

The Problem Behind All the Others

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible nearby, turn with me to Genesis 2. Should be relatively easy to find. Today, we begin a new series all about the Ten Commandments. We'll talk a bit more about the series here in a bit. But on that theme, first, I've got a thought experiment for us: what do you think would happen if God would have crowdsourced the Ten Commandments? Like instead of having Moses go up on the mountain, what if God would've just turned to the Israelites and gone, "I don't know...this is tough—what do you guys think we should do?" How do y'all think you should live?"

And more specifically, what do you think would happen if he were to ask that today, to 21st century Americans? Well, coincidentally, we don't even have to imagine what that would be like. A few years back, a couple book authors here in the States did just that. As a way of promoting their new book on the intersection of atheism and humanism, they asked the general public to contribute their suggestions on the best rules for humanity to live by. And after thousands and thousands of contributions, here were the winners they picked, listed out in an article titled *Behold, Atheists' New Ten Commandments*.¹ You ready for these?

(1) Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence. (2) Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true. (3) The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world. (4) Every person has the right to control of their body. (5) God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life. (6) Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them. (7) Treat others as you would want them to treat you, and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated. Think about their perspective. (8) We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations. (9) There is no one right way to live. (10) Leave the world a better place than you found it.

That's what it would be like if we wrote our own ten commandments—our own rules to live by. Now, there's a lot we could say about that list. Some of them I actually am a fan of. But there is also some thick irony in that list. For instance, one of them states that God isn't necessary to be a good person or to live a meaningful life. But interestingly, the seventh one on the list is just a slightly modified version of the Golden Rule—as in the one from the bible. So bare minimum, God is at least necessary for formulation of that rule. There's also the very interesting choice to place #9—that 'there is no one right way to live,' right in the middle of a list dictating exactly how people should live.

¹ CNN.com. *Behold, atheists' new Ten Commandments*.

But **all of that**, really, is **beside the point**. The *most* interesting thing about that list, to me, is that it **proves something**. It proves that **all of us—all human beings who have ever existed—actually do believe in morality**. So much so that apparently even the people *least* interested in *God's* definition of morality, still *want* there to be universal rules to live by. They want there to be shared definitions of right and wrong in the world for people to operate out of—they just don't want **God to be the one determining those definitions**.

And that's true of **every person in this room** too. Every person in *this* room *has* functional definitions of right and wrong. Whether or not you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, whether or not you consider yourself a religious person or even a *moral* person, we *all* possess a moral code that we operate out of the majority of the time. As much as we love to throw around cliches like, "everyone has to figure out right and wrong for themselves" or "I just have to live *my* truth", we don't *actually* believe that in most arenas of life—at least not *fully*. Anytime you ask questions in your mind like "should I _____?" or "is it okay for me to _____?", you are asking questions *about morality, about right and wrong*. Anytime you make moral judgments or assessments of other people's actions like "I would never do *that*" or "no one should ever do *that*", those statements are based on *assumptions* you have about *morality, about right and wrong ways to live*.

So **the question actually isn't** 'do I believe in *morality*?' *All of us believe in morality. The question is 'what morality do I believe in?' 'Whose definition of right and wrong do I live by?'* / And maybe more critically: "am I thinking *correctly*—or at least *consistently*—about that morality?" Are *my* functional definitions of right and wrong even *consistent*? Do they *hold up* to any amount of scrutiny and criticism? And for followers of Jesus, it's 'is *my* definition of morality consistent with *God's*?' Does my life align with what *he* says about right and wrong—the way that *he* designed life on planet earth to work?

And all of **that is what this teaching series** is about. From now all the way through November, we are going to look in-depth at this well-known list of Ten Commandments in the bible. Ten rules and principles for how to live that have been around for thousands of years, at this point. But even more than that, we are going to use them as a *guide* to help us think critically about morality *in general*. About our functional *definitions* of right and wrong, and where we've borrowed those definitions *from* through the years. And, full disclosure: **the goal is to discover exactly why these Ten Commandments are incredibly sound ways to think about life. I'm not planning to make a case for why we need to plaster them all over courthouses around our country (I'll let the people with more free**

time than me debate *that*), but I *am* going to make the case for how foundational they actually are to the way you and I already *think about* life, whether we realize it right now or not.

