

“Be Fruitful and Multiply; Fill the Earth and Subdue it...”

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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According to the book of Genesis the first words God ever spoke to a human being were these, when after He had made this creature in His own image, male and female, and blessed them, He said,

“Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28).

He also went on to point out that every herb yielding seed and every tree bearing fruit was provided for these human beings – and also for the beasts, the birds and the creeping things – to eat. Now this is interesting: He didn’t give the first people animals and birds for food, although He did give them control or “dominion” over them. Instead He gave them all plant life for food.

Vegetarians, of course, like this a lot. But there is something much deeper and more important for our spiritual lives here than “what goes into the mouth” (Matt. 15:17-18). Besides, as it says in Genesis 9:3, after the flood “every creeping thing that is living” was given to the human race for food, just as the plants had been before (see AC 994). The point is that the “herb yielding seed” and the “tree bearing fruit” both represent things that are very important to us in the beginning of our spiritual lives, in fact they represent the only things our spiritual systems can digest and use, whereas later on our spiritual development requires more, and different, food.

We’ll come back to this in a few minutes. The *essential* point here is not really about food but about the fact that men and women were blessed by God and commanded to do five things – for which they were nourished and prepared. They were to:

- (1) “be fruitful,”
- (2) “multiply,”
- (3) “fill the earth,”
- (4) “subdue it,”
- (5) and “have dominion” over the fish, the birds and all other living creatures in it.

These commandments have never been altered: they are repeated one way or another in many direct and symbolic teachings throughout the Word. Some Christian literalists believe they constitute a clear mandate to plunder the earth, especially since the last judgment, the Second Coming and the end of the world as we know it would make conservation irrelevant. But this is a pretty rough and threatening interpretation. Besides, we know that the Word has been given to us for instruction about our spiritual lives, and not about our natural lives.

So what do these commandments *really* mean? In the *Arcana Coelestia* we read that ‘being fruitful’ has reference to matters of love, and ‘multiplying’ has reference to matters of faith (AC 43). The most ancient people on earth found their greatest happiness and delight in marriage, but they also knew that the source of all this joy was internal, not external. So when they thought about their natural relationships they reflected on the spiritual qualities that were (or could be) represented in them. “For this reason they called the understanding in the spiritual person male, and the will female, and when the two acted as one they called it marriage” (AC 54). So they

“applied the term, marriage, to the understanding and the will, or faith and love when joined together, (and) they gave the name, *fruitfulness*, to any good resulting from that marriage, and *multiplication* to any truth” (AC 55).

This use of language became a permanent feature of religious life through the ages and continues today in the stories of the Word, not to mention myths and legends and even to some extent common expressions in our daily life. “A good tree brings forth good fruit,” the Lord said with unmistakable reference to the good deeds of human life (Matt. 7:18). “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him *bears much fruit*; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5). It is similar with the multiplication of people – or things – in the Word. The multiplication of the Jews themselves, for example, in Canaan or Egypt represents the growth of faith in any given individual, and their death or destruction represents the loss of faith, again, in the individual.

This is why the Lord multiplied bread and fish in His miracles, and why He spoke of seeds growing and multiplying, some thirty-fold, some sixty and some a hundred-fold. Fish and grain in particular correspond to the truths we learn from the Word, that nourish our spiritual lives. And nothing multiplies without first bearing fruit, so you can see how spiritual fruitfulness and multiplication also go together: you can’t really do what is good unless you know the truth, but you won’t ever learn the truth if you’re not at least trying to bear fruit in a good life.

Of course, given the context of the teaching in Genesis it obviously applies to the marriage of a man and woman, as this is the orderly means of procreation. But even here, we know that the male of any species represents the intellect or understanding and the female represents affection or will, so in one we have a focus on the truths of faith and in the other a focus on the good of love, which two things *together* produce everything that is useful for eternal life.

Just remember that we’re not ONLY talking about natural procreation here, or natural uses of any kind; it goes deeper than that. There’s nothing particularly spiritual about having babies or growing the population for its own sake. And anyone can do good works, some with good intentions, others with bitterness, ill will, or purely selfish aims in mind. We all begin our spiritual development in external, natural ways: we’re born, we grow, we learn manners, we learn to clean up after ourselves, and we learn to be kind, hopefully even generous toward others. Sometimes when we are young we earn material rewards for doing these things, or we get punished if we don’t do them. So we learn self-discipline. But if it’s only external it won’t last, and even if it did it wouldn’t be inwardly fulfilling. It would just be “going through the motions.” And the Lord had a LOT to say about people just going through the motions.

So how do we get from external fruitfulness to internal fruitfulness? Well, we go to the third and fourth commandments in our list of five. We “fill the earth and subdue it.” And here you can begin to see how this whole series represents a very specific progression in our spiritual lives!

