

# THE ENVIRONMENT AND STEWARDSHIP



How do people misuse planet earth?



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Working in pairs or small groups, discuss the ways in which people can misuse planet earth. Use the following suggestions and the pictures above to help you:

- Think about what we do with our rubbish
- Think about how we get from one place to another, especially if it is a long distance
- Think about what we do in our homes with our televisions, our phones and other things
- Think about what we do when we need to build more homes
- Think about how we create energy to heat our homes, cook our food, etc.

Which of the misuses you have identified are the most serious? Why do you think this is?

How might these cause problems for: people, animals and plants? Discuss your ideas in your groups. You could use a table like this to help you.

Bad effects on people	Bad effects on animals	Bad effects on plants

Christians believe that the Bible helps them to understand how they should treat the environment and the kinds of things they should do to make the world a better place.

## What does the Old Testament say about the environment and stewardship?

'Genesis' means 'beginnings' or 'origins', and it is the name of the first book of the Bible. It isn't called Genesis only for that reason, but also because it begins with an account of how the world and everything in it came to exist. This first words of the Bible are:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...

Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 (NRSV)

To a Christian, this means that the reason why everything exists is because God created it all. Christians believe that this means that the earth and everything in it is a gift from God, but that ultimately it belongs to God and not humans. This belief can be seen many times in the Old Testament, such as in Psalm 24:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it ...

Psalms 24 verse 1 (NRSV)

*What do you think is the significance for a Christian of saying that the world belongs to God?*

Genesis explains how humans should treat the environment.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind **in our image, according to our likeness**; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, '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.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis chapter 1 verses 26-31 (NRSV)

God makes humankind in his image not so that they look as he does, but so that they are somehow like him, including that they have 'dominion' over the earth.

*What do you think Genesis means when it says God's creation was 'very good'?*

*What significance do you think this has for the way in which Christians should treat the gift of the world that God has given them?*



The passage says that humankind should have 'dominion' over the animals.

Christians believe 'dominion' means God has given humans power and authority over the world. However, Christians understand this in different ways.

A very small minority of Christians think this means humans can do what they like to the world. However, most Christians understand 'dominion' to mean 'responsible stewardship'. A steward is someone who looks after something that does not belong to them, by following the wishes of the owner. Christians believe that humans have been given the responsibility of being caretakers of God's world. They believe God wants them to look after the world, to not misuse it, and to make sure it will continue to be a good place for everyone both now and in the future.

*Which of the following do you think best describes the Christian view of dominion as 'responsible stewardship'? You can choose more than one.*

*Ruling over   Taking care   Power   Respect   Looking after  
Authority   Control   Protector   Responsibility   Enjoying*

*The following pictures could all express the idea of responsible stewardship. Which of these do you think best demonstrates this idea? Explain your reasons.*



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*How do you think a Christian might show responsible stewardship today? You could use the picture and quotations below to help you.*

"I try to make sure that I buy as much food as I can that has been grown nearby and I also try to walk or cycle as much as possible."

"As the owner of a company I try to make sure that I dispose of my waste safely and that I use green energy."



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## The Parable of the Talents

The first four books of the New Testament are the gospels, which are accounts of the life of Jesus. They include the parables, stories which Jesus told to illustrate points he wanted to make about how people ought to live.

In the Parable of the Talents, a man goes on a journey, but before he leaves, he gives his slaves some of his money to look after. To the first slave he gives five talents, to the second two and to the last slave he gives one talent. In the ancient world, a talent was an amount of money worth around 15-20 years' wages.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

Matthew chapter 25 verses 16 -18 (NRSV)

*The first two servants invested their master's money, and the third buried it. What do you think that says about them?*

After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing the five talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; **enter into the joy of your master.**" And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

Matthew chapter 25 verses 19 – 23 (NRSV)

**Enter into the joy of your master** means that the master was very pleased with the first two slaves. Another way to translate this phrase is as 'Come and share in my happiness'.

