

Acceptable Sacrifice

**St. Mark Lutheran
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Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord. And again, she bore his brother Able. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and the fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." Genesis 4:1-8 I recommend you read Genesis 4:9-15 also.

I would imagine the Cain and Abel story is well known to us since Sunday School days. This is not just a narrative about murder; it is also about acceptable sacrifice or offerings to our God.

A message of the same title was written recently by the Rev. Walter A. Maier III, a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary at Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has a small but important connection with my family tree and myself, although he doesn't know it. He is a relation of the former Dr. Walter Maier of the Lutheran Hour. God worked through the preaching of Dr. Maier to bring our family to a faith in Jesus Christ.

I borrowed some from his sermon but added much on my own. Let me say first of all that this message is based on Genesis 4. Genesis is a book of beginnings. I am thankful that I am a member of a church body where practically all its scholars and ministers teach that Genesis is a literal, historical narrative. Some Christian church bodies have backed off from this stand and they have lost the answers to a lot of questions by doing that.

Genesis tells about the many different things God created and mankind's fall into sin. It describes how God initiated and made covenants with his chosen people, pledging his love and faithfulness to them. It gives the first revelation of God's plan to redeem people from death and the forces of evil. It contains the oldest description of faith and the result of faith (Gen. 15:6). The first promise of a Savior is given in Gen. 3:15, where the Lord reveals that the seed of the woman would defeat Satan and his offspring.

So you heard the account again this morning. Why was Abel's offering acceptable to God and Cain's was not? What does God look at to determine whether to accept a sacrifice or not? Dr. Maier III makes a strong case that God looks at the heart. His judgment concerning one's heart helps determine either his acceptance or non-acceptance of a sacrifice or offering.

Cain and Abel had different hearts when they brought their offerings to God. Cain brought his sacrifice with a heart that was not right with God. God knows everything. He knows us inside and out. God looked first at Cain's heart, and things were not right. So God rejected his offering.

Abel brought his sacrifice with a heart that was right with God. God also looked at Abel's heart, then at his offering, and God accepted Abel's offering. Let's not miss something important here. God's looking at hearts did not end with Cain and Abel. He does the same thing today with us and our sacrifices. How does your heart look to God at this time?

What kind of heart is not right with God? The kind of heart where a person just goes through the motions. Some people give to God because it is the expected thing to do. They actually don't want to give anything, but it would make them look bad. It is the kind of heart that does not really love God and appreciate all that God has done for us. That's the kind of heart Cain had.

Now this situation was redeemable. It could have had a much better outcome. The Lord apparently spoke to Cain and said, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. It's desire is for you, but you must rule over it." So Cain had a chance here to reverse things. He could have repented of his selfishness and brought the Lord an honorable gift. But he did not.

One of my teachers long ago told me that the sun in the sky sometimes reminds him of God's word. The sun when it shines down on things often makes them melt. But it shines on other things and they become harder and more resistant. God's word is often like that in regard to human hearts. We can hear God's word, and our heart sort of melts spiritually when we realize that we have done wrong. But we are thankful for God's grace and we follow the path he has set for us to make amends. But not everyone's heart responds that way. A person can hear God's word and their heart seeks out excuses to justify itself and becomes even more rebellious.

That's what happened with Cain. Instead of admitting he was wrong and changing his ways, his sin gave birth to more sin. When a person does not repent of sin, it often leads him into deeper sin. Abel was not responsible for the trouble Cain was in, but Cain's pride had taken a hit. His lack of repentance led him to the act of killing his brother! And when God confronted Cain after the murder, Cain gave a disrespectful answer and showed no remorse over the act.

What kind of a heart is right with God, making one's sacrifice acceptable? King David answers that with his words of Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

We must admit that even we in Christ's New Testament church share the same sinful nature that got the best of Cain. We would all do well to acknowledge that in the lives of all of us sin is "crouching at the door" some times. That is why the Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5, "Be

self-controlled and alert. You enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Don't take your non-confessed sin lightly. It can destroy you.

But while we are on the lookout, we should be comforted that God has given us what he promised to give us - a new heart. That is the heart of faith. Faith is created-and preserved-by God in his mercy and love. Romans 10:17 describes this miracle when it says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." The believer's heart believes in the Triune God and in Jesus Christ as the Savior. Through him, we have forgiveness of our sins and everlasting life. The heart of faith grasps Christ and so is right with God. Despite his sinful nature, the believer is covered before the eyes of God with the righteousness Christ acquired for us by his holy life and his atoning death on the cross.

This heart of faith should lead a person to bring his best gifts to the Lord willingly. God no longer asks for animal sacrifices like Abel gave, which foreshadowed the coming all availing sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Those sacrifices were brought to an end by the complete, redeeming work of Jesus Christ. What are the acceptable sacrifices we offer to the Lord today? Our sacrifices today include monetary offerings, but not only these. We also bring the sacrifice of our praise. See Hebrews 13:15. We serve the Lord by caring for and helping other people. In fact, our whole lives are offered up as sacrifices to the Lord. As we are motivated and empowered by the Lord through his Word and Sacrament, we dedicate ourselves to serving him. Let us, by his grace and power, continue to do so! Amen.