

## Authentic Stewardship Respects Creation

*And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:27-31)*

His first moment of self-consciousness was an amazing experience. He was already fully grown, no childhood to rely on. The world was pristine. His eyes saw nothing but the wonder of God's creation, freshly formed by the Word of God Himself.

This very first man, Adam, would be a great interview for any reporter. He possessed knowledge that has baffled all of us. I don't know about you, but I would really like to know what it was like to be the first human being. Imagine waking up on that initial day, and finding yourself thrust into a beautiful garden filled with perfection.

As Adam focused his eyes on that original morning of life, the sun illuminated a sight that had never been seen by another human being. He was the first person to see the world that God had created. Rolling hills covered with flourishing green grass; trees laden with plump fruit shimmering with drops of water from the morning dew; the golden sun against the brilliant blue backdrop of the daylight sky; he experienced it all.

If anyone ever had an identity crisis, it was Adam. His first thoughts had to be, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing here?" He had not memory, no language, no history, no relationships. He was just there. In the most beautiful place ever created, he found himself all alone.

He was not all alone, really. God was there. It was God's custom, during the cool of the day, to spend time with His new creation. It happened so often that Adam recognized the sound of God moving through the garden (see Genesis 3:8). This relationship between God and Adam was a picture of intimacy – the Creator and His creation enjoying one another without any barriers.

Perhaps it was during these times together that God noticed something missing from Adam. He realized that it was not good for Adam to be alone (see Genesis 2:18) so He decided to act. First, He paraded all the animals that populated the garden in front of Adam for close inspection. Adam studied them and named them, which must have been astonishing afternoon, exceeding any experience at the zoo that we can imagine.

It was apparent to both God and Adam that none of the creatures could fill the empty void in Adam's life. No animal, in spite of its perfection or uniqueness, had the ability to be partner to the crowing glory of God's creation. God had to do something.

He anesthetized Adam. Flat on his back in the wide-open spaces of the Garden of Eden, Adam became the first surgery patient. Why didn't God simply take some of the rich soil of the garden and create a woman as He did when He breathed life into Adam (see Genesis 2:7)? Why was Adam required to experience such painful surgery in order to have a partner? (If you have ever broken a rib, you know the pain.)

The fact that woman was fashioned from the rib of man provides an important lesson about relationships. There is something missing from man's existence that can only be provided through a relationship with woman. No animal or object is sufficient to meet this need in man's life. Although some would have us believe that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, the truth is that we are a part of each other. We were created to need one another in order to be complete.

When he awoke in the recovery room of Eden, imagine his thoughts when his eyes first fell upon the woman. These were not the shouts and catcalls of a construction crew hurled at a woman walking down the sidewalk, nor were they the whistles and howls of a drunken patron at an adult nightclub. His thoughts bordered on reverence and awe.

Adam pledged that he, and all men after him, should "cleave" to the woman (see Genesis 2:24). He instinctively knew that living in relationship with woman was best for everyone concerned.

At that moment, everything was exactly as God intended for His created world to be. But, it did not last. We are not told how long it took, but it happened when Adam and Eve disobeyed and resorted to hiding themselves from the presence of God. With the origin of sin, their relationship with God, and His world, changed

However, if we study the relationship between man and his world prior to the unfortunate consequences of sin, we discover what it means to be stewards of God's creation. As we have already noted, authentic stewardship results from our relationship with the owner. As long as Adam and Eve had an unmarred relationship with God, they were the ideal stewards. As we take a snapshot of this first couple living in the perfect garden, we discover authentic stewardship of creation.

### **The Authentic Steward's Responsibility to Mankind**

If Adam was a typical red-blooded male, imagine his reaction when he first saw Eve. Although he had already observed some amazing sights in God's perfect creation, there was nothing that compared to the sight of this special creature.

