

Speaker 1:

If you'd like to turn there. And this is one of the oldest stories in scripture, of course. It's amazing how these stories are still very relevant for us today. I'll be reading verses one through 10.

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you so angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

May the Lord at his blessing upon this reading of his holy word, help us to hear it, understand it, believe it, and then live in response to it. Let's be in attitude of prayer together.

Lord, we do thank you for this time of worship that grounds us, that reminds us of who you are and reminds us of who we are and who we are in you. Thank you already for the gift of this worship service, the experience we've already had by the gift of your spirit. And now, Lord, I thank you for this opportunity to preach your word to these my friends and your servants, Lord, a task I cannot do on my own strength, oh no. I humbly ask Lord that you would give me the strength to do it. So Lord, please speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us do receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ name we pray. And all of God's people said...

Well, the United Methodist Church had him, but we lost him. He wanted to start his ministry with this particular denomination, but we said no. It was not our finest hour. But he kept his head high and decided he would start his ministry somewhere else. His name, William Booth. The ministry, The Salvation Army. That's right, that ministry that all of us know so well with one goal in mind, reaching out to the least and the last and the lost. And whenever we hear that bell ringing outside the stores at Christmas time, we are reminded of the magnitude of that ministry.

Well, the true story is told. Toward the end of Booth's life, he was invited to speak to a large gathering of people from the Salvation Army and they were excited about the event. Their founder was going to speak and the Salvation Army Band was going to play. But the truth of the matter was he was really too sick to speak and so he wanted someone to speak on his behalf. And so a representative came to his deathbed and said, "Well sir, what would you like me to say to this group?"

And Booth told him, he wrote it down and left. Well, the night of the event came and the auditorium was packed with people and they kept shouting his name, "Booth, Booth, Booth, Booth, Booth." Representative came up to the podium and he quieted the crowd and he said, "I'm so sorry he can't be here today. He is too ill. But he wanted me to give you a message." And it was quiet and they all leaned in. And he took out that piece of paper and he said, "This is what Mr. Booth wanted me to say to you, 'Others.'" And he sat down.

The great theologian, Paul Tournier, once said that every Christian really needs two conversions. One out of the world and then one back into it. I certainly believe that the Christian faith is not just about

personal piety, even though oftentimes that seems the only thing that we get. It's not just about reaching up to God and reaching into ourselves. No, I submit to you today, church, that the Christian faith is not complete until our reaching up and reaching in leads us to reach out to other people.

While our story today reminds us of that, oh, one of the oldest stories recorded in scripture, the Cain and Abel story, the first recorded murder in all of scripture. And the reason for that murder, well, it's the reason, well, it's old as God's green Earth. In fact, people are still killing in the name of this particular thing. And I'm talking about jealousy. Oh, jealousy. Cain was jealous of Abel. He thought God preferred Abel. And so Cain got angry, Cain got jealous, and he killed Abel. And after that awful event, God approached Cain and said, "Where is your brother?" And Cain flippantly and rudely replied to God, now mind you, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

It's amazing how relevant the story still is for us today because the same dialogue, church, goes on for us each and every day. Even now, God will not let us rest. God will not relent, God will not let go. He continues to ask us, especially his church, the question, "Where is your brother? Where is your sister?" Which reminds us that we are responsible for each other. As Nathan just sang, "We belong together." We are responsible for one another.

Unfortunately, as some of us know all too well, it seems even in the church and especially in our culture today, we seem to live by the spirit of Cain's reply, "I don't know, am I my brother's keeper?" Which is another way of saying, and people still make that statement today, "I don't have any responsibility to other people. Mind your own business. I relinquish my responsibility to other people."

I don't know. I don't need to tell you today, church, I know you know this all too well, that we live in a very individualistic society. We have a culture that seems to have one goal, one goal in mind, personal consumption. People aren't people oftentimes, they are a means to an end at all costs. And we see that around in society. Oh my gosh. And some of course take on the loan ranger attitude, leave me alone. I haven't hurt anybody. I'm keeping to myself. I'm asking for nothing and I'm giving nothing.

