Unexpected Truths 4) I Am My Brother's Keeper

Ezekiel 33:7-11 ● 2026-09-06 ● Audio version

Cain, the first recorded son of Adam once said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He had invited Abel to go out with him to the fields. Cain assumed that no one was watching. He thought he could get away with murder. In jealous anger he attacked and killed his own brother. God came to confront him for his sin. But Cain was not found hiding like his parents who tried to flee and hide when they disobeyed God. Instead, Cain is found arrogant, bold, and calling out defiantly to God as if he has nothing to hide. At first, God gave Cain a chance to confess his sin. "Where is your brother, Abel?" But Cain only responded, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" This set the stage for the rest of Scripture as every other descendant of Adam struggles to fend of this same attitude. We may not have gone so far as to take our own brothers' life. But we still make the same type of defense. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Today we consider how Scripture tells us something unexpected for every sinner. We are indeed accountable to God for our brother and sister. We'll consider just how true that is as we look at God's Word to the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel had no doubt that he was his brother's keeper. He had a call from God to be a spiritual watchman over the people of Israel. The glory of the Lord appeared to him while he was living in exile in Babylon, 600 years before Christ. God did not want his people in exile to get comfortable with sin. So, he called Ezekiel to warn them of God's wrath and punishment over those who refused to repent. Then the day came when reports came from Jerusalem. After twelve years in exile the people heard that the city of Jerusalem had fallen. God had appeared to Ezekiel again to remind him that he remains a "*watchman for the house of Israel."* He had a call to continue to call the stubborn hearted people to repent, even if they had failed to listen for so long. The Spirit spoke to him and gave him prophetic words for the people. He was called to direct them to turn from sin to the mercy of God. He knew this much!

In the same way God continues to call people to serve him and his Church. The apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians and us that even though Paul had called and appointed the elders to shepherd their church, "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers… (to his people)." I have a call from God through his Church to shepherd the flock at Rock of Ages. All spiritual shepherds and overseers are called by him.

What is that shepherding supposed to look like? Firstly, Ezekiel isn't called to harp on his favorite subjects and the sins he regards as most important. He is called by the Lord to "*listen to the word I speak and give them warning from me*." It's the same with those called to be a shepherd in God's church today. They must first listen to what God says with his Word. That Word will include warnings and the call to preach repentance. Shepherds are to keep watch over the flock and protect it from harm. The dangers don't diminish if "everyone is doing it." It doesn't matter if "my mom says it's okay." It doesn't even matter if the government allows it. God says, "*Listen to my words and give them warning."*

God's call to repent is not a popular teaching nor is it one that the world wants to hear. Like Cain we like to assume God has no role in how we live our lives and ought to mind his business. But we are his business. Everything we say, think, and do is God's business. So, God sends his Word by those he calls. This included prophets like Ezekiel, the apostles sent by Christ, and it includes pastors and teachers today who shepherd the flock of God. They serve as watchmen because Christ has called them to do that with his Word.

Ezekiel had a call to be his brothers' keeper. As a pastor I do too, along with all who serve as spiritual leaders. But what about you? We read earlier today that Jesus instructs all believers to carry out their role of watching out for their brother and sister who sins. Yes, Jesus does warn against hypercritical judgment of others or looking down on others in pride or hypocrisy. But he also calls on us to rebuke those who openly sin. After warning of the severe dangers of sin and leading others to sin, he says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault." This term translated "brother or sister" isn't meant to be just for your household. Jesus is talking about brothers or sisters in faith, those who belong to the family of God. And as we read on, we see especially those who belong to your church family. These are all those who claim to join with you in worship and confessing Christ. Every believer is called to confront sin and deal with it. That starts with your own heart, but it doesn't end there. He calls on all believers to watch out for all believers.

To the person who says, "They have no right to call me out for my sin!" Jesus gives a clear promise. He said that whenever two or three gather in his name, he is with them and gives them the keys, the tools to bring the sinner to repent and to rejoice in forgiveness. And he calls watchmen to guide the church in the proper use of these tools.

Note the way he tells us to do this in love and in private. Then if necessary to bring another believer along. Then if necessary to bring it to the attention of their pastor and spiritual leaders. The whole point Jesus makes clear is to bring that person back from sin to peace and pardon.

Ezekiel is told to warn the unrepentant sinner that "*you will surely die."* This is not just a slap on the wrist from God but a severe warning. It means separation from God's mercy and facing his great wrath over sin. It is what Jesus spoke about earlier in Matthew 18. "It is better to be thrown into the sea… better to have eye or limb removed than to be thrown into the everlasting fires of hell." God is telling Ezekiel and all of us that to call someone to repentance is not merely a life-adjustment. It is a complete turn from death to life, from hellish agony to heavenly pardon.

