

Authentic Stewardship Accepts Responsibility

Cain and Abel were the first sons and first siblings. They grew up together, depending upon one another because there were not a lot of other kids in the neighborhood. We are not told if their relationship was close, or if it was marred with sibling rivalry. Because of what happened, it seems that there might have been a great deal of tension between them.

We don't know how much information they possessed about God. We do know that God was accustomed to spending time with their parents in the Garden, before the great fiasco called sin. It seems likely that they would have passed on this knowledge of God to their two sons. We do know that Cain and Abel possessed a desire to offer sacrifices to God. That is where the problem started.

Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer (see Genesis 4:2). Both were noble professions. It seems natural and right that a shepherd would offer a lamb, and a farmer would offer grain, as their sacrifices. Although Cain and Abel did not have the advantage of reading the book of Leviticus, both lambs and grain were acceptable offerings to God. There does not seem to be anything about the offering itself that caused a problem.

Therefore, if the gift was acceptable, the problem must have been with the giver. This is one of those places where we wish the Bible provided a little more information. I would like to know *why the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard* (Genesis 4:4-5).

The Bible is very clear that God often has respect for specific individuals and we are not always told the reason. When God despaired that He had ever created humans, we are told that Noah found favor with God (see Genesis 6:8), but we don't know anything about him. God frequently demonstrated favor to Joseph (see Genesis 39:21), but from what we are told about his childhood, most of us would call him a spoiled brat. Samson was greatly blessed by God (see Judges 13:24), which seems totally inappropriate considering his lifestyle.

The only consolation is to realize that God knows much more than we know about one another. God sees the inner being; He knows the heart. Noah, Joseph, Samson, and all the others proved to be useful to God. In the same way, Abel had been singled out by God.

Cain did not like being second fiddle, since he was the first-born. *So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell* (Genesis 6:5). The "countenance" refers to a person's face. To say that a person's countenance fell is a graphic description of what is seen in their face, their expression. Cain was angry and it showed on his face.

He was angry enough that even if God did not know Cain's heart, He could tell that his countenance had fallen (see Genesis 4:6). God offered him the opportunity to explain his anger. Perhaps this is the first example of therapy. Picture Cain, lying on God's couch, and God says, "Tell me about your anger, why are you so mad?"

Cain left his session with God and went straight to his brother Abel (see Genesis 4:8). We don't know if he went to apologize or to continue to vent his

anger. We are not told about Abel's response. Was he understanding? Supportive? Frightened? What did he say? Whatever it was, it was the wrong thing. The next time they were in the field together, Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel (see Genesis 4:8).

The biblical writer would never make a good fiction author. He is too matter-of-fact. As we read the story, we are in hopes that Cain and Abel can work out their problem. Especially after speaking with God and unloading his anger, we would hope that things would be better between them. Then, all of a sudden, he killed his brother.

Human history is filled with murders. They are the source of great fascination. A novel or a television drama seems incomplete without a murder mystery. Even in real life, a dramatic murder always captures our attention. No doubt, you have heard of O.J. Simpson and Scott Peterson. Murder has been a problem since the beginning of time.

When God arrived at the first murder scene, His investigation began with the penetrating question to Cain, the lead suspect. "Where is Abel your brother?" (Genesis 4:9).

Like any good suspect on television's Law and Order, Cain denied his involvement, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

He quickly discovered the answer to his question. He is definitely his brother's keeper. We are all keepers of our brother (and sister). This is the lesson that Adam needed to learn as well. In order for the human race to multiply, it was imperative that he assume his position as keeper of the brotherhood.

Authentic stewardship requires that we care for one another. We do not live in isolation. From the beginning when God saw that it was not good for man to be alone, community was imperative. At first, it was a community of two. However, the community quickly multiplied and eventually split into multiple communities.

What Adam learned from the failure of his first two sons is that we are responsible for one another. An isolated hermit is not a good steward because he avoids being his brother's keeper. In our time, when communication and travel push us toward becoming a global community, this concept is especially important. Because I can communicate with someone on the other side of the planet means that I can also affect their life for good or evil. The ability to travel from the top to the bottom of the earth in a matter of hours means that my neighborhood is very extensive.

