

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Genesis 4:1-15

Sermon Title: "Giving What God Wants Us to Give" (Misuse of Funds Series)

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Cain and Abel. The first murder that ever occurred in human history.

This is how we remember the story: Cain killed Abel. We might not remember why he did it, but Cain did it. We then associate the name Cain with evil – Cain sounds evil to us. Cain becomes a dark, menacing creature that lurks in the shadows, ready to draw us into the darkness. I finished a Spanish novel not too long ago, in which Cain is a magician who can grant your every wish, but there is a price to pay for his services. It turned out that this Cain character in the novel was Satan, and he wanted the life of a young boy who was used as a pawn for somebody else's gain.

Cain seems to be that character who is always trying to get something he never earned. He always demands something from people, because they can get for him what he cannot get for himself.

But before the murder, we begin with a simple story of two brothers, Cain and Abel. They are the

children of Adam and Eve, Cain being the oldest. Abel is the keeper of sheep, or a shepherd, and Cain is a tiller of the ground, or a farmer. So both men tend the fields, one with the animals and the other with plants.

Now it must be noted that when Eve gave birth to her first child, she gave thanks to God for him. She blessed her son with the name Cain, because she praised God for helping her bring forth another man. Cain sounds like the Hebrew for bringing forth or acquiring. Eve and Adam were grateful to have acquired a son – Cain was a great blessing. Abel was a wonderful blessing, too, but we aren't told what his name means. Genesis doesn't tell us that Eve made a big deal about him being born. Of course, both sons were loved by their parents, and each contributed to the work of the entire family. Yet Cain is a special man. He was the first man born of human beings, and he was the apple of his mother's eye.

Things go wrong, however. Both men wish to honor God with their lives, so they present sacrifices to God before they are even mandated to do so by God's law. It will be centuries and centuries later, when Moses receives guidelines for sacrifices on Mount Sinai. Abel brings the firstborn of his flocks and its fat. This was mandated in Exodus 34. Cain brings the firstfruits of his harvest. This was mandated in

Exodus 23. Both sacrifices were acceptable to God during the time of Moses and beyond. But in the first stages of human existence, what is more acceptable is the offering of the firstborn from the flocks and its fat. Abel wins out. Cain loses, and becomes ticked off and dejected.

What went wrong here? Why does God accept Abel's offering and not Cain's? Both men are freely giving of themselves to God. Both are honoring God with their livelihoods, which is what we all should do. It is too difficult to probe the mind of God here, however, and try to explain why one sacrifice was not as pleasing as the other. The point of the story is not to probe God's mind and make God change his mind to suit our pleasures. The story is told to make us aware of what God requires of us, and to bow our will to him.

The sacrifice of Cain is not inherently terrible. At some point God will accept *firstfruit* offerings with *firstborn* offerings. But for these men, in their time, God seems to only require firstborn offerings. This is how God wants to be worshipped. God has every right to tell Cain and Abel and us how God wants to be worshipped. We don't change God's mind. We don't force God to accept something less from us. God

wants us to honor him, and there is a way to do so, so we need to get on board.

According to the Collins Online Dictionary, the misuse of funds is to be careless with the monies a person is in charge of, to use such funds incorrectly and even dishonestly for one's own gain. According to US law, it is a felony to misuse the funds of a company or another person. Now, we might not be responsible for handling the company's money as accountants or treasurers, but we are placed in charge of handling the things God gives us. Everything that God gives us is a gift, which is to be used for God's greater glory. We do just that with joy and thanksgiving. There are times, sadly, when we handle God's blessings selfishly, and try to find ways to use them for our own benefit. God doesn't like that.

This is the season for us to consider stewardship. This is the time to observe the crops we have cultivated, and to consider the sort of harvest we want to gather for God. In the coming weeks we will look at people who were given much from God, but who misused their funds, intentionally and dishonestly, out of self-interest.

Cain is the first character we are looking at. He had something to give to God, which was not what God

wanted him to give. God wanted what Abel was giving, so Cain could have had some farm animals to the side or the sole purpose of sacrificing them; or he could have paid Abel for a farm animal or two for the purpose of giving it to God. Cain had options to give to God what God required, but he decided to covet what his brother had. He consciously chose to become bitterly jealous and hateful toward his brother, to the point of killing him. All because Cain did not want to submit his will to God's will.