The first command Adam received from God was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). You know he was excited to hear those words. It has

often been said that this is one command that man has never had trouble keeping. The earth's population has continually expanded, with projections that the current pace will eventually lead to serious overcrowding in many corners of the earth.

It is significant that God's command contained both injunctions to fruitfulness and multiplication. If it were simply a matter of bearing fruit then it would speak of nothing more than eroticism. Man can be fruitful by scattering his seed to numerous recipients. That is a common situation in our contemporary world of unencumbered sex with multiple partners. That was not God's intention.

With the addition of the requirement to multiply along with being fruitful, God insisted upon further responsibility along with the act of procreation. If making babies is the goal, there will be very little multiplication. A newborn, left to himself, will not survive. The child requires care and nurture for a significant period of time. Unlike the remainder of the animal kingdom, the human offspring does not become self-sufficient in a matter of weeks.

In fact, it might be accurate to say that man never becomes self-sufficient. A child requires emotional, along with physical nourishment. There must be instruction and discipline. Without these provisions, the child will self-destruct and might even cause the destruction of many others as well. So, Adam and Eve had to do much more than simply produce new life – they were charged with the responsibility of developing new beings who would continue the process of God's creation.

As a steward, Adam understood that stewardship began with himself. He was not free to simply wander around the garden and scatter his seed at will. Once his seed was planted, it was his responsibility to see that it survived and matured into a healthy being. Thus, the family was created.

Adam did not learn this lesson at first. We do not know how long it took but he and Eve became the parents of two sons, Cain and Abel. They were fruitful, but they did not immediately multiply. Something happened between these two young men and Cain took the life from his brother Abel (see Genesis 4:8). The two, Adam and Eve, were fruitful, but there was no multiplication. Abel was dead and Cain was a fugitive. There was much to be learned before man would survive.

Adam and Eve needed to learn how to be parents. Talk about a hard task! All of a sudden their lives were turned upside down by a new responsibility. Being the first parents meant that everything had to be learned from scratch. There was no James Dobson to point them in the right direction. They were on their own. At least they did not have to deal with peer pressure.

Children are a stewardship from God. Learning to be a good parent is being an authentic steward. Not only is good parenting beneficial to the parent and the child, it is imperative to society and the survival of mankind.

One of the frequent mistakes of early societies was the belief that the gods were pleased with child sacrifices. They dutifully marched their children to the altar of sacrifice, believing that they would receive divine favor. Such was not the case with God's people. It was very clear that God did not want children to be sacrificed (see Jeremiah 7:31).

From the very beginning, God has placed the responsibility for human survival on the shoulders of the family. When parents fail their children, tragedy results. Other ancient societies, specifically Israel's neighbors in the Old Testament, did not understand the importance of family. All of those cultures that practiced child sacrifice ceased to exist. God's people survived because they knew about the stewardship of the family.

However, on occasion, someone slipped. There is a fascinating story about a Judge named Jephthah who made a tragic mistake with his family (see Judges 11). He is described by two phrases – “a valiant warrior” and “the son of a harlot” (see Judges 11:1). Apparently, his father, Gilead, made a trip to town one evening for a night of promiscuity. Jephthah was the result.

Gilead brought the boy home and raised him with his family. However, his other sons, the ones from the womb of his wife, did not accept the outsider as a legitimate brother. It must have made for some interesting mealtimes and holiday celebrations. Jephthah probably felt more at home with the servants than with his own father. When the boys were old enough to make choices, they drove Jephthah out (see Judges 1:2). The Bible reveals they were concerned about sharing the inheritance with this illegitimate brother.

Fighting for survival, the valiant warrior Jephthah, surrounded himself with “worthless fellows” in the land of Tob (see Judges 1:3). That is usually what happens when a child is not accepted by his own family. There is always someone who will welcome him, and more often than not, it is worthless fellows.

