

Does Matter Matter? Gen 1-2

I. Introduction

We continue our summer series today, Does “it” Matter? And, today, we ask the question, Does Matter Matter?

A Pastor who was known to be a bird-watcher decided to provide a special area around his church for people to watch birds. And, it was a total hit. People came from far and wide to watch birds in this special area. But, the funniest thing began to happen. People would come look at the birds for awhile, then they would say something like this to him: “Let’s go up to the church and look at what you are doing in ministry” as if enjoying and appreciating creation was not Christian ministry. Only the work that the pastor was doing within the church was considered ministry.

What an interesting worldview? Does matter matter? Environmental ethics, what I like to call creation care, is a hot button issue right now in our world, especially in the political realm. But, this talk today is fundamentally a theological talk. What does Scripture say about matter mattering?

II. Review

This is our second week in our summer series exploring eight different topics under the title, “Does *it* Matter?” And, as Joel said last week, spoiler alert – they all matter. Why? Because they matter to God. And, if they matter to God, they should matter to us. Some of the topics are clearly Christian topics, but some are not. But, in reality, they are all Christian topics. In other words, our faith should make a difference in every area of life, not just on Sundays, not just for small groups, not just within the four walls of the church. Our Christian faith should inform and impact every area of our life.

And, so this summer, we want to think Christianly about different areas of our lives and find what the Bible says about these things so that we can bring each area under the Lordship of Christ. We want to submit every area of life to his Lordship.

Last week, we opened the series by exploring the importance of being human in our world. I gave you a few words to help remember what being made in the image of God implies. The words were: reflection, representation and responsibility.

The wonder of the Biblical story is that every person is raised to the status of royalty, a reflection and representation of God. All people, from the least to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest, are fearfully and wonderfully made in love, in his image. No person is an accident. These are the ground rules for being human. And, today we come to the third word: responsibility. As God’s reflections and representatives, we also have a responsibility.

III. God's View of Matter: It is Very Good!

A. The Creation Account (Gen 1:31)

Our text today is Genesis, chapters 1 and 2. We are not going to read the entire text, but as we saw last week, chapter 1 gives us a rhythmic pattern like this:

'Then God Said', 'Then God Said', 'Then God said,'...

Let there be, Let there be, Let there be...

And there was, And there was, And there was...

And, **God saw** that it was good and it was good and it was very good (Gen 1:31).

God, the great king, makes matter, and his assessment is that it is "very good." This is the foundation for today. As CS. Lewis said, "There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather rude and unspiritual. God does not: he invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it" (Lewis, 63-4).

Matter is very good. This is the foundation. Scripture, then, affirms this throughout.

B. The Psalms (24, 104, 119, 110)

For example, the psalmist says that the earth is God's (Ps 24), is made in his wisdom (Ps 104), is full of his love (Ps 119:64) and is cared for by him (Ps 110). And, the Psalmist rejoices in all of these things.

But, then in the New Testament, we get these words:

C. The Incarnation (John 1:1-3, 14)

John 1 says this: *1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (Jn 1:1-3, 14, NIV)*

Maybe the most cataclysmic words ever written. The creator God becomes matter! It's breathtaking! God becomes matter. If God didn't think matter mattered, he wouldn't become matter! God is so committed to his very good creation that he becomes a part of it. He doesn't become a principle or theory or idea. He becomes matter. He becomes a person. A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Does matter matter? Yes! But, there's more.

D. The Crucifixion (Col 1:15-20)

In the Scripture Reading today, did you notice the words "all things" repeated over and over again? This Colossians hymn reminds us that "all things" are created by Jesus, through Jesus and for Jesus. Notice the earth is for him, not for us. He graciously allows us to participate in it and enjoy it, but it is ultimately for him. At the end of the hymn, we get the truth that Jesus is

the process of reconciling **all things** to himself by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:20). “**All things**” – not just humanity – are being reconciled to him through his blood. And you don’t shed your blood for something that doesn’t matter. He goes to the cross for “**all things**” because “**all things**” matter. He cares for all of it.

Does matter matter? Yes! But, there’s more.

E. The Resurrection (John 20:24-29)

But, then there is this Good News: the resurrection. Just as cataclysmic, Jesus is resurrected - into a **physical** body!

Instead of reading the text, I'm going to show you a video clip from the movie *Risen*. This movie, from 2016, tells the resurrection story through the eyes of the agnostic Roman centurion, Clavius, charged by Pontius Pilate to investigate rumors of a risen Jewish Messiah. So, he begins searching for the body of Jesus. Clavius had watched Jesus die on the cross, and this clip is of him wandering into the room of disciples with the risen Lord. He can’t believe it, walks back out, then walks back in, as Thomas joins the disciples. Through it all, he has flashbacks of seeing Jesus dead on the cross. Let’s watch it.