God requires us to give of ourselves. God requires that we set aside our firstfruits and firstborns, and dedicate them to him as thank offerings. What are those firstfruits and firstborns? It is for each of us to ask God, and discover them. We could all give the same thing, and determine that it is what God wants of us. We can say money is the firstfruits and firstborns. We can say time is our sacrifice. Talent, possessions, intellect, whatever: we could agree on one or two things that we should give, and just give them. But are those the things God wants from us? Wouldn't God require something from you or me that wouldn't be the thing he requires from the other person?

There is one person who has the money. He has

managed his money very well and can afford almost anything. God may require of that man 10% or more of his income as a sacrifice. Like a Warren Buffet of sorts, God may want that man to give what he can, so not all his money is used for selfish gain. He has that resource, which we all might not have, so his sacrifice might be more money.

Or, another person may have great talents. She has great communication skills. She can organize people without much effort, make plans for everyone to share, and put all the pieces together to create a wonderful program. God may require her talents to use for the good of God's church. She doesn't have money like the well-to-do man does, but that is not the firstfruits and firstborns that God calls her to bring forth. God may want that woman to give what she can, so not all her talents are used for selfish gain.

Do you see what is happening here? We all have something to give to God. Some of us work great with children and some of us work great with youth. Some of us have extra money to donate, and some of us have extra time. Some of us love to organize programs such as VBS, Kids' Club, and Life Groups, and some of us love to accomplish that which is already mapped out.

Each one of us has a firstborn or a firstfruit to give to God. Have we prayed to God for that which we

should give? Cain never got the chance to ask. He never inquired, “God, what do you really want me to offer you, because the first cut of my harvest is not enough?” God, what do you really want us to offer? What we are offering might not be enough, or even the right thing. How do you want us to worship you, O Lord, with what you have given us?

Don't be like Cain and assume anything. Is it money, is it talents? Is it time, is it possessions? What is it? God wants to delight in something we have, something God has already given us. Offer it as a sacrifice with joy and thankfulness, and keep giving it so that our worship of God grows.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's series, *The Lord of the Rings*, there are two relatives who were Hobbits and who loved each other dearly, Sméagol and Déagol. You could not separate the two relatives and great friends. As they were fishing together one day, Déagol came across a gold ring of immense beauty. As he observed the ring, turning over in his fingers, Sméagol caught a glimpse of the ring and fell under its powerful spell. He had to have it. Sméagol had to possess the ring, and let it become the only reason for his existence. He fought his beloved Déagol, and ended up strangling him. The murder of Déagol became a great scandal

among the Hobbits, and Sméagol the murderer became an outcast. Sméagol then became Gollum, who coughed up his name, whose body was as scaly and as twisted as his brain.

Cain is no different than Gollum. Cain ignores God's counsel to do good, to do as God wills. He focuses on Abel and the precc-ious gift that he gives to God. Cain chooses to eliminate his younger brother by strangling him, or hitting him repeatedly with a stone, or however he did it. He, whom Eve had praised God for, is known as the first murderer in history. His brother Abel is forgotten for his faithful offerings of firstfruits.

We cannot begrudge the gifts that others give to God. We cannot see what others have, and become jealous over them, just because we aren't giving such things, too. God calls us to give something to him, and they might be the same things, or they might be different things. God knows what we ought to give – God calls us to give according to his plans for our lives. So we give them, and we celebrate together all the gifts we are able to give.

In our Mark 12 passage today, Jesus comes across people putting money into the temple treasury. The rich pour copious amounts of money in the treasury, and thus make it grow fat. But a poor widow

approaches, and all she can give is a few pennies.

Imagine this story from the poor widow's point of view. She could have been jealous of those fat cats with their long, flowing robes and their sparkling complexions, pouring loads of money into the temple treasury. And there she is with moth-eaten old rags hanging off her body, dumping in just a few coins. She could have been embarrassed by what she was giving, and not given her two coins at all. However, Jesus calls her a great blessing. "I say to you," Jesus tells his disciples, "this poor widow put more in the treasury than those who have given to it, because she didn't give out of her abundance but out of her poverty."¹

Focus on what we can give to God. Pray about it – take it seriously. Give with great joy. We praise God for all that which we and the other person is able to give: time, talent, money, whatever. All of it adds up. All of it benefits our community, benefits others with whom we wish to share Christ, benefits the entire kingdom of God. Not one penny can be withheld. Not one talent or thought or second is wasted.

God desires all of it to be placed before him in worship. And we are blessed.

¹ Mark 12:43-44.

Assurance of Pardon:

In Christ, we are offered a new design for living: open hearts, abundant forgiveness, yearning to serve others, desire to be one with God. The old is gone, and a new life has begun. Accept Christ's sacrifice, and be healed of your sin. Through him you and I are forgiven - thanks be to God. Amen.