

Being the Family of God *The First Epistle of John*

Stewardship: True Care for Others

1 John 3:11 – 18

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¹¹ For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; ¹² not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. ¹⁶ We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

Introduction: My Fighting Kids

I have two kids: John & Zoe. John is 5 and Zoe is 3. One of the things that was absolutely adorable about their relationship is when they think about one another and share with one another. When Zoe was born in Brigham and Women's Hospital, I came back home to get John. I brought him over to the hospital, and on the way there, he stopped and picked up a little acorn from the sidewalk under a tree. He turned to me and said, 'For Zoe?' It was an awesome moment. Even now, we still have that acorn as a Christmas tree ornament as a symbol. It represents John's love for his little sister, his generosity, and his thinking about her. But there have been times when they have not been so careful with one another, and they have not shared their things with each other. A classic situation is when we sit down for meals. There are a number of kids' plates with little animals on each plate that we have. One morning, I give John the one with cats on it, and Zoe gets the one with Cookie Monster and Elmo. Zoe says, 'I want the kitties!!' and proceeds to grab John's plate. Or, another classic situation is when John wants to play with his stuffed animals: Ti the tiger, Li the Lion, and so on. But Zoe also wants to play with them. And somehow between them they can't figure out how to make it work. Now the ironic thing, of course, is that they actually own nothing. They didn't get these things themselves. Ming and I, as their parents, own everything. They own nothing. So at any given moment we could intervene and say, 'John gets this, Zoe gets that.' But that wouldn't be good parenting because we want them to understand that they are stewards of one another. In the same way, if you believe in Jesus, you have siblings in God's family. God owns everything. We own nothing. Everything we touch and feel, He owns. He shares it with us and He lets us manage some of it. It's true that we are therefore stewards of wealth. But that is framed by the larger fact that we are stewards of something much more precious and important to God: one another.

I want to poll you. How much did you pay for your iPod? How many CD's or DVD's do you buy? How many times do you go see a movie in the theatre? How many times do you go out to eat? How many times do you pay for a haircut?

Every day you make decisions about how you spend your money. I want you to think of the sum of money you pay for basically your entertainment. Compare it to what you give to: homeless people; a scholarship fund with this fellowship so other people can go on retreat; a sponsored child overseas with Christian organizations like Compassion International or WorldVision; Christian microbusinesses overseas that is helping women and girls get out of prostitution start their own businesses.

The Background Theme: Cain and Abel

The story of the Bible is a story that goes from old creation to new creation. God made the old creation, humans screwed it up, so God sent Jesus to begin the new creation. The new creation in some ways is a restoration of the old creation. It's a restoration of that paradise Eden. In the old creation, one of the key relationships is that of brother to brother, or sister to sister, or more generally, person to person. That is exemplified by Cain and Abel. The ideal relationship was one of love. Cain asked God, 'Am I my

brother's keeper?' God's implicit answer to that question was an emphatic 'Yes, you are.' God had given Cain a *stewardship of his brother in love*. Of course Adam and Eve messed up human relationships, and Cain went even further by killing Abel. But God sent Jesus to reverse all that, to bring peace between people who came to him, to beat swords into plowshares between people groups. In the midst of all the people around, who are generally at war with one another, Jesus creates a new family around himself. And he asks us, 'Are you your brother's keeper? Your sister's keeper? Yes you are!' Jesus makes you a steward of your brothers and sisters in God's new family.

One of the ways the New Testament talks about the new creation family of the church is to use Cain and Abel language. Whenever we find Cain and Abel language in the New Testament texts as we do in 2 places that I'll look at with you, we are really looking at *new creation language*. And in both of these places, the New Testament says, 'Don't be like Cain; be true brothers and sisters to each other. Be stewards of one another.' Right away, I want to tell you that it impacts your money. Sure, it goes beyond that. But it does not go lower than that.

