



*It's Easy Being Green: One Student's Guide to Serving God and Saving the Planet*

Copyright 2008 by Emma Sleeth

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# chapter 1



## won't you be my neighbor?

**E**verything in life suddenly seems funnier when you have 17 people sitting on top of you.

About two years ago, a student in one of my mom's English classes—my mom's a teacher—started a “by teens, for teens” worship service. Every weekend we meet at Jamie's church on Sunday afternoon to sing, hear the Word, pray, and fellowship together. Jamie always plans some kind of activity to illustrate each of his mini-sermons: We've played thumb wars, lit matches, done push-ups (okay, *tried* to do push-ups in my case), and put together puzzles. But by far the most outrageous—and fun—activity Jamie ever had us do was musical chairs, love-your-neighbor style.



Jamie told each of us to grab a folding chair, and we set them all up in a circle. One of the girls from the praise band got her guitar. It was just like when we used to play musical chairs at birthday parties in elementary school. Every time Brittany stopped playing, we would stop circling the chairs and sit heavily in the closest one. Then a chair would be taken away, and we'd do it again. There was only one catch: In this version of the game, nobody ever got "out." Each time a chair was taken out of the circle, one more person would have to share a seat with a friend.

At first it wasn't bad: My best friend, Hannah, and I would take a chair together or Geoff, Jamie's seven-year-old brother, would sit on his big brother's lap. But as more and more chairs were taken away, the seating arrangements got less and less normal. Strangers began cramming together, four to a chair. Then we got down to two chairs. When Brittany resumed her song, Jamie folded up one more chair. We all laughed, not really expecting he'd have us all try to fit onto one chair. But then the guitar music stopped. We all bolted to the one chair instinctively, piling football player on top of computer genius, drama kid on top of math team captain.

When we all toppled off of one another, still laughing, Jamie explained the point of the game:



“When Jesus was asked what the most important things to do were, he answered that we should love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.”

What did this have to do with being crushed like a very small ant on a very heavy bowling ball?

“First, it means we need to really have hearts and minds and souls and strength—we need the chairs and the music and all of you guys who showed up today in order to play this game. We also need to know who our neighbors are: As you just found out, that’s every single person here. But most importantly, we have to have love—we need to laugh and have fun and appreciate the blessings we’ve been given.”

In a similar sense, I believe the only way we can protect our environment is by following Jesus’ greatest commandment of all. We need to learn to love God and others with every part of our lives. If we’re going to preserve the creation for future generations, we need to call on God. My dad is always telling me that God gave us the power to move mountains—the only thing we have to do is figure out which mountains need to be relocated.

Following Jesus’ greatest commandment begins with our hearts. We must have compassion for those who



are suffering—whether they be Kenyan children who are starving while we Americans throw away an average of 470 pounds of food per year, or Honduran elders who are dying of cancer because of the toxic pesticides used on coffee plantations, or kids our own age in Thailand who are choking on the smoke thrown into the air by factories that produce our school binders.

We hear so much about environmental concerns that sometimes our hearts can harden. I remember when my best friend Hannah cut off a foot of her hair. I thought I'd never get used to it. For the next month, every time I saw her I was once again surprised to see gentle waves of brown curling about her ears, no longer able to reach into her customary ponytail. But after a while Hannah's short hair began to seem normal. Now I have a hard time picturing Hannah *with* long hair. The same thing can happen to us regarding the environment. The first time we read an article about the declining state of the ecosystem, we can immediately commit to recycling everything, picking up trash by the side of the road, and carpooling more. But then we can lose our enthusiasm. Soon pollution again seems normal, greenhouse gases and curbside litter unavoidable. Loss of zeal really means loss of heart. In order to make a difference, we must really care about the people a polluted environment is affecting—and the God who calls us to do something about it.



But it's not just about our hearts. To protect the environment effectively we must also have minds. We must educate ourselves about the state of the planet and where it will be heading in the very near future if we do nothing to intervene. We must have knowledge about God's biblical demand to care for nature.

