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Understanding Our Times: The Story of Cain and Abel

Genesis 4

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Interestingly enough, the very first story that the Bible tells after Adam and Eve were ushered out of paradise was the story about what we are willing to give as an offering to God that reflects either our desire to worship the creature or the Creator. That's what we want to talk about this morning.

We've called this short three-week series *Understanding Our Times*. We talked about the need to understand our times in order to be good stewards of the message of the gospel, which is our calling as a church. We've reminded ourselves that the mission of the church is not to be popular, but rather to be faithful. We've reminded ourselves that all these issues that concern us are actually, at the end of the day, symptoms of one core issue, and that is this issue from the early part of Genesis — whether we worship the creature or the Creator.

In order to make it practical, we tried to take this idea into one particular issue that is quite confused in our culture, and that's this whole topic of homosexuality. We've talked about the importance of not compromising and standing on the truth, but also being people of love and kindness and compassion and finding that biblical balance.

I think what's relevant to us as Christians is to realize the culture has changed dramatically. If you are still thinking in a couple of election cycles, everything's going back to the way it used to be, I think you are sadly mistaken. This train has left the station, and it is way down the tracks. As Christians, whose calling is not to stand on issues, but to be stewards of the gospel, we have to be more thoughtful; we have to be more strategic; we need to get two or three steps ahead of the game. You don't change the issues by focusing on the issues because it's merely a symptom. You change the issues by focusing on people and stewarding the gospel where people have a meaningful encounter with the resurrected Christ. If you are serious about changing things, that's where the focus has to remain. At the end of the day, those are symptoms of the core.

Once we rebel against God, once we choose to worship the creature rather than the Creator, we start to take God's good gifts and we start to use them to be a replacement for God Himself. Once we distance ourselves from God and we choose to worship the creature rather than the Creator, we try to find a new identity in our sexuality. We find a new way to experience pleasure in our sexuality. So we are trying to now hide by taking what God meant for good and actually using that as a substitute for our relationship with God. It's equally true and this is the story in Chapter 4—that as God gives generously to us, rather than finding our delight and significance and pleasure in Him, we choose to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and now we try to find our significance in our money. We try to find our significance in pleasure. We try to find our safety and our security, in our bank account, in our success, in our stuff. This then begins to show up in what we are willing to give back to God.

So this is the very first story out of Eden. Adam and Eve had two sons: Cain and Abel. The text tells us that Abel was a shepherd; Cain was a farmer—both noble callings. Both of them brought an offering to God. Obviously there were some dialogue that must have gone on that wasn't recorded in the text in terms of what's expected from them. But all we were told is that Cain and Abel both brought an offering. Abel's offering was accepted; Cain's offering was rejected. So we are left with

the question: Why? First of all, the text makes sure that we understand that Abel was a shepherd; Cain was a farmer. This was what they had to give out of or to give from. We know from the Old Testament law, for example, that grain was a perfectly acceptable offering. In both cases, the same Hebrew word is used for offering. Probably the biggest hint is: the text says that God **had regard for Abel and his offering, but God did not have regard for Cain and his offering**. In other words, the problem was not *what* they brought; the problem was the *heart*—the difference between the heart of Cain and Abel. The text says that Abel brought **his firstlings** and the **fat portions**. That would be biblical language to say he brought the absolute best of what he had. What did Cain bring? Cain brought some grain—carries much more the idea of maybe some leftovers, but he just brought grain. The whole point had to do with the problem of Genesis 3—whether one chooses to worship the creature or the Creator. And the choice you make will be evident by what you're willing to give back to God. From Genesis 4 on, there are these two stories—these two paths represented by Cain and Abel—those who worship the Creator, those who worship the creature.

The light of God shined into Cain's heart and exposed his desire to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and Cain didn't like it. So he got mad because people don't like it when the light exposes the truth in the darkness. God doesn't whack Cain along the side of the head. He actually responds with patience like a loving daddy and says, "Cain, what is the deal? All you have to do is change your heart." In other words, in New Testament language, "Repent and choose to worship the Creator rather than the creature and everything will be fine." But there are sobering words here because God says, "But if you don't, then you need to understand that **sin is crouching at the door**." It's a word that would be used to describe a lion sneaking up to attack. "And if you don't deal with it, it is going to deal with you. It will master you." This is the great moment of truth for Cain. Will he worship the Creator or will he worship the creature? So how does Cain respond? All we know is that Abel worshiped the Creator and Cain didn't like it. Either you repent and change, or you extinguish the light—and Cain chose to extinguish the light. There's just simply a sin condition of someone choosing to worship the creature rather than the Creator. Once I've made that decision, I will do anything to ultimately have my way.

So Cain kills Abel, and God comes knocking. Cain responds with kind of a smarty-head answer, but God responds back and clearly holds him accountable. No matter how sincerely you believe you can be your own god and there is no consequence to your choices, this text reminds us that is not true. And in this moment, it was painfully evident to Cain: God is God and I'm not, as God handed down the sentence. As a matter of fact, when Cain got his sentence, he immediately has this awareness that God's God and I'm not because he says, "Wow, this is too much for me and it's going to be too dangerous and they're going to kill me, and, God, do something!" which is clearly an acknowledgement, "You are God; I'm not. Now I've got a real problem on my hands."

I have this conversation with people a lot. People choose to practically function as their own god, and then they make a total mess out of their lives. And then when life gets really hard as a result, they wonder, "*Why doesn't God just make it all better? Why doesn't God just wave His magic wand and make everything okay*?" As if somehow God's been unfair in this whole deal. There's a reality when we make a total mess of our lives that suddenly we realize, "Hey, I'm not God; I'm not adequate to be God; now I've made a mess of things." And somehow in the midst of that, there is this acknowledgement that, "God, you are God; I'm not." It's just now I've made a mess of things before I finally get to the point where I'm willing to acknowledge that.

You can tell me all day long how very spiritual you are and how much you love Jesus. But whether you choose to worship the Creator or the creature is going to show up in what you choose to give back to God as an offering. What you do with your time, what you do with your talent, what you do with your treasure is an accurate reflection of whether, on the most practical levels of your life, you worship the Creator or you worship the creature. At the end of the day, all these issues that plague our culture root back to this one core issue. What we need as a nation is not a new government; it's not new politicians; it's not a new Supreme Court—really doesn't have much to do with any of that. What we need as a nation is repentance and revival. And that is not the work of the government, and it is not the work of the Supreme Court. It is the calling of the church as we wisely steward the life-changing message of the gospel. A culture changes one person at a time, and maybe that one person this morning is you.

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