

Tell Me The Story: *Only One Command* - week 5

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Sept. 26, 2021

Read Genesis 2:16-18

In Genesis 2 we are given a big picture of who and what we were created to be. We see what it means to be created in the image of a relational God: we were created for harmony in four relationships. Harmony in our relationship with the earth, with others, with one's self, and with God.

According to Genesis 2, all this harmony hinges on one command: **"The Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely'"** (v. 16). God has provided for human existence and wants humans freely to enjoy it all. **"From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, from the day that you eat from it you will surely die"** (vv. 16-17).

This is the only command that God gives in the Garden of Eden, and I submit to you that it is the only command God has ever given. All other commands are, but another way of speaking this one command.

But before we grapple with the one command, I want to take a moment to talk about the Tree of Life, which stands in the middle of the Garden. We might ask. *"Why is there so little said about the Tree of Life and so much attention given to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?"*

Well, Adam already has life, so he doesn't need to grab for the Tree of Life. What Adam does not have is the "knowledge of good and evil," hence the reason for the one command in the Garden.

But now let me note: God is not prohibiting something we need with this one command. This is about something we DON'T need. We do not need to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to live "*fully human, fully alive.*" God is not being unfair or unreasonable through His one command in the Garden. And further, God our Creator, has the right to make this one command.

But why this one rule? Why this one command in the Garden? God gives this prohibition for our good. God is warning us. There is a natural consequence of eating from this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The consequence: sooner or later you will die.

Like all of God's commands, including the 10 Commandments and those in the Sermon on the Mount, God's commands are given not to ruin our lives. Rather, they are given to prevent us from ruining our lives. This one command actually reveals God's respect for us human beings. God is treating us as free, rational creatures with this one command. In order for us to be truly like God, made in God's image, we must have the freedom to make moral choices.

God is taking a huge risk in giving this one command. God has created a beautiful world; the world that is in His words, "very good." In every sense we live in a paradise. God then places in the world a creature who has the capacity to choose – and with that capacity just might make the wrong choice. Human beings capable of being a partner with God or competitor, either the crown or crucifixion of creation. What choice then did Adam and Eve make? I think we know, because we, their descendants, have felt like competitors of God ever since. It now takes much convincing from Scripture and the Holy Spirit to believe that God is good, to believe that God is loving, to believe that when He calls to us, it is to bless us and not condemn us. And even to believe that we are indeed "very good" and that that "very good" is a reflection of our God: God is very good. We were created by a good and loving God.

Now back to the trees in the Garden for some help understanding the goodness of God. God did not create one good tree and one bad tree. If God had created a bad tree, as Francis Schaeffer writes,

"then we would have here a concept like the Hindu idea that eventually both good and evil, cruelty and non-cruelty, spring from God and thus are finally equal."

Rather than God creating an evil tree. This is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; not a tree of evil and a

tree of good. This is a helpful clarification. God did not create something evil in the Garden. God wasn't being cruel. God is very good. He did not create evil.

And note this isn't even a prohibition against knowledge. Some shorten the name to the tree of knowledge. God wants us to learn. God delights in our discovering truth, and learning all about the created order. We can delight in the knowledge of so many here in our church. Quilters and archers and racecar drivers and teachers and artists and chemical engineers and interior designers and mechanics and mothers and grandmothers of little children. God made us to learn and know information, and God wants us to use our brains. It is a false spirituality that asks us to stop thinking in order to believe. The prohibited tree is not the tree of knowledge; it is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

So then what is this?

“Knowledge of good and evil” is something only God has. Only God can have it and live. In Scripture this idiom “knowledge of good and evil” is used in reference to little children and the elderly. **“Moreover, you little ones... who this day have no knowledge of good and evil.”** (Deut 1:39) And elderly according to the Bible have lost this knowledge, **“I am now eighty years old. Can I distinguish between good and bad [Can I know good and evil]?”** (2 Samuel 19:35) Oh, young children and elderly have knowledge, lots of it, elderly need to share this knowledge with younger generations.

What then is the knowledge of good and evil? ***“To know good and evil”*** means the capacity to live independently, without anyone else’s help in making one’s way through life. This is a maturity which frees one from the need for guidance from others on how to act wisely. But it’s a maturity only God has.

The wisest among us, know they lean on the wisdom of those who have gone before them. The wisest among us make discernments with a heart tuned to the speaking of God’s Holy Spirit. Truly, only God has the independent knowledge of good and bad, right and wrong, good and evil. We all live and learn and make decisions with help. Only God can live independently of another in this way.

Choosing to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil then speaks to a moral independence desired so we can live independent from God. Note though that God does NOT say Adam and Eve will HAVE the knowledge of good and evil, but rather He simply commands do not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. I think this command speaks to all of us who quite Frank Sinatra-ly have a desire to say, *“I did it my way.”* Something in us doesn’t want to be told what to do. We’d much prefer to tell God what to do.

But then let’s note further that eating from the tree did not ever make Adam and Eve independent of God. The Frank Sinatra desire in us can get all the wealth and fame and power we want, but it does not ever make us independent

of God. So then why do we want this independence. We want it only if we believe God is bad. We'll look at that more next week. It's the main lie of the evil one.

What did Adam and Eve get then instead of independence? Instead of independence, Adam and Eve became dependent on drives and forces beneath their dignity. They discovered that they were not God and that instead of becoming more like God, they had become less like the humans God made them to be. A restoration was now needed. A rescue, because they were losing the *fully alive life* they believed they were missing out on. They believed the lie that God was holding out on them. Isn't that after all why we take matters into our own hands, because somewhere along the way we've thought that God is holding out on us? That God doesn't want our best? That God is not giving us what we need to have the good life? Again we'll look at this next week, but good news: the Creator did not give up.

God went after Adam and Eve, Genesis says, "*God went looking for them,*" and God comes after us. God comes all the way down into the Garden that has become a cemetery and calls us back to the original intent. Jesus, the one true human, calls out to us, "**Truly I say to you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**" (Matt. 18:3). He's saying this phrase we see in Genesis, "***Stop trying to live apart from Me, let me restore the four relationships you need, and you will have the shalom (peace, well-being) you desire.***"

So again, why become a child? Because little children are unable to make life work on their own. And look at our world, adults apart from God don't know how to make life work either. To this Jesus says, **"I am the true vine"** (John 15:5), referring, perhaps, to the Tree of Life in the Garden. **"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for a part for me you could do nothing."**

Jesus seems to be going all the way back to the Garden with this statement. There is only one command. All other commands are variations on one theme: ***"Trust me." "I will be God; you be human. I will be the creator; you be my children."*** Thank God. With an intimate dependence on God, we find we are free to live fully alive, fully human lives.

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book *The Story of All Stories*.)