

Let's Clean West NC

4 Weeks of Lessons: Servants of Creation

2021



Week 1: Sustaining Creation

Open the floor for discussion, with the discussion revolving around the question: “How do we live now?” Ask one another what activities, besides work, they spent the most time doing during their leisure hours. Ask if anyone went shopping, ask what they bought, and ask them if they already owned a similar item. If people mention going to restaurants or grocery stores, ask them if they were able to use all the food they had.

It can't be denied that we live in a culture of consumerism. As many of the activities you likely mentioned earlier indicate, much of American culture revolves around buying. Buying is the end goal of every product that reaches the shelf, and if large corporations can entice customers to buy new items frequently—their profits will increase. On the surface level, this seems like an arrangement that can keep everyone happy. Businesses make a profit and people get what they want. But, this rampant cycle of production and consumption takes its toll. As companies try increasingly invasive ways of advertising their products, saturating our culture with material items, it encourages us all to adopt a lifestyle that, for the sake of future generations, can not be sustained

Even in our lifetime, we can see how the pace of our consumption in the United States, the kinds of lifestyles we choose to lead, use up resources—and take them out of the hands of people in developing nations. While we burn through non-renewable resources to power our homes, our cars, and our luxuries, one in five people worldwide go without electricity. While one in nine people worldwide are undernourished, 30-40% of food produced in America goes to waste.

American culture is, currently, built around a model that seeks to commodify the world; this model produces and sells without thinking of the consequences—only of profit growth. But, economists and scientists alike tell us this model isn't sustainable for future generations. Natural resources aren't unlimited, and the production of so many commodities isn't without consequences itself. Direct and indirect emissions from industrial production account for nearly a quarter of all carbon dioxide pollution in America.

Week 1: Sustaining Creation

This unchecked and unprecedented rate of consumption directly contrasts the intended relationship God intended humans to have with creation. Two verses from Genesis illustrate this point:

The LORD God took the human and put it in the garden of Eden to [till and keep] it (Gen 2:15).

God blessed them, and God said to them, “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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:29-28).

Notice how the relationship God intends humans to have with creation is reciprocal. Humans are told to “till and keep” creation. By working the land, humans receive food, water, and the other necessities of life; creation provides for humans. But, humans are not allowed to exploit this relationship. They are told explicitly to “keep,” to guard and care for the land that sustains them. In this way, humans are provided for—and so is creation. The relationship is one of harmony and sustainability.

The “dominion” God gives humans over the earth, in this context, isn’t unlimited freedom. It isn’t a license to become tyrants. Rather, it’s a form of responsibility. Humans are granted temporal ownership over God’s creation and entrusted with the immense responsibility of protecting this creation. If they do as they are commanded, creation will prosper with them. But, disobeying this relationship is tantamount to disobeying God; it destroys the delicate harmony of the world.

Think about how this relates back to consumer culture. The ideal structure of the natural world is one of mutual responsibility between humans and creation. The profit-oriented world we live in places its entire focus on the individual. Fulfilling your own desires, getting what you want, modern culture wants us to idealize these goals, because modern corporations attempt to fill them with material objects. And, in doing so, it tips the balance of the natural world. We take more than we need, and creation and fellow humans suffer. Isn’t there something contradictory between the message of consumerism, urging us to own and possess all that we can, to build bigger houses, drive nicer cars, make and spend as much money as possible, and the message of Jesus sternly telling his quarreling disciples:

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

To Conclude

We are born into a culture that's geared towards catering towards our desires, buying more than we need, taking more than is allotted. But, that doesn't mean we can't escape this mode of existence. Together, think of ways to tackle the following problems. What can you, as an individual, do? Try to develop a concrete plan and actions to tackle:

- **Overconsumption.** In what ways do you overconsume? What things, especially, do you have more of than you need? What could be some methods to cut back?
- **Waste.** Does your overconsumption lead to excess waste? Think of clothes or food that you've thrown away in the past week. What ways can you reduce your amount of landfill waste produced? Are there even alternative ways of disposing of your unwanted items, like by recycling them or upcycling them into charities?

Finally, is there anything that all the members of your class can do as a group to care for creation. We've seen that the proper relationship between humans and nature is one of harmony. In what ways can you all together cultivate this kind of relationship?



**God intends
the
relationship
between
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Week 2: Paying Attention

Open the floor for discussion by asking questions about where our attention is directed, especially in our free time. Ask people what they feel like they spend too much time doing, and ask them how much they use their phones and social media for entertainment. Then, ask about what kinds of emotions they feel while using social media. Why do they feel these kinds of emotions?