Case Study 1: James 5

The first occurs in James 5:4. James says, 'Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.' Now this is a situation of overt injustice. Today we would call it exploitation. It's like Nike and overseas workers. Workers are being overworked and underpaid. In fact, the whole letter of James seems to be to address rich and poor differences in what could have become an explosive situation. The phrase 'the pay of the laborers cries out against you' reminds us of Cain's murder of Abel, when God responded to Cain, 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground' (Gen.4:10). I believe there are three parallels James draws between the blood and the pay. (1) Blood and pay define the relationships. Cain was related to Abel by blood. The rich are related to the poor by pay. (2) Both blood and pay also characterize the betrayal of the relationship. One can look at the blood of Abel and know there was betrayal. One can also look at the pay of the poor and know there was betrayal. (3) Finally, both the blood and the pay cry out to God. The paychecks of the poor have a voice, in some sense. James alludes to Cain and Abel because the two situations are very alike. Cain willfully betrayed his brother. The rich also betray their brothers, the poor. They are not merely underpaying the poor; they are murdering them. They take advantage of them and then turn their heads away so as not to see their suffering. This is a very powerful Jewish allusion, designed to tell the rich that they are guilty of murdering their brothers.

Now this isn't relevant at all to us today, is it? Not at all, right? Of course it's relevant! There's plenty of injustice today. That's why Kanye West says nothing's ever promised tomorrow today. Who were the major colonial powers? The Dutch, the British, and the Americans, in that order. All three of these powers were Protestant. These colonial powers combined merchants and the military and dominated the world in their respective eras. They operated with sense of individualism, where people were saved not into a family, but just as individuals. Protestants didn't have a strong understanding of the family of God, the fact that individuals are saved into God's new community. And they had an idea of stewardship but only a stewardship of creation, where the more of creation they controlled in a cost-effective, efficient manner, the better stewards they thought they were. So they took away land and natural resources from people they thought were not using it for economic development. Everywhere they went, they created injustice, even when other people became Christians and became spiritual family. Dutch Protestants colonized Southeast Asia and South Africa – the result in South Africa was Apartheid. British Protestants colonized huge parts of Africa, the Middle East, and India. American Protestants colonized North America. It took land from Native Americans and sucked labor out of black Africans. No wonder the U.S. got so rich so quickly!! It didn't have to pay for anything. No wonder it looked so cost-effective and efficient! Even if we are Asian-Americans whose parents and grandparents did experience some discrimination, as mine did since they went through the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the fact is that you are now at MIT. You participate in that system. You benefit from it. You benefit from a system that is built on neglect of others, oppression of others, and at times, murder of others, even our brothers and sisters in the faith.

What does it mean to be a steward of our brothers and sisters in this situation? When there is injustice like this, and when that injustice continues as it does, what do we do? Well, let's look at the second instance of Cain and Abel references.

Case Study 2: 1 John 3

Another use of the Cain and Abel motif occurs in 1 John 3:11-18 where the concern is financial sharing. 'For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this: that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.'

Here's this language of family again. How many of you have siblings? Imagine what it would be like if you had brothers and sisters sitting at the dinner table together. And what would it be like if everyone else had steak, lobster, fresh bread with melting garlic butter, fresh fruit and tangy salad, but you had only a handful of rice on your plate? And what if you asked for a little bit of what other people had because you were starting to get undernourished? And what if people said, 'No; you have a work ethic problem.' Admittedly, some people do have a work ethic problem. But the reality is, being family goes a long way. 'Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?'

This passage makes it straight up. Who are we not to be like? Cain. Cain didn't care about his brother Abel. Instead, he hated and murdered him. Cain symbolizes the entire non-Christian world, since sub-communities within the non-Christian world love neither one another (think of Sudan and other places in the world) nor do they love Christians, and John braces his readers for opposition. Who are we to be like? Our older brother, Jesus. Christian love is defined by Jesus, his self-sacrifice, and especially self-sacrifice with money. 'We know love by this: that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' This has huge implications for us.

It impacts who we include in our decisions. When I worked for Intel during the mid-90's, I lived in an apartment complex of Mexican immigrant families. One morning as I was going to work, one of the Mexican Catholic grandmothers asked me for a ride to work because her usual ride was arrested. Her name was Dona Graciela, or Chela, for short. It turns out that she worked at a potpourri-making factory about 8 minutes away from Intel, so I took her to work. The next morning, I took her to work again. It was good because I got to practice my Spanish with her, got to know her family pretty well, and they were really thankful because she was one of the breadwinners of this family. Well, I started picking her up from work, too, because the bus and train money was substantial given what little she made. That situation lasted over a year. During that time, one day my supervisors at Intel offered me a promotion. I was looking to be get into managing a team, and that would have allowed me to do that. But the organization that we would need to consult was in disarray. It would have meant that I spend long hours just stabilizing things for them. That would have meant that I couldn't take Dona Chela to work. So I said no. A few months later, Intel offered me another promotion. I prayed about it and said no again. People at Intel were mystified. And I never told Dona Chela about these choices. But later on, she asked me, 'Mako, would you be the godfather (el padrino) to my grandson Uriel?' Do you know what it means to be a godfather in Mexican culture? It's a high honor; it means that you're kind of part of the family. So those decisions cost me financially, but it helped Dona Chela's family financially, and it helped me from a ministry standpoint.

