

Title: My Brother and Sister's Keeper pt.1  
Text: Hebrews 12.12-17  
Theme: Perseverance  
Series: Hebrews #50  
Prop Stmt: Striving for holiness is a church-wide mission  
Aim: I aim to challenge my people to be intentionally involved in the lives of others to encourage true spiritual relationships and growth.

#### Read Text:

Within one generation from the fall of Adam, his son, Cain committed murder. Cain, in a fit of rage killed his brother Abel. The first family was already a dysfunctional wreck. When God confronted him about it, Cain's response reflects the heart of the self-willed, self-ruled, independent, live-by-my-own-rules, attitude. "Am I my brother's keeper?" I'm not responsible for anyone! Is that true?

There is one God, who eternally exists as three persons in a perfect relationship of love, trust, cooperation, communication and harmony. Forever, God has been trinitarian and forever He will be three in one. When he made us in his image, he made us to be relational and interdependent upon each other. He made us as the creation, to be dependent upon Him, the Creator. Therefore, his people are that: the people of God. The people of God are a community of people who are in relationship with each other because they are in relationship to God.

That concept is difficult for us to grasp. It not only goes against the grain of our hearts, it goes against the message of our culture. We live in a country that has made independence a virtue. The American dream is where everyone has their own place, separated from others by a fence. We do not walk to work, we drive, we stay in isolation from others, and do things on our own terms. We look for a church that will be convenient for us or for our family. We survey the list of programs on the website or bulletin as we would items on a menu. Joining a church? Why should I join? What is there to join? Do you get a rewards card like you do at a grocery store? Do you get a discount in the bookstore or when you send your kid to camp? Formally committing myself to being accountable to and to being accountable for others is almost a foreign concept. We don't want to be tied down. We don't want someone else knowing our business (our hearts), we don't want to feel the weight of someone else's spiritual condition. I mean, we might pray for someone, but take on their concerns as our own?

The entire concept of being responsible for the lives of others is very difficult for us to grasp. We do not want to be responsible for others, and we certainly do not want others responsible for us. Sadly, we think like Cain. "Am I my brother or sister's keeper?" YES! While you come to faith in Christ as an individual, you are rescued from your individualism and isolationism and are born into the family of God. Eternal life with God is eternal life with his people. We will be in community

with the people of God before the face of God forever and ever. The church now, is to be a foretaste of the life that is to come. But, we do not do this very well.

We are too busy pursuing our dreams, polishing our idols, protecting our privacy, and pretending to be self-sufficient that we do not want to be bogged down by needy people. We want freedom, not commitment. We want flexibility, not involvement. And of course, a complicating matter in this, is the reality that because we are all a bunch of sinners, and when we do choose to get involved in the lives of each other, we end up hurting someone or getting hurt, which we then use as evidence to prove our point. Relationships are hard. Involvement in each other's lives is messy. Fact is, relationships are nearly impossible. The very thing that we need is seemingly impossible to accomplish. So, what do we do? Do we stay at a "safe distance" away from relationships and in disobedience to God, or do we get involved with people knowing that we will more than likely experience a measure of disappointment and hurt?

If I am describing you, then I want you to see where this text takes us. Jump ahead to vs. 15 and 16. In those two verses, there are three commands for all of us. 1) See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. We are responsible for the perseverance of each other. 2) See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled. We are responsible to help each other deal with the issues in our hearts so that we do not become bitter. 3) See to it that no one is sexually immoral or unholy. Do you know what that means? If you claim to be a follower of Christ and you are sexually active with someone other than your spouse, then we have the responsibility to help you address this. That also means that if you claim to be a follower of Christ, then you are responsible to help other believers live out the gospel.

So, as I go through this text this morning, I want you to try to answer this question. "How did I obey these commands this week?" and/or "What am I going to do this week?"

## Review and Overview

Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who had experienced some severe persecution and were about to face another round, probably at the hand of the emperor, Nero. These believers were probably in Rome and were cut off from their people ethnically, because of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. They were really feeling the sense of isolation. Throughout this book, the AH keeps pointing them to Christ. Christ is worth every faith-driven step of perseverance. In spite of the adversity and cost, He is worth it. And you are not alone. Not only do you stand on the shoulders of men and women who blazed a trail of faithfulness, but ultimately you must look to Jesus. We endure, knowing that He already endured perfectly. We endure, knowing that even our adversity is part of the discipline process that God is using to enlarge our hearts so that we enjoy God even more.

This particular passage (12-17) begins with the word "therefore" which relates the instruction of the previous passage to the commands of this passage. Verses 3-11 are thick with challenging, heart-gripping truths. There are some commands but there is much more instruction. But, verses 12-17 are now thick with challenging, heart-engaging commands of obedience. There is some instruction, but notice how many commands there are.

Digging In

1. **Press On Together Pilgrims!** (12-13)

Behind the cloud of a disappointing circumstance, is the discipline of our wise, and loving Father. Behind the curtain of adversity is the sovereign plan of our merciful God. Behind the momentary pain is God's pursuit of peaceful fruit in your life.

