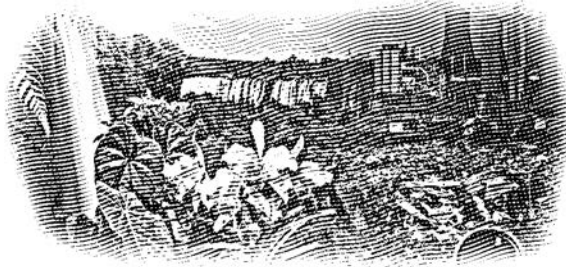


# Stewardship *and the* Environment



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Psalm 8; Gen. 2:15; Rev. 4:11; Exod. 20:8–11; 1 Cor. 16:19, 20.*

**Memory Text:** “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 the earth’ ” (*Genesis 1:28, NKJV*).

The world in which we live is a gift of love from the Creator God, from ‘Him who made heaven and the earth, the sea and the springs of water’ (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*). Within this creation He placed humans, set intentionally in relationship with Himself, other persons, and the surrounding world. Therefore, as Seventh-day Adventists, we hold its preservation and nurture to be intimately related to our service to Him. . . .

“Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs. . . .

“In this commitment we confirm our stewardship of God’s creation and believe that total restoration will be complete only when God makes all things new.”—Excerpted from “Caring for Creation—A Statement on the Environment by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 9.*

## Dominion Given at Creation

According to Genesis 1:26, Adam’s dominion extended to all other created entities—in the sea, on land, and in the air. Dominion includes the idea of ruling or having power over these creatures. Nothing is said about dominion over the forces of nature themselves, only over the creatures. And, according to the text, this rule was universal: Adam was to be, essentially, the ruler of the earth.

**Read** again Psalm 8. What is David’s response to the honor that God gave to humans? What does it mean that we have been given “honor and glory,” especially in the context of humans having been given dominion over the earth?

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According to Genesis 2:19, one of Adam’s earliest tasks was to name the animals. Names had great meaning in biblical times. One’s name represented one’s person and often one’s status. The authority to give names to the birds and beasts was confirmation of Adam’s status as ruler over the animals.

**Read** Genesis 2:15. In what ways do you see the principle of stewardship revealed here?

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Adam was assigned the task of caring for the Garden, to manage it and tend to its needs. The Hebrew root, *smr*, translated here as “keep” it, often means “to watch over” or “to protect.” The Garden was a gift to Adam, an expression of God’s love, and Adam was now given responsibility over it, another example of the dominion that Adam received at the time of Creation.

**How should our understanding of God as the Creator, or even, more specifically, our understanding of the Creation story itself, impact the ways in which we treat the environment? Why should our understanding of these things protect us from either gross indifference toward the environment or, in contrast, a fanatical devotion to it?**

## Caring for Other Creatures

“For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills” (*Ps. 50:10*). What in this text touches on the topic of our stewardship of the earth?

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**Read** Revelation 4:11. How does this text contrast radically with the common atheistic notions of a creation without a creator, a creation that comes into being purely by chance alone?

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Creation of the animals was not an accident or an afterthought. God intentionally created them. It was His will that they should exist, and it is this principle that should guide our treatment of them (*see also Exod. 23:5, 12; Prov. 12:10; Luke 14:5*).

Indeed, cruelty toward animals and indifference toward their suffering are widely recognized as being symptomatic of personality disorders. Many organizations have been established to promote good treatment of animals, and rightly so.

However, at the same time, some people have gone so far as to claim that humans are not intrinsically more important than animals, and so humans should not be given preferential treatment. In many ways, this is a train of thought that flows logically from an evolutionary model of human origins. After all, if we and the animals are separated only by time and chance, why should we be any more special than they are? One philosopher has even argued that a chicken, or even a fish, has more “personhood” than does a fetus in the womb or even a newborn infant. However ridiculous these ideas might sound, they can be derived with a fair amount of logic from an atheistic evolutionary model of human origins.

