

Offer Your Firstfruits to the LORD
I. Not like Cain with selfishness and pride
II. But like Abel with faith and love

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ 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 master it."

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰ The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

¹⁵ But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

With an increase in the price of fuel comes the increase of the price of food and naturally, we, as consumers, business owners and employees are feeling the economic crunch. This is especially true at this time of year when we are planning vacation time. We feel the financial pinch around the holidays also, when we buy gifts. Thankfully we don't have to think about Christmas gifts for a while, but in the meantime there are birthdays, anniversaries and weddings. This past week was especially brutal. My father, mother, one sister and one daughter all have birthdays that fall within 5 days of each other. There's two ways we can approach this. You joyfully take the time to select THE greeting card, look for a gift and don't mind spending a little cash. You sit down and write a note in the card and send it off. The other approach is, "suppose I have to at least

send a card. But that means I have to take time to pick a card out, maybe buy something to send, then I have to find their address, sit down and think of something witty to say. Then I have to mail it off.”

Which approach do you take when the offering plate is passed around, or when a church committee chairman asks for your attendance at a meeting or to volunteer for a special event or when your pastor asks you to be faithful in worship and Bible study? As you’ll see this morning, at times we have the attitude of Cain and other times of Abel.

In our lesson we see that two of Adam and Eve’s sons offered burnt sacrifices on an altar. The LORD had not yet commanded his people to sacrifice to him. And yet, we witness a spontaneous expression of thanksgiving. Cain and Abel, by their sacrifices, acknowledge that their possessions came from the bountiful hand of their Creator. But the two offerings couldn’t be any more different. Just by reading the text we might assume that Abel’s offering was acceptable because he brought the best of his flocks while Cain did not. The inspired Word does not say that for certain. We might also assume that the LORD was happier with an animal sacrifice as opposed to fruits from the soil. This, too, is not the case.

As good Lutheran theologians we allow Scripture to interpret itself. In Hebrews 11:4 the author writes, **“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.”** Cain did not offer his sacrifice out of faith. The writer to the Hebrews continues and says, **“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”** (11:6) Although Cain participated in joint family worship and outwardly offered gifts to God, inwardly his motivation was impure. When we hear that Cain was angry because his sacrifice was not accepted, this further demonstrates that his sacrifice was made out of self-righteous motivation.

The LORD warned Cain, **“Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”** (vs7) Cain’s sinful attitude was like a wild beast hiding the brush, waiting for its prey to come along so it can pounce on it and devour it. Sadly, Cain allowed his sinful hatred overwhelm him to the point that he premeditated and carried out the murder of his own flesh and blood.

The LORD’s judgment on Cain terrified him but there is no indication of repentance. Cain’s worst fear was for his own life, not his shattered relationship with his Savior. However, the inspired writer informs us that our gracious **LORD put a mark on Cain.** Most people think this was some kind of physical marking on his body. But a better translation of the Hebrew would be ***a sign or a miracle***, similar to the signs God gave Moses to perform for Pharaoh. Cain had a miraculous sign to reassure him that his life would be spared by any blood relative of Abel who might try to take vengeance. However, he would not enjoy the life to come and neither would his children or their children. When we further read about the lifestyles of Cain’s descendents it becomes clear that their forefather did not pass down the faith of his mother and father and now deceased brother.

Do you have the attitude of Cain or Abel when it comes to offering possessions to the LORD? Out of love for the LORD Abel brought the very best of his possessions. On the altar he burned the fat portions. These were the juiciest and most tender parts of the steak. And Abel didn't give God the leftovers. He sacrificed the firstborn of his flock. Do we always follow the model of Abel and bring the best of our firstfruits out of thanks for our Father's wonderful gifts to us?

Every month you receive a paycheck, or a Social Security or retirement check. Are the first checks written for the Lord out of thanksgiving that he so lovingly gave you this money or does the first portion go toward you and he gets what's left over in your pocket? Beginning next month some of you will receive a stimulus check from your government. Have you already decided what you're going to do with that money? Do those plans include humbly giving back a portion to your Heavenly Father who was gracious enough to give it to you?

Giving the best of your firstfruits is not just about money and possessions, but also time and abilities. Is the first and best of your time devoted to your TV or computer, yard work and other outdoor activities or is the first and best of your time spent engaged in conversation with your Lord through prayer and study of his Word or in worship and joint Bible study? Are the best of your talents and abilities being used for labor in the Lord's kingdom or are they used first and foremost for your employer or for yourself?

