

"The Great Contest"

1 Kings 18:17-40

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Continuing our sermon series on Elijah, this morning we examine the prophet's dramatic contest against the prophets of Baal on top Mt. Carmel. Israel's terrible drought had now entered well into its fourth year and Ahab had been searching all over his kingdom for him. Elijah had passed with flying colors his first two major exams in what I have called God's "School of Faith." During Israel's great drought, he had developed remarkable faith and patience beside the Brook Cherith where he was sustained by a trickle of foul water and bits of carrion brought to him by the ravens; and he had learned to give as well as receive love and compassion through his relationship with a poor despairing widow and her son in the heathen land of Zarephath. Now God feels he's ready for his FINAL EXAM as one man is about to take on an entire religious cult that was an affront to everything Jehovah stood for. Thus, God tells Elijah that it was now time to take his leave of the widow and her son and show himself to the king.

This meeting takes place on one of the highways of Samaria where Ahab greets the prophet by angrily accusing him of causing this terrible famine and blaming him for all their misery. Israel had grown rotten to the core with all forms of immorality, greed, and violence- and Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, had been more responsible than ANYONE for that. However, in his moral and spiritual blindness, the king is unable to see how his nation's suffering was the consequence of HIS terrible sin, not Elijah's! Elijah responds, "It's not I who has troubled Israel! It is you and your family that have torn down the Lord's altars and replaced them with pagan shrines. It is you that has imprisoned and killed God's prophets and substituted your own priesthood in their place. Because you have deliberately forsaken the laws of the Lord and followed the falsehood of Baal, you have brought this misery upon YOURSELF and YOUR KINGDOM!"

Elijah then challenges Ahab to a contest between his God, Jehovah, and Ahab's heathen god, Baal. This is as much a contest to see whose authority and power is GREATER- the PROPHET'S or the KING'S. Instructing him to assemble the 450 prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel, there he would appeal to the people of Israel to choose between the worship of Jehovah and the worship of Baal: "How long, O Israel, will you stagger and stumble between two loyalties? If Jehovah the Lord be God, then follow him, but if Baal be God, then give HIM your full allegiance."

Pastors and theologians, philosophers and sociologists have long contended that since the beginning of the twentieth century, modern man has suffered from a PROFOUND CRISIS OF FAITH, that people don't know HOW TO BELIEVE any more. They say that after two World Wars, faith in a good and just God has become increasingly hard, even throwing into question the very EXISTENCE of God. They say that all the discoveries of science and the advances of modern technology are rendering God obsolete, that we are now able to do for ourselves many of the things we once relied on a mysterious transcendent being to do FOR us, that there's no place for the divine in modern man's thinking any more. They point to statistics that show how even those who SELF-IDENTIFY AS CHRISTIAN are LESS INCLINED TO TALK PUBLICLY ABOUT

GOD AND THEIR FAITH than their predecessors- an indication that we're no longer sure of what it is we DO believe. To take this to its ultimate conclusion, there are those who would even go so far as to argue that this is actually a VERY GOOD thing, that reliance on human reason and in oneself marks a major step in human progress, an advance in mankind's maturity and development.

This movement away from Christianity towards a more SECULAR belief and lifestyle is no more dramatic than it is right here in the United States. From 1981 to 2007, the U.S. ranked as one of the world's more religious countries. However, SINCE then, we have shown a greater movement AWAY from religion of any country for which we have data. When asked of the importance of God in their lives forty years ago when I first entered seminary, we rated 8.2 on a ten-point scale. In 2017, only three years ago, that figure had dropped to 4.6 on the same scale. In truth, ask many Americans what their religious affiliation is and yes, they'll tell you they are CHRISTIANS all right- but dig a little deeper and you discover that they're Christians in NAME ONLY, that they use the term more as an indicator of their CULTURAL BACKGROUND than as a declaration of a spiritual life committed to the teachings of Christ. For example, years ago I had a conversation with my uncle who was trying to convince me what a good Christian he was, that he was in fact a COMMITTED PRESBYTERIAN. I said, "Why in all these years, I've never known you to darken the door of ANY church much less a PRESBYTERIAN one. Why do you say you're a Presbyterian?" To prove it, he called out to my aunt, "Honey, wasn't that a Presbyterian church we were married in forty years ago?"

However, what some might interpret as a wholesale rejection of God isn't ENTIRELY true. Rather than a crisis of faith, never has there been MORE faith, STRONGER faith as there is today; never have people believed as MUCH and as FERVENTLY- in EVERYTHING and in NOTHING. The fact is that human beings are INCURABLY religious. People are looking for meaning, for a sense of purpose to their lives that religion is typically meant to afford them. However, if they can't find it in Christianity or some OTHER "religious" outlet, then they'll look for it ELSEWHERE. In truth, there are a MULTIPLICITY of religions all around us and they go by such names as communism and capitalism, nationalism and materialism, moralism and hedonism to name just a few- EACH OF THEM a religious attitude. The question isn't one of whether we believe in God or not, but rather in WHICH of the Gods do we choose to place our faith in?

