

You know with all the “biblically” adapted movies that have poured out of Hollywood since film started, it’s a wonder we’ve not seen the story of Elijah and his struggles against king Ahab and queen Jezebel. Yeah, I know that part of Biblical history isn’t quite as well-known or catchy as Noah or Jesus, but when you look at the whole of the story told through 1 Kings, it’s about as compelling a tale as Hollywood could ask for. You’ve got the one lone prophet railing against the corrupt monarchy, you’ve got the oppression of the people by the monarchy, a time of drought and a big flashy showdown on a mountaintop just begging for the latest in big budget special effects. The confrontation on Mount Carmel is one of the biggest spectacles in all scripture, the kind that really captures the imagination and sticks with you long after you read about. It would be something to have seen in person, or at least see an attempted recreation of it on the big screen.

But as impressive as the event was, and as spectacular as the miracle that took place was, the flash was not the point. Like so many things with God, the event was not about the miracle, it was about the message. And it all comes back to the question that Elijah poses to the people as they’ve gathered on Mount Carmel. **“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him,”** he says (v21).

That’s what it really comes down to, right? That’s almost, you could say, the ultimate question of human life. To phrase it a little more open-ended, “Who is going to be your God?” Now, sure, in Elijah’s day they had a lot of options as to things they could put their trust in that were actually called “lords” and “gods”. Idol worship in those days was obvious. Not so much now. That doesn’t mean idol worship has gone away. It’s just more subtle to the average person. Well if we’re not bowing down to golden images, then what are our other options? What are the “gods” that compete for our attention with the true God?

To help identify them, let’s go to Martin Luther’s explanation of the first commandment. We all probably know this by heart, right? The commandment, “You shall have no other gods.” And what does this mean? “We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.” Those are your three key words. Fear, love and trust. Anything that you fear or anything that you love or anything that you trust more than the Lord your God...that has become your god. That is your idol that you worship.

So let’s imagine ourselves in the place of those Israelites that Elijah posed this question to. Except obviously none of us have a problem with Baal worship, so let’s stick in something that’s a little more common to our day and age. Probably the most obvious, the easiest target of our society and culture would be material wealth. Whether we’re talking having nice toys or a fancy car or big house or just a lot of numbers in the bank accounts and other such investments...well that’s certainly one of the biggest temptations given to us these days, right? We are tempted to buy into the idea that with enough stuff and enough money, we will always be happy and can buy our way out of whatever trouble comes along. Money is what we’re told to trust in, and that takes our trust away from God. Whether it’s skipping time with God so we can earn more of the money or holding back on helping others in God’s name because we want more for ourselves, the pursuit of wealth can easily become an idol in our hearts.

Going right along with that in our culture is the obsession with health and fitness. We’re tempted in our youth to trust in our physical abilities, to hone them and care for them and stupidly expect that they will never let us down. In old age we are tempted to grab onto physical health as hard as we can and do whatever we can to hold onto it. We are tempted to equate our happiness with our health and if we can’t fix what’s wrong with our bodies then our lives are basically ruined! Our well-being becomes what we love more than anything else, losing it is what we fear more than anything else.

But you know what, although both of those are temptations our culture puts in our path and they are temptations we should not take lightly...well, I also don’t think they are the ones likely hitting you hardest. Those probably aren’t the idol traps you’ve fallen into as much. The ones we do hit are more subtle and devious. Why? Well because they have the outward appearance of being good and noble while at the same time still taking the place of God! They appeal to us because they give the impression of rising above the material shallowness of those who chase after paychecks and make us feel proud for appreciating the more valuable things in life.

One of the bigger dangers to us I think is the idol of ease or recreation. How many times have we put aside our God for what we wanted to do? How many times have we justified skipping a worship opportunity or a chance to study his word because we had something else to do or we were just too tired or just didn’t want to make the effort? Oh we try to justify it...this other thing is a one-time thing and God’s there every week. I do my bit for God often enough, he won’t care if I skip a different chance to get closer to him. But we do it, we show that we love our own wants more than the

needs God seeks to fill for us. We are tempted to love our free time more than our God and we hesitate to give any of it to him.

