

“Be Your Brother’s Keeper”
Genesis 4:1-12

Each day’s news brings more reports of disorder and devastation, riots and rage, break-ins and brutality, chaos and cries for justice. Especially painful are stories of people hurting other people, using violence, taking life. Sometimes, worst of all are the personal stories that don’t make the news but scar our souls.

Where have you encountered the woundedness that is rampant in this world? What scars do you carry? Who has wronged you? Attacked you? Lied about you? Hurt you? Stolen from you? Cost you something great? [P] What do you do now? [P]

As our text begins, Adam and Eve have become the parents of Cain and Abel. Later on, both bring offerings to God, but Cain’s is refused. Why? And why does the question still matter?

The problem was not that one was grain and the other blood. The key is in the Hebrew word translated “offering” (*minhah*): *a gift offered to a superior as an expression of gratitude for his goodwill*. The “offering” is to be given in gratitude, not obligation; in worship, not routine.

And that’s how Abel made his “offering.” Heb. 11:4 says, *“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.”*

“By faith” means “as a result of faith.” Abel’s offering was superior to Cain’s, for it was offered in faith, not works. In gratitude for God’s grace, not to earn his favor. It is the difference between the person who comes to church because it is Sunday & you’re supposed to, and the person who comes to worship to give back to the God who has given everything to them.

We see what our neighbor gives; God sees the heart which gives it. Vs. 4 – He *“looked with favor”* on Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. “Favor” means “grace.” God

received by grace Abel's offering of humble gratitude, but he could not receive Cain's offering of self-righteous performance.

So, Cain's attempt to justify himself failed. His deeds fell short. He felt himself a failure and became "*very angry*" (v. 5); the Hebrew says that he "*burned.*" His self-righteous anger was such that sin was "*crouching*" at his door (v. 7). We see the equivalent to this in 1 Peter 5:8, where we are warned, "*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8).

God warns Cain: "*You must master it*" before it's too late. But he did not. 1 John 3:12 offers us another warning: "*Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother ... Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or a sister is a murderer ...*" (1 Jn. 3:12-15)

Cain and Abel. One hurts, and one is hurt. Why? And which are you today?

When You're Cain

Cain is every man, every woman. We all have an Abel. We all have someone in our lives whom we've hurt. Think back to the last time that was true for you. Why did you do it? Why did you repeat that gossip, tell that lie, speak that slander, hurt that person?

There is a cycle to sin – it started with the Serpent's lies to Adam and Eve, it slithered its way into the life of Cain, and it has poisoned us ever since. So what does this cycle look like? Here it is: 1. Satan starts with your so-called problem or need ("Would you look at that fruit"); 2. He questions God's provision ("Did God really say you can't eat it?"); 3. He minimizes God's punishment ("Surely, you won't die"); 4. He replaces God's position ("Your eyes will be open and you will be like God").

So, what about this cycle of sin in our life? What's the problem, the need that the Enemy is trying to convince us needs addressed? What's the thing that starts the cycle by which we hurt others? [P] Here are the leading candidates. And ask yourself:

"Which is tempting me today?"

Revenge. Cain convinced himself that Abel was his problem—if Abel’s offering had not been superior to his own, none of this would have happened. We hurt those who hurt us and feel justified in revenge.

Justice. This is Abel’s fault, and he deserves what he gets. *We* hurt others, but they deserve it, or so we think.

Reward. Cain wins, Abel loses. We’ll see whose offerings are acceptable, now that there’s only one to give them. We steal to get what we want and justify our action by the belief that they won’t miss it, or that we need it more.

