

(Knowing God's Way) 10. Lessons From Cain and Abel

by Zac Poonen

The sermon explores the contrasting heart attitudes of Cain and Abel, emphasizing the importance of humility and the dangers of jealousy in our relationship with God and others.

Scripture: Genesis 4:7, Proverbs 18:21, Galatians 6:7, Philippians 2:8, 2 Thessalonians 2:10, Hebrews 11:4, James 3:16, James 4:6, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Heart Attitudes", "True Worship"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the story of Cain and Abel, highlighting the importance of heart attitudes in worship and the acceptance of offerings by God. He emphasizes that God looks at the heart, not just outward actions, and that true worship comes from a broken and contrite heart of faith. The sermon delves into the dangers of pride, jealousy, and anger, drawing parallels between the story of Cain and Abel and the spiritual battles believers face today. It concludes with a powerful message on the consequences of ignoring God's warnings and the need for humility and self-judgment in the Christian walk.

Transcript

Reading: Genesis 4:1-12.

This is the first incident recorded in the Bible after Adam and Eve were turned out of the garden of Eden.

Here were two children brought up in the same home, under absolutely identical circumstances, with the same background the same teaching concerning the true God etc., And yet their lives turned out so differently. Jesus said that when He comes for His Bride, two can be in one bed, and yet one may be taken and the other left behind. Two can be fellowshiping in the same church, one will be taken and the other left behind.

That was how it was with Abel and Cain, one was accepted and the other rejected. Both were religious. Both brought offerings to God, but their heart attitudes were different and that made all the difference. Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.

The difference between Abel and Cain was NOT, as we have commonly heard, that one brought a lamb (and shed its blood) and the other brought an offering of the produce of the ground. They were not presenting a sacrifice for their sins but an offering to the Lord. And it was quite permissible (even under

the law of Moses) to present to the Lord an offering of "the produce of the ground" (Deut.26:2,10). The exhortation in Proverbs 3:9 is to honour the Lord with the first of all your produce. In Abel's case this happened to be the firstlings of his flock, because he was a keeper of flocks. In Cain's case this was the fruit of the ground because he was a tiller of the ground (Gen. 4:2). Each of them brought the firstfruits of their respective occupations. In this matter, there was nothing to find fault with in Cain.

Acceptable Sacrifices

But the sacrifices of God are a broken and a contrite heart, that is aware of its own nothingness and helplessness (Psa.51:17). That is what Abel had, and what Cain did not have. And that is why it is written, "The Lord had regard for Abel, and (therefore) for his offering But the Lord had no regard for Cain and (therefore) not for his offering either (Gen.4:4,6).

Faith is the helpless dependence of the soul upon God and it was "by faith that Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain" (Heb.11:4). Therefore Abel's gifts were acceptable to God.

There is a great deception in the teaching that what made the difference between Abel and Cain was that Abel offered blood and Cain did not. The application of such teaching is that what makes a man acceptable to God is his presenting the blood of Jesus before God. It is almost as though the way the man lives and the condition of his heart (whether broken or not, whether with faith or not) makes no difference. All he does is plead the blood of Jesus as though it were some type of magic charm, and he gains acceptance with God. This is a lie and many are being deceived by it.

The blood of Jesus cannot be claimed by anyone and everyone. It does NOT say in the Scriptures that the blood of Jesus can cleanse anyone and everyone from their sins. No. That is a subtle perversion of Scripture. What the Scripture does say is that the blood of Jesus will cleanse all those "WHO WALK IN THE LIGHT AS GOD IS IN THE LIGHT" (1 Jn.1:7). To walk in the light of God, one must have a broken and a contrite heart, as Abel had. Only then can one's offering be acceptable to God.

If a man says that he trusts in the blood of Jesus, but has a proud and arrogant spirit, God will resist him and oppose him (1 Pet.5:6), just like He did Cain. It is only the humble who receive grace from God (Jas.4:6).

Our offerings of worship, prayer and service are acceptable to God ONLY if they come from a broken and contrite heart of faith (humble dependence on God). It is not the fluency of our speech or the efficiency of our service that God looks at, but rather the attitude of our hearts. This is the first lesson that we can learn from this incident in Genesis 4.

From the days of Cain and Abel and on until the end of time, the sacrifices of God have always been a broken and contrite spirit. He does not change. His laws remain the same.

God would not have accepted Cain even if Cain had brought a lamb and shed its blood, for his heart was proud and lifted up.

Humility of heart is the first step to salvation. Then we can come into the light and ask for the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from all sin.

