

Loving Creation for God's Sake

When I was a boy, we would often sing this chorus:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace*

Singing that chorus seemed to suggest that it was one or the other – either the things of this Earth were to be bright and enjoyable, and the face of Jesus would be obscured, or else the face of Christ would be clear and bright, and the things of the earth would grow dim. It seemed that you could enjoy creation or Christ, but not both simultaneously.

Another hymn sings a very different song.

*This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought.*

That's a very different idea – that creation reveals God, that creation can be loved, that it needn't be a war between the two.

But those two hymns show you the very different thinking about how Christians should relate to the created order. Christianity has always had a stream of thought that regards creation with real suspicion. Drawing from Greek Platonism, the body is seen to be inferior to the spirit, a kind of temporary vehicle that trips up our spirit, until we can finally shed it and be in the pure spirit world of Heaven. Bodily pleasures are seen as distractions at best, and mortal threats to the Christian life at worst – food and drink, clothing and comfort, sleep, exercise and play, and even marital sexuality are held in some suspicion. Even when they are not shunned altogether, like the ascetics did, many Christians feel you can't really be spiritual and eat good food, you can't worship and swim or run or do push-ups, you can't be Christ-focused and enjoy some pleasure through the five senses. You have to switch one off and do the other.

Of course, we then also hear messages on the need for self-denial, to shun materialism. We read about worldliness in 1 John 2, and it is a focus on sensual experiences, outward appearances, temporal and this-worldly. We know we must shun worldliness, we must set our affections in things above, we must lay up for ourselves treasures in Heaven. We read New Testament warnings about the danger of wealth. So we live with a kind of tension, feeling we should enjoy God's gifts, but not too much.

Some people decide the answer is to compartmentalise – loving God in one box, loving creation in a different one. They reason, there is a time to be spiritual – quiet time, read the Bible, pray, go to church. Then, there are times to take a break from that, and do some gardening, have a tickle-fight with your children, have cake and coffee, play a hilarious board game with your friends, enjoy a great book. But they are always stalked by a guilty feeling that what they are doing is less spiritual, inferior.

Some people decide to do scale balancing – for every enjoyment of a movie or a bike ride, or some stargazing, they need to do extra Bible reading, prayer, church ministry. A few people even give up one entirely, abandon Christianity to love the world, or renounce all of life now to serve God in

poverty or celibacy.

What does God, who commands us to love Him, say about loving creation? What do we do with sports, exercise, good food, desserts, hobbies, literature, marriage, and nature?

Do I love God by hating creation? Do I love God and sometimes turn away from God to love creation? Is God so identified with creation that when I love anything in creation I am loving Him?

Once again, we remember the ultimate love is reserved for God alone. Nothing in creation should be loved as a god. But then, we are creatures within creation. He made us embodied spirits in the midst of a pleasure-filled creation. So how do we relate the love of God to creation?

I. Love God By Learning From Creation Thoughtfully

*Psalm 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.
2 Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge.
3 There is no speech nor language Where their voice is not heard.
4 Their line¹ has gone out through all the earth, And their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,
5 Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, And rejoices like a strong man to run its race.
6 Its rising is from one end of heaven, And its circuit to the other end; And there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Psa 19:1-6)*

Why did God make the sky and the stars and the sun? Partly to reveal who he is. The heavens show who God is by showing what He has made. Creation communicates. Creation teaches. Creation displays truth about God.

The Bible is so often sending us back to creation to teach us – Go to the ant, it tells us to teach us about diligence. Consider the lilies, Jesus tells us, to learn about God's provision. God fills His Word with analogies from creation to teach us about Himself. He compares Himself to a Lion, a Lamb, the Sun, a Rock, Water, Bread, a Vine, a Father, a Son, a Bridegroom, an eagle, a Shepherd, a Fortress, a Shield. He compares salvation to birth, to a court case, to adoption, to a financial transaction, to release from slavery. He compares believers to organs in the body, branches, ambassadors, citizens, a loaf, set-apart vessels, jars of clay, stones, a Temple, pilgrims, sheep. That's just a sample. In fact, you can't read more than a few paragraphs of Scripture without seeing how God uses creation to reveal truth.

Creation is a set of symbols, analogies and pictures of God. It's important to understand that when God made the world, He didn't just make it, and then say, "Wow, mountains would be good illustrations of power. I think I'll write that down." He didn't create sheep, and then say, "These would serve well as illustrations of people." No, before God made, He designed sheep, and mountains, and fire, and gold, and wind, and snow, and hard and soft, and sweet and bitter, and hot and cold, and rough and smooth, and fragrant and putrid, and bright and dark and loud and soft because He wanted it all to teach.

Creation is not God and yet reveals God. Creation exists in God, and God is in Creation, and yet God is distinct from His creation. We are not to see creation as identical to God. But we are to be aware that the world shouts meaning and analogy and parable everywhere we turn.