< Risen Clip >

Can you imagine being there? Jesus is resurrected into a physical body. This is no apparition. Maybe the hardest part of the resurrection to understand is this new body that Jesus has, something the movie cannot obviously depict. But, it is a new kind of matter, the first signs of the new creation.

So, the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection are God’s great yeses to this physical world. They are God’s great yeses to matter. God’s not going to give up on his creation, in fact, he dies for it! Matter matters to God, so, what is our responsibility as his image-bearers? At this point, let’s go back to the creation narratives of Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.

IV. Humanity’s Responsibility For Matter (Gen 1:26-28, 2:15)

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind 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.” 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 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.”

A. Gen 1: Subdue and Rule

God makes his good creation, then he passes the baton to his image-bearers to partner with him in looking after it. He blesses his image-bearers and commissions them to be fruitful, to subdue and rule. Now, these commands have traditionally been called the “cultural mandate.”

As his image-bearers go about making things in the world, making culture if you will, this is the assignment. This is the responsibility. These are universal commands, summarized in two words: procreation and stewardship. Today, we will obviously focus on the stewardship side. The commands are: subdue (*kavash*) and rule (*radah*). Some translations say to “subdue” and “have dominion over.”

Unfortunately, these words have been taken by some throughout history to legitimate an exploitative and destructive agenda toward creation. One environmentalist even encourages his readers to “abandon biblical faith (along with the world’s other dominant religions), claiming that it promotes anthropocentrism and focuses exclusively on the superiority and divinity of the human species” (Provan, 225).

But, to do this is to certainly take these words out of context. As I said last week, the best way to understand these texts is to understand them in the context of when they were written. Most theologians see Genesis 1 as God, the awesome, powerful and benevolent king, building his kingdom. And, kings in the ancient world did not destroy with unbridled power. Kings cared for their subjects and ensured justice for them. And as we said already, we know that God is a loving king, seeking the best for his creation. Humanity, then, is to rule and subdue on his behalf, taking the baton by ruling and subduing with love.

Note that there is a place for subduing creation. Humanity does not flourish in a jungle or forest. Water may need to be shaped and directed. Wild animals may need to be separated from domestic ones and so forth. So, there is a tension here, and place for a wise balance between earth-subduing and earth-keeping. We live in this tension.

B. Gen 2: Serve and Keep

Humanity’s responsibility to care for the earth is further revealed in chapter 2. In this creation account, we get a different perspective from chapter 1. Whereas God was the powerful king building his kingdom in chapter 1, in chapter 2, God is Yahweh, the personal companion. He walks and talks with humanity within a garden paradise.

And, here, the text says, “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it*” (Gen 2:15). Humanity is to work and take care of creation.

Another way to translate these commands is “*serve,*” to be a servant of creation, and “*keep*” creation, to watch over it. Later in Israel, you may know (especially if you have taken Bernard’s Genesis classes) that these are the same words used for the Priests, and how they are responsible to care for the Tabernacle. In other words, this is religious work. This is holy work. Serving and keeping creation is not separate from our faith, it is central to it. In fact, the word for “keep” is also used in the Aaronic Blessing. You are familiar with this prayer, “*May God bless you and keep you, may he make his face shine upon you and give you rest*” (Num 6:24-26). God keeps us in love; we then keep his creation in love.

I have a hazelnut here. How many of you know the name Julian of Norwich? She was a 14th century mystic from the English town of Norwich. She wrote the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman. At age 30, she became seriously ill and was on the verge of death. And it was during this time, she received a series of visions from Jesus. She then miraculously recovered, and spent the rest of her life pondering these visions.

One of the most famous of these visions is the hazelnut vision. She says this, “And in this vision he [Jesus] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand... and I looked at it and thought: What can this be? And, I was given this general answer: It is everything which I have made. It lasts and always will because I love it.” (Norwich, loc 1340).

In other words, the hazelnut represented the universe in a nutshell. Everything that has been made, from a blade of grass, to the elephant, to the oceans – to the ends of the universe – has their beginning in the love of God.

Reflecting on this later, Julian says she saw three properties in this hazelnut vision:

1. God made it.
2. God loves it.
3. God keeps it.

God made all things in love and keeps all things in his love, and he has passed the baton to us to partner with him in serving it and keeping it in love. These are the ground rules. Once again, this is not on the fringes of our faith. This is central to our faith and to being human.

Note that we don’t worship creation, we serve it and keep it. We become like that which we worship, and if we worship creation, we will lose those things that make us human. So, we don’t worship it. We keep it in love. We have the responsibility, as his image-bearers, to rule and subdue, to serve and keep, *as he would*, in love.

