**How to Rule Over Our Sinful Desire**

Genesis 4:1-5:32
Key Verse 4:7 – ***“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 rule over it.”***

There is a popular,old Native American folktale entitled “The One You Feed” that is often put on posters and shared all throughout the internet so I am sure many of you have encountered it before. It is about an old Cherokee man teaching his grandson about life: *““A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied,* ***“The one you feed.”****”*Many people love sharing this story for its profound yet simple life lesson.However, this story has its limits;even though it presents the choice as being neutral, itdoes not take into account our natural inclination to choose evil over good or vice over virtue when the choice is presented without consequences. Furthermore, it fails to answer two important questions along the way; who gets to determinegood & evil and why choose good?

In today’s passage, we see this spiritual conflict played out in the story of Cain and Abel. What started off as one seemingly insignificant rule broken in the Garden of Eden would later fester into jealously, anger, murder and exile as mankind descended further into darkness. How did it all fall apart so tragically? It is because Cain, as the representative of all mankind, rejected God’s sovereignty by choosing to live according to his own rules and his own standard. In doing so, the brokenness of Cain’s relationship with God and the restless wandering that follows serves as a reflection of our own spiritual condition when we try to live our lives apart from God. Yet, it is by that same sovereignty that God reveals His love and mercy for sinners and shines a ray of hope for redemption even in the midst of all the darkness that engulfs us.

Look at verses 3-4a, ***“In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.”*** We pick up the story just before the conflict begins. In accordance to God’s punishment after the Garden of Eden, mankind had to fight to survive. By the sweat of their brow, they eked out a meager living from the cursed earth, a far departure from the joyous and fulfilling nature of their work in Eden. As the first people to live off the land,Cain and Abel divided the labour with Cain being the farmer and Abel being the shepherd. In time, they both brought an offering to God but with vastly different results. Look at verses 4b and 5, ***“The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.”***

Why did God look so favourably on Abel’s offering but not on Cain’s? Most scholars give the reason as being that Abel offered the very best he had by offering the best portions from the best animalsof his flock. But the Bible does not mention anything outwardly wrong with Cain’s offering. It seems perfectly fine. The difference is the attitude behind the offering. Hebrews 11:4 states, ***“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.”***Abel’s offering was accepted not because it was outwardly a better sacrifice but because of his faithful heart as he gave it. It is reminiscent of the widow’s offering in Luke 21:1-4 who offered everything she had to live on even though it amounted to two worthless pennies for she depended on the Lord for her providence. It is always important to remember that with God, it is not about the gift but rather the heart of the giver that matters.

However, the passage seems less concerned about figuring out what Cain did wrong (it does not say explicitly) but puts all the emphasis on Cain’s response to God’s decision. Think about the situation from Cain’s perspective. Cain likely worked just as hard, put in many hours farming and harvesting in the scorching sun until his body ached and his hands were full of callouses.He gave the Lord what he thought would be best, yet God completely disregards his offering without giving even one reason. Cain had just encountered God’s sovereignty and it felt completely unfair. Shouldn’t his offering be just as acceptable as Abel’s? Now let us consider the same situation from God’s side. God’s sovereignty is a fancy way of describing God’s rule or His standard. As learned in the Book of Daniel, even King Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest and most powerful king of his era humbled himself in submission to God’s rule as he testifies, ***“Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: "What have you done? (Dan 4:34b-35)."*** In short, it is God who sets the standard and Cain’s offering fell short of it.

However, rather than looking outward by asking God how he could remedy the situation and please Him, Cain turned everything inward by becoming angry and sullen over God’s decision. At this point, we have to ask ourselves this question; how do we respond when God seems to say “No”? When God does not fulfill our request or expectation of Him, do we become angry at Him and stop seeking Him altogether? When God convicts us of the sin we desperately cling on to, do we seek to make things right by coming before Himwith a humble and contrite heart? When He seems to be sending you on a path different from the one you want, do you accept that His ways are indeed higher… or do you decide to just carve out your own path to spite Him?Years ago, when Luke West was still here, we spent so much trying to serve the Lord together through Bible Study and leading praise. But when received his offer for graduate school, I resented God greatly for showing favour to Luke while ignoring my own service to God even in the middle of my struggles. I could not be truly happy for Luke for my bitterness toward God outweighed whatever positive feelings I had. In my own eyes, God was simply not being fair.

Which leads us to God’s rebuke of Cain. Look at verses 6-7a – ***“Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?”*** Amazingly, God gave Cain a second chance to do the right thing. Though Cain’s anger was directed towards God, God gave Cain a chance to put away his anger and restore his relationship with God. By saying “***If you do what is right***” God implies that Cain knows exactly what he is doing wrong; the very thing preventing him from having a loving relationship withGod. Hence, God proceeds to bookend this invitation of forgiveness with a dire warning. Let us read verse 7 together, ***“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 rule over it.”*** God told Cain to master his sinful desire. Man was created in God's image. He was originally good. But because of Adam's sin, evil came into man's heart. So man's nature became a mixture of good and evil. However, our nature is not dualistic, with good and evil balancing each other out like scales. If we do not actively fight evil and push it aside to do good positively, evil will overcome us. Some people believe that they can go through life doing neither good nor evil. They pride themselves with sayings such as “It doesn’t matter what you do or believe in so long as you are good person and treat everyone equally.” But sin is like gravity; no matter how hard or how little you try to resist, it will always draw you towards it.