Before the series is over, the goal is to spend a week on *each* of the Ten Commandments. To talk about what they mean, why they matter, and what it looks like to obey them as followers of Jesus in the 21st century. But before we do *that*, we're going to do a *few* weeks of set-up. I want to spend the next *three* weeks trying to give us some *lenses* to look at the Commandments through. So that when we get to the Commandments *themselves*, we're understanding them in their proper *context*. And *simultaneously*, I want to help us think *critically* about our *own* cultural context; about things that could make us *like* or *not* like the commandments when we first read them. We're going to dissect the commandments themselves, while also dissecting our own cultural beliefs and assumptions around morality. So we've got our work cut out for us in this series.

Today, I want us start off by looking, not at one of the *Ten* Commandments, but actually at one of the *first* commandments given in the entire bible. Because I think *this* one actually helps us understand our posture towards God's commands in *general*. So if you've got your bibles open to **Genesis 2**, we'll pick it up starting in **v. 15**:

15 The Lord God took the man (or as we know him, "Adam,") **and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden—**

Okay, stop right there with me for just a second. We just read the very *first command* given to humanity in the story of the bible. It reads, and I quote, "...the Lord God commanded the man..." Now, question for you: is what follows a *positive* command or a *negative* command? Does God tell Adam to *do* something, or *not* to do something? *Positive*. In fact, it's *more* than positive, it's actually a pretty *liberating* command. It's a command of *freedom*. God says, "You are free to eat..." from all but one tree in the garden. The *garden*, by the way, that God *himself* designed, created, and planted *for* humanity to enjoy. That's a pretty sweet deal if you ask me.

But I bring that up, in part, because I think some people who only interact with the bible from a *distance* tend to *miss* that. Some of us often assume that God is mainly interested in *restricting* people's freedom. In our minds, God just goes around finding the things people really enjoy *doing*, and then telling them to stop. Almost as if every word out of God's mouth starts with the word "don't." But that, I would argue, is a very *shallow* understanding of the God of the bible. The God of the bible, according to *this* story, puts

humanity in a garden with all kinds of enjoyable things—including *each other*, if you're tracking with me there—and says “go for it. *Enjoy*. Almost *all* of this is for you.” That's the God we read about in Genesis 2.

But *then*, after that, **God does complement** that *positive* command to humanity with a *negative* one. Continuing in v. 17:

17 but you must *not* eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (remember the name of that tree for later), **for when you eat from *it* you will *certainly die*.**”

So, God says, “*do eat* from any tree in the garden, except one. *Don't* eat from this *one* tree, called the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’ / Now, here's what's interesting: **we're not told *much* about *why* they shouldn't eat from this one tree.** It does say that *when* they eat of it, they will die—but that's more of an *outcome* than it is an *explanation*. I would imagine that as skeptical modern people, the story still leaves us going, “okay, but why can't they eat from *all* the trees? Why did God make one tree, only to have it be *off-limits*? What's wrong with eating from *that tree*, *specifically*?” **Anybody else feel that question rising in you as you read this story? I think it's a very understandable question to have.**

But here's the thing: I would argue that's kind of the *point* of the story. The point is that there's one tree in the garden of Eden that simply isn't *for* Adam and Eve to eat from. There isn't a reason given. Put another way, **I think God wants them to *trust* that there *is* a reason, even if they don't know what the reason *is*. I would also argue that the *name* of that tree reinforces that. The name of *this* tree is *what*? “The tree of the knowledge of...? *Good and evil*.” I think that's *telling*. **It's almost like God is saying that by them *not* eating from *that tree*, they are *trusting* God to define good and evil *for* them.** They're trusting that if God said ‘don't eat from this tree,’ there's a *reason* he said that, so they won't.**

So **in the Bateman household**, we have a bit of a slogan—a *mantra*—that we repeat over and over again to our kids. It sounds something like this: **whenever there's a rule, there's always a reason.** It's our way of teaching our four year old and our seven year old that we as their parents don't make *arbitrary* rules. Rather, if there's a rule, then somewhere underneath it, there's a reason for that rule. Now, just to be clear: that doesn't mean that I *owe* them the reason in every situation. It also doesn't mean that even when I *do* explain the reason, it's going to make sense to a four year old or a seven year old, or that it's going to make them *like* the rule any more than they did before. But

the point is that there is always a *reason* for the rules we give. We are inviting our kids to *trust* that there is a reason, whether or not they understand.

And I would argue that it is **very similar with God**, and *God's* rules. Whenever God gives a rule or a command, there is always a *reason* for it. That doesn't mean God is *obligated* to share that reason with us in every situation, and it doesn't mean that even if he *did*, we would understand it or *like* the rules any more as a result. But it does mean that God doesn't make arbitrary rules. Here's the way we put it in our City Church Class: **sin isn't bad because it's against the rules; it's against the rules because it's bad**. Do you hear the difference? That *idea*, I would argue, makes a ton of difference in how you understand the commands in the bible. If you think God is just going around arbitrarily deciding to command and prohibit certain things, that creates a very specific, unhelpful view of God in your mind. *But* if you know that God gives commands for our good and the good of the world, you get a very *different* picture of God as a result.