*Without reading any further ahead, how do you think the master will react to the news that the last servant hasn't done anything useful with the one talent he was trusted with?*



*The master reacts angrily to the last servant, accuses him of laziness and promises that he will be punished.*

*“You wicked and lazy slave! . . . you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.”*

*Matthew chapter 25 verses 26 – 27 (NRSV)*

*Why do you think the master calls the slave ‘wicked’ and ‘lazy’?*

At first glance, this story looks as if it is just about money, but, like other parables, this is a fictional story which has deeper meanings within it. Often, parables can be understood in different ways by different readers.

One way in which Christians have understood this parable is to see the slaves as people like themselves, and the gold coins as representing their talents and abilities.

*How could a Christian understand this story when they consider how they should use their talents or abilities to look after God’s world, i.e. to be responsible stewards?*

*Try to summarise the meaning of this passage and how it might relate to responsible stewardship in no more than 80 words.*

*‘Through this parable, Jesus was saying that God created humans with gifts and abilities to be able to carry out his wishes, including being a responsible steward. He also says that a Christian will be accountable for how they use these abilities or talents in order to carry out his work. This means that they will have to explain to God why they used their skills or abilities in the way that they did.’*

*Do you agree with this Bible scholar’s interpretation of the parable of the three servants?*

*If you had to rename this parable, what would you call it? Why would you call it this?*



The apostle Paul was a very early Christian leader who helped to spread Christianity to different parts of the Roman Empire. The New Testament contains some letters written from Paul to different Christian communities. One of these books is called Romans, as it is a letter from Paul to the community of Christians in Rome.

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and **divine** nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

Romans chapter 1 verse 20 (NRSV)

**Divine** means godlike or holy.

Christians believe that the natural world reveals God's nature and power. For example, the fact that there is a universe could indicate to them the power of God, and the beauty of bird song might reflect his magnificence.

*What other things might a Christian learn about God by looking at the natural world? You could think about things like beautiful sunsets, the complex design of the eye or heart or the variety of species in the world.*



## How have Christians responded to what the Bible says about the environment and responsible stewardship?

Christians today can respond to these teachings by undertaking actions to keep the environment a good place for all living things to enjoy, both now and in the future. Christians believe that this world is a good gift from God and that he has given them the duty to look after this creation in a responsible manner as good stewards. They also believe that they have been given talents and abilities to undertake this task. Of course, people who are not Christian might do similar things without having the same motivation.

Some of the actions that a Christian might undertake to show responsible stewardship could include:

- Recycling
- Buying or consuming less
- Buying locally produced food where possible
- Buying from businesses that try to protect the environment
- Writing to their MP asking them/government to focus on environmental issues
- Buying greener washing machines and fridges
- Helping with clean-up events, such as picking litter off the beach

*Looking at the list above, which three do you think would have the most effect on helping to protect the environment?*

*Can you think of some more actions to add to the list?*

Some Christians might also donate money or volunteer for a Christian charity that tries to show responsible stewardship for the environment. These charities will try to follow Christian teachings when looking after the environment. Examples of these can be seen below.



*Investigate how these charities show responsible stewardship. Think about which of the actions, listed above, they focus on.*



*These ideas from the Bible inform how Christians think about the environment. Write a short summary of these in your own words.*

- The world is God's creation and it was created to be good. It reveals something of God's nature.
- God gave the world as a loving gift to all life, including human beings.
- Humans have a special responsibility of looking after the world as responsible stewards.
- They are given certain abilities and talents to undertake this work.

Pope Francis has spoken many times on the need for Christians to care for the environment. For example, in a letter to Catholic Bishops entitled 'On the care of Our Common Home' he asked Christians to do all they can to tackle poverty, climate change and pollution. He said that "the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."

*Use all that you have learned on this topic to explain how Christians might respond to this. You could think about how they might feel, what they might do and why they would do it.*

