

Essential Truths III: Working With God

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The Tree of Life

When we look at the life of Christ, as recorded in the Gospel accounts, we see unique qualities in his approach to ministry. Even a cursory reading of those accounts reveals an attitude markedly different to that of those around him. His love and compassion, together with his righteousness and justice, stand out in stark contrast against a background of petty legalism, self-righteousness and self-centered ambition.

But as you read the Gospel accounts over and over, you will begin to notice something leaping out from the pages of God's Word. You will begin to see an image emerge from the Scriptures. That image is, of course, of Christ himself – his character, his authority and his ministry. But because of who Christ is, that image is also an image of:

- **The Father** – Since Jesus is the image of God (**Colossians 1:15**), we see in his words and in his actions a reflection of the image of the invisible God (**John 1:18**). If you want to learn how God speaks and how God acts, then you will discover this in the life of Jesus.
- **You** – Since your new self is “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (**Colossians 3:10**) as you are “conformed to the likeness of [Christ]” (**Romans 8:29**), you will see in Christ's words and actions a reflection of how God wants you to speak and to act. If you want to discover what God is conforming you to, then you will see this in the life of Jesus.

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

▶ **The Tree of Life** ◀

Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt of the Earth

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

The work of the Holy Spirit is to conform you to that image. What made Jesus different from the world is what now makes you different too (**John 17:14**). To understand this difference, we need to look at where the difference began. Flip the pages of your Bible to the dawn of human history and the book of **Genesis**.

Two Trees

Read Genesis 2:9

God created man for a life of intimate connection with his Creator. But for that intimate connection to strengthen and grow, it first had to be tested. So God provided man with a choice – a choice between obedience and disobedience, between an intimate dependence upon God and a detached self-dependence. And this choice involved two trees. As the Genesis account describes it:

“In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Most people have heard of only one tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This tree, of course, was the focus of the original temptation. It would be easy to think that the choice God had given man was simply a choice between eating or not eating the fruit of this tree, between obeying or disobeying God’s command. But the choice that God gave Adam and Eve had another dimension. It was not, in fact, just a choice focused on one tree. It was a choice focused on two trees, one labeled “life” and the other labeled “the knowledge of good and evil.”

These two trees also represented a choice between two ways of life, two ways of acting and reacting. As we compare what these two trees represent, we discover that today, too, we have a choice between these two ways of life – the way of the knowledge of good and evil and the way of life.

Let’s take a closer look at these two trees.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil

First of all, notice the name of this tree. It is not just called the tree of knowledge. Nor is it simply called the tree of the knowledge of evil. It is called the tree of the knowledge of good *and* evil, and in its name we discover what it represents.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the moral capacity to distinguish between good and evil, the ability to judge between right and wrong without God’s help or advice. Note the wording of the serpent’s temptation:

“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, *knowing good and evil*.”

Satan’s words were deceptive, but they contained within them a seed of truth. Our enemy rarely speaks blatant lies, but cloaks his lies with half-truths. After man’s fall, God was later to lament the fallen condition of man in **Genesis 3:22**:

“The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”

Satan's temptation was a classic study in half-truths. But whenever a half-truth is spoken, the other half of the truth is hidden. So what was the whole truth?

Here are the two halves of the whole truth:

- **First Half** – If you eat of the fruit of this tree, your eyes will be opened and you will be able to discern right from wrong for yourself.
- **Second Half** – If you eat of the fruit of this tree, you will be declaring yourself independent from God and, severed from the source of life, you will wither and die.

What Satan did was focus on the first half of the truth and replace the second half with a lie. This was the half-truth/half-lie that Satan presented to Adam and Eve:

- **First Half** – If you eat of the fruit of this tree, your eyes will be opened and you will be able to discern right from wrong for yourself.
- **Second Half** – If you eat of the fruit of this tree, you become gods in your own right, on an equal footing with your Creator, able to dictate the terms of your relationship with him.

The force of this potent half-truth/half-lie struck its target in Eve's heart. **Genesis 3:6** informs us:

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also *desirable for gaining wisdom*, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”

This was the pivotal event, the moment in time when the whole of mankind experienced separation from God, bringing upon itself a flood of sin and destruction. The result of the eating of the forbidden fruit, as recorded in Genesis, is revealing:

- **Genesis 3:7a** – “**Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked...**” – Just as Satan had promised in his temptation, their eyes were indeed opened, knowing good and evil.
- **Genesis 3:7a** – “**...so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves**” – This was the first act that stemmed from their newly discovered capacity to discern right from wrong: they sought to cover up what they perceived as wrong.
- **Genesis 3:8** – “**Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden**” – Their moral discernment resulted not in them facing up to their guilt, but in seeking to hide their guilt.
- **Genesis 3:10** – “[Adam] answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid’” – Now we see the next progression. Because of fear, the man and the woman hid themselves from God.

- **Genesis 3:11-13** – “And [God] said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’ The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’” – Here we see the outworking of a self-centered discernment of rights and wrongs. Both Adam and Eve justified themselves by pointing their finger at someone else. This lies at the heart of the nature of the knowledge of good and evil – “I’m not really the one at fault. It’s really the fault of *that* person!”