Which means that **a lot of our relationship with God comes down to one word: trust**. The invitation *from* God to Adam and Eve in the story is this: "trust *me*—the one who created you, made you, blessed you, and *gave* you everything under the sun—trust *me* to define what is good and what is evil. Trust me to *decide* what is right and wrong. And you just go on *enjoying* the world I gave you to enjoy." **So the question is, will Adam and Eve accept that invitation, or not?** Will they *receive* and *respect* that boundary from God, or will they *question* and *reject* it?

Turn with me over to **Genesis 3** and let's find out what happens (if you know the ending, no spoilers). So Adam and Eve are in the garden, and all seems to be going fairly well, until *another* character enters the plotline. Look with me, starting in v. 1:

1 Now the serpent(did I forget to mention there would be a talking snake in this story? Because there totally is. Anyway, "the serpent...") **was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman** (Eve), **"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"**

Now, just to **see if you're paying attention**: what's the answer to that question from the serpent? *Did God really say* that they "must not eat from ANY tree in the garden?" *No*. He 100% did *not* say that at all. In fact, he *almost* said the precise *opposite* of that. *He* said, and I quote, "you are free to eat from any tree in the garden." He just said not to eat from *one* of the trees. *But* you've gotta realize: this isn't an honest question from the serpent; he's not genuinely wanting to know what God said. His agenda is to cast doubt onto God and the commands God gave. He's saying, "wow—did God *really* say you can't eat from *any* of the trees in the garden? How restrictive and controlling this God *is*—he

must really not want you to enjoy yourself.” That’s the message the serpent is selling. / So let’s see how Eve responds, v. 2:

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

Okay **it’s subtle**, but something *happened* in that last part of v. 3. According to Eve, God *also* said they couldn’t *touch* the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But *question*: did God *say* that, back in chapter 2? Nope. He didn’t say *anything* about not *touching* the tree. *He* just said not to *eat* from it. So here’s what *I* think happened *here*: **the serpent’s lie failed, but his tactic worked**. He wasn’t able to convince Eve of something God *didn’t* say, but he *did* cause her to *believe* something incorrect about God: **that God is more restrictive than he truly is**. A functional belief set in, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, that went something like this: **maybe God is holding out on me. Maybe he is unnecessarily restrictive. Maybe he doesn’t want me to enjoy good things**. So seizing the opportunity, the serpent continues. Verse 4:

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

Seeing that he’s making some traction with Eve, the serpent begins assassinating God’s *character* and *motives*. He tells Eve that the consequences of eating from that tree aren’t legitimate: ‘you won’t *surely die*,’ he says. ‘God is just jealous and petty. He knows that when you eat from that tree, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like him, and he doesn’t *want* that to happen.’ **So notice the contrast here between God’s invitation, and the serpent’s**. Earlier, *God* said “trust *my* definition of good and evil, right and wrong.” The *serpent* comes along and says “*don’t* trust God, and *instead*, define good and evil for *yourself*. Create your *own* definition of right and wrong, and don’t answer to anybody else about it. He says, ‘you don’t need to know God, worship God, serve God; you can become your *own* god instead.’ **The choice before Eve is A) trust God’s definition of right and wrong, or B) define right and wrong for herself**. Let’s see what she decides, v. 6:

6 When 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.

Adam and Eve decide that God's definition of good and evil, right and wrong, isn't something they're interested in anymore. They're *not* going to take his word for it. They're not going to trust him. They're going to choose to *define* right and wrong for themselves, on their own terms. And immediately, we read, *this happens*, v. 7:

7 Then 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.

So Adam and Eve eat from the tree, and **the whole thing comes crashing down.** As a result, they are now infiltrated with shame and a desire to hide—from God, and from each other. **All because they decide to reject God's definition of right and wrong and instead, define it on their own terms.** / And I would argue that the *power* in this story comes from realizing that **this isn't something that happened just once, a long time ago—but also something that happens over and over and over again** in human history.

This is **not a story just about one man and one woman** in a garden; it's a story about the *perennial* problem with *humanity*. **This is a story about the problem behind all of the other problems in the world.** Namely, that instead of us trusting **God's definition of right and wrong, we've chosen to create our own definitions. We've chosen to define good and evil for ourselves, based on our own perspective, from our own limited vantage point.** We've created our own versions of right and wrong, by which we judge ourselves and each other constantly, independently from God.

