

**GOD'S EYE IS ON THE SPARROW**

**MATTHEW 10:29-31**

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THE PRESENT ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IS ENOUGH TO PUT THE FEAR IN ANYONE. THIS PAST WEEK SCIENTISTS GAVE AN UPDATE ON GLOBAL WARMING CAUSED BY THE DEPLETION OF THE OZONE LAYER IN THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. THE NEWS WAS NOT GOOD. THE CUTTING AND BURNING OF TROPICAL RAIN FORESTS, EXPANDING URBANIZATION, THE POLLUTION OF OUR LAND, AIR, AND WATER WITH TOXINS, THE DESTRUCTION OF WHOLE ECOSYSTEMS, AND THE EXTINCTION OF ANIMAL SPECIES PAINTS A NIGHTMARISH SCENARIO FOR THE FUTURE, NOT ONLY OF PLANT AND ANIMAL LIFE, BUT HUMAN LIFE ON THIS PLANET. IN 1962 RACHEL CARSON WROTE SILENT SPRING IN WHICH SHE CONTENDED THAT UNLESS DDT AND OTHER PESTICIDES WERE BANNED FROM USE, THE PLANET WOULD BE UNFIT FOR ALL LIFE(1). SHE DRAMATICALLY PREDICTED THAT OUR SPRINGS WOULD BE SILENT, BECAUSE ALL THE BIRDS THAT ARE A PART OF THE FOOD CHAIN AFFECTED BY THE TOXINS WOULD FALL VICTIM. BUT, WHO CARES ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO BIRDS?

IN MATTHEW 10:24-31 JESUS ADDRESSES THE POTENTIAL FEARS OF HIS DISCIPLES AS THEY PREPARE TO TAKE CHRIST'S MISSION TO THEIR WORLD. KNOWING THAT HIS FOLLOWERS WILL FACE A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT AS THEY TAKE THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S REIGN INTO THE WORLD, JESUS ASSURES THEM OF GOD'S CARE FOR THEM, JUST AS GOD CARES FOR THE SPARROW. WITHIN THE SIMPLE WORDS OF JESUS ARE SOME PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS FOR A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF ECOLOGICAL AND HUMAN VALUE.

THE ORDER OF CREATION HAS A DIFFERENT VALUE WITHIN THE HUMAN EYE THAN IT DOES WITHIN THE DIVINE EYE. HOW WE HUMAN BEINGS VALUE NON-HUMAN CREATION DEPENDS UPON HOW WE VIEW ITS RELATIONSHIP TO US. WE HAVE TENDED TO VALUE THE CREATED ORDER ACCORDING TO ITS BENEFITS FOR US. CREATION HAS BEEN VIEWED PRIMARILY AS A UTILITARIAN OBJECT, AS SOMETHING TO BE VALUED ACCORDING TO ITS USE BY HUMAN BEINGS. THE GREATER THE BENEFIT TO HUMANS, THE GREATER THE VALUE. THE LESSER THE BENEFIT, THE LESSER THE VALUE. JESUS INDICATES THE VALUE PLACED UPON SPARROWS IN HIS DAY: "ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY?" A HALF-CENT PER SPARROW. THAT WAS THE MONETARY VALUE PLACED UPON SPARROWS. SPARROWS, WHICH COULD BE EASILY BOUGHT IN THE MARKETPLACE, WERE THE CHEAPEST MEAL A PERSON COULD BUY; CHEAPER THAN McNUGGETS! NOW, A CAMEL WAS OF GREATER VALUE BECAUSE OF ITS BENEFIT FOR HUMAN TRAVEL. AS A SHEEP WAS OF GREATER VALUE BECAUSE OF ITS WOOL FOR CLOTH. SPARROWS WERE PART OF THE CREATED ORDER WHICH WAS CONSIDERED TO BE OF LITTLE HUMAN VALUE. THEN, AS NOW, THE VALUE

PLACED UPON CERTAIN PARTS OF CREATION DEPENDED UPON THEIR BENEFIT TO HUMANS.

