

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Why is there evil in the world? Why do people die of cancer? Why do terrorists bomb airports, killing and maiming innocent bystanders? Why do our nation's divorce courts keep cranking out their ungodly statistics? Why are innocent people who are following the law killed by drunk drivers or those who are driving too fast for the conditions? Why are so many unborn babies killed each year? Surely a God of love would never allow these kinds of things to happen to his people. Many have a hard time understanding how all of this fits with a God of love. They look around our world and see all the evil and wickedness and tragedy and they question how God could possibly be a God of love.

This questioning of God's love is not a new thing. It goes back to the beginning when God commanded Adam and Eve that they could not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Many look back to this account and question God's love: How could a loving God hold out on his people in this way? If God is truly love, he never would have denied them the pleasure of this food. God can't be a God of love if he would place this undue burden on them by restricting what they could eat. Even more they ask, If God really loved his people, why would he put this tree in front of them at all and command them not to eat of it? Though each question might come from a different angle, they are all doing the same thing: questioning God's love for his people.

The season of Lent brings the depths of God's love before our eyes. From creating us and this world around us to the Savior who willingly gave his life to rescue his people from their sin, we see nothing but love from God. Our text before us today answers the question of why evil is all around us. But more importantly it helps us to see even better the depths of God's love. It gives us even more confidence that not only is God love and does God love the world...but **God loves you!**

We see God's love throughout this account. By using the name, the Lord God, Moses is already pointing to him as a God of free and faithful love. It speaks to the faithful God who displays his love and mercy in addition to his awe-inspiring power. God's love is seen in the way that he created. While God simply spoke to create the rest of creation, he took special care with humans. He formed Adam from the dust of the ground. The word "formed" is used of a potter molding clay. We think of what care and precision potters use when they go about their work. This speaks to the personal interest and care God showed in the creation of humankind in addition to his attention to detail. Then God did for Adam what he did for no other creature—he breathed into him the breath of life. This speaks to the distinctiveness and superior dignity God gave to his human creatures. He gave them a soul, free will, rational thinking. He breathed his own breath into them. Then God showed his love by creating a perfect companion for the man and bringing them together in marriage which he intended to be a perfect blessing for them. He showed his love for them by creating for them a perfect home in the Garden of Eden through which he satisfied their needs for food and shelter as well as gave them perfect joy and fulfillment by carrying out the satisfying activity of tending the garden. In that garden, God had given them every other tree as food to eat. They had a wide range of options to choose from to enjoy the food that they were eating.

To say that God didn't love his people by commanding them not to eat from one tree in the garden is pure foolishness. It is ignoring all of the other displays of God's love in creation. God wasn't selfish in dealing with Adam and Eve nor was he holding out on them. He didn't overburden them with this request. He had given them everything else! God didn't make this difficult on them, either. He didn't make his request hard or complicated with so many rules and laws that they couldn't possibly remember them all. He gave them one command. Adam and Eve couldn't complain, "There were so many rules we didn't know what we were supposed to do." God gave them everything they could possibly imagine or need. The only prohibition he gave them was to not eat the fruit from one tree. He had shown them nothing but love and even this request was done in love for his people.

That last statement might be the one that is difficult to understand. How could God telling them not to eat from this tree with all the serious and dangerous consequences that would come from it be considered loving for his people? This was the perfect opportunity for them to turn their created innocence into conscious holiness. They had been created innocent and had not had the opportunity to consciously choose holiness and obedience by doing what was right when given the option to do what was wrong. God was giving them a chance to display their love and thanks to him. They had the opportunity to worship their creator in thanks for the love he had shown them by not eating this fruit. If they were hungry, they could choose from every other tree. They were to view the fruit from this one tree as their way to show their love for God. God didn't design humans as robots or puppets whom he regulated by pulling strings or pushing buttons. He designed them with a free will and gave them a chance to display their thanks for his gracious and generous love by following this one command and not eating the fruit from this tree. Martin Luther said: "*This tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church, his altar, his pulpit. Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, to give recognition to the word and will of God, to give thanks to God and to call upon him for aid against temptation.*" This command wasn't burdensome or irritating. Even this command was evidence of God's love to give his creation the chance to display their love for him.

But then came the devil. His whole goal was to undermine God's love in the hearts of his creation. This account gives us a firsthand, up close view of how the devil works. He first cast doubt on God's Word by asking Eve, "Did God really say?" In other words he asked, "Are you sure you heard him correctly?" Yet, this question also started to undermine God's love by placing a seed of doubt in Eve's mind, "Is it possible that a loving God would deny his highest creatures the pleasure of eating any fruit in the garden?" This should have been something that Eve immediately rejected. Look at how good God had been to her! But she didn't...and she left the door cracked open just a bit for the devil. And he took advantage of this by pretending to be interested in Eve's well-being. He didn't say, "Come on, I'll teach you how to sin!" That would have been too obvious. Instead he said, "Let me help you to a happier, more exciting life. Surely God wants you to be happy. Why would he put this beautiful fruit on the tree if he didn't want you to eat it? Come on, God wants you to live life to the fullest!"

The devil then called God's truthfulness into question by denying the punishment God had threatened. Finally, he tried to picture God, the giver of all good gifts, as selfish and envious rather than unbelievably gracious and generous. His basic lie was this: "God and his will really aren't good. God has known all along that eating the fruit would make you equals and God doesn't want that." He dangled before Eve the one thing God had not given them: equality with him. They were not God. God had designed them to live under him, not alongside of him. The devil dangled before her the one gift God had not given them knowing there would be no earthly gifts he could give that God had not already given to his people. And this finally cracked Eve's trust in God's love. She doubted

God's love and didn't trust his word and she ate. Eve's sin was unbelief. In the end, she refused to believe what God said about himself. She doubted his love and chose to believe the devil's lie. And when she did, sin entered the world and along with it, death.

