

Abel: It's What's Inside That Counts

Hebrews 11:4

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Cooperstown, NY, Canton, OH, Springfield MO, and Eveleth, MN. What do those four cities have in common? Each is home of the Hall of Fame for one of the major professional sports in the United States. Baseball, football, basketball, and American hockey. Now, I have not been to any of these places. Well, I have been to Eveleth, but I guess I am not much of a hockey fan because I have not ever visited the Hall of Fame there. However, I do know, based on my visits to the Packer Hall of Fame in Green Bay, WI, one of my favorite spots on earth, that it can be a wonderful experience to go somewhere, read and hear the stories of the legends of that sport and see maybe one of Babe Ruth's bats or Fran Tarkenton's helmet.

In a similar way, I believe it can be a great experience for Christians to study Hebrews 11. This chapter of the Bible is sometimes called "The faith hall of fame." In these verses we see some of the amazing ways various Old Testament saints demonstrated their faith in the Lord. This summer, my plan is to explore this chapter in some detail on Sunday mornings. The purpose is two-fold.

First, this is a great survey of who the God inspired writer of Hebrews sees as some of the main characters and lessons in the Old Testament. Christians today sometimes neglect the Old Testament. As a result, we miss out on the wonderful nourishment for our souls found in those first 39 books of the Bible. My hope is that our study of Hebrews 11 will make us more familiar with these Old Testament accounts and would also whet our appetites to explore them in more detail.

Second, there are important, practical lessons for followers of Jesus today throughout this chapter. Hebrews 11 provided important insights that we may have missed when we heard these stories as a child, or when we quickly skimmed through them trying to read the entire Bible in a year.

Folks, the Lord has much to say to us through this portion of the Bible, including our text today,

which is verse 4. Let's pause and pray that we would hear, understand, believe, and obey God's words for us today.

Hebrews 11:1-3 is kind of the preamble to this chapter **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.** Then **Hebrews 11:4** **By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.**

The first exhibit in this faith hall of fame takes us way back to the beginning. We don't have a bronze bust of Abel, but his story is told in Genesis 4. He was the second-born son of Adam and Eve, the first two human beings. Abel and his older brother, Cain, each made an offering to the Lord. Cain brings some grain or produce he has harvested, while Abel apparently brings a lamb that he killed for the occasion. The Lord is pleased with Abel's offering, but not with Cain's. Cain becomes very upset and angry. Then **Genesis 4:8** **Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the fields, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.**

Wow! Cain then tries to cover up his crime. When God asks him where Abel is, he replies, **Genesis 4:9b** **"I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"** **Hebrews 11:4** is really a New Testament commentary on this passage. **By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.**

According to Hebrews the main point of the Cain-Abel story is the different attitudes the two brothers had as they brought their offerings. I was "by faith" that Abel presented his offering.

Now, when we look at the story in Genesis, it is not really obvious why the Lord prefers Abel's offering to that of his brother. **Genesis 4:2b** **Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.** In other words, Abel was a shepherd, while Cain was a farmer.

Genesis 4:3, 4a **In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.** At this point it seems like both of them are doing a good thing. **Genesis 4:4b, 5** **The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.**

I remember reading this story as a teen and feeling really sorry for Cain. I was puzzled because it seemed like he was doing the best he could. He gave what he had. Why would God expect him to do more? God is certainly not prejudiced against farmers, is he?

Well, some claim that Abel's offering was inherently better than Cain's. They argue that despite what animal rights activists might think, God prefers animal sacrifices, living creatures full of blood, to a grain offering like Cain made. Maybe, but neither Genesis 4 nor Hebrews 11 ever hint that the Lord would have been pleased with Cain if he had brought an animal as a sacrifice.

It seems that God is not so much disappointed with what Cain brought but is troubled by the attitude Cain has as he makes his offering. That is something we see throughout the Bible. God has a big problem with folks who have wrong attitudes as they perform religious duties.

So, I think the big difference between Abel and Cain was in their attitudes. As he brought his animal sacrifice, Abel's heart was filled with reverence, gratitude and love toward the Lord. By faith he made his offering. In Matthew 23:35 Jesus speaks of "the blood of righteous Abel." This implies that even before he brought the sheep for a sacrifice, Abel was seeking to live in a way that pleased the Lord.

On the other hand, as Cain brought his grain offering to the Lord, his heart was not full of gratitude and love. Cain's problem was that he was not a man of faith. Now, he may have thought he was doing the right thing when he brought his offering. After all he was fulfilling his religious duty. Yet, Cain was sadly mistaken. He was not really trusting the Lord.