It is only the humble of heart who can shout Paul's shout of triumph, "If God be for us, who can be against us" (Rom.8:31), because God is only on the side of the humble. The proud cannot say that, for God is

against them. Anyone who has high thoughts concerning himself, as Cain had, will end up like Cain too, even if he keeps claiming the blood of Jesus. "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal.6:7). And that law applies universally without respect of persons.

Jealousy and Anger

There is a further lesson that we can learn from this incident. Cain was jealous and angry with Abel, because he had gone so well with Abel (for God had accepted him).

How do you feel when you find it going very well with someone whom you are closely associated with? When you find a fellow-brother who is preaching victory over sin and you find that his life is consistent with his preaching - that there is no evidence of anxiety or anger or impatience in him, but on the contrary, a perpetual spirit of triumph and joy and peace; and in contrast your own life is miserable and gloomy and defeated (because you do not believe that a life of victory is possible) - Do you then find a root of envy creeping in and a desire to see him fall somewhere so that you can gloat over his failure and drag him down in the eyes of others? That was the same spirit that drove Cain.

Do you feel happy when some trouble befalls that brother? Does his perpetual victory irritate you and make you angry? That attitude of yours, is the spirit of Cain, not the Spirit of Christ; and the sooner you recognise it for the foul, slimy thing that it is, the better.

Sin was crouching at the door of Cain's heart when God sought to warn him. Sin wasn't a hundred miles away but at the door of his heart pressing for entrance.

Cain was NOT thinking about doing something good. He had not yet thought to do something evil, for in that case, sin would have been inside the door already. He had just kept his heart empty, swept and unoccupied with anything good. That opened the way, as Jesus said for eight wicked spirits to occupy it (Matt.12:43-45).

There was no joy in Cain's life, for such a man cannot truly rejoice. His face was fallen, and gloom and depression and anger were written across it. He could not bear to see it going so well with someone else.

Cain was angry with God and with Abel. An extra reason for his anger was that it was going well with someone younger than him. It would perhaps have been tolerable to see it going well with someone older, but it was unbearable to see it happening to someone younger.

Before you throw a stone at Cain, consider: Can you truly rejoice when you see brothers who are much younger than you, going ahead of you spiritually? Do you seek their good so zealously that you are eager to see them go ahead of you. If so, then you have the mind of Christ Who could rejoice that His disciples would do greater works than He Himself did (Jn.14:12).

But "where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing" (Jas 3:16). Yes, where the spirit of Cain is found, every imaginable evil will also be found, sooner or later.

God's Warning

And yet the amazing thing is that God does not leave even such a man without giving him a warning. Look at the father of the prodigal son who was willing to go outside and invite his elder son to come in. So God came to Cain. As Jesus would later love even Judas Iscariot right up to the very end, so God loved Cain

and did not desire his destruction.

"Why are you angry?" God asked him, "if you do well, surely you too will be accepted" (Gen.4:7 marg.) If Cain came with a broken and a contrite heart, he too would be accepted. There is no partiality with God.

God has no favourites. His laws are unchanging and those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Even Jesus, His own Son, was not treated in any special way by the Father. It is clearly written that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, because He HUMBLED HIMSELF (Phil.2:8,9). Not because He was God's Son, but because He humbled Himself as a man. He lived as a man under the same laws of God that we live under, as human beings. God treated His own Son just as He would treat any other man. Therefore we dare to believe that what God did for Jesus He will do for us too. If we humble ourselves, we too will be exalted - but not otherwise. If we do well, our face too will be lifted up and become radiant with joy.

"But," God warned Cain, "if you do not do well, then sin is crouching at the door." Like a lion waiting to devour him, sin was close to Cain's heart. He himself did not probably realise it, but God warned him. Cain was already jealous and angry, but something worse was waiting outside the door. The spirit of murder was waiting to possess Cain. But God told Cain that he must master sin This has always been God's desire for man and it is mentioned right at beginning of human history - THAT MAN MUST MASTER SIN.

But that warning of God went unheeded - just many do not heed God's warnings in Scripture today. Cain did not respond to God's call. Instead of humbling himself under the mighty hand of God, he exalted himself and gave in to the desires in his flesh. Thus God became His enemy.

God orders our circumstances so that we begin to see the corruption in our flesh. If Cain had been an only son of his parents, he would never have seen the jealousy that there was in his flesh. But the presence of Abel and the fact of God's acceptance of Abel brought out the evil in Cain's flesh - for Cain to see clearly, if he wanted to. Cain should have judged himself instead of being angry with his brother. Then he would have been saved.

