Now, this word is also used in the Bible to talk about parents; that they are to **rule over their children**. What does that mean? Does it mean that we can just treat them anyway we feel like it—because we're bigger and we're in charge?

-**Absolutely not!** If you know anything about parenting—you know that leadership means keeping children safe to grow and develop. Sometimes good parenting means sacrificing what **you** want to help them and care for them. When you're in charge, you have an obligation to protect what you've been given responsibility for. To **rule over something** is **not** about the person doing the ruling; it means to give leadership in such a way that what you're responsible for **prosper**.

- c. There's another set of words used to describe the responsibilities we've been given. They're found in narrative account of Genesis 2:

**The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15 TNIV)**

-Notice the first phrase. **Work it!** Sounds like an exercise video—or a bad rap song doesn't it? And the call to **work it** came before the Fall. Interesting, isn't it, that even before the Fall—there was apparently all the responsibilities that go with gardens—planting, cultivating—i.e. **WORK!**

- d. The final bit of instruction is—**take care of it**. When someone says to you as a friend, "I'm going to be gone for a couple of months—could you **take care of my house?**" Does it mean, "Just go help yourself; move in,—trash it if you want!" No. "Guard it. Protect it. Treat it like you know **I'd** treat it if I was there."
- e. Now, did you pick up on these four key responsibilities God has given us for the **place** He's entrusted to us?  
**SUBDUED IT. RULE OVER IT. WORK IT. TAKE CARE OF IT.**  
-Who does it belong to? Well, the earth and all that is in it is the **Lord's**. But He has placed it in our care.

3. There's an interesting thing I've begun to notice about God—and it's found all through the Bible. God cherishes the people He's created—but He also cherishes the **place** He's put us in and entrusted to our care. It starts in Genesis 1&2—and continues through the Bible. He calls Abram our of Ur—to a new land; a good land. A **place**. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, it was **clear** that God had a place in mind for them—a **land** He would give them to settle in. A rich land—a **good** land.

a. And God gave very specific instructions on how they were to care for this place He had given them. There was a rhythm to how the land was used. Every seventh year—it was to lie fallow for an entire year. And they were warned about getting greedy; that if they didn't give it the rest it needed, they would be hauled into exile—and **then** it would rest.

-Surprisingly, God even gave instructions to them about not harming the fruit trees when they inherited the land.

b. God was and is also interested in the respectful treatment of animals. Proverbs 12:10 says,

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

Some of you may remember the story of Jonah—angry at God, waiting for him to nuke Nineveh. And the story closes with God's question:

**“Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, *not to mention all the animals*. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?”  
(Jonah 4:11 NLT)**

-Jesus talked about nature a lot—and said that His Father—who can see the Universe in a single glance—notices and cares when even **sparrows** fall from the sky! According to the Bible, God loves us with reckless love—and He also loves **all** He has made! And He has placed His creation in our hands—with the understanding that we will care for it and not abuse it.

c. Paul, in Romans 1, says that creation is a witness that tells people about **Who** God is—and what He's like. How many of you have ever seen the Rocky Mountains on a crystal clear day? Or been up north on a quiet lake—with trees all around you? Or been in the forest in the Fall—with sunlight shining through the leaves? Or been on a rocky ocean shore in Newfoundland? Boy is that a powerful witness. When I'm there—it's almost like God whispers and says, “I **made** all this! Isn't it gorgeous?”

-Now—how many of you can relate to this? Of **course** you can! Creation does **powerful** things in the hearts of people who believe in God—and in those who don't! God's creation is a magnificent gift—and it adds value to every life in this planet!

d. There's one other fascinating piece about creation that may surprise you. Listen to what Paul, an early leader, says:

**Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. (Colossians 1:15-16a NLT)**

-All this has huge implications for me, a Christ-followers. Christ is supreme over all creation—and everything was made **through** Him. If He's my Lord—and He is—then what does that mean for me? For us?

4. Now. If creation has been placed in **our** care, there's an accountability question that begs to be asked: **How are we doing?** I mean, if God cherishes all He has made - and has asked us to manage it—told us to do something great with it--**how are we doing?** And the question gets personal. How am **I** doing?

-You've seen the stats on this, right? And, again, some of you are way, way, **way** ahead of me on this:

**\*That because of over use and over-fertilization—and how we dispose of waste-- a third of the earth's soil is now unfit for growing food.**

**\*That rain forests which once covered 14% of the earth—and are the key to our entire global eco-system—have been reduced to 6%. And the number goes down every year**

**\*That every year more of the ocean and more rivers, lakes and streams are polluted—which compromises the drinking water for up to a billion people.**

What kind of a grade would you give us managers on the kind of care we've given? Shout it out.