Circumstances changed. The Ammonites attacked and the city fathers of Gilead realized they were in trouble. A valiant warrior was needed to save the day. (By the way, I think Jephthah became a great warrior because he had to fight for survival in his father's house all of his life.) They called for Jephthah to deliver them (see Judges 1:6). To entice the reluctant warrior, they promised to make him their chief. He would be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead, including his brothers. It was an offer he could not refuse. His dream of being somebody was within his grasp.

Jephthah was not about to let this opportunity slip away. All he had to do was defeat the Ammonites. As he traveled toward the battle, it was apparent that God was going to give him the victory. We are told that the “spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah” (see Judges 1:28). There is no greater guarantee of victory because we do not lose battles when we have the spirit of God on our side.

Yet, Jephthah wanted to make sure, so he made a bargain with God. *“If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering”* (Judges 1:31-32). That is an amazing promise.

Jephthah was so desperate to become somebody for the first time in his life, that he made a stupid, unnecessary oath to God. It was unnecessary because God was already with him so the victory was assured. After the battle was won and the Ammonites were routed, Jephthah returned home to celebrate his victory and assume his position of authority. I wonder if he forgot about the vow. Perhaps the adrenaline rush of victory pushed his vow out of his mind.

However, as soon as he approached home, his daughter danced out the front door, with tambourine in hand. She came to celebrate, but her father realized he had to execute. Now, before you try to offer an excuse for Jephthah and say he did not know that his daughter would come out of the house, what else did he expect. What else was in the house that would come out the front door? He knew exactly what he was doing when he made the vow. It reveals his desperation.

His tragic vow was compounded when he fulfilled the promise. True to his word, he offered the young woman as a sacrifice to God. If he had known God, he would have known this was not God's desire. This was Jephthah's only child and she died without bearing any children. Although he was fruitful, he certainly did not multiply.

The story of Jephthah is a tragic tale of a miserable family. Gilead stepped outside marriage to scatter his seed. The result was a son who experienced rejection and ridicule. The son then murdered his daughter in a misguided attempt to earn the acceptance he should have been given by his father. This story would keep Sigmund Freud busy for a few days.

An authentic steward fulfills this basic relationship with family. From the very first moment of creation, God has given us the task of raising a healthy family. The responsibility begins with the birth of our first child and continues until the day we die. My father, speaking about raising children, has often reminded me that you never get them raised. I suspect that I have proven him correct many times.

### **The Authentic Steward's Responsibility to the Earth**

Sam had been a deacon in the church for many years. However, before I became the pastor, he and his wife had quit coming. There were some issues that he could never resolve so he chose to quit participating. However, I always knew that Sam would show up at church at least one time a year, but it was never on Sunday.

He always made his appearance on a weekday, dressed in his work clothes, overalls and boots, carrying a large envelop. The envelope contained a small stack of bulletin inserts and a brochure that described the importance of stewardship of the earth. The material was provided by the county extension office and Sam was involved because it was an important subject to him.

Sam was a farmer, as were most of the men in our congregation. He clearly understood the importance of taking care of the land because it was the direct source of his livelihood. When you mention stewardship to farmers, they do not think about tithing and money management. Their thoughts turn to management of the earth.

In fact, if you do a Google Search under the word "stewardship," the majority of the results are concerned with the environment. However, as Christians we normally define stewardship as managing time, talent, and treasures, with no mention of the earth and its environment. Yet, from the beginning, God intended for us to concern ourselves with the earth.

In His initial instructions to Adam, God charged him with the task to “fill the earth, and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). The word “fill” is often translated as “replenish.” It speaks of maintaining and rebuilding. It is interesting that once the floodwaters receded, God gave the same instructions to Noah (see Genesis 9:1). The earth had been ravaged by water and needed to be replenished.

Environmentalists constantly remind us that we are in danger of destroying the earth. Even though they sometimes speak from an extreme position that many of us find disagreeable, we must not avoid our responsibility to the earth. Authentic stewardship means that we take seriously the world that sustains us.