Power. Nietzsche called the “will to power” the basic drive in human nature. Sometimes we hurt people just because we can. Cain was older and presumably stronger than Abel, and he *could* kill his brother, so he did. The “golden rule” in our *fallen* world is simple: the one with the gold makes the rules. We don’t even know why we did it. We just wanted to, and we could. [P]

We’re all susceptible. We’re all Cain. When last did you hurt someone for these very reasons? G. K. Chesterton was asked to write an essay under the title, “What’s wrong with the world.” His submission: “*Dear sir: In response to your question, ‘What’s wrong with the world?’ I am.*”

The first step to stopping a sin like Cain’s is understanding why you’d commit it. The first step to stopping the sin cycle is understanding where you are being tempted *to hurt* today. Which serpent is whispering in your ear right now?

When You’re Abel

Now let’s reverse things. You’re Abel—you’ve been hurt, and you’re tempted to respond with revenge, justice, reward, or power. You’re ready to perpetuate the sin cycle. What *should* we do when Cain hurts us?

First, be honest about your *pain*.

Listen to your life. Don’t cover up your hurt, or excuse it, or pretend it didn’t happen. You really were the victim of slander, or selfishness, or rage. Identify the person who

hurt you, and why he or she did it. If you won't admit your pain and your desire for revenge, justice, reward, or power, you'll *react* before you can respond. You'll say or do something which you'll regret for a long time. Remember that you cannot un-ring a bell. Be honest about your hurt today.

Second, trust God's *provision*.

Know that He knows and cares: "*The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!'*" (v. 10) Your Father knows that you are hurt, and by whom. You may think that no one knows the injustice you've suffered, but One does. He knows when you have been hurt, and by whom, and why. Any father hurts with his children, our Father most of all.

Third, respect God's *punishment*.

God acted for Abel. He says to Cain: "*Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth*" (vs. 11-12).

I looked up the subject of Divine Vengeance this week and discovered 91 biblical references. Here's one ex.: "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them*" (Deut. 32:35).

Before Paul later quoted this verse, he instructed us, "*Do not repay evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord*" (Romans 12:17-19).

There are certainly times when God uses the legal system to bring about his justice. That's why we have laws dating back to the Ten Commandments and punishments in place to fit the crime and deter its recurrence. And yes, the legal systems of this world and of our country fall far short of justice. For this world is broken. We are broken.

Which is all the more reason why *we* are to give the person who hurt us over to God and his justice. God has promised, and God is faithful ...

Last, give God His *position*.

Be sure He's Lord of your life, whether he is Lord of those who have hurt you or not. Don't let their sin cause you to sin. Don't let their hate draw you into hate. Be sure you are right with God, and humble before him. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Rom. 3:23). And *the wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* for all who believe (Rom. 6:23). As you give the one who hurt you over to God, be sure Christ is on the throne of your heart. Surrender to His supremacy, including in the realm of needing to be right; needing to be vindicated.

And when you cannot seem do this, ask God to help you. Jesus said: "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me ... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:11, 44). If you cannot pray for those who have hurt you, pray for God's help to pray. And it will be given to you.

Corrie ten Boom's story is familiar to some of us. Her family was taken by the Nazis. She was forced to watch her sister Betsie's slow death in a concentration camp. Of all her family, she alone survived the Holocaust. In *The Hiding Place*, she tells how it all came back one unexpected evening:

"It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

"He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!' His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

“Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? ‘Lord Jesus,’ I prayed, ‘Forgive me, and help me to forgive him.’

“I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

“As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that *it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on Christ’s. When he tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself*” (The Hiding Place).

Today, we have encountered the first human question in the Bible: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” [P] What is your answer? [P] Who is your brother today? Who is your sister? In a world where the rage of Cain still runs rampant, what will you choose to offer? How will you choose to live?

[Communion – see next page]

Communion – We were once enemies with God and with each other.

Ephesians 2 – *“You were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions ... ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.”*

Colossians 3 – *“Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God ... ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God ... ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: evil desires and greed ... ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander ... ¹¹ For here there is no Gentile or Jew, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.”

As those reconciled to God and to each other, raised with Christ, and united in His Spirit, we come to the Lord’s Table, where we receive His grace and are strengthened to live not in anger, rage and malice, but with compassion, kindness and humility ...