Well, folks, this is not so surprising because I'm going to say a word you don't often hear, but I'm going to say it because all of this represents and shows the well-worn path of sin. Or in the south we say, "Sin." That's right. You don't hear that word a lot, but I tell you at the very beginning, it all starts, this sin business, with self-centeredness. That's where it all began. Remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? They wanted what they wanted. They didn't think they needed God. They wanted to be in control. They wanted it at all cost. Well, they got it. And we know the story.

You see, this sin business has twisted everything where God has called us to love people and to use things. But now often it seems we love things and we use people. Oh my gosh. And the church needs to be reminded of this right now because we got to do something about it. Where is your brother? This is why the world is so unhappy because our spiritual wires are all crossed. We're not not created to live this way.

So if Hell is a state of complete self-centeredness, and that's one definition of Hell, the only way out of that misery is to be pulled out by God to reach other people, to reach out of ourselves and help other people and hear God say to us today, "Where is your brother? Where is your sister? Where is your brother? Where is your sister?" Where God continues to ask that question that pulls us out and reminds us as a church, reminds us as followers of Jesus Christ, what we're called to do, who we're called to be.

[inaudible 00:09:53] Bishop Henderson was reminded of this one time this lesson. Bishop Cornelius Henderson was, well, used to serve in the North Georgia Conference, but then he was, well, they ruined him. They made him a bishop. Just kidding. And he served the Florida Conference. Well, he tells us of the time when he was invited to a very elite black tie affair that was going to honor President Jimmy Carter.

He was all excited. He got his tuxedo. He looked so good. He got the best seat. He wanted to see President Carter and he wanted President Carter to see him. And so the night of the event came and there Bishop Henderson was in his best. And they waited and waited for President Carter. Then someone got up to the podium and said, "He's on his way. He's very sorry, he's running late from another event." Well, finally they said he had arrived. And Bishop Henderson, well, he straightened his tie and pushed his chest out high, all proud. And then all of a sudden, President Carter came into the room and Bishop Henderson couldn't believe his eyes.

President Jimmy Carter was in overalls and covered and dirt and sweat and gunk. He had just come from building a habitat house and they had to finish. And there he was. And Bishop Henderson said as he stood there in his tuxedo, he said he had never felt more convicted. Where is your brother? Where is your sister? Where are they?

Church, I want to tell you something and I don't want you ever to forget it because it's the most truthful thing you'll ever hear me say from this pulpit. The closer we get to Almighty God, the more he draws us closer to other people. That is the truth. And the Bible puts it this way. "It's impossible to say you love God and then hate your brother or sister." In other words, you can't go around saying how close you are to God and how pious you are, how often you read scripture and then turn around and treat other people like trash. It's a counterfeit faith. It's impossible to love God without loving other people. Need to hear that today.

Tony Campolo often reminds people of this in sometimes very profane ways. Campolo is a Baptist. I have baptist roots. I don't know if you can tell today by my preaching. But he has baptist roots and he is a Baptist. And he said one time in his church he had a deacon that wouldn't deac, whatever that means. Very depressed, miserable, and quite frankly, people were getting annoyed by him he was so miserable. And finally Campolo said, "You know, got a problem. You know what you need to do to get out of your misery? Go out and help somebody. Go out and get out of yourself and help someone." Well, he did it. He found a nursing home close by to his church and he found a man to go visit just about every week, and he did. Just about every week he would go to a chapel service and hold that man's hand and they would have these kind of conversations. The man's mind wasn't really all there, but he would visit.

One time he went to that nursing home and his friend was not in his usual place. And the nurse told him that he had taken a turn for the worst. And so he went to his hospital room. And this deacon was surprised to see all these tubes and wires connected to his friend. He was dying. And that deacon, he reached for that man's hand and prayed for him that God will receive him into his everlasting arms. And the deacon squeezed his hand and the man squeezed the deacon's hand and opened his eyes.