THE INSIGNIFICANT VALUE PLACED UPON SPARROWS CAN SYMBOLIZE FOR US TODAY THE INCREASING TENDENCY TOWARD HUMANITY'S DEVALUATION OF GOD'S CREATION. BY THAT I MEAN, THE CREATED ORDER, INCLUDING SPARROWS, HAS BEEN VIEWED AS BEING OF LITTLE VALUE TO HUMANS OUTSIDE OF ITS UTILITARIAN BENEFITS; THAT IS, AS SOMETHING TO FEED, CLOTH, HOUSE, ADD COMFORT, PRODUCE GOODS, OR BRING MATERIAL PROSPERITY TO HUMAN BEINGS. SCIENCE, INDUSTRY, TECHNOLOGY, AND CAPITAL HAVE BECOME THE CENTER OF OUR VALUE SYSTEM, OFTEN TO THE DETRIMENT AND DESTRUCTION OF LAND, WATER, AIR, AND ANIMAL LIFE. BECAUSE OUR VALUES HAVE BEEN PLACED IN THAT WHICH PRODUCES HUMAN BENEFIT, WE HAVE NEGLECTED TO VALUE AND THEREFORE CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION IN AND OF ITSELF.

A WORLDVIEW WHICH PLACES HUMAN BEINGS AND THEIR CONSUMING APPETITES AT THE CENTER OF THE COSMOS LENDS ITSELF TO THE DEVALUATION OF THE REST OF CREATION. WE SEE GOD'S CREATION AS HAVING VALUE ONLY IN SO FAR AS IT SERVES THE EVER-INCREASING NEEDS OF THE HUMAN AS A CONSUMER OF GOODS. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE NATURE ONLY HAS UTILITARIAN VALUE. THIS VIEWPOINT CAN LEAVE US WITH A JAUNDICED EYE TOWARD CREATION. IT CAN LEAD US TO THE VIEW NOT JUST SPARROWS, BUT THE ENTIRE ANIMAL REALM, AS OF VALUE ONLY IN SO FAR AS IT BENEFITS SOME HUMAN NEED.

OUR DEVALUATION OF ANIMAL LIFE HAS LED TO THE EXTINCTION OF WHOLE SPECIES AND TO UNNECESSARY CRUELTY TO ANIMALS. WHAT IF WE REWORDED JESUS' SAYING ABOUT SPARROWS AND UPDATED IT A BIT? ARE NOT MONKEYS SOLD FOR A FEW DOLLARS AND TOO OFTEN NEEDLESSLY SUBJECTED TO CRUEL EXPERIMENTATION? ARE NOT ELEPHANTS CONSIDERED OF NO VALUE WHEN THEY ARE SLAUGHTERED JUST FOR THEIR IVORY TUSKS? ARE NOT WHALES CONSIDERED OF LITTLE HUMAN VALUE, WHEN THEY FALL VICTIM TO HUMAN OVER-CONSUMPTION? ARE NOT BIRDS WORTH VERY LITTLE BECAUSE WE DON'T CONSIDER THEIR COST WHEN THEY ARE DESTROYED BY OUR OIL SPILLS? WHO CARES ABOUT ANIMAL LIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT AS VALUABLE IN AND OF ITSELF? ACCORDING TO THE EYE OF HUMAN VALUES, ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY?

GOD LOOKS AT SPARROWS, ANIMAL LIFE, AND THE WHOLE CREATED ORDER WITH A DIFFERENT EYE THAN WE DO. GOD VALUES THE CREATED ORDER DIFFERENTLY. IT WAS NOT GOD WHO PLACED THE VALUE OF SPARROWS AT HALF-A-CENT. WHO AMONG US TAKES NOTICE IF A SPARROW FALLS TO THE GROUND OR A SQUIRREL DROPS FROM A TREE OR THE POLLUTED STREAMS KILL THE FISH OR TOXINS CAUSE BIRDS TO HAVE THIN-SHELLED EGGS THAT CRACK TOO SOON? WHO REALLY CARES? ON THE SCALE OF HUMAN VALUES THEY'RE INSIGNIFICANT. BUT, WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT HOW GOD LOOKS AT THOSE PARTS OF CREATION, WHICH ARE OF LITTLE HUMAN VALUE? ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY? YET NOT ONE OF THEM FALLS TO THE GROUND APART FROM YOUR FATHER. GOD NOTICES, CARES, AND VALUES WHAT HUMANS CONSIDER OF LEAST VALUE IN THE CREATED ORDER! THE TINIEST OF BIRDS DOES NOT COME TO THE END OF ITS LIFE AND DROP FROM THE SKY WITHOUT

THE AWARENESS AND CONSENT OF GOD. THE CREATOR OF BILLIONS OF SPINNING STARS, PLANETS, AND GALAXIES HAS AN EYE ON THE TINY SPARROW.

