

## Earth Day and Stewardship

### The Parable of the Talents

<sup>14</sup> <sup>p</sup>“For <sup>q</sup>it will be like a man <sup>r</sup>going on a journey, who called his servants<sup>3</sup> and entrusted to them his property. <sup>15</sup> To one he gave five <sup>s</sup>talents,<sup>4</sup> to another two, to another one, <sup>t</sup>to each according to his ability. Then he <sup>r</sup>went away. <sup>16</sup> He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. <sup>17</sup> So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. <sup>18</sup> But he who had received the one talent went and <sup>u</sup>dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup> Now <sup>v</sup>after a long time the master of those servants came and <sup>w</sup>settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and <sup>x</sup>faithful servant. <sup>5</sup> <sup>y</sup>You have been faithful over a little; <sup>z</sup>I will set you over much. Enter into <sup>a</sup>the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup> And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup> He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be <sup>b</sup>a hard man, reaping <sup>c</sup>where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, <sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, <sup>d</sup>you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup> But his master answered him, ‘You <sup>e</sup>wicked and <sup>e</sup>slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? <sup>27</sup> Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup> <sup>f</sup>For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>30</sup> And <sup>g</sup>cast <sup>h</sup>the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place <sup>g</sup>there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

### Introduction

Good morning everyone. Hey did you all know that it was Earth Day today? For those of you who didn’t know, Earth Day was founded in 1970 by Democratic

Senator Gaylord Nelson from Wisconsin. Nelson was inspired to action after he witnessed the damage created by a large 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara, California. Nelson also witnessed the power and momentum of a large college student movement which was at that time very anti-Vietnam War. Nelson believed that using this population of young people and the energy they possessed, that he could push environmental regulation and protection onto the national stage, into the national conversation, and into national politics. The first Earth Day was scheduled for April 22<sup>nd</sup>, which landed between Spring Break and Finals week, allowing for potentially a high attendance. In its first celebration, 20 million Americans got outside, picked up trash, held demonstrations and rallies, protesting the decline of the environment. First celebrated in 1970, Earth Day today is celebrated in 193 countries, where coordinated events take place and mostly the point is to demonstrate and voice support for environmental protection. It is the largest secular observance in the world, while over 1 billion people celebrate in some way.

The question I want to ask this morning is: Should we, as Christians, care about Earth Day or what it stands for? Some of you are sitting there and saying to yourself: "that's an easy question, nope! Let's break for lunch, good talk!" It certainly is true that over the decades since it began Earth Day and environmental issues have been and still are high politicized topics. And I don't want to go there this morning. I would like to say that although the movement may have had good intentions at inception, I do believe, personally, this isn't like a Grace Community Church bonified belief, that environmental concerns, including a big ticking clock counting down our imminent doom is a little bit overblown.

In fact, I have here a few predictions made by credible scientists around the first Earth Day.

Joseph Ehrlich, an American biologist warned in the May 1970 issue of Audubon that DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbons "may have substantially reduced the life expectancy of people born since 1945." Ehrlich warned that Americans born since 1946...now had a life expectancy of only 49 years, and he predicted that if current patterns continued this expectancy would reach 42 years by 1980, when it might level out.

-Anyone here born between 1945 and 1970? Oh ok. Outliers of the norm, I'm sure. Here's another one:

-Ecologist Kenneth Watt declared, "By the year 2000, if present trends continue, we will be using up crude oil at such a rate...that there won't be any more crude oil. You'll drive up to the pump and say, 'Fill 'er up, buddy,' and he'll say, 'I am very sorry, there isn't any.'"

To be fair to these gentlemen, and the whole movement, many of their predictions were made with the caveats "unless things drastically improve," and to what extent we can probably argue, but changes for the better were definitely made in the area of environmental conservation, and we should all be grateful for that.

One quote of Congressman Nelson that I can agree with is this: "The ultimate test of a man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard. "

**This morning I want to talk about our role as stewards, left in charge to care for God's creation, the planet earth.**

## **Part I. Stewardship**

There's something in human nature that drives us to own land, to be the caretaker of it, to somehow know that it is ours. But even the idea of "ownership" doesn't always mean what our hearts want it to mean, right? But there is something freeing and exciting about closing on your first house, shutting the door behind you, and letting out a big "woo!" It's yours! You own it!

Not to burst your bubble, but let's look at the facts. Technically the bank still owns it, unless you paid cash for it. And then, even if you did pay cash for it, (way to go!) you must pay taxes on it. If you don't, your property can be seized and you'd be in big trouble with the government. But other than the bank, and you know, the local, state and federal government, that house and the land underneath it is totally yours! Unless of course you want to, say, replace the roof on your house,

you need the government's permission, and to pay a fee. That's freedom right there. But I digress.

