

**The Earth is the Lord's
Leviticus 25:8-12, 23**

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If you are 28 years old this morning, you represent the most numerous age group on the planet. The March issue of National Geographic reports that the most typical human being on earth is a 28 year old Han, Chinese male. Han being the largest ethnic group in the world and China, the most populous nation on earth. The most prevalent human being is male since there are 1.01 men for every 1 woman.

National Geographic states that the world's population will hit 7 billion sometime this year. To put that number in perspective, when my great-grandfather arrived here from Scotland, there were barely one and half billion people walking the face of the earth. Fifty four years ago, when I was born, barely three billion folks inhabited our global shared space. When my son Aaron was born in 1985, the population was but five billion and now, twenty-six years later, its racing toward the 7 billion mark.

Birth rates are declining in most of the world, but the best estimates project that the birth rate of our species will continue to outrun our death rate until 2050 when the census of the entire world will plateau at around 9 billion people.

National Medal of Science winner and two-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, naturalist E. O. Wilson writes in his book *Creation* that our population explosion is the chief cause of the alarming destruction of this planet. Wilson says that it is human overpopulation that has led to the destruction of essential habitats around the globe, rampant pollution that threatens the existence of thousands of species and over harvesting which threatens the survival of whole groups of plant, fish and animal life.

The problems caused by the explosion in the numerical growth of human life are compounded by the simultaneous growth in the standard of living of billions of people around the world. Several years ago, Christian Ethicist W. Paul Jones observed that "if everyone enjoyed our way of life, the global ecosystem would be destroyed." The majority of the people on the planet are still a good ways from living at our economic level of comparative prosperity. The rich are still getting the richer and the poorest people on earth are getting poorer. National Geographic documents that two per cent of the world's population now holds 50 per cent of the wealth. Even though gross inequities persist, however, development in India, China and parts of Africa have elevated five billion of the seven billion folks on earth into the middle income bracket of the world population. This allows millions of people to buy cell phones and computers and automobiles that could not have done so even five years ago.

There are of course aspects of this economic advancement to be celebrated, but the cost on the environment of billions of people using more and more resources in escalating standards of living is potentially devastating. Again E. O. Wilson puts the problem succinctly when he writes, "at least up to this date, civilization has always been purchased by the betrayal of nature."

As dire as the numbers can seem to be for the future of our planet, Dr. Wilson is not pessimistic. In fact, in his book *Creation*, he says that he believes the salvation of our ecosystem can be achieved if folks who give ultimate authority to science and those who look to revealed holy texts as their supreme authority will simply work together toward that end. He says regardless of the huge differences that exist between many people of faith and many people of science, we are bound together by the fact that both of our ultimate sources of truth teach us to love creation.

Certainly the book of Leviticus would agree. In the twenty-fifth chapter of this book the Hebrew people referred to as "And God Calls," God calls us to take care of the land on which we live. The chapter begins with God telling the people of Israel that every seventh year, they were to let the land rest. The Lord promised that the harvest of the sixth year would be plentiful enough to last the people of Israel through three years: the year of the harvest, the year in which they did not plant and the year that followed when they did plant but had to wait months before the harvest was ready. "Trust in me" God told Moses, "to make the sixth year harvest last and don't put seed in the fields or prune your grapevines in year seven. The land needs to rest." The Great Provider went on to say that the farmers were not even to harvest what came up in the fields voluntarily in that Sabbath year nor were they to take the grapes that grew without cultivation. The poor folks, immigrants, domestic animals and wild animals were to take the food that came up in the fields that were left fallow. Everyone else was to rely on what God provided in year six.

The reason the Lord commanded this Sabbath rest for the fields was because God wanted the people of faith to protect the land and cherish it for simply being the wondrous creation of God. The Land, taught the Lord, had value beyond the material wealth it could provide. It was precious and should be cared for even if that meant the people might have to do with less for two or three years.

Next, God told Moses to lead the people to follow a practice that has almost never been obeyed in Jewish or Christian history. Because I was raised by parents who saw to it that I attended Sunday School and worship every Sunday morning, Training Union and worship every Sunday evening, and prayer meeting and Bible study every Wednesday night, by the time I entered seminary, I had benefitted from at least 5000 sermons and lessons on the Scriptures. In addition, I had 15 years of Vacation Bible School as a pupil or a leader under my belt. I was privileged to attend at least 20 Bible camp experiences on top of that. Virtually every night, I read a portion of the Bible before I went to sleep. That's several thousand more exposures to Scripture. In middle school I actually won the Kansas state Bible drill competition which meant I had to memorize dozens of verses and know my way around the Scriptures. Then in college, I took university level courses on the Old Testament, New Testament and the Gospels. I served as a paid youth minister in four different churches where I led multiple Bible studies and the last two years of my college experience, I pastored a church where I preached three times a week. By the time I graduated from college, I had memorized well over 300 verses of Scripture.

I tally all this to show you that by my 21st birthday, I had read and heard more of the Bible than 90 per cent of the people on earth, maybe more than 99% of the people my age on earth. And yet with all that Biblical foundation, I'd never heard the information I'm about to share with you from Leviticus until I went to seminary. And it wasn't even in seminary that I got the news.

Somewhere around my second year of graduate studies, a buddy and I attended a conference in Jackson, Mississippi sponsored by Voice of Calvary ministries. It was led by the Rev. John Perkins and in a sermon that I'll never forget, he told me about this grossly neglected portion of the Bible. It was so important to him that he named the conference, "Jubilee." He drew the name straight from the 25th chapter of Leviticus which is the only place in all the Bible that documents this great commandment of God.