This happens at every level of humanity. The reason **your kids** can't get along with each other is because on some level, their definitions of right and wrong are *different* from each other. **One of them thinks it is right to get to play with their toy all by themselves, and the other thinks that doing that is wrong enough to push the first one down because they're not sharing.** This is the reason **you and that person at work** just don't see eye-to-eye on anything. **They think it is right to do the minimum amount of work to collect a paycheck, and you think that's wrong because it negatively impacts you and every other person you both work with.** This is the reason you don't get along with **your roommate.** **They think it is right to wait until later to take out the trash because they're in a hurry, and you think that's wrong because it makes the whole apartment smell horribly for the entire day.**

This is why **you and your spouse** fight. This is why you and your *neighbor* secretly, quietly despise each other. This is why you don't get along with your in-laws. This is why *America* seems so divided, so much of the time. This is why Democrats and Republicans never—and I do mean *never*—agree on *anything*. This is why countries go to war with

other countries. The problem *presents* itself in all sorts of different ways on the *surface*. But underneath all of those problems is *this* problem: we are all defining right and wrong for *ourselves*. And because we're all defining it for ourselves, our definitions of it never quite line up with other people's definitions.

You see, when we all define good and evil for ourselves, it doesn't lead to any of us becoming like God; it just leads to everyone thinking they are God. It leads to all of us deciding that we get to define right and wrong, and then expecting everyone else to abide by our personal definition. And when you have nearly eight billion people on the planet, all doing *that*? What you get in return is *chaos*. *Disagreement. Dysfunction. Conflict. Frustration. Suspicion of one another. Injustice. Sexism. Racism. Abuse.* You see, this is what the story is trying to tell us: **the problem behind all the other problems in the world is that human beings have chosen to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.** They have all chosen to define right and wrong on their own terms. That's why the world is the way that it is, today.

And I think this story *also* gives us lenses for how we individually think about God's commands. There's a process I've seen play out through the years in example after example of people who end up *walking away* from faith in Jesus. Nearly always, it looks something like this. It starts with...

"I don't understand God's rules."

It starts with us not *understanding* why God says certain things are right and wrong. Maybe it's a specific command he gives around your sexuality or money or time—or most anything. But we hear a command from God and we think "that doesn't make sense to me, that he would command *that*." Then, over time, that morphs into...

"I don't like God's rules."

Here, our posture morphs from confusion to *discomfort*. Now, it's not just that we don't *understand* some of the things God says; it's that we don't *like* them. They start to feel stifling and restrictive to us. And if *that* goes on long enough, it becomes something more like this...

"I don't need God's rules."

Here, we start thinking "you know, I don't know that I actually *need* God in the first place." It's that quasi-commandment from the list we gave at the beginning: *God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.* Just FYI, if you want to become a good missionary to our culture: *this* is where the vast majority of Americans

are right now. Most of them wouldn't say they're outright *against* God; he just feels *unnecessary* to them. They're thinking "I just don't *need* God."

But then, for many people, this process takes **one final shape**. And it sounds like this...

"I must reject God's rules."

This is the **final step in the deconversion process**. Eventually, thinking that you don't *need* God's rules morphs into something much more antagonistic. When we adopt different definitions of right and wrong as our *guide*, we start to judge *God by* those new definitions. And where he doesn't measure up or agree with us, we actually conclude that the correct, moral thing to do is to reject God's definition of right and wrong. In our mind, we must "leave God behind" in our quest to be a moral person, by our own definition.

I'll go ahead and tell you that **serving as a pastor for over ten years now**, I've seen *this* progression play out dozens and dozens of times. People who, at one point, seemed to know and follow Jesus, move from one of these stages to the next, until they walk away from Jesus altogether. Sometimes this takes place over months, sometimes over years, sometimes over *decades*. But this, almost *always*, is the progression. It's been happening, *literally*, since the pages of Genesis. If you currently would claim to follow Jesus, and one day in the future you decide to walk away from it all, I can almost guarantee you that something resembling this happened, either consciously or subconsciously.

