

1 Kings 18:20-40

**Hills of Lent: Mt. Carmel**<sup>1</sup>

Hootie and the Blowfish did a song about 10 years ago (2000) called “Fine Line” ...describing the predicament in which a man found himself. It’s the story of a man who has pulled his car off the highway trying to figure out where he’s headed in life. He has a wife and two kids in one town, plus a woman in another city who’s pregnant with his child. The lyrics tell us:

There seems to be no escape: everyone involved is going to wind up with a broken heart.

And then the chorus declares “there’s a fine line between right and wrong, and this guy’s been crossing that border way too long.”

But still, the man is unsure which commitment he should keep.

Like so many other songs – it’s a pretty accurate commentary on the attitude of a culture who’s strongest desire is to satisfy every pleasure.

Nothing shapes your life more than the commitments you choose to make. But in today’s culture, many are afraid to commit to anything ...and you may just drift through life with no real boundaries, no principles, no restrictions, because you’re afraid that if you form a commitment to something now, something better might come along! Others make half-hearted commitments to one thing, one purpose, one relationship – while making a half-hearted commitment to something else that violates that first purpose or relationship all together.

Of course that leaves you frustrated and weary.

Jesus described some of us in the Church who are like this. We hear the Word of God, **“and accept the message but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity.”** (Luke 8:14)

Not only in our faith, but even with our jobs, our relationships and our marriages, we can be fickle, uncommitted, disinterested. We can be lured by other options, tempted by other idols, and cheat or lie ...to satisfy a new itch.

This was the congregation we find with Elijah at Mt. Carmel, in 1 Kings 18. We have one of the great stories that would appear all the better if we could see it in movie form! The drama is perfect! Elijah, alone among all Israel, is bold enough to express faith in the Lord God! Elijah alone.

There are 450 priests and prophets of a god named Ba’al, god of the sun, worshiped by primitive people for centuries.

The Lord *God* calls for a contest in order to bring His people back to faith, to Him! Ahab and Jezebel were king and queen over Israel at the time, wicked beyond any who

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon resources: “*Ten Lies About God*”; by Erwin Lutzer; “*Finding God in the Shack*”; by Randal Rauser

came before them. They were the agitators who forced this new “religion” onto God’s people. In fact, the name Jezebel has become synonymous with the worst forms of wickedness.

READING 1 Kings 18:20-25

Ahab summoned all the people and the prophets to Mount Carmel. 21 Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, “How long are you going to waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent.

22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only prophet of the LORD who is left, but Baal has 450 prophets. 23 Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. 24 Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!” And all the people agreed.

25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood.”

Do you understand the challenge? Elijah demanded to hear from God’s people who they would worship! **“If the LORD is God, follow Him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!”** Another translation reads: “How long will you go limping around with two different opinions?”

But they refused to answer. They were completely silent.

Fickle, feeble-minded followers of “Whatever.” Have you ever heard that? “Whatever” – Indifferent, Uncaring, Uninvolved.

So the contest: the 450 prophets of Baal would prepare a bull for a burnt offering and call upon the name of their god to consume the animal with fire! Elijah would do the same. Whichever God answered would prove to be God for the people!

Really, it was no contest. Baal was a pretend god people made up! It was like asking Peter Pan or Dumbo to come to the party!

READING 1 Kings 18:26-40

26 So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal all morning, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced wildly around the altar they had made.

27 About noontime Elijah began mocking them. “You’ll have to shout louder,” he scoffed, “for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or he is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or he is asleep and needs to be wakened!”

28 So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. 29 They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no reply, no voice, no answer.

30 Then Elijah called to the people, “Come over here!” They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. 31 He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, 32 and he used the stones to rebuild the LORD’s altar. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. 33 He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood. Then he said, “Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood.” [Kevin: There’s a reason why Elijah asked for the water. In ancient days there was a way to keep fire hidden with coals buried just under the ground. At the right time the coals could be fanned to produce a dramatic flame... But not if water had been poured on them!] After they had done this, 34 he said, “Do the same thing again!” And when they were finished, he said, “Now do it a third time!” So they did as he said, 35 and the water ran around the altar and even overflowed the trench.

36 At the customary time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am Your servant. Prove that I have done all this at Your command. 37 O LORD, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that You, O LORD, are God and that You have brought them back to Yourself.”

38 Immediately the fire of the LORD flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the ditch! 39 And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces and cried out, “The LORD is God! The LORD is God!”

40 Then Elijah commanded, “Seize all the prophets of Baal. Don’t let a single one escape!” So the people seized them all, and Elijah took them down to the Kishon Valley and killed them there.

And immediately God puts an end to the *deception* under which the people had been fooled! These false prophets had committed the greatest crime, “You shall have no other gods besides Me!” and so the death sentence for every idol-worshiper commanded by scripture was carried out!

Now doesn’t this story offer graphic warning for judgment?

Elijah asks today’s Church, “How long will you limp along with two different opinions?” Jesus invites you to trust Him; to live your life in the power of His love! Yet so many of us try to hedge our bets. Those engaged in big business support two opposing candidates with contributions, so whoever holds office can be “persuaded.” Frozen by uncertainty, we play both hunches.

Elijah asked the people to make a decision ...and they refused until after the results of the test. Now God demands that we make a commitment!

Or does He?

How do we answer those who insist that God is more tolerant today than He was in the Old Testament days? God told the chosen people of the Old Testament to destroy their enemies totally! We see it in this story and other places across the history of the Old Testament. How can a God of love and mercy wipe out everyone, including children?

