

No Time to Waste

The Bible doesn't have a lot to say directly about waste, at least in regard to the remnants of things consumed. Material possessions had great value – though not as great as spiritual treasures (Matthew 6:19-20; Luke 12:16-21) – and so the notion of discarding something isn't often mentioned. There were no single use plastics or packaging, no industrial processes, and much less over consumption.

That isn't to say that the issue isn't addressed, particularly around the broader theme of stewardship. In the telling of the feeding of the multitude in John's Gospel, it says

“¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² **When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’** ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.”

This is in line with what the Old Testament has to say about how to deal with excess – in Leviticus (23:22) and in Deuteronomy (24:19):

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

Excessive consumption, ignoring the plight of the poor and therefore waste, are all tied to sin, turning from God and pursuing our individual desires to the detriment of others and the planet. The call in the Old Testament to leave the edges and the gleanings of the harvest has echoes in today's world, where we buy more food than we can consume, throwing away as a planet almost 1/3 of all food produced – much more than just the edges of the field and the gleanings of our harvest.

Waste and inequality are tied up throughout the Old Testament – in Proverbs 13:23 it says “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” - poor farmers throughout the world are pushed out by wealthier organisations who ruin the land through the over use of pesticides, deforestation and biodiversity loss.

The food we eat is often packaged in plastic and other wrappings, in order to give the appearance of freshness, but is just another way of generating more waste that won't degrade over time (as the skins and peels of fruit and vegetables will). Our society, through urbanisation and consumerism has lost touch with the seasons and demands the same food year round, despite the demands globally to produce it. Similarly in a self-centred and consumerist society we buy clothes and throw them away with little thought for the environmental impact of producing them, or the working conditions faced by the people that make them.

So often when we have focused on our own environmental impact we have highlighted the 'R' of recycle, without much thought for where that happens, or the fact that it still requires industrial processes to remake things. Instead our focus should be on reducing what we consume, and refusing single use plastics, or purchasing new things when we can reuse old ones.

Our relationship with the earth is fractured, and our over production of waste is symbolic of the pollution we have done to the land. In Numbers 35:33 it is written:

“You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.³⁴ You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites.

This is in reference to murder, and the need for cities of refuge for the Israelites, however it speaks a deeper truth – human presence on the earth can steward creation, or defile it.

In our present context these concerns are still relevant – exploitation, murder and injustice, all defile the land. In addition, our consumption does the same thing, with 1 in 4 people in the world without access to waste collection, and mountains of rubbish piling up in cities around the majority world (this is without considering the impact of landfill garbage sites). The number of people engaged in waste picking in India ranges between 15,00,000 to 40,00,000 and collectively they deal with 62 million tonnes of waste that is generated annually. As they sort our waste and provide a valuable service to our municipalities they are forced to brave foul smells, feral dogs, the risk of infectious disease, and the risk of injury, and they face all this without any protective gear or the promise of a decent wage. Additionally they are often stigmatised by society. This lack of empathy or showing of dignity to those who are combating our own waste is itself a sin.

All the way back at the opening of the Biblical narrative, in chapter 2 of Genesis “the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” This expands on the role given in chapter 1:28 – to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”. This is the foundational text of stewardship of the earth in the Bible, and yet we too often take the words subdue and dominion in a militaristic sense – a harsh rule. Yet we know that this is not what God’s Kingdom should look like, and therefore, as guardians, those entrusted to care for God’s creation, we should be modelling something different.

In Psalm 72, which is named as ‘A Psalm of Solomon’, the model of Godly Kingship is laid out – yes that he should “have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (verse 8) but also, that he “deliver the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the need, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight (verses 12-14).

Our relationship with the earth is to be as stewards of it, but not the dishonest Steward of the parable in Luke 16, who wastes his master’s goods and takes less value in order to settle unpaid bills. Instead, as we look to be good stewards of God’s creation, and this extends to how we consume, what we consume and how much we consume. We must value those who produce the goods we use, rather than exploiting them, allow for the renewal of the land, rather than polluting it, and reduce the waste we create, and deal appropriately with what we do make.

Biblical stewardship is about justice for all, caring for all of God’s creation, and being in right relationship with the people, animals and ecosystems of earth.