

God warns Adam and Eve: “You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die” (Gen 2:16-17).

“The power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone” (VS 35).ⁱ As Saint John Paul II liked to say, true freedom comes from choosing the good. Adam and Eve are given unparalleled freedom in the Garden of Eden but there is a limit. Just as a parent will teach a child not to touch a hot stove, God tries to warn Adam and Eve that they should never eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In our lives, God is the definitive source of moral law. “God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments” (VS 35). The 10 Commandments were written on stone tablets for Moses and the Israelites. They are written into our conscience and on to our hearts by God so that with the proper exercise of reason we intuitively know that we should not kill, should not steal, and should not commit adultery.

In helping us to understand right from wrong, God does not limit our freedom. He protects and promotes our freedom. In our secular society however, we are often taught that we should have no limits. Pushed to its logical extreme, secular man wants to define right and wrong without reference to God. Faith and Reason are designed by God to be compatible. Both should lead us to the truth. However, in a society which prides itself on no limits, the moral dimensions of a choice appear to place unreasonable limits on science. To defend this freedom of thought, the misguided man, must suppress the truth given by God in order to put forward a half truth.

Let us return to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve chose wrongly. They ate the forbidden fruit. Their eyes were not opened and they learned that they had been deceived by the snake. They are not equals of God. They know shame and hide from God instead. A whole series of unintended consequences pour forth when man decides God should not be trusted.

Just as Adam and Eve were deceived, so too very bright minds can falter as well. Jesus encountered difficulty with the learned scribes and Pharisees. “They observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands” (Mk 7:2). Amidst the pandemic, we are more aware than ever of the value of washing our hands, however, the scribes and Pharisees tend to outward appearances without ever getting to the heart of the matter. Jesus responded to their pettiness. “You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.” He went on to say, “How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition!” (Mk 7:8-9).

Jesus is concerned about the eternal destiny of each soul. The scribes and Pharisees make a fuss about matters of cleanliness on the outside of the body. In the folly of man’s pride, he often rejects the truth. “From within the man, from his heart, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile” (Mk 7:21-23).

Jesus came to help us. Let us always keep that in mind in reference to the moral order God has laid down for humanity. “By forbidding man to ‘eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, God makes it clear that man does not originally possess such ‘knowledge’ as something properly his own, but only participates in it by the light of natural reason and of Divine Revelation, which manifest to him the requirements and the promptings of eternal wisdom. Law must therefore be considered an expression of divine wisdom: by submitting to the law, freedom submits to the truth of creation” (VS 41). God’s moral laws do not limit us. Rather, they set us free to worship God and to become the holy people he has created us to be.

ⁱ vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html