Authentic stewardship means that we expand our area of concern far beyond our immediate family and next-door neighbors. We are global citizens. The lifestyle choices I make for myself create a ripple effect that can circle the globe.

Remember when you were young and your mother placed a meal on the table that did not qualify as one of your favorites. After picking through the vegetables and moving the meat around on your plate, you were finished. However, your mother, who was concerned about your diet, knew that you did not eat enough. If you resisted long enough, you might hear a comment like this

– “Clean your plate because there are kids in China (or name another third-world country) starving to death!”

I was always smart enough to know that stuffing my face with meatloaf was not going to pacify a hungry child in China. I am also confident that my mother was not trying to solve the world hunger problem. She was simply trying to motivate me to eat.

However, there is a real sense that what I do makes a difference around the world. When I over consume the world’s resources, there is less available for others. Yet, it is also true that when I purchase goods and services, it puts money and resources into the pockets of others. It is a very delicate balance.

That is why we have political parties. On one side are the advocates for austere living in order to make more goods available to the needy. On the other side are those who advocate consumption because it creates greater wealth for everyone. Personally, I do not know the best system. I see good and bad in both approaches. What I do know is that I have a responsibility to all humanity. That is what it means to be an authentic steward.

Since we have defined authentic stewardship as living in a healthy relationship with God, that means we are interconnected with one another. As we are related to God, we are related to one another. We are family. Families have responsibilities to one another. Healthy families fulfill these responsibilities; unhealthy ones do not.

When we realize that we are indeed our brother’s keeper, it points toward two tasks that will be fulfilled by the authentic steward.

Protect One Another

The word “keep” used in Genesis (see 4:9) literally means to build a hedge around something. When I was twelve years old, we had a great neighborhood. There were several kids who loved baseball, and we spent every summer afternoon and evening playing some kind of imaginary baseball game. Our front yard, and the two front yards to the north of our house made a great field, except for the elm tree in the middle of the Carabello’s yard.

The biggest problem for our baseball games was the hedge around the front yard of the house next door to the south. It was trimmed low, probably only four feet tall, but it was like a magnet. It mysteriously sucked up every ball that got close. Each summer we spent hours trying to find the baseball that flew into the hedge, with very little success. However, in the fall, after the days got too cool for baseball, the leaves would fall from the hedge, and we would find all of our lost balls.

The neighbor’s hedge provided great protection for their house. It kept the game from spilling into their yard. It also prevented any baseballs from clanging off their siding. The hedge seemed to keep people away. We knew the Carabellos but I don’t recall ever knowing the family that lived in the house with the hedge.

To build a hedge around something means to provide protection. To be our brother’s keeper means that we are to build a hedge around them, to be their

protector. In other words, we have a responsibility to protect one another. In one of His parables, Jesus provides a contrast between good and bad stewards.

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. "And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. "And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. "But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. "And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:30-37)

This story is all about relating to one another. Like Jesus' parable of the talents, it provides a picture of good stewardship and bad stewardship.

Jesus typically used images that were familiar to his audience. In this case, the story happens on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a path notorious for thieves and danger. He captured an experience that could have come from the headlines of the newspaper.

The victim "fell among robbers" and he was stripped of his possessions, beaten, and left to die. He became a crime statistic. His plight was much like many people in our world. Look at the residents of third world nations or American inner cities. People left with nothing, clinging to life.

Remember, Jesus told this story in response to a question about loving our neighbor. We have just learned that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (see Luke 10:27). In order to make sure that we are not expected to love too much, the lawyer in the crowd asked, "Who is my neighbor?" (see Luke 10:28). Then, Jesus told the story.

Along the winding, narrow path, there was a naked man writhing in pain, abandoned for the vultures. "And by chance," Jesus said that a priest was going down the road. To be honest, I am surprised that Jesus used this word "chance." By the way, this is the only time it is used in the New Testament. It is hard for me to imagine Jesus speaking of something happening by chance or accident. I don't know all the ramifications of Jesus using the term, but I think it is safe to assume that the priest was not planning to have his trip interrupted by a man in need.

When the priest saw the man, he passed by on the other side of the road. In the same way, a Levite happened by, chose the same course, and ignored the situation. Of course, the priest and Levite were religious leaders, and we would

expect them to demonstrate compassion for the injured man. Such was not the case.

