

Mastering sin * Genesis 4

October 24, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Before Julie and I were married, we lived in different cities and so I ended up spending a couple of summers up in Kingston so that I could be closer to her. And I got a very exciting, very prestigious job – can you guess what it was?

Sorting worms. I'd take this box of hundreds of wiggly, writhing earthworms and dump them on a table. Count out twelve worms, put them in a container; count twelve worms, put them in a container and then the guy I worked for would sell them as bait. The things you do for love, right?

Now in amongst these worms were these little baby worms and they were called 'dillies.' And we'd package up the 'dillies' and sell them for less because they were smaller. And yet I could never really figure out why they were called 'dillies.'

I think though, I've figured it out now. Because the guy I worked for was Portuguese and Portuguese is a Latin language and in Latin languages like that, that 'illa' in dilly is a diminutive – it's how you make things small. So a flotilla is a little fleet. A tortilla is a little 'torte' – ie., cake. A quesadilla is a little Quesada and a guerilla war is a little guerre – a little war. And so I think that these things were called 'dillies' because they were little worms.

Now there's one other 'illa' that I can think of and that's what ties this into our passage for today and that's the word 'peccadillo.' Have you ever heard that word? Sometimes you'll see it in a news article like 'the movie star's peccadillos made great tabloid headlines.' If you Google it, here's what you get – "a small, relatively unimportant offense or sin." A 'peccadillo' is a 'small sin.'

But that kind of begs the question – is there such thing as a 'small sin'? Is sin a 'small, relatively unimportant offense' to be scoffed at? Or is sin a much more influential power that we need to guard against?

That's really the question at the heart of Cain and Abel's story. I know that we usually think about this story in terms of Cain's relationship with Abel, but really, I think that this story is all about Cain's relationship with sin. And when you pull back and think about how this fits into our lives, it invites us to ask, how do WE relate to sin? Do we think in terms of 'peccadillos' and say 'sin's not the bad;' we can tolerate it or justify it? Or is sin something that we need to actively resist?

Join me in Genesis 4 and we'll look together at God's answer to that question. Genesis 4 in your Bible.

Now Genesis 4 follows hot on the heels of Genesis 3, which means that this is happening just after the Fall. Adam and Eve have disobeyed God and God sent them out of the Garden, but He

doesn't send them away from His presence. I suspect that if we were Adam and Eve in this situation, we'd wonder 'has God abandoned us in this? I mean, we stepped in it pretty bad; is God going to be able to overlook our transgressions and still love us?'

Chapter 4, verse 1 is the answer to that question –

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." (Gen 4:1 NIV).

Even after what they had done, God was still with them. And in fact, God was even helping them to multiply. And really to do the job that He'd given them to do before the Fall - to be fruitful and multiply and take care of the Creation on behalf of the Creator. Far from cutting them off, God was helping them to do that.

And this bouncy baby boy was proof of that. There would be a next generation of people and God was helping to make that happen. In recognition of that, Eve called her firstborn son 'Cain,' which means something like 'brought forth,' because 'God had helped her to bring forth a son.'

And then He did it again, and Adam and Eve had a son named Abel. I'm not sure what Eve was thinking when she named Abel – his name means 'vapour' or 'bubble' – maybe she was really big into foreshadowing.

So now outside of the garden, Adam and Eve were experiencing God's blessings – two sons, Cain and Abel. When they were old enough, one became a shepherd and the other a farmer. Verse 3-

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.

Now let's pause here. Cain and Abel had no Sunday school to go to, but clearly, Adam and Eve were raising their sons to honour God and so at one point, Cain and Abel brought offerings from their work. Cain brought grain and Abel brought meat.

Both of those are good offerings. There is nothing inherently wrong with either of them. People sometimes wonder if maybe Cain brought something that God didn't like, like a vegetarian bringing cauliflower steaks to a bbq, but the reality is that both of these offerings are good in the eyes of the later OT Law.

It's true that Abel's offerings came from the firstborn of his flock; Cain's just came from the harvest generally, but even still, it's not enough to say 'this is why Cain's offering wasn't accepted.'

And to be honest, I don't think that it's the offering that's the problem. The problem here is the heart that's offering the gift. Abel seems to be making this offering out of wholehearted devotion to the Lord and that devotion is expressed in the firstborn, first fruits offering. Hebrews 11:4 actually says that Abel made his offering 'by faith;' his heart and his gift were equally devoted to God.

Cain, on the other hand, is making this gift out of a sense of obligation. His heart's not in it. He knows he should honour God but he doesn't really think it's that important, and so he makes the offering but his heart's just not there.

And I think that's reflected in his response to God's displeasure. Verse 4 – The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favour. Now look at how Cain responds – So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast.

That's the look of a man who expects a pat on the back when he brings a gift. He's done his duty; he's made his offering; what gives God the right to say what's good and what's not? This response, I think, reveals Cain's heart. And why it wasn't accepted.

And so God says to him, verse 6:

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."

God knows Cain's heart and He knows the darkness that's there. And He doesn't want Cain to fall prey to it. I mean, look at the language of it – it's like sin is a lion, crouching outside of the door of Cain's heart, just waiting to pounce on him and devour him. God knows that sin is going to try to overpower him, that anger and pride are going to cloud his vision, and so God says to him – 'don't go there.' Master that sin before it masters you.

What would you do? It almost seems unfair – he's done his duty but he didn't get credit for it. And now he's mad. But God is gently calling to him, saying, 'let's work on your heart. There's an issue in there that we need to work on, but it's not going to hurt nearly as much as the sin that's trying to get in. What would you do? Repent and invite God to do His work? Or just press on, motivated by pride and anger?