In the last lesson, we talked about how we live in a culture that encourages us to consume more than we need. In this consumerist society, we take up more than our fair share of resources in the pursuit of fulfilling our desires and becoming happy. These are goals society sets for us because the powers that be benefit when we try to fulfill them by purchasing material objects. This has led to our culture of hyper-abundance that consumes global resources at an unsustainable rate while also contributing to a major source of pollution.

Sometimes, it's obvious to us the things that are commodified in our society; think of all the material things you can buy on Amazon. But, this consumer culture can even commodify intangible things—which can be just as destructive to our sense of duty towards the creation.

Think of the prevalence and power of social media. Companies like Facebook are some of the most profitable in the world because they profit off of several new commodities, one of which is your attention. Social media feeds capture our free time nearly entirely. They use complex algorithms to ensure we see content we like and avoid content we do not. The reason is simple; the more time a user spends on their platform, the more targeted ad revenue the platform receives. Many social media executives have admitted they designed their platforms to be addictive, exploiting dopamine feedback loops to ensure you spend a maximum amount of your time on a screen. Psychologists liken these mechanisms to playing at a slot machine: as with pulling the lever, scrolling on your phone connects a physical action to a perceived “reward.” The more you scroll, the more you play slots, the less likely you are to win and the more your time is exploited for someone else's profit.

Besides taking up some of our free time, this fact about social media design may seem insignificant. But, many have argued that it represents a much more dangerous shift in society. As virtual worlds become increasing objects of our attention and concern, what happens to the world around us? As algorithms on Facebook ensure people receive misinformation about climate science—how can the truth be shown to people? Our task should be to turn our attention away from these engineered and artificial public spaces and onto our actual communities and creation itself.

Week 2: Paying Attention

One of the ways that we can do this is by taking biblical examples and using them to learn how to redirect our attention into more servant-oriented roles. Look, for example, at Job's response to his adversaries, who argue that the "deep things" of God are unknowable:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth,[a] and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being (Job 12:7-10).

We can metaphorically compare Job's situation to ours. We can consider Job's adversaries to represent the kind of attention-exploiting culture that distracts our pursuits away from actualizing our full productivity. This kind of culture tells us not to worry about the deep issues that we face; it's a nihilistic response. But, Job's response focuses our attention onto the fine details of life. It isn't a call to ignore deep questions or to retreat from them. It tells us to focus on the world around us, in every way. That the traces of a larger design are intelligible from this kind of attention, one that reorients us out of ourselves and our desires and into the larger world of relations around us.

This kind of worldview, especially when your mode of attention is directed onto the natural world, can be called bioregionalism. Bioregionalism is an awareness of the specific ecological humans share with all forms of life—and one another—and how these specific communities contribute to the global whole. To look at the world as a bioregionalist does, one has to be aware not only of how their actions affect others—but how their actions affect their biological community and thus the world. It's, as Job refers to, the recognition that knowing the small details helps to infer the big picture. It's also a perfect way to focus our ethics onto the servant mentality that Christ calls us to fulfill. Bioregional awareness allows us to be a servant of all by serving our own communities first and foremost.

Bioregionalism, when applied to ethics, allows us to fulfill Christ's ultimate commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself." A world view rooted in these ideas ultimately cares for creation, allowing us to fulfill the duty commanded by God to Adam in Genesis, by changing our perception of "who" is our neighbor. Why can't the river running through my town be my neighbor? If I keep it clean, will it not irrigate the food someone else eats? Bioregionalism forces us to realize what God commanded in Eden, that creation depends on humans as much as humans depend on creation.

To Conclude

Our attention, in the modern age, has been exploited by forces more powerful and technologically advanced than the world has ever seen. But, it remains within our power to resist this exploitation. We should do so because, in the process, our attention can shift back onto what really matters. By focusing our attention on bioregional communities, we fulfill our duties to the land and one another. We should learn, as Job insists, from the familiar details of creation—so that we may explore its larger purpose.

To conclude, discuss some specific problems you see in your community. Start by identifying them, then identify ways to address these problems. Do resources already exist, or do they need to be created? Take the time to think about the specific environment of your community, and how solving these issues might be important to those outside your community as well. Are there any programs that exist or could be started in your church to solve these issues?



When we change the focus of our attention, we also change what we care about—what matters to us.

Week 3: Facing Facts

Open the floor for discussion by asking others about their sense of ethics. How do other people in the room define what is and isn't ethical, and do they think that they live ethical lives? Ask them to think about their week and if they've made good or poor ethical choices that week. What do people see as their own ethical shortcomings, either now or in the past?

