

## “Kids Have Imaginary Friends. Adults Have Imaginary Enemies.”

### The Family of God

Downtown

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Last week we talked about what I said was a potentially undiagnosed problem in your marriage. Today I want to talk about a potentially undiagnosed problem in all of your relationships. And I want to use the same passage that we looked at last week.

#### Genesis 3:1-5

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.

Just to set the scene, the garden of Eden was a paradise. No sin present. No brokenness, no pain. Perfect communion with God all day every day. There was also no deceit there. Just truth, just reality. Up until this point, when God said something, they believed Him. When they said something to each other, they believed it. There was no complexity. No ulterior motives. No confusion. No insecurity or second-guessing. No “what do you think he meant when he said...” none of that.

But here we are introduced to a character who is crafty, or deceitful.

He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Notice it starts with a question intended to produce doubt. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree of the garden?’” If you know the story God did not say that. But the question is meant to project that falsehood onto His character.

He goes on in verse 4 to expand from confusion and distrust to flat out lies. “You will not certainly die,” he said. God lied to you. He told you that because He doesn’t want you to eat from the tree and have the same power He does. He’s trying to keep you down. He must not care about you. He must not want you to be satisfied. He must not be as good as you previously believed. He’s withholding from you because he’s selfish and jealous and he doesn’t want you to be like him.

**Think about it this way: one of the things that happened with the fall and Adam & Eve was the introduction of the category of false or untrue perception.** When I say perception, I simply mean how things “seem” to you. Up until this point, Adam and Eve’s perception of God and one another was 100% in line with truth, with reality. Their perception has now become an alternate reality in their minds. Yeah, but what do *you* think about God? How do you *feel* about Him? What do you think His motives are? And in that moment, an alternate reality was formed in their mind of a nefarious, repressive God. One who needs to be rebelled against.

Their perception of God began to matter more than the reality of God. The truth of who God is, what his motives actually are, what his thoughts actually are becomes less weighty, less powerful, less persuasive to Adam and Eve than their perception of God. Objective truth disintegrates, and now what they have is how it seems to them...their perception.

Take me, for example. On one hand, there is the reality of me--who I am in front of God who sees all. And then there's your perception of me, and your perception of me. There's my wife's perception of me, my friends' perception of me, the driver I accidentally cut off yesterday's perception of me, my non-Christian neighbor's perception of me. If I preach to 500 different people there will be 500 different perceptions of me--some more positive than others, some more accurate than others.

This is one of the things that happened when sin entered. A shadow world was created where we deal not exclusively in truth or reality but in innumerable perceptions. Where what we *think* and *feel* about God can end up mattering more than the reality of God. Where what we think and feel about others can end up mattering more than the reality of them.

Let me continue to clarify what I mean by perception and why it plays such a big role in your life.

A while ago, pre-pandemic, I was with my kids at the zoo. Having a great time. At one point during our time there, one of my kids said, "I feel like we should get an Icee." I love Icee's, and we all got an Icee. A little later, a sibling who shall not be named was intentionally bothering his sister and she eventually said "I feel so angry." Now I had already told that particular unnamed sibling to stop bothering his sister, so I said "I feel like you are not listening to me."

So within just a few minutes, we had 3 statements.

I feel like we should get an Icee.

I feel so angry.

I feel like you are not listening to me.

Those statements sound very similar but in reality they are categorically different.

I feel like we should get an Icee is a statement about desire.

I feel so angry is about emotion.

I feel like you aren't listening to me is about perception.

So our three categories are desire, emotion, and perception.

**Desire**, biblically speaking is about good and evil. We have good desires that should be cultivated. We have evil desires that should be put to death. Starved. And then of course we can have neutral desires and inordinate desires and so forth. But the category we're dealing with when we talk about desire is good and evil.

### **Colossians 3:5**

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Good desires we cultivate, enflame, help them grow. Evil desires we put to death. We starve them out. Part of growth in Christ is wanting the right things in increasing measure. And wanting the wrong things in decreasing measure.

**Emotion** is about being human and being made in God's image. God has emotions. Emotions are not good or evil, they aren't true or false, they are simply present. And they should be honestly processed before God. The Psalms are a great resource for this. Some Psalms are uncomfortably emotionally honest as David and others process their emotions with God.

Then we have **perception**. Perceptions can be true or false. You might be right and you might be wrong. They should be humbly held up for reconsideration.