You might be very used to thinking about yourself. The way you think about your major or your career choices is individualistic. You ask, 'What am I good at? What do I enjoy? Where do I want to live? What are my gifts? What is my calling?' Those questions are significant on some level, but I don't think they should be first priority. What you like, what you enjoy, where you want to live – those things are not first

priority. The real questions are, 'Where are the poor Christians in the world? How do I help them? How do I help the message of Jesus to go forward from their community?'

This leads directly to a second application. Since the Cain and Abel story is about family and the breakdown of that relationship, and since Jesus comes to restore a human family with God as Father, we have to take that seriously. God wants us to feel and think and act like family. So we need to think of what our new last name is. It's no longer Chang, Huang, Lee, or Park or whatever. Our last name is 'of Jesus.' So you're Sandra Yu 'of Jesus.' You're Philip Bramsen 'of Jesus.' And there are lots of people with our last name, especially in the Third World. We are stewards of those Christian brothers and sisters from other backgrounds, especially when they are in financial need, in poverty, in desperate times.

And that could have an impact on how you use your major. For example, my wife and I have a friend named Megan White who graduated from Harvard with a Sociology degree. She developed a huge heart for the global Christian community and also kids. She got hooked up in Nairobi, Kenya, with a Christian ministry called Homeless Children International. In Kenya, she ministers to kids, especially street children. But she also helped start a bridal rental store, a bakery, and one other small business to help develop the community, to bring employment to folks, and fund the ministry to kids. You're smart people; you can totally use your skills to do that. If that sounds interesting, you should look at Eastern College in Pennsylvania, where they combine an MBA and MDiv degree to bring Christian reflection on sustainable small business and community development in poor areas.

Or, you can get connected with some kind of Christian community overseas and think with them about how to help. I have some friends who exemplify this to me: Nick and Sheila Rowe. They were in contact with lower-income Christians in South Africa who were trying to run a ministry to AIDS patients also in the lower-income bracket. This is a huge issue in the aftermath of Apartheid. Nick and Sheila asked, 'They are of Jesus; they are family. How can we help them?' They noticed that the women who ran the ministry and the patients themselves made crafts like blankets, clothes, pottery, artwork, and musical instruments. So Nick and Sheila helped them export their stuff from South Africa to sell them here in the U.S. so the money can go back and help that ministry. It's called Naitumela, which means 'I'm grateful' in the Lozi language. And the name of Jesus is being more honored through this bond, this relationship, both in South Africa and in the U.S.

I am not suggesting that Christians should give preferential or nepotistic treatment to other Christians. I am saying, though, that the body of Christ should become a reconciling force across multiple communities. First, Christians are drawn out of their own local community, or the community they'd like to be in out of their self-interest, and into a much larger world where they must be more broadly concerned for the communities in which poor Christians reside, to which they are ministers. So second, we become partners with Christians who are poorer than us in the ministry they have in their relationships.

Let's say you go into business or some kind of engineering company in the States. At every single level in the firm, you have choices. You come in and you feel like you don't have any real power. But let's say someone on the janitorial staff is a Christian. You could help that person do ministry, especially within their ethnic community, and even within the company, as they are often from an immigrant community or even a displaced ethnic community. Some of the most effective missionaries in Saudi Arabia are Filipinos who work custodial and domestic jobs. That's strategic there and here! You could be in a situation like that. You and that other person are in the same family in Jesus. You've got the same mission. Now, you could just get absorbed with climbing the corporate ladder. But if you do, it's not just an individualistic decision. You're really making a decision about community. You want to join the community of the up and coming, the powerful, and the wealthy. But it's the wrong community to identify with. That only increases once you do get more seniority and responsibility. You'll have trouble just laying people off without processing that decision with them. You'll be like Federal Express recently, where a significant number of managers were Christians. They hit hard times but decided to not fire anyone. Instead, they reduced everyone's hours and salary, especially their own. They weathered those hard times together. Things picked up again, and all the employees were talking with their families and neighbors about how their Christian supervisors made that gutsy but compassionate decision. And I would imagine that the Christian employees, the line workers, had a field day talking about Jesus.

