

## “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”

The Book of Genesis tells how Adam and Eve bore a son named Cain, then another son named Abel. Cain was a tiller of the ground, a farmer. Abel was a keeper of sheep, a shepherd. In time, each brings an offering to the Lord. Cain brings some produce from the field. Abel brings “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.” In response, it says, “The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Genesis 4:4-5).

The Bible doesn’t tell us why God approved of Abel’s offering, and not Cain’s. Most likely God saw into the heart and motive behind each offering, and Abel’s offering represented a greater expression of love and devotion to the Lord. But we are only guessing – the Bible doesn’t say.

As you may remember the story, this did not sit well with Cain! He was angry, so enraged that he goes out into the field with his brother, and he murders him. His brother’s blood is now on his hands. The account continues. “Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’” (Genesis 4:9). “I don’t know,” Cain answers back. When Cain says, “I don’t know where my brother is,” he’s lying! He knows. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God says, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10).

*“Am I my brother’s keeper? Is it my job to take care of him? Is Cain my responsibility? Am I obligated to look out for his wellbeing? Am I my brother’s keeper? This is the Scripture text and theme for the day.*

The Bible answers the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper”. The answer is: *Yes!* We humans do have a responsibility to look out for one another. The Bible is full of passages telling us that we have a responsibility to one another as human beings! We have time to highlight only a few of the many Scriptures on this theme.

*Old Testament Law* laid it down that those who have enough should share with the suffering and the needy. For instance, Deuteronomy 15:7-8 says, “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.”

*Old Testament prophets* warned of God’s judgment on those who neglected their responsibilities to others. The prophet Amos spoke out against those who “trample upon the poor” (Amos 5:11) and those who “turn aside the needy in the gate” (Amos 5:12). The prophet Isaiah insisted that righting social wrongs, caring for others, is what God desires – and not just religious rituals like fasting: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”(Isaiah 58:6-7).

*Jesus* made clear our responsibility to others in the human family! In the Parable of the Last Judgment Jesus said we will ultimately be judged by the way we respond to the hungry, the

naked, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. How we respond to others in need is how we respond to Him! In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus made it clear that our compassion and our desire to help others should not be limited to just the people we like, or just the people who are like us, but our neighbor is *anyone in need*. Jesus poured Himself out unselfishly for others: in teaching, preaching, healing, and ultimately giving up His life on the cross for our sins.

The Old Testament, the New Testament, and Jesus provide an answer to the age-old question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”. The answer is “yes”!

But just *how much* am I responsible for someone else’s life? Does this mean I should be expected to help *everybody* in a bad situation, or *every person* with a pressing need? Should our church be expected to help *everyone* who calls and asks for money – rent money, or money for food or gas? On a national level, should we in the U.S. open the border to *every person* who wants to get into the country? Should our country spend more on aid to other nations than it does on caring for our own citizens? I think those are fair questions?

*Maybe a better answer to the question “Am I my brother’s keeper” is not just a flat out “Yes”, but “Yes and no.”* I think the answer is somewhere between two extremes. One is: “I have no responsibility to take care of anyone except myself”. The other extreme is, “It’s my obligation to help anyone who asks me for help.”

The one extreme is: I don’t have any obligation to anybody except me. I think we can all agree that that’s wrong. Totally wrong. Human life is so much better when we all feel an obligation to one another in the human family. Our families are better off. Our neighborhoods are better off. Our churches are better off. Our nation is better off, when people care about one another and respond to one another’s needs. Do I need to say any more about that? It’s pretty clear.

But the other extreme is: “It’s up to me to be *everybody’s* keeper!” Years ago a family in the church I was serving had a young man come to the church and sing for us. A nice young man. Sometime later, they informed me that this young man was having mental health issues, a “nervous breakdown”. They said he was trying to solve all the world’s problems – taking on his shoulders all of the world’s woes. *No one’s shoulders are near big enough for that!* No one can help everybody. The world only has one Savior, and it isn’t you or me!

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Let’s look more at that question in regards to us as individuals, as the church, and in our national life.