If you mess the categories up you're gonna run into problems. If you tell someone an emotion is wrong, well that's unhelpful at best. "Stop being angry" has nearly never helped anyone.

Indulging a sinful desire leads to death.

Failing to challenge someone with an incorrect perception is a failure to love.

"I feel like you are not hearing me."

I am hearing you.

"Well, now you are dismissing my feelings."

No, I'm not. I'm challenging your perception.

They are different but can be connected. For example, if you perceive that someone is out to get you, then it will affect your emotions. You will feel fear. Maybe anger.

If you perceive something to be satisfying, you will desire it.

Oftentimes, desire and emotion are downstream from perception.

And the problem, as we see in Genesis 3, is that we are susceptible to our perceptions being wildly wrong. And if you cannot have your perception not just challenged but changed as a result, you will increasingly live in an alternate reality.

In Genesis 3, What is God actually doing? Protecting them and us from everything bad that's ever happened. That's what he's actually doing. That seems like a pretty decent motive. To protect them and every human who's ever lived from all suffering and pain whatsoever. Yet somehow they are able to come to believe his motive is to deprive them. Somehow they are able to believe that God is the bad guy. That's how badly we can misperceive. Someone who deeply wants good for you, you can become convinced they want bad for you.

To use a modern term, it's a conspiracy theory with absolutely no evidence whatsoever. But once they had assigned a negative motive, their perception of God changed, and suddenly his gracious kind command became the evidence they needed to prove their perception true. And every time we think "god doesn't really love me. God doesn't really want good for me. God doesn't really care about me" we prove that genesis isn't just what happened. It's what happens.

We may not live in the Garden of Eden anymore, but I would argue that our lives are marked by this exact same pattern.

Question the motive. Assign a negative motive..to God or another person. Perception of God or that other person changes. Seek out evidence to prove a negative motive.

Have you ever had a friend, spouse, family member, co-worker tell you that they know what you actually think or what you actually want? "Well sure you said that but I know what you were really thinking!" "I know what you really want." "All you care about is..."

It's a fascinating thing...you're telling me what I want. You're telling me what I think. Really? You know what I'm thinking? How could you possibly know that? And why are you so confident that you're right.

It's certainly happened to me. Where someone will say to me "'blank' is all you really care about." And the truth is, I don't care about 'blank' really at all. I never even think about it. But they are completely sure that they are right. And it's not even that I'm trying to defend myself, because I'm not that great and sometimes I think horrible things. I just so happen to not think what you so confidently believe I do. It's not because I'm righteous, it's just because your perception is wrong.

So I say "no, that's not what I was thinking." And they say back to "yes it was." So now, the expert on what I think, or what I care about, isn't me...it's you?

Perception has overwhelmed reality. The fact that I wasn't thinking that thing doesn't matter...because you perceive that I was. And now you're hurt and angry because of it.

God wasn't Adam and Eve's enemy but they perceived him as such. We do this with God and with others when we allow our perception of them, however, we came to it, to matter more to us than the truth about them. So the end result is relationships that have a lack of truth and a lack of grace.

Now, here is why this is such a deep concern for me (and this is all hypothetical in wording).

Imagine a scenario with me. You live in a country, purely hypothetical of course, in which there are deep divisions... political, economic, religious, class, race, you name it--each individual with their own unique history, family background, and makeup of data points, leading to drastically different viewpoints on a wide range of issues.

In this hypothetical country, there is no longer such a thing as news. It has been replaced, at least mostly, by financially-motivated "infotainment" companies. These companies receive revenue, not when they present the most accurate version of the facts, but instead based upon numbers of viewers or readers. Extreme views receive more clicks and views which therefore receives more advertising revenue. So anger and fear have been monetized because when you are angry or afraid you are more likely to click and view. Their business model relies on you becoming outraged or fearful. They have also discovered that correcting people with accurate information is not good for business, so instead each organization plays to target audiences' prior beliefs and views.

So different people end up having radically different ideas about events. On how serious certain things are. On whether something should be celebrated or bemoaned. And, occasionally, the "news" can even differ widely on whether certain very important things happened or absolutely did not happen. On what is fake, and what is real.

