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Genesis 4:6-9

15th Message

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BATTLING THE DEMON OF SIN

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Why do we do the things we do? Why do our kids make such bad choices? They get started at such a young age! We tell little Johnny not to hit his sister Susie, but he goes ahead and does it anyway, knowing full well that what he is doing is wrong. As they grow into adolescence and enter adulthood the consequences of their poor choices become much more serious. Why do some adults make such bad choices? Politicians continue to provide us with spectacular examples, Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina being the most recent. You would think mature adults would know better. Why do *we* make so many bad choices?

Every day we are faced with choices. I'm not talking about the big choices: where to go to school, what job to take, whom to marry, what house or car to buy. We usually put a lot of thought and care into these choices that come along but occasionally. It's the "little" choices, the ones that we face many times each day. How to respond to the driver who cut us off, to the colleague who spoke ill of us, to the family member who said a cross word, to the pretty woman who caught our eye. Even when we know what we ought to do we choose the other path. We respond in anger or resentment, we throw a pity party, we stomp off in a huff, we bear a grudge, we yield to temptation. What pitiful people we all are. How do we explain our propensity to make bad choices? Whom or what do we blame? Our environment, our genes, our stress level, our family, our boss? Yet a moment's reflection shows that there isn't much correspondence between these factors and the choices people make. Purely material explanations are unable to account for our choices. There is only one explanation that makes any sense: it's the plain, old-fashioned word "sin." Today we come to the Bible's first use of this word.

Last week we left Cain and Abel beside their altars. Each had brought the Lord an offering of some of the produce of their labors. But their offerings were not equal. Abel had brought the best of his produce, reflecting a heart of faith, and so the Lord had looked with favor on both him and his offering. Cain had not brought his best, reflecting a heart that thought too much of himself and too little of God. The Lord did not look with favor on him or his offering. This provoked Cain to anger and a fallen countenance.

We pick up the story in verse 6.

Questioning Before the Act (4:6-7)

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Gen 4:6-7 TNIV)

The Lord reasoned with Cain just as a parent might reason with a child who has thrown a temper tantrum. Holding a mirror up to Cain, he asked him why he was behaving in such a way. He gave Cain the opportunity to own up to his behavior, to take responsibility for his attitude, and to choose a different path. In verse 7 the Lord

moved on to explain the dynamics of the situation. This has been called the most obscure verse in Genesis. There are several translation difficulties and ambiguities but the thrust of the verse is clear.

The Lord showed Cain that he had a choice between doing what is right and not doing what is right. Each choice had its own outcome. Furthermore Cain knew this: the Lord was asking a rhetorical question.

The Hebrew of the first clause is ambiguous. It reads something like, "Is it not if you do well, uplift." The result of doing well is a lifting up. But what would be lifted up? Would it be Cain's countenance, which had fallen (NASB)? Would it be Cain and his offering which would be lifted up so as to be accepted by the Lord (TNIV etc.)? Would it be Cain who would be lifted up so as to walk tall in the face of sin's attack? Or would it be Cain's sin that would be lifted off his shoulders in forgiveness? Though it is ambiguous what would be lifted up, the general point is clear: "Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine?" (NET). It is assumed that Cain knew what doing right meant, and that he knew the outcome. To do right would presumably mean to turn from his anger and to approach the Lord with an acceptable offering and an acceptable heart.

There is an alternative: not doing what is right. Cain had already started down this path, taking two steps. He was dismissive of God in the offering he brought, and he responded to non-acceptance with anger and a sullen face. The Lord patiently warned Cain of the precarious position that he was now in. If he does not do what is right then sin is at the door. Sin is viewed as a dangerous entity, described with the Hebrew word *rovets*. Here too there is disagreement on how to understand this word. Most take it as a verb meaning "to lie down," likening sin to a wild animal crouching down at the door ready to pounce on its prey. Others take it as a noun meaning "demon": sin is a demon at the door. Either way the general meaning is again clear. The Lord was warning Cain that there were serious consequences to his current path of choosing to do what is not right. Sin was right there at the door and sin was dangerous.