Of course, such ideas are not supported in Scripture. Humans have special status in God’s plan, in contrast to the animals. (*See Gen. 3:21, Exod. 29:38, Lev. 11:3.*)

**Put yourself in the mind of an atheist evolutionist and work through the reasons for why you think that animals should be treated no differently from humans. What should this tell you about how important our presuppositions are in determining the outcome of our thought?**

## The Sabbath and the Environment

As we have seen, the concept of stewardship, in the context of the way in which we take care of the planet, is tied directly to the creation. Our views on Creation will influence our views on the way in which we should relate to the creation.

For some, the creation is to be exploited, used, even pillaged to whatever degree necessary in order to fulfill our own desires and wants. Others, in contrast, all but worship the creation itself (*see Rom. 1:25*). Then there is the biblical view, which should give us a balanced perspective on the way in which we relate to the world that the Lord created for us.

**Read** Exodus 20:8–11. What do we find in this commandment that relates to stewardship?

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“God set aside the seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial and perpetual reminder of His creative act and establishment of the world. In resting on that day, Seventh-day Adventists reinforce the special sense of relationship with the Creator and His creation. Sabbath observance underscores the importance of our integration with the total environment.”—Excerpted from “Caring for Creation—A Statement on the Environment.”

By pointing us to the fact that God created us and the world that we inhabit, the Sabbath is a constant reminder that we are not wholly autonomous creatures, able to do whatever we wish to others and to the world itself. Sabbath should teach us that we are, indeed, stewards and that stewardship entails responsibilities. And, as we can see in the commandment itself, responsibility extends to how we treat those who are “under” us.

**Think about how you treat other people, particularly those who are under your dominion. Are you treating them with respect, fairness, and grace? Or are you taking advantage of the power that you have over them? If the latter, remember, one day you will have to answer for your actions.**

## Stewards of Our Health

As we have seen throughout this quarter, God’s original creation was “good,” even “very good.” Everything and everyone came forth from the hand of the Creator in a state of perfection. There was no sickness, no disease, no death. Contrary to the evolutionary model—in which disease, sickness, and death are part of the very means of creation—these things came only after the Fall, after the entrance of sin. Thus, it is only against the background of the Creation story that we can understand better the biblical teaching about health and healing.

**Read 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20. What is our responsibility to God regarding the care of our bodies?**

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Our bodies are the vehicles for our brains, and it is through our brain that the Holy Spirit communicates with us. If we wish to have communion with God, we must take care of our bodies and brains. If we abuse our bodies, we destroy ourselves, both physically and spiritually. According to these texts, the whole question of health itself and how we take care of our bodies, the “temple of God,” is a moral issue, one filled with eternal consequences.

Care of our health is a vital part of our relationship to God. Obviously, some aspects of our health are beyond our power. We all have defective genes, we all are exposed to unknown chemicals or other damaging agents, and we are all at risk of physical injury that may damage our health. God knows all this. But to the extent that lies within our power, we are to do our best to maintain our bodies, made in the image of God.

“Let none who profess godliness regard with indifference the health of the body, and flatter themselves that intemperance is no sin, and will not affect their spirituality. A close sympathy exists between the physical and the moral nature. The standard of virtue is elevated or degraded by the physical habits. . . . Any habit which does not promote healthful action in the human system degrades the higher and nobler faculties.”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 25, 1881.

## Stewardship Principles

**“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17, NIV). How does this text help to set the foundation for a biblically based concept of stewardship?**

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We often tend to think of stewardship in terms of money. As we’ve seen this week, however, stewardship involves much more than just that. Yet, whether dealing with money or with environmental concerns or our own health, there are certain principles involved in good stewardship, principles that have their ultimate foundation in the Creation, as depicted in Genesis. In the end, because God is our Creator, and because everything we have is a gift from Him, we are obligated before Him to be good stewards of whatever has been entrusted to us.

**Read Matthew 25:14–30 to see how this parable illustrates the rewards of good stewardship. What is the message of this parable regarding the principles of stewardship in general?**

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“To His servants Christ commits ‘His goods’—something to be put to use for Him. He gives ‘to every man his work.’ Each has his place in the eternal plan of heaven. Each is to work in co-operation with Christ for the salvation of souls. Not more surely is the place prepared for us in the heavenly mansions than is the special place designated on earth where we are to work for God.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 326, 327.