What does it say? That every fiftieth year, the people were once again to allow the land to rest. But wait, there is more. In that fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, all land was to be returned to its original owners. When Israel entered the Promised Land, each tribe was given land. Every family within each tribe was given a portion of that land. They were to build a home on it, plant their crops, raise their children, live out their years on that soil.

They were forbidden to ever sell that land for financial gain. However, if they fell on hard times and went into severe debt, they could sell the land to their creditors to get free of that debt. They would still farm it and reap some of the profits for the survival of their family, but the land would belong to the person to whom they owed the debt.

God saw that over time, this transfer of land would create deep problems, divisions and inequities in the land of Israel. The fortunate or possibly the shrewd could accumulate more and more land over time, thus wielding an unhealthy amount of power over those who had become landless due to misfortune, laziness or incompetency. So to prevent that, the Lord said, every fiftieth year, the land was to go back to the family who originally owned it and all debts were to be cancelled.

To be fair, the purchase price of the land was then set according to the number of years that remained before the year of Jubilee. If an Israelite bought a debtor's land thirty years before Jubilee, the price was considerably higher than if a creditor took the land two years before Jubilee.

As far as we know, this command was only kept briefly during a couple of times of national crisis. When Israel was under siege and all seemed lost, the leadership promised to follow the year of Jubilee, but as soon as the siege was over and the danger passed, they went back to business as usual. It's easy to see why. Creditors didn't much like this command. They evidently complained about it to Moses who relayed their unhappiness to God. "That's not fair," they must have cried. "We've worked hard to accumulate that land, we paid good money for that land, that land belongs to us now." To which God responded with the most important verse in this passage. The Lord's response is to be the foundational principal of all our financial dealings, our standard of living and our stewardship of life. Leviticus 25:23 quotes God as saying, "This land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants." In other words God responded to the cries of the wealthy landowners, "Don't tell me its your land. The land belongs to me. You will always be a tenant, a hired hand, a migrant worker on my land."

Try sending that in with your mortgage payment next month.

Down outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, Patricia Kluge is being forced to unload her 1100 acre estate because she is millions in debt. She tried to sell her mansion known as Abermarle House for 100 million, but didn't get any takers so she slashed the price to 24 million at which point Donald Trump began to negotiate with her for the purchase of all her holdings. Ten years ago, Ms Kluge thought she owned the land. Today, the bank evidently thinks they own the land. In the next few weeks the Donald may acquire it and think he owns the land, but Leviticus tells us the truth, the earth is the Lords and we're all just squatters for awhile.

I learned this lesson years ago when I rented a home in Bethesda. Weeks after I moved in, I was feeling very proud of the house I had. I referred to it as my home and was making plans to paint a few rooms colors more to my liking. As I prepared to paint the interior of a closet in one of the bedrooms, however, I noticed some markings on the inside of the door frame. There were a series of pencil notches going up the frame with names written beside them. It took me a minute to realize what I was seeing. The former family that had resided there had raised their children in that home. Once each year or maybe every six months, they had called their children in and marked their height on the frame. The number of measurements indicated that for years, those folks thought the house was theirs. I realized they were only passing through and so was I.

Since the earth is the Lords, we are to care for it according to the commands of the Lord. We are privileged beyond comprehension to walk the surface of this amazingly beautiful planet but it is not ours. We are simply stewards of it.

This understanding should inform our upcoming discussions concerning this property at 3515 Campus Drive. It has recently been valued at 6.5 million dollars and there is interest in purchasing it. We have no interest in selling our entire tract of land, but many in the church think we ought to consider selling some of the property and using the proceeds to build new educational or worship space on the acreage we keep.

Many conversations await us on this subject, but the primary questions can't center around what we are to do with the land we own. If we were following the teachings of this passage, all this land we say we own would have reverted to the Weldon Rawley family by at least 2007. That was the fiftieth year the land had been in our possession and Jubilee would have kicked in at least by then. Of course the Rawley family would have had to turn around and give it all to the Frank Competillo family for that is who Mr. Rawley purchased it from in 1932. As you can anticipate, Mr. Competillo would then have to pass it back to whomever he bought it from and eventually, if we traced the transactions all the way back in time, we would get to who rightfully owns the plot, God. So let's ask God what to do with God's property and then we're likely to do the right thing.

Whatever we decide to do with God's land, we can be mindful of how to create a greener building whether through renovations of this structure or new construction. We usually make decisions based on what is cheapest for us, but the care of the earth has to be part of the equation as well.

This passage has implications for much more than the design or sell of our own building, however. It has ramifications for our own habits of consumerism. The question of how to reduce our carbon imprint is a holy question for it helps care for God's land.

To be faithful to this passage, our church ought to recycle paper products better than it does. Desa recycles used paper from the office, but we don't do well with our bulletins, reports and recyclable trash from dinners and events. The Methodist church next door has invited us to recycle our office trash in their pick-up center but they can't take the rest of it. If we care about God's earth, we ought to find a way to get the rest of the stuff to a center. You don't have to be ordained to do this, just grab the project and get it done.

I think I'll stop at this point so I don't stray too far into issues I know next to nothing about. We can each do the work of applying this sermon in our own lives. What I believe the Lord wants us to hear this morning, at the very least, is that caring for the earth, the environment and the ecosystem in which we live is not just the work of science or somebody's political agenda. Caring for the earth is the work God has given to all of us for the earth is the Lord's, we just get to enjoy it for a relatively short span of time.