Maybe you're already at this level: in joyful response to God's love for you, you dutifully fill your offering envelopes at the beginning of every month even before you write out the bills. You've asked your pastor how you can use your abilities to serve your Lord. You've volunteered hours of your time in service to the LORD. But even you, at times, have the attitude of Cain. "Look at how much I give. How come more people don't give that much? Look at how much time I spend in service to my Lord. Why don't more people volunteer? Look at how faithful I am. Why aren't they here every Sunday? Why don't they stay for Bible Class or a voters' meeting?"

God warns all of us, "**Sin is crouching at your door.**" If we allow our selfishness, our greed, our pride to rule our attitude toward our management of God's blessings of time, money and talents, if we continue down this path, our sinful attitudes will devour us. Because of your sinful attitudes God should allow Satan to mark you for eternal destruction. But he has done just the opposite.

In love your heavenly Father has marked you for eternal life. God hasn't given you the mark of Cain; some kind of miraculous wonder that tells everyone you've been chosen for heaven. But in Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says, "**You were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.**" (1:14) In today's world we might sign a contract. With our signature we are agreeing, "I will pay this amount in full." In Jesus' day, people used a signet ring as a way to put their signature on documents. A signet ring had a stamp on it, usually with your name or some kind of marking. Hot wax was then dropped onto a parchment. The ring was pressed into the wax, making a mark. That mark was your pledge that full

payment would be made. The apostle Paul says that you were marked in Jesus with a seal. That seal or mark is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has made you a guarantee. The apostle Peter explains when the Holy Spirit did this, “**Baptism now saves you, the pledge of a good conscience toward God.**” (1Peter 4:21) At your baptism the Holy Spirit promised you that your debt to God for your sins has been paid in full. The apostle Paul says that you were buried with Christ and that you rose with Christ at your baptism (Romans 6:1-3). Because you receive Christ’s resurrection through baptism, you’re receiving Jesus’ signature stamp, his guarantee. If Christ had not risen, his death would mean nothing. Because he has risen from death, it proves that his death meant something. Christ’s resurrection proves that when he said from the cross, “It is finished,” your sins of pride, of selfishness, of stinginess, your poor management of God’s gifts to you, your debt of sin to the Father has been paid in full. By rising from the dead Christ also signed his signature on your heart, guaranteeing your resurrection from death on the Last Day. This contract comes with a signing bonus: the promise that you will enjoy eternal life in heaven with him. Through baptism, Christ’s resurrection also raises you from the dead unbelief of Cain to the new, living faith of Abel.

By faith Abel believed the promise the LORD had made to his mom and dad. Even though they had sinned and plunged whole world into sin and death, they held onto the promise that an offspring from the woman would crush serpent’s head. By faith Abel clung to that promise and out of love for his Savior gave his best to the LORD. Through baptism you and I have that same faith of Abel. You and I believe that same promise from the LORD that our Savior has come and has destroyed the power of that ancient serpent, and the power of sin and death. Faith responds to that promise. Out of love to our Lord we will act as Abel did. We will recognize that everything we have comes from the LORD. We will acknowledge that whether we give our time, money or abilities, it is ultimately given to the Lord. Now, like Able, we will give selflessly and humbly and of our firstfruits.

We saw what this looked like in the life of Abel. Let’s take a peak at what this will look like in your life when you give the firstfruits of your time. As a way to say thank you to the LORD for another day of grace, for another opportunity to work and earn a living, you begin every day with a conversation with God. You speak to him in prayer. He speaks to you through his Word. Maybe for you it’s a sit down with your daily Meditations devotions, or the Bible on CD or MP3 in the car on the way to work. Before you hit the power button on that TV or computer, you sit down with a chapter or two in God’s Word.

This is what your life looks like when you give the firstfruits of your possessions. When you receive the stimulus check and your monthly income you will first set aside what you decide in your heart to give to him (2Cor 9:7) as a way to say thank you for setting his mark on you at baptism.

Finally, this is what your life will look like when you give the firstfruits of your abilities. God’s Word tells us that the Holy Spirit gives all Christians spiritual gifts. You will

discover what your gifts are. You will ask your pastor about how to plug you into some kind of service to the Lord.

When you remember how great the love is your LORD has for you, how he marked you with his Holy Spirit and gave you his pledge through baptism, like Abel, by faith, out of love, you will offer the best of your firstfruits to him. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.