We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake. - C.S. Lewis

The discerning eye seeks to see beyond and behind surface meanings. What does this reveal of

God? Why was this made? Why was it made in this way? What in the heart or plan of God chose to make this? How does this activity reveal God? Why did God permit this action? How did God weave these events into his plan? How was this an answer to prayer? What is this like? Does it teach anything? Why does this exist? For what good purpose did God make it, or for what evil purpose has man used it for? How does it reflect God? How can we be like God with this, as His image-bearers? What does it communicate or reflect?

How many things in our day might God be wanting us to turn aside to and contemplate? What about the meaning of motherhood, or fatherhood, or singleness, or being a grandparent? What about the meaning of your vocation: what it reveals about God, and man, and the world, and how to do it as only a Christian can.

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. (1 Corinthians 7:20-22)

Our various callings, be they mother, student, plumber, pilot, or pastor are to be lived out for God's glory. Each man should consider the meaning of his calling, how it reveals God. In small and big ways, our callings enable us to order the world God has made for his glory.

I fear that one of the attacks on the church is to make us deaf to God's glory and meaning in creation. Non-stop busyness, the frenetic pace of modern life, and undeveloped powers of reflection conspire to expel thoughtful contemplation. Sadly, many Christians increase the noise in their souls by adding distractions. The brief quiet they might have between appointments gets filled with the car radio, the iPod, surfing the web, hours on Facebook, Twitter, or blogs, DVDs or TV, apps and computer games, or more trips to the mall. The result of too much of these things is that they divide our attention, they scatter our thoughts, they disquiet the heart, they absorb our interests, they shift our focus to temporal matters, they make us curious about what does not matter, inquisitive about other people's business, and generally thoughtless about meaning.

Blaise Pascal said "Distraction is the only thing that consoles us for miseries, and yet it is itself the greatest of our miseries."

We can love God in creation when we allow it to reveal more of God. We love God by being in His world, and learning, and pursuing understanding.

II. Love God by Enjoying Creation Gratefully

1 Timothy 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;

James 1:17 ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Here is something we can all do. We can allow the enjoyment we have in God's good gifts to return up to God in gratitude. The great food, the good book, the sunset, the falling autumn leaves, the wool jersey, the incredible symphony, the moving story, the refreshing swim, the beautifully crafted woodwork, the creative scrapbook, the hide and seek with your children, these are meant to cause joy in our hearts. They come from God. We know that. If it is a lawful pleasure, if it is not forbidden in His Word, or have the appearance of evil, or could cause others to stumble into sin, it is one of thousands of lawful ways of enjoying creation.

Our difficulty is division. We feel that to love God, we should be reading the Bible, praying, singing at church, witnessing. So we tend to think that these things are inferior because we are not directly engaging with God.

It is true those are means of grace which are what we could call direct godwardness. We, as it were, look up into the face of God, deal with Him as children to Father, speak to Him, hear from Him. And without that, we will have very little of the Christian life.

But we have to know that as intense and concentrated as those times are, probably the bulk of our lives will not be spent in the Word, or in church. Most of our lives will be spent in creation – at home, at work, at play. So we need to cultivate a kind of indirect godwardness, where we learn to enjoy God through the joys and struggles of creation. We allow creation to become a means of enjoying God, by actually enjoying the creation, and then receiving it from God.

We must know the earthly pleasure for itself, if we are to understand its analogy. Maybe you have read C.S. Lewis' *Meditation in a Toolshed*. He writes:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

In other words, if the beam of light is like people, or nature or the gifts of God, you can either just look at them and try to enjoy them or experience them as ends, or you can look up them, beyond them to the God they reveal.

The danger of creation is twofold – idolatry and ingratitude. If any thing in creation is loved as an end, and not as a means to God, it has become an idol. It has become a source of satisfaction that belongs to God. You are granting that thing or activity a need-love or a gift-love that belongs to God Himself. Ingratitude is similar. We take the joys and pleasures of creation, and enjoy them as if they did not come from God at all. When loving God becomes the pursuit of our lives, creation is enjoyed as creation, but the act of enjoying it is the enjoyment of gratitude.

How do we do this? We recognise that God expects us to take our eyes off Him directly, and look at what He has made. He expects us in those moments not to have our minds in two places, but to do what we are doing well, to enjoy what we are enjoying. We might pray a prayer before, asking for help. But then we focus on the task. We might pray a prayer during, asking for enablement.

Someone compared it to sight. Our eyes can typically focus on one thing at a time. It still sees other things behind or before or peripheral to what we are focusing on, but they are seen but not focused on. So it should be with our love for God. David said, "I have set the Lord always before Me" God is his vision, his ultimate and first love. Sometimes God is the direct focus, in prayer, Bible study, corporate worship. Sometimes God is not the direct focus, but He is still in view, as we turn our focus to work, play, family, hobbies, leisure, study. We engage with creation, focussing on what we are doing, with God still in the picture, doing it for Him, and through Him, and to Him.