As we return to the creation story of Genesis 1, we notice that Adam was given the task of tending to the earth, prior to sin. In other words, there was work to be done even before the world was marred by man’s rebellion. Every farmer knows that the earth is more productive when it is cultivated than when it is left to grow wild. When a forest is left untended, a fire is necessary to burn away the undergrowth in order to make the forest healthy. To “fill the earth” does not mean to leave it alone in its natural state. The earth is in constant need of replenishing.

From the outset, when there was only one man and one woman to feed, God expected Adam to be involved in the process. As we think about the fact that Adam was placed in the garden and given chores, it is difficult to imagine what he did. The trees bore fruit and the ground produced grain. God even took the responsibility of watering the crops (see Genesis 2:6). However, every husbandman will tell you that there is work to do, even when the soil is fertile and the rain is abundant. Although God causes the growth of crops, they can be more productive and beneficial under the guiding hands of the farmer.

That is why farmers are such good stewards. They know the importance of natural resources. I served as pastor of Sam’s church for nearly thirteen years. Having been raised in the city, Denver, Colorado, I knew absolutely nothing about farming. Sam and the other farmers taught me the importance of stewardship. Our community was in an area that is very arid. To pump water onto the crops was expensive, which often meant that farming was financially unprofitable. Out of necessity for survival, they had learned how to get the most from each rainfall, and how to manipulate the soil so it was most productive. It is never advantageous to destroy the land and other natural resources.

But, few of us live on farms. We have moved to the cities and we seldom think about the land. The majority of the ground has been covered with concrete and asphalt. When it rains, we hope the water runs off rather than try to save it for a later time. We don’t need to worry about those things any longer. I doubt if the county extension office distributes bulletin inserts to any of the churches in my neighborhood.

We often take the earth for granted, that there will always be enough natural resources, even if we do not replenish. Yet, it is a very serious issue. We buy cars, purchase products, waste usable items, and fail to recycle because of our failure to understand stewardship. When our lifestyle is more about consuming the earth than replenishing the earth, it exposes that we do not

understand our relationship to the earth. The authentic steward is committed to filling up the earth.

The second word from God to Adam concerning the earth was to “subdue” the earth. The term means, “to bring into subjection.” Sometimes the word is rendered bondage (see Nehemiah 5:5). Adam was charged with the task of bringing the earth under bondage. I don’t think I have ever read anything like that on an environmentalist’s website.

However, to place the earth under bondage simply means that the earth is under man’s control. It is to be used for man’s purposes and benefit. We have been authorized by God, the Creator, to have dominion over the earth and all its products. This means that the earth is to be used to serve man.

This is exactly what happens everyday. Trees are burned for warmth and cooking. They are transformed into lumber to make shelter. Water becomes electricity, oil becomes fuel, and the sun becomes energy. Virtually every element of the earth has been used for man’s benefit. We have learned how to subject the earth in order to serve our needs.

The twin commands of replenish and subject must be kept in harmony. If the emphasis on replenish is too great, we might become “tree-hugging” alarmists who make the earth more important than man. If the emphasis on subjection is too great, we will carelessly consume the earth’s resources and inflict environmental catastrophe. The authentic steward lives in proper balance between replenishing and subduing the earth.

During my lifetime, I have had the privilege of living in a variety of places, which has afforded the opportunity to see the wonders of God’s creation. I grew up in several places in Colorado, including the flat plains on eastern side of the state and the lofty San Luis Valley in the Rocky Mountains. For three years, I lived in Kentucky, and admired the rolling hills and watched in awe as the trees changed colors in the fall. For more than a decade, I lived in the midst of the smooth farmland of the Texas panhandle. I have seen the beautiful city of Rio de Janeiro, enjoyed vacations in the northeastern United States, the Arizona desert, the Florida coast, the Caribbean, and numerous other amazing places. God created a remarkable world.

