

I Am My Brother's Keeper

Call to Worship: Psalm 9:1-2

1st Scripture: Galatians 6:1-5

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

Hymn Insert- *By Faith*

Hymn #269- *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken*

Hymn #487- *Faith of Our Fathers*

Introduction:

When Cain had murdered his brother Abel, the evidence of his lack of shame and guilt came when God, seeking to address Cain's conscience, asked, "Where is Abel your brother?" We recall that very memorable response, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The response itself was telling of the wicked, unrepentant, shameless heart of Cain. It shouted aloud of Cain's utter disdain, not only for the life of his brother, but also for the Law of God, which commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. For, even if Cain had not murdered his brother, he would have known too well that mankind ought to have a sincere sense of responsibility for the welfare of his brother. God created us not to be islands, but to love and care for one another, as we do even ourselves. Every human being, bearing the image of God, ought to say, "Indeed, I am my brother's keeper."

Sadly, the effects of sin have turned our hearts inward, to the point that others matter very little, unless they can benefit us in some way. Is it not a sobering thing to find that some of the greatest contentions and conflicts of life, are found within the home, where brothers and sisters war against brothers and sisters, hating each other for the most selfish and sinful reasons? Well, life in the church; life in the brotherhood of Christ, ought to be composed of a redeemed people, who are seeking to overcome those, now, naturally selfish inclinations, unto the glory of God. We are one body, one temple, and one people in Christ, all united to the same Head of Christ. And our Lord's greatest command to us, is for us to love one another, even as the Head has loved us.

In the exhortation that we considered last time, Paul has charged us to be at peace among ourselves. And I sought to lay a foundation that would help us understand the significance of that peace, as a critical element, within which, unity is to be preserved unto the revelation of God and Christ, to our lost and fallen world. Well, this morning, Paul's next exhortation takes us a

step further, calling us not only to maintain peace among ourselves, but also to take a very specific, loving interest in one another, with the design of promoting one another's spiritual good and welfare, unto the glory of our great God and blessed Savior, Jesus Christ. Here, Paul gives us specific instructions concerning how we ought to be our brother's/sister's keeper, in the life of the local church.

I. Our Brother's Keeper

Paul begins this exhortation in verse 14, by saying, "Now we exhort (encourage) you, brethren..." And what follows is a charge (a command), directed to the whole body. In other words, this is not a command, which is designated to individuals, who are gifted in a particular way, or to some, who are in an office of some sort (a deacon or an elder). No, this is an exhortation (a responsibility), given to the whole body (men and women)...to every single part of the body.

And Paul leaves us with four pieces of instruction, geared toward meeting the needs of four categories of people (This is not to say that everyone in the body fits into one of these categories at any given time, but rather, as we see people in these conditions, out of love, we ought to take the necessary steps, to help them along in their walk with the Lord):

1) Warn those who are unruly. Warn those who are insubordinate, idle or are entangled in any particular sin. Those who are idle (4:11-12), those who fail to honor the shepherds of the church (5:12-13), and those who are given over to any particular sin are not to be left in such a state. We have the responsibility of warning them; lovingly doing so, but doing so nonetheless. There is nothing loving about allowing a brother/sister in Christ to go astray, brethren. And while it is very inconvenient and uncomfortable, out of love (because we are our brother's keeper), we must rebuke and warn each other, when we see anyone heading in a dangerous direction. And that warning might consist of a reminder of the chastening hand of God, which will fall upon His wayward children, or even the fierce judgment and wrath of God, if the individual is manifesting a pattern of unrepentance, which is in keeping with the life of an unbeliever. The point is, that we are diligent to bring back those who are going astray, borrowing

from the principles given in Matthew 18, to rescue the unruly brother or sister from certain destruction.

