The third mistaken idea is that this temptation had something to do with human intimacy. This was a big idea in the early Christian church, popularized by Augustine of Hippo who became a Christian in midlife after years of debauched living. Augustine triumphed over his carnal addiction through prayer and faith in Jesus Christ, but he taught that all sin is somehow traceable back to the intimacy between Adam and Eve, and that physical love is something of which to be ashamed. The intimacy problem was pure Augustine, a once-promiscuous-man-turned-celibate who read his own psychological hang-ups into the story.

God created Eve to be Adam’s partner, and Adam exclaims in delight, “This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). Clearly, God intends partners to delight in one another on every level. It is an incredible stretch to think that biting a piece of fruit could change God’s intention so completely. Adam and Eve may be ashamed of their loss of innocence or of their disobedience, but not, I suspect, of the physical relationship for which God created them.

Adam and Eve’s true temptation is found in the phrase, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Simply referring to it as the “tree of knowledge” may mistakenly lead us to imagine that God maliciously wants to keep humanity in the dark; to keep us from using our full intellectual capacities. The qualifying phrase “of good and evil” is important. It means that this is not a tree of knowledge in the general sense; it is a tree of knowledge *of good and evil*. The ability to distinguish good from evil seems like a helpful thing to know, but the downside comes when we recognize that such knowledge, as defined by the ancient Hebrews, belongs by rights only to the king of Israel, as delegated to him by God.

God is not bent out of shape because Adam and Eve develop an ethical sense. God is angry because Adam and Eve dare to place themselves in the judgment-seat of God. The Hebrew word *yada* (“knowledge”) means more than simply cognitive ability: it means an awareness of God’s justice. The “knowledge of good and evil” is what a judge needs to know when weighing testimony in a courtroom. To pursue and claim such knowledge means claiming the right to decide what is right and what is wrong, a role that belongs to God alone, except as delegated by God to the kings of Israel.

If Adam and Eve aspire to gorge themselves on the fruit of this tree, it means they desire to make themselves into little gods who no longer have any need to revere their Creator. The serpent gets it exactly right when he explains to Eve that the reason God does not want her to taste the fruit is because, if she and Adam do so, they “will be like God” (3:5). This is idolatry: the desire to assume for oneself the role of God. Unfortunately, Eve buys the serpent’s words hook, line and sinker, and Adam proves even easier to turn. We do this, too! In large ways and small ways, every day, we turn from the God who created us. We believe we can go it alone in life. We are like Sam, driving around the block eight times to snag the divine seal of approval for what he’s already decided to do! We work hard to convince ourselves that we know better than God, are independent, and can successfully chart our own course.

We justify our thoughts and behaviors, making them seem “good” and not “evil” (or at least “okay”). Eve did this with respect to the fruit of the tree. “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 to be *desired to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate” (3:6, italics added). Eve justifies eating the fruit in three ways. The tree is “good for food,” it is useful. The fruit is “a delight to the eyes,” truly it is beautiful. The tree is “to be desired to make one wise,” offering the tantalizing promise of knowledge. Eve seeks *utility, beauty,* and *wisdom* from the tree*.* These are good things, but they tempt Eve to do the wrong thing. Sometimes it is not the bad things that lead us astray as much as the *good* things or the things that seem to be good.

**Utility.** Eve is tempted by the tree’s *utility*, its practical usefulness. When something tempts us, we are more likely to give in if we can convince ourselves there is something useful about it. Utilitarianism is a powerful philosophy, but it can also be ethically blind. Utilitarianism, as a school of thought, gained ground in England in the 1700s. John Stuart Mill, its chief proponent, maintained that any ethical decision could be made according to one simple standard: it must bring “the greatest good for the greatest number of people.”

That sounds good but consider how some of the most destructive movements in human history used utilitarian arguments to justify their actions. The Nazi Party executed millions in concentration camps to purify the nation. The regimes in Soviet Russia and North Korea starved their people to build massive arsenals to protect the state. Slaveowners in America legalized human bondage to preserve the nation’s economy. You can justify all manner of atrocities against a minority group if you see those actions as leading to a greater quality of life for the majority. Utility is not a good basis for moral decision-making.

**Beauty.** Eve is tempted by the tree’s *beauty*. Our aesthetic sense is a wonderful gift, but it is also a poor guide for ethical decision-making. Each year Hollywood hosts the Academy Awards show. All the “beautiful people” of Tinseltown revel in their few seconds of fame as they parade down the red carpet. TV commentators focus on every aspect of the gowns, the make-up, the hairstyles. Beauty, or a certain understanding of beauty, is celebrated. But many of these so-called “beautiful people,” with their marital infidelities, substance abuse, and conspicuous consumption are anything but beautiful when it comes to their inner lives.

