

Messing With Our Minds About The Only Command

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

- [0 : 00] Did God say an apparently innocent question posed by an apparently benign being?
Did God say? Did God really say? With the nuance of, would a good God ever say anything like that?
If God is really for you, and if God really wants your best, would he have ever said, you shall not?
On the Sundays of this fall, we are making our way through the opening chapters of the Bible, through Genesis 1 to 11. We have been trying to listen carefully to what I'm calling the story that makes sense of our stories.
No chapter of the story serves that end, make sense of our stories, like the chapter we just read in Genesis 3, 1 to 7. Here we have revealed for us the fundamental struggle of human existence.
- [1 : 18] Here we learn what we could have never deduced on our own. Here we learn that someone is messing with our minds.
An enemy of God on earth is not his equal, sings Martin Luther, is messing with our minds about the one command God gives humanity.
Let us review what we have learned thus far in this series. From Genesis 1, we have discovered what every person alive today needs to hear.
We have discovered that the universe is not an accident. It did not just pop into being out of nothing.
Someone wanted it to come into being. From Genesis 1, we have discovered what every human being alive today longs to hear, that we humans are not an accident either.
- [2 : 29] You are not an accident. I am not an accident. Someone wanted us to come into being. Someone wants us to exist. Someone made us happen.
The living God made us happen. From Genesis 1, we learned that human beings were created in the image of God.
Nothing else in all of creation bears this significance. Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness. We were brought into being to represent the creator in and for the rest of creation.
We were brought into being to reflect the nature and character of the creator in and for the rest of creation. When the rest of creation looks at us humans, creation is to see who God is and what God is like.
What dignity. From Genesis 2, we have discovered what being in the image of God involves. The living God is a relational God.
- [3 : 35] The living God is a relationship. Us. Our. The creator of all things can use plural pronouns when referring to himself. Us. And our.

To be made in the image of a relational God is to be made for relationship. In Genesis 2, we see fleshed out in pictographic form the fourfold relational existence for which the relational God made us.

We were made for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with the living God. And in the beginning, all four of those relationships worked and they worked in harmony.

And from Genesis 2, we learn that we enjoy this fourfold relational harmony around one command.

It all hinges on one command. Only one command. Only one. 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 of it you shall surely die.

[4 : 45] God had given the first humans everything they needed to live fully human, fully alive. Everything. From any tree you may eat freely.

God withheld nothing humans need. Any and freely. Just one command. Only one. You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We discovered that that phrase, knowing good and evil, has a particular meaning. We discovered that to the first readers of Genesis, the knowledge of good and evil refers to the kind of knowledge that makes one think we can live life independently of anyone else.

We do not need that kind of knowledge. Indeed, that kind of knowledge is the kiss of death. Only one command. Only one command. I paraphrase.

Adam, you and Eve are glorious creatures. I made you in my image with a capacity for all kinds of creativity. But it only works if you remain who you are, a creature dependent upon the creator.

[5 : 59] You be you, I'll be me. You be human, I'll be God. If you try to be your own God, your world will fall apart. You cannot bear the weight of making your world work on its own.

I'm the vine. You are the branches. Live in me and I in you. For apart from me, you can do nothing. In the day that you try to go it alone. In the day that you try to make life work without me, you will die.

One command. Only one. Then Genesis 3. Enter the serpent. With his apparently innocent question.

Did God say? Who or what is this serpent? From the rest of the story, from the rest of the Bible, we learn that this serpent is an enemy of God.

The serpent does not like the living God. Why? We are not told. All we are told is that this serpent experiences the living God as a threat and he opposes himself to everything God desires.

[7 : 14] From the rest of the Bible, we learn that this serpent in the garden is the being called Satan or the devil. The word Satan simply means adversary or accuser.

Especially an adversary of God, an accuser of God. The word devil simply means slanderer or deceiver. Especially a slanderer of God who speaks deceitfully of God.

Jesus would later call him the father of lies, the liar himself. Now, why does the author of Genesis 3 not call the serpent Satan or the devil?

He just calls him a creature. Why not use the term Satan or devil? Because, as Derek Kidner argues, Genesis 3 does not want to give humanity an excuse for disobedience and for the resulting fall.

