

He wakes up every morning at 5am and runs 12 miles. Then, after work, he goes home and runs 15 more miles. His couch potato coworker wonders incredulously, “Why do you live that way?” He responds, “I’ve always dreamed of finishing the Boston Marathon.”

Pounding coffee until 3am every night this week with her nose in books and eyes on her computer, her worried roommate asks, “Why do you live that way?” She responds, “No one from my family finished college, and I’m getting my Masters. They’re so proud of me.” People live their lives in ways that seem strange to others when they’re motivated by a purpose or goal.

Many see your Christian life and wonder, “Why do you live that way?” “Why spend an hour-plus of your relaxing weekend at church?” “Why give some of your hard-earned money to God, when you could use it?” “Why don’t you go out on Friday night looking to bring someone back to your dorm room like everyone else?” “Why let an ancient book determine what you believe and how you live?”

The world, the Devil, and our sinful flesh demand answers for our counter-cultural Christian life, so we need to understand the “why,” because “why we do” drives “what we do.” What motivates our lives as Christians?

### **“Why Do You Live That Way?”**

Life had changed drastically for Adam and Eve. After enjoying perfect unity with God, their fall into sin had exiled them from the Garden and into a world ruined by sin. Understanding God’s promise that a Savior would come from their offspring, they started a family. For the first time, Eve experienced the extreme pain of childbirth—a curse of sin. But it wouldn’t be the last time Eve would feel sin’s sting because of her firstborn, Cain.

As we see two young men, Cain and Abel, sacrifice the fruits of their labor to God, it’s obvious Adam and Eve raised their children to trust in the LORD. ***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.***

But these two brothers lived very different lives, because their lives were driven by two very different things. We see it in their sacrifices. Abel, a shepherd, brought the very best portions of his best animals—the filet mignon of his flocks—to sacrifice to God. Cain, a farmer, brought some of the crops his fields produced. But we’re told, ***“The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.”***

Why Abel’s offering and not Cain’s? Does God prefer meat over potatoes? Certainly not. Notice, it says that God looked with favor first, on Abel—then his offering. Likewise, he looked with displeasure first on Cain—then his offering. God was focused on the hearts of the men who brought these sacrifices, not the sacrifices themselves. To God, “why” always trumps “what.”

The book of Hebrews lets us see Abel’s offering through God’s eyes. ***“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.”*** Abel’s offering pleased God because Abel trusted in the loving LORD who promised to send a Savior. By faith, Abel gave God the “fat portions” not just of his flocks, but of his whole life. Why did Abel live that way? Because Abel’s humble, joyful faith in the God drove him to live in thankful obedience to God and his commands.

But what about Cain? Shouldn’t God have been pleased with him too? I mean, some crops is better than nothing, right? 1 John explains, ***“Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one...his own actions were evil.”***

When God looked at Cain's heart, he saw a man "going through the motions;" an unbeliever who wasn't concerned about living for God as much as he was concerned about doing what would best benefit Cain. To God, Cain's offering said, "I'll throw you a bone, God, if you keep making crops pop up in my fields." Cain's unbelief and self-righteous attitude was the problem, not his sacrifice. Why did Cain live that way? Because Cain lived for himself, not God.

Does your offering look more like Cain's or Abel's? I don't just mean the amount of money you put in the offering plate. I mean every part of your life— as spouse, parent, employer, employee, child, child of God—are you giving God the best, "filet mignon" parts of your life, in faith-driven thanks for everything God has given and done for you? Or are you giving him your leftover scraps after you've given everything else away to other ventures?

Does your life reflect a humble faith and love for God, like Abel? Or a selfish, self-righteous attitude, like Cain? When we examine our lives in the mirror of God's law, we hope to see Abel staring back. But what we often see looks a lot like Cain.

Do you worship regularly because you genuinely love God; because you're a sinner who needs constant spiritual nurture from the Gospel in Word and sacrament? Or do you worship the bare minimum to keep your parents, pastors, or church elders off your back with their spiritual encouragement? Do you worship only at tenuous times when you hope worshiping will score you brownie points with God?