Remember when you were a young kid playing outside and you somehow "didn't hear" your mom calling you for dinner? "Sorry, Mom, I didn't hear you screaming at the top of your lungs those, er, 25 times" seemed like a sorry excuse when she glared at you with one eyebrow raised and her hands on her hips. Don't worry, the God of the universe hasn't borrowed your mother's floral apron, but he *is* going to hold us accountable for what we do or don't do to steward his creation. With massive climate changes, a plethora of available information about how we are destroying the planet, and hundreds of Bible verses all pointing to our need to care for God's earth, saying "we didn't know" to God isn't going to cut it.

Jamie also pointed out that we need souls. We need spirits rooted in God if we're going to sustain our commitment for the long haul. That's where our generation comes in. There are a lot of great people who care about the environment out there, but they can't do it by themselves. It's great that we've developed



the technology to recycle paper that's previously been printed on or to reform old aluminum cans into new ones. But if we don't take the initiative to recycle those things in the first place, they aren't going to be able to do anything. It's up to us to find ways we can make a difference. If each of us makes even a few small changes, the results will have a huge impact on our climate. Many hands make light work—many souls do great works.

The fourth big quality we need if we're really going to make a noticeable difference in the health of our world is strength. I'm not talking about physical, do-500-sit-ups-at-a-time kind of strength—although I could personally do with a little more of that, too. No, I'm talking about a determination to do what's right, no matter how fruitless or tiring it may seem. I'm talking about the kind of stamina it takes to go the extra mile for God, even when all you want to do is finish your homework (well, okay, maybe you don't *want* to do that) and go to sleep.

I am horrible about following through on resolutions. I'm the kind of person who decides she's going to stop procrastinating—right up until that next assignment is due and I haven't got around to doing it yet. Or I decide I'm going to be better about writing back to people quickly, but by the next week my inbox is piled gigabytes high. Every time I clean my room,



I promise myself I won't let it get messy again—and then the second law of thermodynamics kicks in. Hey, it's the thought that counts, right? Wrong. Getting our thinking right is an important start, but the earth does not register good intentions. Protecting the ecosystem can't become another failed New Year's resolution—like an exercise plan or a work ethic that fizzles out after three weeks. We need to have endurance, if we are going to change the world.

## **who is my neighbor?**

The second part of Jesus' great commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. But as my teen leader pointed out, if we want to do that, we need to know who our neighbor is. Yes, your neighbor is the sweet little old lady living next door who bought the wrapping paper for your school fundraiser when you were in third grade. But your neighbor is also the bone-thin child from Kenya, the Honduran grandmother with cancer, and the teenager in Thailand who's already acquired a chronic cough she will keep for the rest of her life.

There is a danger in defining “neighbor” too narrowly. At my high school, the same group of people is in almost all my classes. I don't have a lot of interaction with students in other grades, or even others in my grade with different academic interests.



When I walk into history class each day, it's pretty much the same gang that was in my science class the previous period. These are the people I see every day, the ones whom I share memories with—they are my scholastic “neighbors.” I've always justified my narrow view of “neighbor” by telling myself there's a reason we hang out together. I mean, why should I hang out with people who don't share any of my interests, who aren't preparing for college, or are at a different maturity level than I am? Only one problem: This kind of thinking is wrong. I'm the one who needs to grow up.

Near the end of my sophomore year, a student at our school was in a skiing accident. He hit a patch of ice before a race and remained in a coma for weeks. I helped fold the paper cranes our school sent down to cheer him up when he was in rehab, but I felt terrible. I'd never spoken to Tony before. I hadn't even realized he existed: He wasn't in my grade or in any of my classes. I mean—he was a sports kid. He liked computers. He didn't believe in God. What would I have to say to him? Quite a bit, as it turned out.

The next year I ended up in one of Tony's classes. Still, I didn't talk to him; in fact, I didn't even know he was the kid who'd been in the accident. Tony still wasn't my neighbor: He sat seven desks away from me and we never spoke. A few months into the year,



our teacher gave us some reading time. To keep chatter down, he sent us in groups to different areas—and I found myself sitting between Tony and Nick on a carpeted stair landing. You'd think I would finally realize that the kid sitting two feet away from me is my neighbor. But no—I didn't know him; therefore, he was not my neighbor. Of course, as teenagers with the normal amount of procrastinating tendencies, we diligently read our books for about two whole seconds. Then one of us made a remark about something in the book, which led to another comment...