Genesis 3 wants to keep it clear about who is responsible for ruining God's good world. The devil did not bring about the collapse of the fourfold relational harmony.

[8 : 23] Yes, Satan enters the scene and he starts messing with Adam and Eve's mind. But Satan did not cause the collapse of this fourfold relational existence. We did.

We caused the collapse. Some of you might remember the comedian Flip Wilson who used to say, The devil made me do it. Well, that's not true. It's never true.

The devil can entice you to do it, but we always make ourselves do it. So, Genesis 3 does not use the terms Satan and the devil to make sure that the serpent doesn't get the credit he seeks.

The author simply calls him the serpent. A creature. Mark that. A mere creature. A beast of the field whom the Lord God had made, says the text.

Genesis 3.1. Whom the Lord God had made. And that is good news. It is? Yes.

[9 : 28] The serpent was created by God. Not as a Satan. Not as a devil, as we'll see in a moment. God did not create an evil creature and then place the evil creature in his good creation.

God created a good creature who at some point in the unfolding story made a choice that resulted in becoming evil. The serpent was created and therefore can be uncreated.

That is what the text is wanting us to see. The being who becomes the enemy of God was made by God and therefore can be unmade by God.

It was C.S. Lewis who puts this all in perspective for me. He wrote a book. Some of you may be familiar with it. Entitled The Screwtape Letters. In which a senior devil is coaching a junior devil on how to undermine and ruin the faith of a new Christian.

And in the introduction to Screwtape Letters, Lewis writes this. The commonest question is whether I really believe in the devil. Now, if by the devil you mean a power opposite to God and like God self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly no.

[10 : 47] There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a perfect badness opposite to the perfect goodness of God.

For when you have taken away everything that is good, intelligence, will, memory, energy, there would be none left of him. The proper question is whether I believe in devils.

I do. That is to say, I believe in angels. And I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God and as a corollary to us.

These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel, only as bad man is the opposite of good man.

Listen to this. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael the archangel. God has no opposite.

[11 : 48] The serpent was created by God, but not to be serpentine. The snake was created by God, but not to be snaky. God did not create the devil as a devil.

God created an angel, a good angel, who made a choice, who exercised freedom in a particular direction and became evil, and does not like the living God nor what the living God makes.

Now, focus where the text focuses. Focus where the Genesis 3 text focuses, on the serpent's way with the first humans.

Step one. The serpent isolates the woman. He isolates her from the man and from human community.

Because, off by ourselves, so to speak, we are sitting ducks. No human being can stand alone. More to the point, none of us can keep believing alone.

[13 : 03] We need community to keep believing. We need fellowship to be strong in faith. One of the movements of our time is toward what some people are calling a church-less faith.

Because, as it is argued, the church is not what it ought to be. Duh. And because, in some cases, the church is so problematic.

Double duh. One simply needs to leave the church and live a church-less faith. Anne Rice recently announced that she's quitting the church.

In the name of Christ, as she puts it, I'm quitting the Christian church. Anne Rice became famous for her novels about a vampire. But, in 1998, she had a saving encounter with Jesus Christ.

And, she wrote two fabulous books on Jesus. Out of Egypt, describing Jesus' early childhood. And, toward Cana, describing Jesus' earthly ministry.

[14 : 10] Fabulous books. And, now she says, she's had it with the church. She's not giving up on Jesus, but she's had it with the church. I understand.

And, I share some of her concerns. But, I grieve for her. For, very few people can remain faithful to Jesus alone.

As problematic as the church is. As problematic as the church has always been. We need each other to keep believing. Step 2.

The serpent then gets her to question God's word. The serpent doesn't come as a devil carrying a pitchfork. Or, as a vampire. He does not come to the woman as an evil being.

He comes as an interested fellow seeker. But, didn't God say? That's so much more effective. For, the serpent is flattering Eve.

[15 : 19] He's suggesting to Eve. That she just might know better than God. How to live this human life. Here, I simply have to quote.

The insight of the German preacher Helmut Thilica. He did a sermon series on Genesis 1-11. Which is gathered together in a book. How the world began. And, he writes.

The first thing that strikes us about this chapter is this. The drama of temptation. Which now begins. And, puts a sudden end to the vision of a sound and healthy world. Begins not with the crash of a kettle drum.