The Psalmist declared,

*The heavens are telling of the glory of God.  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. (Psalm 19:1)*

The authentic steward will join the chorus and allow creation to continue to proclaim the glory of God.

### **The Authentic Steward’s Responsibility to the Creatures**

Animals are a big part of our lives. Your house is probably like mine; we have had numerous types of pets over the years – dogs, cats, hamsters, rabbits, fish, turtles, Guinea Pigs, tarantulas, lizards, birds. We have three boys, which explains the variety.

Currently we are down to a single dog, a Yorkshire terrier. Although he is only a five-pound ball of fur, we call him Samson. It's a great name that always elicits a response when people hear us call him. Like most housedogs, he has very little value other than companionship. My wife loves him, but not nearly as much as he loves her. She spoils him more than she ever did any of our sons. If I got as excited as Samson does whenever she came home, she would probably treat me the same way. Whenever family or friends come in, they always grab Samson and give him affection. He has won the hearts of everyone who enters our house.

Animals have served a wide variety of purposes in relation to mankind. They have been food, beasts of burden, partners in labor, companions, objects of sport, and zoo residents. There has always been an important relationship between man and animals.

When God spoke to Adam, He gave him the instructions to *rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth* (Genesis 1:28). The older, more familiar translation is "to have dominion." Man was given dominion over the animal world. It essentially means to have control or power over something.

God made it very clear that man and animals are not equal residents of the earth. We must resist attempts to equate the rights of animals with the rights of humans. It was never God's intention, even in the perfect world of Eden, that man and animals exist on equal footing. It was obvious from the beginning that no animal was considered capable of being man's partner.

To have dominion over animals means that man can use animals for his purposes. Some try to make the case that it is more spiritual to be a vegetarian than a carnivore. They usually try to string together some Bible verses to show that God never intended for man to eat flesh; it only started as a consequence of sin. Therefore, if we are to be good stewards, it means that we must not eat the animals.

I think it is possible to build a case for vegetarianism from the Bible. However, in order to do so, you must ignore significant portions of the Bible. If you are going to accept all of Scripture, it is obvious that eating meat is not less spiritual than eating fruit and vegetables. From the beginning, man was allowed to eat meat.

*Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. (Genesis 1:29-30)*

Jesus came along and made a bold proclamation about eating, and Mark interpreted it to mean that "*He declared all foods clean*" (Mark 7:19). The Apostle Paul had the perfect opportunity to endorse vegetarianism when he waded into the Corinthian dispute about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Instead, he said that food will not help nor hurt our spirituality.

*But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. (1 Corinthians 8:8)*

It might be healthier to eat vegetables and avoid meat. I am not a doctor so I don't know. I am confident I would be healthier if I ate less gravy. I do know that eating a salad rather than a hamburger will not bring me closer to God.

However, diet can still be a stewardship issue. One of the great responsibilities of a steward is to care for our bodies. When we allow ourselves to be overweight and out of shape, we are not being good stewards. That has nothing to do with our relationship to the animal world because it is possible to be an unhealthy eater without ever consuming meat – have you ever heard of chocolate candy and cheesecake?

When God created the animals, He did something amazing. I recently read that just last year, scientists discovered nearly 200 new species of living creatures in the ocean. Countless years after Adam was given the task of naming all the animals, the job continues with no end in sight. We have a tremendous responsibility to administer appropriate rule over such an enormous collection of animals.

An authentic steward accepts responsibility for God's creation. It is an area that needs great improvement for most of us. We have become consumers of the earth, rather than caretakers. If all we do is consume and cling to our right as rulers of the earth, the environmental alarmists will be correct. The earth will suffer. I think the writer of Ecclesiastes had the attitude of an authentic steward when he wrote these words:

*And I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. (Ecclesiastes 8:17)*

Once we realize that God's creation is far beyond our comprehension, the only appropriate response is awe. Rather than consuming and destroying, we will worship the God who created such a magnificent world.