The next day we were sent out of the classroom in groups of two, sheep among the wolfish lockers. Maybe Mr. McCarthy thought we'd be less likely to talk if there were only two of us? Although Tony and I quickly opened our books and looked up innocently whenever Mr. McCarthy came to check on us, we proved a commonly known rule of high school: "Where two or three come together to do homework, very little gets done."

I wrote Tony a quick note the following day to finish up the conversation cut short by the school bell. The next day he wrote back. Then I wrote back to him. By then we were in a routine—we both kept thinking of just one more thing to say. Though we didn't have "much in common," Tony, the-kid-who-was-not-my-



neighbor, turned out to be a fun, interesting, easygoing person who challenged me to look at life in a different way. Tony turned out to be exactly what I never thought he'd be: my neighbor.

Here's my point: Many of the same excuses I had for never talking to Tony are the same ones we American teens use to explain our disregard for God's creation.

## **demographic differences don't mean diddly-squat**

The first thing that kept me from defining Tony as my neighbor was that we were in different grades. As teenagers, we tend to do the same thing on a global level. We assume adults should change their behavior first. They should be setting the example; they're the ones who can really make a difference. That's just ridiculous. We have just as much power to follow God's plan for the earth as our parents do.

It is also possible to go the other way with our thinking. Even if we recognize that we share responsibility for this planet with our neighbors in the generation before us, we do not always acknowledge our responsibility to those who will succeed us. We sometimes figure that, if the health of the world really



is going downhill, at least we won't have to bear the brunt of it. And maybe we won't. But our children will. And if not them, then their children.

The bottom line is that we are consuming natural resources at an unsustainable rate, and the earth's population is growing too quickly for the planet to support. There is solid evidence for worldwide climate change—melted ice caps, droughts where there used to be water, and record high temperatures. We need to face these facts now, while change is still possible.

When I think about the next generation, I think of Cole, the six-month-old whom I babysit. A simple game of peek-a-boo or blowing raspberries on the back of his neck is all it takes to make him smile. Do I really wish smog-filled air on him? Well, if I don't stand up for Cole, who will? He can't even say "mommy" yet—that makes "global warming" out of the question. We have a responsibility to protect the people whom God loves, and that includes future generations.

## **beyond sympathy**

Just as my "feeling bad" for Tony when he was in rehab didn't get us a wit closer to knowing each other, pitying others who face the consequences of our ecological neglect won't do them any good. Emotions alone won't



keep one ounce of greenhouse gases out of the air, pick up one piece of trash, or prevent one tree from being cut down. Saying we care about the environment, thinking about the devastating effects of our reckless actions, or even talking about the need to protect nature isn't making the hole in the ozone layer any smaller, averting poisons from our water supplies, or cleaning up our air. When faced with a polluted planet and a dearth of natural resources, our children will not find it comforting to hear that we *meant* well.

Think about the last group project you did at school. If you showed up empty-handed a day before the assignment was due and told your teammates you'd really thought about the project a lot and hoped it would turn out nice, you'd be sure to receive a few evil eyes. In the same way, God calls us to action, not just good intentions. The environment is a group project. Just "feeling bad" doesn't help anyone and, unfortunately, the consequences of our inaction are much bigger than a glare and a bad grade. Don't just feel: Do!

## **luther says: plant a tree**

Another reason I rarely ventured outside my own social circle was that I figured there must be *a reason* I hang out with the people I do. I make up this fictitious law in my head that says, "Like attracts to like." Somehow,



everyone figures out (subconsciously) what people they are most compatible with, and that's how friendships are formed. Yeah, right.

Maybe we find it comforting to think there's some reason the environment is a shambles. Who knows what God is thinking? Maybe he doesn't care that we're trashing the planet. Again: yeah, right. The Bible makes it clear that God loves the earth and wants us to care for it.

When my dad talks to groups about the need to care for creation, he's often asked, "Isn't this environment thing kind of low on the list of Christian priorities?" What if Jesus comes back today?

Dad usually answers by telling a story about the German church reformer Martin Luther. Apparently, Luther once gave a Sunday morning sermon about the second coming of Christ. He was such a powerful preacher that when his parishioners went home, they all started acting as if Jesus were going to return that afternoon. One man from the church happened to walk by Luther's house and saw him planting a tree. The parishioner was puzzled and asked the preacher a question: If he really believed his own sermon, shouldn't he be doing what he'd want to be doing when Jesus returns? Luther answered that planting a tree was exactly what he wanted to be caught doing when the Lord came back.