We see a natural progression from the moment our first parents ate the forbidden fruit:

- Shame
- Cover up
- Guilt
- Hiding
- Fear
- Blame
- Self-justification
- Broken relationship
- Curse
- Death

The instant they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the relationship between Adam and Eve deteriorated. A cycle of blame and self-justification had begun.

But the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not the only tree that God planted in the middle of the Garden. Whereas the first tree is the source of all human misery, the second tree is the source of our hope.

The tree of life

This tree was not prohibited by God until *after* Adam and Eve had disobeyed God (note **Genesis 2:16-17; 3:22-24**). So what was this tree all about? We know that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented an independent morality and self-centered discernment of right and wrong. But what did the tree of life represent? Why was it open to man before the fall, but disallowed after the fall?

The tree of life represented nothing less than the life of God himself. This tree symbolized a growing into the full likeness of the Creator, a “participat[ing] in the divine nature” spoken of later in **2 Peter 1:4**. But as you would remember, we cannot participate in the divine nature unless we first “escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” The two cannot mix. This was why access to the tree of life was denied after the fall. The “corruption in the world caused by evil desires” had to be resolved before mankind could again be allowed to “par-

participate in the divine nature.”

We must remember that even though Adam and Eve had been created in the image of God, they still had to grow up in that image. Just like a baby is born in the image of its parents, but is not yet physically mature, so Adam and Eve were spiritually immature. Physically, they were adults; spiritually, they were babies.

The tree of life represented their path of growth into the full glory of God’s image. By eating the fruit of that tree, they would have been transformed “from glory to glory.” Yet, oddly enough, this tree is hardly mentioned before the fateful temptation. Even though the way to the tree of life was open to man before the fall, there is no record of Adam and Eve ever eating its fruit. In fact it appears that they hardly noticed the tree at all until that tree too became forbidden to them. According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

“Two trees ‘in the midst of the garden’ (**Genesis 2:9**) are mentioned at the outset; but the tree of life, the permitted one, seems no more to have been thought of until it was no longer accessible...indeed, when the woman speaks to the serpent of ‘the tree which is in the midst of the garden’ (**Genesis 3:3**) she has only one tree in mind, and that the prohibited one.”¹

The tree of life offered Adam and Eve the highest expression of life. Eating of that fruit would have progressively imparted the fullness of God’s nature.

Now to understand the nature of the tree of life, we must understand the nature of God. God has a totally rounded character, with his love and holiness in perfect balance. The tree of life represented all of this.

But according to **Genesis 3:22**, God’s nature also includes the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, if Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of life— if they had chosen to participate in the divine nature rather than walk a path of self-corrupted morality – they would have had their eyes opened, knowing good from evil. The difference, however, would be that this attribute of discernment would have been balanced by the other aspects of God’s nature – his love, his wisdom and his power.

Proverbs 3:13,18 tells us:

“Blessed is the man who finds wisdom...She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.”

Read Proverbs 11:30

Two Kinds of Knowledge

The two trees represented to kinds of knowledge:

- The knowledge of rights and wrongs
- The knowledge of God

Let’s look briefly at the difference between the two.

The knowledge of rights and wrongs

Without the full complement of God's nature, the knowledge of rights and wrongs is the most destructive thing in this world. Every argument, every divorce, every war has been started because of this ability to judge between right and wrong.

If you are not sure of what is meant by "the knowledge of good and evil," just try cutting someone off while driving, or jumping the line at a bus stop, or doing any of a myriad of things that impose upon other people's rights. When someone's sense of personal justice is piqued, we see the full power of the knowledge of good and evil unleashed. And at the heart of the knowledge of good and evil lies a simple statement:

"I'm right and you're wrong!"

Read James 3:13-18

The reason Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was because it was "desirable for gaining wisdom" (**Genesis 3:6**). It is this self-declared wisdom (what James calls a wisdom that is "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil") that lies at the heart of the knowledge of good and evil. James describes this warped wisdom as having at its core two sins:

- Envy
- Selfish ambition

And these two sins produce two results:

- Disorder
- Every evil practice

Read Titus 3:9-11

The Church has its share of experts in the knowledge of good and evil. It is this knowledge that splits churches and divides the Body of Christ. But the good news is that God never intended for the knowledge of good and evil to be the driving force in your life. His intent is that an entirely different kind of knowledge be the motivation of your words and your actions.

The knowledge of God

In complete contrast to the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of God is the driving force behind a Christian's spiritual growth. Just take a look at some of these verses:

- Read Habakkuk 2:14**
- Read 2 Corinthians 4:6**
- Read Ephesians 4:13**
- Read Colossians 1:10**
- Read Colossians 3:10**
- Read 2 Peter 1:2-3,8**
- Read 2 Peter 3:18**

The tree of life represents this higher source of knowledge. Rather than being a source of a self-centered knowledge, it imparts an intimate knowledge of the nature of God, a knowledge that brings transformation “from glory to glory” (**2 Corinthians 3:18**, KJV).