But even if we manage to rise above that trap, there's another waiting that even more devious...the idol of other people. This one truly seems noble on the outside, and indeed, it can be noble. God calls for us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He calls for us to care for our families, to treat our friends with respect and to value the lives of those around us. In fact, all of the idols we've talked about have proper uses, from money to our leisure. But all that is secondary to fear, love and trust in God above all things. We are tempted to love family more than God, to use them as an excuse to neglect him. We are afraid of people who might ridicule us for our relationship with God, so we hide it. We place our trust in others when that trust rightly belongs with God above all else.

These are all just examples, but ask yourself which is your idol? Actually that's the wrong way to ask it because there's no way for any of us that's a singular idea. What are your idols? What is it that you fear more than God? Love more than God? Trust more than God? Perhaps on paper you would say nothing, but look back at your own actions and habits and see if that's really true. What is it that has kept you from being at worship whenever it was offered? From Bible Study? What has stopped you from just taking time on any given day from picking up your Bible and seeing what your God has to say to you? Whatever they are...those are the idols you are dealing with.

And so how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. If these idols you've created for yourself...follow them.

That's not really a fair question to ask, you know. I know the very fact that you are here listening means that you know the Lord is your God and you want to follow him. But like me, you also probably have seen yourself in our descriptions of idol worship. The natural human heart is an idol factory and it wants us to put our hope and trust in anything at all as long as it's not the true God. The heart is selfish and it wants something it can control. It doesn't want to surrender itself completely to God. And so that nature within is constantly struggling against the faith you have in the Lord. And sometimes...more times than we want to admit...the selfish heart wins out over God.

We know that because of that, we deserve to be punished. God's law expects love of us and we have been the opposite. We have broken the law and we deserve punishment. When we stand before the judge to answer for our crimes, that's the real moment of decision. Who or what will you put your trust in to defend you? Your bank account? God cannot be bought. Your health? It was God's to give, and his to take away. Your times of recreation? What comfort will they be when you're in torment? Your family and friends? They are no better off than you, they need help just as badly, they won't be able to bail you out. All those other things our heart tries to get us to trust in instead...they are worthless in the end.

The prophets of Baal found their god equally worthless when it came down to it. Only the true God had the power to light his own sacrifice. And more than just light, but utterly consume the bull, the altar, the stones and even the water nearby. But more important I think was not the demonstration of power toward the sacrifice, but what came later. The raincloud. Israel had been under a drought and now the Lord was, in his mercy, ending it. It didn't matter that the people had defied him and the majority would continue to. In his love and compassion he showed mercy to them and sent rain.

The mercy of our God is what we cling to. We sin much and daily. Every sin we commit is, at its core, a sin against the first commandment. We deserve to be put to eternal death for how often we have broken it. But instead God put his own son to death in our place. He willingly put himself on the cross to make us saved. All our idol worship is forgiven. All our waffling between who is God is gone in his eyes. By Jesus' perfect life and his sacrificial death, God looks at you and sees you as Jesus is. Perfect and loyal. Completely faithful to him at all times and in all things. And in declaring us innocent, he actually enables us to *be* the people he sees us as. Not out of fear of punishment, but by giving us the best reason to fear, love and trust in him alone. Because he rescued us when we didn't deserve it. By his power he gives us the strength to overcome that old nature and live with him as our God above everything else in this life.

Living with the Lord as our God alone is not a trial or torment. It is true joy. The more we make him the center of our lives, the more we are strengthened in our faith, our trust in him. That faith is our connection to eternal life, our trust in him is all that truly matters. The faith he has given us is our link to the only thing that will last beyond this life. Serve the lord in response to his love of you, but have a healthy fear of him too. Do not take him lightly. He alone has the authority to punish us, but he alone can save us. He alone grants us faith and strengthens it. He alone has died to save us. There is only one true God. Fear, love and trust in him above all things. Amen.