- a. There's a single analogy I've thought of that I think gets at the **heart** of our responsibility. The analogy is, **DOWNSTREAM.**

-Imagine that your house is on a river or stream. You love the stream. You get your water from it, your food from it—and the stream is a quiet place of beauty that **restores your soul.**

-But you're not the **only** one on this river. There are people **upstream** from you. And they are not **evil** people; they just don't think. They net all the fish out, build factories that suck water out, use it, and dump the residue back in. To have their trash and sewage disposed of properly costs a **lot** of money—so they just dump it into the river. **Downstream** is not a nice place to be!

- b. Here's the problem. It's the people who live **downstream** from us. Right now --and the future generations who will inherit this place.

-Does anyone know who suffers most when it comes to environmental issues? It's the poor. Especially the poor in developing lands. Of course, the other people who will likely have to pay the bill—and experience the health effects of

it will be our children and grand-children—and the children and grandchildren around the world.

-There is a place near North Bay where my family started vacationing over 35 years ago. You could travel by boat to a portage we simply called, **The Chutes**. It's old—and was used by the native population for centuries. A metal plaque was placed there to tell about this history. It was gorgeous and wild—where water roared down over the rocks into a deep pool—where there was fantastic fishing. But I digress! This portage was ancient—used, in fact, by Native Canadians for hundreds of years before we showed up.

-I used to take my sons there to camp and fish. But some local partiers found it—left junk there, spray-painted the rocks—and eventually stole even the sign. On a recent visit, I found out that camping had been outlawed there because of the vandalism. A few people can ruin things for everybody else.

- c. It's important to know that the environment is **not** a hopeless thing. God has built tremendous restorative qualities into this planet. And with some solid work—and some encouragement—a lot of the damage can be reversed. And some **has** been.

-I'm most familiar with Lake Erie because I grew up on it—and it has cleaned up a **lot** more quickly than anyone expected. I've recently been to Pittsburgh, and they've removed some of the old mills and cleaned up the rivers.

-Recycling has **really** taken hold—and a lot of you take it very seriously. **Blue boxes**—and **green bins** have become part of our vocabulary.

-The auto industry seems to **finally** be making strides toward zero emission cars.

-There's been a groundswell of people who are saying, "We've got stop living like we are the last generation who has to use this planet! Like all of the resources we enjoy are endless!

-Now, a lot of these movements are led by people who are simply thinking of the longevity of the planet. And rightfully so—I mean, that's a **good** thought, right? But **our** reason, as followers of Jesus and a part of His Kingdom—goes way deeper. We see our role in this as partners with God—called by Him to manage well—knowing that one day He will complete what we start!

- d. We just need to be clear that caring for this planet is **God's** idea. And He is at work all over the place guiding, working to rescue and restore what has been lost and damaged and contaminated. And God didn't just recently decide to go green; this has always been a part of His Mission! I've just been blind to it.

-Here's what I believe. When I read God's delighted comments over creation; when I see his power and majesty in the breathtaking beauty of what He's made; when I hear Jesus' stories about nature, and hear the commands of God to those first people to **take care of the earth**—I have to take seriously my

responsibility as one of those caretakers. And that means I—**we** work alongside our Creator God to reclaim and restore—to **save** what has been lost; the **people**—and the **place**, too. Would you agree?

5. Of course, the big question is... **what** can we do? Fortunately, we live in a world where a lot of brilliant, caring people are giving a lot of thought to that. The good news is that you and I are poised to truly make a difference. It's not complicated. And we do these things as an act of love for God—who cares about the damage to our planet—and as an act of love for the poor. Now, some of you could give some **marvelous** suggestions—and you'll have the opportunity to do that. Let me, as a comparative novice, make a few:

a. One is simply taking steps to use less electricity. Like using compact fluorescent bulbs. These things are little more expensive—but use about a quarter of the electricity of regular bulbs. It's a small thing—but it counts. If every home in North America just replaced **one** regular bulb—with one of these, we'd save enough energy to light more than 3 million homes per year. And they last longer!

b. Another thing that I think people are catching on to. Bottled water. I realize it has its place—but **green** says that we should be using metal bottles that can be washed and reused. It saves us money, it saves the energy it takes to recycle the bottles, and it keeps them out of landfills and campsites.

-Some interesting research I've come across on **Fiji** water. Anyone heard of it? Well, you can buy it for about \$50 for a case of 24 bottles. Celebrities love it! But the **back story** on it is that this water gets pumped out of an already fragile eco-system. And because it's so popular, 3 huge diesel engines have to run 24/7. The irony is that half of the people on the island it comes from don't have drinkable water. See, the dots **are** connected—and we just need to live with our eyes open! Right?

c. I think we need to think more deeply about our use of water—and ask, “Do I need a 20 minute shower every day?”