2) Comfort the fainthearted. Certainly, in a context where persecution was ongoing, we can appreciate why some of the Thessalonians would grow faint of heart. The longer Job had to endure his suffering, the more his will to live began to break and he began to question the justice of the Almighty. There are indeed times when Christians can and do grow discouraged and begin to spiral down toward despair. They are tempted to throw in the towel and to give up, as various lingering trials have overwhelmed them and have worn them out spiritually. [Even Paul]

And so, one of the ways in which we are called to help those who fall into such a condition, is by comforting them. Notice, the difference between the medicine given to the faint hearted and the medicine given to the unruly. The unruly are to be warned. The faint hearted are to be comforted and encouraged. Sometimes, brethren, we can give the wrong medicine to the wrong person. But each medicine has its proper place, doesn't it? If we comfort the unruly, and shroud them with grace, we may do them great harm, allowing them to feel comfortable in their sin. And if we warn and threaten the fainthearted, we may add to their sorrows, and push them further down toward anxiety and despair.

Our Lord said that He would not break a bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. He is gentle with the faint of heart, and graciously comforts them, so that they might be restored in their faith. And brethren, we ought to treat His precious lambs in the same way. Rather than being harsh with the weary, we ought to help them reset their sights, so that, once again they might see Christ, over and above their circumstances. If they mourn their sins, and see themselves as objects of God's wrath, we ought to comfort them by reminding them of the abundant grace that is theirs in the Christ, who died for them. If they are tossed about by the storm of affliction, we ought to remind them of the One, who stands above the winds and the waves, and who is able (with but a word) to calm the storm and to bring them safely to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Whatever the circumstance might be (guilt, sorrow, pain, fear, exhaustion), the Gospel and the Christ of the Gospel, must be teased out before them, unto their comfort and encouragement. We must gently take them to where they are certainly going, as they agonize over where they presently are.

3) Uphold the weak. There are those who are weaker in the faith, who require the help of others to continually nudge them along. Their doubts loom often. They need to be reminded of the same things a hundred times over. Or maybe they are mentally challenged? Or maybe they are more susceptible to temptation or false teaching? Whatever the case might be, we must walk along side of them, help bear their burdens; indeed, throw them over our shoulders at times, so that we might safely make it home together. As a general principle, the soldiers of Christ seek to hold to a "marine-like" motto of, "No soldier left behind." We're in this together! We are ready to bear with one another in love, and to exercise long suffering, continually forgiving one another, even as God continually forgives us in Christ. We watch each other's backs, and even if the watching is unbalanced; even if our shift is longer than others, we do all on our part to help move the body of Christ forward toward glory. For, we are our brother's keeper.

4) Be patient with all. This particular directive encapsulates the whole battalion. The unruly must be warned, the fainthearted comforted and the weak upheld, and toward the unruly, the fainthearted, the weak, and every other category of people, we are to be patient at all times. We are to handle everyone, in whatever condition they might be at this time, with a spirit of gentle, tender, patience. Patience is the seasoning that must accompany all rebukes, warnings and encouragements, and patience comes from a mindset and motive that thinks restoratively, setting others and the glory of Christ, above all of our own conveniences, comforts and natural preferences. It is the seventy times seven of forgiveness, the blanket of love that covers a multitude of sins, the fountain that saturates every short fuse, the tongue that is slow to speak, the ear that is quick to listen, and the tamer that tames the lion of provocation.

Ever keeping the incomprehensible, and yet, genuine patience of Christ (toward us) in mind, we learn, we train, we strive to humbly exercise great patience toward all. We endure all things for the glory of Christ and the prosperity of His church. We never come to the point where we can sincerely say, "My patience has run out. I have none left for you," even as Christ never comes to the point where He will say, "My grace and my shed blood have run out. I have none left for you." (Paul's patience with the Corinthians, the Galatians...etc)

And so, Paul leaves us with four duties here, which belong to every church member. We are to concern ourselves with the needs of the unruly, the fainthearted and the weak, and we are to exercise patience with all, in whatever state they might be in. We are our brother's keeper.

And then finally, Paul straps on a general ("catch-all") statement that can be followed by an innumerable list of applications, when he adds these words: (In keeping with being patient toward all...) "See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all" (vs. 15).