The second half of the verse is very terse, just five words in Hebrew: "for you its desire, but you rule over it." This is usually understood as meaning, "Sin's desire is to rule over you, but you must rule over it." The verse is nearly identical in vocabulary and syntax to 3:16 where the Lord said to the woman, "for your husband your desire, but he rules you," which is usually understood as "Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you." In both cases there is a struggle for supremacy. The verb for "rule" means gaining and exercising dominion over someone or something, bringing into subjection. In both cases the first half of the statement expresses an undesirable direction of subjection that must be resisted and reversed. The woman desires to subject her husband to her dominion; sin desires to subject Cain to its dominion. Both must be resisted.

But when God tells Cain to resist sin's desire for dominion over him, does he issue a command, make a promise, or offer a possibil-

ity? Does he say to Cain, “you *must* rule over it” or “you *will* rule over it” or “you *may* rule over it”? Those who have read Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* may recognize that this ambiguity lies at the very heart of the book. Lee, the Chinese servant of Adam Trask, ponders this question, studying it for many years. He finally concludes that this word *timshol* means “you *may* rule” over sin. Lee assumes that this verb applies not just to Cain long ago, but to his master Adam in the present, and indeed to all people.

As the Lord addressed Cain, humanity stood poised on the brink. Cain had started down the path of choosing to do what is not right. The Lord offered Cain the opportunity to reverse his path and warned him of the dire nature of his current situation. There was still time to turn around and choose the right, but barely so. At the door lurked sin, whether as a lion ready to pounce or as a demon. In either case sin was eager to take control over Cain. It was not too late: whether as a command, a promise or a possibility, Cain could prevent the demon of sin from taking control of him. God did not allow Cain to proceed without issuing this stern warning. What would Cain do?

The Act (4:8)

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (4:8)

Cain spoke to his brother Abel. This is striking for the Lord has just been speaking to Cain. Hebrew narrative is full of speech, usually dialog between two parties. Dialog implies that the two parties speak back and forth, as, for example, in 4:9-15 where there are 2½ rounds of dialog between the Lord and Cain. Here the Lord had initiated dialog with Cain; he has asked him two outright questions and one rhetorical question. These invited a reply. In the previous chapter when the Lord questioned first Adam then Eve they both responded, however inadequate their responses were. But Cain made no response to the Lord. Instead he turned and said something to his brother. It doesn’t really matter what he said to his brother; he was speaking to the wrong person. The Lord had been addressing Cain directly, saying “you” a total of seven times. His brother had nothing to do with it; the Lord had said nothing about Abel. Cain’s refusal to reply to the Lord was ominous. He had nothing to say to the Lord for he had already made up his mind. He had already allowed sin to take mastery over him. He had already redirected his anger onto Abel.

What Cain said to his brother is not in the Hebrew text. TNIV supplies the words from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament: “Let’s go out to the field.” This fits the context, but it is an addition. Why might the Hebrew text have told us that Cain spoke to Abel but not supplied the words? This enhances the terseness of the text. It also enhances the facelessness of Abel. Abel is an almost non-existent character in this story. He never speaks, we never hear any words that are spoken to him, he is the subject of only two verbs.

Perhaps Cain really did say to Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” In which case we can imagine Abel meekly following his elder brother, tagging along with him as he had perhaps done all his life, like a lamb to the slaughter. And so one day they were out in the field. There was nothing unusual in this. The field was the open countryside beyond their settlement. This was where they both pursued their occupations: in the field Cain grew his crops and Abel grazed his flocks. It was territory familiar to both of them; there was noth-

ing to make Abel suspicious. It was not dangerous country. But it was beyond their settlement, meaning it was out of earshot. Israel’s law would later distinguish between crimes committed in the open countryside where no cry for help could be heard and crimes committed in a settlement where a cry could be heard.

