

01/13/19

Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1-16

**When You've Failed to be Your Brother or Sister's Keeper**  
**Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

In the *Book of Genesis*, it only takes two people, Adam and Eve, for there to be fear, anxiety, mistrust, and a failure to accept responsibility for one's actions. It only takes four people, from the same family, to have the first murderer and the first murder victim. It goes to show how ancient is the human failure to properly handle conflict and disagreements, and emotions like anger, jealousy and envy. Conflicts between people are as old as humanity; the only difference from this ancient story to the present is our enhanced ability, because of advanced technology, to kill more people from less personal distances. Listen to the sad story of two brothers from *Genesis 4*:

"Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.' Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, '**Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?** If you do well, will you not be accepted? **And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.**'

"Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; **am I my brother's keeper?**' And the Lord said, '**What have you done?** Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden."

In last week and this week's scriptures from *Genesis 3* and *4*, we hear the first questions in the Bible. The serpent asked the first question in the Bible in *Genesis 3:1* asking Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" His purpose was to cast doubt on God and God's Word. The second question is in *Genesis 3:9* where God called to Adam asking, "Where are you?" God's purpose was to seek out and be in relationship with Adam and Eve. God's still seeking and calling for us today. The first question asked by a person in the Bible is found in *Genesis 4:9* where a man asks God about our relationship to each other. In reply to God's question, "'Where is your brother Abel?' Cain said, '**I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?**' And the Lord said, '**What have you done?**'"

In *Genesis 4*, God continues to reach out to God's rebellious children. Ever since Cain, every generation has questioned how we ought to relate to our brothers and sisters especially if the "other" is different than us. Are we our brother or sister's keeper, or not? Do we love them or hate them? Accept them or reject them? Assist them or ignore them? Trust them or view them with suspicion? What if they hate us, or are different from us? Cain and Abel demonstrate that living with God's other creatures, specifically other people, is difficult. Throughout the Bible the struggle of living with "the brother" is a troubled but crucial part of human history, especially in *Genesis* where we meet Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. In Jesus' parable in *Luke 15*, there are two prodigal brothers. There's an old Irish saying, "To live above with the saints we love, that would be purest glory. But to live below with the saints we know, ah, that's a different story."

The trouble begins when God has regard for Abel's offering and not for Cain's. We're not sure exactly why, perhaps because Abel brought of the first of his flocks and offered the best parts while Cain only brought some of the fruit of the ground not necessarily the first or the best. Maybe this story is coming to us from those who were shepherds and moved with their flocks, and didn't like farmers and those who were beginning agriculture, taking up land, and telling them to keep their grazing animals away. However, this is all conjecture; we're not told why in the story. We don't even know how Cain knew that God had no regard for his offering. If you listen carefully, you can almost hear Cain complaining to his mother about God's unfair treatment; and Eve giving voice to the universal mantra of all mothers which has been passed down in every age and culture ever since... "Life isn't fair."

What is revealing is Cain's response—his offering to God is unacceptable and God knows that Cain is on the verge of both anger (*Why are you angry?*) and depression (*Why has your countenance fallen?*). Clearly something is going on inside Cain. So the Lord tries to encourage him, "**If you do well, will you not be accepted?**" The verse that is at the heart of this scripture is "**And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.**"

The desire of God is to accept Cain and the Lord tries to help him by teaching him and guiding him. Part of how we master sin is by hearing God's voice and obeying God's command. We do this through reading and meditating on the Scriptures, prayer, and spiritual direction. Cain hears God's voice directly, but he doesn't follow God's invitation and warning. This is a statement of choice—we have the capacity to master sin, God is trying to help—the Lord is concerned: "This is the way it is with sin, Cain, I'm telling you to help you cope with reality." The giving of an offering is external. Our motive for giving is internal. **The internal issue for Cain appears to be that he despises his brother enough to kill him.** God warns Cain that sin is like a predatory animal ready to strike. God's warning in *Genesis 4:7* is echoed in *1 Peter 5:8*, "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour." Sin is not just a breaking of rules; sin in the Bible is portrayed as an active, malevolent, oppressive force ready to ambush Cain, Abel, you, and me. Sin is lethal. We must be on guard and alert—there is danger to Cain in how he handles his anger and depression.

But the Lord gives Cain and us a key thing to remember regarding sin, “You must master it,” or in the King James Version, “Thou mayest rule over it.” Sin, desiring our downfall and death, need not have its own way. It can be ruled. It can be mastered. American author John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* is built around this very theme, of “You may rule” (Hebrew, *timsel*). Steinbeck writes, “It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness, to throw oneself onto the lap of the deity, saying, ‘I couldn’t help it; the way was set.’ But think of the glory of THE CHOICE! That makes a man a man. A cat has no choice, a bee must make honey. There’s no godliness there. These sixteen verses are a history of mankind in any age or culture or race. This is a ladder to climb to the stars...You can never lose that. It cuts the feet from under weakness and cowardliness and laziness...I feel that I am a man. The soul is always attacked and never destroyed—because THOU MAYEST.” Steinbeck understood how much hangs on this word to Cain—its invitation, challenge and promise.

