

Does God Break God's Own Rules?

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Today let's start with the question, "**Does God break God's own rules?**" The answer, or what appears to be the answer, settles us right at the beginning of the Word.

We know this story well. God created the world. Everything was pronounced by God either "good" or "very good", interestingly not "good" and evil." God then placed a picturesque paradise in the middle of it – the Garden of Eden.

Into that paradise - in the middle of it actually – God placed two special trees - the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He planted the trees as well as a stern command laced with implications of dire consequences should the command be disobeyed, "*You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.*" (Gen. 2:16-17)

Eat of it they did. Welcome to the human condition. Sin, in a sense, arrived. What was this sin? "*The most egregious sin is Humanity's will to be powerful in a way that only God is – to control our own destiny, to assert our prideful will and allow greed and our unquenchable thirst for power to dominate our minds and compel our actions.*" (Serene Jones).

When we take on, for ourselves, the role of God – the god we make in our image not the humbling image that we are made in His - we see everything backwards – an inversion of the spirit. As Emanuel Swedenborg notes, "*We call hatred love, darkness light, death life, and the other way around. The Word calls people who succumb to this way of thinking lame and blind.*" (AC 210) Restated, in trying to be all seeing, all knowing – eating of tree of knowledge of good and evil - we become blind to everything.

In this blindness, the struggle whiplashes between hubris – "*We can eat the apple*" – and a detachment, unable to shoulder any responsibility, that says with self-righteous fervor, "*I am not to blame.*" Who does Adam blame? The snake and "*The woman you put here with me.*" (Gen. 3:12). In the end, Adam then essentially blames everyone but himself. "*We can do as we please*" is met with "*I am never at fault.*"

Here the story should take a predictable turn. Remember God's command, the prediction, one might even call it a threat "*When you eat of it, you will certainly die.*"?

But death does not happen. The infraction is clear. The remorse scant. Yet they are not consumed in an eruption of God's unmitigated wrath. Apparently, God breaks, in sparing their lives, God's own rules.

Let's return to the beautiful story to look at this blessed "breaking."

After eating that fruit, *“They heard the voice of Jehovah God, going alone in the garden at the breeze of the day. And the human hid himself, as did his wife, from Jehovah God’s face, in the middle of the tree of the garden. The Lord God then called to the man, “Where are you?”* (Gen. 3:8)

A voice. A face. A question.

Very different this God of surprises. A voice. A face. A question.

As Arcana Celestia writes...

- A voice: An alertness to what is inside us
- A face: Jehovah’s face of mercy, peace, and all that is good
- And a question: Not starting with the searing indictment *“How could you?”* But starting with the searching question, *“Where are you?”*

Let’s settle there. Let’s sit there – a voice, a face, and a question - for a minute.

Note - a God of destruction does not emerge out of these three. Not a God of wrath. What emerges - a God of deep, abiding love. A God who quietly calls in a way, literally, to the better angels of our nature. Who breaths His way deeply, with light and love, into the very best intentions of our souls. Who gazes at us not by casting a disapproving scowl but with a full face – a face filled with *“mercy, peace, all that is good.”*

Can we SEE God that way – lets pause for a silent second here. Is it any wonder that Swedenborg held that the Lord cannot frown?

It is no small thing to ponder how God views us. Pope Francis in a recent interview put it well. He noted that wayward people often approach him with a desperate longing, a heart-breaking longing to have a life of faith that seems unattainable, out of their grasp. They want faith, they desire belief, but it remains frustratingly illusive. The Pope’s answer? *“Just let Jesus look at you.”* What is the Pope hoping they see as they stop hiding from Jehovah’s face? Returning to the Arcana’s words around “face”... *“Mercy, Peace, everything that is good.”* Just let the Lord look at you.

Of course, the story of the Garden of Eden does not end with a Divine “bail out” as it were. There is indeed accountability. There are indeed consequences. Accountability and consequences are part of the story too. But they are not what we would imagine. We must leave the Garden with all the sadness that entails – and as one author put it – *“thus has always been so.”* But we leave still alive – God *sending us on* the journey, not *saving us from* the journey.

So, to return to the opening question, did God break own rules?

Maybe this. **God does not break God's own rules. He breaks ours.** Some "rules"...

One: We often cast life as a series of perfectible life-and-death decisions for ourselves, a game where every inning is the bottom of the 9th with 2 outs and us behind in the score. Pray for God's help. Let God look at *you*... *"Mercy, Peace, and Everything Good"*

Two: We often enforce sharp binaries between ourselves and others. As such, like the Prodigal son, we often appear disappointed when those who have made mistakes don't receive "their just desserts" as it were. Pray for God's help. Let God look at *them*... *"Mercy, Peace, and Everything Good"*

Three: We are tempted to build ever-higher walls not ever-larger tables, deciding that we are the final arbitrators – eating of that tree yet again - deciding who is invited and who is not, forgetting that Peter (Denier), Thomas (Doubter), and Judas (Betrayal) all took part in the Last Supper. Pray for God's help. Let God look at *us, all of us* with... *"Mercy, Peace, and Everything Good"*

As God does, so should we.

It is not that bigger tables are set without challenges. Ask anyone with a large family what ensues at times around the dinner table in terms of arguments and spills and they will not talk of it as perfect.

But they will talk of that table as a place of beauty. Of laughter. Of connection.

What did you know about such dinners – the good and the bad?

I would like to close with a story heard around our dinner table. It is a story of God's rules, not ours.

My dad was medic during the Korean War. Serving with combat engineers, one of his jobs involved transporting injured soldiers back to the MASH hospitals where they could be cared for.

After completing this task one day, he spoke of looking over at an occupied hospital cot, a cot occupied by an injured enemy Chinese soldier. The soldier was eating an apple.

Dad's next insight was not the "apple" we might be tempted to "eat", an apple that all too easily divides the world between friend and foe. Dad's insight... *"I realized we are all one. I like apples. He likes apples. We are all one."*

The miracle to me is that story probably had other unknown/ unknowable parts to it as well. Who rescued that enemy soldier? Who ensured he got medical care? Who gave him that apple? What did he think, eating that apple, as my dad looked at him? We will

never know, but maybe two lives, not just one, transformed that day as the table got a little bigger, and the walls a little less high.

I imagine those transformations are God's rules. And while forgotten for a time, they are in a sense, part of an unbroken chain.

The seeds continue to be sown ... *"every charitable kindness a seed."* (AC 932)

What else is the Lord saying when he heels on the sabbath or, as in story of the Leper, offers a touch that heals?

In closing, we are here friends to learn to live by God's rules, not ours. What is the saving faith aligned with those rules? The exact same faith that heals... *"faith born of love."* (AC 31). That is a faith born more from tables than from walls. We can call that table fellowship, or Communion, or Eucharist, or Holy Supper. We can also call that table simply this - the rule of God in the round with the right kind of apple in the middle.