In the past weeks, we've discussed several important aspects of the Christian faith and care of creation. We've traced the human duty to care for creation from God's command to Adam in Eden to Christ's call for us to become servants of all. Furthermore, we've discussed how bioregionalism—a specific way of caring for the global environment by paying attention to specific ecosystems—has its parallels in Biblical thought. We've also seen how life in the modern age directs our attention away from these deep connections between communities and creation, instead of focusing it on commodities.

Bioregionalism shows us that no part of Earth is a closed system. One polluted stream is all it takes for the land it irrigates and the waters it merges with to become polluted as well. When we realize the fact that we make up part of this system, even our smallest actions take on global importance. We can't escape the fact that our lifestyle choices affect the world—affect other humans and all of creation—on levels that we may find difficult to conceptualize.

But, even at the present moment, these choices add up and reveal that our habits, as Americans, secure us an unwelcome title of the world's biggest over-consumers. Despite having 5% of the global population, Americans use 1/3 of paper produced globally and over a quarter of its oil, and they produce about half of its solid waste. Measuring resources in terms of foods, material goods, and services, the average American will—in the course of their life—consume as many resources as 35 citizens of India and 53 of those in China. This isn't just a difference between developed and developing nations either. Americans use twice as many fuel resources as their counterparts in the United Kingdom.

While these facts certainly don't paint a pleasant picture of American life, they have sinister implications for the global future. Energy, water, and food demand are all expected to increase by 50% within the next decade. While these facts will have little significance for the average American, they could have disastrous implications for the world's poor. As water becomes scarcer, the world's wheat-growing countries in Asia will have shortages. Grain prices will rise, which Americans can stand; this isn't true for the world's poor—who will face starvation as Americans continue to throw away hundreds of pounds of food per year.

Week 3: Facing Facts

America, unlike countries in the Middle East, will never face the threat of a war over water. If anything, American consumption—which is predicated on a massive over-production of resources—will lead to such conflicts and troubles without suffering from them. Reports from the NIRC suggest that, of all resources, non-renewable fuels are likely to cause the most social conflict as demand for these resources increases in the developing world. Yet again, it will not be the developed nations that suffer from this increased demand, but people in developing countries—particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

There are biblical injunctions against the behaviors in America that will cause these issues. Ironically, they can be found in the most familiar list of rules and obligations, cherished and known by nearly every Christian; you shall not murder. Neither shall you steal (Deut. 5:17,19).

If we consume more than we need, so much more that it ensures future generations can't survive in peace, how could we claim to abide by these commandments? How is ensuring we live in luxury at the expense of another's life anything but murder? How is out-buying the starving poor for wheat crops anything but stealing?

Bioregionalism forces our attention onto our own actions. If we pay attention, we will see that many of our actions, purchases, and habits are driven by luxury rather than necessity. This luxury is bought at the price of transgressing the ultimate ethical injunctions. Our actions can not be separated from global effects. But, if our actions can be condemned in this manner, Old Testament law still can provide a suggestion for a more sustainable lifestyle:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants (Lev. 19:9-10, 25:24).

Perhaps some people may answer my earlier question about wheat crops by saying that the crops should go to whoever has bought them; these people clearly used what they had to their best advantage. But, stepping back into a biblical mode of thinking distorts our conception of ownership. In this verse, God is portrayed as the ultimate owner of all possessions. We are tenants, and we are tasked with caring for God's property. Furthermore, God wants this care to extend not just to creation, but to a sharing of wealth for those who don't have it. We are commanded not to overuse the resources given to us. But, we've been stripping our vineyard bare, and doing so without leaving food and fallen grapes for those who need it.

To Conclude

As Americans, we seldom realize the uniqueness of our lifestyle when viewed from a global perspective. Collectively, no other people use so much of the planet's resources, and no other people produce as much waste. The lifestyles we adopt—each time we make an unnecessary purchase, waste gasoline with poorly planned car trips, throw away uneaten leftovers—are entirely unsustainable. The dangers of such choices were apparent even to the ancient Hebrew people, who knew that overusing the land would deprive it of nutrients, weakening future crop yields.

Come up with a plan to cut back on your wasteful habits, both as an individual and as a class. Last week, you were challenged to think about and develop a plan to address a specific problem in your community. Is there any overlap between the goal of becoming more sustainable and addressing this problem? How could you go about solving it in a sustainable way? As always, try to make a concrete plan with identifiable goals.



