

# Welcome

How do you feel about rules?

It might surprise you to learn that I love rules. (I know, I know... hear me out.)

When I was a kid, teachers gave out those “follow the instructions” worksheets - there’d be a list of 10 instructions where number 1 would say something like, “Draw a sun”, so you’d drop down to the space at the bottom and draw a sun. But when you got to number six, it would say, “Don’t do number 1. Draw a moon instead.”

Which was supposed to teach you to read all the instructions first or whatever.

So anyway, rules.

I have developed something of a personal brand for *not* being a rule-follower (pastor with tattoos and all). But honestly - and maybe this has to do with growing up - I really appreciate rules.

I *love* board games. Like *love* them. And you can’t play games without rules. Even *tag* has rules. Otherwise it’s just running. Some of my favorite games have a pretty complex rule set. And I didn’t understand how the game worked, let alone why it was fun, until I understood all the rules.

I love to cook. When I try a new recipe, I always stick closely to the rules. Because the rules provide structure. They help me understand how the final product - a complex combination of chemical reactions and complementary flavors - comes together.

Learning the rules actually enables us to understand the big picture. They help us achieve the end goal.

Religion is sort of infamous for rules. Plenty of people reduce religion to a list of rules - dos and don’ts that measure how good we are.

But what if we’re missing the purpose of God’s instructions? What if God’s rules are actually about leading us to the whole, flourishing life we were created to live?

# Message

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, which is a six-week journey we take with Jesus to the Cross. It's a season we set aside each year for introspection, a time to ask ourselves if we're living in faith, both as individuals and as a church family.

Our series this year is called Broken Promises. Each week, we're exploring one of the covenants God made with the people in the Hebrew Bible. We'll see how - and why - the people failed to keep those covenants. That's our gateway to our own introspection.

We're also going to see how Jesus kept each of these covenants in his own life and ministry. This is a reminder for us that we're not in this journey alone. We're always following our leader, Jesus. It's *his* faithfulness that enables our life of faith. So we have the safety and security to explore our own failings. Jesus' love and faithfulness create space for us to be honest about our own sin so that we can confess it and turn to him.

Turn with us to [Genesis 2](#).

We're beginning today at the beginning. If you've been around a while, you know these opening chapters of Genesis are some of my absolute favorite in Scripture. But rather than do a deep dive like we have other times, we're going to zoom out and look at the big picture. There's a reason this story is emblematic of all human sinfulness - and it's not just because it's at the beginning.

This bit of [Genesis 2](#) is an encapsulation of human vocation. Let's read it and make a couple of notes that will frame up the rest of the morning:

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." -- Genesis 2:15–17 (NLT)

Human vocation: tend and watch the garden. Care for the Earth. But part and parcel of that call is a boundary: as you care for all this garden, there is a singular tree you're not to eat from.

What, exactly, is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? This is a fun question, one that's been asked for millennia to some provocative answers. But again, today I want to hang out at the highest level:

What does it mean that the human vocation has both freedom and limitation?

Tend and keep the garden. Eat of anything you want (permission) except for this one tree (prohibition).

We're not terribly surprised by the prohibition. After all, what is religion if not a bunch of rules designed to keep us from doing anything? But notice the tremendous freedom that is God's vision for the human community: till and keep the earth. And eat freely from all of it, save one, singular tree.

Freedom is God's plan for humanity.

These days, we're likely to say that this is not true freedom. In our hyper-individualistic culture, we understand freedom to be free only if it's completely unfettered. We should be able to do whatever we want, whenever we want, with no consequences (the battle over 'free speech' is a quintessential example).

But Genesis illustrates that's not the case at all - from the beginning, God's vision for a flourishing human community has included both permission and prohibition. Freedom and limitation.

The question of faith isn't, "Did I break the rules?" but rather, "Do I trust God's vision for our flourishing?"

And if you know this story, you know the first answer was, "No."

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?"

"Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.' "

"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. -- Genesis 3:1-7 (NLT)

There are consequences later between the humans and God (and between each other), but we see the first fractures immediately:

No sooner have the first couple rejected God's vision of their flourishing (in favor of their own vision, it should be noted), than they experience shame and distance. They literally put clothing between them.

Friends, this is the heart of sin: not breaking arbitrary rules, but rejecting God's vision for the human community. Deciding we know better.

## Song

Here's the reality: sometimes, going my own way (or our own way) *is* actually better for me. But it's never better for *we*, at least not when *we* is God's vision of 'we' that encompasses every human person.

Babylon flourished while God's people suffered.

Rome flourished while the larger Mediterranean world suffered.

Racist institutions benefit white persons. But they harm persons of color.

Patriarchy benefits men, but they harm women and non-binary folks.

Ablest societies make things easier for able-bodied and neurotypical people at the expense of those whose bodies and minds don't conform to the narrow standard of ability we've decided is normal.

The same is true at the micro-level, too. When we prioritize our own flourishing at the expense of those around us, it can feel good for us even while it harms others in our home or community.

This is where we need Jesus' example.

Turn with us to [Matthew 4](#).

This is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. All three gospels that tell this story place it immediately after his baptism, so it functions as a sort of trial by fire. Having been confirmed by God as the anointed one, the Messiah, Jesus immediately faces the question:

Will he, like Adam, prioritize his own needs and desires above God's?

Or will he trust that, if he is faithful to God's way, God will lead him to life? Let's read:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say,

‘People do not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say,

‘He will order his angels to protect you.

And they will hold you up with their hands

so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’ ”

Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”

Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.”

“Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say,

‘You must worship the Lord your God

and serve only him.’”

Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus. -- Matthew 4:1–11 (NLT)

At every turn, despite real temptation, Jesus rejected the same temptations that plagued Adam. At any point, he could have agreed with the devil that his own comfort, success and power were the most important. But he refused. In refusing, Jesus illustrated that the truly human life is one dedicated not to the preservation of my own flourishing, but one lived in solidarity with the flourishing of all peoples.

So Catalyst, here at the beginning of our own Lenten journey, we begin by interrogating our own desires. Are we living in harmony with God’s call to us? Is our work tending and watching over creation? Are we working for the flourishing of everyone? Are we doing everything we can to ensure that our ‘us’ doesn’t have a ‘them’?

## Communion + Examen

God invites us all to this table, to receive our bread and drink.

In this year so far, when has my work been focused on my own good?

In this year so far, when has my work been focused on the common good?

As we begin Lent, how is God inviting me to repent?

What does tending and watching over look like for me in the next six weeks?

## Assignment + Blessing

Fasting!