Some have suggested that the religious leaders did not want to touch an unclean person, or handle a corpse if he happened to be dead. This would have defiled them and kept them from temple service. That might be a plausible excuse for hard-heartedness, but in this case, we are told they were going “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho. In other words, they had already fulfilled their religious duty and were returning home.

Others have suggested that they were afraid that the injured man was being used as bait. If they stopped to check his status, they might become victims themselves. The safest course of action was to keep moving. We don’t know their motivation. All we know is their apathy toward another human.

Surprisingly, a Samaritan came along, stopped, and ministered to the injured victim. Samaritans were considered unclean by Jews and would have been an unlikely candidate to be the hero of this story. Not only did he save the man’s life, but also he provides a great lesson about stewardship.

I mentioned there were three characters in the story who teach us about stewardship. First, note the thieves. Their approach to stewardship was based on the conviction that what is yours is mine. They apparently felt no hesitation in taking what belonged to someone else. They are identified as “robbers” which seems to indicate a description of who they were. Perhaps this was not a one-time misdemeanor, but rather a way of life.

It is easy for most of us to swell with pride because we are certainly not robbers. Perhaps you have never forcefully taken anything in your whole life. However, the problem is not the forceful stealing from another person; the problem is the stewardship attitude of what is yours is mine.

Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean without becoming too confessional if I approach it from the standpoint of a victim. There have been numerous times in my life when I have been approached by people with this attitude of what is mine is there’s. I have been suckered by salesmen deliberately talking me into something they knew I did not need. I have fallen prey to fast-talking telephone solicitors on more than one occasion. There have been many times when I felt like I had a bull’s eye on my wallet.

If it has been done to me, the question I need to ask is, do I do it to anyone else? Do I ever see anyone as a potential source of income? Have I ever encouraged anyone to do something that was more beneficial to me than to them? Do I view what belongs to someone else as potentially mine?

This is a difficult issue to resolve because it goes far beyond personal relationships. Remember, we live in a global society where we have access to material things from every corner of the world. One of the serious problems in our world is that many people from other countries hate Americans. One cause of this hatred is that we have displayed the attitude of the thieves in Jesus’ parable – we want what everyone else has.

You don’t need me to remind you that Americans, although we are a minority of the world’s population, consume a majority of the world’s resources. How can we expect the world to feel any different toward us? I am aware, of

course, that this is a national problem, not necessarily caused by individuals like you and me. However, the problem is that enough of us individuals have acted that way that it has become our nation's attitude. I cannot change the nation, but I can correct my own attitude.

The second type of steward in Jesus' parable is represented by the Priest and Levite. Their attitude is what is mine is mine. Pure selfishness. Whatever excuse we want to provide for these two religious leaders, it can be nothing more than selfishness. Perhaps they did not want to defile themselves by touching someone unclean. Perhaps they did not want to risk becoming a victim of robbery themselves. Perhaps they did not want to spend the time or resources helping the unlovely victim. The basic motivation is the same – they wanted to hang onto what they had.

It is a risk to help someone else. There is always the potential for loss – possessions, position, prestige, personal safety. When we have the attitude that our possessions belong to us then we will be stingy. It is the fear of losing that keeps us from being a steward.

We have developed ways to sooth our conscience so that we don't feel selfish. We drop coins in the bell ringer's bucket at Christmas, or send a small check each month to support a child in India, or make a donation to the United Way with each paycheck. However, we can do all of these things and still walk past the man who was beaten and left to die. To get involved might be expensive. We have a family of our own to feed, obligations to fulfill.

The third example of stewardship in Jesus' parable is the Samaritan. He is the hero of the story because of his attitude that what is mine is God's, and I am free to serve Him with it. Jesus does not tell us if the Samaritan was wealthy or not, because it doesn't matter. He paid the price to help. He was free from the love of money, so he was able to love his neighbor.

When we live with the realization that everything belongs to God, we experience tremendous freedom. Our family lived in a rent house for several years when we first moved to Fort Worth. Our landlord was Mr. Fuller. On Labor Day, a hot Texas summer afternoon, the air conditioner stopped working. I called Mr. Fuller so he could make the repairs, but he was out of town for the holiday. The house quickly turned unbearably hot, so I called a repairman. He studied the situation and told me the bad news – we needed a new air conditioner.

