

The Environmental Impact of Sin Sunday, 5/24/20

[OFF] I wonder if anyone watching today has been involved in writing an environmental impact statement. We've all heard of those, usually in connection with mining, like the proposed Twin Metals mine in the Superior National Forest, or the proposed PolyMet mine near Babbitt, also in northeastern Minnesota, and also a copper-nickel mine. The proposal to mine for copper and nickel in the Iron Range is controversial because of concerns over the potential impact the mining operations could have on the underlying watersheds, one of which includes the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.¹ In the case of the PolyMet mine, nearly a thousand acres of wetlands would also be destroyed.² Will we decide to open these mining operations, knowing that there will be unavoidable damage to the surrounding land, water, and air? That's really a political question, because no matter what an environmental impact statement indicates, the will to act comes down to human decision making.

[SHARE: Adam and Eve] Human beings have been wrestling with these types of dilemmas from the very beginning. Will we choose what we think is best for us in the short-term, or will we choose what's best for God's creation, and ultimately, for us, in the long term? It's the tale told in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and brought down a curse on themselves and the planet. It's the tale told as national governments fail to lead in taking significant steps to slow climate change. It's the tale of our schools and churches, when we prioritize cost savings and convenience over environmental sustainability and justice. And it's the tale of our own lives, every time we waste clean water and food. There are many ways to describe that tale: selfishness, short-sightedness, pride, brokenness, and sin. Sin isn't an abstract concept from the Old Testament. It's a willful turning away from Godliness to selfishness, and it doesn't just manifest in our sexual lives, but also in the mundane actions we take, or fail to take, in our relationship with this planet.

[OFF] Perhaps environmental impact statements should be required for more than builders, refineries, and mining. Perhaps our church should develop an environmental impact statement that weighs out the choices we make and the impact those choices have on our

¹ <https://www.startribune.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-polymet-and-twin-metals-mines/513211171/>

² <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/01/05/4-things-to-know-about-polymet-mine>

community, state, and world. I wonder what would happen if, on that impact statement, we made two columns, one labelled “blessings” and one labelled “curses” or even “sins.” Those last two really do go together, because just as God’s curse on creation came about as a result of the original sin of Adam and Eve, so to our own sins bring about curses on creation. Are we willing to be honest enough to say that we, corporately as a church, sin, bringing curses upon creation through our ungodly choices? I think that has to be the starting point before we’re willing to get more serious about moving more of our decisions into that “blessings” column.

Perhaps each family, or even each person, could also develop an environmental impact statement. What are the decisions you make in areas like how you purchase things, share things, use energy, or travel that impact creation, either as a blessing or a curse?

Before we consider what those environmental impact statements might look like, let’s remind ourselves that in the face of our greatest failures to be true to our pledge to follow Jesus, God’s power and purpose still hold out an undeniable hope for our future, and the future of all creation. I’m reading now from Romans 8:18-24 in the New Living Translation.

[SHARE:] {Read Romans 8:18-24, NLT}

[OFF] If I can paraphrase that first verse with an interpretive shift of sorts, I’d say, “What *all of creation* is suffering now is nothing compared to the glory God will reveal to us in *the new creation*.” In other words, God’s plans for the future include not only God’s children, but the entirety of creation. We’ll be focusing on the new creation as we celebrate worship together next week. For today, I want you to grab hold of the idea in verse 23 that we “wait with eager hope,” not just for our bodies as Paul emphasizes, but for the restoration of all that is wrong with creation. By the way, a hopeful future by no means lets us off the hook for exercising responsible stewardship in the present. To the contrary, our active and intentional love shown for creation is a kind of fruit that not only demonstrates that we’re on the right track in being Jesus followers, it actually becomes a means by which God accomplishes the renewal of the earth. Our present and future decisions, individually and collectively, cooperate with God to bring us into a more hopeful future.

[SHARE:] Last week we talked about clean water, so let’s look at clean air today- or rather, the problem of dirty air. The World Health Organization (yes, **that** World Health

Organization that's been in the news so much) estimates that 4.2 million people die each year as a result of exposure to outdoor air pollution. When combined with indoor air pollution, that figure climbs to seven million premature deaths each year.³ The WHO lists the major source of outdoor air pollution as "vehicles, power generation, building heating systems, agriculture, waste incineration and industry." Shockingly, the largest single source of indoor air pollution is cooking fires, although this is especially problematic in what we somewhat euphemistically refer to as the "developing world."

[OFF] If you were to begin writing an environmental impact statement for home and church, what might you include about air pollution? Let's start with the small stuff. On a recent episode of *Madam President*, President Elizabeth McCord was mocked by the media as being out of touch with the people when she suggested they could save money by keeping their car tires inflated. But the thing is, she was right. One of the easiest things you can do at home is keep your vehicles, lawn mowers, and appliances in good working order, including keeping your tires inflated. When it comes time to buy a new vehicle, consider a hybrid or an electric. When it comes time to buy a new water heater, stove, or clothes dryer, buy electric, which is now more economical and environmentally friendly than natural gas with the advent of affordable solar and wind energy. Plan your trips out and combine them to save gas. Don't burn leaves, wood, or garbage. Install a programmable thermostat and set it to conserve energy. Carpooling is pretty much out of the question these days, but it's the perfect time to get out and walk or ride your bike.

[SHARE: Fire Pit] OK, so now I'm really going to say something unpopular. One of the great pleasures that seems to have taken over suburban backyards is the outdoor firepit. I love sitting around a campfire, but something truly awful happens when every household in a crowded development of quarter-acre lots starts burning wood. You know that smell that permeates your clothing when you've been to a campfire? That smell comes from fine particulars that become airborne when burning wood. Unfortunately, they don't just stay in your sweater, they go into your eyes and lungs and through every open window on the block and contribute to the overall reduction of air quality. Look, I'm not asking you to give up

³ https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

your backyard fires, but at least you could use dry, clean wood. Even better, use propane or natural gas instead, which when burned is odorless.

[OFF] I challenge you to sit down and write down a list of everything you do that contributes to the pollution of our clean air. Make two columns, one for blessings and one for curses. What is your personal environmental impact to indoor and outdoor air quality? Who are the people most affected by your actions? What are the plants or animals most affected? If you're anything like me, there's more that you don't know than you do know on this topic, so this is a great way to get motivated to learn more as you form an action plan.

How about our church? Currently the church building has been intentionally set into a low energy use state with the pandemic, both to reduce costs but also to reduce waste and reduce our carbon footprint. That's one small but significant item for the "blessings" column. Over the years we've been phasing in LED lighting, another blessing. But we can do so much more. What about installing solar panels or joining a local solar cooperative? You don't have to be a member of our Property Team to think about ways that our building configuration and use impacts the land, air, and water, as well as the health of those inside the building and as the health of the neighborhood and the city of Buffalo. Let's see what creative ideas you can come up with to lower our church's environmental impact.

Yes, we live under a curse on creation. But that's not how we're destined to live. Jesus came to reverse the curse, and so we, the church of Jesus Christ, hold the keys to seeing that hopeful future happen. We wait with eager hope, not passively, but with energy, purpose and action. By God's grace, we can turn away from our destruction of the earth and reclaim our roles as caring stewards of creation.

[SHARE: Reflection Slide] Please take a minute now to reflect on what you hope for in the future of this planet, and what environmental sin you are ready to turn away from in order to be a part of bringing about that future. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



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