The problem that plagues our culture is the same one that caused ancient Israel to frequently forsake her covenant obligations to Jehovah- the problem of idolatry. While we think of idolatry in terms of ancient pagan rituals and cults, the Bible sees idolatry as present and pervasive in every culture and period of history. This worship takes many forms and it manifests itself in our lives, our relationships, our institutions, our ideologies, our movements, and our nations. Some of our modern-day idols take the form of money, possessions, power, pleasure, race, class, sex, nation, status, success, work, violence, religion, ideology, causes, and so on. Caught in the grip of idol worship are our corporations and institutions of commerce, the state and the branches of government, the private and public bureaucracies, the various professions, the schools and universities, media and entertainment, and even our churches.

Simply put, idolatry originates in the human decision to seek life and salvation apart from

the ACTUAL source of life in God. Idols are "imposters of God" as one theologian has put it. They may be things, ideas, persons, or institutions exalted and worshiped as gods. Anything we place ultimate trust in- whether it be our jobs, our bank accounts, government, television, sensual pleasure, the flag, drugs or alcohol, sports- anything we allow ourselves to become slaves to- that, in fact, becomes our idol. The gods may be different since Elijah's day but the worship, the POWER we give to these things over our lives, remains the same.

In his Christian manifesto--*The Call to Conversion*, the writer and activist Jim Wallis writes:

That which commands our time, energy, and thoughts is what we REALLY worship. The things we usually think about, worry over, and plan for are the things we value MOST. Listen to the conversation of most middle-class Americans. A very large part of it revolves around consumption: what to buy, what was just bought, what products are preferred, where to eat, what to eat, the price of the neighbors' house, what's on sale this week, our clothes or someone else's, the best car on the market this year, where to spend a vacation...To help us in these big decisions of life, there is the constant barrage of commercials that sound increasingly theological: "Datsun Saves," "Buick, Something to Believe In," "K-Mart Is Your Saving Place," "Keep That Great GM Feeling," "The Spirit of Marlboro," "The Good News of Home Heating," "GE: We bring good things to life."

For Wallis, MATERIALISM has become America's civil religion; consumer goods have become SUBSTITUTES for our faith. It's not that people literally place their cars or their clothes on the altar but rather, they function as idols- they hold center place in our lives even though most of us would deny it. Love of THINGS rather than love of GOD is what motivates them.

Had we not had been caught-up in the grip of a world-wide pandemic, I would have spent two weeks last month at the Chautauqua Institute in southwestern NY on the shores of beautiful Lake Chautauqua; it is a place I have returned to again and again over the past thirty-five years. I describe it as an educational and cultural Disneyland where one can go to hear some of the finest speakers and educators America has to offer. One summer, I attended Chautauqua because I wanted to see and hear one of the central figures in my doctoral dissertation. The theme for the week was "Markets, Morals, and the Social Contract," and Prof. Michael Sandel of Harvard University was the honored speaker. In fact, his class on ethics is SO popular that hundreds of students have to be turned away each semester. The day of his appearance, thousands packed the Great Amphitheatre to hear him lecture in the morning and again later that afternoon in the Hall of Philosophy where he talked about his latest book *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. He spoke of how over the past three decades or so, markets and market values have come to govern our lives as never before, that we now live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold if the price is right.

For instance, in some cities, non-violent offenders can pay for better accommodations—a clean, quiet jail cell away from the noisier ones—for a mere \$82 a night. Minneapolis and other locales are trying to ease traffic congestion by letting solo drivers pay to drive in car pool lanes for \$8 during rush hour. Western couples seeking surrogates increasingly outsource the job to India

where it is legal for an Indian surrogate mother to carry a pregnancy for \$6,250- a third of the going rate here in the U.S. Foreigners who invest \$500,000 and create at least ten jobs in an area of high unemployment are eligible for a green card that entitles them to permanent residency. Although it's never explicitly stated, it is well known that students with less than stellar grades can get into our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities if their parents are wealthy and likely to make substantial financial contributions. Probably the MOST disturbing fact is the extent we outsourced much of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, with private defense contractors in the Middle East outnumbering the troops on the ground. "A market economy is a tool, a valuable and effective tool for organizing productive activity," Sandel said. "But a market society is a place where everything is up for sale. It's a way of life in which market values and market thinking begin to reach into every sphere of life."