Oh, I forgot to mention that people in this hypothetical country have their brains plugged into this magical cloud for a few hours each day. This cloud has powerful, money-hungry algorithms that are trained to be addictive and do nothing but feed each target--I mean person--more of what he or she has already shown they are likely to click on or watch. Powerful machines beyond our wildest comprehension, in this make-believe society, turn humans into literal clickbait.

So each human ends up actually, terrifyingly, living in their own completely personalized Truman Show bubble. Where deeply held thoughts and beliefs are formulated based on highly individualized experiences and media that actually give you what you wanted, not what is necessarily accurate. Because of this, people gradually become so convinced of their perceptions that they conclude that only a crazy person would disagree. Surely everyone is outraged by the things I am outraged by. Only to find, that many times, they aren't at all. It's as if the person across the office from you inhabits a different universe. They might think \*you\* are the clueless one.

While these hypothetical people are being fed more and more of what they already believe and want to hear, they are also watching as many documentaries and shows as possible that showcase the fact that conspiracies sometimes are true.

We are just washed with these stories. The stories that are like, "See this picturesque American family? Well, guess what, the dad is a murderer duh duh duh..." They highlight and accentuate any time the friend does turn out to be a backstabber, sometimes the pastor does turn out to be scum, the government official is sometimes indeed corrupt.

So in this imaginary land, these people become washed over with distrust with any person, any authority, any organization, any group. Suspicion and distrust is our, I mean their, predisposition.

In this hypothetical place, people become so wildly susceptible to conspiracy theories that some of them believe elections were stolen. Others come to believe that biological gender is a made-up construct. Some believe aliens are hidden all over the planet. That everyone in power is evil and abusive and always just covering their tracks and only looking out for themselves.

Obviously, this is not hypothetical. I'm talking about you. And me. And the not so United States of America.

We've become people so filled to the brim with scandal and cynicism and distrust and anger and fear, that by the time we walk into these doors...that fuse is already lit. The lens is already locked into place. We've been so primed that when we come together to be the church we don't even realize how much we are doing this to one another.

We've already been disciplined to operate just like the pattern from the Garden of Eden.

Question others' motives. Assign a negative motive..of God or another person. Perception of God or that other person changes. Seek out evidence to prove that negative motive.

-The plans for LifeGroup this week don't fully accommodate my preferences? "These people only care about themselves." (is there another potential reason for why the plans ended up as they did? Does it matter? Or can you only see your perception?)

-Did you see that thing she posted on social media? She's one of those people. (maybe. Or is there a perspective she has that if you talked to her and listened, you might not agree with but you'd understand a bit more?)

-He said this to me, and I was hurt by it. He is a monster.

And all the doubts swirl in our minds.

-Do you think that person actually cares about you? They are just being nice or using you for something you don't know yet.

-Do you think you can really trust them? Don't you think you are better than these people? Don't you think these people think they're better than you?

Let me share a recently challenging verse for me.

**Job 36:13**

The godless in heart cherish anger;

Cherish anger. I had never noticed that verse before. Courtney pointed it out to me recently. And as soon as she showed it to me I thought two things.

-I know exactly what that means because I do it sometimes. Where someone has hurt me and I'm angry because of how wrong it was. Which is ok. It's ok to be angry when God's will is violated. But I'll nurse that grudge. I'll have anger fantasies in my mind where I tell that person exactly what I think they need to be told to be put in their place. I'll get a sense of superiority and energy from my anger. I'll cherish it.

-And the second thing I thought, was how many people I have seen be torn apart by this. Where their anger seemed to become a driving force in their lives. And they sought out opportunities to be more offended, more outraged, and angrier. They nursed their anger and cultivated their anger. They cherished it.

And because anger has been monetized, we have an entire cultural system built and designed to get us to cherish anger.

We're on edge, suspicious of everyone, just waiting on other people to prove they are the monsters we quietly assume that they probably are. So we try to come together but we're so tightly wound and just waiting on something to set us off.

"Oooh, Let somebody forget about my birthday." Let one of these people say something insensitive and I will let them have it."

This is most of sentient life under quarantine. Fewer interactions with other kids. In LifeGroup Graham has a friend named Charlie. They're about the same age. Pre-covid, when they would see each other they would yell out "belly!" and then lift their shirts up and belly bump. That's how they greeted each other. Well for the past year, they really haven't been able to see each other very often. When our older kids tell stories about their happenings at school, Graham began to make up stories about something he and Charlie did that day. Of course, he can't pronounce Charlie and instead calls him Twarwey. Charlie was a real friend who became an imaginary friend. It's simultaneously adorable and sad.