Did God raise up terrorists?

Back “in the day” the law commanded that homosexuals and adulterers, children who curse their parents, witches, and blasphemers to be stoned to death!

Today, everything has changed. Homosexuals are invited into our churches; parents are told to love their rebellious children unconditionally; adulterers should be forgiven; and witches are allowed to get rich practicing sorcery in every city in America. People can be as irreverent as they wish and live to see old age.

Is God more tolerant than He used to be?

We need to answer this question, because we want to know whether we’re free to sin as we please, expecting God to treat us with compassion and forgiveness.

I mean, how many of us in the pews today have given in to temptation, lost ourselves in alcohol, sex, pornography, gambling ...pretty sure “God will forgive me anyway”? We don’t seem to fear His wrath.

This demand to commit to something – just doesn’t faze us.

I have to ask: Why does God seem silent?

Have the rules changed? Are the ancient warnings still valid?

1) Let me start by saying, God has not changed. He’s still a jealous God. There can be no other god in your heart. The commandments continue to serve us as guidelines on right and wrong! But God has chosen to interact with people differently, at least for a time. In fact, the same savage brutality toward sin that we find in the Old Testament ...can be found in the New Testament as well. God is still holy and He will not tolerate sinners enjoying their sinful life!

But God is teaching us now about His goodness, His patience, His mercy, and His love.

We read a remarkably refreshing illustration of God’s mercy from the Old Testament, with our Psalm reading this morning!

**<sup>8</sup> The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him...**

So in both testaments, in both periods of history, we will find the wrath of God and the patience and love of God. Still, we want to ask, “Why aren’t the Old Testament penalties carried out anymore?”

2) It seems, since Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, God has chosen to manage His judgment differently. Wrong is still wrong. And right is still right. And God’s judgment between the two will not change.

But it’s like the seven year-old boy who was caught stealing candy from a store. His father gave him a sound spanking. But when the lad was caught snitching candy at age 13 the father chose to give some other kind of punishment. There was the loss of privileges with the discipline. But if the same boy repeated the practice at age 21, the

consequences would be more severe, pending a day in court!

And the point is that the parents' position on thievery hasn't changed, but they choose to deal with the sin differently from one period of time to another.

God's penalties for sin are still severe! But His timetable for punishment seems to have changed. God will absolutely punish sin. The New Testament is filled with that warning and promise. Our Lord hates what sin does to you!

There's an interesting exchange between God and Mack, a man whose daughter was murdered by a serial killer, in the book, *The Shack*.

Mack asks God, "...what about your wrath? It seems to me that if you're going to pretend to be God Almighty, you need to be a lot angrier."

God responds: "Do I now?"

And you can hear the expectation from Mack, that God will indeed punish the pervert for killing his daughter. "That's what I'd think. Weren't you always running around killing people in the Bible?"

And it's a fair question. But God answers, "I am not what you think I am, Mackenzie. I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it." (Pg. 119-120)

I want you to think about that: sin is its own punishment. Yes! Because Your sinfulness creates animosity, jealousy, envy, pride, lust, greed inside of you ...and breeds all kinds of conflict in your relationships!

Thankfully God offers a remedy for sin. He chooses to cure it!

In fact the New Testament clarifies the condition of us all, an expression as harsh as anything we will find from the Old Testament: In *The Message*, a modern paraphrase of the bible, the point is made clear: **We've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us...** (Romans 3:23) And what this means is that there is a long history of failure when it comes to the commandments of God. No one can keep the commandments. In fact, the Bible tells us the commandments were given in order to reveal something about us we may be unwilling to confess: we are lost in sin, we are imperfect people, and "will power" just can't fix us. So all of us are under the holy wrath of God!

Except that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to the world to absorb *all* of God's wrath! God placed the judgement reserved for the world ...onto Jesus! The bible says: **God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us.** (Rom. 3:25)

God has always wanted to forgive the sinner. But humanity had to go through a long history, with all it's stories and witness, so we could be convinced – that we need something more than our own efforts. We need a Savior! And more than just being saved – we need to be reclaimed and recovered from an old life with all it's hostilities and trials.

No sir! We cannot tolerate divided loyalties. Christ Jesus died to save us from the judgement we deserve – but He lives to fill our hearts and minds with His Spirit, a living

Presence, in order to make our lives holy and right! It's God's gift to you – because you couldn't do it alone!

God Himself has offered and accepted the sacrifice for your sin, for your life, your eternal spirit, and **He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance**, (1 Peter 3:9).

So Christ is redeeming you and me. God has not left us alone in our struggle to do His will. God wants to come alongside you and live in you – if you'll invite Him in. Because if you're wanting a better Christian life today – you're *wanting* this life because the Spirit of God is knocking on the door of your heart. God gives us the power to do His will, and the secret to this new life is to submit your will to God's will, with a readiness to respond as He directs and counsels you from this day forward!

To be like Christ, to be holy, we have to train ourselves to think like Christ. And that's made all the more possible with the power of His Spirit igniting your thoughts and actions!

- I don't want you to misunderstand: There will be a judgment for those who refuse and reject God's gift of life! The New Testament warns you with detailed and graphic description of that misery in Romans 2, Matthew 25, Revelation 20.
- God is giving us a chance to acknowledge and confess our sin, to invite His Spirit into our lives.
- You may think there's no hurry...
- But there may never again be a time of grace for you – like today!

Today – in prayer! Humble prayer from a broken heart is the invitation for which God waits...! God's cure comes when you admit you need His Son in your life.