When the church is truly the church, other people benefit, and they become Christians. When the family of Jesus really acts like the family of Jesus, other people benefit, and they become Christians.

Illus: This is one of the reasons why I live in the city and why I want to raise my family there. Urban ministry is not what Jesus calls everyone to do, but it is something everyone is called to care about. When I was a sophomore in college, the Rodney King incident erupted in LA. Somehow I had graduated from high school thinking the racial tension in this country was solved. Also, I grew up in LA, so it was a huge shock to see the violence, to hear about Black and Korean tension, to hear representatives from all these communities talk about what they were trying to do. As I stayed up late at night listening to talk radio, I felt Jesus say to me, 'Mako, let's do something about this – you and me.' I said, 'No way!' I was self-centered and materialistic so there are a lot of things Jesus has to work with in me! But eventually, Jesus won out. Years later now, my wife Ming and I live in a low-income, high crime area in Boston with other Christians in this three-decker house. As we've become family with Christians on our street, we feel privileged. Right now, there's an older woman who lives down the street from us who has suffered from mental problems, drug abuse, and abusive relationships. We've become good friends. A few months ago, she started coming to a Bible study that my wife helps to lead. She discovered what it means to really know Jesus, and he has been transforming her life. Her drug problems are fading away. She's more mentally stable. She was able to draw her boundaries. In fact her granddaughter just moved in with her a few weeks ago, and our friend was so thankful. Last night, she came over to borrow my car (sharing resources) to pick up her granddaughter and when she dropped it off, she smiled a great big smile...even though she only has 2 bottom teeth. She smiled and hugged me and said, 'Thank you. God loves me!' We are family with her, spiritually. And the things we share with her – our car, our resources, our relational energy – we see it as, 'Well, that's what family does.' And in response, God has showed us first hand what He's doing in her life to heal her. 'Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?'

Summary

You should really listen to the early Christian preachers on this. They said that if you accumulate wealth, you rob the poor. Ambrose: 'Not from your own do you bestow upon the poor man, but you make return from what is his.' John Chrysostom: 'This also is theft, not to share one's possessions. Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor.' Basil of Caesarea: 'That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry...Wherefore as often you are able to help others and refused, so often did you do them wrong.' Centuries later, theologians and preachers were still drawing from this deep well of teaching. Aquinas argued: 'In cases of need, all things are common property. There is no sin in taking private property for need has made it common.' This teaching is not merely hyperbolic language. Nor was it coming from a context-specific situation where the rich were forcibly robbing the poor. It's not as if wealth acquired by 'hard work' makes it yours. No: In the church, the poor are robbed by the rich because the rich are resisting their sibling responsibility to the poor. The early Christian preaching on sharing wealth has at its source an accurate understanding of the new creation community. It is simply a faithful transmission of the motif of Cain and Abel.

One major way we rob the poor today is the 10% tithe to your local church. You heard me right! Giving 10% to your local church reproduces class inequalities in the church globally. So Church A in the suburbs can build expensive buildings and programs. But Church Z in the skids can barely afford to pay a pastor. Where did we get this idea? From the Old Testament? No: In the Mosaic Law in Israel, if you add it up, 30% of all wealth went to the poor. From the New Testament? No: In Jesus' new family, wealth was shared. If you want to tithe, you need to figure out a way to give to the Church global, not the church local. You need to prayerfully ask whether paying for such and such a program is a godly and cost-effective thing when you could probably stop people from dying with that same amount of money. How are you living out the truth of the new creation family?

Finally, let me challenge the Christian Religious Right, just to help make this practical. Just to say, a critique of the Left would also be important, but with a different topic. The American evangelical community on the Right speaks out against gay marriage. Under what rubric? Because marriage in Jesus' new creation restores the marriage in the old creation. Yes, that's true (too bad the church doesn't also

speaking out against divorce, since divorce is also a violation of marriage as God intended). It is about new creation, isn't it? But not only that: Christians who are Republicans tend to believe what about money? That if you work hard enough, that your money is just yours! It's an individualistic view, not a communal new creation view. Never mind that the system is unjust to begin with, that the rich unduly influence the state. Never mind that Jesus demands that you share your money with people in need, especially Christians from the other side of the railroad tracks. Some Christians have very little commitment to the global church, which is mostly made up of poor Christians in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. But Jesus came to start the new creation family. How are you living out that truth?

Are you your brother's keeper?