WE MAY NOT HAVE AN EYE THAT CAN WATCH EVERY SPARROW. BUT, WE HUMANS CAN REFLECT GOD'S AWARENESS AND CARE FOR CREATION. WE CAN TREAT GOD'S CREATURES EITHER WITH CALLOUSNESS AND CRUELTY OR WITH REVERENCE AND RESPECT. I HAVE A MEMORY FROM CHILDHOOD STUCK LIKE A SPLINTER IN MY HEAD. IT'S THE TIME I WATCHED AS A NEIGHBOR BOY, CONSIDERED THE SCHOOL BULLY, SHOT A SPARROW DOWN TO THE GROUND WITH HIS BEE-BEE GUN. AND AS THE POOR BIRD WAS FLUTTERING ON THE GROUND I SHUTTERED WITH PAIN AS HE, FOR THE FUN OF IT, PUMPED A RIFLE FULL OF BEE-BEES INTO THE BIRD UNTIL IT LAY ON THE GROUND LIFELESS. HE WALKED AWAY WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT. WHY SHOULD HE HAVE CARED ABOUT THAT BIRD? ISN'T A SPARROW JUST WORTH HALF A CENT?

HAVE YOU EVER NURTURED A FALLEN BIRD UNTIL IT COULD FLY AGAIN? I REMEMBER A SPARROW THAT ONCE FLEW SMACK INTO MY WINDOW WHERE I WAS WORKING AND KNOCKED ITSELF SILLY. I PICKED IT UP, WRAPPED IT IN A WARM CLOTH AND LAID IT DOWN TO REST. AFTER A WHILE THE BIRD REGAINED ITS SENSES AND FLEW TO A TREE LIMB. IN THIS SIMPLE ACT I FELT LIKE I HAD DONE SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT. WE CAN TREAT CREATION WITH RESPECT, AS SOMETHING OF INTRINSIC VALUE, OR WE CAN TREAT NATURE WITH DISREGARD OR EVEN CRUELTY.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1979 A WIDELY PUBLICIZED EVENT OCCURRED IN THE CENTRAL ENGLISH VILLAGE OF BRANT BROUGHTON, WHEN A "CHIRPY" SPARROW GOT TRAPPED IN THE RAFTERS OF ST. HELEN'S PARISH CHURCH AND BROKE INTO SONG DURING A GUITAR RECITAL BEING RECORDED FOR A RADIO BROADCAST. REVEREND ROBIN CLARK, THE CHURCH RECTOR, ASKED THE CONGREGATION TO LEAVE, SUMMONED A MARKSMAN WITH AN AIR GUN, AND HAD THE OFFENDING SPARROW SHOT. THE KILLING OF THIS SPARROW BECAME BIG NEWS IN ENGLAND, THE U.S., AND ALL OVER THE WORLD, WITH THE FRONT PAGE OF THE LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH ANNOUNCING, "REV. ROBIN ORDERS DEATH OF SPARROW." EDITORIALS AND PUBLIC OPINION STRONGLY CONDEMNED THE ACT AND MANY WERE REMINDED OF THE PSALM THAT SAYS THAT SPARROWS ARE WELCOME IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD (PS. 84:2-5). MAYBE THOSE WHO THOUGHT THE ACT OFFENSIVE WERE IN SOME SMALL WAY MIRRORING GOD'S CARE FOR THE SPARROW.

NOW, I'M NOT GOING TO SAY ALL HUNTING OR KILLING OF ANIMALS IS EVIL. I'M NOT ADVOCATING VEGETARIANISM. I AM SAYING ONE SHOULD RESPECT AND HONOR GOD'S GIFT OF CREATION. MY POINT IS HUMAN DISREGARD AND LACK OF CARE FOR NATURE DOES NOT REFLECT GOD'S VIEW OF CREATION. GOD WATCHES OVER THE TINY SPARROW. AT LEAST THIS MEANS SPARROWS, ANIMAL LIFE, AND THE WHOLE CREATED ORDER, DOWN TO ITS SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT PARTS, ARE UNDER GOD'S CARING EYE. GOD VALUES THE CREATED ORDER IN ITS MINUTEST DETAIL. ACCORDING TO JOB 39-41, GOD ALSO CARES ABOUT HAWKS AND HORSES, HIPPOPOTAMUS AND CROCODILE. AFTER THE FLOOD GOD MADE A COVENANT NOT ONLY WITH THE HUMANS, BUT WITH EVERY LIVING CREATURE. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS INCLUDE A ADMONITION FOR THE REST OF ANIMALS ON THE SABBATH. GOD'S VALUES ARE REFLECTED IN PROVERBS 12:10, WHICH SAYS: "THE RIGHTEOUS CARE FOR THEIR ANIMALS, BUT THE MERCY OF THE