Suddenly, Cain rose up against his brother and killed him. The report of his action is very brief and matter of fact. There is no build-up, no elaboration and no aftermath. The terrible deed is told with the minimum of words. Why did Cain kill Abel? How did he think this was going to resolve the situation? Abel had done nothing wrong, and the Lord had said nothing about him. Shortly before they had been standing side by side as brothers, worshiping the same Lord. Now one lies dead at the feet of the other. It is sobering how quickly their position changes. In the 1990s we had several stark examples of communities that had lived in peace with one another for generations, even centuries, suddenly turning on one another in murderous hatred: Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Indonesia. How fickle we all are, how quick to swing from loving acceptance to murderous rejection, from warm embrace to violent exclusion.

John Donne wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself...any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.”¹ Simon and Garfunkel turned this around: “I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock feels no pain; and an island never cries.” Cain felt no diminishment from Abel’s death; he felt no pain, cried no tears over his brother’s dead body. Cain’s murder of Abel was a rejection of community, a determination to go it alone in life. Presumably he now felt free, free to pursue his own course in life. Of course he was not free; he was now subjugated to sin.

Questioning After the Act (4:9-10a)

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The LORD said, “What have you done?” (4:9-10a)

The Lord’s questioning of Cain before the murder is now balanced by a questioning after the murder. He did not leave Cain alone, but pursued him just as he had pursued Adam. Adam and Eve had hidden from one another and from God because of shame. Therefore the Lord had asked, “Where are you?” (3:9). Cain had not hidden himself, though he will later do so. He had no sense of shame, no remorse over his actions. The Lord therefore asked a different question: “Where is your brother Abel?” Just as with Adam, the Lord didn’t need to ask this question for his own sake. He knew very well where Abel was: dead at Cain’s feet. Cain needed to be asked the question. Would he confess and take ownership of what he had done? Now Cain did reply. Adam had replied honestly, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (3:10). Cain’s reply was both dishonest and callous: “I don’t know.” Of course he knew: Abel lay dead at his feet. But he didn’t care to know. He then asked the rhetorical question that has echoed down through the centuries, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s rhetoric implied the answer, “No.” But down through the centuries every hearer and reader has shouted back, “Of course you are.” With his callous reply Cain further cemented his rejection of life in community, his determination to live life on his own as a rock, an island. He had rejected both the Lord and his fellow human.

The Lord’s second question, “What have you done?” echoed his question to Eve, “What is this you have done?” (3:13). Eve gave an answer, albeit a very poor one as she cast blame onto the serpent.

Cain gave no answer; he made no excuses; he had nothing to say about the sin he had committed. We'll leave the story there with this question ringing in our ears, "What have you done?"

Battling the Demon of Sin

I want to spend the rest of our time looking at the struggle between humanity and the demon of sin. The Lord had warned Cain about the struggle, seeking to arouse him to fight off sin. Cain had made not even the slightest effort, capitulating entirely. Sin easily exercised dominion over him, so that his anger and sullenness intensified into murderous rage. Sin multiplied among Cain's descendants, reaching its climax in Lamech, the seventh generation. He boasted of his murders: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me" (4:23). Cain opened the door for sin to enter; sin came in and took full possession of him and his descendants.

Our own experiences show that we yield only too readily to the demon of sin. How can we get sin back outside the door and how can we keep the door shut? The Bible makes it abundantly clear that we can't, but that God can. There are really two different problems here. The first need is to save humans from past sins committed, from all the occasions in the past when we have opened the door and allowed sin to master us. God's solution to this problem is *salvation*. The second need is to transform people so that we are able to master sin in the future each time it lies in wait at the door, so that we are able to shut the door in sin's face and refuse it entry. The solution to this need is *sanctification*. Salvation and sanctification: God saves his people not so that they can carry on living the same lifestyles, but so that they might live new lifestyles. We all know that once we've been saved from our past sin, sin does not leave us alone. It continues to lurk at the door. So God not only has to forgive us for past sin committed but change us so that we are able to resist sin in the future.