Though it is so serious, sometimes we might toss out Cain's reply in bitterness and resentment at others. In a cold-hearted shrug we just abandon those in danger around us. At other times we might toss out Can's reply in apathy or fear of confrontation. We don't want to get involved. "It's not my business." When we try to brush aside our own call to help others by saying it's not our problem, the same cold, heartless refrain can come from our mouths. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Yes, I am. We've established that much is true! But why should I even care?

Ezekiel was told why he should care. He is his brother's keeper, and God would hold him accountable for his failures to love his brother and to properly warn him. And whatever the reason is why we might drag out Cain's old contempt, we bear guilt before God when we fail to speak his Word. Ezekiel received a sobering reminder, "*When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood."*

In July of 2017 a group of teenagers recorded 31-year-old Jamel Dunn crying for help as he drowned. The teenagers were heard laughing as they told him he was going to die. They did nothing to try to help. Those teenagers were not prosecuted because most states, like Florida, have no duty to rescue someone in an emergency if you did not cause the danger. People called the teenagers' behavior morally reprehensible, but there was no law against not trying to rescue someone in an emergency. That's how our society seems to feel about this issue. But that's not how God feels about it. He holds those who do nothing guilty. And in this case, we are not mere bystanders watching someone drown. When a Christian sees another Christian sinking into sin and evil, but does nothing, God regards that Christian as the lifeguard on duty. He sees someone on duty ignoring their plight of a drowning swimmer. Even if the person sinking was foolish to jump in, the lifeguard still has a duty to fulfill to rescue them. So do we when we see brothers drowning in their sin.

Ezekiel was told why he should care. His fellow man was not just going stumble but would end up dying for his sin. When Christians see their brother or sister in Christ falling into sin it is not merely them stumbling into a less-then fulfilled life. That person is doing what is wicked. The devil seeks to destroy their soul. And the judgment of God looms over them. There is real and immediate danger that their sin will lead them to the grave and hell. Sin is not a trivial matter of living your best life or not. Sin kills body and soul. Sin separates us from our God. It condemns.

Ezekiel was told why he should care. The house of Israel was lost. By this point they had become spiritually confused and falling into a pit of despair. They were crying out as they heard that the city of Jerusalem had bene destroyed. *"Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"* Without a shepherd to speak God's Word to them they had nothing but fear, guilt, and shame. They had no hope of pardon or peace. They had sunk into despair. Have you ever known a brother or sister who so completely lost their way that they despaired of any hope? God wants you to speak his Word to them, call them to repent and live! Hope remains!

Finally, Ezekiel was told why he should care. The Lord cares! "*Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?*'" This is the whole reason why the Lord had made Ezekiel a watchman for the people of Israel. He cared about them. This is the whole reason why God has called on you to rebuke your brother or sister and point out their sin to them. He cares about them. God cares about the sinner even when that sinner does not want to acknowledge their sin or repent. He wants that sinner to turn to him for mercy.

That's why God patiently approached the murderer Cain and called him to repent. That's why God sent prophets for hundreds of years to the people of Israel who were committing idolatry, child sacrifice, and sexual immorality. He wanted them to repent and live. That's why God calls you to confront your brother or sister who insists killing babies isn't wrong, living together outside of marriage isn't wrong, or the seemingly lesser sins like bursts of anger, coveting, and whatever sin you might need to point out to your brother or sister in Christ. God cares and does not want that person to turn to evil and die in their sin. He wants them to live. "Brother, sister, it doesn't matter if you once believed that the wicked things you did were okay. Hear it now, they cause death and hell. And hear it also God does not desire that you die for your sin. Turn to him once more and every day and find forgiveness, mercy, and everlasting life."

"Brother, sister, why will you die for your sin?" There is one who came as the perfect watchman. Though he was the faultless Son of God he did not come in pride to accuse, but in mercy to save. He came to warn the sinner and invite not just the straying but all the lost to come to him and find life. For all the times we failed to be a faithful brother or sister and show concern for others, he did not fail. He cried out regarding the centuries from Ezekiel's time until he walked in human flesh, "How often I have longed to gather you under my wings!" They strayed; he remained faithful.

We will not die when we turn to him for mercy. Does God care? Just look at the cross. He took on flesh, became our brother, and died for our sins so that we might live. He made us and our sin his business. He dealt with it. And as surely as he lives, he desires we now find everlasting life in him. He rose from the grave so that we might know that the life with him!

This is a truth that the world hates to hear, but that brothers and sisters in the family of God delight in: You are your brother's keeper. Their sin is your business; along with their rescue and return to Christ. He became your brother so that you might share his love with your brother. And Christ now lives so that we might forever live with him.