

Title: My Brother and Sister's Keeper pt.2
Text: Hebrews 12.12-17
Theme: Perseverance
Series: Hebrews #51
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:

A number of years ago, a mom brought her child to me insisting that the child understood the gospel, believed the gospel and was ready to be baptized. The child was around 4. What am I supposed to do? Is it possible that a child that young can grasp the gospel and truly be regenerated? The Scriptures do not give a hard and fast age for this. But, is this child in a place where “credible” evidence can be displayed that would be considered genuine fruit consistent with conversion? Probably not. The kid is 4. All the kid knows at this point in life is that my daddy and mommy love me, they are nice, I like them and want to please them, and they want me to love Jesus, and if I love Jesus, I get to go to heaven, so, sure, I'll love Jesus – who wouldn't? But of course, that is not how mommy sees it. She is sitting in my office convinced her child is a believer and should be baptized. After all, when the people in Acts 2 heard the gospel and believed, they were baptized right away, so we should do the same – right? Why don't we do it like the Bible? Why do you have to meet with people and talk to them and ask all these questions? We don't see that in Acts 2. Well, hold the phone for a second. It's not quite the same.

What happened to the man in John 9 who said that Jesus had healed his blindness? He was thrown out of the synagogue. This guy was excommunicated from Jewish society because of his profession of faith in Christ. Does that make any sense? The day before the guy was blind. Fact is, this guy was born blind. He had no earthly hope of seeing. Today he can see and everyone can see that he can see – know what I mean? So, the obvious question is – how is it that you can now see? And he says, “Jesus did it.” And they say, no, that cannot be, tells us really what happened. And the guy can only say what really happened, but what really happened is not what they want to hear, so they throw him out of the synagogue. There is a price to pay for speaking well of Christ. What happened to Christ? He was crucified at the hands of the Romans because of the hatred and animosity of the Jewish officials. So, here, on the day of Pentecost, with Peter standing up and preaching Christ were all of these people who heard the gospel. They knew what had happened to Christ. They knew that the Jewish officials had not changed their mind. They knew what happened to people who professed to be followers. So, while the day of Pentecost was an amazing out pouring of God's Spirit, it was not all fun and games. Baptism was public, which meant that many of these people who publicly professed faith in Christ lost their homes that night. They were thrown out. Some of them lost jobs. Some of them lost friends. Often times when I am talking with people that I am going to baptize I tell them of the time when I was in India and was participating in a baptismal service of a church there. Some of the people I baptized had already been told

that if they went through with this, that their belongings would be in the street. They would be considered by the family to be dead. Fact is, at the end of Acts 2 the people who had food, and who had extra possessions were sharing those because there was such a need. My point being, yes these people were baptized right away, but in that setting the “credible” evidence of their faith was put on display by their willingness to publicly identify themselves with the One who just a few weeks before had been crucified. They were willing to be known as a Christ follower in a setting where their world was not all cheering them and encouraging them. So, it’s a little different for four year olds whose entire world is applauding them – isn’t it? I recently spoke on this topic to our children’s teachers who, by the way, I love. They love Christ. They love the gospel and they love children. And they have such a desire to present the gospel, but they also recognize the inherent danger of assuring children of the certainty of their standing before there is credible evidence of conversion. I applaud that, but guess what. It’s an issue that applies to more than just kids.

Every June, our high school Seniors stand in front of us and tell us of their future plans. My challenge to them generally goes like this. “In the next few years, you are going to be moving out of the controls and shelter of your home into freedoms and situations that here to fore, you have not been exposed to. Right now, you may consider yourself to be a Christian. The truth is, we’ll see and you will see. When you are faced with temptations and opportunities and adversities that up until this point your parents protected you from, you did not have to search your soul and ask yourself, what is it that I really believe? Do I belong to Christ? Do I really believe the gospel? Or, did I repeat what I was told to say because it made others happy? The truth is, some of these seniors standing here, really don’t know! But, time will tell. We have had kids that have been very involved in the church who in their early adult lives, even right now, show no real affection for Christ. The temptations of this world clearly have a hold on them. It would be tragic to say, “Now honey, I was there when you prayed the prayer so I really no that you are a believer.” Don’t say that, because they may have prayed a prayer to make you happy, not because there was genuine repentance and faith. But guess what, this is an issue that applies to more than just young adults. This is an issue for all of us.

