

MESSAGE: **How good do you have to be?**  
**Adam and Eve, Part 2 of 2**

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

TEXTS: Matthew 5:20, 43-48  
Isaiah 58:3-11

MEDITATION: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Matthew 5:48)

**NOTE: The interpretation of this story and many thoughts in this message come from Harold S. Kushner's *How Good Do We Have to Be?***

Last week we reviewed the story of Adam and Eve, considering it one of the most misunderstood stories in the bible.

We wondered about some troubling questions, like...

1. **How can you believe in a God who punished people so severely for breaking one arbitrary rule?** In biting the forbidden apple, they made one blunder and the punishment was harsh and severe.
2. If Adam and Eve had no knowledge of good and evil before they ate the forbidden fruit, **how could they have been expected to know that it was wrong to disobey God?** Is this story telling us that God made humans sinful and then punishes them for that?
3. **Why did God create a tree** that He didn't want anyone to eat from? Was God setting them up to disobey so that He could punish them?
4. Why is the story told in such a way as to make it seem that it was all the **woman's fault?**

Then we considered that of course the story of The Garden of Eden is not a journalistic report, a historical description, or a scientific explanation, but a faith statement about the moral emergence of the human race.

We looked at Rabbi Harold Kushner's inspired interpretation.

Kushner suggests that the story of the Garden of Eden is a tale -- not of Paradise Lost but of **Paradise Outgrown**, not of Original Sin but of the **Birth of Conscience**.

The story of Adam and Eve is a faith story of how the first human **beings left the world of animal existence behind** and entered the problematic world of **being human**.

Here's how Kushner summarized it:

*I am suggesting that the story of the Garden of Eden is NOT an account of people being punished for having made one mistake, losing Paradise because they were not perfect. It is the story of the first human beings GRADUATING, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of **animal life** to the immensely complicated world of **being human** and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.*

They enter a world where they will inevitably make many mistakes, NOT because they are weak or bad but because the choices they confront will be such difficult ones. But the satisfactions will be equally great. While animals can only be useful and obedient, human beings CAN BE GOOD.

And so...

The story of the Garden of Eden is not a story of the Fall of Man, but of **the Emergence of Humankind**.

It is the birth of free will... and all the consequences that go with the freedom to choose.

Now doesn't that make sense?

Because...

if it really were a story of God rejecting Adam and Eve  
for breaking one arbitrary rule and punishing them...  
and their ancestors down to you and me...  
all because of that one bite, one mistake, one blunder, one act of  
disobedience...  
that WOULDN'T make sense.

Because...

if God expected that kind of **perfection** from them, he would expect it from you.

Expecting perfection

PERFECTION. It does a lot of harm.

And perfectionists? They have a lot of ISSUES.

What if... your **parents** expected you to be perfect... and you wanted to please them... you craved their approval... but you just weren't perfect.

What if... your **wife**, your **husband**, your **partner** expected you to be perfect...?

What if... your **boss** expected you to be perfect, and your not. Your human.

What if... **you** expect **yourself** to be perfect... and you're never satisfied?

What if... you expected your **kids** to be perfect or your **spouse**... what kind of long-term harm are you doing?

...all because of one of the most misunderstood stories in the bible, taking it as a literal account rather than the real faith story of how man and woman emerged into the complicated life of being human.

A lot of misery could be traced to this one mistaken notion, that we need to be perfect for people to love us and we forfeit that love if we ever fall short of perfection. Kushner says that..

*There are few emotions more capable of leaving us feeling bad about ourselves than the conviction that we don't deserve to be loved, and few ways more certain to generate that conviction than the idea that every time we do something wrong, we give God and the people closest to us reasons not to love us.*

The master psychologist, Carl Rogers, was known to approach every therapeutic encounter this way:

*There is something I do before I start a session, he said. I let myself know that I am **enough**. Not perfect. Perfect wouldn't be enough. But that I am human, and that is enough. There is nothing this man or woman can say or do or feel that I can't feel in myself. I can be with him or her. I am enough.*

Imagine if you could say that to yourself: **I am not perfect, but I am enough**. Knowing that allows healing to happen.

The Rabbi explains further:

*As one who believes in a loving, cleansing, forgiving God and as one who advocates **religion** as a cure for the afflictions of the soul, I am embarrassed by the use of religion to induce **guilt** rather than to cure it..*

*I believe that the fundamental message of religion is not that we are sinners because we are not perfect, but that the challenge of being human is so complex that **God knows better than to expect perfection** from us. Religion comes to **wash us clean** of our sense of unworthiness and to assure us that when we have tried to be good and have not been as good as we wanted to be, we have **not forfeited God's love**.*

It would be so wonderful to feel good about ourselves again, to be able to rise above the voices of nagging parents, teachers, and other ghosts from our growing-up years and

feel we are people to be loved and admired. **Religion** properly understood can give us that feeling. It is perhaps the **best and most valuable thing that religion ever does.**

All the great faiths can get it wrong

Isn't it amazing that something that can be so good... like faith... can also be so bad?