-I think we need to think about what we buy—and what we carry it home in. These reusable bags are great! See, even though we have recycling—that takes power and money and effort. I think this impacts the kinds of cars we buy. Some of you are all over that!

d. There's one more arena I think I need to speak to—and it's not a comfortable one. The issue could be summarized as, “If you can **afford** stuff—don't worry about it.” Money in general—and our craving for more has been responsible for a **lot** of the messes in history—from slavery to war. You can dress greed up and take it to black tie parties—but it has left a trail of blood through our world.

-To get more—previous generations have leveled herds of buffalo, ripped ore and coal out of mountains—leaving gaping holes and eroded soil. Why? Well, because they **could**.

-And that's the way it's been. Dump the garbage in the ocean. Make electronics and clothes cheaply—so they'll stop working—and people will buy **more**. And then the junk will have to be trashed...**somewhere**.

-I think it would be fair to say that the **monster of MORE** has created a lot of mess on our planet. Here's the deal; God did not create us to just consume what this planet offers—regardless of what it does **downstream**. God has created us to love Him—and love others as we love ourselves. That means treating the people **downstream** as we would want to be treated. That's fair, right? Jesus taught that **more** does not bring happiness. Contentment does; and we can **learn** contentment.

-I think a question worth asking is, "How can I **simplify** my life?" I think if we did that, **we** would be happier, it would help us care for the **place** God has given us, and it would help us with the financial stress we face. The way we live in the West, friends, is **not** sustainable!

- e. I know that when it comes to **green**, I am **not** an exemplary leader in this area. And I'm asking God to help me see what I **haven't** seen, do what I **haven't** done—and love my neighbor as myself.

-See, God is out to **rescue** and **restore** all things. All the people on this planet—and the planet itself. Paul describes how all creation looks forward to that day:

**But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:20b-22 NLT)**

-If God's mission here is to rescue and restore all people—as well as this place—this planet—then we need to look for ways to join Him. And love calls us to think of others—especially those who live downstream!

6. There's a story in the Old Testament of a king by the name of Hezekiah. By anyone's standards, he was a man who loved God—and wanted to please God with his leadership. Near the end of his life, he got deathly sick. But God miraculously healed him. Apparently, an envoy from Babylon came to wish him well. The whole thing kinda went to Hezekiah's head—and he showed them—and bragged about-**everything he had**.

-The prophet, Isaiah, was **very** upset about this incident—and prophesied that because Hezekiah had done this, the Babylonians would come one day, take **everything** he had showed them—leaving nothing. Then these chilling words:

**Some of your very own sons will be taken away into exile. They will become eunuchs who will serve in the palace of Babylon's king. Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "This message you have given me from the Lord is good." For the king was thinking, "At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime." (Isaiah 39:7-8 NLT)**

-Does that hit anyone the wrong way, besides me? “Some of your **sons** will be hauled off—and become **eunuchs** serving a pagan king! **Ouch!** And Hezekiah says, “Good word. At least things will be okay for **me!**”

-And that kind of **DOWNSTREAM** thinking is selfishness in a nutshell: Who gives a rip about future generations—as long as **I** get what **I** want; as long as **I** have peace and security!

-And that is the **specific** attitude I think we have to watch out for! God lovingly created this place, values it, calls us to take **care** of it—and holds us accountable for what we do. And—**Good News**--one day, **He** will finish what **we** start!

7. God is at work helping me to see what I **haven't** seen clearly before. I've sensed Him saying, “Ken—you can't just be apathetic about this. This is **My** World. And all the decisions you make affect the people, especially the poor, who have to live downstream from you!” He's changing my heart.

-A guy named Matthew Sleeth, a former MD, has written a **great** book on this whole subject; **Serve God; Save The Planet**. I heard him speak and he said, “You know, a lot of the environmentalists are **angry** people—judging and condemning others.

Guilt and shaming others is totally counter-productive. I've just decided to **live** it!

-And that's true. This message is **not** about pointing fingers or shaming or making people feel bad. The goal isn't for us to figure out who drives gas guzzlers--and who drives Prius's. The bottom line is: If the **mission of God** is about making **all** things new—including the place we live—our calling is to be a part of it. Right?

## Q & A

8. A couple of years ago, the **downstream** thing became very real. My Grandfather Kelly, and two of my uncles died of either lung cancer or emphysema. I didn't think about all three living and working in a steel mill area, I blamed their smoking.

-But then my Mom, got lung cancer and died 2 ½ years ago—and two of her friends had the same thing happen—who had grown up in the same area and never smoked—I thought, “living downstream from that is not a nice place to be!” I can't replace the loss—but maybe, by joining God in **His** mission to rescue and restore all of creation, I can make living downstream from me a better thing.