

## ***Giving by Faith***

Follow as I read **Genesis 4:1-7** and **Hebrews 11:4**, as we look at the story of Cain and Abel, who's an example of one who gave by faith:

*4 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."<sup>2</sup> Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.<sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?<sup>7</sup> 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."*

*And from Hebrews 11:4:*

*<sup>4</sup> By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.*

In a previous pastorate in the US, following what I thought was a good sermon on giving, I was accosted by a young man I had never seen before in my life. He reproached me for preaching on giving, saying that he had been visiting different churches in the city, and that for the past four weeks, every Sunday the sermon had been on the same subject of giving money. Instead of apologetically explaining this was the season when churches were raising pledges for their budgets, I should have suggested the Lord might have been trying to tell him something.

And it's not like I enjoy preaching on giving any more than this young man enjoyed hearing about it, but the gospels are filled with Jesus' teachings on the importance of managing the material, i.e. stewardship. And the giving of Abel's offering should be a positive encouragement to us, as it shows the relationship between giving and our faith, which is vital to our being the people of God.

Isn't it interesting that in Hebrews 11, which lists great heroes of faith, the first example is Abel, whose faith was expressed by giving an offering that was pleasing to God? Since we all have to deal with money and finances, on one level or the other, how we manage the material is vitally related to our spiritual life. For this reason, Jesus said more about money and giving than he said about heaven, hell or even his Second Coming! The young man I just mentioned who was unhappy to hear four sermons on giving would have been unhappy with Jesus' teaching, even in his Sermon on the Mount, where the heart of that sermon has to do with giving by faith and trusting God to meet all of our needs, including the temporal and material (See Matthew 6:1-4;19-34).

Just about every decision in our lives is in some way a financial one. Whether it's a decision to spend more time with our family and less time at work, or to offer years of your retirement doing volunteer work, your decision is in some way a financial one. The decision to live by faith is a financial decision as well. If we have faith, we'll necessarily give, and faith will determine the way we give as well. Scripture is filled with instances of right giving and wrong giving.

Our text says, "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's." We can only speculate how Cain knew that his offering was inferior in the eyes of God to Abel's offering. We know that God commended Abel's offering and that he didn't look with favor on Cain's (Genesis 4:5). God knew the heart of both Cain and Abel. He understood the motive behind their offerings, and he alone could comprehend the level of the sacrifice that each was making.

Just as Jesus watched the giving of offerings at the temple, was unimpressed with the ostentatious gifts of the wealthy and was moved by the sacrificial gift of the widow, so he alone infallibly evaluates every offering and every gift (Luke 21:1-4). The giving of Abel was better than Cain's because it was obviously an act of worship on the part of a man who knew God. He was a man who had a right relationship with God, and his offering was an act of worship.

In his giving Abel was saying God is worthy, first of all, of his obedience. We don't know a lot about Abel's offering, but obviously he sought to please God with his offering. There are a lot of motivational factors behind giving, but the one that pleases God is the motive of loving obedience that says, "I'm giving because it pleases God and I love him." Clearly, giving to the Lord is such an integral part of the life of faith, it would be impossible to be an obedient Christian apart from giving to the Lord, and giving as he directs.

In a church business meeting, a member raised a vociferous objection to the purchase of two brooms to be used by the church custodian. After the meeting the young son of the church's treasurer asked his mother why this church member was so upset over the church's spending \$20.00 on two brooms. "Well, son, look at it this way," answered the wise mother and church treasurer. "You might be upset too if you realized that your entire yearly contribution to the church had been spent purchasing two brooms." People who give by faith truly give and no longer hold ownership of what they have given to the Lord and to his church. They've relinquished ownership of what they've obediently given to the Lord. They realize, like the Macedonian believers, that everything belongs to the Lord, even their very lives (2 Corinthians 8:5).

Abel's gift was better also because it represented sacrifice. This element of sacrifice is what made the offering of the widow's mite so significant in the eyes of Jesus. He saw her gift as far surpassing that of the rich, who were giving out of their wealth (Luke 21: 1-4). In terms of financial value, her gift was

infinitesimal. But in terms of the way God measures sacrifice, her gift was “more than all the others” (verse 3).

The spirit of sacrifice makes us always glad for the opportunity to give, and to prove the maxim, “You cannot out-give God.” This was proved in the extreme case of the widow. Even though she gave all she had to live on, she had grace to trust that God would meet her every need. The law of the harvest is proven again and again in the lives of those who give sacrificially (2 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 6:9). Equal sacrifice, not equal gifts, is what Paul urges the Corinthians to make in their offering to the Jerusalem church (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). Those who have less income share equally in sacrifice with those who earn a higher income. And, as God prospers with material wealth, should he choose to do so, we’re enabled to give a higher amount of our income.