I have leaned heavily on Rabbi Kushner's compassionate understanding of God today because so often we think that Jews get it wrong and Christians get it right. But **getting it wrong** is a non-denominational phenomena.

- Muslims get it wrong, and right.
- Jews get it wrong, and right.
- Christians get it wrong, and right.

Whether they get it wrong or right seems to stem from *the stem*... from the story of eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

There are days Muslims must shake their heads in shame, to see the radical misinterpretation of condoning terrorism in the name of Allah.

There are days Harold Kushner must shake his head in dismay as he considers how some Jews have taken the great principles about God and turned them into fundamentalist literalism... following the rules, but missing the boat when it comes to a healthy relationship with God and with other people.

There's an example of that in Isaiah. The people thought their religion wanted them to fast. That's what religion was about to them. Keeping certain practices. Knowing all the religious SHTUFF. Like fasting. Isaiah saw right through that, because they fasted like holy rollers but they rotted at the way they treated people. *You got that wrong*, said Isaiah.

*"Why do we fast, but you do not see?" says Isaiah 58:3.*

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.*

***Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.***

Stop it, stop it, stop worshiping fasting... Don't worship religion. It's not about fasting. It's not about religion. Don't you get it? It's about people. Go help people. Do your best to do good to them. Help them, share with them, feed them. That's what Isaiah 58 says:

*THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn... says Isaiah 58:8*

*THEN you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will*

*say, Here I am.... if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
THEN your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

That's real religion, says Isaiah. It the shirt-sleeves practice of faith in action, in helping people, in relationships.

So the Jewish prophets got it right, but in their practice, there were some who got it wrong.

And then... there are days Christ himself must be shaking his head in sadness to see how some who bear his name get it wrong... especially the part about how they expect themselves to be perfect and they expect you, of course, to be perfect (they define what they think *perfect* means)... and it could take a generation to undo the harm that kind of belief has done.

Be careful, because there are places in those red-letter bibles where the words of Christ himself might lead you to think that perfection is what he wants.

*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,* he instructed his twelve at the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48). Whether that specific teaching applies to you or applied only to them is subject to interpretation, but let's see what is meant by it.

*Be perfect.* The Greek word is "**teleios**".

There is no perfect English translation for Teleios.

Teleios does not mean "*perfect*" as we use the word, but it means full, complete, functional, at it's ideal **highest and best**.

- A thing is perfect (teleios) if it fully realizes the **PURPOSE** for which it is planned and designed and made.
- A person is perfect (teleios) if he or she realizes the **PURPOSE** for which he or she was planned, designed and made.

Teleios is the end of the line, the completion, the highest and best.

- A person who has reached full grown stature is "**teleios**" (vs. one still physically growing). [my height]
- A student who has reached a mature knowledge of her subject is "**teleios**" (vs. a beginner or even an intermediate).
- An expert level skier, an advanced pianist, a fluent language speaker... these are "teleios."

THEREFORE, when Jesus said "*Be perfect,*"

- he did not mean that if you made one mistake like Adam and Eve, you'd be booted out of the garden.
- He did not mean you should hold yourself or others to a standard of perfection.

What he said and what he meant was that you should strive to reach the highest purpose for which you were created... and THAT...

YHWY, Allah, and Jesus would agree...

is for you to be a faithful child of God...

and THAT, they would mean,

has everything in the world to do with **RELATIONSHIPS**.

Get that wrong and you get the whole kit and kaboodle wrong.

**"...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

The best understanding of the word *righteousness* is *right relationships*.

The scribes and Pharisees were professional religious leaders who, in Jesus' day, took religion to be a matter of following rules rather than of being in good relationship with others.

Jesus is not saying you need to be more religious than them... NO NO...  
but that when it comes to relationships,  
you can do better than they did.

It's not about being religious,  
but about being spiritual.

**Be fully human, warts and all.  
Then, allow others to be fully human.**

*Religion, says Rabbi Kushner, is the voice that says, I will guide you through this minefield of difficult moral choices, sharing with you the insights and experiences of the greatest souls of the past, and I will offer you comfort and forgiveness when you are troubled by the painful choices you made.*

That sounds remarkably similar to the One we follow...

The One who knows of your complexities in being fully human...  
He knows that even trying to do the best you can  
is a challenging burden...  
It can make you weary.

To you he offers His invitation... to come to him as you are  
and be offered comfort and forgiveness  
when you are troubled by the painful choices you made.

Come to me, he invites... not to be punished because you failed to be perfect, but to be restored.

***"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.***

***Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;***

[get in the yoke with me, and I'll help you pull your burdens]

***Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;***

***for I am gentle and humble in heart,***

***and you will find rest for your souls.***

***For my yoke fits easy, and my burden is light."***

Amen.