V. The Modern Predicament

But, in many ways, we’ve dropped the baton in the modern world. In the pre-modern world, humanity saw a world that was well-ordered by a wise creator. And, humanity submitted to this wise creator. Not that we want to go back to that world, but it does help in comparison. Beginning with the industrial revolution in the 18th century, humanity began to simply view creation as a resource to exploit and manipulate in the name of progress. In other words, humanity began objectifying creation for the sake of money and control and innovation. This is the modern predicament. And, God’s good creation is groaning and complaining all around us. Traditionally, Christian wisdom, which led to the rise of modern science, would stress knowing something for the sake of living with it and ultimately loving it. But, the modern view is to know something in order to use it and control it. God’s good creation becomes simply an object to satisfy our desires and to benefit only us. And, that is to live without reference to God. When we objectify anything, we will no longer apprehend beauty. We will no longer

apprehend wonder. And, in this case, we will no longer apprehend a loving creator behind a very good creation.

So, what can we do? I could go many directions at this point. But, let me suggest three things:

VI. The Implications

1. **Practice Gratitude.** It's like the atheist lady who was dying from cancer and she wanted to go see the Alps one last time. And, she walked up the path to the magnificent view of the Alps and said, "I just wanted to say thank-you to somebody, but I didn't know who to thank." It has been said that "gratitude is the heart of faith" (Kostamo, 129). Why? Because gratitude continually recognizes all the gifts, graces and blessings from our good God. After all, God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. So, every time we turn on the spigot, we give thanks. Every time we see that little bit of sunlight peek through the redwood tree, we give thanks. Every time we look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, we give thanks. We take nothing for granted. Although our affluent culture influences us to think we are entitled to everything, we take nothing for granted. Everything, no matter how small, warrants our gratitude.
2. **Practice Contentment.** Sometimes when we talk about creation care or environmental ethics, we talk about it from the supply side. We talk about the supply of energy resources. We talk about how this or that company is cutting down all the trees for their supplies. We talk about using advanced technology that will reduce environmental impacts, etc. But, that is all on the supply side. Maybe we should change the focus to the demand side? Maybe we should focus on a reduction of the insatiable appetite that we in the first world have? The Bible calls this greed, which is "to want under all circumstances and at all times irrespective of what goods and services are actually acquired and consumed" (Gay, 215). That's greed. This is the mindset of our consumer culture, encouraged by billion-dollar marketing campaigns continually promoting discontentment and dissatisfaction in hopes of enticing the consumer to buy more. Are we not inundated with this all day every day? We must find a way to practice contentment. I submit to you that the easiest and most practical action the average westerner can do to care for creation, to fulfill their responsibility as an image-bearer is to *simply* live more simply, being content with what we have.
3. **Practice Baby Steps.** If we think too big about this topic, creation care can get complicated quickly and can become overwhelming, and sometimes disheartening. And, I don't think it would be wise for me to prescribe specific things to do because we all have different issues and needs. But, can I encourage you to simply try some baby steps in the direction of creation care? I'm embarrassed to say that I am only now just beginning to take baby steps myself. I am beginning to ask the question – how can I better care for creation in this moment? I'm trying composting, I've been trying to pay attention to where my food comes from and where my garbage goes, and I'm trying to consume less, especially with plastic, while taking nothing for granted. But, although we need to take these things seriously, there is grace as well. We do what we can, where we can, taking baby steps.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we, Christians, should be leading the charge in creation care and helping each other care for creation. We know the truth and the truth sets us free to care for creation. This creation is very good, created by a loving God and being redeemed by Christ. Matter matters and we have the baton. Let's see what we can do.

Now, at this point, I'd like to call up good friends of mine who are living out the creation care mandate. Their story also speaks to last week's message as well. Craig and Jen Thompson and their two children, Hattie and Anders, run a sustainable farm in Etna, CA, in northern CA, that is also a ministry to broken men. One young man came from our body whom Craig disciplined and helped get back on his feet. So, come on up Thompsons and share with us.

Benediction

Take the baton, and
Go forth with a new appreciation for
all things being made
by Christ, through Christ and for Christ.
And, as his image-bearer,
Serve and keep this creation,
In the name of the One
who called all things very good.
Amen.

Resources:

Aiello, Paul, *Risen*, Affirm Films, LD Entertainment.
Bell, Bernard, *Whom to Serve is Perfect Freedom*, PBCC Sermon on 7/20/08,
Gay, Craig, *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist*.
Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.
Kostamo, Leah, *Planted*.
Lewis, CS, *Mere Christianity*.
Provan, Iain, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*.
Thompson, Craig and Jen, <https://rocksideranch.org/> .