So then, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? It can be argued that those Americans who have earned their way to the top SHOULD be able to access faster lines at busy amusement parks and faster lanes in traffic-congested highways. "The PROBLEM," Sandel said, "is that the more 'things' are subject to PURCHASE, the more AFFLUENCE, or LACK thereof, MATTERS. If the only thing that money and wealth determined were access to yachts, fancy vacations and BMWs, inequality wouldn't matter all that much. But when money comes to govern more and more of life, when it decides access to a decent education, to good healthcare, to living in a safe neighborhood rather than a crime-ridden one...when money comes to govern the big things in life, then inequality matters more than it otherwise would. This throws economic inequality, which has been steadily increasing over the last forty years, into sharper relief. It limits quality education, healthcare and housing to only those who can AFFORD them.

He used as an illustration how when he was a kid growing up in Minneapolis in the 1960's, he used to attend Minnesota Twins' baseball games. Bleacher seats then cost about \$2.50 less than box seats. CEOs rubbed shoulders with janitors and everyone ate the same soggy hot dogs and drank the same stale beer. But NOW, every stadium has luxury skyboxes that separate the upper class from the underprivileged. He called this divide "the 'sky-boxitization' of American life." When inequality is exaggerated in this way, TRUE DEMOCRACY is threatened, and the VOICES OF THE LESS PRIVILEGED are drowned out. He ended his lecture by saying that "the question of markets is not mainly an ECONOMIC question. It's a question of HOW WE WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER. Do we want a society where everything is UP FOR SALE? Or are there certain moral and civic goods that markets DO NOT HONOR and money CANNOT BUY?"

Well, this speaks to the very purpose God had raised up Elijah for in the FIRST place- to confront the sin of idolatry and condemn it. You see, much like TODAY, idolatry was permeating more and more of Israel's life along with the other nations of the world. It is an evil that originates in the human heart, for where we put our heart is where we orient our life, and where we orient our life tells us where we are putting our faith. As human beings, we are forever attempting, however feebly, to generate our own security whether by trying to maximize our finances or consolidate our power. The lie which power and money so easily seduce us with is the illusion that with one more dollar in our wallet or that one big job promotion, we will finally be satisfied. If we can eliminate the competitors and become number one, the top dog, king of

the hill, then the gnawing fear and insecurity will finally have been arrested- the beast will hunger no more, or so we tell ourselves. But the sad reality, and one we rarely ever learn, is that the anxiety still remains and even deepens. All the power and money in all the world cannot hide or eradicate that dread or insecurity. Martin Luther King had this to say about all the idolatry and pride that is so much a part of our American culture:

There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on GODS rather than GOD. We have genuflected before the god of SCIENCE only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshipped the god of PLEASURE only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of MONEY only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These TRANSITORY gods are not able to save or bring happiness to the human heart. ONLY GOD is able. It is faith in HIM that we must rediscover.

The problem which the Israelites had created for themselves wasn't that they had forsaken Jehovah entirely. Rather, it was that they were double-minded, that they showed conflicting loyalties, that they wanted to worship BOTH gods at the same time. For Elijah, however, it was a case of "either-or" NOT "both-and." They could not worship both a lie AND the truth. "If Jehovah the Lord be God," he said, "then follow him. If Baal be God, then give HIM your full allegiance." The Israelites could not continue to serve both Jehovah AND Baal!

The same is no less true for the CHURCH today. We have our OWN idols, whether we're speaking of our denominational affiliation, the church building, or even our particular brand of theology. To say that Christians are idolatrous does not mean that they dispense with the worship of the Lord, but that they simply include the worship of OTHER gods as well. We want God's life, but we also want the GOOD LIFE too. We seem to believe that we can pay homage to our many cultural idols and still retain our integrity as God's people. Like the Israelites, we want to serve both God AND mammon, to enjoy the BLESSINGS OF GOD while also reaping the BENEFITS OF THE WORLD.

My friends, we need to ask God to cleanse us from those selfish, self-serving attitudes that are the root of all idolatry. We need to pray for a spirit of discernment so we can recognize the ONE, TRUE God from all the imposters. We need to re-evaluate our priorities and ask God for the faith and the power to abandon our drug-like dependence upon idols- upon money, upon possessions, upon power, upon pleasure, upon sex, upon nation, upon sport, upon success, upon work, upon violence and upon ANYTHING ELSE we find ourselves enslaved to for as Elijah clearly warned, it is impossible to pay homage to our many cultural idols and still retain our integrity as God's people. And so the challenge that took place atop Mt. Carmel many years ago is STILL being played out today, on the mountaintops of our own hearts. And the question we must confront ALSO remains the same: "How long will WE continue to stagger and stumble between two loyalties? If Jehovah the Lord be God, then follow him. If Baal be God, then give HIM your full allegiance." Amen and amen.