God began his twin program of salvation and sanctification with Israel. He called Abraham out of his sinful idolatrous life in Mesopotamia to be the progenitor of a new people, the people of God, the people who would be the beneficiaries of his great promise: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." God saved this people by bringing them out of Egypt. He brought them to Sinai to meet with him and worship him. Here he took them as his people, as his treasured position, chosen out of all the nations of the earth, not because they were better than anyone else, but because through an act of free grace he had set his favor upon them. Here at Sinai he gave them his Torah. We usually translate this word as Law; it is better understood as instruction. The Torah showed Israel how to live life. The general principle, repeated again and again, is "Be holy as I am holy," says the LORD your God." Keeping Torah did not save the Israelites. They had been saved by God's action of rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. Keeping Torah sanctified them; they kept Torah in order to be holy. The Torah showed Israel how to battle the demon of sin. Eventually the Jews classified the Torah into 613 separate commandments. Keeping Torah remains a big deal for observant Jews today. At the age of 13 a boy has a bar-mitzvah ceremony, a girl a bat-mitzvah. The name means son or daughter of the commandment. At that age they enter adulthood and undertake to keep the Torah, all 613 commandments.

Israel was cheerfully confident that it could keep the commandments, that it could keep Torah. When the covenant was sealed at Sinai they said, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey" (Exod 24:7). It did not take long for them to be proved wrong: within just forty days they were worshipping the golden calf.

The Torah pronounced a curse upon any Israelite who did not keep it: "Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (Deut 27:26). God knew they would sin, so he provided Israel with a system of sacrifices whereby both intentional and unintentional sins could be atoned for.

In one respect God's work with Israel was not a success. Israel proved unable to keep Torah, unable to keep sin outside the door. But in another respect it was a great success, because Israel birthed the Messiah, Jesus. Throughout his life Jesus did keep the door closed on sin. Nevertheless, though Jesus was the only Israelite never guilty of breaking Torah, God placed upon him the curse due those who did break Torah, who did break the Law, so that he might redeem God's people from the curse of breaking that Law. And who are God's people the other side of Jesus taking that curse upon himself? They are those who identify with Christ Jesus in faith, first the Jews who were called to keep Torah but were unable to do so, and then also the Gentiles who had been promised blessing through Abraham's descendants (Gal 3:10-14).

Paul came to see that this was God's intention all along. As a zealous Pharisee he had bound himself to keep Torah, trying hard to keep all the commandments. But he found that the Torah kept showing him how sinful he was.

Our Scripture reading was the end of Romans 7. Earlier in that chapter Paul elaborates on the role of the Law—every time he mentions Law what he has in mind is the Torah, this Law that God gave specifically to his people Israel. He says, "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law" (Rom 7:7). The Law clarified how sinful he was, even though he, of all people, made every effort to keep it. So he says, "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (7:10).

But elsewhere he says that the Law itself was a beautiful thing, a precious gift that God had given his people. But the Law brought death not life. But Paul also saw that the Law led to Christ. In Galatians he describes the Law, the Torah, as a guardian, a pedagogue (Gal 3:24-25). A pedagogue was a household slave whose task was to lead the master's children to the tutor for their daily instruction. The Torah's purpose was to lead to Christ; having led Israel to Christ its work was done.

This is hard for some people to grasp. Christian theology talks of different uses of the Law. The first use of the Law was to show Israel how to live, to give them a guide to life. The second use of the Law was to lead to Christ. Both of these are fine; they are clearly in the New Testament. But in some theological systems there is also a third use of the Law: to show Christians today how to live life. But it's quite obvious that there are parts of Israel's Law that no longer seem applicable: Christians no longer offer sacrifices or avoid pork. Therefore theologians have distinguished between three categories of commandments within the Law: civil, ceremonial and moral laws. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ and so no longer applies. The civil law applied to Israel as a nation, so it too no longer applies. But the moral law does still apply. This takes a bit of casuistry to demarcate the Law into civil, ceremonial and moral. I don't think ancient Israel had any concept of such a three-fold demarcation. What is the moral law? It is encapsulated within the Ten Commandments. This is the rationale for putting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms and schoolhouses. The Ten Commandments are held to be still binding on Christians today as God's moral law.

This is a big issue in Scotland today. A few hours ago a ferry set sail from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis bound for Ullapool on the mainland, the first scheduled sailing on the Sabbath Day. This has caused great controversy in Scotland today, because some hold the moral law to be still binding upon Scotland. But how is it concluded that a law given to Israel to govern its life thousands of years ago still applies to Scotland today?