Ok. The way some children have imaginary friends, some of you have imaginary enemies. You think your mother in law is out to get you, the reality is she loves you and just has flaws that bother you.

You think your boss has nefarious motives and is set against you, the reality may be that your boss doesn't think about you very much. She might prefer that you succeed but have a reasonable critique of your work performance.

You think that a particular LifeGroup member is purposefully excluding you. But maybe they have no idea you feel that way and would be horrified if they found out. They just have different expectations than you do and the friction is entirely unnecessary and damaging.

So often the negative and sometimes monster-like qualities of people in our minds are literally figments of our imagination. A story we've weaved based on the few data points we have available to us. Those people actually aren't out to get you and have no ill will towards you. And you continuing to believe they do without honestly reconciling your perceptions only helps build the shadow world of darkness.

The problem is, our relationships lack grace and truth. We trust our perceptions way too much, and there is no space for others to be regular old sinners. Who sometimes hurt us.

In the story Scripture tells, what we find good news: that Jesus came to reverse that. Read with me from John chapter 1.

**John 1:1-5, 14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This is not just some artistic metaphor, but a theological statement. In the beginning was the logos. The voice of ultimate reality who spoke everything that is real into being. He is the radiance of truth in and of Himself.

He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In other words, He came to turn the floodlights on in the shadow world. To dispel the rumors, the false perceptions, the unrealities in a million different minds. And His radiance is so bright, His truth so weighty, that the lies of darkness will scatter like the cockroaches they are.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Notice the dichotomy here. The father of lies came to the Garden and created a false reality with his words. The effects of his deceptive words caused humanity to leave the mountain paradise and have to come make their dwelling with him in the land of darkness, the shadow world.

Until the Word left heaven and became flesh. And He made his dwelling here, among us in the shadow world. With the liars, the confused, the distrusting, the cynical. But He was not about to just sit in our misery and chaos. No, this was a rescue mission. He came to reinstate reality.

I love the end of this passage, Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” Filled to the brim with both. Not even a mixture of falsehood in Him. His face gracious and warm as the sun. Calling us back to what we lost. So that our relationship with God could be filled with grace and truth. Forgiveness for our sins and truth about who God actually is in the face of all of our false perceptions. And truth and grace for our relationships with each other. With space for weakness and sin in our midst. And relentlessly pursuing truth in our perceptions of one another.

That’s the big idea for this week and next. In Christ, we are to leave the world of shadows and perceptions and unreality and follow Jesus, becoming people full of grace and truth in a world where neither abound. But the starting place is simply realizing that your perceptions are simply that...perceptions. Perceptions can be true, can be half-true, can be false. That little bit of difference is actually a mile, because it allows you instead of coming in guns blazing to say, “Hey, my perception of this event was \_\_\_\_\_. Can you shed light on this for me?”

This sounds simple, but it’s not at all simplistic to truly realize for yourself. The truth is, you have a set of alternate realities in your mind that is wreaking havoc on your life, your joy, your spiritual health. Collectively those alternate realities damage your marriage, your family, your LifeGroup, and our church. Jesus brings grace and truth. Truth, not perception. And grace, not judgment. Imagine if in all of your relationships no one ever falsely assumed the worst of your motives or intentions... or assumed that you were belittling them or intentionally harming them. This is the type of humanity that Jesus displayed in His life and came to offer us. A community of grace and truth, where we become...  
- peace-makers in a culture of war-wagers  
- uneasily offendable because we don't take ourselves too seriously.

You can remain in relationship if you say something insensitive. Not because it’s ok, It’s not ok. But because you can be a sinner here and we won't pounce all over you. Now we will gently correct and if you defiantly continue that's a different story. But you’re allowed to be a sinner. Grace and truth. I don't assume I know your thoughts and motives. And there’s grace for your failures.

We will talk in more detail next week, but if you will simply open this category in your mind. This idea of perception not necessarily being reality...you’ll often find people are not sudden enemies, but image-bearers of the most-high God with mixtures of sin.

They are, ultimately, exactly what you are. A broken, cynical, lie-believing, unreality-spreading sinner. And aren’t you glad that Jesus died for just such as these, for you and I both.