We ought to be thankful that God brings us into situations with other people, that bring out what resides in our flesh, for us to see clearly. If we heed those warnings from God and humble ourselves and judge ourselves, acknowledging the truth about ourselves that God has brought forth into the light, then it can go well with us. Otherwise sin waits outside our door too to devour us.

We should be thankful too that we can be part of an assembly where the light of God shines brightly, so that all that is fleshly and soulish is brought to the surface for us to see. It would be terrible to belong to an assembly where we can sit for years and never discover the evil that dwells hidden in our flesh. Those who do not seek for fellowship never have any light on their self-life, and thus remain in blissful ignorance of their condition and never make any progress. When God shows us something concerning ourselves we should be thankful for the light.

When God gives us a warning through the exhortations of the brothers and sisters in the church, we should take it seriously, or we too can end up like Cain who ignored God's warning.

Freedom from suspicion

In Abel, we see a contrast to the wicked attitude of Cain.

When Cain invited Abel for a walk in the fields (Gen.4:8), he went along with him unsuspectingly. Abel did not suspect that Cain was jealous of him - or else he would not have gone out with him. How simple in heart Abel was. He had a broken and contrite heart and did not judge his brother Cain. What an example for us to follow!

How often even those with whom it is going well in other ways, are suspicious that others are jealous of them or that they are thinking bad thoughts about them or trying to push them down etc., We may have nothing against others, but may yet suspect that others are having things against us. Thus we also are defiled.

Abel did not even suspect one who was out to murder him. What a good heart he had! That is the type of heart we need. There are two cliffs on either side of the narrow way. One is the cliff of jealousy and the other is the cliff of suspicion - and we can fall over either cliff and reach the bottom. Abel was neither jealous of Cain nor suspicious of him. This is the path we are to walk in relation to our fellow-believers. It is better to die like Abel with an unsuspecting heart than to live with a heart contaminated with suspicion.

The one who suspects and judges others of being jealous or angry, is a busybody in the matters of others, and thereby proves that he himself does not have a broken and contrite heart any more than the one who is jealous and angry.

If we have lowly thoughts about ourselves, like Abel had, then we will not even think that others could be jealous of us. We would then be so insignificant in our own estimation that we would not imagine that anyone could possibly be jealous of us.

Abel rejoiced in God's acceptance of him. But that did not lift his heart up in pride against Cain. No. He would not compare himself with Cain neither would he be a busybody in Cain's life.

The end of Cain

Cain was too proud to accept God's warning and so the sin that lay crouching at his door came inside his heart, mastered him and destroyed him. Finally, it was Cain who was destroyed, not Abel - for Abel went straight into God's presence, whereas Cain went out from the presence of the Lord for eternity (Gen.4:16).

When God warns us through an exhortation in a meeting or through a word that comes to us through an article, if we think, "Oh, I don't need that exhortation," then we have begun to walk "the way of Cain " (Jude 11). "The pride of our heart has then deceived us" (Obadiah 3).

And when the exhortation has come from a brother who is much younger to us in the Lord, then the temptation is even greater to treat it lightly. It is then that God shows us, if we have ears to hear, that we love ourselves more than we love the truth. And if we continue along that path, God will one day send a delusion into our lives so that we are deceived concerning the truth (2 Thess.2:10,11). It is dangerous to ignore exhortation. That is the surest way to be end up being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and to depart from the living God, like Cain did (Heb.3:12,13).

We may not kill someone with a stone, as Cain did, but we may do so with our tongues. The Bible warns us that the tongue has the power to kill people (Prov.18:21). We can murder a man's reputation, his character and many other things besides - without even touching his body. And, alas many who call themselves believers do just that, week after week. And at the end of the week, they go so innocently to the Sunday meeting, to worship God, as though they had done nothing wrong at all during the past week.

But God says to them, "The voice of your brother's character (which you have slain) is crying to me". But they don't hear that voice, because their conscience has become hardened. Like Cain, they end up as tramps and wanderers spiritually, never making any progress into the likeness of Christ, and never being built into the Body of Christ (Gen.4:10,12).

Truly, sin crouches so very closely at the door of our hearts. The only way of escape is by keeping our minds occupied with good things and praiseworthy things concerning our fellow-believers, and not with their faults and weaknesses (Phil. 4:8).

Abel and Cain are the forerunners of the two systems described in the closing pages of the Bible - Jerusalem and Babylon, the Bride and the Harlot. One system is spiritual and the other religious (like Cain). One follows Jesus and the other follows the Pharisees.

He who has the hope of Christ's coming and of being taken up when He comes will certainly purify himself day by day, and seek to go down and humble himself more and more (1 Jn.3:3). The remainder will go on "deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim.3:13).

He who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit is saying.

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