Well, the next day he went by again and found out the man had passed away shortly after the visit. Well, he was really upset, and then he ran into a middle-aged woman who is the man's daughter. And when she met him, she said, "Oh my gosh, are you the person? You cannot believe what you did for my dad. Because of you, he died in peace." He said, "What in the world are you talking about?" "Oh my gosh. Well, about every time I would come to see him, he would always say this to me. He would always say, 'You know what? Just about every week Jesus comes by to hold my hand. Every week Jesus comes by and he holds my hand and I don't want to die until he holds my hand again.'"

I don't know what you think being a Christian is, church. There are lots of definitions for it, but I think a pretty good definition for it is this. Being a Christian means being the hands of Christ in this world. It means being the feet of Christ in this world. It means being the mind and heart of Christ in this world.

And Romans 8, oh my gosh, you wouldn't believe the audacious statement the Apostle Paul makes in Romans 8. Get this, if you haven't heard it before, Paul says, "The same spirit that raised Jesus Christ

from the dead, lives and breathes in each one of us as followers of Jesus Christ." Can you believe that? The same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, lives and breathes in each of us.

That means Jesus is chomping at the bit to work through us, to resurrect people's lives, to make them whole and oh, the world so desperately needs it. We live in an age that sociologists like to call the age of the lonely crowd. It means we're with people, but we don't really connect with people. And this is the irony. In this is day and age of all these tools of communication, we got TikTok. Well, some of us have it. We've got Instagram, we've got Facebook, right? We got Snapchat, we got all that. We got email, we got texts, and we're still awful at connecting with people.

I mean, when was the last time you really connected with someone? Do you really want to live? Because I have a hunch some of you do here today. You want to move from success to significance in your life? You want to find out where God is working in this world and be a part of it and be the joyous, happy person that you so desperately want to be? I'll tell you how you do it. Jesus told us how. Here it is. You may want to write this down. Take up your cross.

Now, we hear that phrase a lot in church, don't we? Sure, that sounds like something a preacher ought to say. You sound so holy. Take up your cross. What does that mean? It simply means this, to sacrifice yourself for somebody else. To put your needs aside and wishes aside and make another person a priority. And I tell you this, I've learned that truly happy, joyous people have learned that this is the only way to live. And in every church I've served, I've seen the happiest, joyous people are the ones who have learned this and live this way.

This is why the church is so important. Oh my gosh, this is why the church is so important. I mean, oftentimes I, excuse me, I hear people badmouth at church. That's a popular thing to do to bad mouth the church. And when I hear that you and I think the church is the best thing God has going for him in this world, and if God is going to do something significant, he's going to do it through his church. Amen? Are you out there? I can hear you snoring.

I mean, why are we here? Because I'll tell you this, I say it often and I'll say it again. The church is not a country club. The church is not a civic club. The church is not a recreational club. It's not a free entertainment center. The church is a movement, a movement filled with people who love Jesus Christ and are filled by his spirit. I want to see people changed by his love. We are a movement, church.

We need to be reminded of that. And oftentimes we hear that and cognitively we know that, but my gosh, we need to hear it and put it into our hearts, especially now because the church is the only place that's going to hold us accountable by asking the question, where is your brother? The church is the only institution in the world that's going to remind us of what's most important and how to really live because who else is going to do it? Oh my gosh, we need to hear this word today, especially now.

Ever seen hot coals? This is an old illustration, but a goodie. Ever seen hot coals? You know they stay hot because they stay together. What happens if you remove one piece of coal and put it aside somewhere else? What happens? It gets cold. Well, I'm going to start preaching in a minute. That's what happens. That's what happens, church, when people get into their minds that they can be a Christian without being active in church, without participating in church. And you know what? It seems now in my ministry now more than ever, there seems to be more people who fit into that category in this COVID malaise.