When we are not actively engaged in doing right, sin crouches at the door of our hearts, awaiting an opportunity to spring on us like a lion on its prey. 1Peter 5:8,9a says, "***Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him..***." Cain was like a man walking through the jungle with no thought of the lion. It may be a little difficult envisioning a lion ready to pounceon your very weakness at any given moment but that is the reality of what sin is. Whether it is the open private browser window late at night, splurging money after a big payday, seeking self-worth from the “Like” button, nursing old grudges, comparing your life with others and constantly arguing with othersfor the sake of proving your “rightness”, sin imprisons us by making us believe our standard is the only one that matters. This allure is so powerful we can never escape its hold by our own strength. So how on earth can we possibly resist it?How can we master the desire to sin? We can’t… on our own!

Sin can only be overcome when God's righteous and loving reign in one's heart is humbly welcomed. Much like the two wolves, it is a great spiritual conflict going on within us but unlike the story, we are strengthened and enabled to actively do good solely by the grace of God. If we reject this grace, we remain slaves of sin. Cain should have received God's word and put to death his own pride and feelings. Cain could not master sin's desire by his own strength, but with God's word in his heart, a decision of faith to obey God and not his feelings. Then Cain could see himself and Abel in the light of God's will. In order to master the desire to sin, we must first receive God's word and God's sovereign rule into our hearts. The Psalmist said, "***I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you***" (119:11). Because sin came into the world, we became slaves to our passions and feelings which is slavery to the power of sin and death.But God sent His One and Only Son Jesus Christ to free us from this captivity by engraving His Word in our hearts so we may strive to live according to God's Word. When this takes place, our desires are slowly changed to the things God desires, our values to the things He values and the view of others to the way He sees them; beyond all our human frailty and shortcomings to a dearly beloved child of God.

Tragically, Cain rejected God’s appeal to him. What started as a spark of anger grew into an infernal and murderous rage that was unleashed upon his brother Abel. Maybe Cain thought to himself that all his problems would be over and these feelings would go away if Abel were out of the picture. Our anger often works that way. Remorselessly, he kills Abel and proceeds as if nothing happened. When God questions Cain about his brother’s disappearance, he is even crazy enough to think he can fool an all-knowing, all-seeing God by playing dumb, completely blinded by his own sin for not an iota of repentance is present in his answer. By saying ***“Am I my brother’s keeper?***” Cain sadly sets the template for which the rest of humanity has followed ever since by rejecting his responsibility of caring for his brother and loving him as God loves us.

Cain cut himself off from God’s love and forgiveness. God punished him by punishing the very earth on which Abel’s blood cried out from. No longer would it provide anything for him and Cain was forced to wander the earth as an exile forever. Hearing this, Cain lamented that this punishment was more than he could bear for he feared suffering the same fate as Abel. But the true punishment was that Cain was Cain would live forever in fear, anxiety and isolation; a fate worse than death itself. The delusion of sin is that our actions have no consequences but from this, we see how our sins and desires, however great or small, have real consequences that will reverberate throughout our entire lives, characterized by profound isolation and loneliness. As the saying goes, “*You can run as hard & fast as you can but you can’t run away from yourself*.”

Yet God does something extraordinary. Look at verse 15, ***“But the Lord said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.”*** If God subscribed to our own notion of fairness, He should have smote Cain right on the spot or at the very least allow Cain to suffer like Abel but amazingly, He did neither. Instead, He placed a mark not just to keep people from killing Him but to serve as a reminder of God’s constant protection for Cain. God’s sovereignty is displayed in showing His love for Cain in spite of everything Cain had done against Him.

As for Cain, he tried to build his life apart from God by starting a family and building a city that he dedicated to his son rather than to God. From this point own, human civilization grew as Cain’s descendants became farmers, builders, musicians, craftsmen, artisans and later on heroes of legend but what defined them was they and their entire way of life was completely God-less. For all their human achievement, there was no escape from the corruption and degradation of sin.It seemed that all of mankind was beyond saving.

In spite of all this, God shone a ray of hope through the descendants of Adam and Eve’s other son Seth who, as Eve attests, God granted to be born in place of Abel. And it is when Seth’s line begins that men began to call on the name of the Lord. Although the whole world was in the darkness of sin, there were a precious few who accepted God’s sovereignty and lived according to His will. This is not to say these men and women where perfect. Even though they all the same fate by growing old and dying, they placed their hope in God, living according to His ways rather than the way of the corrupt world around them. Enoch was a direct contrast to Lamech, both in terms of their position in the family line but, more importantly, in how they lived before God. Enoch walked with God throughout his live and lived so blamelessly that God carried him into His presence without ever tasting death. And it would be through his great-grandson Noah that God would bring about His plan to save the world through one family of faith.

In conclusion, through this passage we have seen how damaging sin is. Itcrouches at the door of all our hearts, wishing to rule and separate us from God for all eternity. It is only through acknowledging God’s rule in our hearts that we are able to overcome our sins and live out the life He has.