**Considering
that all
people are
part of God's
creation,
what right do
we have to
steal from
them?**

Week 3: Building Community

Open the floor for discussion by asking about servitude. Discuss how your conceptions of who and what is owed service has changed over the course of the past week. Does anyone feel like they're becoming a better servant to all of creation? What are some areas where everyone has room for growth? Does anyone feel like some part of creation or humanity has been excluded from the discussion of service so far?

The past few weeks have been meant to challenge the values that, simply by living in America, we are all exposed to. Living in a consumer-oriented world places an undue amount of emphasis on our desires as individuals; this culture wants us to place our wants ahead of others' needs. As we've seen, this cultural mentality can be challenged by placing our attention away from what consumerism wants it to focus on—whether that be advertisements, entertainment, or unneeded commodities—and onto our communities. We've come to expand our definition of community in a way aligned with biblical thinking—serving both creation and the global community by caring for our own regional habitats.

Naturally, when thinking about caring for communities and getting involved in actions designed to better them, obstacles come to mind. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing community change in America is America's increasingly polarized society. Surveys continually show that Americans are holding views that are less moderate, more extreme, and all while becoming increasingly distrustful of one another. Theorizing about how we should care for creation is one thing, but the growing bifurcation of American politics makes reaching across party lines to form caring communities difficult. The greatest challenge to American community life, to reducing the unsustainable behaviors mentioned throughout the past weeks—thereby bettering creation—is to create a truly inclusive community.

This will be quite the challenge. Many of the interactions we take part of on a daily basis do not readily create such communities. This is, in part, because a large amount of these interactions are structured in a way that purposely avoids true dialogue. Looking at the structure of social media platforms can aid in realizing this. Platforms like Facebook create only the illusion of a public sphere of discourse. The ideas people are exposed to are, because of algorithms that sort content by a user's favorable reaction to certain content types, ideas that they already agree with. Again, these algorithms exist to encourage people to remain on the platform for as long as possible. Social media makes money not by challenging ideas or sponsoring debates and dialogues; it does so by entertaining its users and reinforcing their beliefs.

Week 3: Building Community

These platforms are the way most Americans get their news, the way they spend their free time, the way they've connected with friends that they couldn't see in person for all of 2020. They are not models of community-based discourse. They create digital suburbs: homogenized zones of like-minded thought. But, perhaps religion can serve as the basis for creating truly inclusive communities.

Biblical scholar Micheal Cartwright argues for Christians to approach scripture through a “communal hermeneutic.” Cartwright means that the responsibility of interpreting scripture should ultimately lie with churches themselves; they should take up the duty of performing their interpretations and bringing about, what they believe, is God's plan. With this idea in mind, think about how this famous section from Matthew might be interpreted:

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:19-22).

How might performing an interpretation of these verses be realized in the modern world? First, we might realize that these lines are essentially about conflicts. They are focused on what divided members of the church. But, Jesus has very loose ideas about what should truly divide people. To Jesus, two people, agreeing on as little as one thing, constitutes a community of faith. And, when Peter asks Jesus about the kinds of sympathies we should extend to members of the church—Jesus proposes essentially unlimited forgiveness.

Putting this interpretation into practice may involve realizing that, to Jesus, the definitions and limits of “the church” may be boundless. Its membership is radically inclusive, and to its members, Jesus tells us to extend a likewise radical sympathy. Thus, we should extend this sympathy to everyone.

This extension is the first step in building inclusive communities. It bars no one from entry, but it also opens up room for disagreement. If we're going to escape the monologues of like-minded thought that Facebook promotes, we need room for disagreement. We need room for dialogue, and the first step in that direction is tolerating different viewpoints, respecting everyone for their inherent worth, and barring church doors to no one.

To Conclude

Over the past month, at the close of each lesson, you've been challenged to develop plans for action. These plans have all been focused on changing your behavior as individuals, but they have also included challenges to identify the problems that your community faces—and ways to solve them. This week, we've identified the biggest challenge to building coalitions like the kind you may need to bring about the change your community needs. Think more about these challenges, but the ultimate goal for the end of this week is to synthesize your earlier plans into action.

The first step in doing this is to spread the word about your ideas. Reach out to the church at large, reach out to other churches, reach out to organizations that might already exist. But, importantly, reach out to everyone. Focus on a particular community issue that you would like to see solved, try to identify concrete steps towards solving it, and go about building a new community. It can be one where all are included, where people are taught to refocus their attention back to what affects them directly and all of creation indirectly. It can be a community centered around service and care.



**To disagree
is natural, but
to exclude is
a decisively
unethical
action.**

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