Idle Talk

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I'm suffering from a condition called "environmental angst." If I'm not careful, I'll catch myself standing at the sink with my hands full of soapsuds, fretting about polar bears and humpback whales. The cure for this condition is simple: I remind myself that it's not about me leading the life of a green superhero—leaping tall compost piles with a single bound—but about all of us doing the small things that add up.

One example of a small thing is turning off my car's engine rather than letting it idle.

Now that the weather's getting cold, it's tempting to sit in a softly humming, warmed-up car, but there are good reasons to turn off the engine. For one thing, an idling engine burns fuel as if it's going somewhere, but all the while it's going nowhere and getting zero miles to the gallon. In fact, for every two minutes a vehicle idles, it burns the same amount of fuel it takes to drive one mile, according to the Consumer Energy Center (CEC) sponsored by the California Energy Commission. The average person lets the engine idle five to ten minutes a day. How many of those people also complain about how much they are spending at the pump?

Do engines need to be warmed up to function at their best capacity? No—with today's technology, the best way to warm up a vehicle is to drive it, even in the winter. Engines are built to move vehicles, not sit still. Idling can eventually damage components like cylinders, spark plugs, and exhaust systems. "Fuel is only partially combusted when idling because an engine does not operate at its peak temperature. This leads to the build-up of fuel residues on cylinder walls that can damage engine components and increase fuel consumption," reports the CEC.

Does leaving an engine running reduce wear and tear on the starter? Actually restarting the engine doesn't impact the starter components much at all (it adds about $10 a year to the cost of driving), but idling more than ten seconds uses more fuel than restarting the engine.

Idling wastes fuel and money, but it also causes air pollution, a known asthma trigger. The culprit is fine particle pollution (also known as soot) emitted from car and truck exhaust, industrial sites, dirt, dust, smoke, road salt, and other sources. Fine particles embed deep within the lungs, causing not only asthma but also other breathing difficulties such as chronic bronchitis.

School grounds—particularly in urban areas—can be some of the most polluted areas in a community as buses and parents line up to transport their kids. In fact, research links high pollution levels at schools with increased absence and lower academic performance—and it's often at-risk populations who are exposed to the most pollution. As a Christian, this should get my attention—God has always put vulnerable populations at the top of his priority list.

I can do one green thing today—I can turn off my engine. That means not using drive-through windows at the bank, pharmacy, or restaurants unless there's no one else in line—it's usually quicker to go inside, anyway. To avoid idling at school pick-up times, I can park my car, get out, and walk up to the school to retrieve my kids. If I decide to get in the line of vehicles, I can turn off my engine until the line is actually moving. Even in extremely hot or cold weather, I can turn the car off for a few minutes without discomfort.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency currently sponsors a National Idle-Reduction Campaign aimed at helping schools and school bus drivers reduce emissions. For more information, visit www.epa.gov/cleanschoolbus/antiidling.htm. ❑

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