First we bear fruit by doing what is good outwardly. This we can do because we all have a core of essential goodness from the Lord within us (a core we call the remnant, or remains) implanted by the Lord from the time of our birth. This is what moves us with love and consideration for others. But it isn’t long before this goodness leads to our need and desire to learn, thus to *multiply* our knowledge about how to express that goodness rightly and well. Only when we have done that

are we ready to “fill the earth.” And what is that about? Well, in Scripture the earth is a symbol for the spiritual life that it supports, thus for the human life that makes up the church ON earth (individually or in a corporate sense), so this next stage of our spiritual development refers to the *filling* of our own lives with the goodness and truth that the Lord has given us, in other words the application of His love and wisdom to everything we think and do.

One way to fill the earth, for example, is to let the truths we have learned from the Word flow down and into the particular thoughts about how we hope to do something. Let’s say you want to – or you need to – approach a friend, a partner, a child or a co-worker about some problem, even some infraction or offense: you can be angry and resentful and just blurt, or you can let the fruitfulness of goodwill and the multiplication of lessons from the Word fill your message with gentleness and wisdom for a much better outcome. In short you can pray about it before you fly into action.

Obviously, this is an ongoing process. Success doesn’t come overnight – any more than the human population fills the natural world in a few years. But like the natural population, barring wars and natural disasters, goodness and truth may increase very quickly once we get started, leading to an ever growing sense of satisfaction and delight.

Of course the new loves and the spiritual wisdom we gain will unfortunately be at odds with the natural loves and worldly ideas we start out with. So as our next step we have to subdue or subordinate these natural loves and *manage* our sensual pleasures so that they are in compliance with the spiritual principles that rule in our minds. Note, we don’t *neglect* our worldly needs or desires, but we bring them under *control* so that they serve the higher life. There is nothing wrong with the delights of the senses! They are gifts from the Lord! But if we want to enter into heavenly life we must learn how to handle them, how to enjoy them in appropriate ways.

A simple example of subduing the earth would be keeping our emotions in check as we respond to any challenge, not to mention the daily practice of moderation of self-indulgence. In that context we note that the serpent in Scripture and myth always represents the sensuous life – or to use a more neutral expression, the life of the senses. And while this can be very deceptive, when we have faith and really follow the Lord it can’t hurt us, in fact the Lord specifically said that we can take up serpents and they will not harm us (Mk 16:18). We CAN enjoy life in this world. We just need to be careful not to get carried away.

OK. So when we have “filled the earth” and “subdued it” by bringing everything in our lives into the service of spiritual principles, then at last we are able to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the face of the earth.”

Again, Christian literalists are inclined to think that this means we should learn how to regulate, manage and manipulate everything in the natural world for our own purposes, and yet, aside from the impossibility of such an arrogant thought, given the infinite complexity and interrelationship of all things, it’s simply not the point of the teaching. Rather we are to learn how to control and use the things represented by all these creatures *within ourselves!*

Specifically, the fish of the sea represent all the various forms of knowledge – especially the knowledge that comes from the literal sense of the Word – that form a basis for our spiritual life. Cold blooded, and living under water, fish are a lower form of animal life and so represent a low level of spiritual life – merely knowing the truth.

Birds, however, represent our thoughts *about* the truth, or about the things we know. Many birds *eat* fish, and so our thoughts thrive on knowledge, but as birds soar high above the earth and have great vision, they represent the insight and perspective that our thoughts bring to knowledge.

And the living things – “every living thing that moves on the face of the earth” – these represent all our varied loves and affections, the only things that really live in us, and move and motivate us.

When we have dominion over all these aspects of our inner life our purpose in creation is fulfilled, and we are truly blessed by God and prepared for life in heaven.

So, let’s review. Again, the whole series of commands is a sequence that develops in order:

Step 1 is to be fruitful. Take whatever knowledge and affection we have from the Lord, even if only for our own sense of satisfaction, and do good, useful things for others.

Step 2 is to multiply. As we do these good and useful things we will realize we have a lot to learn, and as we go to the Lord in His Word our insights into the truth will grow.

Step 3 is to fill the earth. As our insights into the truth multiply our minds will be filled with the knowledge and affection – faith and love – that come through heaven from the Lord.

Step 4 is to subdue the earth. This is the process of subordinating the desires, thoughts and actions of our lower nature to the concerns and principles that now fill our minds. The head and the new heart will lead the body, and the body will obey – or at least come under some control.

Finally, step 5 is to have dominion over the fish, the birds and all living things. As we learn how to control the passions and cravings of our lower nature we will discover that the Lord can fill them with new life from within, and help us to make use of all the information, thoughts and affections that fill the world of our minds, so that far from threatening or hurting our eternal lives they nourish and sustain us and provide unending opportunities for us to be fulfilled in loving, helpful, mutually supportive relationships with others every day.

Each step is important, each stage wonderfully more advanced. And it’s all part of the Lord’s incredible process of creation, all based on the marriage of goodness and truth in our minds, a marriage that is reflected in the blessings of a happily married couple who may also in their relationship be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, having dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth *whether they have natural children or not*, since it is *all* about their mutual commitment in love and wisdom to the principles of spiritual life.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 1:26-31
Children’s talk on Real Power and (Self-)Control

Genesis 8:20-9:7
Arcana Caelestia 55 & 983, selections