

The Unliveability of the Lie

Imaginary Gods vs. the Real God | Pacific Church of Irvine

DAY ONE The Lie, Up Close

Last week we talked about something that has been running underneath a lot of the conversations in this series. Before there are imaginary gods, before there is confusion about what a human being is, there is the lie.

Romans 1:24–25 “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. Amen.”

The exchange Paul describes is a specific one. We took the truth that God is God, that we are his creatures, that we were made for him and are dependent on him for everything that matters, and we traded it for the lie that we do not really need him. That there are better substitutes. That we can find what we are looking for in created things, things God made, things that exist inside the world he designed, rather than in the God who designed it.

What I want to sit with today is the word "exchanged." This was not forced on us. It was a transaction. A choice. We looked at what God was offering and decided we wanted something else more. We wanted what we wanted, more than what God wanted for us. And so we reached for it.

I think most of us can recognize that pattern in ourselves. Not as a single dramatic decision but as the accumulated weight of a thousand smaller ones. The job that became more important than anything God might say about it. The relationship we needed to work out so badly that we stopped asking whether it was healthy. The version of ourselves we were building that quietly became the thing we were most committed to protecting.

None of those are dramatic moments of rebellion. They are ordinary Tuesday decisions. But underneath each of them, if we are paying attention, is the same exchange. Our desire over God's truth. Our read on things over his. The creature over the Creator.

The reason this matters is not to produce guilt. It is to produce clarity. The lie does not feel like a lie from the inside. It feels like reasonable choices in pursuit of a good life. Naming it for what it is, clearly and without drama, is the beginning of being able to do something about it.

REFLECT

- Where in your life have you most consistently chosen what you wanted over what God said? Not in a dramatic way, just in the ordinary rhythms of your week?
- What created thing are you most tempted to treat as though it can deliver what only God can give?

DAY TWO **My Truth**

There is a phrase that has become one of the more common expressions of the lie in our culture, and it sounds reasonable on the surface. "My truth." As in: I have my truth, you have yours, and nobody should impose one person's truth on another.

The appeal of that framework is real. It sounds like respect. It sounds like space for people to be different from each other without being wrong. And in a culture that has seen real harm done in the name of enforced conformity, the instinct to protect individual experience makes sense.

But there is something quietly contradictory at the heart of it. The person who says "my truth" is usually not offering it as one option among others. They are saying: this is how things actually are for me, and you need to respect that. Which is a claim about reality, not just about preference. It is, in fact, a fairly aggressive truth claim, dressed up in the language of humility.

I have noticed something else about it. The same culture that insists all truth is personal and relative tends to treat certain truths as non-negotiable absolutes. The ones connected to identity, to sexuality, to inclusion. Disagree with those and the response is not "well, that's your truth." The response is something much more like moral outrage. Which suggests that the "my truth" framework is not really a philosophy at all. It is a way of protecting the things we have decided matter most, while refusing to be accountable to anything outside ourselves.

Titus 3:3 “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”

Paul is not describing monsters here. He is describing ordinary people who organized their lives around their desires and ended up somewhere they did not intend. Foolish. Deceived. Enslaved. Those are strong words for what starts as something as ordinary as deciding that I am the final authority on what is true for me.

The problem with "my truth" is not that it is immoral. The problem is that it is unlivable. A life built on shifting personal preference, on truth that bends to serve my desires, cannot hold. It cannot give me a stable foundation for my identity, my relationships, or my sense of what matters. It gives me permission to do what I want, but it cannot give me a reason to believe that what I want actually matters.

The freedom it promises turns out to be a smaller room than the one it claimed to be opening up.

Titus 3:4–5 “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

The alternative to "my truth" is not a set of rules imposed from outside. It is a Person who knows us better than we know ourselves, who made us and loves us and offers us a truth that is actually large enough to live in. Not a truth that accommodates my desires, but a truth that can bear the weight of my life.

REFLECT

- Where have you caught yourself treating truth as something that should accommodate your desires rather than something you accommodate yourself to?
- What would it look like, in a specific area of your life right now, to submit your read on things to God's?

DAY THREE **Something Larger**

There is a hunger that most people feel at some point, and it is hard to name precisely. It is not just the desire for more stuff or more success. It is something more like the sense that there should be more. That what is visible and immediate and measurable is not the whole story. That somewhere underneath the ordinary routines of life is something that actually matters, permanently, in a way that goes beyond this particular moment.

The philosopher in me wants to call that a religious instinct. The Bible has a more specific name for it.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

God has set eternity in the human heart. In every person made in his image, which is every person. We are the only creatures on earth who sense that our lives should add up to something beyond themselves. The only ones who ask whether what we do matters not just now but forever.

Genesis 1:27 “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Being made in the image of God means, among other things, that we are built for more than a lifespan. We are built for meaning that outlasts us. For purpose that is larger than our own story. For something that will still matter after we are gone.

The lie cannot satisfy that hunger. It can offer experiences and achievements and relationships, and all of those are real goods. But none of them can reach the place in us that is asking the larger question. They are finite answers to an infinite longing. And the person who has been honest with themselves knows this. The trip was wonderful. The promotion felt meaningful. The relationship brought real joy. And underneath all of it, the same question was still there: is this all there is?

I have watched people arrive at places they worked toward for years, and the arrival was real and good, and it was also not the thing they were actually looking for. Not because the thing was bad, but because the hunger it was answering was too large for any created thing to fill.

