

This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

I have a sister-in-law who runs her own interior decorating business, and the transformations she performs on people's homes are borderline miraculous. But, if you have toddlers who treat freshly painted walls like coloring books, cats who like to push delicate objects off of shelves or puppies who are still learning the difference between chair legs and chew toys, you might want to consider waiting awhile before investing in her talents.

The apartments my siblings and I grew up in were much plainer than anything you'll see on my sister-in-law's website. And, while growing up I was frequently reminded that my brother and sister and I were the main reason for the simplicity of our surroundings. Whenever our rambunctiousness resulted in a breakage or spillage, my mother would swoop in with a mop or broom and the same old battle cry: "See! This is why we can't have nice things!" For the longest time I daydreamed about what kind of "nice things" we were missing out on because of our reckless behavior.

My grandparents on the Portuguese side knew something about how to defend "nice things" from the likes of easily tempted grandchildren like me. They had a special room of the house that was reserved for times when "company" came to visit. It was the image of elegance. Which is why I was only allowed to view it from the other side of glass paned French Doors.

The second and third chapters of the Book of Genesis are the Bible's version of "this is why we can't have nice things." As the story goes, humanity's original home was stocked with nothing but "nice things." After God finished creating the universe, he surveyed his handiwork and declared everything about it to be good. Then God turned a man and a woman loose in the middle of it all, with one job—to care for it and keep it nice—and just one simple rule. They could have free access to any place in the whole garden of Eden... with one exception. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the only thing that was off limits.

There's a reason that child proof locks were invented. They keep kids from getting into things they shouldn't—and mostly it's for their own benefit. Often a simple "Don't touch" translates to young ears as less of a command to be obeyed and more of an invitation to explore for themselves.

Sure enough, the first time God left them alone for a minute the man and the woman made a bee-line for...you guessed it, the forbidden tree. I know... there was a serpent involved, but you can't say that they put up much resistance either. Before he even slithered up, they were probably staring at the tree and asking each other, "I wonder why God does not want us to touch that tree?"

By the time the serpent showed up, the man and the woman, like the forbidden fruit they were eyeing, were ripe for the picking. The man and the woman looked at the tree and saw that it 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. Why would God *not* want them to enjoy something like that!

That's how temptation works. It begins whenever our attention is drawn away from the abundance of what God provides and focused on what we might be missing out on. The serpent nurtured that seed of doubt when it whispered, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." In other words, they could be their own bosses.

God had warned them not to cross the boundary God set about the forbidden tree or they would die. Which sounds like a threat, but was really a prediction of consequences. Like warning a child that if they play with matches, they could burn the house down. But the serpent encouraged them to call God's bluff on that. And they did.

At first, it seemed that the serpent was right. No one died. At least not a physical death. But something did perish in the man and the woman's relationship to each other. Their eyes were opened and for the first time they realized they were naked. Filled with guilt and shame, they felt the need to sew together fig leaves to hide themselves from each other. No more would the two be one.

The next consequence was that their relationship to their Creator became terminally fractured. Even though God had never done anything but good by them, when they heard God coming their way, they both hid from God's presence.

The other thing that died was their relationship to the home which God had entrusted to their care. They were evicted from the Garden where all the nice things they ever needed were at their disposal, leaving them on the outside looking in, the way I could look but not touch the "nice things" on the other side of those glass paned French doors.

But this has always been more than a story about a man named Adam and a woman called Eve. It is the story of every man and every woman. Because it is a parable about human nature—particularly our susceptibility to succumb to temptations that ultimately sabotage our relationships to each other, to the world we live in, and to God.

The pattern of divisiveness that began with one temptation has multiplied into the pattern of hostility, intolerance and violence that surrounds us today. It is a pattern that has repeated itself in every life that has been lived. With one unforgettable exception that happened not in a fertile garden, but in a barren wilderness.

When the voice of temptation spoke to a hungry and weary Jesus and coaxed him to satisfy his empty belly by turning stones to bread, he turned instead to the nourishment found in trusting God's Word. He turned down an offer to have the world at his feet in exchange for worshipping the devil, and chose instead to give his life to save the world because he worshipped his Father.

By refusing to take the bait set before him, he was eventually rewarded with the comforts of heaven on the wings of angels. And he set the example for us to follow, which is that the only sure route to having nice things--not nice material things like crystal and cashmere; but nice things like justice, peace, abundance for all and scarcity for none--is found by trusting in God's unconditional love for us to meet our every need.