This understanding of the Law has been a bedrock of much theology for the past 500 years. But Paul is quite clear in the New Testament that the Law, by which he means this Torah given to Israel, has run its course, has achieved its purpose. It was very good—in its time. It was given to Israel to show Israel how to keep sin outside the door, how to live holy lives. It failed and instead showed Israel how sinful they were. But God intended that for its second purpose was to act as a guardian over Israel, restraining sin until it could lead Israel to Christ, where they would find a savior who could save them from their sin.

Those who are raised on this system of theology get very uncomfortable with the idea that we are no longer under Law, even if it is just the moral law as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments. How then do you prevent Christians from sinning?

Though the Law was a gracious gift to Israel it never dealt with the underlying problem: how to change people's hearts so that they were actually able to master sin. Paul writes in Romans 7, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (7:18). The Law was unable to change him from the inside. The Law was written on tablets of stone not on the heart. But through Jeremiah the Lord said that one day he would write his law on people's hearts (Jer 31:33). This is what he now does through his Spirit.

We are *saved* from our past lives of sin through our identification by faith with Christ. We are *sanctified* through the Spirit in us. Sin continues to lurk at the door. But as the Spirit changes us, renewing us into God's image in Christ, we are actually able to exert mastery over this demon. We are actually able to choose to do what is right. It's clear that we don't always do so. God knows this. He could have tied salvation and sanctification more closely together, changing us completely at the moment we identify with Christ in faith and so become a part of God's people. But God has chosen not to do that. He has chosen to take a lifetime to work on our character. Even then, when we die we are still so far from being the people that God intends us to be, restored to being fully human. Throughout our lives we continue to struggle between acting in the Spirit and acting in the flesh. Sin will always be lurking at the door this side of glory. When we act in the Spirit we are able to overcome the demon, to close the door in its face. When we act in the flesh we succumb to the demon, we open the door for it. What we should expect to see is that increasingly we act in the Spirit. But at the same time, as we grow in the Spirit we become increasingly aware of all the times we act in the flesh. Here is a paradox: the less sinful we actually become the more aware we become of how sinful we are. One of the purposes of this is that God keeps us humble.

At the end of Romans 7 Paul concludes, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25). Then at the beginning on chapter 8 he goes on and lays out a theology of the Spirit, pointing out that all those who are in Christ have the Spirit in them, and that "those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires...the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (8:5-6). The Spirit is able to do in us what the Law could not do.

So how do we know what is the right thing to do? How are we able to overcome the demon of sin lurking at the door? Not by looking up a rule book of 613 commandments. There was nothing wrong with the rule book; it was a precious gift to Israel, but its work is done. Not even by looking up an abbreviated rule book of the Ten Commandments. But by having the Holy Spirit at work in us, renewing our inner selves, transforming us into God's image perfectly expressed in Christ Jesus. The Spirit teaches us how to do what is right before God and how to be our brother's keeper. God himself is present in us through his Spirit, so that it is God himself enabling us to do what is right. We should remove the Ten Commandments from all the courtrooms and schools. Scotland should get rid of the idea that the moral law has any binding upon it today. The appropriate symbol is the dove representing the Holy Spirit, which is God's presence among us to enable us to live lives pleasing to him, to change us from the inside out.

How, then, do we yield to the Spirit? How do we facilitate the Spirit's work in our life? We should cultivate our passion for God. As our appetite for God increases, so the Spirit will be increasingly at work in us. We should expect to see growth in our ability to shut the door on sin. All the credit for that is due the Spirit, for it is the Spirit in us who so enables us. But as we grow in our ability to shut the door, we also grow in our sensitivity to the many, many times when we don't shut the door, when we act in the flesh rather than the Spirit. It is a struggle; it calls for discipline; it calls for making hard choices. But God empowers us to make those choices. And so we should expect to see the fruit of the Spirit growing in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). The demon of sin cannot get in the door when the fruit of the Spirit thrives.

Thanks be to God that he rescues us from our sin and that he is at work in us to enable us to resist sin and become people who are pleasing to him.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

1. John Donne, *Meditation XVII*.

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