Is raising your children to know God's Word the most important thing? Or do you spend more time teaching them to throw a spiral than about the Spirit? Do you take the role God gave parents to spiritually train their children seriously? Or do you hand them over to the church until Confirmation Day, and then think "my work here is done"?

Do you always use your God-given talents to serve the Lord? Or only when your boss is watching? Is the love in your marriage self-sacrificing, or self-serving? Do you believe God's Word is the truth for the world? Or that God's Word is truth, if it conforms to the world?

Do you see the difference? Some of those examples mean giving your best to God. Others mean keeping everything for yourself. Outwardly, those thoughts and actions might resemble godly obedience, just like Cain's sacrifice looked good. But God, who sees the hearts, isn't fooled when we attempt to mask our half-hearted praise and selfish desires with a disguise of obedience. Why do we live that way? Because our sinful nature is inherently selfish, not selfless.

Now, I have to include this caveat. Cain lived that way because he was an unbeliever. I'm not saying that we're all unbelievers, because we're not. But it's important as believers to honestly reflect and examine whether we're living a life of faith-driven, thankful obedience to God, or whether we're sinning by self-serving.

When God rejected Cain's offering, ***Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.*** Not in repentance over his hypocritical sacrifice, but because he felt slighted by God. In love, God warned Cain to be careful about the anger that grew inside him. ***"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."***

God pictures sin as a bloodthirsty beast ready to pounce, waiting for Cain to open the door, even just a crack, so it could devour his soul. Satan didn't want just a piece of Cain. He wanted to tear him to pieces. But in spite of God's warning, Cain did nothing. He didn't repent and turn to God for forgiveness and protection. His anger continued burning until it boiled over into the first murder, as he killed his brother Abel in one of his fields.

Satan tempts us to think that our selfishness and half-hearted obedience to God isn't a big deal, as long as we occasionally give some of our lives to God. But God's loving warning for Cain, is also directed towards us.

Sporadic church attendance becomes non-existent church attendance, and the beast strikes and devours your faith. If we only half-heartedly teach our kids to know and love their Savior, we shouldn't be shocked when the beast attacks and drags them away from God. Doubting parts of God's Word leaves the door cracked for the beast to burst through and destroy your trust in all of the Bible.

So, what should we do when God's warnings lead us to realize we're giving God our leftovers? That the beast is waiting at our door? We remember who our God really is!

In Cain and Abel, the sad consequences of a sinful world are glaring. But God's grace shines even brighter. After each of Cain's sins, God meets him not with death, but with questions meant to lead him to repent. **"Why are you angry? Where is your brother Abel?"** God knew the answers. But with these questions, God sought to lead his straying child to confess his sins, repent, and humbly turn to God for the grace and forgiveness he promises. God never gives up on his children, calling us to repentance through the Word, just as he does today.

God gives us his Word to steer our focus away from ourselves and back to our gracious LORD. He shows us our half-hearted, selfish service, not to destroy or drive us away, but so we will confess our sins, repent of them, and freely receive by faith the forgiveness Jesus won for us. He sends his Spirit through the means of grace, to strengthen our faith that drives us to live in obedience to God, and equips us to keep the door closed to the beast that desires to devour us.

Cain's murder of Abel couldn't stop the God of life from keeping his promise to defeat sin and death. God gave Adam and Eve another son, Seth, who would continue the family line of the promise all the way to Jesus. Jesus, who lived in perfect obedience to his Father's will; who became obedient to death, so the death he died would conquer death; the antithesis of Cain, who laid down his own life to save his brothers; so that Abel could be one of the first people to enter eternal life in Heaven; so that selfish, self-righteous, half-hearted sinners like us can live in the blessed forgiveness of every sinful failure to give God our best; so that Jesus can promise, **"Because I live, you also will live"** and mean it.

We love the God who loved us first. We serve a God who humbled himself to serve sinners. We believe in God, who brought us to faith in him. And that faith drives us to live the life that God intended—a life that treasures our LORD, his Word, and obedience to both. Why do we live that way? Because Jesus lived and died for us!