The point here is that the idea of actually owning land is a little diluted, right? Especially in 2018, in America. Now, I'm not trying to bad-mouth home ownership or property ownership. It's a great way to build equity, and the case can be made that property ownership is an inherently good thing. We should seek to use the gifts and blessings that God has bestowed on us to try and make the lives of those around us better. Like all gifts in life, as a tool to build up the church and reach the lost. I know several families in this very congregation do a wonderful job of opening their home, hosting people for dinner, breaking bread. I've personally borrowed a lot of tools, books, vehicles, what have you, from so many of you, and I just want to say thank you. Part of being good and wise stewards of what God has entrusted us with is not holding our things tightly, but holding them with an open hand, ready to lend to someone or give to someone. These are some questions to consider when we're talking about being good stewards: First, are you providing for your family's needs? Do you trust the Lord to not only provide for your present needs but future ones? Can you "afford" or is it wise to help someone else in need? As believers we need to consider ourselves not as owners, but stewards. That land under your feet isn't really yours, right? Even putting aside all the others with claims to that property, it is ultimately the Lord's, the God of ALL creation. He has entrusted us with all that we have, our money, our possessions, our families, gifts, talents. And yes, this planet and the environment we live in. It is not ours, but ours to steward.

As we look back at the parable of the stewards, that Rachel read, although He was specifically talking about the Spiritual kingdom in His parable, the principle extends to all things He has called us to steward. We've been entrusted with great things, and will make an account with how we've used them.

Let's look back at the Garden of Eden:

In Genesis 1:27-28 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on earth."

I think we can easily catch His drift when he says “be fruitful and multiply” but what does it mean to have dominion over the animals and all living things?

To answer that question, I need to reference my very favorite childhood Disney movie, the Lion King. I’ll get to that. You see, to “have dominion” pretty plainly means to rule, as a king, a governor, what have you. Adam and Eve were commanded to have dominion over the land, and many people use this as a basis to kind of do whatever we want when it comes to the environment, or animals, right? Top of the food chain, baby! But that’s where the Lion King reference comes in. Mufasa, who was a noble king, took responsibility for the preservation of all the species in the Prideland, BUT he and his family were still carnivores. They needed to kill another animal to be able to survive themselves but couldn’t kill so many of one species so as to deplete their population, throwing off and jeopardizing the entire eco-system. He was King and believed that his role as King was also one of a servant, as a steward of the land. The role came with great responsibility, self-sacrifice, and an almost constant eye on the future.

When we compare the way he governed to that of his brother, Scar, the two could not be more different. For a long time Scar wanted to rule, and he resented his elder brother, who in Scar’s eyes never did anything right. Once Scar manages to assume the role, (I don’t want to give it away) he rules like a tyrant, benefitting himself and his allies at the expense of the whole Pridelands. They overfeed on herbivores, they don’t consider the impact on the ecosystem, and before long many of the herds move on from there and now even Scar and his lackies are out of food. It was Scar’s self-centered, self-serving attitude as the top of the food chain that ruined everything. A quote by Senator Nelson: If we continue to address the issue of the environment where we live as though we're the only species that lives here, we'll create a disaster for ourselves. That’s just what happened with Scar and his followers: He thought of only himself, and because of the position he held it affected so many, for generations.

Now, I don’t want to rely on Disney movie references, so let’s pivot to that of Biblical references. How does God say kings should rule as they have dominion over their people? It actually says a lot in the Old Testament and Prophets about how Kings, specifically of Israel, should and should not rule. This will give us a

clearer picture as to how we are to rule the earth, along with our own little kingdoms.

In Ezekiel 34, the prophet brings a condemning word to the leaders in Israel: In verses 2-4 he refers to them as shepherds:

Ah, shepherds of Israel <sup>f</sup>who have been feeding yourselves! <sup>g</sup>Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3h</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, <sup>i</sup>you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4j</sup>The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, <sup>h</sup>the injured you have not bound up, <sup>h</sup>the strayed you have not brought back, <sup>k</sup>the lost you have not sought, and with force and <sup>l</sup>harshness you have ruled them.

One thing that jumps off the page to me is this: This shepherd is NOT thinking of the future generations of his sheep. He isn't fixing the broken, he isn't bringing back the lost, he's eating the healthy, he ISN'T leading. This isn't sustainable, and he's simply taking advantage of his position.

