

Only One Command

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you inspired the writing of this text thousands of years ago. And we believe that you saved it so that it would be a text that you would speak even in our time.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace that we could enter into the message you have here as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, From any tree in the garden you may freely eat, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.

For in the day that you eat of that tree you will die. On the Sunday mornings of this fall we are slowly making our way through the opening chapters of the Bible, through Genesis 1 to 11.

Why? For two basic reasons. First, the rest of the Bible, where we tend to spend most of our time, assumes that we know the story or stories of Genesis 1 to 11.

The Bible does indeed have two halves. Not just Old Testament and New Testament, but Genesis 1 to 11 and Genesis 12 to Revelation 22.

[1 : 25] And the second half of the Bible assumes we know the first half. The second reason we are spending time in Genesis 1 to 11, the opening chapters of the Bible put everything into perspective for us.

They are the story that makes sense of our stories. Genesis 1 to 11 helps us understand what and who we were created to be. And just as importantly, Genesis 1 to 11 helps us understand why we are not now who and what we were created to be.

And most importantly, Genesis 1 to 11 helps us understand why Jesus Christ had to come into the world and what Jesus Christ came to do. And the Lord God commanded the man saying, 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, for in the day that you eat from that tree you will surely die.

In the text before us, in Genesis 2, we are given an expansive picture of what and who we were created to be.

In almost childlike simplicity, we have fleshed out for us an expansive and, I think, compelling vision of what it means to be created in the image of God.

[2 : 55] We have been emphasizing that the living God is relationship. The living God can use plural nouns when speaking self-referentially.

Us, our, we. Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness. In Genesis 2, we see what it means to be created in the image of a relational God.

In pictographic form. God shows us that we were created for a fourfold relational existence, a fourfold relational harmony.

We were created for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with God.

Earth. Genesis 2, 7. Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground. Others. Genesis 2, 18. It is not good for the man to be alone.

- [3 : 55] Self. Genesis 2, 25. And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed. No need to hide. No need for personas. And God.
- Genesis 2, 7 again. The Lord God breathed into the man's nostrils and the man became a living being. Earth. Others. Self.
- God. All working together. And according to Genesis 2, it all hinges on one command. The fourfold relational harmony rests on obeying one command.
- Only one. Genesis 2, verses 16 and 17. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, From any tree of the garden you may freely eat, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it, for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die.
- Only one command. Only one. Only one. Only one. In the garden of Eden, God gave humanity only one command.
- [5 : 10] Only one. And I submit to you this morning, it is the only commandment God ever gives. All other commandments are but another way of saying this command.
- From any tree of the garden you may freely eat. God has given us everything we need. Freely eat. He wants us to enjoy it.
- Freely eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. Now, technically, technically, this is not the first command God gives in the story.
- And therefore, technically, it's not the only command. For in Genesis 1, in the song that sets the stage for this story, God speaks ten commands.
- Ten creative commands. In Genesis 1, ten times we hear God said, let there be light, let there be a firmament, let the waters below the heavens be gathered and the dry land appear, let the earth sprout vegetation, let there be lights in the firmament, let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, let birds fly in the firmament, be fruitful and multiply, let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind, let us create humankind in our image according to our likeness, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and rule.
- [6 : 38] Ten creative commands. I like to think of them as the original ten commandments. Which helps us appreciate, then, the commandments God spoke to Moses thousands of years ago on Mount Sinai.
- It turns out that those ten commandments, you shall have no other God before me, you shall make no idol, you shall remember the Sabbath to keep it holy, you shall not steal, you shall not murder, etc.
- It turns out that God speaks those ten commandments to make it possible for us to live in the fullness and freedom of the first ten commandments he spoke in the beginning.
- If we could keep the ten commandments, if we could keep the ten commandments spoken from Mount Sinai, we would be able to live in the blessing that God intended in the ten commandments in the beginning.
- Especially if we could live that first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me. Which takes us back to the garden, to the first relational commandment.
- [7 : 41] The only commandment God gives in the garden. From any tree of the garden, you may freely eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat.
- Only one commandment. Only one. Now, in order to be clear about what God is getting at in this command, we need to make a number of clarifications.
- I got the idea from doing this watching my grandson the other day. I came home and he was upstairs visiting with Sharon all these toys out on the living room floor and he saw me come through the door and he just started moving those toys back and forth to get at Grandpa.

Cool, huh? Now, that's what we're going to do. I'm going to get all the stuff out of the way so that we can understand the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Prohibiting us from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and we must always say the whole phrase, the whole mouthful, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, prohibiting us from eating from this tree is in no way unfair or unreasonable.

