

“God Save us from the Heart of Cain and the Pharisee”

Genesis 4:1-15; Luke 18:9-14

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Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Old Testament reading, Scripture presents us with the story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain murdered his brother Abel in cold blood (Genesis 4:8). In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks to us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Both talk about human pride and that God does not think according to the way that comes naturally to human beings. Therefore, being on the right road in relation to God requires that we not immediately think that we are in the right when we simply do what may come naturally to us. When we look at Cain, we also see that he is an illustration of what the prophet Jeremiah said about the natural human heart in its being corrupted by sin: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV). The story of Cain and Abel also teaches us about giving of offerings, sacrifices, and good works to God.

So, there are Cain and Abel. They are brothers. They are sons of Adam and Eve. Cain murders Abel.

Do you get dismayed sometimes over murder and violence that takes place today among human beings? And maybe you think: “What is this world coming to. Things sure seem to be so much worse than they ever have been.”

But here God’s word tells us that the first murder in human history took place within the family of Adam and Eve, right at the beginning of the human story. Murder has been in the human heart and the potential of humanity since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell from the goodness in which they were created. Murder, whether in desires and intentions, words, or deeds, lurks within the natural human heart, and will until the end. But what drives it?

There could be many things that drive murder. In the story of Cain and Abel, the driving force is human pride. In other words, human nature corrupted by sin does not fear, love, and trust in God, as it ought; and, therefore, it does not love its neighbor as itself, as it ought. Human pride loves itself more than anything. This is why human nature as it comes into this world is spiritually dead before God in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Therefore, God must make us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4). In other words, God works repentance in the heart (humility) and faith; faith in Christ who is the atoning sacrifice for sin by which God speaks to us forgiveness and gives us new spiritual life in humility, truth, and desiring the well-being of our neighbor.

So, there are Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer. He tilled the ground to produce crops. Abel was a shepherd of sheep (Genesis 4:2). They each brought an offering to the LORD from their labor. Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the ground, presumably of grain (Genesis 4:3). The Scripture doesn’t say anything more about this offering. It was just an offering of grain. What I mean is that the Scripture doesn’t say how much grain, or whether this grain was the first-fruits; the best, as it would pertain to grain; or a little, or tons? Scripture doesn’t say. It just says an offering from the fruit of the ground.

Abel brought an offering from his herds. Scripture does say more about Abel’s offering. It was the firstborn of his flock. He gave what first came into his hands to God. This indicates that God had the first priority. It says that his offering consisted of the fat portions. This means the filet mignon, the best and choicest cuts of meat, we could say. He gave those to God (Genesis 4:4).

Now the Scripture says that the LORD “had regard” for Abel’s offering but “had no regard” for Cain’s (Genesis 4:4-5). This means that the LORD thought highly of Abel’s offering but did not think highly of Cain’s. “Hey Abel. That was a really good offering. Hey Cain, not so much.”

Now I think we want to know why the LORD had regard for Abel’s offering and not Cain’s. And using our natural sense of justice and common sense, maybe we think we know why. Abel’s was just a better offering, when we compare the two offerings to measure their worth. He gave the filet mignon. Cain just must have given something cheap from the grain and not what would be an equivalent in value to the filet mignon. Awe, yes, that must be it.

But we need to be careful here, lest we end up thinking along the lines of works-righteousness, which comes naturally to our natural sense of justice and common sense. We must think about this in a manner that is consistent with all of Scripture; that is, consistent with the heart of the Christian faith and the way God relates to us. The issue here is faith. Abel gave his offering in faith. Cain did not. The Apostle Paul states it clearly: “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Faith here would mean honoring God as God. It means giving the offering to the LORD for the LORD’s sake, just because the LORD is the LORD; just to give praise and thanksgiving to the LORD because of the LORD’s goodness, faithfulness, and love. In this faith, Abel’s offering isn’t about Abel at all, it is about the LORD. Faith is full of the LORD.

For Cain, it could have been that he was really trying to impress the LORD with his offering. This could have meant that Cain offered an offering that was truly impressive, though in terms of grain. But he did not do it for the LORD’s sake, as if he thought so highly of the LORD, but for himself. He made the offering just so the LORD would be impressed with him; so that the LORD could look at him and conclude: “Wow, Cain. You are such a great guy.”

But that is not faith in the LORD. Whatever “faith” and religion Cain had was full of himself for his own glory, not full of the LORD and the glory of the LORD’s grace, faithfulness, and kindness.