I was talking to a colleague of mine the other day. He said something interesting. He said, "Charlie, I want to be honest with you. If there ever was the perfect, perfect time for some folks to have a perfect excuse not to participate in church and be active in it, it's now. Oh yeah, there's some people who have legitimate excuses. No doubt about it.

There are others. We've grown cold. We've grown cold. There is no such thing as an isolated Christian, mark my words, not in the New Testament. Not throughout Christian history, not now. I mean, you

show me a person who is growing in the faith and active in the faith and doing things for Christ on amazing level who is not root rooted in a local church, a local community of believers. You show me. I'll give you \$200 if you show me some person who fits that category.

I know in many ways I'm preaching to the choir today. You're here, I get it. But maybe the message today is for you to go out and preach it to other people. My gosh, why would any Christian not want to be part of the church? I've often asked that. Why in the world? Because Jesus said in John 14, my gosh, one of my favorite verses in all of scripture, he said, "You will do greater works than me because I'm going to the Father and I will be in you." Can you imagine that? That's doing greater works than Jesus Christ. How is that possible?

Well, you know. When Jesus was here on Earth, he was limited. He could only heal one person at a time. He could only teach groups of people at a time. But when he went to the Father, his spirit dwelled in each of us, so his influence magnifies where he helps millions and millions of people through the Christian Church. And oh how people need this. Jesus wants so bad to reach others through us.

I need you and you need me. We need each other. And that's why you know it's going to come sometime in this message. Eventually it all leaves to stewardship. Amen? Not enough amens on that one.

This week, as I said earlier, a letter went out to all the leaders of this awesome church asking them to pledge to rise up now more than ever. And I know they'll all do their part just like I have done. I've filled out my pledge card with Brandy and we will turn it in because I would never ever ask you to do something I would never do myself. Same is true of our clergy team. And I make no apologies for it. Sometimes some of my colleagues will ask me after they hear a sermon I did on stewardship, "My gosh, you got a lot of courage to preach on money like that."

Why not? We're the only bank account God has. How in the heck can the church be the church without being financially supported? How can we do what Jesus calls us to do without the resources we need? Because what this means, you know what this translates into? You're pledging. You're giving. Your money, it means reaching others for Jesus Christ. So I know you'll do the right thing. I know this year I won't have to cajole and twist arms and make phone calls. You're going to turn your pledge in when you get that letter in the mail and when you get pledge cards, which be in the pews next week.

I read a story recently about a man who went to visit a church for the first time. And he parked his car in the parking lot in a particular space, fairly close to the campus of the church when an angry driver came by and said, "You took my spot. You took my place." I thought, well, this is a friendly church. And the man went into the church building, went upstairs to a Sunday school class, and he went into the room and he sat down on his seat and this man came over and said, "That's where I usually sit. You took my place." I thought, oh, wonderful. What a spirit-filled church.

He thought about not going to worship, but he did. He went into the sanctuary, sat down at a particular pew, and this couple came up, long-standing members of this great church in the story and said, "What have you done? We usually sit there. You took our place." There came time in the worship service where the congregation was praying for the spirit of Christ to dwell. When all of a sudden that visitor, his appearance changed. There was blood on his head and face.

Scars began to appear on his wrists and hands and feet. And a parishioner saw it and looked at him and said, "Oh my gosh, what happened to you?" And he replied, "I took your place." Jesus took our place on the cross, and now he takes his place in our hearts. And what he so desperately wants and needs for his followers to do is to reach out to a hurting world that needs his love and light so badly. It's time to rise up. Start taking this seriously again.

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Let's pray. Lord, we are overwhelmed and humbled by what you've done for us. You did take our place. And Lord to kneel and bow before you at the cross and receive forgiveness of our sins and accept you as our Lord and Savior, oh, it's a wonderful, wonderful event, but it's only the beginning. You want to work through us. You want to show us what life is really all about. We submit to you. We surrender to you. We embrace it, Lord. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.