But, rather with the sound of oboes. One might even say it has a hymn-like motif. Thilica goes on. The overture of this dialogue is thoroughly pious.

The serpent introduces himself as a completely serious and religious beast. He does not say, I'm an atheist monster. And, now I'm going to take your paradise and turn it upside down.

[16 : 21] Instead, he says, children, today we're going to talk about religion. We're going to discuss ultimate things. He continues. Well, something like that immediately inspires confidence.

After all, blackards and rascals do not dabble in such topics. When you talk about pious things. You immediately secure for yourself the alibi of serious mindedness and sincerity. So, he begins by asking.

Did God. This God whom we all revere. Even I, the serpent, honor him dearly. Did our revered God say that you should not eat from any tree of the garden? In other words. The serpent is trying to start a discussion.

Something like a theological discussion about the word of God. He seems always to plan his tactics from this quarter. The tempter in the wilderness, too, did not say to Jesus Christ, you are a fool to obey your heavenly father.

He, too, cited nothing but scripture passages. And pious sayings. When he urged Jesus to make bread of stone. And leap from the pinnacle of the temple. And accept the kingdoms of this world from his, the devil's hand.

[17 : 22] And then T. Licker writes this. The devil acts more pious than a nun. And knows his Bible better than a professor of Old Testament or Jehovah's Witness.

This reptile would even lift his eyes devoutly to heaven if he had the eyelids to do it with. The tempter always operates in disguise.

He hides behind a mask of harmless, indeed, pious benevolence. All temptations begin in sugared form.

Step two. Get the woman to question God's word. Did God say? Step three.

The insidious step. The serpent twists God's word. Ever so slightly at the beginning, but blatantly so by the end of this pious conversation. Satan would try this again with Jesus in the wilderness.

[18 : 24] He would quote God's word to Jesus and twisted it just so slightly. It didn't work with Jesus because Jesus knew the word better than the enemy. The evil one still comes at us with the word of God.

Out of context or changed in little ways. Now here's the key to understand the story. The serpent twists God's word in a particular direction.

The serpent twists God's word in a particular direction, wanting us to make false deductions about God's nature and character.

Now watch this. Serpent's first speech. Genesis 3.1 Indeed, has God said, you shall not eat from the trees of the garden?

Well, has God said that? You shall not eat from any tree of the garden? Look what the serpent has done. He leaves out the word freely.

[19 : 31] God had said, of any tree of the garden you may freely eat. The enemy leaves out the word freely. And he transposes the prohibition, you shall not, from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to any tree of the garden.

What is he doing? He's raising suspicion. Suspicion. Suspicion about the goodness of God. He's interjecting the idea that God just might be holding back something that we need.

You shall not eat from any tree of the garden. He's getting Eve to wonder about God's motives. You shall not eat any tree of the garden. And to paraphrase, Eve, God is speaking his you shall not because he doesn't want you to live well.

The serpent does this with all of God's commands. He sneaks in the suspicion that God gives the prohibition, you shall not, because God does not really want the best for us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The serpent pretends somehow to know something about the profundity of the true God. The serpent pretends to know of a greater, nobler God who does not need such a prohibition.

[20 : 47] The serpent is raising the possibility with Eve that God is stingy. Did God say you shall not eat from any tree of the garden?

No. God did not say that. God did not say you shall not eat from any tree of the garden. God said from any tree of the garden you may freely eat.

The only prohibition was against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God only prohibited us trying to live independently of him. And that's a good command. Now, listen carefully to Eve's response to the serpent's speech.

Listen carefully because something now has gone wrong in her soul. Genesis 3, verses 2 and 3. From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat.

But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said you shall not eat from it or touch it lest you die. Notice how Eve misquotes God's word.

[21 : 53] Revealing that she is now suspicious of God. Eve leaves out any and freely. God has said from any tree you may eat freely.

She leaves out those words of generosity and quotes God as saying, From the fruit of the trees you may eat. I've done this many times. Luke 12, verse 32.

Jesus says to us, Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you the kingdom. Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you the kingdom.

Did I quote that correctly? No, I did not. I left out your Father. Your Father. Not just the Father, but your Father. And I left out what I always leave out.

I left out gladly. Fear not, little flock. Your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. From any tree you may eat freely.