**What are you doing with the talents with which you have been entrusted (remember—everything good comes from “the Father of the heavenly lights”)? What choices can you make that will enable you to use these gifts in better service for the Lord’s work?**

**Further Study:** “Christ’s followers have been redeemed for service. Our Lord teaches that the true object of life is ministry. Christ Himself was a worker, and to all His followers He gives the law of service—service to God and to their fellow men. Here Christ has presented to the world a higher conception of life than they had ever known. By living to minister for others, man is brought into connection with Christ. The law of service becomes the connecting link which binds us to God and to our fellow men.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 326.

### Discussion Questions:

❶ Some secularists have proposed that the value of life should not be measured by whether the life is human but by its potential to live a pleasant life. They might value a young, healthy chimpanzee more than they do an old, diseased human.

For instance, read the following quote from Australian Peter Singer, who argues that, in certain cases, humans shouldn’t have any more rights than some animals do: “Far from having concern for all life, or a scale of concern impartially based on the nature of the life in question, those who protest against abortion but dine regularly on the bodies of chickens, pigs and calves show only a biased concern for the lives of members of our species. For on any fair comparison of morally relevant characteristics, like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, autonomy, pleasure, pain, and so on, the calf, the pig, and the much-derided chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy—while if we make the comparison with a fetus of less than three months old, a fish would show more signs of consciousness.”—Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: The Ecco Press, 2000), p. 156.

Singer, of course, is an evolutionist; thus, he believes that there’s really no overt qualitative difference between us and the animals. We just have evolved into something different from what they did, that’s all.

What is radically wrong with this picture? How should we as Christians respond to this kind of thinking?

❷ If you can find it, bring to class the entire text of “Caring for Creation—A Statement on the Environment” (this statement can be found at [adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat5.html](http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat5.html)). Otherwise, use the sections quoted in this week’s Sabbath study. Focus on how the statement ties in the Genesis Creation to the environment. Dwell more on how a proper view of Creation can protect us from taking an extreme position.

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Genesis 1:27, 2:15*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Discover how humanity’s stewardship of the world was designed to operate in Eden.

**Feel:** Feel the importance of caring for God’s creation in the context of his or her belief in the soon return of Christ.

**Do:** Accept responsibility to be a good steward of nature and of the environment.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: How to Be Custodians of the Earth**

**A** Does Christianity cause poor stewardship of the environment? Why, or why not?

**B** How was humanity’s dominion limited at Creation?

**II. Feel: Caring for the Environment**

**A** Why is caring for the environment important, even though we believe Christ is coming soon?

**B** How does the Creation account inspire you to better serve and protect the environment?

**III. Do: Being Better Stewards**

**A** In what ways can you use your personal power to be a better steward of this world?

**B** What other areas of stewardship, aside from protecting the earth, does God call Christians to practice, and how can we implement the practice of faithful stewardship in these areas?

► **Summary:** The dominion given to Adam and Eve at Creation was not an unrestricted dominion given to them to do with as they pleased. Human dominion was limited, for example, by the forbidden fruit. Also, humankind was placed in Eden to serve and protect the Garden, not to exploit and destroy it. Some, however, have tried to blame our ecological problems on Christianity, claiming that it has an inherently exploitative theology, based on Genesis 1. The limitations to human power given in Genesis 1 and other data refute this position. Finally, we must consider the question, why care for the environment if we believe that Jesus is coming soon?



## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Creation reveals that God made humankind to nurture and to care for His world, not to exploit and pillage it. This should impact the ways in which we treat the powerless beings in our lives.

**Just for Teachers:** Instill in the class the idea that Genesis 1 and 2 do not support any kind of oppressive leadership over fellow human beings or over nature.

In the Bible, righteousness is a covenantal-relational concept. It is about who you are and not just what you do. In short, righteousness is being in the proper relational orientation to the members of the covenant community, which, in this week's lesson, is the Creation community. Balaam demonstrated his unrighteousness by abusing his donkey (*Num. 22:27*). By contrast, Proverbs 12:10 declares that the righteous man respects the life of his beast. Old Testament law protected even the draft animals of your enemy. If your enemy's ox or ass was struggling to get up under its load, you were to help relieve its suffering, even though it was your enemy's beast (*Exod. 23:5*). What relevance do those principles have for us today?

