



## Reviewing the Basics

### (2) “Why does God make such a big deal about sin?”

Genesis 2:1-17

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This is the second sermon in a series on the basics of the gospel or the Christian message. In the first sermon we looked at part of Luke 24 which tells of Jesus sending his disciples into the world with a message in his name for all the nations. The message was a message of repentance for the remission of sins. In that sermon, I especially wanted to show how Jesus claims the right to tell everyone in the world how to live. Perhaps the most basic of all the basics is that God, whether God the Father or God the Son, claims to be King or Lord of the whole world with the authority to tell every human being how to live their lives. The basic message of the Bible to the world is the existence and character of God. There are many facets to the character of God, but the characteristics that we are confronted with in God’s message to the world as Jesus summarizes it in Luke 24 are the authority to tell all human beings to repent and the grace in offering us all the forgiveness of sins if we do so.

In this second sermon on the basics of the message of the Bible I will deal with the question, “Why does God make such a big deal about sin?” God’s message to the world as it is summarized in Jesus’ declaration in Luke 24 has to do with repentance for the forgiveness of sin. So the message is a call to turn from sin in order to be forgiven of sin. God’s message to the world has a lot to do with sin. Sin is a very big deal in the message of the Bible, and it is that because it is a big deal to God. And so one of the basics of the Bible has to do with the seriousness of sin.

One of the reasons that it is important to address this subject is that sin is **not** a very big deal to most people. Of course, it depends what you mean by the word sin. Sin is not a word that gets used a lot in our society, but people do operate with some understanding of right and wrong. But the key idea about sin in the Bible is not much of a concern to most people in our society and that is that sin is breaking God's law. This is the primary concern of the Bible when it comes to sin. The Bible is very concerned about the effects of sin on other people, but the most important thing about sin is that it is a violation of God's law.

And that, I think, is puzzling to many people. They can understand why it is wrong to hurt other people, but few people give much thought to the seriousness of sinning against God. Most people of our society, if they believe in God at all, picture him as an indulgent easy going deity who really is not too concerned with the failures and short comings of regular decent people. And even we who are more familiar with the Bible than most people are, have a tendency to lean in that direction.

So to understand the message of the Bible, which of course gives a lot of attention to the forgiveness of sins, we must have some idea of why it is that sin is such a big deal to God. Our starting point will be the story near the beginning of the Bible in which God gave a command to Adam and told him that if he broke that command he would surely die. Verses 16-17 of Genesis 2 say, "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every three of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Now why would God set things up in this way? Why create a tree of the knowledge of good and evil and then tell Adam that he may not eat of it and then threaten him with death if he should do so? Why would God create a tree and then declare it to be off limits? Is that not just asking for trouble? Why not just leave that tree out? Why not only make trees that Adam was allowed to eat of? Why not, not make commands so that it was not possible to break commands? After all it was just Adam at this point and he was declared very good with the rest of the creation, why give him this command with a death sentence attached to breaking it?

Now the Bible does not fully answer this question. One of the great mysteries of human existence is why God created human beings who were capable of sinning. Why didn't God just create Adam and Eve in such a way that they would not sin? There are lots of guesses, but that is not something that the Bible addresses. And so we must deal with the Bible as we have it. Deuteronomy 29:29 is a verse that is very helpful when we faced with questions that come up in our minds, but which the Bible does not answer. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." There are things that God does not tell us, either because he does not want us to know or because we are not capable of knowing. God has given us what we need to know, and we have to be content with that.

However, that does not mean that there is nothing that we can learn from God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Even though we can't know exactly why God didn't just leave the tree of the knowledge of good and evil out of the garden, there are some very important things that we can say on the basis of the fact that God did make the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and he did tell Adam not to eat of it and he did warn him that he would die if he did eat of it.

What all of this did was to make the relationship between God and Adam very clear. It was already clear that God was the creator and Adam was a created being. What this formal command did was make it very clear that God was the ruler and Adam's role was to obey God's rules. As the creator, God defines the relationship and here he is making it very clear that God is a God who makes commands and Adam's role in the relationship was to follow the commands. This command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil formalized Adam's place over against God. God is saying to Adam and through him to all of us, "My job is to make the commands and your job is to follow my commands." This is the way the creator wants it to be. This is the nature of the relationship that he has designed between himself and human beings. By this command God is saying, "I am God and you are not God. I am the King and you are the servant. I have created you to obey me.

This defines you as a human being. You have been created to be subject to me.”

Now it would be possible to view this kind of relationship as a negative thing for Adam. But to think that way is to forget the goodness and the generosity of God. Even though we are only in chapter 2 of the Bible, there are indications already that God is treating Adam very well. God had given human beings the task of having dominion over the earth. God had made human beings in his own image. God had given Adam a beautiful garden to live in. God had given all the other trees of the garden to eat from. It is very clear already that God is not going to treat Adam badly. It is clear already that God is not going to use his authority over Adam to oppress him. The rest of the Bible will make it very clear that there is perfect harmony between service to God and human wellbeing and flourishing. So being a servant of God is not a bad thing in biblical thinking. In fact it is the only good way to live.