The power of sin is so great that after a direct word of challenge and promise from God about the threat of sin and Cain’s ability to rule over it, Cain still goes out and gets ambushed by sin and then ambushes his brother Abel and kills him. Cain has not ruled over sin, but has been ruled by it. The power of sin is frightening. We still see that power at work in the world every day in similar acts of murder, violence, apathy, and indifference towards the needs of others.

The rest of Genesis chapter four sounds like a court case. When Cain asks, “**Am I my brother’s keeper?**” he knows the answer and he’s haunted by the fact that he refused responsibility as a brother. He let sin get the best of him. He has taken a human life, which is traumatic and can haunt people for the rest of their lives. God answers Cain’s question with a question, “What have you done?” When God asks these kinds of questions, I don’t think it’s because God doesn’t know, but because the Lord wants the person being questioned to truly reflect on what he or she has done. With Cain, the killer fears being killed and casts himself on the mercy of God. The mercy he receives is a mark asserting both his guilt and God’s grace. We don’t know what the mark was. However, it announces to all both the guilt of Cain and that Cain is safely under God’s protection. This is the two-sidedness of human life—we place ourselves in jeopardy because of our disobedience and failure to master sin, yet God’s grace and love are so great that the Lord still watches out for us. The acknowledgement of guilt and the reality of God’s grace come together for Cain in the mark. For us they come together in the blood of Jesus, which was shed because of our failure, but which, at the same time, is the mark of God’s love and mercy for us.

So the story of Cain and Abel moves from God’s invitation to responsibility and the power we have of choosing to master sin; to Cain’s refusal to choose; to finally his banishment. How do we master sin so that we don’t have to face a similar destiny? First, by realizing that sin is an active malevolent force that seeks to harm us. Second, by discovering that life with our “brother” is not lived in a void but in relation to God. Mastering sin is tied to our relationships with others. The Lord says to Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” Cain could have turned to his brother and been reconciled, but Cain chose not to do well. He chose to kill. And his life and relationship with God were never the same. And his brother was gone. How do we respond when we’ve failed to be our brother or sister’s keeper?

The love of God is such that God doesn't let go of the unreconciled one. God gives Cain a mark signifying both shame and security. Would we be more willing to take the risk of working for reconciliation and looking out for our sisters and brothers if we had a big unmistakable mark on our forehead (like a flashing, neon "U") for all to see every time we needed to be reconciled to a brother or sister? I wonder how many of us would have one this morning. Imagine if we had a scoreboard with the Top Ten Unreconciled List.

How do we master sin? How do we master anything? Through practice. What do we have to practice to master sin? As Christians, first we recognize that we need the help of Jesus to practice reconciliation and love. If you don't practice to master the piano, your life won't be destroyed. But sin is an active force, lurking and looking for us, which means we better learn to practice love and reconciliation. Otherwise, like Cain, we too may be overcome by negative emotions and harmful actions. We face choices every day to be ruled by sin and to give in to anger, fear and aggression, or to rule over sin and seek to live in love and unity with our brothers and sisters. Have we been more like Cain or more like Christ?

When people tell me that Paul's words in *Romans 12* or Jesus' words in the "Sermon on the Mount" are not practical or realistic in the so-called real world, my response is to ask, "How well has the alternative been working for most of human history right up to the present day?" Shall we be more like Cain or more like Christ? That's a choice we have to make. While the *Old Testament* has many stories of fighting and warfare, there's no mistaking in the *New Testament* that Jesus and his followers pursue a different path; a path of non-violence. It is still the road less traveled.

I hope we all will choose to respond to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" with a decisive, "Yes." May we do the same in our lives each day so that when the story of our life is told it may reflect more of Christ than Cain.

**Prayer:** Merciful God, help me to master and rule over the sin that would seek to defeat me. I am a new creation in Christ, and I am not a slave to sin or anger. May Christ have greater control of me as I yield my life to Him. Change my heart, O God, and enable me to see other people as you do, as my sisters and brothers and part of your family. Refresh me with your love and help me to walk by the Spirit each day so that I always strive to be more like Christ than Cain. In Jesus' name. Amen.

**Blessing:** "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." *1 John 3:18*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. It is very traumatic to think that the first family also suffered and caused the first murder. In *Genesis 4:9*, Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Why is it difficult or challenging living with our brothers and sisters, both those within our own families and those who may be quite different than us?
2. Cain is on the verge of both anger (Why are you angry?) and depression (Why has your countenance fallen?). Clearly something is going on inside Cain. So the Lord tries to

encourage him, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Why are anger and depression so potentially dangerous?

3. Each person handles anger differently; some common responses are suppression, silence, denial, or explosion. Why do we struggle to handle and express anger appropriately? How does it look to handle anger in a Christian manner? What do you do to help yourself or others cope with and handle anger appropriately? What would you like to do differently with anger in your life?
4. "And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." God warns Cain that sin is like a predatory animal ready to strike. What does that tell us? How have you primarily thought of sin?
5. The Lord gives Cain and us a key thing to remember regarding sin, "You must master it," or in the King James Version, "Thou mayest rule over it." What have you found helpful in mastering sin in your own life?
6. When Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Why do you think God answers Cain's question with the question, "What have you done?" Why doesn't God directly accuse Cain?
7. Compared to *Genesis 3*, can you see a pattern in God's response to Cain that is similar to how Adam and Eve were treated? What does that tell us both about God and the consequences of sin?