

**CROSSWAY CHAPEL**  
**14 MARCH 2019**  
**11:30 A.M.-12:15 P.M.\***

Let's start with a pop quiz. Three questions: Where do you think we find the first *yous* in the Bible? What do they indicate and why are they there?

The first *yous* are found at Genesis 1:29 and 2:16-17—

And God said [to our first parents], “Behold, I have given **you** every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. **You** shall have them for food.

And the LORD God commanded the [first] man [Adam], 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.”

What do these *yous* indicate? —They indicate that our first parents were being addressed as persons: *I* and *you*—as in “Behold, *I* have given *you* every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth”—is the lan-

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\* Most of this material is excerpted from the second of my forthcoming books on Christian suffering which will be published by Crossway.

guage persons use to communicate with other persons.

Why are those *yous* there? —They are there because God’s work in creating was nearly complete since he had now made beings who imaged him by being persons.

Another question: Why do you think I began with this quiz? —I want to drive home how well we should know Scripture, and especially the most crucial parts of it. Creation is the first of the four parts of the complete Christian story: *Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, and Consummation*. In order for us to be the persons God created us to be, we need to know inside out the key Scriptures narrating each part. Why do we need to know them so well? —Because, as persons, we do not live on bread alone but on each and every word coming from God’s mouth (see Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). As created persons, we are first and foremost *verbivores*, word eaters. Our hearts and spirits are shaped by our hearing words even more than our bodies are nourished by our eating bread. Our lives as ordinary persons hinge on our digesting words.

Next question: How are God’s words at Genesis 1:29 and 2:16-17 meant to function? In other words, Why did God say what he did in those two passages? —In Hebrew, the verbal form is what is known as the *imperative*. That means that in both passages God is expressing “a direct command, demanding immediate action from the one being addressed.”<sup>1</sup> 2:16 makes this explicit with its “And the LORD God *commanded* the man, saying, . . .”

And now a final question: Why did God address Adam and Eve? What was it about them that made it appropriate for him to address them personally as *you* in a way he didn't address anything else? —It was because as persons they were responsible agents who could be commanded by God. They were created—as we are created—to hear, answer, and obey.

It is a sign of our special status in God's world that we alone can be addressed as persons. As God declared in Psalm 32:8-9:

I will *instruct* you and *teach* you in the way you should go;

I will *counsel* you with my eye upon you.

Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
or it will not stay near you.

When God breathed into Adam the breath of life (see Gen. 2:7), he became an addressable being. He became the kind of creature who, unlike anything else in the visible creation, could be instructed, taught, and counseled, instead of needing to be curbed by force or its threat.<sup>2</sup> Because Adam could understand, he was capable of responding, of choosing whether he would hear and obey. Instead of being wholly subject to natural laws like physical objects or to the exigencies of environment and instinct like animals, he was capable of some degree of

self-regulation, of stepping back from his beliefs, desires, and feelings and asking, Ought I to be believing or desiring or feeling this way? This capacity to step back and assess what he was thinking or desiring or feeling made him accountable—that is, responsible to God and other persons to give an account of who he was and what he did.

We know what it means to be self-regulating. You self-regulated yourself into this room this morning, since I didn't see anyone dragged in by his or her hair or fit with a bit and bridle so that someone could lead or ride you to your seat. And you may have self-regulated yourself into this room only because you felt someone would hold you accountable if you did not!

The blessing and responsibility the capacity for self-regulation conferred on Adam comes out vividly in 2:16-17. Both the let and the hindrance in the LORD God's command to him are noteworthy. It is noteworthy that the let (that is, the permission)—“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden”—comes before the hindrance or prohibition. God is actually commanding Adam to walk through the whole garden, delighting in the look and taste of the fruit of each kind of tree.<sup>3</sup> Because the Hebrew here intensifies the action by means of what is called the infinitive absolute, the blessing of this part of his LORD's command can be more powerfully translated as *EATING you shall eat*. First God turns Adam loose to roam through the garden with a command of incredible generosity—Go, taste and see!

But then, secondly, comes the prohibition, which again is intensified by an infinitive absolute. Perhaps it is best translated as “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it *DYING you shall die.*”<sup>4</sup>

There are several crucial features to this prohibition. First, it is extremely strong, having the same grammatical construction as the Ten Commandments’ *You shall nots*. The LORD’s prohibition to his newly minted human being was decisive, meaning, You must *never* eat from that tree! And then to this categorical prohibition God appended an ominous warning: “for in the day that you eat from it *DYING* you will die.”