So we see here already part of the answer to our question of why God’s takes sin so seriously. Clearly from this text about the first prohibition, we see that God takes his role as God very seriously. God takes his role as ruler very seriously. That is at least part of what is behind this command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God is making it very clear that he is the one who gives the commands and Adam’s place in their relationship is to be the follower of commands.

So one of the key ways that Adam was to relate to God was submission. God is making it very clear that the proper response of Adam to God is one of submission. God is the creator. God is Adam’s creator. And God requires Adam to acknowledge his authority over him and to submit to his commands.

And this chapter early in Genesis is here to set the stage for the rest of the biblical story. These early chapters in Genesis teach us some of the basic and fundamental truths about life. And one of the points that God makes very clear by means of declaring the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to be off limits for food is that he is the boss and Adam is not the boss. God is the giver of commands and Adam is the obeyer of commands. This is a fundamental feature of the nature of things. This is the nature of the relationship between the creator and the created. This

is not something that human beings decide. This is something that God as the creator decides.

And the penalty that the LORD God attaches to the command shows us how seriously God takes this matter. “[I]n the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” So the death penalty. It doesn’t get more serious than that. The most precious thing that God had given to Adam was life itself and God takes obedience to his command so seriously that the penalty for disobedience is forfeiture of life itself. God is making the point here that obedience is necessary for life itself. Adam doesn’t get to continue living if he chooses to disobey God’s command. So life and obedience are closely connected in God’s world.

Now there are two ways of looking at the threat of death for law-breaking and they are both important. Clearly death is the penalty for lawbreaking. But at the same time, death is the result of breaking God’s command. There is more here than just the idea of penalty. The text is also teaching us that it belongs to the nature of things that lawbreaking leads to death. This gets at a deeper definition of death. There is more to death in the Bible than physical death. It is possible in biblical thought to be dead even while you are physically alive.

This is mostly hinted at in the Old Testament, but it becomes explicit in the New Testament. Romans 8:6 is an example of this meaning of death. Romans 8:6 says, “For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind of the Spirit in life and peace.” And then verse 7 continues, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot.” To set the mind on the flesh is to set the mind on life apart from God. The term “flesh” refers to sinful human nature. The meaning here is that death and life have to do with our relationship with God. It is possible to be alive physically and death spiritually. To be dead spiritually is to be alienated from God.

And that idea is at least hinted at in Genesis 2:17 in which God says to Adam that if he would eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would surely die. Certainly that was a threat. But at the same time it was also a statement about the nature of things. God was also making the point that to disobey him was to die spiritually. Life in the Bible is associated with being in a good relationship with God and death is

associated with separation from God. And God in Genesis 2:17 is saying to Adam and all of us, that disobedience separates one from God and that is the essence of death. To be alive physically, but living in disobedience to God is to be in a state of spiritual death.

This helps us to see why sin is such a big deal for God. He made human beings to obey him. He is the ruler and human beings are the servants. And disobedience to God's rules is rebellion. It is rebellion against God's rightful rule. God is the creator of all things and he has given human beings certain freedoms and responsibilities over his creation, but he has not given human beings freedom from his authority. In this text he is making it absolutely clear that while God has given mankind dominion over the creation, mankind remains under God's authority. And to rebel against God's authority is rebellion against God. It is actually to reject God's right to rule. And when a created being says that against his creator, that is a very very big deal. It is cosmic treason. And so the penalty of that cosmic treason is death.

But alongside that there is the fact that disobedience against God automatically leads to a state of death which is separation and alienation from God. And that death is the very opposite of life. God is the source of life and life as it was meant to be lived is in a loving relationship with God. Spiritual death is a state of alienation and separation instead of harmony and love. And so it is destructive. We see that in that after Adam and Eve did sin, their relationship with God changed. Their relationship with one another changed. And their relationship with the rest of the creation changed. There was no longer harmony. Instead there was separation and division. And that has led to the brokenness of the human condition.

Life is harmonious relationships between God and man, between people, and between humanity and the rest of the creation. Death is disharmony in all relationships and so we come to the destructive disharmony that is such a pervasive characteristic of life on planet earth. The fundamental relationship is between mankind and his creator and once that is broken, the state of affairs that ensues is death – disharmony at every level and the brokenness and misery that results.

So yes, sin is a very big deal to God and you can see why that is. It is rebellion against his authority, and it unleashes the destruction of sin and its results in all our relationships. That is not God's will for his creation. God's will for his creation is beauty and fullness and fruitfulness and wellbeing for all. God is love and his love desires that his creatures experience fullness of life and harmony and blessedness. Sin is destructive of all that. Rebellion against God automatically means to death which is the opposite of life. Death, even before physical death, is separation from the source of all life and goodness which is God himself and the result is conflict and disease and brokenness and misery. And God cares about that. One of the reasons that sin is such a big deal to God is that he wants what is best for his creatures including mankind and death is not what is best. It is a long way from that. And so God takes sin so seriously, not only because it is rebellion against him, but also because it is the cause of all the suffering and pain and misery in the world. God is definitely concerned about maintaining his own authority and honor, but that is tied up with his creation, including the human race doing well.

