

**BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff**

**By Pastor Bryan Clark**

**Message Title: Facing Dependence Pt. 1**

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Every year, I find myself seeking to better develop my skills in the art of deception. Some people refer to it as the sport of fishing. [Laughter] Fishing, when it's all boiled down, is the art of deception. It's seeking to convince a fish that it's in his best interest to consume what's at the end of my line. Of course, viewing it from his point of view, that's a lie. It's funny, you go to both the Old and New Testaments, and the Bible often uses a fishing metaphor to describe the strategy of the enemy. He is a deceiver and he is very skilled at the art of deception. Now like any good fisherman, he has many lures in his tackle box. But like any good fisherman, he has his favorite lure. His favorite lure is seeking to convince you, that you are adequate to be your own god. It comes with a promise of freedom: that if you surrender to God, that's a life of rules and regulations, that's less; but if you choose to become your own god, to depend upon yourself, to run your own show, that certainly would be freedom; and certainly that would be more. Is that true?

Well, if you have a Bible, turn with us to Genesis Chapter 3. The strategy that the enemy uses is not new. It was his very first strategy, and by far his most popular. Genesis 3 is a text we refer to often, but every once in a while, it is just good to go back to the text, and kind of unpack what happened so long ago. In my opinion, Genesis 2 is the best picture, for what God has always wanted for people made in His image; just a beautiful picture of what God has always wanted for you. God's never wanted this world the way it is; God's never wanted the pain, and the suffering, and the hatred, and the violence. It was never God's idea; it wasn't His plan. What God wanted for all of us was Genesis 2. But Genesis 3 takes a different direction.

Verse 1:

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” (\*NASB, Genesis 3:1)

The text refers to the serpent, and we would believe it to be Satan himself, as being crafty. It's an interesting Hebrew word; it is sometimes used in a positive way, and sometimes in a negative way. It means to be shrewd; it means to be extremely clever. It is a way of saying that what's going to transpire in the next few verses is extremely clever in the art of deception. He says to the woman, “Indeed, has God said?” That Hebrew word that's translated “indeed” is quite a difficult word to translate. As a matter of fact, we have no word or phrase in our English language that can capture it. Basically, it carries an idea of scoffing, of mocking. There's a high level of questioning in this term. When you think about Adam and Eve, you would have to say, they literally had it all. So how do you tempt someone who has it all? For them, life was perfect. And the answer is, you get them to consider maybe there's still more.

And so, it begins with a questioning of the goodness of God. Maybe God isn't as good as you think He is. And maybe He isn't as generous as you think He is. Maybe He's actually restrictive, and if you were to become your own god, there's still more out there. That's the basic idea of what's happening here. He completely misquotes God from Genesis 2:16-17, when he quotes God as saying, "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden." Of course, that's not what God said at all. God said you could eat freely from all the trees. There's just one that's off limits. God is a God of unbelievable yes, and an occasional no. But the enemy turns it all the way around. Now I don't think he thinks he's going to get away with this. I think the strategy is, let's make God look really restrictive and Eve will bring it back, but she probably won't bring it all the way back. And that's exactly what happens.

Verse 2:

And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'" (Vs. 2-3)

Now at first glance, it would appear that Eve did a good job, kind of put that serpent in his place; she corrected his statement. But when we look closely, there are some things about her statement that trouble us. One of the very significant things to look for, when you are interpreting a Hebrew narrative such as Genesis, is that you want to look for any time when something is re-quoted or restated. Whatever is re-quoted or restated, then the thing you want to notice the most is, what are the words that are added, and what are the words that are left out? That would never be done for stylistic reasons, and it would never be done by accident; always very calculated, in order to help us understand the point of the text.

So, we look at that and the first thing we notice is, what are the words that Eve added? 'God said that you shall not eat from the tree.' But Eve became the first legalist when she added, "You shall not eat from it or touch it." God didn't say that: Chapter 2, Verses 16 and 17, you can read it for yourself. Already, I think the point of the text is, already in Eve's mind, God is becoming a little bit more restrictive. And it's reflected in her statement, "You can't eat from it and you can't touch it." You say, "Well, that's not really what she meant".

Well, if you go up to the earlier part of her statement, she says, "But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said that you shall not eat from it or touch it or you will die." In Chapter 2, Verses 16 and 17, there's two words that God used that Eve left out. God said, "You could eat from ANY tree in the garden." Eve left out the word ANY. God said you can eat from any tree FREELY. Eve left out the word FREELY. Eve left out the words that would make God seem more generous, and she added a phrase that made God seem more restrictive. I think that's the point of the text here. The enemy has caused her to question the goodness of God: maybe He's not as generous as you think He is, and maybe God is actually more restrictive, which begins to develop the idea that maybe if I took charge of my own life, there's still more for me out there.

