

March 20, 2022

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit..."

"Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast."

"Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Genesis 4:1-7

Selfless or selfish? In nearly every situation each one of us is faced with this choice; to be selfless or selfish. In most of those situations we probably do not even realize we are making a choice and in still more we fail to understand that our underlying attitudes influence our choices even before we make them. In effect, we are either selfless or selfish by nature.

The story of Cain and Abel really exemplifies this truth. As these sons of Adam and Eve grew up, one became a farmer and the other a shepherd. In the course of time each brought a sacrifice to God.

It is, I think, important to understand that these sacrifices are not sin sacrifices, but thanksgiving sacrifices. The problem here is not that one offered an animal sacrifice and the other a grain offering. Later, under the Law of Moses, both would be acceptable thanksgiving sacrifices.

I am convinced that the real problem in this account is that Cain offered **"some"**, but Abel offered the **"fat portions from some of the firstborn..."** These two brothers have very different attitudes toward their sacrifices and toward their God. Abel has chosen the best part of the firstborn of his flock; chosen to give God the best he has to offer. He is selfless by nature.

Cain chooses to give only **"some"**. He has already lost the battle between selfish and selfless in his mind even before he chooses what to sacrifice to his God. Cain is by nature selfish. Very likely, this is a part of our own natures that many of us struggle to overcome. By nature we put our own needs and desires above the needs of others and we really don't even think about what we are doing. By now it is our nature.

The truth is, I think, that a lot of us struggle with Cain's attitude. We don't give of our best to God. We filter our offerings to God through a 'good enough' filter. Selfless chooses the best of the first. Selfish chooses 'good enough', and 'good enough' always starts with me first, my way first, what I want or need first. It is that 'me first' filter that gets us just as it did Cain

God's admonition to Cain convicts. **"Why are you angry?"** Cain has made his choices, and he is accountable for the choices he has made. Why is he angry and in particular, why is he angry with Abel? Like each of us the choices are ours to make. But in reality those choices are so much a part of our nature that they flow through everything we do or say.

Changing our nature from selfish to selfless is no small task. Our nature is the product of so many influences and influencers that trying to undo their work through the years can seem insurmountable. Thus God will not only warn Cain that sin desires him, but he will also command Cain to master it.

How do we begin to master our very nature? The key word is, I think, 'intentionality'. If I would change my very nature I must intentionally choose selflessness even when I don't want to. I must become aware of my own motives and address my selfishness over and over again until it becomes a part of who I am all the time. To master selflessness I must master my self; my choices, over and over again until that selflessness becomes my very nature.