That there was a problem with his attitude becomes very obvious when he gets angry and murders his brother. This action reveals that pride and competition were part of his motives for what he did. His offering should be considered just as good as his brother's, right? Perhaps, he thought God would be more pleased with his offering, then the messy, bloody sheep that Abel brought.

If Cain's goal was to please God, there is no reason for him to become angry at Abel when the Lord rejects his offering. Cain should have been glad his brother had succeeded in pleasing the Lord, even though he had failed. His actions of deceiving and killing Abel reveal that there were problems with Cain even before he brought his offering. In the first four verses of Genesis 4 it is not clear who is the good brother and who is the bad. Yet, after that it becomes obvious that Cain's heart is full of wrong attitudes not pleasing the Lord. Cain's wickedness provides a stark contrast to the righteousness and faith of Abel.

Okay folks, that is our first exhibit in the "Faith Hall of Fame." What does the Lord want us to learn from this text? Well, the main lesson is clear. I would express it this way: External religion does not equal genuine faith. There is a difference between what someone is doing on the outside, and what is really happening inside that person's heart or soul. Cain is the first of a long list of people who go through the motions of practicing religion, but on the inside focus on many things, especially their own pride, rather than on worshipping the Lord.

They are lovers of self, rather than lovers of God. In **Isaiah 29:13** the Old Testament prophets put it this way. **The Lord says this: Theses people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from**

me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.” This is the verse Jesus quotes in Mark 7 to describe the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his who are full of hypocrisy. And there are still many who follow in Cain’s footsteps today. Let me introduce you to a couple of them.

First is a fellow named Jeff. My friend, Jeff, has the day off today. Jeff believes in God and has been a church member for 30 years. He believes in the Bible or “the Good Book” as he calls it. He thinks the problem with public schools is that they took God and prayer out of the classroom 60 years ago and says there is way too much sex and profanity on TV. However, Jeff only goes to church on Christmas and Easter, and seldom reads the Bible, rarely prays, and watches a lot of those TV shows that have too much sex and profanity. What is the offering Jeff brings to the Lord? Well, he is a hardworking, patriotic American, who believes in God. He admits he is not a very religious person, but figures God will welcome him into heaven, he says, “I’m a good guy, especially compared to atheists, perverts and other creeps out there today.”

Folks, I am afraid Jeff may be walking in Cain’s footsteps. He has a veneer of godliness, a thin veneer, but he doesn’t seem to be a man really trusting in the Lord Jesus. Thus, his offering of “being a good guy” is not pleasing God.

Next, there is Janet. Unlike Jeff, she goes to church every Sunday. In fact, she is at church multiple times each week. She is the church treasurer, sings in the choir, leads craft time for the kids on Wednesday night, and is coordinator of the social committee. She even volunteers to come in and fold the church bulletins each Friday. Here that happens on Thursday, but at Janet’s church it is Friday.

However, one thing has really been bothering Janet lately. She has been helping fold the bulletins each week for five months, but the pastor has never acknowledged that from the pulpit. There has not been a word in the church newsletter expressing appreciation to Janet for her help. She really loves hearing someone say, “Oh Janet. She is a great gal. She does so much in

the church. I don’t know how we would get along without her.”

Yes, Janet is a very religious woman. Unfortunately, I fear she may be walking in the footsteps of Cain. She faithfully performs church duties, but her motivation seems to be to impress and receive the applause from other people. It is strange, though Janet spends many hours on church business, she admits that she doesn’t think about God much. Is she really trusting in the Lord Jesus as her Savior and Lord? If not, all her offerings of church activities are not pleasing to God.

Folks, though Jeff and Janet are very different, I fear they may both be in the same boat as Cain. They are forgetting that it is what is on the inside that counts. The quantity of religious activity makes little difference if there is no quality. It doesn’t matter if one is just going through the motions of being a Christian. Like Jeff seems to be doing, or if one is very enthusiastic about church and religious activities as Janet is. If the attitude is wrong, the Lord is not pleased.

It is so important that we realize this. Chuck Colson used to say that the American church seems to be a mile wide, but only an inch deep. Even as our society has become more and more secular, there are still a lot of people who claim to be Christians. The latest Pew Survey found that 63% of American adults use that label for themselves. Many people go to church and express their agreement with Christian values.

Yet sometimes it seems the religion is just on the outside. It is only skin deep. Attitudes of lust, pride, and greed, as well as the actions associated with them, continue to dominate the lives of many self -identified Christians.