To understand the point of this question better, it is useful to look at the ethical dilemma of Joseph during his engagement to Mary, in which he finds her to be pregnant and he is not the father. Matthew informs us that "Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (*1:19, ESV*). Joseph, who believes he has been unspeakably wronged by his fiancée, seeks to avoid shaming Mary precisely because this is the way in which righteous men act.

Yes, Joseph was going to hold her fully accountable, but he sought to do so in the least shaming way possible in order to protect her dignity. Joseph was in right relationship, even with his apparent enemy. What an example of Creation ethics!

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** God did not give Adam and Eve unbridled dominion over the earth. Their dominion was to be exercised

**within divinely prescribed conditions and limits. Exploitation of God's creation is not part of the Creation dominion package.**

## Bible Commentary

**I. To Serve and Protect: A Divine Mandate** (*Read Genesis 1:27 and 2:15 with the class.*)

In 1973, Lynn White Jr. published a scathing article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 18–30. White contended that Christian theology, based heavily on the concept of Creation dominion, provided a theological basis for the promotion of an exploitative view of man’s relationship to nature, hence our current eco-crisis. White’s article did accomplish some good by touching off a chain of reactions within Christianity, including among Evangelicals, causing those Christians to seek to refute White and proponents of an exploitative view, while arguing for a stewardship model of environmental care based in Creation. It is true that some exploitationist theology appears in Christian history, especially during the Industrial Revolution. However, most of the pro-exploitation expositors made poor use of biblical data when framing their arguments. It is likely, however, that the majority of Jews and Christians have not held such views.

This week’s lesson highlights evidence from Genesis as to why White, and exploitationist theologians, were ultimately wrong. Besides the problem of finding ecologic crises in thoroughly non-Christian areas, Genesis 1 and 2 contains no message of exploitation.

First, after Adam and Eve are given joint dominion—the text says, “let them have dominion” (*NKJV*)—but that dominion is immediately limited. One tree was not under their dominion, and its fruit was off-limits. Additionally, in Genesis 2 humanity is put into the garden to “serve and protect it.” (This is a literal translation of the roots *abad*—to labor or serve, and from which the term for servant is derived—and *shamar*, “to guard, watch over; or, of the Sabbath, to keep and observe.”) Humanity was not given any authority to do as it pleased, nor allowed to exploit and pillage God’s creation. Humanity

was a vassal ruler, subject to the policies of the sovereign God.

While humankind is given a higher level of moral protection than animals or nature (see Genesis 9:5, 6, for example), this privilege does not logically entail that nature and animals are devoid of divine protection. The Sabbath commandment typifies this point. Those addressed by the commandment are agents of power. These power agents have the ability to deny the Sabbath rest to their children, servants, ox, ass, and the alien in their gates. The common denominator of this potentially oppressed latter group is precisely their powerlessness to resist being unjustly forced to forfeit the Sabbath rest. With the Sabbath, God shows that He has granted basic rights of non-exploitation to the weak and powerless. It makes sense that the memorial of Creation shares in the same nurturing, caring spirit of Genesis 1, 2. This can be seen in the Sabbath poem of Isaiah 58, in which part of keeping the Sabbath was to cease one's oppression of the poor and powerless, not just to keep one day for religious observance. Isaiah does not ask for political activism against other oppressors. Rather, he calls oppressors themselves to keep the Sabbath by ceasing their exploitative ways over the weak and powerless.

**Consider This:** Why care for the earth and environment if Jesus is coming soon? What biblical principles urge us to avoid shirking our stewardship of the earth in the name of the Second Coming?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Creation calls us to a life of non-exploitation over those whom we have the power to exploit.

#### Thought Questions:

❶ Whom do you have the power to exploit? How would both Creation principles and the Sabbath inform how you exercise your power?

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2 To what degree can we use technology to gain greater control of nature? What principles should control our conclusions?

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### ► **STEP 4**—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Stewardship is a Creation ordinance that means God owns us.

#### Thought Questions:

1 Because I do not own myself, what are my obligations and duties to my owner?

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2 How does Creation stewardship define and clarify the kind of claims that God has on me?

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3 What difference would the belief that I own myself make in my approach to others and to God's claims on me?

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