*As individuals.* There are obligations that we have, for example, in our families. Parents of little children are certainly their “keepers”. You have to take care of your children! Sometimes a brother or sister needs help. Or, if adult children have an aging, sick parent, and the kids don’t lend a hand, that’s pretty bad, isn’t it. Some moral obligations are pretty clear. If we have a neighbor, or coworker, or close friend, and they’re going through a really rough time, we probably want to help them out, if there’s a way to help. But if we have a family member who’s

too lazy to work, are we obligated to take care of them? If we have neighbors who do nothing to help themselves, are they our responsibility? I don't think so!

Let me take a time out, and put my therapist's hat on for a few minutes. There is a psychological diagnosis called a Dependent Personality Disorder. These are people who have a "pervasive and excessive need to be taken care of"; people who feel they're unable to function without the help of others. They're always, in one way or another, saying to people, "Please take care of me." (Now if you have somebody with this dependent personality, who needs to be taken care of, and someone else who has an obsessive need to be a *caregiver*, you've got a perfect match, although not a healthy one for either the caregiver, nor the care receiver). I don't think we're obligated to be our brother's keeper for anyone who could help themselves, but don't!

Sometimes we do people harm by not forcing them to be responsible for their own lives and their own choices. Many of us are uncomfortable with pain, we want to relieve others' pain. But sometimes the only way we grow is when we are made to face the consequences of our choices, and someone doesn't step in to rescue us. For instance, not rushing in to rescue someone who has made poor financial choices. Not being an "enabler" with someone who is an alcoholic, sheltering them from having to face the consequences of their drinking.

So, yes, we do have a moral obligation, as an individual, for our fellow man, but not necessarily for those who refuse to take responsibility for their own lives.

*How might this apply to us as a church, a congregation?* It's a lovely thing, an admirable thing, when a church responds to human need. We give Christmas gifts to families in need. We take a special offering for victims of a natural disaster, or some other desperate situation. On a larger scale, the global church can provide wonderful support to people in need. Our United Methodist Committee on Relief is a marvelous organization that has helped millions of people in dire need over the years. Not too long ago I saw a TV program where the guest was the President and CEO of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, an organization that builds bridges between Christians and Jews, and provides humanitarian help to Jews throughout the world. She quoted this Scripture, that we are our brothers' keepers.

But one of the more difficult decisions is how much we help people that contact the church and ask the church for money. I've talked about this before, that over the years I've become hard-nosed about helping people whom I don't know. Early in my ministry I learned that the hard luck stories people tell you are probably not true. Many people who ask for help – it's just their way of life. They're chronically looking for handouts. If I know the situation, and if I'm pretty sure it's a legitimate need, I will give assistance from the church's resources. But realistically, our small church is very limited in what we can do. We can't help everyone.

So, church, are we our brother's keeper? Yes, if there is a legitimate need, and we have the resources to help. But we can't help everyone!

Just a few thoughts about this question and *the nation*. Our country has a generous heart. We

Americans spend millions and millions of dollars in foreign aid. But, how much should we be expected to take care of the rest of the world? How do we balance that with the needs of our own citizens?

I believe almost every fair thinking American wants to have a “safety net” so that people in dire circumstances don’t fall through the cracks: people who are disabled, the aged, those injured at work, those truly living in poverty. But, should we expect the government to take care of everybody – give all kinds of “free stuff”? Free education, free medical care for everyone, free child care? Someone has to pay for it – and that would be through higher taxes, from the workers. Are those of us who work – and perhaps are successful – required to be our brother’s keepers for those who want a free ride?

Likewise, probably almost every fair-minded American welcomes immigrants who want to come into our country *legally*, go through the process of becoming citizens, and contribute to our country’s welfare. But when literally millions enter the country *illegally*, overrun our cities and get free food, free medical care, free housing, disrupting those Americans already living in those cities, must we be our brother’s keepers in that respect? Added to that, recent figures from ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) show that among the millions who have entered the U.S. illegally more than 425,000 are convicted criminals, 13,099 have been convicted of homicide, and 15,811 have been convicted of rape.

So, back to the question: Am I my brother’s keeper? Are we our brother’s keepers? Yes, when there is a legitimate need, and we have the resources to help. But not when people should take responsibility for their own lives.

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