A. **You are not the first to face adversity.** (12)

The command here fits very well with the running theme that the AH is using in this section. When a runner gets tired or is giving up, the arms sag and the steps get short. As soon as I read this, I thought of a guy here in the church whose daughter runs cross country. When most other parents are saying stuff like, "You're looking good honey. Way to go. I'm so proud of you." He's saying, "Arms pumping, knees up! Arms pumping, knees up!" That may be one of the reasons why his daughter went made it to state's. But, this is more than just a call to keep running hard. This statement is actually taken from Isaiah 35.3.

Now, I recognize that many of you are not that familiar with the book of Isaiah, but we are going to change that. In about two months, we are going to change that as we launch into a study of this absolutely incredible book! Isaiah was writing to the people of God during a time of major international upheaval. The massive political and military juggernaut, called the Assyrian Empire had reached its peak and then something incredible happened! A rebellion by the Babylonians was successful! They overthrew the Assyrians! For 300 years the Assyrians had ruled the Ancient Near East. And now, they were conquered. And while that turn of events was truly amazing, it was the Babylonians who did the unthinkable. They conquered Jerusalem! The city of God was wiped out. The people of God were in exile. Isaiah writes about all of these things. He speaks of them long before they happen and not only tells of the coming of the Babylonians, and the coming of their conquerors, the Medes and the Persians, but he names the ruler by name, who will allow the Jews in exile to return to their land. It is a phenomenal book addressing the rising and falling of world kingdoms. The Jewish people for the most part have rebelled against God and have become enamored with the gods of this world. Isaiah writes about the future, not simply for information purposes but to taunt the gods of this world. Most religion is simply man's attempt to control forces that he did not make and to find an

explanation for why things are. That pursuit is futile apart from God. Why would you trade God for the inferior gods? So, Isaiah challenges these gods to predict the future, which of course they cannot do. He taunts them. But, in his laying out of the future, he not only describes the rising and falling of the world's kingdoms, he describes the coming of the King, and the rising and establishment of the true Kingdom. In the midst of rebellious Judah, was a remnant of the faithful. To these Isaiah writes, "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong: fear not! Behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'"

Do you not see the connection? The Jews, for the most part, ignored Isaiah. Their beloved Jerusalem, their capital city for 400 years was now a smoldering pile of rubble. They were in exile in Babylon. Their "God", who could not protect them now, seemed to be inferior to the gods of the Babylonians. In Babylon they read what Isaiah had written 125 years earlier. God said that this would happen. And it did. Now, 650 years later, another group of Jews were under the control of another world empire - the Romans. In a few short years after the book of Hebrews was written, Jerusalem would once again be destroyed. To these Hebrews, they would be tempted to fear and wonder, "What is the world coming to?" The answer is, it's coming to an end! The world, as we know it, is coming to an end. But the world, as it was meant to be is going to start, and it will never end. (Heb. 12.28) You are not the first to face adversity. You are not first to be in the minority. You are not the first to observe kingdoms in upheaval and political and military collisions. One day, they will be over. Meanwhile, you have a race to run. Don't get freaked out about the future or immobilized by fear. "Arms pumping, knees up! Let's go!" What about you? Is our land and life at risk?

### **B. Giving in is related to giving up (13a)**

This statement, "make straight paths for your feet" (Proverbs) is actually a reference to living ethically and morally pure. Now, why is this here? We desperately want to be in control. I think that is one of the reasons why some people will spend 3 hours a day watching the Weather Channel. We love to have the illusion that we can predict the future. As I said, most religion is our attempt to control forces that do not answer to us. But, we are not in charge, and when that becomes obvious it creates panic. Most of you are making plans. You plan to get through school. You plan to get your driver's license. You plan to get a job. You plan to get married. You plan to have children. You plan to buy a home. You plan to keep your home. You plan to raise your children. You plan to retire. You plan to be comfortable. You don't plan for your nation to be conquered by someone else. You don't plan for a disease or a catastrophe to blow everything up. You don't plan for your spouse to die, or to lose a job or to lose a child. But things like this happen and when they do, it is so easy to respond by saying, "it doesn't matter how I live. I might as well give in to sin and live for myself in the moment, because I may not have another moment." Whoa! Beloved, genuine Christianity

is not a means to control God or manipulate the will of the Divine for our comforts. We bend to Him and to His purposes; He does not bend to us. But, if you "follow" God in order to get Him to cooperate with your plans, you are setting yourself up for some serious problems. Make plans, but hold them in an open hand. Trust His Sovereignty and do not lose hope and give in to sin. Not only is God in charge, but if you give in, there will be collateral damage.

### C. **Your life affects others.** (13b)

So that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed

Like it or not, you are your brother and sister's keeper. Like it or not, your faithfulness (or lack thereof) affects the rest of us. There are people in our church family who are spiritually lame. That is, they are weak, tired and vulnerable. When you give up and you give in, you may think, "Well, I just need a break. I'll get re-engaged down the road." Maybe you will, but maybe they won't. So, keep those arms pumping and knees up. But, what exactly does that mean? Verse 14 spells some of it out.