Our family did not want to sweat it out for a few days until Mr. Fuller returned, so I authorized the repairman to make the necessary repairs. When he finished, I wrote him a check. In case you don't know, replacing an air conditioner is expensive, and we really did not have the money set aside for that purpose.

However, I wasn't worried, because the house belonged to Mr. Fuller. It was his problem, not mine. I knew that when he returned home, he would reimburse me for the repair bill. Sure enough, when I finally contacted him and explained the situation, he brought a check over to cover my expenses. I had freedom because it was not my house and I knew Mr. Fuller well enough to know what to do.

The Samaritan understood that the donkey he rode, and the money he carried in his pocket, belonged to God. Therefore, if he encountered a man who had been beaten and left alongside the road to die, he could use them to be a neighbor. He was free. It was not his stuff.

Perhaps it is just human nature, but it is always easier to be generous with things that belong to others. The authentic steward understands that everything belongs to God, so there is no fear in sharing. Since it is already God's and not ours, we cannot lose it by giving it to others.

This idea of ownership is such a liberating truth that it is hard to understand why we have such a troublesome time grasping the concept. However, once we do, we are able to use everything at our disposal to provide protection for one another. We no longer need to use others in order to get their stuff, because we realize it is not their stuff. God is in control and we are free to be His stewards.

Regard One Another

The second task of an authentic steward is to regard or respect one another. When Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's offering refused, Cain was jealous. He was upset and angry because his brother's offering won favor with God. He had no reason to kill Abel. He did nothing toward Cain. Cain's anger should have been directed at God. Instead, he was jealous of his brother.

To be our brother's keeper means that we must have regard for one another. This was so important to Jesus that he forced the Pharisees, described as "lovers of money" (see Luke 16:14), to examine their lack of regard for others. In fact, if the Pharisees' had asked Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper," the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus would have been an appropriate response.

"Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. "And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. "Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. "And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.' "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' "And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to

my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' "But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.' " (Luke 16:19-31)

The steward in this story is described as a “certain rich man.” We know he was because “he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day.” He wore the finest clothes and enjoyed splendor every day, not just on special occasions. This man didn’t party just on the weekend; he enjoyed the high life every night of the week.

There is another man in the story by the name of Lazarus. He is in the exact opposite situation from the rich man. He is described as poor, “covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.” His life is filled with misery and hopelessness. The best he can expect is a few crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table. The only physical contact he enjoys is the compassionate licks of stray dogs.

One of the amazing details of this story is the location of Lazarus. He is found at the gate of the rich man’s house. That means that every evening when the rich man left home to enjoy his wealth and splendor, we had to walk past the begging Lazarus. At the end of the evening when he returned home, once again he had to make his way past the poor beggar. His heart was callous because he did nothing to ease this “neighbor’s” suffering.

Not only was he callous, but he was also arrogant. Notice how his words in Hades revealed the arrogance of his heart – “send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.” Even from the torment of Hades, he had a sense of superiority to Lazarus and that his needs should be served.

He failed at stewardship because he had no respect for Lazarus. He treated him like an object instead of a person. The amazing thing is that those who are often objectified in our world, are the very ones who God receive God’s special attention. As He announced the arrival of His ministry, listen to Jesus’ words:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are downtrodden. (Luke 4:18)*

He came for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the downtrodden. These are the ones who receive the least respect in our world. As he typically did, Jesus turned our thinking upside down.

The rich man in Jesus' story is a very poor steward when it came to his relationship with his brother. He failed to be his brother's keeper. This concept of taking care of one another is a difficult one to fully grasp. When I teach money management principles in churches, this issue generates the second most questions. (The most common question I hear concerns tithing, "Should I tithe on the net or gross?").

In Jesus' story, it is apparent that the rich man found himself in Hades because of his callous attitude toward Lazarus. Therefore, just as Cain discovered, relationships with others are crucial. There are some important issues we need to address.

One of the most frequent ways this concern is expressed comes in the form of a question about determining the truly needy. We want to know that when we give to someone that we are giving to a genuine need and that someone is not taking advantage of us. Most of us can relate an experience about someone who took something from us under false pretenses of poverty. It might be a man who claimed to be hungry but then used the money for alcohol, or a woman who told about needy children but then spent the money on herself.