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At the end of Verse 3, when she (Eve) says 'you shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die' - the consequences - Eve's statement is very mild compared to God's statement. Go back and look at it in Chapter 2. God said, "If you eat from it, you will surely die." In Hebrew language, that is very strong. But when Eve came back and repeats it, her statement in the Hebrew is very

mild. It's more like, "If you eat from it, you could, I mean possibly, I mean you know, you never know, but you could kind of, maybe, die." Now I exaggerate a little bit, but clearly the two phrases are different. And I think that's part of the point as well: when we're beginning to doubt the goodness of God, when we're starting to think that God is more restrictive than generous, when we're beginning to consider that maybe if I took charge of my own life, that would be more, not less. Part of that journey must include the minimizing of sin. I think that's a huge problem in our culture, and in our Christian culture, today. In many ways it's because we have lowered our view of the holiness of God, and we have raised our view of ourselves. So, we bring God down, we bring ourselves up, and when we do that, sin is not really that big a deal. When we recapture the holiness of God, we have a new sense of the offensiveness of our sin, and the consequences of those choices.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran pastor who was ultimately executed by the Nazi's in World War II reminded us years ago, that when we minimize sin, we cheapen grace. Now there's two basic phrases or umbrellas that I hear people using to somehow excuse sin. One of those phrases would be, "We're all sinners." We say that as if somehow that makes it okay, "Well, we're all sinners." That statement should horrify us, rather than become an excuse for our behavior. It is true we are all sinners; that should be a horrible thought. That doesn't make it okay. The other umbrella would be, I think, a complete misunderstanding of grace.

Now we talk a lot about grace around here. Some of our critics say we talk about it way too much. I would suggest to you that that's not possible. But I do think it's possible to have a wrong definition of grace. When we begin to lower our view of the holiness of God, then we begin to mis-define grace and it becomes a shrug of the shoulders. Whatever sin it is, it's okay. It's not a big deal; there's grace. That isn't grace. That's indifference. Grace is only meaningful, when you understand the offensiveness of your sin. The only way for grace to be properly defined, is to have a clear understanding of how offensive sin is in the nostrils of God. According to the text, all it takes is one sin, whatever it may be. That one sin is so offensive to God, He bans you from His presence forever. And in God's economy of justice, that is fair.

Now people in our culture today, they don't like that. That doesn't seem fair. That seems very judgmental. What kind of God is this? Well, I want to tell you that you are free to have your opinion, and if you want to disagree with that, you are free to do that. But I have to tell you something: your opinion does not matter. Neither does mine. At the end of the day, there's only one judge calling the shots. There's only one opinion that matters on this subject, and it's not unclear in the text. One sin, and you're spiritually dead, and banned from the presence of God forever. Why? Because it's that offensive to God. It's only when you recognize the offensiveness of your sin, that you begin to realize the scandalous nature of grace. It's not a shrug of the shoulders. Remember the words of the great old hymn, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound." Where's it goes? "That saved a wretch like me." John Newton clearly had understood, in the eyes of God he was a sinful wretch. That's what made grace amazing. Anytime we're beginning to go down that path of becoming our own god, calling our own shots, running our own show, we begin to minimize sin, which is exactly what's happening here.

Verse 4:

And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die!" For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. (vs. 4-5)

“You surely won’t die, I mean, c’mon. That’s God trying to play the intimidation card. It’s God trying to scare you. See that’s the way God is, He’s restrictive. He wants to be in charge and so He’s trying to scare you.” Well that’s not really true. What’s really true is, if you so choose, you could be your own god. You could decide for yourself what’s right and wrong. The idea of knowing good and evil doesn’t mean knowing it experientially - God’s never known evil experientially - knowing in the sense of determining what’s right and wrong. In our world today, we refer to it as relativism, that every individual has the right to determine for himself or herself what’s right and what’s wrong. That’s the offer that is made to Adam and Eve. “You can be like God. You can decide what’s right and wrong.” And what’s implied in that is, “You can take charge of your own life. And I’ll tell you this, if you do, it’ll be better. It’ll be better”.

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 desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate and gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. (vs. 6-7)

Genesis 2 ends with the statement, “They were both naked and unashamed.” It’s beautiful. But now suddenly we have the shame factor. And they know they’ve been had.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (vs. 8-9)

I love that question. The question was not, “What have you done?” which is about behavior. The question was “Where are you?” which is about relationship.