So here's the question. Assuming that the bulk of us don't *want* that to happen to us, **what should we do?** How do we avoid going down that path where we end up rejecting who God is and feel justified in doing so? Well, the Scriptures actually give lots of instruction and guidance on the answer to that question—we'll talk about some of it in the series as a whole. / **But at the same time, that's actually *not* the question the bible answers *first*. The *first* question Scripture answers is not what we should do about all of this, but rather what *God did* about all of it.**

If you read through the rest of Genesis chapter 3, you'll read about all kinds of fall-out from that decision that Adam and Eve made. There are all kinds of *physical* consequences, *spiritual* consequences, *relational* consequences, for that decision. But **to me, the most *fascinating* thing that happens is *God's* response.** I think from a human perspective, you would almost expect God to just go, "well I told you guys not to do this, and you did—so for that reason, I'm out." **Like God is an investor on *Shark Tank* or something. And let's be honest: that's what *you and I* would do in a situation like this,**

right? Think about the last time you told someone not to do something, they did it, and then things went horribly wrong as a result. How did you most instinctively respond? The only thing we have left to say to them is one big, fat “I told you so.” “Bet you wish woulda listened to me now, huh?!” Good luck with all the damage you caused with your terrible decision-making.” I think that’s how we would respond.

But in Genesis 3, **that doesn’t seem to be God’s response** at all. Instead, what we read is that God *seeks out* Adam and Eve. They run from God, they hide from God, they dodge him...but God *pursues* them. We’re told that he goes and finds them in the garden, he asks them what happened.² Adam and Eve are filled with shame over their nakedness as a result of their sin...and it says that God made them clothes out of animal skins for them to wear.³ He covers their shame. **He begins remedying the fall-out from the decision they made.** You see, **we often run from God, but God never runs from us. He runs towards us.** In the middle of our sin, in the middle of the *shame* and the *fall-out* from our sin, our God comes looking for us. He begins fixing what we broke. That’s the type of God he is.

And **even as he lays out in detail some of the consequences** of their sin, in the story, he also makes a *promise* to them. In the story, it sounds like this. God says to the serpent, “...he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” In context, “he” there is a future descendent of Eve: a human being. The serpent, the architect of evil and death and chaos in world, will strike that human’s heel, but the human will crush the serpent’s head. Theologians often call that line “the proto-evangelium.” Which in Greek, means “the first gospel,” or the first *mention* of the gospel.

God is saying that one day, it will appear that evil and death and chaos has had the final word over Jesus, as he dies a cruel death on a Roman cross. But that death and eventual resurrection will actually crush the head of the serpent: it will deal a decisive blow to the very presence of evil and death and chaos in our world. Which means that from the moment Adam and Eve choose to define good and evil for themselves, God had already set in motion a plan to redeem everything that they lost. That we lost. **God doesn’t move away from us in our sin; he moves towards us.**

And here’s **why that matters for everything that we’ve talked about** this morning. The case the Scriptures are going to make, over and over again, is that the cross and resurrection of Jesus—are *the primary reason* we should trust God. **Romans 8:32** says this:

² See Genesis 3:9-13

³ See Genesis 3:21

*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us **all** things?*

In other words, if God didn't even withhold his own *son* for our good—don't we think he can also be trusted with everything else? The reason we know God can be trusted is the cross. That's how God *proves* he's worth listening to. He's worth *giving our lives* to. That's how we know: because of Jesus.

So **as we move through this series**—as we look at this ancient list of dos and don'ts that attempt to show us right and wrong from God's perspective—I'll just go ahead and tell you: there are going to be things you don't *understand*. There may be things you don't *like*. There may be things you feel like you don't *need*, or that don't need to be on that list. And *part* of the reason we're doing this series is that we do want to better *understand* God's commands. We want to do our best to piece together *why* he says some of the things he says—why he says to *do* some things, and *not* to do others. So we're going to talk about *all* of that over the next several months. We're going to try to better *understand* God's commands.

But at the same time, I want to point out this morning as clearly as I can that ***understanding* God's commands is not actually the primary reason given to us for why we should obey them.** *The invitation from God throughout the Scriptures actually is NOT “trust me, because my commands will always make logical sense to you.” It isn't “obey me, because you fully understand why I say to do and not do certain things.” The invitation from God is actually “trust me, because of my son Jesus. Look to the cross where you can verify, once and for all, that I am trustworthy. And in light of that, trust me, when it makes sense and when it doesn't. When my commands seem rational and logical to you...and when they don't.”*

We're invited to see, in the crucified body of Jesus, that God will stop at *nothing* to redeem what was lost, to fix what we broke, and to invite us back in after we stepped out. *That* is what makes him, and his *commands*, trustworthy. So every week, following the teaching, we take time together as a church family to remember the cross through the bread and the cup. This, for us, is a way of remembering and resetting our entire person on the most crucial moment in human history: the moment when God sent his son to the cross. And as we do that, we ask him to help us align every part of our being with that reality.

If you're a follower of Jesus, you're invited to participate in that with us as we sing. Let's pray together.