WICKED IS CRUEL." "THE LORD IS GOOD TO ALL, AND MERCIFUL, AND HIS COMPASSION IS OVER EVERY LIVING THING." "O LORD, YOU PRESERVE BOTH HUMANS AND ANIMALS." THESE WORDS FROM SCRIPTURE REFLECT GOD'S VALUES. GOD IS AWARE NOT ONLY THAT WHOLE ANIMAL SPECIES ARE DISAPPEARING AT A RATE OF ONE EVERY TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES, BUT NOTICES WHEN ONE SPARROW FALLS. YOU MAY NOT HAVE THOUGHT OF IT IN THIS WAY, BUT GOD IS A MOST SKILLED BIRD WATCHER!

GOD'S WATCHFULNESS AND CARE DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD STOPS EVERY SPARROW FROM FALLING, ANYMORE THAN GOD STOPS THE HAIRS FROM FALLING FROM OUR HEADS OR TREES FROM BEING FELLED IN THE TROPICAL RAIN FORESTS OR HIS DISCIPLES FROM FALLING INTO PERSECUTION. JESUS DIDN'T PROMISE HIS DISCIPLES THAT GOD WOULD KEEP THEM FROM HOSTILITY OR MARTYRDOM AS THEY PREPARED TO GO ON CHRIST'S MISSION. NEITHER ARE WE PROMISED THAT, BECAUSE WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN, WE WILL NOT FALL OR BE HURT OR ENDURE PAIN OR DIE. AND YET, GOD IS AWARE WHEN THE SMALLEST OF SPARROWS FALLS TO THE GROUND.

IF GOD NOTICES, VALUES, AND CARES ABOUT A TINY SPARROW, THEN HOW MUCH MORE MUST GOD NOTICE, VALUE, AND CARE ABOUT US. SO, WHY SHOULD WE FEAR? THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF JESUS' ARGUMENT. GOD NOTICES, VALUES, AND CARES ABOUT THE TINY SPARROW THAT FALLS TO THE GROUND. SO, DON'T BE AFRAID, FOR YOU ARE OF MORE VALUE THAN MANY SPARROWS. WHY, EVEN YOUR HAIRS, THOSE TINY, INSIGNIFICANT STRANDS OF PROTEIN ON OUR HEAD, ARE NUMBERED! SOME OF US MEN WHO ARE GETTING OLDER KNOW THAT TRUTH EXPERIENTIALLY! I THINK NUMBERS 1,038 THROUGH 1,050 FELL FROM MY HEAD JUST YESTERDAY. AND WHEN WE GET OLDER AND THINNER ON TOP, IT IS NOT JUST GOD WHO COUNTS THE NUMBER OF HAIRS ON OUR HEADS AND NOTICES WHEN ONE FALLS TO THE GROUND! IF GOD NOTICES THE FALL OF SPARROWS AND THE INDIVIDUAL HAIRS ON OUR HEAD, THEN SURELY GOD KNOWS AND VALUES US. SO, WE HAVE NO NEED FOR FEAR OR WORRY.

REMEMBER WHAT JESUS SAID CONCERNING WORRYING ABOUT OUR LIVES? THE BIRDS OF THE AIR NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER INTO BARNES, AND YET GOD FEEDS THEM. ARE YOU NOT OF MORE VALUE? LOOK AT THE LILIES OF THE FIELD AND THE GRASS. GOD CARES FOR THEM. ARE YOU NOT MORE VALUABLE? YES, GOD VALUES CREATION, THE WHOLE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM, BUT EVEN MORE SO, GOD VALUES HUMAN LIFE.

SOME ENVIRONMENTALISTS WANT TO PLACE EVERYTHING WITHIN THE CREATED ORDER ON AN EQUAL LEVEL OF VALUE; SPORES AND SPARROWS, HUMANS AND HUMPBACKS. BIBLICAL FAITH MAKES A DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE VALUES OF ANIMAL AND HUMAN LIFE. SOMEONE HAS SAID THAT "THE NOTION THAT A MOSQUITO HAS THE SAME VALUE AS A HUMAN BEING IS SIMPLY INCREDIBLE AND WITHOUT FOUNDATION IN EITHER SCRIPTURE OR REASON. REVERENCE FOR ALL LIFE, YES. EQUAL REVERENCE FOR ALL LIFE, NO." IF YOU HAD THE CHOICE BETWEEN SAVING A SPARROW, OR EVEN A FLOCK OF SPARROWS, OR A HUMAN LIFE, WHICH WOULD YOU SAVE? HOW WE ANSWER REVEALS WHERE WE PLACE GREATER VALUE.

