

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on the nature of Sin, part 2.

*“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.”*

(Genesis 3:6, NRSV)

The woman and her husband in this passage are Eve and Adam, and this is what we have traditionally called the *original* sin. I want to examine this a bit more closely in looking at what sin really is, but first there is some context we need to add: the command from God, the appearance that in the garden just about everything is beautiful and good to eat, the making of the woman, and the confusing statement of the serpent:

*And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree 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 die.”*

*And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.*

*[The serpent] said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

(Genesis 2:16-17, 22, 3:1b-5 NRSV)

Notice a few things: In the original command, God in essence says that nearly everything in the garden is good eating. God also says not to eat of the one tree, and this command was to Adam (Eve was not present yet). God might have repeated the command to both of them (a reasonable thing to do, as serious as it was), but it is also possible that Eve got the information from Adam secondhand. One of them, either Adam or Eve, probably came up with the extra command “nor shall you touch it.” Again, it is possible that God added that later, but given our human tendency to embellish, it seems more likely to be from one of them.

So back to verse 3:6. The reasoning process Eve goes through seems perfectly logical, given what she would have known: Everything else in the garden was good for eating, and this fruit looked especially good, and “someone” said it would make her wise – she probably hadn’t been lied to before. So what went wrong? She reasoned everything except the first bit: that God had commanded them not to eat. The passage doesn’t tell us that she thought God lied, or that she was going to get back at God for something; it seems that she just forgot about God altogether. For this reason I suggest that the sin started not when she ate the fruit, but in the moments before. This lines up with a couple other Bible passages:

*“But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”*

*“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

(James 1:14-15, Mark 7:21-23 NRSV)

Notice what happens to Eve in verse 6. She has a number of pieces of information, but only focuses on what appeals to herself. At that moment God doesn’t exist for her – and for that matter, Adam doesn’t exist either, at least not as a person. It is as if she is in a dream, where she is the only subject, and everything else is an object. Only she and the fruit are real in that moment.

Last month I wrote about solipsism: the idea that I am the only thing that truly exists, as if the world around me were all a dream. To me, it seems that this is what is happening in the story: it is not that Eve purposely is out to defy God; if that were so, she would at least be considering what consequences this might bring for Adam. But instead it is all about her.

Does all sin work this way? I’m not sure about that, but we can certainly think of several instances where it does. The moment I am stepping into an affair, I am not thinking of God or my spouse, or for that matter, what is truly best for the person with whom I am about to cheat. When I think about stealing something, it might be that my intention is to inflict pain on the person who possesses the item. But more often, I suspect that the people who steal don’t consider what the effect will be on the person they are stealing from. And for that matter, if they were trying to punish someone in this way, it is unlikely that they see the other as a person made in the image of God – more likely they see them only as an object in a world where only they matter. This would also be true of most violent acts.

One thing this suggests to me is that serious damage can be done *without* clearly malicious intent. We can hurt people simply by not considering them as people. Most of the human evil in the world (including environmental damage) may be due to solipsism – human selfishness that simply stops seeing the world outside us as having any real value. James 1:14-15 suggests that it grows; it may start small. We might neglect or not notice others at first. But as we continue to not value others, and become focused only on what we desire, and if we have the means, our selfishness can give rise to war, murder, terrorism, and ultimately our own destruction. The difference between me and the worst offender in history may be more a matter of opportunity than anything else. God help us all.

In the next segment I want to explore some of the other Bible passages that deal with sin. My hope is to get us thinking about sin in a relevant way and to see that our need for a Savior and the church is as great now (or perhaps even greater) than it has ever been in our history.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.