From the time we are toddlers, we tend to resent life’s prohibitions, thinking they exist to quench our fun. But in fact these strong *You shall nots* call us into mature personhood. They instruct us to step back from our beliefs and desires and feelings to judge and then govern them. Should I be believing what I am believing? —As Proverbs 14:15 declares, Only the simple believe everything. Should I be desiring or feeling as I do? —Proverbs 11:6 tells us that those who are captured by their desires are treacherous and James 1:19 counsels us to be slow to anger. We are accountable because we can step back from our beliefs and desires and feelings to judge them by truths like these.

But mature persons don’t merely possess this capacity. They actually govern themselves according to their judgments. Spoiled children are *spoiled* because their impulses rule them. They are little wantons,

driven every which way by whatever momentary urge happens to be strongest. “A person without self-control,” Solomon warns, “is like a city with broken-down walls” (Prov. 25:28 NLT). Indeed, it is “better to have self-control than to conquer a city” (Prov. 16:32 NLT).

Categorical prohibitions, accompanied by severe warnings about violating them, can counterbalance our strong impulses and thus help us govern ourselves. By resounding in our conscience and consciousness, they promote mature personhood. They are an integral part of the word we must hear (see Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 29:15).

By commanding Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil his LORD was calling him into fully mature personhood. This would have moved him from the mere capacity to govern himself to actual life-sustaining obedience. By this severe word God was calling him into spiritual maturity.

Yet, secondly, his LORD’s prohibition was offering Adam much more than spiritual maturity. His LORD was inviting Adam to affirm their fellowship. By addressing him personally and stipulating what he must not do, his LORD was giving Adam the opportunity to choose what he would do and whom he would be. God had the right to require Adam’s obedience. Yet in issuing his command he was not just asserting his right. The transcendent God of Creation was transforming himself into “the immanent God, *the personal God, who enters into unmediated communion with human beings.*”<sup>5</sup>

In issuing his command, the LORD was stepping back from our first parents and bidding them to choose to stay in communion with him. He was in effect placing himself before them and saying: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). But communion with God requires obedience, as our Lord stressed:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. . . . Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. . . . If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” (John 14:15, 21, 23-24, 31)

“Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” (John 15:9-10)

The Person who would walk in the garden in the cool of the day and call out to Adam, asking him where he was and calling him to account for what he had done (see Gen. 3:8-11), was offering our first parents his

friendship. It would be theirs as long as they obeyed.<sup>6</sup> He was inviting them to ratify their love for him, to affirm their joy in his steady presence.<sup>7</sup> The tree's fruit, "not in its own right, but as appointed to a function and carrying a word from God, [confronted them] with God's will, particular and explicit, and [gave them] a decisive Yes or No to say with [their] whole being."<sup>8</sup> Obeying would not deprive them of any legitimate good.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, by enabling them to decide what their relationship to their LORD would be, the prohibition gave them *more* freedom, not less.

Decisions involve choices. Our first parents' choice was their RSVP. They could keep unimpeded, abundant life with God only by obeying his command. But would they choose to obey? Would they choose to keep human life's greatest possible good—communion with their LORD, *spiritual* life, the only kind of life that ultimately matters because otherwise we are like beasts?<sup>10</sup> Or would they choose to throw it away by disobeying him?

By issuing his command, the Lord lifted his relationship with Adam and Eve out of the realm of what he as their Creator could rightfully demand of them and transferred it into the realm of freely given love, of a love match. Honoring his command would have been like honoring a wedding vow to forsake all others and be faithful to one other for as long as both would live.<sup>11</sup>

Their LORD was bidding them to make a glad surrender—indeed, to deliberately enter into and continually live a life of glorious freedom

by being his obedient children.