[22 : 58] And Eve forgets that. She adds, In the middle. But from the tree in the middle of the garden. The tree is not in the middle.

The prohibited tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is not in the middle. The tree of life is in the middle, but not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adding in the middle means that this tree has now become problematic for her.

Eve puts this tree in the middle. And she adds, Do not touch it. God said, You shall not eat or touch it.

God never said, Do not touch it. Now, there might be an implication of do not eat from it, but God never said, Do not touch it. Again, Eve is beginning to doubt that God is wholly disposed to her good.

Notice also that she plays down the severity of the warning. Lest we die, she says. God had said, You surely will die. The slight changing of God's word now signals that Eve is beginning to question God's character.

[24 : 08] I detect in her mind what the serpent wants to put in her mind. Would a good God really let us die? Would a good God really make such a statement?

You will surely die. And then notice that Eve does not speak of God the way God speaks of God. She does not speak of God the way God speaks of God.

The text of Genesis 2 and 3 always refer to God as the Lord God. Eve now only calls Him God, using the generic word God, and not Lord God.

Lord in Hebrew is the word Yahweh. Yahweh is God's personal name. The name by which He wants to be called. The name He gives us to call upon. Yahweh.

It's the covenant name. I will be your God. You will be my people. I give you myself. All that I am, I give to you. All that makes me be God, I give to you. Having left out any and freely, and having added in the middle and do not touch, her suspicion is fully revealed by leaving off the Lord.

[25 : 14] God is now only God, and not Yahweh God. The good and gracious God who gives Himself to humanity. So the serpent, realizing that the woman is suspicious, drops all the subtlety and reveals his true agenda.

Genesis 3, verses 4 to 5. You surely shall not die. For God knows that in the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, you'll be like God, knowing good and evil.

The serpent calls God a liar. You will not die. You surely shall not die. Again, I paraphrase, and it bothers me that I can paraphrase this serpent so well.

Why would a good God ever say, you humans are going to suffer the consequences of your disobedience?

I mean, what's the big deal about this little act? I mean, how could a little act possibly affect your well-being, let alone lead to death? This is silly.

[26 : 21] Eve, you surely shall not die. But, the serpent continues, besides Eve, God knows. Eve, God doesn't want you to be like Him.

You see, God doesn't want you to be as happy as He is. That's why He's speaking this prohibition. And the serpent continues, God knows that you'll be like Him, knowing good and evil.

True. To choose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil does lead to independence. And in that sense, we become like God, the independent one. But false. We cannot live independently.

Only God can. We can never be like God in that way. We cannot live as our own gods and still live. But the serpent's twisting of God's word twisted Eve's thinking.

And she concludes that God is withholding something she and Adam need. So, she took of its fruit and ate and gave it to her husband and he ate and they began to die.

[27 : 43] Okay. Review. How does the serpent part of the story make sense of our stories? It reveals the nature of temptation.

Temptation does not initially begin with a temptation to do something overtly evil. We are initially tempted to doubt the goodness of God.

And then, doubting God's goodness, we are tempted to take charge of our own well-being and become the captains of our own destiny. Imagine water skiing out on a lake.

And imagine the tempter come alongside as a water ski coach. Tan, muscular, no fear, written on his swim trunks. Hey, what is going on?

How you doing? Do you like the boat driver? He tells you to hang on to the rope. Ever asked why?

[28 : 53] Do you see him hanging on to a rope? Are you sure you can trust him? Nice enough guy. But can you trust him?

Like, does he really want you to have the best ride possible? First time he sees you really enjoying yourself, he'll dump you. Besides, I'm here to tell you, you don't need the rope.

In fact, you don't need the boat. You can ski on your own. Silly.

But not as silly as what we humans do with the Word of God. Lose your life for my sake and the Gospel.

Right. See, I told you. I told you he doesn't want your best. If you want to be great, be servant of all. I'm like, what's this noise? I'm telling you, he doesn't really want you to live well.

[30 : 04] That's the nature of temptation. The story also reveals the nature of sin. Sin is not just disobedience.

Sin is not just rebellion. Sin is not just ungodly deeds. At its roots, sin is unbelief. Sin is unbelief. Sin is not believing that God is as good as He says He is.

And every particular sin is but the fruit of this prior sin of unbelief. sin is not just ungodly deeds. Why do we steal? Why do we steal? We steal because we no longer believe that God will take care of us.