### 2. **Strive together for Peace.** (How to) (14a)

Striving for peace with fellow believers (primarily) and others is one of the ways in which you run your race. Notice how this fits together. (v.10) God disciplines us so that we can share in his holiness. God is preparing us to be able to live with Him, enjoying Him, and enjoying each other, forever with Him. "His holiness" refers to His uniqueness, His separation, His setting apart. There is no God, like our God. There is no kingdom like his kingdom because there is no King like our King. Therefore, we are to be a people who are unlike any other people. When His kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven, then there will be peace. There cannot be peace on earth, until the people of the earth are at peace with God. People who are peace with God are now free to be at peace with each other.

Because we are sinners, we are, in our natural condition at war with God. When our father Adam sinned, he was thrown out of the presence of God. He was banned from Eden. The way back to the garden, the way back to the tree of life, the way back to God, the way back to life as it was intended to be, the way back home was blocked by a cherubim with a flaming sword. Anyone who tried to go back would be killed because no sinner could stand in the presence of this holy and righteous God and live. But, what is impossible to us was made possible by God. God became man in the person of Christ. He incurred upon himself the flaming sword of the judgment of His Father when Christ became sin for us and died on the cross. He took the sword for us by means of his death and when he died, he opened up the way back home. The way to Eden is open once again, and one day, we will get there. Meanwhile, we are here, together as a people to

live together in such a way, that our relationships (horizontal) reflect the peace that we now enjoy with God. Do not give up pursuing peace with other believers.

The verb that is translated pursue is stronger than the command to seek. This command in v.14 speaks of intensity and urgency. We absolutely have to guard the unity that we have in Christ by pursuing peace with each other. We can only do that through the gospel. I know that we are like porcupines, in that, the closer we get to each other, the more we can irritate each other. But the gospel is bigger, even than that. Our peace together, driven by our humility before God, is itself a picture of what Eden, the kingdom, is going to be. The gospel reminds me that I am in need of a Savior. Therefore, when I am in conflict with another person and I have to pursue peace by assuming that I have contributed to the conflict. I need to man up to my contribution and repent of what I have done and seek forgiveness. By the way, you will never get to the point in this life when you outgrow this. Neither do you ever outgrow your need for the next command.

### 3. **Strive together for Holiness** (14b)

Striving for the holiness is done within relationship to other believers because relationships always reveal things in our hearts. Every person in this world (other than you) has irritating habits, don't they? Little noises, not sitting still, poor grammar, talk too loud, too soft, too much, can't hear, on and on it goes... How many times do you have to ask your kid to put his dirty clothes where they belong? How many times do you have to ask someone to be on time, or to get you needed information, etc.? And when they don't, you get impatient. Where did that impatience come from? It was already in you. The situation simply revealed it.

Do you see why this command is here? When we are facing adversity that we think is unfair, or when we are in conflict with others that is draining, we are so tempted to give up and give in to bitterness, or go into a shell. If you do and you get stuck in that, and you quit pursuing peace and you quit pursuing holiness, and you quit pressing on, then that, may be an indication that you have never really been converted. Perseverance is put on display in adversity. Look at Jesus! Perseverance is the fruit of genuine faith. And we need, we desperately need the encouragement from each other to stay on course and pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

God made you in order to enjoy Him forever. But sin ruined you. Through Christ, you can be re-created, re-born in order to become what you were made for. That new birth brings a new life by which through the disciplines of God you are being prepared to share in his holiness. The discipline, whether adversity from without or conflict from within, is God's means to train you. This week, look around at your brothers and sisters. Some of them have lost sight of this. They are weary and need your encouragement and need your prayer. Look ahead at verses 15-17. How are you going to obey these this week?

Conclusion of pt.1

4. Love others enough to help them guard their hearts. (15-17)

Admonition and Warnings (15-16) each warning gets longer and more complex  
See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God  
[see to it] that no root of bitterness springs up and  
causes trouble and  
by it many become defiled

*when stubbornness, complaining, discontentment grows it destroys many  
(Exodus generation)*

How are you going to obey this? Do you even look at the church this way? Do you recognize your responsibility to be part of the body in such a way that you have relationships with people who are watching out for you and you are watching out for them.

It's not that the author of Hebrews thinks that the majority of the professing believers are not really believers and are in danger of apostasy, but the warning focuses upon the amount of danger that a single member can have upon the entire body when that member falls away.

that no one is sexually immoral ( *pornos* ) or  
unholy like Esau  
who sold his birthright for a single meal

What does unholy mean? Holy means – set apart for something special, unique, in a class all by itself. Unholy, therefore means profane or common. The picture is that of someone who is totally driven by appetite. This is like an animal that is governed by glands. There is no self-control, no culture, no refinement, no conversation, no relationship, just animalistic impulses and self-centered instincts. A person who is governed by animal-type desires forfeits the greatest joys of humanity in order to feed and indulge these urges.

One of the evidences of the inspiration of the scriptures is how the text does not sugar coat the truth. Esau is a train wreck, but Jacob is no saint.

Loving each other enough to warn, counsel, plead, pray is not easy, but oh so every important because sin is so deceitful and repentance is tough. (17)  
For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Now What?