We started with a look at the story of the Prodigal Son. The father of the Prodigal Son represents the heart of God. And that was his question; that was his longing. It wasn’t so much about what his son had done; it was the longing to restore the relationship. I’m going to guess every morning he got up and thought, “Where are you, and when are you coming home?” It’s exactly the question God asked. Even though it is sin, which is offensive to God, what breaks His heart is the loss of relationship. That’s what He wants.

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Arnie: Bryan, what a tremendous message. Now you've titled your message, “Facing Dependence”. What in the world do you mean by that?

Bryan: Yeah, so I think, and we've talked about this before, that the great struggle all of us have as people made in the image of God, is that desire to be our own god. So that's essentially learning to depend on ourselves, to meet our needs and desires. And as long as that is true, we're headed for disaster.

Arnie: So, you mean being dependent on God is actually a good thing.

Bryan: I do mean that. You know, the root of all of our sins goes back to self-dependence, this idea of being our own god. So, being dependent on God is absolutely necessary. It's essential to really living out our Christian faith. So, if you think about it as parents, we raise our kids to be independent from us, which is a mark of maturity. But as believers, it's the other way around.

The more independent we are from God, the more immature we are. And it's a lifetime of maturing, which means more and more dependence on God.

Cara: Your teaching on the lies of the serpent is really amazing, because I started thinking about how maybe in 2019, Satan changed up the storefront, but the same lies are being sold inside. So, doubting that goodness of God, and you see it now all over, especially as a woman. "Nobody can tell me what to do with my body," is probably the one that is so damaging right now. It's so destructive.

Bryan: Yeah. The culture is full of lies, and I think the relevant question we always wrestle with, is life more with God in charge, or is it more with me in charge, and that centers around the question you raise, is God good? I think it's helpful to keep reminding ourselves of that question.

Arnie: So, Bryan, another lie we fall for is minimizing sin. We say it's not really that bad, or everyone else is doing it. And I can remember going to Christian school and minimizing sin. I was an expert. I thought I was a Christian; I wasn't. But the one thing you can count on, if we were doing something wrong, we would minimize it.

Bryan: Yeah, huge problem. And a huge problem, frankly in the church. One of the things I hear often from Christians, when they're talking about somebody else, is they'll say, "Well, we're all sinners". (Oh yeah.) And I guess that means then, "It's okay". I mean, that statement should horrify us. We're all sinners and that's the big problem. But it does go back to the lie of the enemy, "You surely will not die", which is another way of saying, "Sin's not that big a deal; God's trying to scare you." You know, James uses that imagery that we talked about of, it goes from conception to birth to stillbirth, but it's the picture that what we think is going to bring so much life and joy, ends up breaking our heart. You know, we went through that as a family. My daughter was pregnant, and I remember the morning I'm sitting in my office and the phone rang, and I was 100% sure they were going to the hospital to deliver the baby. It was their due date. And instead the message was sometime in the night, the baby died. And it's that imagery that James uses. You thought this was going to be such a joyful occasion, and it turns out to be so devastating, and that's what happens when we minimize sin. That's where we end up.

Cara: Would a good example of that be, when we start to categorize sins as well? So, maybe this one isn't as bad as this one.

Bryan: Yeah, we certainly do that, rather than just realizing sin is sin, and offensive to God. There's no question, we excuse a lot of sins in the church, and we really focus on others, and I don't think that's helpful.

Arnie: So, are you saying, if you get to the point where sin isn't such a big deal, then neither is grace?

Bryan: Yeah, I love that, because you're exactly right. As long as sin isn't that big a deal, then grace is pretty ordinary, and that's how we live. It's only when you realize the depth of sin before God, that you realize how amazing grace truly is.

Cara: All this leads to, "Hey, I can be my own god." And that may feel pretty good for a little time, but it's not really sustainable.

Bryan: Right. So, it reminds me of a little kid who runs away from home. You know, when our girls were little, every now and then, they'd pack up and run away from home, and that would last an hour. And then they'd get hungry, or they'd want this and that. There's a great episode on Andy Griffith, where Opie's going to run away from home, and they help him do it. But it doesn't take long until you realize, this isn't what I thought it was going to be. And so, then the fears, the hurt, the pain, the struggles, the emptiness all starts to settle in. And it's just not much fun anymore.

Arnie: When we talk about being dependent on God, that needs to be a daily dependence, even minute by minute, doesn't it?

Bryan: Right. Every day, all day, in the most ordinary circumstances of life. I think that's really important.