Alas! We know what they chose and how it turned out! “DYING you shall die” and DYING *we* die because of their transgression (see Rom. 5:12-19). We are all now born spiritually dead, moving about like zombies, possessing biological but not spiritual life, until the curse of sin overwhelms us and we return to dust in our graves. Yet we remain accountable. We still must choose. And God remains merciful, having sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to do what our first parents did not and what we cannot do. He became a man, that he might be perfectly obedient to the Creator and Sustainer of all things. And so there is now but one name, under heaven, by which we can be saved (see Acts 4:12). And the waiting Father of one of our Lord’s parables bids us to regain real life, true life, spiritual life, through faith in the perfect obedience of his Son, Jesus Christ. Choose life, rely on the work of my Son, take him as your Lord, the Father bids us, and then manifest your love for him through your day-by-day obedience. Then and only then will you know the blessedness of participating in the love-feast known as the great marriage supper of the Lamb.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gary D. Practico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 2007), 130.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew for *breath* at Genesis 2:7 is *neshamah*. With only one possible exception, the Hebrew word *neshamah* refers elsewhere in Scripture only to human beings. The possible exception is at Genesis 7:22. T. C. Mitchell argued that *neshamah* applies only to humanity in “The Old Testament Use of *n<sup>e</sup>šāmā*.” After examining all 26 occurrences of *neshamah* in the Old Testament, Mitchell’s final conclusion runs:

[T]he use of the word [*neshamah*] in Gen. ii 7, where God's creation of man is distinguished from that of the rest of the animal creation, by the act of breathing into his nostrils the breath of life . . . [plus] the general context of the whole creation account would lead one to expect [that *neshamah* refers to] some particular and exclusive feature in the creation of man, who was made in God's image, and given dominion over all the animal creation.

None of these considerations settle the matter, but they make it a tenable view that the word *neshamah*, and its related forms, may be used in the Old Testament to describe the breath of God, which, when imparted to man, made him unique among the animals. (*Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 11, Fasc. 2 (Apr., 1961), p. 186)

Our personhood makes us unique, which, it seems, is a gift of God’s breathing into us the *neshamah* of life. Henri Blocher takes *neshamah* to refer only to human beings, commenting:

The Spirit was at work particularly in the creation of mankind. The second tablet of Genesis (2:7) represents the special privilege of mankind as the communication of a ‘breath’. The term employed [*neshamah*] . . . is used rarely for God and avoids any notion of emanation. It is used for mankind and not for animals, and designates the spirit of mankind created to correspond to the Spirit of God” (*In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1984], 77).

<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew, the whole sentence that makes up vv. 16-17 is in the same case, which means both the permission and the prohibition are part of the same command.

<sup>4</sup> “Twice the same grammatical procedure is used, which in Hebrew allows the greatest force: the infinite absolute. To the phrase ‘EATING you shall eat’ responds the phrase ‘DYING you shall die’. In the first case the tone must be that of the fullness of the permission . . . Likewise, it is stipulated in the creational agreement: ‘you shall not eat’; otherwise ‘DYING you shall die’. That is the condition that is the basis and the safeguard of the happiness of the human race” (Blocher, 121).

<sup>5</sup> “**28. God blessed them and God said to them** The difference between the formulation here and God’s blessing to the fish and fowl in verse 22 is subtle and meaningful. Here God directly addresses man and woman. The transcendent God of Creation transforms Himself into the immanent God, *the personal God, who enters into unmediated communion with human beings*” (Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 13; my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> Westermann notes that

There are three basic ways in which man’s conduct in community can be limited: by the taboo, the command (or prohibition), and the law. Each of these three is institutionally conditioned: the taboo is pre-personal, the command is personal, the law is post-personal. There can only be command where there is speech; the voice of him who commands must be there so as to command. *There cannot be command and the consequences of command without a personal relationship to the one who issues the command. Address in the second person is inseparable from the command.* (Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 91; my emphasis)

<sup>7</sup> As Wenham points out, even the name of the garden as Eden

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was a sign of God's presence in and blessing on Eden . . . So it seems likely that this description of "the garden in Eden in the east" is symbolic of a place where God dwells. Indeed, there are many other features of the garden that suggest it is seen as an archetypal sanctuary, prefiguring the later tabernacle and temples. (61)

A bit later he writes:

We have seen that the garden of Eden narrative is full of symbols suggesting the presence of God and his live-giving power—trees, gold, rivers, and jewels used to adorn the holy of holies. In Israelite worship, true life was experienced when one went to the sanctuary. There God was present. There he gave life. (74)

Again,

"They heard the sound of the Lord God walking to and fro in the garden in the breeze of the day." The description of Eden with its trees, rivers, gold, and so on emphasized God's presence there. Therefore it seems likely that it was not unusual for him to be heard walking in the garden "in the breeze of the day" . . . . Maybe a daily chat between the Almighty and his creatures was customary. The term "walking" . . . is subsequently used of God's presence in the Israelite tent sanctuary. (76)

Blocher asserts: "In Eden, freedom knows . . . the fullness of communion with the Father" (138).