The philosophy of the moment says: only the material is real. God is not real. Spirit is not real. There is no meaning beyond this life. That is a devastating set of ideas to hand a young person, not because it is offensive but because it is obviously false to the experience of being human. We were made with eternity in our hearts. A philosophy that says there is no eternity cannot account for that longing. It can only tell us to suppress it, which is not the same as satisfying it.

The eternity God set in our hearts is not a problem to be solved. It is a clue. It is pointing us somewhere. And the place it is pointing is not toward the next thing the lie is offering. It is toward the one who put it there in the first place.

REFLECT

- When have you felt that "is this all there is?" feeling most acutely? What were the circumstances?
- What does the eternity in your heart seem to be reaching for right now? What would it look like to bring that longing to God rather than to a substitute?

DAY FOUR **The Dead End**

There is a particular kind of disappointment that hits harder than ordinary disappointment. It is the disappointment that comes when you have done everything right, by your own definition of right, and it has not been enough. You worked hard. You built something. You got the things you were working toward. And then you sat with what you had built and discovered, quietly and a little devastatingly, that it did not reach the place you needed it to reach.

Solomon knew that disappointment better than almost anyone who has ever lived.

Ecclesiastes 1:2–4 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.”

The man who wrote those words was not a failure. He was not a dropout or a person who never had the chance to find out whether things would work. He was a king. Wealthy past the point of imagination. He had built great construction projects and planted beautiful gardens. He had an army. He had thousands of horses. He had accumulated everything that the ancient world considered evidence of a life that had gone well.

And then he sat down and wrote the word "meaningless" over all of it.

Solomon uses a phrase throughout Ecclesiastes that I find clarifying. "Under the sun." Life under the sun is life without reference to God. Life bounded by what is visible, measurable, achievable within the frame of a human lifespan. And his conclusion, after living as fully under the sun as it

is possible to live, was that a life lived entirely under the sun cannot satisfy the soul that was made for what is above it.

This is not just a Bible observation. It is one of the more consistent findings of human experience. There is a French phrase for it, "l'appel du vide," the call of the void, though the feeling I am describing is different. It is the quiet voice that shows up after the achievement, after the acquisition, after the arrival, and asks: was that it? The voice that the lie has no satisfying answer for.

I do not think this is meant to produce despair. I think it is meant to produce direction. The dead end is a piece of information. It is telling us something true about the nature of the road we have been on. And the appropriate response to a dead end is not to push harder in the same direction. It is to turn around.

Solomon's conclusion, at the end of all his exploration, was not sophisticated. It was simple: fear God and keep his commandments. Not as an obligation but as the only frame of reference large enough to make sense of a human life. The frame that comes from above the sun, not below it.



Ecclesiastes 12:13 “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.”

The dead end is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a more honest one.

REFLECT

- Have you ever arrived somewhere you worked hard to reach and found it less satisfying than you expected? What did that experience tell you?
- Is there something you are currently "under the sun," working toward primarily within a frame that does not include God? What would it look like to bring God into that frame?

DAY FIVE The Vineyard

Jesus told a parable that his original audience found outrageous. I think we should find it a little outrageous too, because it is about us.

Luke 20:9–15 “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.” But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. “This is the heir,” they said. “Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”

The parable is simple enough on its surface. An owner plants a vineyard, rents it to farmers, and sends for his share of the harvest at the right time. The farmers respond by beating the messengers. When the owner finally sends his own son, they kill him too. The audience hearing this story was outraged. Obviously, the tenants were wrong. Obviously they deserved consequences. Obviously the owner had every right to take the vineyard back.

And then Jesus turns and makes clear that the parable is not about ancient Israel. It is about the human heart. It is about what we do with the life God has given us.

God gave us the vineyard. He made it, furnished it, placed us in it, and entrusted it to us. And he asks, at harvest time, for what is rightfully his: our obedience, our trust, our acknowledgment that the vineyard belongs to him and not to us. And what we consistently do, in a thousand

ordinary ways, is what the tenant farmers did. We quietly claim the vineyard as our own. We decide that we are the ones who get to determine the terms of our existence. What we value. What we pursue. What we owe to whom.

This is what the sermon calls the sin of entitlement. Not entitlement in the small cultural sense of expecting things without earning them. Entitlement in the deeper sense: the conviction that we have the right to be the final authority on our own lives. To define our existence. To determine our values. To use what God made however we choose, because we have quietly concluded that it is ours and not his.

The most sobering part of the parable is not the tenants' violence. It is their reasoning. "Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." They were not confused about what they were doing. They understood that the son represented a legitimate claim on something they wanted. And they chose to eliminate the claim rather than submit to it.

I recognize that logic in myself. Not in dramatic form, but in the smaller, quieter moments when I know what God is asking and I decide I have a better idea. When I treat the vineyard as though the owner has gone away permanently and the lease has transferred to me.

The gospel's answer to this parable is extraordinary, because it uses the same elements to tell a different story. The son who was killed did not stay dead. The owner did not press charges. Instead, through the death of the son, the inheritance that the tenants tried to steal became available to anyone willing to receive it as a gift rather than take it as a right. The vineyard is still his. But he is offering us a place in it not as tenants who owe a debt but as children who share an inheritance.

The lie says the vineyard is ours. The gospel says it is his, and he is giving it to us anyway.

Titus 3:4–5 “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

That is not a concession. That is grace. And the only appropriate response to grace is to stop trying to own what was never ours, and to receive what we could never have earned.

REFLECT

- Where in your life are you most tempted to act as though the vineyard is yours? In your work, your relationships, your time, your body?
- What would it look like, practically, to acknowledge God as the owner this week in a specific area where you have been acting as though you are?