Now we get additional insight into the seriousness of sin by considering the fact that the tree from which Adam forbidden to eat was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That surely is significant. There was something about the knowledge of good and evil that God was declaring off limits to humanity. Interestingly the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to eat of the tree helps us to understand its significance, although it is clear that his overall purpose was not to be helpful to anyone. But the serpent assured Eve that if she would eat of that tree her eyes would be opened, and she would be like God, knowing good and evil.

The serpent was right about the fact that God is the one who knows good and evil. He was knowingly wrong to suggest that it was somehow an advantage for human beings to be like God in knowing good or evil. D.A Carson gives a good explanation of this phrase, "the knowledge of good and evil." In his book *The God who is There* he writes, "[T]he expression in Hebrew, 'the knowledge of good and evil' is often used in places where to have the knowledge of good and evil is to have the ability to pronounce what is good and to pronounce what is evil." This

helps us to see what is going on here and why God prohibited eating from this tree. God is saying that he is the one who knows what is good and what is evil. One of the things that we see God doing in the creation story is declaring again and again what was good.

What the serpent was promising and what the Adam and Eve were attracted to, was the opportunity to be like God and to pronounce for themselves what was good and what was evil. They wanted to be free of God's pronouncements about good and evil and to be able to make those pronouncements themselves. And so they wanted to be out from under God's pronouncements of good and evil and to be free to decide for themselves what was good and what was evil. And so the enormity of this sin was not that the fruit of that particular tree looked particularly delicious and they wanted some. That would be bad enough. But much worse than that, they wanted to take over God's role. They wanted to decide good and evil instead of God pronouncing what was good and evil.

Here is Carson again. "We would not think that the serpent's temptation is nothing more than an invitation to break a rule, arbitrary or otherwise. This is what a lot of people think that 'sin' is: just breaking a rule. What is at stake here is something deeper, bigger, sadder, uglier, more heinous. It is a revolution. It makes me god and thus de-gods God."

And you see there is something of this in all sin. Every time we sin we are doing the same thing that Adam and Eve did when they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are telling God that we reject his pronouncements about what is good and what is evil, and we will decide that for ourselves. And when we do that we are claiming one of the rights of deity – to pronounce what is good and what is evil.

God restricted access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it was his role as God to say what was good and what was evil. The reason that he put the tree in the garden and told Adam and Eve not to eat of it was that it was their role as creatures made by God to leave God's role to God and to embrace their role as those created to find their fulfillment and joy in being what God had created them to be and doing what God had created them to do. And for them to usurp



God's prerogative to define good and evil was the way of death. The only one who can fulfill that role is God himself.

So we see why sin is such a big deal for God. It is not just breaking some arbitrary and frivolous rule. It is to revolt against the God who made us. It is putting ourselves in the place of God. It is cosmic rebellion. And both the penalty and the inevitable result of that is catastrophic. It is death.

So the Bible has a lot to say about sin. You can't understand the message of the Bible without understanding the seriousness of sin. And what is a most significant point is that seeing the seriousness of sin is directly related to seeing the wonder of the grace of God.

It is a wonder of grace that the rest of the Bible even exists. It is a wonder of grace that anything exists in light of the horrific meaning of Adam and Eve defying God and eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The most amazing thing is that God did not just end it all there – give Adam and Eve and the serpent what they deserved and wipe his hands of the whole business.

But here we are thousands of years later – many generations have come and gone – but what God has been working towards through all of that history is to undo what Adam and Eve did. That is why the story continues after Adam and Eve. God has been working through all that history to conquer and overcome the sin and evil that Adam and Eve's disobedience unleashed into the world. Already to Adam and Eve, after the fall into sin, God spoke of one who would come to crush the head of the serpent and to win to himself a people who would hate sin and love God. That promise was and is and will be fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The key to the whole plan was God sending his beloved Son to bare the penalty of death that Adam and Eve and all of us deserve. There is a sense in which God bore the penalty himself. We have no idea of what it cost God to do that. WE get a little insight if we have some understanding of how serious sin is and thus what it deserves. God himself in Jesus Christ paid that price.

And so it is possible for us to have life instead of death. We are born dead in sin, but by grace through faith, we can be reconciled to God on

the basis of what Jesus has done and so begin to experience the fullness of life that is rooted in a relationship of love with God. The richness of that now already is beyond words, but what we experience know is just a foretaste of what is to come. And the key to it all is giving God his due – living for him and not for ourselves and finding our great joy and satisfaction in him.