

Tale of Two Trees

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely 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 surely die.’” - Genesis 2:9, 16-17

Within the Garden of Eden stood a forest of beautiful fruit trees, but only two are named: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Both trees came with a command from God. “You may eat,” he said, “from any tree of the garden”—including the Tree of Life.” But from the second tree he said that they may not eat. If they ate from it, they would die.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represented a choice Adam and Eve had to make, and it is also a choice *every* human has to make as well. God gave us this account to teach us something about this choice that faces us all.

I. What This Choice is *Not*

- A. **This is not a choice between two options that both have God’s blessing.** Adam and Eve had many choices they were free to make. They did not need to fear, for example, that by taking the banana instead of the orange for breakfast, they might miss God’s will. God does not micromanage: he reigns, and he made us to reign with him. He created us as rational, affectional, volitional creatures so that we could exercise the full range of our interests and personalities. God’s commands do not stifle but stimulate human creativity.
- B. **This is not a choice between two bad options.** God did not say, “See this beautiful juicy fruit over here? Well, *DON’T EAT IT!* If you do, you’ll die. Now look way over there. See that scrawny bush with a bit of nasty, moldy fruit? That’s the only food you’re allowed to eat, so start munching.” Instead, Adam and Eve had an entire orchard God *wanted* them to enjoy. We should be careful not to confuse self-flagellation with godliness.
- C. **This is not a choice between two options where the wrong looks dangerous and the right safe.** God did not say, “See the fruit on that tree? It looks beautiful at first, but take a closer look and you’ll see mold growing all over it. That mold will make you sick and die, so stay away from that tree.” Instead, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil looked just as beautiful and tasty as any other tree in the forest (compare 2:9 and 3:6). In fact, there was nothing about the tree or its fruit in particular that would cause any harm.

II. What This Choice *Is*

Because there was nothing harmful about the tree or its fruit, the real issue was not the tree itself, but the choice that tree represented: the choice to *trust God to decide what is good and bad, or to determine for oneself what is good or bad.* That is why it is called “The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The Hebrew word for “know” carries a range of meanings, including the sense of *deciding*. So to say, “That’s good,” about something God had said, “That’s bad,” is to *decide for oneself what is good and bad*—to “know” good and evil.¹

¹ This is why God later said that “man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil” (3:22). He meant that humans had become their own deciders of good and bad—something he knew would destroy both themselves and the good world he had created. This is also why God would not allow them to live forever—as a mercy both to themselves and to the world they lived in. There is a name for a place in which everyone exists forever insisting, “Not Thy will but mine be done.” It is hell. God would not let his good creation be turned into hell.

III. Why This Choice Is Necessary

It is worth asking why God presented humans with this choice in the first place. By giving them this one prohibition, wasn't God setting them up for failure? There are at least two reasons why this choice—to trust God or oneself—is necessary.

A. It displays God's goodness.

The very existence of stars, seas, and trees bears witness to God's *power*. But there is more to God than his power: there is also his goodness. But how will goodness be known and displayed? The only way is through *voluntary trust*. If you lived in a neighborhood where everyone left their doors unlocked and windows open at night, what would you conclude about such a neighborhood? Unless the neighbors are simply naive or don't have anything of value in their homes, you'd have to conclude that it's a *good* neighborhood. In a similar way, by giving humans an opportunity to *trust* him, God's goodness would shine.

B. It makes love possible.

If God had given humans no options but simply "programmed" them to respond in a particular way, he would have created a world without love. But since God *is* love, such a scenario is unthinkable. Love requires trust, trust requires choice, and choice requires options.

IV. What This Choice Leads To

"In the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (3:17). *Disobedience* to God's command leads to death, as it did eventually for Adam and Eve, and as it does for us as well. Death is both a natural consequence and divine judgment. But *obedience* to God's command—what would that lead to? We know of only one case in which this happened.

Jesus Christ's entire life was one in which he *chose* to trust and obey God. In another garden, when faced with a choice, he prayed, "Nevertheless not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). His trust and obedience led him to defeat death for us, but by dying on the cross, then rising again.

Jesus' tree of death became our Tree of Life, where we must choose between trusting ourselves and trusting God.

Discussion

1. Adam and Eve had choices to make, but not all were choices between good and bad. Why is this important to understand when it comes to making decisions?
2. Try using this "good/bad" template to explore how the following sinful tendencies are actually a choice to determine for yourself what is good and bad.

EXAMPLE - Complaining: "I think it is **good** to make sure people know how terrible I think things are. I feel heard, validated, and maybe even pitied. I think it is **bad** when others remain unaware of my opinions about how terrible things are. I feel ignored, overlooked, and taken for granted.

- a. Anxiety: I think ____ is good. I think ____ is bad.
 - b. Anger: I think ____ is good. I think ____ is bad.
 - c. Jealousy: I think ____ is good. I think ____ is bad.
3. How does *trust* in what God says is good and bad correct the sinful tendencies (above)?
 4. How does Christ's obedience in his death and resurrection motivate our trust in the above scenarios?