

“The Temptation to Deny Sinfulness”
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7;
Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

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Sin. Now there's a word that you can do something with. When I say the word “sin,” I wonder what your very first thought is. What's our relationship to sin?

It feels like these days sin isn't something we talk about much. We kind of don't like the word anymore unless it's used in something like “it's sinfully delicious.” It's almost as if we've taken that word and suggested that there's something we're missing if we acknowledge it is a sin and therefore we want it.

But I think it's worthwhile to take a moment and think about this idea of sin. What is sin? In some way or other, when we talk about sin we often begin to think about what are things we do that are wrong. So there's a sense of morality in there. What is the morality we use to decide whether something is sinful or not?

It's interesting because this last week, I heard someone define morality as that moving center that socially we agree on as good. I just can't accept that. I think sometimes socially we accept things as good that I don't think are good at all. Scripturally, I think we're directed to understand that there are some things that are good and there are some things that are not. There is good and there is evil.

In some ways when we begin to think about what it means to sin, there's a way in which if we sin we're associating ourselves with the evil side of the equation. We're enabling evil or we're engaging in evil. It's a little hard sometimes to make that distinction, but that idea that there is this morality that is part of creation. I want to suggest that there is something good and evil innate in our creation and we have choice involved, and it is in that choice that's what sin is about. There's an idea that we can make a choice between good or evil; we can do what's good or bad. We have some ability to make that decision.

As we think about the idea that there is some innate morality in creation, I would like to suggest that there's a reason for that. We have a God who wants to call us, who set creation up in a way that allowed us to have the ability to make decisions, and calls us to do good and to be good and live into that better way, and in fact, that doing so is about our relationship with God. This very temptation of Jesus in many ways is describing what it means to be in relationship with God. We get tempted in lots of ways. Sometimes we just think about sin as the act, something we do. We don't think about how it affects our human relationships, let alone how it affects our relationship with God.

So as we begin to think about this idea of sin, it is the idea that our decisions, our actions, our choices, our use of human agency, does matter. One way of thinking about it is that we often come to points where we have to make a decision, and sometimes those decisions are really important. We call them watershed moments. It's one reason

some decisions seem so much harder than others. They really seem to have much more impact on our lives.

The idea behind a watershed moment is that as rain comes across a ridge, at some point it's going down one side of the mountain, and at some point it gets to where it starts going down the other side. That's a watershed moment—the moment where it changes from one side to the other. In human decisions we have those moments when we feel like there's going to be a change.

I think that's one reason that as high schoolers begin to think about what their next steps are, trying to decide what college to go to or whether to go to college at all, it feels so overwhelming because they know it's a watershed moment. It's a decision to make that's going to affect our lives as we go forward. There are consequences to what we do.

When we were young, we took a parenting class that tried to teach us to help our children see that there are natural consequences to their actions and when those were hard to see, to help us make logical consequences. In some ways this whole story of Adam and Eve is about that idea that human agency has consequences and that as people make choices it impacts what happens ever after. Choices throughout time have made differences in people's lives.

Think about when Lincoln made the Emancipation Proclamation—that felt like a watershed moment, a change. There are moments throughout history that were watershed moments that changed the course of history.

As we think back on the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament, choices made differences. One guy got to spend a night or two or three in the belly of a whale because of his choices. There's that kind of story. The choice about not trusting God as they left Egypt led to wandering for forty years. There are all kinds of choices. The choice of having a king led to a lot of bad kings along the way. Their choices had impacts. Eventually there was exile and subjugation. Now the interesting thing about that is that in spite of all the ways that the Israelites made mistakes, made choices that weren't good for them, God kept coming back, and kept coming back, and kept coming and inviting them again to go a different way. Each time was a watershed moment; a moment when they could have tried to follow God again.

Of course, Jesus is a huge watershed moment. In many ways we see in this moment as he goes into this set of temptations as a watershed moment. That's the way Paul describes it in Romans. One fellow (Adam) couldn't make his mind up correctly, and the other one (Jesus) did, basically. Jesus shows us the way. We think about what he's doing.

Oftentimes when we think about these temptations, it's easy to focus all that time on the temptations themselves and to think about each temptation and what it is. Surely, each one of those is something that we really do, the temptations that affect us. But I focused more on Jesus' answers this time, and it was very interesting to me because as

he answered, he didn't say, "That's just the wrong thing to do." He said, "It's about my relationship with God."

Jesus had a choice. Did he simply want to make God into a storehouse where he went and got things for himself? Or did he want to recognize that his relationship to God was what was life-giving? You don't live by bread alone, but by the very word of God.

Did he always want to be testing his relationship with God? There's a way, if you've ever been in a relationship with somebody who is always testing it, it's hard to move forward. It's always kind of a way of looking back instead of looking forward. Isn't that what Jesus says? Don't test the Lord your God. Don't just use God as a safety net. No, I'm not going to test God. It's about my relationship with God. When I'm not testing, then I can move forward and do things with God. I can move into the grace of God. I can move into the goodness of God. I can move into the life God has for me and for us.

Finally, the last one is to just ignore God so we can have what we want. In this case, he is offered lots of power. He says no, that exactly what I don't want to do. I want to worship the Lord my God, not somebody else. I want to care about God. I want to give God honor. I want to be in that relationship. So it is that relationship that he focuses on.

I think this story is an opportunity for us to think about who we look to as the model for where we go forward. Very few of us would say we look to Adam as our model. Yet, that feels like what humanity does over and over again. It doesn't learn from what Adam did, but kind of follows what Adam did.

We have the opportunity here to see another model, to see Jesus as our model, to think about who are the models in our life. I talked about Abraham Lincoln giving the proclamation. He's a model some people look to. Mother Theresa is often thought of as a model. But really, the most important model, the central model, is Christ himself. Here he shows us not to deny temptation, not to deny the fact that we have those choices, not even to deny that we've made wrong choices at other times, but as we come again to those temptations to watch how he answered, to recognize that it's about our relationship with God and that if we can allow that to be important, perhaps the most important thing in our lives, we can think differently about how we make our choices.

The rest of the story is that he goes on to help us deal with the ways we have not made good choices, but here he's being that model of how we do it, what we care about, and to make, at the center of who we are, that relationship with our God, who continually comes to us and comes to us in Jesus to show us grace and to invite us again into that relationship.

In some ways, it is the question of do we want to come to a table where we will be fed and sustained, offered life and goodness, or do we want to come to a table that entices us in and then becomes a place that takes our life and drains us? We are invited to a table of sustenance and grace, and I am thankful. Amen.