Abel’s offering was better than Cain’s perhaps also because of gratitude. Giving by faith is giving out of gratitude for God’s grace. This is perhaps the cheerful giving God loves (2 Corinthians 9:7). Somehow I think that Abel’s gift was better because he was aware that he owed a debt to the goodness of God. When Paul described the giving of the Macedonians, he said they were well acquainted with the grace of God, and were giving generously and sacrificially because grace was ruling in their hearts (2 Corinthians 8:1-9):

*“For you know the generous act (grace) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9).*

Jesus spoke of Mammon, money, as something more than a neutral commodity of exchange. The material easily gains a foothold in our lives and renders neutrality impossible. We either must follow Jesus as Lord, including being Lord of our money, or we will fall into the grip of the material. And we don’t have to be rich to be in the grip of greed. Those of us who don’t have a lot of it are nevertheless not immune from the sin of loving money (Matthew 6:19-24:1 Timothy 6:3-10).

Giving by faith is blessed for time and eternity. Abel received a divine commendation for his offering. Although God uses our giving, which allows us to participate in his kingdom work, he doesn’t depend on our money or upon anything from us. The cattle on a thousand hills are his, the psalmist reminds us, even as everything is his and he has the authority to reclaim everything he has entrusted to us (Psalm 50:9-12). If we withhold from him, he’ll simply use others and their resources to do his work.

But when we give by faith, we participate in his work and receive God’s temporal blessings. The Genesis account tells us that Cain was angry upon discovering that his gift was unacceptable to God (Genesis 4:5). He might have sensed that his offering was unacceptable because he was not receiving an “immediate

return on his investment,” which is the expectation of many who are giving with a wrong spirit and materialistic attitude. Cain may have been trying to buy God’s favor with his offering, or was bargaining with God, saying in his heart, “God, I’ll give to you if you do thus and so for me.”

I’m reminded of the man who sued his church for the tithe he had given over the previous years. His claim was that the pastor had promised God would bless everyone who would give faithfully to the Lord. He had given regularly and “religiously,” to the church, and yet his income had gone “south.” Notice, I said he gave “religiously” but not faithfully. Faithful giving means giving in and by faith. It is giving that says “I trust God to bless me in any way he chooses to bless me.”

Economic prosperity doesn’t always result in greater giving to the Kingdom. Usually an economic crisis turns people’s hearts to once again fear the Lord and realize our dependence on him to meet our temporal/material needs. Material prosperity tends to draw our hearts away from the Lord with an obsession for material gain. Jesus taught us to live by faith and to trust that the heavenly Father will provide for us our daily bread (Matthew 6:11; 19-34). We can often be disappointed about the performance level of our financial investments, important as they are for our families’ future. Yet, the most secure investment we can make is in the cause of Christ and his kingdom.

As your pastor, however, I appeal to you to be obedient in your giving, not just that we might as a church join him in his mission, but that you and your family might experience the blessings of God. I desire for God to bless and enrich, to provide for and to care for you as he loves to do for those who trust and obey him.

There’s great joy giving by faith, in simply knowing you’ve been obedient, and that the Lord is pleased with your offering. There’s the joy of knowing that God’s working through your gift, and allowing you to join him in his work at home and around the world. I’m glad that when I give to Dale Heights my gifts touch lives in Madison, Middleton and around the world.

The giving of Abel was commended by God, and, as our text says, Abel’s faith continues to speak, even though he’s dead. Because of his obedience, the life of Abel has lasting and even eternal significance. Giving by faith is the kind of giving that God blesses eternally. Jesus admonished us to store up treasures in heaven that cannot be taken from us (Matthew 6:19).

During a presidential campaign in a previous decade, the then-Vice President misquoted a verse from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.” This misquote presupposes our hearts are pure and we’d naturally know where to place our treasures. Jesus says, “*Where your treasure is there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:21); that

obedient giving to the causes of the Kingdom helps to change our hearts, and to draw our hearts toward the Kingdom and away from self-centeredness. You may not at first feel like giving to the Kingdom, but when you obey, your heart is changed and you have joy in giving. As we place our treasures in Kingdom causes, our hearts are bound up with a love for God and a desire to serve him. The more we give to him, the more our hearts are drawn to him, and the more we want to give to him.

Simply because of the way Abel gave his offering, he was inducted into the great Hall of Faith-fame. Though he's dead, he continues to speak. Your offering likewise can be a lasting tribute and monument to faith. I pray that this church and even its property might continue to be a tribute to the faith and the faithfulness of God's people. I pray our ministries and mission endeavors will be a tribute to and an expression of the faith and faithfulness of God's people.

Perhaps a better title to this message would be "Monumental Giving," which is what giving by faith is all about. May our giving let our lives speak after we are gone, to the marvelous grace and goodness of the Lord.