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 62. As Kidner goes on to say, the fact this tree is called the tree of *the knowledge of good and evil*

is perhaps best understood in this living context. In isolation [this phrase] could mean a number of things . . . . *[But in context] the emphasis falls on the prohibition rather than the properties of the tree.* It is shown us as forbidden. *It is idle to ask what it might mean in itself; this was Eve's error. As it stood, prohibited, it presented the alternative to discipleship: to be self-made, wresting one's knowledge, satisfactions and values from the created world in defiance of the Creator . . . . In all this the tree plays its part in the opportunity it offers, rather than the qualities it possesses.* (63; my emphases)

This emphasis on the prohibition rather than the properties of the tree is one more indicator that the Genesis account is not myth: this is not a magical tree, with a magical fruit (no matter what someone like C. S. Lewis may think).

Throughout Scripture God requires his people's obedience if they are to remain in communion with him. For instance, the Lord declared to his new people, Israel:

"If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, . . . [then] I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. . . . I will make my dwelling among you . . . . And I will walk among you and [I] will be your God, and you shall be my people." (Lev. 26:3, 9, 11-12)

His commandments test our hearts (see Deut. 8:2; Prov. 17:3).

<sup>9</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 222:

With regard to the form of the prohibition, it is to be noted in the first place that the actual restriction occurs only in v. 17; v. 16 is not a restriction, but a release; "God begins with a great release," G. von Rad. The release of all other trees in the garden means that the man need suffer no deprivation; there is plenty of food there. The restriction cannot mean that the man is going to lack anything.

<sup>10</sup> See Psalm 49.

The LORD placed a similar choice before Israel right before they were to cross the Jordan to enter the Promised Land when Moses said:

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keep-

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ing his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (Deut. 30:15-20)

“Therefore choose life . . . obeying [the Lord your God’s] voice and holding fast to him, *for he is your life.*”

C, John Collins observes, “Each human being fully expresses his humanity when his life is in tune with the creation ordinances” (*Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006], 131) and then quotes Christopher Wright:

The purpose of the ethical provisions given in the context of redemption, which include both the covenant law of the Old Testament and the ethics of the kingdom of God in the New, is to restore to humans the desire and the ability to conform to the creational pattern – God’s original purpose for them. (Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995], 44, quoted by Collins on p. 131)

Collins adds later: “This creational perspective . . . allows Israel to see *God’s moral demands* in their proper light: they *restore man to his right functioning and express the goodness and generosity of the Creator* every bit as much as the redemptive rituals do” (245; my emphasis). “God’s moral demands . . . restore [human beings] to [their] right functioning and express the goodness and generosity of the Creator” every bit as much as the proclamation of redemption does—that’s worth pondering.

This creational perspective, which in Eden would have meant full communion with their LORD, is what through his command the LORD God was inviting our first parents to acknowledge and receive.

<sup>11</sup> As Blocher observes, God’s covenant name is “his name for his ‘marriage’ with Israel” (Blocher, 111). Comparing Adam and Eve’s potential ratification of their love for their Lord with our weddings vows is, then, what Scripture itself suggests:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, *though I was their husband, declares the Lord.*” (Jer. 31:31-32; cf. Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:19-20)

This foreshadows the marriage supper of the Lamb to his Bride, the church, at Revelation 19:6-9 (see above, p. 9). Collins notes that marriage is “well suited as an image for the relationship of the Lord and his people. . . . Paul uses that image in 1 Corinthians 6:16-17; he also employs it in Ephesians 5:31-32 (text very close to the Septuagint of Gen. 2:24)” and then refers his readers to Raymond Ortlund’s *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) (145).

Blocher argues (correctly, I think) there is no reason to take God’s commandment as establishing a probationary test (133f.). It is no more a probationary test than the bride and groom’s vow to be faithful to each other as long as they both shall live is probationary. It is a vow always to forsake all others and be faithful to each other, which is the sort of commitment to their LORD that Adam and Eve were to live out through their entire lives.