THE BIBLICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN ANIMAL AND HUMAN LIFE IS GROUNDED IN THE BELIEF THAT WE, MALE AND FEMALE, ARE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD.

THIS DOESN'T GIVE US LICENSE TO EXPLOIT NOR EXHAUST NATURE, BUT RATHER TO BE STEWARDS OF CREATION. TO BE IN GOD'S IMAGE DOESN'T MEAN WE VIEW CREATION AS OF LITTLE VALUE EXCEPT AS IT BENEFITS US. THIS PERSPECTIVE WILL ONLY CAUSE US TO DOMINATE THE CREATED ORDER IN AN ABUSIVE OR EXPLOITATIVE WAY. TO BE IN GOD'S IMAGE IS TO CARE ABOUT CREATION. WE MIGHT REMEMBER THAT IN MANY WAYS WE ARE THE SAME AS ANIMALS. AS PHYSICAL CREATURES WE SHARE A COMMONALITY WITH ANIMAL LIFE. AS THE WRITER OF ECCLESIASTES REMINDS US:

*...WITH REGARD TO HUMAN BEINGS, GOD IS TESTING THEM TO SHOW THAT THEY ARE BUT ANIMALS. FOR THE FATE OF HUMANS AND THE FATE OF ANIMALS IS THE SAME; AS ONE DIES, SO DIES THE OTHER. THEY ALL, HAVE THE SAME BREATH, AND HUMANS HAVE NO ADVANTAGE OVER THE ANIMALS...(ECCLESIASTES 3:18-19).*

AND YET, EVEN AS WE ACKNOWLEDGE OUR COMMONALITY WITH THE CREATED ORDER AND ITS VALUE IN GOD'S EYES, HUMAN LIFE IS STILL OF IMMENSE VALUE TO GOD.

SO, JUST AS WE SHOULD REVERENCE AND VALUE NATURE, EVEN MORE SO WE SHOULD REVERENCE AND VALUE HUMAN LIFE. AND BECAUSE NATURE, ANIMAL, AND HUMAN LIFE ARE INTERDEPENDENT, CARE NEEDS TO BE GIVEN HOLISTICALLY, JUST AS GOD CARES BOTH FOR THE SPARROW AND THE HUMAN CREATURE. TO VALUE HUMAN LIFE, AS GOD VALUES IT, WILL MEAN BEING GOOD STEWARDS OF THE ENVIRONMENT OF WHICH WE ARE IN INTEGRAL PART. TO VALUE HUMAN LIFE AS GOD VALUES IT WILL MEAN ENDING THE VIOLENCE IN OUR LAND AND REDUCING THE MONEY AND ENERGY THAT FEAR SPENDS CLAWING FOR A HANDFUL OF SECURITY BY AMASSING WEAPONS OF HUMAN DESTRUCTION. TO VALUE HUMAN LIFE AS GOD VALUES IT WILL MEAN CHANGING THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POLICIES THAT EXPLOIT AND OPPRESS THE POOR FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE FEW AND THE WEALTHY. IF GOD CARES ABOUT THE TINY SPARROW, THEN SURELY GOD CARES ABOUT THE LEAST OF THESE OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS ON THIS PLANET.

IF WE TAKE JESUS' WORDS TO HEART, WE NEED NOT LIVE IN FEAR OF A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT, MARTYRDOM, PERSONAL TRAGEDY, FAMILY DISRUPTION, NATIONAL CONFLICTS, ECOLOGICAL DISASTER, OR AN APOCALYPTIC END OF THE WORLD AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM. BUT RATHER FEAR THE ONE WHO MADE ALL THINGS GREAT AND SMALL AND LIVE IN TRUST THAT GOD CARES ABOUT US AND ALL OF CREATION. OUR TASK IS TO REFLECT THE DIVINE CARE AND VALUE GOD PLACES UPON EVEN THE SMALLEST PART OF CREATION, AS WELL AS UPON HUMAN LIFE. WE NEED NOT FEAR. RATHER, WE CAN SAY WITH CONFIDENCE: I WILL NOT FEAR. FOR GOD'S EYE IS ON THE SPARROW, SO I KNOW GOD WATCHES ME.

(1) RACHEL CARSON, SILENT SPRING (BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN), 1962.