[8 : 52] God has given humanity all that we need to live fully human, fully alive. any tree, eat freely. In the beginning, we had everything we needed, which is to say, in his do not eat, God is not prohibiting something we need.

It will turn out that we do not need the knowledge of good and evil. God is not being unfair or unreasonable. Another clarification.

As the creator, the Lord God has the right to make the rules, even if they were unfair or unreasonable. The creator of the game has the right to determine how the game is played.

I think one of the most disturbing and scary things I have heard over my years of being a pastor is people saying, no one is going to tell me how to run my life. That is really scary when the no one includes the creator.

The creator has the right to tell us how to run our lives. He has the right to give us the rules. And it turns out that at root, there is only one.

[10 : 14] Another clarification. God gives this prohibition for our good. God is warning us, you will die. Eat from this tree and you will surely die.

Note well how that's put. God does not say, eat from this tree and I will punish you. God does not say, eat from this tree and I will make you die. God does not say, eat from this tree and I'm going to kill you.

God says, that if you eat from this tree, I will not need to punish you. If you eat from this tree, I will not need to make you die. But the natural consequences of eating from this tree are death.

Sooner or later you die. All of God's commands, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, they're all given to us not to ruin our lives, but to prevent us from ruining our lives.

If I were a supervisor for the construction site for the patina building behind our sanctuary, and I told my workers, do not jump off the ledge, would I be seeking to ruin their lives?

[11 : 24] Would I be seeking to stifle their joy and creativity? No, I would be caring for my workers. I would be wanting them to remember the structures of the universe, how the universe goes together. Apples always fall down.

That's the law of gravity. They always fall down, and so do people who jump off the ledge. So imagine one day one of the workers saying to the rest of the workers, well, I think the boss is being a fuddy-duddy.

He's an old-fashioned fundamentalist. In the day that you jump off the bridge, you will die, off the cliff, you will die. What does he know? So the worker jumps off the 32nd floor.

And initially, he has this rush of exhilaration. And as he passes the 22nd floor, he's heard to say, so far, so good. God prohibits us from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for our good.

Another clarification. Giving this prohibition reveals God's respect for us. It means God realizes that we are free, rational creatures.

[12 : 38] You don't give a command to a robot. Robots only do what they're programmed to do. Human beings are not always doing what they're programmed to do.

And God respects the freedom that we have. Another clarification. In giving this one command, God is taking a big risk. God creates this beautiful world.

Very good. It's paradise in every sense of the word. And then God places in this beautiful world a creature who has the capacity to choose and who just might choose to ruin the world.

Another clarification. In God's command, we are not confronted with a choice between good and evil. It's one tree. The knowledge of good and evil.

It's not two trees. A tree of good and a tree of evil. God does not place something evil in the midst of good and then make us choose. If God had created an evil tree, writes Francis Schaeffer, then we would have thought of a concept like the Hindus have that eventually both good and evil, cruelty and non-cruelty, spring from God and are thus eternally equal.

[13 : 55] We're not given a choice between good and evil. Now, one final clarification. The prohibitive tree is not called the tree of knowledge.

This is so important. I think I'm going to ask you to repeat that with me. It's not the tree of knowledge. Again, it's not the tree of knowledge.

A lot of confusion has been caused by carelessly referring to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the tree of knowledge. Even as brilliant a thinker as Eric Fromm read it incorrectly.

And he held then that Genesis is teaching us that God does not want humanity to know. God does not want humanity to think and to use our brains.

Goodness gracious! God is not afraid of human beings amassing knowledge. I mean, after all, what are we going to discover that's going to surprise God?

[14 : 59] Oh, I didn't know that. Or what are humans going to learn that's going to throw God into a tizzy? God delights into our discovering truth and learning about the created order.

He finds great joy when we figure out how the universe works and we figure out how our hearts and minds and bodies work. God wants us to know everything we can know about his handiwork.

I know I delight in the knowledge that you in this congregation have been given. A very knowledgeable congregation.

I stand in awe of carpenters and bakers and geologists and financial analysts and chemistry teachers and psychologists and I especially stand in awe of mothers of little children.

God made us to know. God wants us to use our brains. It's a false spirituality that says you have to stop thinking in order to believe.

[16 : 08] Just stop thinking so much and just believe. That's not Christian spirituality. Stop fretting and believe. That's Christian spirituality. But not stop thinking.

Okay. The prohibitive tree is not the knowledge. The tree of knowledge. It's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die.

Only one command. Only one. Now, the phrase, the knowledge of good and evil, refers to a particular kind of knowledge.

Trace this idiom through the rest of the Bible and you will discover why God doesn't want us to have it. It turns out that only God has it.