**Wisdom.** Finally, Eve is tempted by her desire to be *wise*. Truly, we can gain wisdom from the decisions we make, both the beneficial and the painful decisions. Sometimes it is the lessons learned from our bad decisions that bring the most wisdom. Veterans of 12-step groups know that part of working their recovery means sharing testimony of bad decisions made, recounting the havoc that filled their lives because of drinking or drugs before they got serious about trusting their “higher power.” Such wisdom is hard-won and valuable.

Eve is not in a 12-step program. She is living “the good life,” but she is naïve in her thinking (and Adam doesn’t think at all!). Interestingly, the serpent never lies to Eve: he simply tells her what she wants to hear. Every word out of the serpent’s mouth is the truth; but the serpent fails to tell the *whole* truth. The serpent slices off a carefully selected segment of truth, one calculated to impugn God’s motives, and to inflate Adam and Eve’s self-destructive pride. The very same thing is true of our own inner voices of temptation. Seldom are we tempted by the blatantly bad things of this world; it is evil masquerading as good that causes the most difficulty. As Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, wrote: “Vice, in its true light, is so deformed, that it shocks us at first sight; and would hardly ever seduce us, if it did not at first wear the mask of some virtue.”

That process by which we turn vice into virtue is “rationalization.” It is the same process Eve uses as she ponders whether to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit. When Eve manages to convince herself that the tree is useful, beautiful, and a source of wisdom, then she can easily do what would otherwise be unthinkable.

Rationalizations can be deadly, but there is a way out: God’s grace. When we recognize temptation for what it is and acknowledge we cannot beat it on our own, God enters in and gives us what we need to succeed. It is all a matter of whom we trust. If we trust ourselves alone, we go down in flames. If we trust God, the author of grace, we find the strength to resist temptation and live a Godly life. As Jesus says to Satan at the end of his temptations, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve God alone” (Matthew 4:10). God alone is what we need to get through any temptation: the appeal of utility, beauty, wisdom, fruit, even donuts!

Prayer: Grace-filled God, we thank you that you laid out clear instructions in the Garden of Eden so that we could understand the end from the beginning. We thank you that Jesus came to be the perfect atonement for humankind, to die on the Cross as remittance for our sin. We thank you that for believers, to live is Christ and to die is gain, for we will gain eternal life and joy with Him in heaven. In Jesus' name we give you all thanks and praise. Amen.

**Bet You Can’t Eat Just One**

Sunday, February 26, 2023 [Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+2%3a15-17%3b+3%3a1-7&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Sam decided to go on a diet. He announced his plan to all his friends and co-workers who provided Sam with moral support until the morning he walked into the office carrying a box of freshly baked donuts. “What’s with the donuts, Sam?” one asked. “I thought you were on a diet.” “I am,” said Sam. “But I wouldn’t have gotten these donuts if it weren’t for God.” Sam explained: “You see, I was driving into work, and I knew I’d have to go right past the bakery. I couldn’t get those donuts out of my mind, so I decided to pray to God for help. ‘God,’ I said, ‘if you want me to have a box of hot, delicious donuts, give me a parking place right in front of the bakery.’ Sure enough, I found one on my eighth trip around the block.”

Sam was one of those people like Oscar Wilde, who remarked, “I can resist anything — except temptation!” We are all susceptible to something! Remember the tempting tagline from the potato-chip commercials? “Bet you can’t eat just one!” This was true of Eve, too, whose story includes a tree, a talking snake, and a tasty piece of fruit. Unfortunately, Eve’s story is much distorted by those who read things into it that just are not there. So, let’s clear up a few mistaken notions about this story.

The first mistaken idea is that this is all the Eve’s fault *because* she is a woman. For centuries, male theologians read this text as proof that women were morally or intellectually inferior to men, casting them as “the weaker sex,” causing incredible injury to women’s characters. The inference is that if Adam kept a closer watch on his wayward wife, and maybe did a little “mansplaining,” the two would still be living in the Garden. This is utter nonsense! God created women every bit the equal of men, and maybe even a little better than men at some things, like knowing when to ask for directions or not panicking when the remote is missing.

The second mistaken idea is that as soon as Adam ate the fruit, the entire human race experienced a cosmic change of condition known as “the Fall.” This notion implies that every generation which followed is doomed to wage a losing battle against sin because Eve boldly plucked the fruit and Adam disobediently ate it. Again, this is blatantly false. There *is* such a thing as sin, of course. Sin is a terrible curse, something we all experience, and against which we all struggle. But God did not consign humanity to a perpetual *state* *of sin* purely because some antediluvian (pre-flood) ancestor pilfered a piece of forbidden fruit. Such an explanation casts God as a vindictive ruler with a distinctly stunted sense of justice. We have plenty of sins for which to atone, but those sins are not Adam and Eve’s. We do not need to import any sins from them to establish the fact that we need God’s forgiveness.