But where it ends up is the experience of gratitude. You don't stop enjoying the cake, or the soccer game, or scratching your dog's tummy, or stargazing, you let that joy be the joy of gratitude. I am enjoying this, and it is from You. Don't separate the pleasure from the interpretation of the pleasure. Unite them under the experience of gratitude.

III. Love God By Using Creation Wisely

25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake;

26 for "the earth is the LORD'S, and all its fullness1."

27 If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake.

28 But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake1; for "the earth is the LORD'S, and all its fullness2." (1Co 10:25-28)

Here Paul uses the same verse about creation (Psalm 24:1) to back up two opposite courses of action. He tells you in one circumstance, eat, and then quotes 'the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness' and he then tells you in another circumstance, don't eat, and then quotes exactly the same verse 'the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness.' The goodness of creation can be applied in opposite ways.

In the first circumstance, Paul speaks of buying food at the meat market. Don't make trouble for your own conscience by asking, where did this meat come from? Was it sacrificed to idols? You are a Christian shopping for meat, and here is meat for sale. Buy it. Eat it. Why? Because food is part of creation, and the earth is the Lord's. It's His creation. The meat is part of His good world, so eat it.

In the second circumstance, Paul speaks of sharing a meal with an unbeliever. Once again, Paul says, don't make trouble for your conscience by asking, where did you get this meat? Did you consecrate this to idols? Did you pray a pagan prayer over this? No, Paul says. You are there to eat, and here is food. So eat it. But, Paul says, let's say that before you tuck in, the unbeliever says something, maybe to test you, maybe to warn you, maybe to taunt you, we don't know why. He tells you, this is food offered to idols. In that case, Paul says, don't eat. Politely refuse for the sake of the pagan who told you. He has now as it were invited you to join an idol feast. The food is still the same, but the meaning of eating it has changed because of what the pagan said. The pagan is now inviting you to fellowship with his gods. And Paul says, as testimony to him, as witness to him, don't eat. Why? The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness: in other words, in God's good world there will always be something else to eat, and that person is more important than your stomach. He is also part of God's earth, needs salvation, God will meet your need out of His fullness, but abstain from the food. As verse 31 says, you need to eat to the glory of God, and you can also not eat to the glory of God. You can love God in regards to food by eating, and you can love God in regards to food by not eating. What makes the difference? The meaning of that part of creation.

In the one occasion, the meaning is food for sustenance, food to be received with thanksgiving, food that will bring pleasure to send you up to God, food that will remind you of God your provider. But in the second occasion, the meaning is different. Now the food is associated with idolatry. The meaning has been changed by what the food has been used for. To eat in the second instance has a different meaning from eating in the first case. Isn't the food just neutral? Yes, but nothing is neutral once moral agents use it. Once we humans, made in God's image use anything in creation – food, clothing, music, architecture, technology, we assign meaning to it. And that meaning determines how you use it.

To love God in creation is to become wise about what the thing in question means. What does this

computer game mean? What does this sports activity signify? Are there things I should consider in terms of association in joining this group, or using the technology? What will this gadget mean in terms of time, in terms of enslavement? What will this clothing mean, if I wear it on that occasion, and not on that? What does this movie mean, not only in its story, but in viewing acts of evil or sin as entertainment? What does this music mean?

Too many Christians have this happy-go-lucky view of creation – God made it, it's good, we can use it, so long as we say we're doing it for God, and as long as we're sincere in our hearts. That's not the standard here in Scripture. Paul says, when you use creation, determine the meaning of what you are doing, or using, or partaking of, to see how to love and glorify God in it.

Meaning comes in four ways. We don't have time to get into this, but meaning in God's world comes in four ways. Meanings can come through convention, that is, use. We understand the meaning of a suit and tie, or of a birthday cake, or of a tattoo, or of slang words, of Facebook through use. Second, meaning can be through association. We understand the meaning of death metal bands, of transcendental meditation, of body-piercings, through associations. Who does this, what way of life, what behaviour accompanies this thing. Third, meaning is sometimes simply assigned. We assign certain meanings to road signs, to hand signals. Some meaning is intrinsic, it is grounded in its very created nature. Certain sounds evoke certain emotions, certain colours, certain human body language and tone of voice is so rooted in the created order it is universal to all people.

This is why Paul says *Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1Th 5:21)*

8 Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy-- meditate on these things. (Phi 4:8)

Paul tells us to be people who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31). We will end up abusing creation, if we do not understand it.

Augustine's famous statement summarises loving creation: "He loves thee too little, who loves anything with thee, which he loves not for thy sake." Only one being deserves ultimate love. Since our lives are surrounded by creation to be used, seen, experienced, shaped, tamed, or avoided, the substance of loving creation is loving creation *for God's sake*.

Whatever cannot be loved for His sake should not be loved at all. Whatever cannot be done for his glory should not be done at all. Conversely, all that can be loved for his sake, or performed for his glory, ought to become media that reveal his beauty, things that cause gratitude, and things to be done for His glory.