Here, Paul gives us what would be akin to one of his "put off/put on" statements, given in other contexts. We might view this general command as a charge to put off rendering evil for evil. Put off revenge or paying back wrongs to those who have wronged you in any sense. And put on pursuing what is good, both for yourselves and others. Look out for the best interests of others, even as you would for yourself, even when you are wronged. In our Lord's words, which go beyond the parameters of the church, we are called to, "Love even our enemies; to bless those who curse us; to do good to those who hate us, and to pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us." And if this is to be our attitude toward the world, arguing from the greater to the lesser, how much more ought we to do good to the brethren, even when they have wronged us in some way? And so, in general, Paul calls us here to run counter to our flesh, by turning away from a proud "pay back" mentality and returning love for evil instead, always keeping the bigger picture of God's glory in redemption, in mind. We are to be on a constant mission of revealing Christ in us, by looking out for the good of others, even when they don't deserve it. As our Lord further stated in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

All in all, brethren, we find here that the Christian life is a life that seeks not only our own good, but also the good of others. It is "others focused," in these kinds of ways. We are our brother's keeper.

II. Closing Thoughts and Applications

Having worked through our main text, brethren, let us then conclude our time by considering a few relevant, closing thoughts and applications:

1) Are you your brother's keeper? In what specific ways have you demonstrated this in the life of this church? I don't mean this in a condemning sense, but if we are going to apply this exhortation, we have to unearth, in very specific ways, what we are doing as individuals in the life of this body. We all have to take inventory of our lives here, to see where we can improve.

At the very basic level, are you taking an interest in others in the body? Do you know the brethren here, not necessarily on an equal footing, but is it registered in your general Christian makeup to necessarily look for ways to serve and bless others in the body? Are you looking out for the interests of others, as well as of yourselves? Are you aware of your surroundings, or are you just too busy with your own business? Do you ask regularly, "In what ways can I sow seeds of blessing in the life of this body, of which I am part?"

2) Do you warn those who are unruly? Or do you leave that to someone else, and borrow the misunderstanding of how the world interprets "Judge not, lest you be judged?" That is one of the most often quoted and brutally misinterpreted texts, by the way. It is as if people interpret that Text as an island of its own, at the expense of everything else in Scripture. We need to lovingly confront and rebuke those whom we love, not in a self-righteous sense, but unto the good of others...unto their own wellbeing and restoration. And so, do you warn the unruly?

3) Are you a comforter to the faint of heart? Are you patient and gentle with them, prayerfully and tenderly seeking to remind them of gospel truths, so that they might be restored and not broken?

4) Do you uphold the weak? Is your eye upon those who struggle and who are more vulnerable to doctrinal error, for various reasons? Do you add your strength to the weaknesses of others, so that they might be ushered along in the battle with you? Do you lift up the wounded soldiers or do you leave them behind to fend for themselves?

5) Are you patient with all? Do you handle all types of people, in all types of situations, with a spirit of gentleness, tenderness, endurance and patience? Do you bear with others, and wisely work with them where they are, or are you a wrecking ball that has little tolerance for the weaknesses of others? Are you forgiving, and willing to go the distance; willing to suffer wrong and to be inconvenienced, for the sake of the body...Christ's body? Or do you throw your hands

up in the air, and say, "Forget it! Someone else deal with this. I have done this a hundred times and I need a break?"

6) In general, do you render evil for evil, or grace for evil, and do you look out for the good and welfare of others, even as you do yourself?

In all of these things, brethren, the love of Christ alone can drive us toward these ends. The love of Christ alone can make us to be, what we cannot naturally do to ourselves. His love alone can drive us back on this course, when we veer off a thousand times. For, we are naturally selfish, magnets of ease and convenience, not wanting to bear the burdens of others. But when we constantly, continually peer at the love of Christ for us, and when we consider that our infinitely large burden of sin, has been removed from our backs and placed on Him (at the cross), suddenly, we find plenty of room to bear the burdens of others and to look out for their interests. The love of Christ is a fuel that will set the soul on fire, compelling us to do all that we can to help His church (His sheep) get safely home to glory! [Ex: The sacrifice made for the president's daughter vs. the sacrifice made for the bride of Christ]

Brethren, are you your brother's keeper? If not, go to the cross and spend some time there. See your very specific sins nailed to His wrists and placed upon His back. Hear the clang of each thrust of the hammer, speaking, "Adulterer, fornicator, liar, thief, boaster, coveter, drunkard, God-hater, blasphemer...etc." And after viewing the incomprehensible love of Christ for even you, hear His whispering voice saying, "Go and do likewise. As I have loved you, love one another. Do you love Me, Peter? Feed My sheep!"

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25