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Q&A#79 Was Cain Really Supposed to be his Brother's Keeper?

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Today's question:

"You referred in a recent lectionary talk with Peter Leithart to "being our brother's keeper." What is your understanding of the ethical meaning of a "keeper" biblically speaking?

It is sometimes a point of controversy in liberal/conservative Christian political arguments as to the relevance of Cain's refusal of the role of "keeper" (when in fact, Cain has not just failed to aid Abel but murdered him actively) to our understanding of our call to love and serve our neighbor, using the phrase as an expansive claim that justifies almost any kind of political action desired, casting the one who is skeptical of the action as a cain-like person who dismisses a call to be his brother's keeper.

To me "keeper" has connotations of a guardian with charge of a dependent inferior or one who is weak. Like 'zookeeper' or a tale of a overprotective father who "keeps" his daughter safe locked in a tower. Do we find being a "keeper" of another as a model of Christian regard elsewhere in scripture, and if not, should we found an ethic by simply negating the dismissive words of a murderer?"

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, you referred in a recent lectionary talk with Peter Lighthouse to being our brother's keeper. What is your understanding of the ethical meaning of a keeper, biblically speaking? There's sometimes a point of controversy in liberal, conservative, Christian political arguments as to the relevance of Cain's refusal of the role of keeper, when in fact Cain has not just failed to aid Abel, but murdered him actively, to our understanding of our call to live and serve our neighbour, using the phrase as an expansive claim that justifies almost any kind of political action desired, casting the one who is sceptical of the action as a Cain-like person who dismisses a call to be his brother's keeper.

To me, keeper has connotations of a guardian with charge of a dependent inferior or one who is weak, like zookeeper or a tale of an overprotective father who keeps his daughter safe locked up in a tower. Do we find being a keeper of another as a model of Christian regard elsewhere in scripture? And if not, should we find an ethic by simply negating the dismissive words of a murderer? I think there is a positive meaning to the role of keeper in this sense. Cain uses it dismissively, but he is a keeper of his brother.

He's the older brother, he's responsible for the safety of his brother, and that responsibility is not just a generic responsibility to another human being. It's a very specific responsibility that he bears as the eldest. He has to protect his younger brother.

And this is something that we have in a more explicit sense in the chapter before, where Adam is set up as the guardian of the garden. He is placed in the garden to guard and to serve the garden. And then the woman is placed in the garden and she is placed under his guardianship.

Now, he fails to guard the garden. He fails to guard the bride and protect the bride. This is something that we see Paul referencing elsewhere in the New Testament, where he talks about the importance of guarding the church, lest like Eve, the Corinthian church be led astray by Satan.

So what we have here, I think, is a guardian role that is a positive role. It is incumbent upon Cain to look after his brother, to take responsibility for his brother's well-being. It's not something that can just be dismissed in the dismissive sense that he uses it.

He is responsible for his brother. We see this later on in the case of Reuben in his relationship with Joseph, that he feels keenly a responsibility for Joseph. And rightly so.

He is the older brother and he bears particular responsibility for the well-being of his younger siblings and a particular responsibility in representing his father to his siblings. And this is something that I think is going on in Genesis chapter 4. Genesis chapter 4 is in many senses a recapitulation of the events of the original fall, a failure of

guardianship, a failure of faithfulness in an initial realm, then leading to a failure of guardianship and responsibility in a greater realm. Both of them involve the question of God coming on the scene, the question of where are you or where is your brother? These are key questions at the heart of both of those chapters.

And I think that as we play these stories out, we'll see that they're very closely paralleled. And Adam's failure to guard in the garden is mirrored in many senses by his son Cain's failure to guard in the land and not just failure to guard, but actually taking life of his brother. I think this does have implications for Christian ethics, that there are persons who bear responsibility for others, even in an unfallen state, as we see in Adam in his relationship to Eve.

Adam is placed as the guardian and he is responsible in a peculiar sense for the well-being of all in the garden and upholding that order. And when he fails, everything fails. And Cain looking after his brother, being responsible for his brother is an extension of that.

And so I do think there is an ethic here. Whether that stretches as far as everyone wants it to, as many people want it to, to have a sort of generic duty to other people. I don't think it works that way.

This is a very specific duty that is borne by the older brother to the younger brother. And we see the same thing in the previous chapter. There's a very specific duty that Adam bears towards Eve.

I think I could say a bit more about the relationship between the two stories, but I'll leave it there. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless and thank you for listening.