

Genesis 3:1-13 (NIV)

[God creates man and woman, Adam and Eve, and gives them a beautiful garden in which to live and to work. God tells them that the whole garden is theirs to enjoy with the exception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They are not to eat the fruit of that tree, for God warns them that if they do so, they will die.]

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

¹⁰He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

¹¹And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

¹²The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Genesis 4:1-8 (NIV)

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” ²Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

What is your explanation for why we so often make such a wreck of the most important relationships in our lives? The Bible’s answer is provided at the beginning of the story.

It all started out so well.

God creates everything there is – yes, everything. And God pronounces it all *good*. All of it. Every corner, every last bit and particle – good. And of all the creatures that God creates, one creature is made in God’s image – the humans. And God gives the humans the responsibility for God’s good creation (that’s what we mean by “stewardship” or “dominion”) (Gen 1:26).

This good God then creates a beautiful place for the humans, where they can live and work and love. In beautifully evocative imagery, we're told that God comes to walk with them in the evenings. There is even a tree in the garden from which the humans will eat so they will live in eternity with God. The humans are free to enjoy God, one another, and this garden with one exception. There is one tree from which they are not to eat. If they do, God tells them, they will die, not live.

And then it turned bad . . . very bad.

One thing. There is just one thing that the humans are supposed to leave untouched. But they can't. A serpent approaches Eve and tells her what she most wants to hear, that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she can know what God knows; i.e., she can be like a god herself. Who among us could resist such a promise? So Eve eats the fruit and then Adam does the same . . . and it all plunges into ruin.

The Truth about Sin

If Christians are anything, we are realists. Rose-colored glasses have no place in our pockets. Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about ourselves and our world. The problem when we begin to talk about sin is that it is commonly misunderstood.

We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. But this is not the best way to go about understanding sin.

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we chase after false gods or dishonor our parents or covet our neighbor's house or commit adultery, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God's way. And the result was that when God came to walk with them in the evening, Adam actually hid from God! *Separation*. The biblical story is about God's work to put back together what was torn apart that day in the garden.

In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve's choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by us all, that we can call Sin.

Torn apart

This act of rebellion, doing the one thing God asked them not to do, tears everything apart, beginning with the humans' relationship with God. They have defied God, refusing to do as their Maker had instructed. It is a bit like a child who defies their parent; such defiance has been known to wreck many a familial relationship. Adam and Eve don't trust God, it is as simple and as tragic as that.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of their rebellion and the consequences. First, their own relationship with God is wrecked. When God comes to walk with them in the evening, Adam and Eve even hide from God. All the rest of the Bible is the story of God's work to put things right, to reconcile the humans to himself, to put back together what was torn apart in the Garden.

But that isn't all. Adam and Eve are quickly at each other's throats, each ready to blame the other for their sinful choice. Further, Eve is told that her husband will "rule over her." This is not how God intended things to be nor was it God's hope for husband and

wife. Such “ruling” is another corner of the darkness brought on by human defiance of God. And in a profoundly sad capstone to all this, the humans are told that they must leave the garden and, hence, will die.

After Adam and Eve are forced to leave the Garden, they begin to have children. And in the space of only a few verses, one brother, Cain, is overcome by anger and murders his brother, Abel.

Thus, the stain of human sin spreads further and further, and nowhere is the darkness experienced more personally than in close relationships. Esau and Jacob hate one another. Their mother connives and lies to gain advantage for her favorite. Delilah betrays Samson. David, the idealized king of Israel, abandons his first wife, Michal, and then “takes” Bathsheba in an act of royal privilege and power. His son, Absalom, murders his brother Amnon, who has raped his sister.

The examples of important relations with people we once cared about and even loved are told across the pages of Scripture and our own lives. Who among us couldn’t compile a catalog of wrecked relationships that have touched us and even threatened to devour us. Broken homes, failed marriages, estranged brothers and sisters. In my own extended family, there is an elderly couple whose son and daughter-in-law live across the street. The parents haven’t spoken to the daughter-in-law in more than thirty years! Can anyone even remember what created the rift? How ridiculous; how tragic.

Putting Things Right

Last week, we saw that understanding ourselves and our need for relationship has to begin with a deeper understanding of the one who made us, in whose image we were fashioned. And we saw that our own desire to love and be loved is grounded in God’s inherent relationality, for God is, indeed, love.

Thus, does it not make sense that if we want to enjoy the sorts of relationships that we all desire, we must begin with our own relationship with God. Strengthening our relationship with God should precede striving to improve our relationships with others. Otherwise, we are putting the proverbial cart before the horse. It is folly to think that we could love others as we should, unless we first love God. But how can we go about developing a deeper, more loving, and more abiding relationship with God?