This is the attitude many have in regards to the Earth, (especially as Americans, who other countries perceive to be mildly obsessed with our freedoms) using the verse about "dominion" as a license to hunt and kill more animals than they're supposed to, hunt out of season, enjoy seeing small (or larger) animals suffer and die at their hands, like aiming for a squirrel with your car, or destroying vegetation just for the fun of it.

I can remember as a boy just LOVING to find a good, strong stick, that was the proper length, weight and shape to use as a weapon against the branches in the woods behind our house and other friends' houses. Just for fun I would break branches off with my battle ax (in my mind) like Heman conquering his foe. Is it the biggest deal in the world? Probably not, in the grand scheme of things. But it shows an attitude of not taking seriously our task as stewards of God's creation.

To go back to the squirrel: Yes, there are approximately 10 trillion too many squirrels in the world, and we shouldn't mourn each one's death. But, to have the attitude of enjoying their demise at the hands of your car, I think is wrong.

The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel. Prov. 12:10 NIV

So how does the Bible say a king should rule? Well there is a Psalm about Solomon's coronation, written by David, spelling out what a godly ruler looks like:

<sup>12</sup> For he delivers <sup>l</sup>the needy when he calls,  
the poor and him who has no helper.

<sup>13</sup> He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.

<sup>14</sup> From oppression and violence he redeems their life,  
and <sup>m</sup>precious is their blood in his sight.

This chapter makes a beautiful case for Biblical, servant leadership. One with dominion is the first to serve, to heal, to fix, to redeem. And we should count our subjects, in our case the earth, as precious.

Again, we are more than just top-of-the-food-chain dwellers, and we should not and will not rule harshly, if we're ruling the way God intended. We are not bystanders, we are the caretakers. That's the system.

Why else should we care for the Earth? The first answer was sort of a "well, God told us to" kind of answer. Which is true, and should always be enough. But another compelling reason, with practical implications I want to look at with you now. It can be gleaned from the same passage, and it is this:

**For the securing of the earth for future generations.**

So look for a moment with me at that last phrase. Future generations. Do you believe that the passage, "Be fruitful and multiply" was only directly relating to Adam and Eve, as they were responsible for populating the entire earth, and they had a lot of work to do? Probably in a real way yes, that applies to them in a way that it never will again. (Except to Noah's family after the flood, who were in a similar "go repopulate the earth" situation.)

But I submit this verse does play a role in our lives today. As stewards of the earth, it is important to secure future generations of humans to rule when we're gone. We are also an important part of this ecosystem and raising the next generation of responsible earth-stewards is important.

That is not to say everyone can or will have children, and as someone who for years had no hope of having biological children, I can tell you that there are people out there who will use this verse to push you and say, now, this is a real quote. Someone actually said the following thing to me, often: “why aren’t you having kids!? It’s a commandment from God that you have kids, and at least 4 because that’s the only way two people can be multiplied.” At the time I wasn’t ready to share my struggles with that person, who had drawn a very hard line between right and wrong, not knowing the limitations Rachel and I had. And it was hurtful. So if you’re with us this morning, and you can’t have kids for whatever reason, you are not outside of God’s laws or commandments. And I think the multiplication thing is bogus.

BUT there is an alarming trend I think with millennials, (I am one, so don’t worry these are body blows) who are having 15% fewer babies than the previous generation. I’ve heard several times from different people things like “I just don’t think it would be responsible to bring children into this screwed up world.” I will be the first to admit that this world is quite screwed up. Quite. I’ve also heard “man I don’t know if I could live with permanently messing up another human being, I mean think of the therapy.” Well, I want to pause here, and as someone who historically has been a worrier and not “truster” by nature, this is worrying, plain and simple. If you trust in the Lord with your eternal salvation and the redemption of your soul, but don’t trust that He could work through you to raise another human, that’s worrying. By the grace of God there are so many resources that young parents have at their disposal today. There are countless books, other parents, the internet. I can’t tell you how many times we had to google the simplest things the first year we had our daughter. We were clueless. It IS scary to think of raising a child today, but like so many areas of life, we do our best, we rely on the Lord, and we trust Him with the outcome. Just like the Earth, our kids are not really ours. They were His first.

Or maybe the work of bringing kids, adopting kids, fostering kids, it’s the daunting task that prevents you. I get that too. But what thing truly worth doing was ever easy? I have a three-year-old daughter, and a one year old son, and probably all of you think they’re angelic, just perfect. Leo actually is, but three years old has turned out so far to be quite a challenge. There’s a lot I could say here, but the point is, if you’re on the fence about it, please be advised: Parenting IS really hard.