How do you know if you have been genuinely converted and that you really love Christ because He is altogether lovely and He alone is worthy of your affection and devotion, or, you love Christ because here in church it is cool to love Christ, or you think that if you love Christ, that Christ will do good things for you? Do you love Christ with a heart that says, “Even though he slays me, yet will I trust him?” or do you love Christ with a heart that says, “As long as you give me comfort, happiness, relationships, or attention, or health, then I will trust you?” The truth is, some of us really do not know the answer to that question because we have not had the privilege of going through deep adversity that took everything away from us or threatened to take everything away from us but Christ. So, we want to say that we love Christ, no matter what, but in the back of our minds, we wonder if we really do.

I wonder that at times. Now, you may say, Bob, you’re a pastor. You’re supposed to have that figured out. Yes, but think about it. You are a wonderful flock to shepherd. You are

kind to me (most of you, most of the time). You are kind to my wife and to my children. So, I wonder, what kind of a pastor would I be if day in and day out I faced adversity from you, or from my world? You see, beloved, adversity is a gift from your Father (that you cannot refuse) to help you know the most critical issue in all of life. Am I really a believer of conviction, or am I a believer of convenience? Hell is already populated with believers of convenience.

What happened on Palm Sunday? How can people change like that? On one day they are calling him Messiah and five days later they are calling for his death by crucifixion. They did not change. Their desire for relief was the same. Their desire for convenience was the same. On Sunday it was convenient to call Him Messiah, after all they may get something out of it. On Friday it was convenient to kill him, after all it would go better for them.

That is why these admonitions and warnings and example in verses 15-17 cannot be glossed over or simply mumbled in the pulpit. They must be faced because they are so strong. And they are strong warnings because they deal with such a serious matter. “Strive for ...holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (v.14) Holiness is the fruit. Genuine conversion is the root. If a life does not bear the fruit of holiness, then there is every reason to question the legitimacy of the root being that of genuine conversion. If you know a person who claimed to be a believer, or still does, but whose life is not reflecting the fruit of holiness, meaning, there is no appetite for the gospel, no longing for the Word, no desire for fellowship, then what do you do? Do you ignore that because you don’t want to come across as being judgmental and pharisaical? What does this text say?

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

In these verses, there are three warnings. Each warning gets a little longer and a little more complex. Each warning is your/our responsibility to carry out. This is how much we are to love others. This is how much we are to love others more than ourselves. This is what deep, gospel-based, healthy relationships are supposed to be like in the church. We are to:

A. **Do all that we can to help each other be certain of the gospel.** (15a)

Look at that first phrase in verse 15. “*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.*” That phrase is a restatement of 4.1, “*Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.*”

This “failing to obtain” is from a verb that means to “miss out on something through one’s own fault.” Do you remember the historical setting of this warning? The Children of Israel had crossed the Red Sea. The Red Sea experience is symbolic of conversion. They were rescued totally by God. God used this event to not only rescue them, but to illustrate for us what it is like to be delivered from the bondage of our sin. Only God can do it. We cannot rescue ourselves. We have to be rescued and that is what Christ has

done for us. But, the symbolism does not stop with that. The Promised Land is symbolic of the eternal Kingdom of God. This is what we look forward to. Between the Red Sea of conversion and the Jordan River of death is the wilderness of life. So, while the Red Sea event illustrates conversion for believers, in reality, in the actual event, the truth is that most of the Children of Israel, while delivered physically, did not have a change of heart. They followed God merely out of convenience. And while they were delivered in Exodus 14, and were singing about it in Exodus 15, before that chapter was over, they were grumbling about the lack of water and in just two chapters later, they became so irate with Moses about their circumstances, that God later revealed in Psalm 95, that he swore at that moment that they would not enter his land. Why? Because they did not really believe him, in spite of all that he had done. Psalm 95 is the basis of the warnings of Hebrews 4, to which this verse refers. (clear as mud?)

The point is simply this. Just because you are in the company of the rescued, does not mean that you personally get it. How you respond when the water dries up (adversity) reveals whether or not you really trust God because you believe him, or because he is at the moment a better option than being a slave in Egypt? A gal in our church has recently had her ticker (heart) getting out of rhythm which can get a little disconcerting when you realize that at any moment this thing keeping me alive can get into a dangerous pattern and simply quit. This has given her an immediate awareness of her own mortality, to which she has looked at Christ, the gospel and is at rest. Is there anything greater in all of life than to know that you are safe in Christ? Adversity reveals your hope? When adversity comes, and it does and someone bails out on God, we are right to be alarmed and to come along side this one to warn and encourage with great humility and love, because what is at stake is their eternity. The fruit is making it evident that this person is not truly converted. Adversity often is the occasion for bitterness, which is why we need to...