I'd have to say "Amen." If Jesus came back this afternoon, I'd rather be tending to God's beautiful creation than doing just about anything else.

## **ignorance is not always bliss**

Another reason I felt like Tony wasn't really my neighbor was because I didn't know him. I was relieving myself of responsibility for caring about Tony as my neighbor because I'd never looked him in the face and said, "Hi, my name is Emma." Of course, Tony was and is my neighbor—whether I realized it or not. I still had a responsibility to try to make his world a better place—even if we'd never had a conversation.

The same is true on a global level. It's easy to forget our responsibilities to people in other parts of the world because we've never looked them in the eye. But the billions of people who are suffering—and will be suffering—because of our irresponsible lifestyles are not just statistics. They are not just numbers. They are people. They are children of God. They are our neighbors. Not knowing is not an excuse.

The other way I justified my ignoring Tony was that I didn't know he was the kid who was in the skiing accident. He was just another unfamiliar face in a room full of big, scary seniors. But the fact that I didn't know



Tony was going through a particularly rough time and that he needed friends outside of his former sports circle didn't make his need for a friend any less.

Maybe you've never given much thought to the extent to which we've harmed God's creation or what you can do to help. That's okay. But we do need to take positive action, and the first step is admitting that a problem exists.

I love playing with Zach, a three-year-old whom I often babysit, while people are arriving for my church faith group. Like any other wholesome, more-American-than-apple-pie child, he enjoys playing hide-and-go-seek. He always hides in the same place—a little nook underneath a certain table—which admittedly makes the seeking part of the game a lot easier for me. The hard part is convincing him that he's really been found when he's still crouched in his favorite corner, eyes squeezed shut and covered by his little hands for an added precaution. He's got, "If I can't see you, you can't see me" syndrome. And when it's my turn to hide, it's almost impossible to find a place in the amount of time he takes to count to ten. Like "l-m-n-o-p" in the alphabet for most kids, "1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10" is slurred together for Zach, taking less than three seconds from start to finish.

Many of us are similarly naive when it comes to understanding the ecosystem. Fortunately, we have the



Bible: God's guidance can always be found in the same place, just like my dear Zach is always in his customary hiding place. But one of the biggest problems with our efforts to save the environment is that we tend to want to do things *our* way. Maybe solar panels seem more interesting than hanging clothes on the line. Maybe we'd like to say we're environmentalists without giving up our favorite food or gadget. Maybe we want to make changes in our own good time instead of fitting ourselves into God's schedule. Like Zach, we may want to skip the counting so we can get on with the seeking. But we have to remember that, even if we cover our eyes so we can't see the environmental issues the world is facing, that doesn't mean there's any less of a problem.

## **location, location!**

My dumbest qualifier about who was my neighbor was physical location. I told myself that only the kids on my immediate left and right in English class were my neighbors because they were the only ones it would be rude to not talk to. Looking back, I guess you could say that my defining "neighbor" purely by physical location was a bit of a "blonde moment."

I'm sure you've heard blonde jokes before. When I was younger, my hair was quite a bit lighter, so I've heard all kinds of jokes playing on the stereotype



of the “dumb blonde.” You know: “Why did the blonde stare at her orange juice? Because it said ‘concentrate.’”

Jesus’ followers had a lot of “blonde moments.” When Christ told the disciples to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,” they thought he was scolding them for not bringing their own bread rather than giving them a spiritual commandment about how to conduct themselves. When Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be “born again,” Nicodemus asked how this was possible, since it’s obvious a full-grown man cannot fit back into his mother’s womb. We sometimes miss the big picture when we take things too literally.

I shouldn’t think of the kid right next to me as my neighbor, but rule out someone else because he’s across the room. We shouldn’t define those we need to help—by lessening our impact on God’s creation—as only those we know or those already born, ignoring people around the globe or across the decades. If I define “neighbor” literally—as only the person whose mailbox is right next to mine—what am I wishing on my friend when I tell her to “break a leg” at a recital? Literal could be lethal.