Adam’s disobedience was a deliberate rejection of the knowledge of God in favor of the knowledge of good and evil. In describing the condition of fallen mankind, **Romans 1:28** tells us:

“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”

By rejecting the knowledge of God and pursuing the knowledge of good and evil, Adam opened the door for sin and death to enter the world (**Romans 5:12**). But this is not the end of the story. God intervened in human history to restore to us the way to the tree of life.

Out of the Tree of Life

When Jesus came into the world, he didn’t come out of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he had, he would have condemned our sin and sent us to hell. His judgment would be correct, because he was right and we were wrong. But this is not what he did.

Read John 3:16-17
Read Romans 5:6-8

Instead, Jesus came out of the tree of life. The tree of life discerns right from wrong, but then finds a way to bring life out of death. As we read the Bible, we discover that the Gospel itself is the tree of life in operation! Christ himself is the tree of life personified!

Read 1 Corinthians 1:30

Two Examples from the Bible

The Bible gives many examples of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life in operation. We will have a look at two:

Jonah

Read Jonah 3:10-4:2

Why was Jonah so willing to disobey God rather than go to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Most people would say he was afraid, and with good reason. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty in war, torturing their prisoners and perpetrating horrific atrocities against whole villages and cities. But as we read the story of Jonah, we discover that fear was not Jonah’s primary reason for disobeying God. In response to God relenting to inflict punishment

against Nineveh, **Jonah 4:1-2** tells us:

“But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? *That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish.* I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity...”

Jonah had an unquenchable hatred of the Ninevites. Because of the evil and cruel acts the Assyrians had committed against his people, Jonah wanted them to be punished. He was living from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But when God saw their repentant hearts he forgave them. The Lord was expressing the tree of life, balancing the knowledge of good and evil with love, wisdom and grace.

Jesus

Read John 8:3-11

The only one with the right to throw a stone at the woman was Jesus, for he was the only one without sin. Yet Jesus did not judge the woman, but instead forgave her and offered her a new way of life. The Pharisees operated from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were definitely right – what the woman had done was wrong, and she was punishable by death under the Law of Moses. But Jesus expressed the tree of life. Notice that Jesus did not condone the sin. He recognized it, but offered a way of escape.

The difference between the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life is that the tree of life, while discerning good and evil, seeks to bring wisdom and reconciliation and life into the problem.

A Modern Example

Watchman Nee, a Christian pastor in China during the intense persecution of the early Communist era, tells the story of a Christian farmer who came to him with a problem. The farmer had a rice paddy on a terrace cut into a hill. Every morning he would rise early and water his field, but day after day he noticed that his field had quickly dried out, eventually discovering that the farmer on the terrace below him was draining his field to water his own field, thus saving himself hours of work.

“What shall I do?” asked the Christian farmer. “Should I report him to the police?”

After some thought, Watchman Nee shook his head. “No, you are a Christian now. You are not called to live out of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but out of the tree of life. Here’s what you should do. Tomorrow morning, rise even earlier than usual and water the field of the other farmer first, then water your own.”

And that is what the Christian farmer did. After several days, the farmer below approached the Christian. “Why is it,” he asked, “that when I did you evil, you

repaid me with good?” The Christian explained his faith in Christ and the result was that the other farmer gave his life to Christ.

What would have happened if the Christian had done the natural thing and reported his enemy to the police. He had every right to do so. He was right and the other man was wrong. But if he had reported him to the police, the result would have probably been a broken relationship and a barrier to witness.

But because the Christian operated out of the tree of life – recognizing that a wrong was being committed but acting out a solution that both solved the problem and won over the perpetrator of the problem – his enemy experienced the grace of God.

Now it’s important to understand that we are not saying you should never report someone to the police or that you should always let people treat you like a welcome mat. What we are saying is that if you are living out of the tree of life, you will have access to more than just the knowledge of good and evil. You will have access to God’s love, wisdom, power and grace.

Taming the Tongue

Read Proverbs 18:21

Your tongue has the latent power to bring life or death to people’s lives. The words that you speak can produce either a hunger for God’s righteousness or condemnation. You can speak to people out of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or out of the tree of life.

Read Proverbs 15:4

This is important for us to understand when we are ministering. Just because we use a verse from the Bible does not mean that life is being produced in our hearer’s heart. Dry knowledge of God’s word will not produce revelation. Only revelation inspires revelation, and only revelation produces life transformation.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:3

Read James 3:3-12

God wants to harness your tongue in order to speak words of life into people’s lives. James writes with great amazement and some exasperation:

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.”

As ministers of Christ, we can use even the Bible as a sword for healing or a sword for destruction. Any passage of Scripture can be ministered out of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or out of the tree of life, the former producing condemnation and the latter producing righteousness, grace and life.

Read Isaiah 50:4

Ministering Out of the Tree of Life

Read 2 Corinthians 3:6

Paul describes two ways of ministering God's Word:

- The letter – which kills
- The Spirit – which gives life

As you yourself “participate in the divine nature” by fellowship with the Lord in his Word, in worship and in prayer, not only will your life be conformed to the likeness of Christ but so will the ministry God has given you. Your words will not only identify sin people's lives; they will also introduce the solution of God's grace. Just as Jesus declared in **John 6:63**, you will be able to say:

“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”

¹ *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

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