

It's A Keeper (Gen 4:1-9) ZCC 9.29.13

1 The man knew Eve his wife. She conceived, and gave birth to Cain, and said, "I have gotten a man with Yahweh's help." 2 Again she gave birth, to Cain's brother Abel. Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. 3 As time passed, Cain brought an offering to Yahweh from the fruit of the ground. 4 Abel also brought some of the firstborn of his flock and of its fat. Yahweh respected Abel and his offering, 5 but he didn't respect Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry, and the expression on his face fell. 6 Yahweh said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why has the expression of your face fallen? 7 If you do well, won't it be lifted up? If you don't do well, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is for you, but you are to rule over it." 8 Cain said to Abel, his brother, "Let's go into the field." While they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and killed him. 9 Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is Abel, your brother?" He said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" World English Bible (WEB)

We love Beaverdam. We grew up in the country and neither of us is really comfortable in a city. In most larger towns and cities—it seems that people don't really want to know the people who live around them. Well, if you learn their names, the next thing you know, they will be wanting to borrow a cup of sugar or wanting to talk or maybe even want you to feed their dog or something.

In this modern world of drive-through food and quick-shops and mega-stores and cell phones and internet and television and streaming movies, we are insulating ourselves from each other—no matter where we live. Right now a lot of us can work at home and shop at home and stream movies at home—next thing you know, we will never leave. What we can't get electronically have delivered.

I'm guessing that one reason we have been isolating ourselves because we want to tie everything up in neat little packages and eliminate the pain and problems from our lives—and relationships with other human beings are sometimes a lot of trouble and just plain old messy!

Besides, you and I are really just responsible for ourselves anyway, right? That is the statement that is implied in the question Cain asked God in Genesis 4: "Am I my Brother's Keeper?"

God did not bother to answer the question—I think that is because the answer is clear. What is God's implied answer? [“Yes, you are your brother's keeper.”]

In the Old Testament, especially in the earliest writings, the word brother usually means a son of your father, but can also mean a close relative. As time went on—after the children of God had been delivered from Egypt and had been given the law, the term brother came to mean fellow Israelites—whether they were directly related or not. The term brother then came to be interchangeable with the term neighbor. These were not related to you, but they were the people of God. They were God’s children, just as you were.

As you and I think about our world and our responsibility to those human beings around us, let me read some passages of Scripture pertaining first to brothers or relatives, then to neighbors. Then I'll try to tie up the loose ends.

First we have Abram and Lot. Some translations call him a brother, but Lot was Abram’s nephew—and not a very good one at that. When they split up (in order to keep peace) Lot took the best and the most. But lets see what happened when Lot was kidnapped. (Gen 14:14-16)

14 When Abram heard that his relative was taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan. 15 He divided himself against them by night, he and his servants, and struck them, and pursued them to Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. 16 He brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative, Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the other people. (WEB)

It is clear that Abraham felt a sense of responsibility to Lot. Either that sense of responsibility or his love for Lot caused him to put himself in danger to rescue him. What is God's implied answer to that question again? [“Yes, you are your brother's keeper.”]

Abraham may have done what he did out of responsibility, but when the people were given God’s word, it was clear that every member of the people of Israel was to be treated rightly and fairly—looked after as if they were brothers.

Leviticus 25 outlines how God's people are to deal with each other—their brothers. Beginning with verse 35:

“If your brother has become poor, and his hand can’t support himself among you; then you shall uphold him...You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. 38 I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God...For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt...You shall not rule over him with harshness, but shall fear your God.”

Here we see God’s people being told to use their money to help each other, even if that money could have been used for gain. The Israelites were allowed to loan money and charge interest to foreigners, but they were to help their brothers and provide money to put them back on their feet—without charging interest.

What is God's implied answer to that question again? [“Yes, you are your brother's keeper.”]

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 is similar, but there the Israelites are told not to just make bare provisions, but to be very generous in their giving. Not just barely meeting the need, but graciously providing plenty. In this passage there is even a promise. You may turn to the passage and follow—I'm going to skip-read:

“...you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother; 8 but you shall surely open your hand to him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need, which he lacks. 9 Beware that there not be a base thought in your heart...and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you give him nothing; and he cry to Yahweh against you, and it be sin to you. 10 You shall surely give, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; because that for this thing Yahweh your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you put your hand to.” (WEB)

What is that answer again? [“Yes, you are your brother's keeper.”]

In Deuteronomy 22, verse 1 and following, we get out of the realm of money and get to just plain “being there” for your brother.

1 You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and hide yourself from them. You shall surely bring them again to your brother. 2 If your brother isn't near to you, or if you don't know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall be with you until your brother comes looking for it, and you shall restore it to him. 3 So you shall do with his donkey. So you shall do with his garment. So you shall do with every lost thing of your brother's, which he has lost, and you have found. You may not hide yourself. 4 You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way, and hide yourself from them. You shall surely help him to lift them up again. (WEB)

This says that if your brother has lost something or if they need your help—the child of God is to provide that help. Verse 8 says we are to “keep” our brother by making him safe—even to the point of putting a railing to keep him from falling.

Now let's look at what God says about dealing with our neighbors. Remember, once they get to Promised Land—the idea of brother and neighbor were virtually interchangeable. Those who lived nearby were Children of Abraham. We might think of all these passages in terms of how we act toward fellow Christians.

Proverbs 14:21 say that if we despise our neighbors, we commit sin.

Psalms 101:5 says that God will destroy the one who slanders his neighbor. Boy, does that one hit home? Most gossip is slanderous in nature—yet we accept gossip as the norm. We are supposed to hold each other up instead of tearing each other down. Sounds like we are supposed to “keep” our brothers.

The New Testament shows the same kind of requirements—making it clear that God has given Christians the same responsibilities as the Hebrews and Jews.

Matt 5:23-24 says that making our relationships right should come before we worship: *“If therefore you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you,24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (WEB)*

In Matthew 18:21-35, the parable of the servant whose debt was forgiven and who still threw his own debtors in prison seems to imply that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive. THAT is quite an implication, isn't it?

From 1st John 3 beginning with verse 14: *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. He who doesn't love his brother remains in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. 16 By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart of compassion against him, how does God's love remain in him? 18 My little children, let's not love in word only, or with the tongue only, but in deed and truth.* (WEB)

Everyone here knows the story of the Good Samaritan, right?

So since everyone knows it, [point out/name someone] give me the important details in 10 seconds or less: GO! [A Jew was hurt. His fellow Jews wouldn't help him. A hated foreigner helped him. The hated foreigner was his neighbor.]

So, there in Luke 10:25-37, Jesus takes the term neighbor or even brother and widens it out to other groups, other faiths, and other peoples. The Samaritan was NOT the same as a Jew. He was not a brother or a neighbor in their understanding. Jesus basically connected all humanity together in this parable. Jesus' expectation is that you and I will treat every person as our brother.

It seems pretty clear that God requires that his people meet whatever need we can in ALL of the needy. They are all our neighbors—and therefore our brothers. We are to love, to provide generously, we are to be honest and truthful with them, we are never to gossip or slander them. We are to help repair their hurts and wounds in any way we can. I want to thank Meagan for sharing how she has been doing that very thing all the way across the world.

What was God's answer to Cain's question? ["Yes, you are your brother's keeper."]