Verse 8, we find out what Cain did -

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.

Very first sin in the world – mom and dad ate the fruit they weren't supposed to; second sin ever – brother kills brother. That escalated fast. Cain was angry that his half-hearted offering was not accepted and so he took his goody two shoes brother out in the field and killed him. He opened the door and let the lion in. Sin mastered Cain.

9 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" (Just like his dad – 'Adam, where are you?' God knows what happened to Abel; He's just calling Cain to account for himself.) God says 'Where is your brother Abel?' and Cain says "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yeah, you are Cain! Genesis 2:15 – people are made to 'keep' – very same word – God's creation – your brother was created in God's image – therefore, you have a duty to keep and care for your brother. At the very least, not to bash his head in with a rock.

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."

God's not pulling any punches. Cain allowed sin to master him and sin led him to kill his brother and now God is holding him accountable. There are consequences to letting sin be in charge.

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." (At the very least, your mom's gonna have something to say!)

But in all seriousness, let's flip this around now. If you're God, what do you do? One generation in and already your people are killing each other. Not just each other, they're killing their blood relatives. It's not too late to start over. At the very least, you could leave Cain to his fate.

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.

God showed him that grace – he would live with the consequences of his sin, but even so, Cain would still live under God's protection.

16 So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden (Gen 4:1-16 NIV).

Now if you asked the average person what that passage is all about, they'd probably say – Cain and Abel – it's about Cain killing his brother. But I would like to suggest to you that it's really all about Cain and sin.

Verse 7 is the key to unlocking the whole passage – God says to Cain – ‘Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.’ This tells us that sin is an active, vital power that is looking to overpower its victims; God says ‘master it before it masters you.’ And who wins? Not Cain. Not Abel. Sin masters Cain and Cain kills his brother.

And sadly, sin is no less powerful today. It remains just as much a threat, prowling around, looking for a chance to pounce on anyone who lets their guard down. And so God says the same thing to us that He says to Cain. Master sin before it masters you.

None of us have this desire to kill our relatives but certainly, we can get jealous. We can be greedy. We can be tempted to lash out with hurtful words or withhold the truth for our own advantage. We can see someone benefit in a way that we wanted to benefit and we have this choice – respond graciously, putting it all in God’s hands, out of devotion of Him, or, let anger and pride take over. This is the message of Genesis 4 for us – master sin before it masters you.

I suspect that Peter had this passage in mind when he wrote 1 Peter 5:8 - 8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1Pe 5:8 NIV). You gotta master it before it masters you.

But there’s a problem, isn’t there? Be honest, have you ever opened the door of your heart and let the lion in? Me too. We all have. That’s the effect of the Fall. Remember Romans 5:19? Through one man’s disobedience, the many have been made sinners? Without God, sin has a hold on us and we are stuck living with its consequences.

But Genesis 4 doesn’t end here, does it? We hear about Cain going off and having a family but down in verse 25, there is a glimmer of hope.

25 Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him."

26 Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD (Gen 4:25-26 NIV).

The Bible doesn’t tell us anything about what Adam and Eve did when they heard about Abel’s murder. It must have been heartbreaking. It must have been gut-wrenching. One son gone and the other one his killer. So much for the seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent. But then Adam and Eve had another child – Seth. And then Seth had a child, Enosh. And then generation after generation, God preserved His people, and then finally, the day finally came when the promised Son – the serpent crusher - arrived. Jesus, God’s own Son.

You go to Luke 3 – Jesus’ line traces all the way back to Enosh and Seth and Adam. Jesus came through Seth and felt the pull of sin at His heart; Jesus recognized the lion prowling outside His door and yet never let him in. He mastered sin before it mastered Him.

And then He took the guilt of all our sin and carried it to the cross. He killed sin when it killed Him so that not only are our sins forgiven, it no longer has any power over us. Romans 6:6 says: 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (Rom 6:6-7 NIV).

Jesus, then, born of Seth, gives us all we need to deal with the problem of sin lurking our hearts.

For one, He gives us forgiveness. We wipes away the debt of our past sin and sets us up to live a new life with the Father. Genesis 4:10 says that Abel's blood cried out from the ground for vengeance; Hebrews 12:23 says that Jesus' blood speaks a better word: His blood cries out for mercy.ⁱ

And then when we receive that and live for Him, He gives us power, so that we can stand against the power of sin as it prowls around our door. Titus 2:12 says that God's grace teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

And Colossians 3:5 reflects the themes of our passage, saying 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Master it before it masters you.

But know this; you're not alone in the struggle; Jesus is there with you, helping you to stand against temptation and to live in a way that honours Him. I know that it can feel like your trapped in this cycle of bad decisions sometimes, but if you have closed the door to sin and opened the door to Jesus, then you are free from the power of sin. It has no hold over you. And Jesus knows what it's like. If you fall and come back to Him, He will forgive you and renew you, but even more, He will give you power to stand in the face of whatever comes your way. Don't give up. Don't give in.

Let Jesus help you to master sin before it masters you.

Our culture has a habit of minimizing sin. Everything's a peccadillo, or not even a sin. And yet this passage reveals what sin is really like – powerful and pervasive like a prowling lion, gross and unappealing as a pile of worms. Don't fall into the trap that Cain fell into; instead follow Jesus and allow Him to help you to master sin before it masters you.

10 The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. (Gen 4:10 NIV).ⁱ

24 ...to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:24 NIV).