Learning to love God

First, we need to remember that we are Easter people, that we live in that strange state when the kingdom of God has come both already and not yet. Jesus has been resurrected (Easter) and God’s Spirit has arrived (Pentecost), yet we still await Jesus’ return and the consummation of his kingdom. Thus, as we learn to love God, we are never on our own, for the very Spirit of Christ (the Holy Spirit) strengthens us, empowers us, and helps to see the reality of the kingdom.

Second, deepening our faith in God means that we are to come to trust him more and more. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to trust God in all things. And trust is a really a two-sided coin; trust on one side, obedience on the other. This is where Adam and Eve failed, but it is where we are to succeed. (Just a thought – could we please concentrate less on what we think we can’t do and more on what God would have us do.) This is what Dallas Willard (see the page three textbox) means by automatic responses to the kingdom. So often, we think we are being “realistic about human nature) when all we are is blind to nature of true humanity (see Genesis 2). It is Jesus who is the true human!

Obedience matters. Not because we can earn our way into God’s presence. Not because we like the comfort of having some rules to follow. Obedience matters because we desire to truly know God and enjoy him forever, in the famous words of the Westminster Confession. God knows, better than we, a way of life that reflects the kingdom of God and is the path to the true love of God. Like all apprentices, we desire

to be like our master and teacher, to be Christ-like. It is God who shows us how. It is God who shows us the way to a joyful life. It is God who shows us the way to a life that can be the light to the world. Obedience is the path to that life. A life filled with loving and fulfilling relationships.

The spiritual disciplines – worship, prayer, Bible study, service, giving, and more – are all tried and true ways to walk the path of obedience and come to the sort of relationship with God that can then inspire and infuse our relationships with others, our families, our marriage, our friendships, even our workplaces.

A Curriculum for Christlikeness

More than a decade before his death, Dallas Willard published *The Divine Conspiracy*. In his book (which I recommend), Dr. Willard lays out a practical approach to discipleship. Much of his book is devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. Surely, he writes, Jesus wouldn't urge his disciples to hear Jesus' words and act on them unless they could actually do so. In other words, surely the sermon is not an impossible ideal.

Dr. Willard suggests that we ought to have two primary objectives as we strive to be authentic disciples, those who hear and do. First, we must learn "to dearly love and constantly delight in the heavenly Father made real to earth in Jesus . . . certain that there is no 'catch'." Second, we have to remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God – as in "what do you mean, love my enemies. That's impossible!"

We will find delight in the Lord when we learn to let our minds and hearts dwell upon his love and goodness. We find joy in God. A psalmist wrote: "I keep the Lord always before me . . . In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:8-11).

The irony here is that we do not become authentic and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ by first striving to be obedient! Invariably, humans reduce such an effort to an exercise in rule-keeping. The path of discipleship – the narrow gate, the hard road, the house built on rock – begins with learning to love God and neighbor and discovering that habits of goodness begin to replace habits of selfishness. In this, we are comforted by the knowledge that we are not on our own, but that God's Spirit dwells in each of us, helping us to be whole and complete, to be the very shining and brilliant image of God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The Bible has seemingly countless stories of lousy, even murderous, relationships. Does it seem odd to you that God's Word has so many stories of human wreckage? Why do you think it does? What might God be trying to say to us?
2. Do you agree that deepening our relationship with others best begins with improving our relationship with God? This isn't really the way of the countless "relationship" TV shows and books. Might that be the reason that the proliferation of such self-help advice is accompanied by the shattering of relationships across our society? I remind you of Robert Putnam's title of his book on the breakdown of community in America, *Bowling Alone*.
3. Obedience . . . this is a tough subject for many Christians. Begin by making a list of your own thoughts about obedience. What words come to mind? Do you find yourself wanting to start making a list of rules? Many people want to make the Bible into just that . . . but it is not a book of rules or a book of right behavior. Knowing which moral choices God would wish us to make is often not straightforward. Even the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of do's and don'ts. Instead, Jesus points us toward what Dallas Willard calls the "habits of goodness." Jesus is training us in the curriculum of Christlikeness. What do you think Willard might mean by habits of goodness? What are some examples of such habits? How do we develop such habits?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

This week, we'll look at an assortment of relationships in the Bible.

Monday, Genesis 27 Rebekah and Jacob connive to still Isaac's blessing from Esau.	Tuesday, Genesis 37 Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery.
Wednesday, 1 Samuel 11 David "takes" Bathsheba. Read this story closely and you'll see it is no tale of romance!	Thursday, 2 Samuel 13 King David's son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar, and another son, Absalom, kills Amnon.
Friday, 1 Corinthians 5 Paul has to deal with a case of incest in the small Christian community in Corinth.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can
check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

***Doing the Right Thing:
Learning to Make Moral Choices***

**Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*,
is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.**

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just
go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's
recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at
www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