B. Do all that we can to warn each other about bitterness. (15b)

“that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”

If your real “god” is convenience, or acceptance, or attention, or comfort (whatever), then you will seek to use the real God to help you get what you truly worship. So, what happens when God does not give you what you want? Simple! Get a new god. Get one that works, after all, this one did not come through for you. That is why bitterness is a root that grows into a tree (life) of idolatry and it affects others. We all know the stories, don’t we? In fact some of you know people who are on the edge right now. I desire to say this with gentleness. God never promised an easy life. God promised adversity for now, but not forever.

It's not that the AH 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 becomes bitter and falls away. The affect of falling away can be so damaging to the body of Christ.

So while we are right to be warned about this for our own lives, (the emphasis in chapter 4) we are also right to be challenged to love each other enough to help others when we see this happening with them. Let me ask you something. How are you going to obey this? Do you even look at the church this way? Do you recognize your calling, 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. Who is watching out for you? Who are you watching out for? Whose life are you involved in and praying for and serving, and counseling and encouraging and running with?

Now, I am going to go from preaching to meddling – ok? Have you ever heard someone say, “If I stopped going to church, I doubt that anyone would even notice.” Now, hold that for just a second, because there are two parts to that. The one is, there should be people who are watching out for you and should notice. But who are those people? Those people are most naturally the ones that you are involved with whom you are caring about, and praying for, and encouraging and admonishing and cheering for so that they will run their race with joy. If you are connected in people’s lives like this text commands you to, then you if you stopped coming you would leave a crater in the lives of others. If you are not missed when you are not here, it is because you’re not living out your calling. We need each other. We need to...

C. Do all that we can to guard each other from immorality. (16-17)

“that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal”

If you are at all familiar with the story that AH is referring to, then chances are you think that maybe Esau got ripped off by the whole thing. After all, the guy comes home famished from a long day of hunting, his brother has made some lentil soup and of course Esau wants it. So, he asks for it and Jacob says, “give me your birthright” and Esau does. And we think, yea, whatever, the guy was hungry and we all know that guys are brain-dead when they are hungry, so what’s the big deal?

The big deal is this. God made a promise to Esau’s grandfather, Abraham, that from all of the nations on the earth, God was going to make from Abraham one nation for his own precious possession. These people were going to be his and they were going to be the people through which he was going to build his kingdom. The birthright was the honor of being the leader of the family and the inheritance of the family due to being born first. Esau, by all rights was to inherit the promise of being the leader of the people of God, that is, Esau, by all rights was to inherit the kingdom of God, as it was on the earth in that day and he traded that away for a bowl of lentil soup. And beloved, it was not simply a stupid choice in the moment. Esau made a decision in that moment based on a life of decisions that were characterized by his glands and not by faith.

Here, Esau is described as being sexually immoral (*pornos*) is the word in the original. The OT does not say speak to this specifically, although Esau took two wives from a pagan people who were a source of grief to his parents. Was their lifestyle characterized

by this or did they have pagan practices that are referred to as being spiritual immorality, which is how idolatry is often presented in the OT? Fact is, immorality and idolatry went hand in hand. Still does.

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. Today we call it, “No Strings Attached.” A person who is governed by animal-type desires forfeits the greatest joys of humanity in order to feed and indulge these urges. A life given over to these urges will take a person to the point where they are so hardened and deceived by sin, that they, like the children of Israel forfeit the grace that is offered to them. And later, though they cry, their tears are tears of regret, not of repentance. In referring to this text, John Piper said, *“There is a point of confirmed sinning which may take you over the line of no return and you will be like Esau who sought repentance with tears and could not find it. He could not repent. If he could have, there would have been forgiveness. But the heart can become so hardened by sin that even its desires to repent are counterfeit.”*

Do you understand the urgency of this text? The gospel rightly embraced will be evidenced in a life of holiness, not a life of perfection, but a life that is marked by appetites and desires for God. Only by faith in Christ can we be born into the family of God. But when we do, we inherit what Esau forfeited. But, if you, like some of the children of Israel, like Esau, like some of these people to whom this book was written, are simply associated with people of the kingdom, and are not really people of the gospel then you, who are so close, have everything to lose, forever. It would be foolish for me to presume that each of you have truly been converted. How do you know? What rules your life? What is it, that you really long for? Who do you worship? What do you really long for?

Conclusion:

Responding to an accident

- 1 – are you really a believer?
- 2 – do you prefer others enough to be involved in their lives?