

Sermon:

Clean Air: Everyone's Right

Recently, a news headline in a national daily warned its readers to "Leave Delhi" in the wake of the alarming air pollution levels in the city. Delhi has notoriously become the most polluted city in the world, but phenomenon is not limited to Delhi alone as air pollution is a countrywide problem. Yet little is done to improve air quality. So why is there apathy when it comes to air pollution, despite knowing that it affects us all? How should our faith influence the way we think about air quality and the problems associated with it?

Clean air: God's gift for all

Clean air is vital for life, and is a central part of God's creation. We see the abundance of God's creation in Genesis 1, which also shows a sense of peacefulness and harmony in creation. In this chapter, we see that God brought forth life and was pleased with his creation. We see the first instance of God being pleased with His creation after He created the earth (Genesis 1: 10). Further in the chapter, we see how God sees the goodness of His creation (Genesis 1: 18, 21, 25, 31). Human beings, created in the Image of God are part of God's good creation (Genesis 1:27-29). God blesses humanity in Genesis 1:28, and also entrusts us to take care of his creation, as seen in Genesis 2:15 "*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it.*" The word translated as work is 'Abad', which means 'to serve' and the word translated as 'take care of' is 'Shamar', which means 'to keep, guard, protect.' These verses indicate that we have the responsibility to keep, guard, protect and serve God's good creation, which includes the air we breathe.

Clean air under threat: What we have done to God's gift?

What do we do with gifts? Normally, when we receive gifts, we treasure them and use them sparingly. However, what have we done to God's gift of clean air?

Clean air is essential for life, and we breathe in at least 20, 000 liters of air each day. At the same time that we inhale life-sustaining oxygen, we also breathe in the bi-products of our lifestyle choices - car fumes, fine particulate waste from industrial pollution, building sites etc. For instance, in most cities like Delhi, emissions from cars is the main cause of air pollution yet reports suggest that at least 1400 new cars are added to the city every day¹. To make matters worse, diesel cars, which emit air that is more noxious, are preferred over petrol car by buyers due to the low cost associated with running diesel cars. In our desire for short-term benefit, we have failed to protect the environment and our well-being.

Apart from polluting, we have failed in taking care of trees, plants and forests that act as sinks in regulating air quality. This shows the interconnectedness of all creation and our misdeed in one sector affects all other sectors. In Isaiah 24:4-6, we see how man's disobedience to obey God's commandments and statutes affects creation. The present condition of air quality is indicative of our carelessness, greed

¹NDTV: 1400 cards added to the city every day. Also available at <http://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/delhi-1400-cars-added-to-citys-roads-every-day-550647>

and selfishness. We have ruthlessly abused the environment and have not considered the consequences of our actions on the air, the environment, plants, and on our neighbours. We often read Genesis 1:28, to mean subdue and dominion over everything on earth and ruling ruthlessly, while failing to obey the call to be faithful stewards. John Stott calls our dominion as a 'cooperative dominion', which has to be seen as a delegated, responsible and cooperative dominion. That it is intended to express the same sustaining care of the environment as its creators. Far from exploiting, we are to use it in a way to be accountable to God and to serve others; we have no liberty to do what we please.

Caring for creation is part of loving God and loving our neighbours

Air pollution affects all, but not all communities are equally affected. The outcomes of our lifestyle choices have severe impacts on the health of children, elderly and the poor. The poor who live on the margins of society have little economic security, live and work in areas of high pollution and have little capacity to cope with challenges imposed by air pollution. In recent years, India has seen the rise in real estate developments with the sector becoming the second highest employer after agriculture. Building and construction sites are often the most polluted sites, where the poor are forced to work without appropriate gear exposing them to many health problems. For instance, a study conducted by Jamia Milia Islamia in 2014 in 19 construction sites in Delhi, found that these sites emit as much as 4000 tonnes of dust every day, making pollution at these sites 3 times higher than the permitted limit resulting in 58% of workers suffering from respiratory problems.²

Respiratory diseases are common in children and even affect babies in the womb. These facts highlight the impact of our actions on the most vulnerable in society. So, what does this present scenario entail for us? Our present condition should enable us to respond in two ways - Matthew 22:36-39

- **Loving God and loving His creation:** God loves His creation, and thereby our love for God should be reflected in the way we care for His creation. We often misread John 3:16, to mean only human beings whereas it includes the whole world (*cosmos*), for whose sake God sent His son, Jesus Christ to die on the cross. Our love for God would entail living in right relationship with his creation and caring for His creation. If we proclaim to love God, we should love the things He loves, and that includes people and the natural environment (His creation).
- **Loving our neighbours:** The second command to love our neighbours is a good beginning point for Christians to respond to the current air quality and its implications. Loving our neighbours includes not only caring about their spiritual welfare but also about their physical and material needs. Christian creation care scholars suggests that we need to redefine our neighbours to include those across time (our future generations) and space (everyone, including those living in distant location) who are/ will be affected by our current actions. Thus, protecting, caring and preserving our shared environment blesses our neighbours. Taking steps to improve air quality in our present location, would reduce pollution levels and ultimately benefit everyone. We have seen the impact of air pollution especially on young children, causing acute respiratory problems for many children. In addition, we need to ask ourselves 'what kind of a world are we leaving

² Dust chokes Delhi's lungs. Also available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-3017123/Dust-chokes-Delhi-s-lungs-sand-particles-construction-sites-worsening-air-pollution.html>

behind for our future generations?'. Our current actions have made the air we breathe to be a curse instead of a blessing intended by God. Our responsibility to care for creation also benefits our future generation, leaving them with a healthy world and the opportunity to be stewards of God's creation. A Kenyan proverb sums up the importance of our role as stewards for future generation by reminding us to *"Treat the earth well, it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children."*

J. Matthew Sleeth aptly applies the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to illustrate our present ecological crisis saying that the priest represents those of us who refuse to take any responsibility for our environmental problems; we close our eyes and walk by. The Levites, like most of us, see the problem and think we must 'get back' to Jerusalem and raise awareness, maybe blog about it. Like the Levites, we see the hardship caused, particularly on the poor. Our hearts are moved to compassion but we do little, if anything, to help. Only the Samaritan, the one who is least likely to view the mugged man as his neighbour, takes action. What does it teach us? To have lasting effect, our hearts must be moved by compassion and it may be dangerous, inconvenient, expensive, and we may be ridiculed. It also indicates that everyone is our neighbour, including people across the globe and our future generations. Most importantly, our ecological crisis will not change by good intentions alone; it will be made better or worse only by our actions.

So, in conclusion, should we 'Leave our Delhis' like the newspaper suggested or should we show our love for God and His creation by doing something to improve air quality in our present locations?