I have second hand information about the nightmare-level challenges that parenting teens brings about as well. If you're parenting teens right now, God bless you, and you truly are being prayed for by our leadership team here. It is not for the faint of heart! If you've decided that having kids isn't for you, or like I said you've been unable to, how are you going to affect the next generation in a real way? Because I think it's a calling for all of us. There is foster care, respite care, adoption, mentoring, the boys and girls club, supporting parents in the heat of a struggle, committing to praying for them. Maybe you've had your children, raised them and hallelujah they're out the door. Well, in the new covenant, which if we are in Christ, we are part of, many theologians stress the shift in the meaning of "multiplying" to the making of disciples. And parenting in a spiritual sense is of utmost importance. If you're a little more advanced in years, consider reaching out to a younger brother or sister in Christ, befriending them, and becoming the Paul to their Timothy. There's a lot of things any one of us can do.

I would be remiss right now to not mention that parenting, in my 3 years of experience anyway, is so rewarding, so fulfilling and besides who needs to sleep ever again anyhow?

### **So where do these two things intersect?**

Would you believe that one of the most cited reasons for not wanting to bring children or too many children into the world is for the environment's sake? There are and have been past projections that say the earth will soon surely be overrun, there won't be enough food, enough space. It just isn't responsible to bring more than one child per household. Now, I'm not a scientist, I haven't written a dissertation on population theory, but history shows that scientists have been predicting the Earth's demise for over 50 years. Because of the politicizing of the topic of climate change and conservation, it is at times difficult to objectively study the facts.

But Christian, listen: The Lord, the God of Heaven and Earth whom we worship and believe, says in His Word that he has big, important plans for this Earth. And HE is the Alpha and HE is the Omega, and we, even as a collective human race are powerless to thwart His plans. He is sovereign and has orchestrated the end of the Earth as we know it already. Our jobs are to be obedient, to make the most of

what we've been given, and to trust God with the outcome. To Him it is already in the past, and about it we need not to worry.

But there are things that we can all agree on, no matter where you stand politically. The Bible says that we, as God's image bearers are to care for His creation. His creation which it says in Romans chapter one reflects His attributes. His power, His creativity, His immenseness, and yet His detailed craftsmanship.

Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist convention writes: All of the creation around us signals the glory of God (Rom. 1:20), and is encoded with something the Apostle Paul calls "the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4). All things are to be "summed up" in Christ; that is, he will unite everything on heaven and earth in him (Eph. 1:10). The physical creation, then, is to be, like our bodies, ultimately a temple of the Holy spirit and a dwelling place for the reigning Christ Jesus. The original mandate of our ancestors to care for and to cultivate the earth does not just point us to the past (Gen. 1-2) but also to the future (Rev. 21-22).

Because Earth Day is a secular movement/celebration, as the church I think there's often friction when it comes to being enthusiastic about environmental stewardship. But I, and many contemporary preachers, would make the case that Christians should be even more motivated to preserve the earth than secular humanists.

However, this is not due to the worthiness of the Earth itself, but it's creator. As humans, we too often look at the gift that someone, ESPECIALLY our heavenly Father, has given us, we are so excited about the gift, so excited about that THING. Without a belief in God, a person is likely to look at the mountains, the oceans, the coral reef, etc. and say "wow, how amazing is that!" As believers in a creator God we should look at that same reef and say "what an amazing, mighty God we serve!" In the same way, our focus will be very different from secular humanists, but our mission should look very similar.

Read Excerpt from "The Earth Book" by Todd Parr

I have to admit, preparing this sermon was a little difficult for me. I'm a little late to the recycling train, and it wasn't until a couple of years ago when I discovered the ease of Zero Sort from Casella that my family was consistently recycling. But if you've ever been to a landfill, or seen pictures of cities like Beijing that still have

thick, heavy smog, or recently I saw a whale that had washed up on shore with just a ton of garbage in their stomach, there are still improvements that can be made. Are we just months or years from a huge, worldwide apocalypse because of our lack of care for the environment? I don't think so. But again, there are improvements all of us can make, to improve the earth's condition, through the lens of fulfilling our duties as stewards of this planet that God has placed us in charge of. A planet that the Bible says reflects God's glory, His character, and ultimately points people to His nature. So, whether it be today, tomorrow, or this spring, join hands with people from outside the church, plant a tree, volunteer at a wildlife sanctuary, do highway cleanup. There's so much we can do, and we can use that opportunity to share about the great Creator that we're serving by doing so. That is our motivation, to serve an immense yet personal, creative, powerful creator God, the giver of good gifts, the generous supplier of all that we need. To him belongs all the glory, praise and worship.

Let's pray.