And so we have to take things into our own hands. Why do we lie? Because we no longer believe that God can take care of us, that the truth be Noah, and so we take things into our own hands. Every particular act of sin is therefore an insult to the character of God.

Every act of sin is saying, sorry God, this time you cannot be trusted so I'm going to have to become my own God. That's sin.

[31 : 16] Through the serpent part of the story, we also discover the nature of our nature. the nature of our natures as a result of not trusting God. In choosing to live independently of God, we do not become independent creatures.

We become dependent on the self. And it's a horrible captivity. The nature of our nature apart from God is egocentricity.

I hate it. I hate it every time I see it in me. Egocentricity. Self at the center. Self as the master. Self as the source of wisdom and strength.

Our fallen nature is not only expressed in evil thoughts and deeds. Our fallen nature is chiefly expressed in self-preoccupation. We sinned into existence a creature that was never intended to exist.

We sinned into being a creature that's centered in itself. A creature that lives around and for the self at the center.

[32 : 29] And that's the source of all our misery. All our wars and poverty and injustice and ecological disasters accounted from there. I, me, mine, myself, that's the creed of humanity apart from God.

God. It's the driving force of so much of our existence driving us into a deep mind from which we cannot free ourselves. you may have seen the guest editorial in the Vancouver Sun last week.

It was from the Ottawa Citizen. It was entitled Secular Worship. Did any of you see that and read it? Go back. Google, go back and read it. The article from the Ottawa Citizen is reminding us that we are the creature that worships.

If not God, someone or something else. And the editor argued, get this, that shopping and hoarding are now the liturgical acts of a secular worship.

The editor writes, but the psychology of hoarding points to a more profound malaise. Humans, as theologians and philosophers have long argued, need a transcendent sense of meaning to give them life and purpose and intelligibility.

[33 : 46] The question, therefore, is, how do you find such meaning in a secular materialist society? The Ottawa Citizen is asking that question and continues. Perhaps it's not surprising people project their human longing for significance into material possessions.

We worship our things. Watch a music video and you'll see jewelry and cars become objects of veneration. And then this. People need to be careful in what they worship lest they become what they worship.

That's the Ottawa Citizen speaking truth into the lie. When self becomes the center, becomes God, we're not free, we're prisoners.

We're prisoners to a God who cannot bear up under the weight of our worship. And we fall into a deep mind from which we cannot free ourselves and for which we need a Savior.

Someone who sacrificial love lays his self aside, someone who empties himself of all of his rightful privileges descends into the depths and lifts us up into a selfless love.

[35 : 00] Which brings us then to the most important way the serpent part of the story makes sense of our lives. It poses the critical decision of our lives.

can I trust the creator or not? That is, is the creator right or is the serpent right? Is the creator for me or is the serpent right that he doesn't really care?

So much of life around us makes it hard to trust. Oh, I know that. In a fallen world, so much around us seems to question the character of God.

I know that. But what this text is teaching us is that the serpent will use it all to mess up our minds to encourage us to conclude that the creator does not care and cannot be trusted.

See, I told you. I told you. You're having a hard time right now because he doesn't care. I told you. He does not want you to be alive and free.

[36 : 11] the critical decision every day. Can I trust the one who made me? Will I trust the one who made me? Which is why the rest of the story leads us to the feet of Jesus.

In Jesus, we see who the creator is. We see in Jesus that the serpent is lying, that the creator is good. Romans 8.32 He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?

There's that word freely again. How will he not also with him freely give us all things?

Amen. Did God say, Eve should have said what we need to say again and again.

Yes, God did say you shall not. But no, not about the trees in the garden, of any tree of the garden we may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge that makes us think we can live independently of the living God we shall not eat.

[37 : 29] For we were created dependent creatures and in that truth I choose to live. I refuse your lie serpent. In the name of Jesus you be gone.

That's what she should have said. Let us pray. living God thank you that you know us and you know where we live and you know what we're facing.

You know where this enemy is messing with our minds and hearts. Please will you now speak your truth into the lie?

please will you now go into those places where we are suspicious of you and tell us again that you really are for us.

thank you dear God for your word and thank you that your word gets the last word in Jesus name amen.