## **we’re all in this together**

I know that talking about serious environmental problems can be discouraging. When my dad first left



his job as an emergency room doctor to focus on global health issues and protecting the planet's ecosystem, it seemed like all we ever talked about was what was wrong with the world. I'd often storm away from the dinner table, overwhelmed by these doomsday discussions. I felt helpless and depressed. I have since learned, though, that the primary reason I couldn't stand to hear any more talk about the state of our planet was because I was focusing only on the problems, not on solutions.

I do not want you to get discouraged. While I believe it's imperative that we discuss the serious environmental issues we're facing, I also know that mulling over the problems of this world is not the way we're going to fix them. The situation we face is challenging, but not an insurmountable one. When we think about the beautiful creation our loving Father has provided for us to live on, our first reaction should not be frustration, discouragement, or anger—it should be thankfulness. Kermit was wrong: *It is* easy being green.

Often we can learn a lot about protecting the environment from people who have more positive habits than we do. I've learned a great deal about caring for the earth from my parents and their parents (and *their* parents). Mom is the one who taught me to garden and to can the extra vegetables at the end of the summer. Dad organized the recycling efforts of our family and



took me to the recycling center when I was little to teach me how to sort out our reusable trash into the different containers. Grandma always let me cook with her when I visited, teaching me how to make “summer meals” that required relatively little heating time and “winter meals” when the oven could be used without heating up the house to unbearable temperatures.

My great-grandmother, whom I always thought was the neatest person ever, probably lived the most energy-efficient lifestyle of anyone I've ever known. She didn't own a car, lived in a small apartment that she wasn't constantly redecorating, wasn't a slave to fashion, and did all her cooking at home. She always turned off the lights when she left a room, which made her dimly lit apartment perfect for hide-and-seek. One of the things I loved most about Gram-Gram was her refusal to buy premade and overly packaged food. My favorite part of meals at her place was dessert, when we'd open the freezer to search for the homemade ice-cream sandwiches she'd prepared and tucked away in different corners of her freezer. It was like Easter all year round!

In the following pages, you'll find lots of suggestions for how to lessen your own environmental footprint (a fancy word for a measurement of the impact we have on nature). I am aware that this book



is not comprehensive and that there are a lot of other great resources out there to help you in your journey to a greener lifestyle. Yet it's my attempt to pass along what I've learned at the ripe old age of 15—my own gardening or summer recipes or homemade ice-cream sandwiches. It's also my acknowledgment that the only way we can make a real difference is if we all pitch in. The environment isn't going to be saved by everyone talking about change, nor by a few individuals making radical shifts in the way they live. The challenge will be met only if everyone makes positive changes in their own patterns and habits. The planet needs individuals taking individual actions; small steps by millions of people equal big results. We're all responsible—we're all in this together.



Throughout this book you'll find boxes like this with practical suggestions to help you care for God's creation. Pick the ones that work for you—and make the earth a greener place!

Throughout this book you'll find lots of practical suggestions for how you can green up your life. You'll find all kinds of ideas in the main chapters, but you'll also find a ton of practical suggestions scattered throughout the book in little boxes like the one on this page. Some



of the tips are easy to do; others will take more effort. But remember: Every change you make toward a more earth-friendly way of living contributes to the healing of God's creation.

## wrapping it up

Protecting the environment is part of what it means to love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can't say we love God and others and then continue to live in ways that destroy God's creation, lead to great human suffering, and endanger our planet.

God calls us to find creative ways to live that show care for his creation. I think that requires the kind of imagination I see in Zach, my little hide-and-seek buddy from faith group. Another game Zach and I love to play is basketball—without hoop and ball. We take turns running the length of the living room, bouncing our “ball” and shooting at our imagined net right above the doorway. We cordially congratulate each other on good shots, catch the ball for each other when it rebounds, and ask Cole (the six-month-old) for his opinion whenever we aren't sure if our form was good.

God wants us to play “basketball.” He wants us to have compassion and zeal for people, even if we can't see



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them. He wants us to act locally, in the “living room” that is our own community, while still keeping the big picture in mind. He wants us to encourage and help one another in our efforts to conserve the environment. He wants us to be humble and to team up with others who care about saving God’s creation. And most importantly, he wants us to imagine. Think about the cleaner environment we could have. Think about the billions of people who would benefit from such an environment. Think about the incredible witness of Christians caring for our earth as they live out Jesus’ greatest commandment. Think about what God can do through us, if we earnestly desire to protect the ecosystem.

Imagine serving God by saving the planet.