Can you hear the words of Satan still spoken in our world today? He's still right there in our ears whispering, "Are you sure you heard God correctly? Are you sure that a loving God would withhold his highest creature from enjoying that pleasure?" That lie told all the way back to Adam is still being perpetuated today: "God is not good! He is withholding from you privileges that you are entitled to. He couldn't possibly be loving and deny you that pleasure. He wouldn't have given you that desire if he didn't want you to act on it! He isn't looking out for your own good. You need to be in charge of your own life, master of your own fate, captain of your own soul." He undermines God's love for us by leading us to see things in a different way from what God intended. For instance, he was us to see sex as a means of deriving pleasure for ourselves so that whatever we do and in whatever manner we derive that pleasure that doesn't really matter instead of seeing it as an expression of the intimacy enjoyed by a husband and wife in marriage. He wants us to see lying as a means of getting what we want for ourselves instead of focusing on what we can do to help others. He wants us to be envious enough of someone else's success or reputation that we are willing to tear that person down to build ourselves up rather than focus on what we can do to love and protect others. The devil wants us to fear that we are the only people who will take care of ourselves so that we are willing to follow whatever method will best work for us than trust that God our heavenly Father will provide in all things.

God isn't mean or withholding from us when he puts prohibitions on things. He's giving us the chance to display our love for him and worship him. Avoiding sexual immorality, whether that is sex before marriage or sex outside of our marriage, whether that is viewing pornography, whether that is engaging in or approving of homosexual behavior, is a way of worshipping God. We worship God when we avoid these behaviors which God has told us avoid. But the devil tempts us to lead us astray when he takes our eyes off of the opportunity to worship God and to see this as something purely physical. The devil wants us to see only the physical and lose sight of the spiritual. People talk about homosexuality and point to the physical attraction that some people have towards the same sex and ask, "Why shouldn't they be able to enjoy that? God is holding out on them by telling them they can't enjoy that." That's accusing God of being unloving. The lie is that God isn't being good to people if he tells them they can't express their desires in this way. This denies all the other goodness God shows to people in every other way. That's the same lie the devil told Eve.

Rather, God says that we worship him by seeing marriage and sex as a blessing that is to be enjoyed by a man and a woman within the commitment of marriage. For Adam and Eve, the fruit of the tree probably tasted good. It probably did look good to their eyes. But the point wasn't the food and it wasn't whether the food was good to eat or not. For Adam and Eve, it was about worshipping God by not eating that fruit. It was about whether they loved God enough to see the fruit in the way which God intended them to view that fruit. Their fall began the moment they doubted God's goodness and love for them. By the time they ate of the fruit, sin had already taken root in their heart and they had fallen away from God in unbelief. They ate the fruit expecting marvelous results...and all they experienced was a sense of shame over their nakedness and sheer fear about facing God. The devil delivered on none of his promises and they were left in sin to face death.

How many times don't we allow ourselves to see things from a physical standpoint instead of a spiritual one? How many times have we doubted God's love or outright denied his goodness to take matters into our own hands and expect things to be much better...only to find that they are worse. I said earlier that Lent gives us more confidence that God loves us. The only way we can truly see that is to admit the depths of our sin and the hell we deserve for it. We've fallen for the "better, more exciting life" by indulging in too much alcohol or despising what our parents have told us to do our own thing. Some have chased the better life by leaving a spouse without scriptural reason while others have done it enjoying the sexual blessings of marriage before the marriage happened. We've let our desire for a better, more exciting life lead us to hurt others by lying to them, cheating them, or shortchanging them. We've told slanderous things behind their backs just to build ourselves up. We harbored hatred in our hearts and acted in ways to get back at people. We know the shame and guilt that flows into our conscience when we come face to face with our sin. We've turned our backs on God expecting to receive marvelous results, and instead everything fell apart. This is sin. Turning our backs on God to chase the better, more exciting life is sin. And for that sin, we deserve God's punishment of hell.

Yet it's here that we see the depths of God's love for us. Here is where we see clearly that wonderful truth: God loves you. The true brilliance of God is that though his creatures fall, God is still able to achieve his original purpose through the redemption which came through Christ Jesus. God promised this redemption later in this same chapter. And what we see throughout Lent is our champion going forward to rescue us from the mess we have made with our sin. What we could not do, Jesus did for us. While we have fallen in the face of the devil's temptations, we saw in the Gospel lesson our Savior Jesus successfully face those temptations and remain perfect. Every battle that Jesus and the devil fought...Jesus won. He brought the war to a completion on Calvary when he made the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. How God loves you! What wondrous love is this! He offers to you forgiveness for your sins and promises that you will not die for your sins but live with him forever.

Now you have the opportunity to go out and worship your God. You have the opportunity to glorify God every single day by consciously choosing what is good where the possibility of evil exists. I urge you friends, to keep your eyes focused on the spiritual part of things rather than the physical. Just because you can...doesn't mean that you should. Just because something looks pleasing to the eye or fun and desirable to do doesn't mean that it is pleasing to your Father in heaven. Rather than focusing on whether something is pleasing to the eye or desirable, ask yourself how you can best worship God. How does my perspective on this best show my love for God who has loved me with an unimaginable love?

Evil came into this world because of sin. With it came wickedness and death. But God loved you so much he willingly sent his Son to be your Savior and rescue you from sin. Trust firmly in God's love at all times, despite the wickedness around you. Look to the cross and know that no matter what you see happening around you: God loves you. Amen