That only God can have this kind of knowledge and still live. Now, the idiom is used in reference to human beings. In particular, it's used in reference to little children and to the elderly.

[17 : 13] Children do not yet have it. Deuteronomy 1.39. Your little ones, who this day have no knowledge of good and evil. Oh, little children have knowledge.

The past two weeks, we've had all four grandchildren living in our house. I can tell you they have knowledge. Lots of it. They know good. And they know evil. But, according to Scripture, what they do not have is the knowledge of good and evil.

And elderly people, according to the Bible, are losing it. Have lost it. 2 Samuel 19.35.

I am now 80 years old. Can I know good and evil? 80 years, 80 year olds know all kinds of things.

They have great knowledge. And it's knowledge that needs to be shared with the next generations. 80 year olds know a lot. 90 years old know a lot. But what 80 and 90 year olds are beginning to lose is the knowledge of good and evil, according to Scripture.

[18 : 22] So, what is this idiom all about? Children do not have it. We start to lose it when we get old. And those in between think they've got it.

Okay. Okay. Daniel P. Fuller, who was the first biblical theologian with whom I had the privilege of studying, now 40 years ago, has done the most complete work I know on this idiom.

He's looked at every place in the Bible where this idiom is used, and he writes, it would appear to the original readers of Genesis 2 that the expression to know good and evil signified the possession of that maturity which frees one from being dependent on someone else for guidance on how to act wisely.

Say that again. The expression to know good and evil signified the possession of that maturity which frees one from being dependent on someone else for guidance on how to live wisely.

Little children do not have it, and in our older years, we lose it. We are not able to live independent. To know good and evil, in Hebrew Bible then, signifies the capacity to live independently without anyone else to help us live wisely.

[19 : 55] So Dan Fuller concludes, The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would thus mean that Adam and Eve were not to aspire to that maturity possessed by God Himself whereby they might consider themselves to be free from dependence upon God and able to achieve the harmony they now enjoyed by taking matters entirely into their own hands.

Only God has that kind of maturity. Only God has that kind of knowledge. Only God can live independently of another.

So this is how I paraphrase the only command God gave in the garden. Adam, you are what you are because of me, your creator. You are a glorious creature, magnificent beyond what you yourself know.

I've made you to be dependent on me for life. All I ask of you is that you be you, a creature, a human. You are free.

But do not use your freedom to try to be other than you are, a dependent creature. Do not try to be your own God. For all of your magnificence, you cannot be your own God.

[21 : 09] You be you, I'll be me. Do not try to be what I am. I'm telling you this for your own sake because if you try to be me, if you try to be your own God, if you try to be an independent being, your world will fall apart and you will die.

Can you feel the love in that one command? God wants us to have life. But he's warning us that to sign the Declaration of Independence from God is to sign one's death certificate.

Only one command. Do not try to live apart from me. Do not try to live without me. I think it's the one command God is speaking to every human being every moment of every day.

do not aspire for the knowledge that thinks you can operate on your own. But Adam and Eve did not believe God.

They thought they could make it on their own. They took and ate. Genesis 3, 6. They took and they ate. They cast off all dependence on God and took upon themselves the responsibility for making life work.

[22 : 41] And they discovered they were not able to make it work. They discovered that when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they did not become independent.

They became dependent on drives and forces beneath their own dignity. They discovered that they after all are not God. And instead of becoming more like God they became less like the humans they were created to be.

But the Creator did not give up. He will not give up. He went after Adam and Eve and He comes after us.

God comes all the way down into the paradise that has become a cemetery and calls us back to this original intent.

Jesus the one true human calls out to us truly truly unless you turn and become like children you will not even enter the kingdom of God.

[23 : 50] Why become like children? Because children are incompetent to make the world work and to become a child again is to be brought back into reality.

And then Jesus says to us I'm the true vine referring to the tree of life I'm the vine you are the branches live in me and I in you for apart from you you can do nothing from me you can do nothing.

Only one command only one all the other commands are a variation on the theme trust me God is saying I will be God you will be human I will be the creator you be the creature live in intimate dependence on me Eve took an ape Adam took an ape all their children took an ape and all their children's children took an ape and I ate and you took an ape we do not hear those words take eat again in the Bible in the story that makes sense of our story they do not appear again in the Bible together until that night when the incarnate

God having gathered his first disciples who were becoming like little children gathered them around a table in an upper room he took a loaf of bread broke it gave thanks and said to them take eat I'm the bread of life whoever eats this bread this fruit will not die whoever eats this bread will live forever only one command only one thanks for I did like did especially for women