Abel gave a valuable offering yes, and certainly his faith would have led him to do so, if he could, if he had the means. But his offering was freely given. And the faith in which he gave it was not for his own glory, but for the glory of the LORD in thanksgiving. His faith was full of the LORD.

Cain may have given a mediocre offering, if we were to measure its worth compared to Abel’s, or maybe he gave a very valuable offering, if we were to measure it. But it doesn’t matter, because Cain gave it in that faith which is full of himself; for his own glory. He gave it in this way: “Hey God look at me and praise me.” Abel gave it in this way: “Praise be to God and thanksgiving; look at the LORD, His goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and grace.

We must be careful when we observe the offerings people make, lest we fall into glorifying men and not God. For two offerings of equal worth could be given, one in faith and one in unbelief. The offering given in faith is received by God because it was given in faith. The offering not given in faith is not received by God, because it was not given in faith. We cannot tell whether an offering is given in faith or unbelief by the value of the offering. So we must be careful not to be in awe of the value of the gift given by others.

Then there is this. One dear Christian whose faith is great, which God sees, gives little in terms of the amount, though it may also be of great sacrifice to that person. On the other hand, the Pharisee gives great sums, for his own glory and power and privilege. The offering of little value is infinitely more valuable in God’s eyes. The offering of the Pharisee not so much (Luke 21:1-4). The difference is not the value of the offering, but faith, which God sees. God glories in

that faith which glorifies Him solely for being God, and for His goodness, kindness, and grace in Christ Jesus.

Cain's faith in himself is why he got so angry with the LORD and murdered his brother. Oh God can be so difficult sometimes. He just doesn't give us the honor we think should be coming to us because of what we give. Then wounded human pride says: "It's not fair. I am just as good as Abel. My offering is just as valuable and came with just as much sacrifice and hard work as my brother Abel's. God is mean and not fair in not saying well-done to me in my offering. I am just as good as Abel, even better."

And then the heart whose pride is wounded gets nasty and feels justified in becoming so. God did not recognize and praise the little ego. So the little ego becomes angry, in the full fury of self-justification, and turns on his brother. God just doesn't do it the way the little ego thinks it should be done.

Now we should talk about Abel too, to take comfort. The gift given in faith, for God's glory, in sincere and grateful praise for what He has done for us in Christ Jesus, out of His grace, really is pleasing to God. But this is not because of the value of the offering, but because of faith in God's grace in Christ and the spirit of thankfulness in which it is given. And in this giving faith seeks no reward, no honor, no privilege, no power, no "I've got something coming for my glory in return;" but only God's glory, in thankfulness and praise.

So, Cain talked to his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). "Hey Abel. God's peace. Why don't you meet me in the field? I would like to show you something cool."

What he showed him was a rock crashing down on his skull, or his own hands reaching up to grab his throat. What he showed him was a face full of hate and violence to snuff out his life. Why? Because his pride was wounded. God did not honor his pride like he thought God should.

After Cain did this, he had an evil conscience. One of the aspects of an evil conscience is to think that what one has done to one's brother, others are going to do in return. Legalistic human nature corrupted by sin thinks that the evil one has done to another, one too deserves from the hands of others. So, Cain says to the LORD, "whoever finds me will kill me" (Genesis 4:14).

The LORD rendered a just judgement against Cain: "When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:12 ESV). But even in the midst of this horrible and ugly scene, the LORD remembers mercy and grace—grace because Cain did not deserve mercy. He put a sign on Cain so that no one would take vengeance on him for slaying his brother (Genesis 4:15).

Now Jesus shows us the poor tax-collector, who dared not even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. He beat his chest for his sins. The only claim he makes in the presence of God is "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). The Pharisee laid claim to his own glory and measured himself against others: "At least I am not like other people, and this rotten tax-collector. I thank God that I am better than them" (Luke 18:11-12).

The tax-collector went down to his house justified; that is, his sins were forgiven, and he was right with God. The Pharisee did not. Whoever humbles himself and claims only the forgiveness of sins given by God's grace in Jesus will be exalted. Whoever exalts himself, laying claim to his own worth, will be humbled (Luke 18:14).

May God grant us humility and faith like this tax-collector and Abel, as He freely gives Jesus to us for the forgiveness of sins, so that our hearts receive God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus with praise and thanksgiving. For through His grace and mercy in Christ Jesus, we enter into His glory by grace through faith in the forgiveness of sins, which God gives freely on account of Christ. Praise be to God, and to God alone be the glory in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.