Yet the Bible is clear: When someone is genuinely trusting in the Lord Jesus, a transformation should be occurring. That individual has been born again, is regenerated, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He/she is still far from perfect. Yet attitudes and actions should slowly but surely be changing. External religion, religion just on the outside, doesn’t produce that. Only genuine faith in Jesus does.

So, three things I believe the Lord wants us to remember:

#1 We need to make sure we have right relationship with God. We need to make sure that is true on the inside. You must not be like Cain. You might come and sit in this room most Sundays, and look fine on the outside, but you can be dead on the inside. Your heart can be hard and cold toward the Lord. I don't know if anyone here is like that, but I fear that may describe someone.

Friends, I want you to know, if that is your attitude, if you have no love for God on the inside, He is no more impressed with you being in church than He was with Cain's offering. Coming to church, being baptized, even giving money is not enough. That is all outside stuff. Each of us, like Abel, needs to place our trust and confidence in the Lord.

The way to do that is to admit you won spiritual poverty, to acknowledge your sin, and by His grace trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Friends, if you are not doing that, it is what you need to do. If you are not sure what that means, we need to chat real soon. It is so important to know you are not like Cain, but like Abel, and that you are trusting in the Lord Jesus as Savior.

#2 We need to be very careful about judging other people. On the surface, on the outside, "Cains" and "Abels" may look very much alike. Sometimes a "Cain" might even look better than an "Abel." You might see someone put in a few \$100 bills into the offering box, while someone else puts in \$5. You would likely think that first fellow is the committed Christian, while the second is just making a token gift. Yet, all you can see is the outside. You don't know what is going on inside those two people.

Maybe you noticed that the gal sitting beside you was singing the songs with great enthusiasm this morning. She really gets into the music. The guy on the other side of you was just mumbling the words and not even singing sometimes. It is easy to assume that the woman has a deep love for Jesus, while the guy has, at best, a shallow faith. But all you can see is the outside. You don't know what the attitudes of their hearts are. Some

people sing with great enthusiasm simply because they find it fun to do so, not because they are really worshipping the Lord.

Or maybe you decide that someone who sings with a lot of enthusiasm is just showing off, and not really worshipping. But, again, all you can see is the outside. You have no idea what the attitude of that person's heart is, so it is foolish to make a judgement. And Friends, if you have been in the habit of doing that, it is time to stop. You need to ask the Lord to forgive for your judgement attitude which is very much rooted in sinful pride.

#3 We need to work on making and keeping our inside healthy. You need to be intentional and make a real effort to strengthen your soul. I am afraid there are probably some in this room who are indeed Christian, believing in Jesus, but who have developed some bad attitudes. Maybe you are coming to church or serving in the church but have been doing so out of habit or duty, and not out of a sense of gratitude and love for the Lord, that is not good. As a pastor, I know I am often content if I see people doing the right thing on the outside. Yet, I need to encourage you, we all need to encourage each other, to make sure our inside, the attitude of our heart, is pleasing to the Lord.

How do we do that? Well, first we need to make sure we take time for personal prayer and Bible study. We often call this "quiet time" or "devotional time." Yet, this too can become an empty habit or a legalistic practice. Yet, it is a key element of spiritual health. This is communication with the living God. He speaks to each of us when we read, study, and reflect upon His word. And then He allows us the privilege to speak to Him as we pray.

If you are not in the habit of doing this and want some help in getting started, or some help in being more consistent, please talk to one of the pastors. If you have been a Christian a long time, and if you have been kind of negligent or lazy when it comes to devotional time, be careful. You are putting the health of your soul at risk. With the busy schedules many of us have, it is easy for this to happen, but it is extremely important that we don't let our Christianity become just something we do on the outside.

Second, the way to keep our inside healthy is through the encouragement of other believers in Jesus. Corporate worship, Bible studies, hearing God's word preached in sermons, just spending time with other believers are all important. And the fellowship we have with other Christians is not just enjoying their company. It involves developing relationships where others care enough about you that they will notice if you seem to be growing cold in your faith and will admonish you to get back on track and stay spiritually healthy. Many people have those type of relationships at Chisholm Baptist, and if you don't, but would like to, again talk to one of the pastors.

Folks, as I look at everyone sitting in this room today, I cannot tell how many "Abels" and how many "Cains" are here. I hope you are all "Abels." But I know there may be some "Cains" here. Friends, make sure your faith is not just something on the outside, not just some religious habits, but that it is fait on the inside, a faith that truly trusts in the Lord Jesus, and out of love wants to follow and serve Him.