It always happens when I talk to people about God's concern for the poor; especially if I direct them to Proverbs where it says,

*"One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD,
And He will repay him for his good deed." (19:17)*

*He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,
But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him. (14:31)*

*He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker;
He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished. (17:5)*

God identifies Himself very closely with the poor and needy. Our response to the poor is a direct reflection of our heart toward God. What we do to the poor, we also do to God.

When we strive to determine the worthiness of the poor, we are usually attempting to justify our failure to care for them. It is not our responsibility to police the poor, to make sure they use resources exactly as we expect. God does not ask us to only care about the ones who are responsible. He does not give us permission to be callous toward the irresponsible.

This is not a license to be foolish; to throw resources away by giving to those who are trying to take advantage of you. One Saturday afternoon our family had the opportunity to respond to a needy couple. They had been directed to the "preacher's house," because they were in need. They told how they were traveling to be with family, but they were out of money, gas, and had not eaten for twenty-four hours. My wife fixed them a meal and I filled his car with gas.

During our conversation, he talked about his desire to find a work, but there were no jobs. He did not realize that you should never tell a pastor in a faming community that you need a job unless you actually want to work. I told

him I could have him a job and a place to live very quickly. He immediately described his back problems that kept him from doing that kind of work. When they left, we were not sure if we had truly helped or if we had been tricked. It didn't matter, because we were striving to care for the poor.

Almost one year later, once again on a Saturday, my son answered a knock on the door. He came to me and said, "Dad, that man is back."

I went to the door and there was the same man, without his wife. It seemed like he had forgotten his previous visit and he told me a completely different story. I asked about his wife but he claimed he had never been married. When I reminded him that he had previously come to our door with a different story, he told me it must have been someone else. It was apparent that he was dishonest and unwilling to work.

When I asked him how much gas he had left in his car, he replied that he had about two gallons. I told him that was enough to get him to the next town and closed door. I did not feel guilty because it was obvious this man was not in need of money or food, and he was unwilling to accept what he really needed.

However, it is unusual to know the real needs of another person unless we make the effort and give the time to get to know the individual. For example, if someone comes up to me on the street and asks for money, how can I determine if giving them cash is the best thing I can do for them? They might be hungry, or they might be out of wine, it is impossible to know without knowing the person.

In order to discover the information necessary to provide good help, we must develop a relationship. In other words, we must treat them like a person. That is the motivating force behind the biblical injunctions concerning the poor. We are to treat them as persons of worth.

The reason this is given so much attention in the Bible is because it is contrary to the normal approach to the poor. The common opinion of the poor is that they are less worthy, and in some cultures, less than human. That is what Jesus is telling us in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The wealthy man gave Lazarus less attention than he gave his own dogs.

From the beginning, God told us that we are keepers of our brother. We are responsible for one another, including the poor. Page after page in Scripture provides reminders of the importance of the poor. They matter! How we treat them matters! The authentic steward, the one who lives in relation to God, takes this responsibility seriously. The result of Cain's failure to accept responsibility for his brother was murder.

Marva Dawn tells the story of her friend in China, a man named Chi Ping. He was riding a very overcrowded train when he realized that a dirty, drunk, bedraggled man has heading toward his seat, and there was no escape. Chi leaned as close to the window as possible. However, he could not flee the stench. The man smelled as if he had not had a bath in years. Chi feared even touching the man because he knew he had lice.

However, even as he pulled away, he was tormented by the fact that he should love this man. Chi was a new Christian who was just learning the meaning of love. He began to think about Jesus' love for the outcasts and

lepers. He began to pray that God would fill him with the Holy Spirit's perfect love for the despicable creature next to him on the train.

As he explained the experience, Chi Ping described how, contrary to his emotions and thoughts, he felt his arm rising, and to his great surprise, found himself putting it around the man's shoulders and drawing him close. The poor man wept as he received Chi Ping's genuine expression of care. (Marva J. Dawn, "Truly the Community," Eerdmans, 1992, pp.139-140)

This is a marvelous picture of authentic stewardship. Stewardship is just as much about relationships as it is about money and the environment. From the very beginning of time, God has told us that we are keepers of one another. Jesus showed us what that means. As we live in relation to Him, we will be like Him. We will protect one another, and show regard for one another.