

January 23, 2022

"Fence Sitting"

1 Kings 18:20-21



Special Music: "Can't Make Up My Mind"

The New Shining

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YATciidmvvg>

UPON THE FENCE

Upon the fence

I sit astride

The topmost rail

Of stalwart pride

I sway in wind

From side to side

Uncommitted.

I cannot choose

Right from left.

My attention span

Is always cleft.

I find myself

Quite bereft

Of obligation.

At some point

I must come down

But on which side

Will truth be found?

By giving choice

I will be bound

By my decision

Choose the truth

Or choose the lie.

Make a stand

Or give alibi.

Will my choice

Ever satisfy

My soul?

War or Peace

Love or hate,

Wisdom's truth

Or foolish fate,

How much longer

Can I wait

To choose?

Live for man

Or live for God.

Live for truth

Or die as flawed

Creatures made

From clay and sod.

Where lies the choice?

**Cast down the idols
Made from dreams
God made us each
For better things
Make the choice
That always sings
Of grace and mercy.**

**Make the choice
To live in light
Cast darkness back
And end the blight
Take the wrongs
And make them right
Choose love.**

I have had several Muslim friends over the years. I've always found my Muslim friends to be gracious, caring and given to grace and patience. They have not been given to hatred and violence. They have always accepted me as I am, wholly Christian. I once asked one of my Muslim friends what they believe creates the barrier between Muslims and Christians. After all, most Christians and Jews get along. My friend told me something that I should have already realized. He said, that as a Muslim, he prays without fail five times a day. Not that he doesn't pray at other times, but five times a day all Muslims turn their face to Mecca and pray together. I responded by asking what that had to do with their outlook on Christianity. He told me that, for the most part, Muslims do not hate Christians for their belief in Christ. After all, Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet. No, the problem that most Muslims have with Christians is their lack of commitment. While Muslims pray five times a day, it is difficult to find Christian believers that can find time to attend a church once a week. Christians seem to lack the respect and commitment before God that Muslims example. They find it hard to respect Christians who can't seem to commit.

And that is hard to argue with. In today's world of Christianity, a person who attends church twice a month is counted as a regular attender. That is a very general statement that is meant only to emphasize a point. It isn't directed at anyone. It is more of a reflection of western civilization's general attitude towards faith. It is simply a truth we are forced to deal with. We struggle with our unity in belief. We are fickle. We are stiff-necked and proud. We often treat Christianity more like a menu item than the core of our soul. We seem to think that Jesus is

someone who is very important to us, but not necessarily something to die for.

And yet, the early Christians found that to be exactly what it meant, something to die for rather than deny the sacrifice of our Lord.

Throughout history, there has been a radical side of Christianity that is given to hatred, violence, and indifference. There have been times when Christianity was forced upon people, often with the threat of death if they do not comply. The crusades, with the senseless slaughter of thousands upon thousands of people, was instigated and supported by the church. The Bible was used to justify slavery in the United States. The Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of Manifest Destiny was used to forcibly remove people from their native habitat. The church seemed to have no problem with this and even encouraged it. The idea that white Europeans “discovered” the Americas and were therefore entitled to it, because the indigenous populations were considered little more than animals, was supported by the church. The Doctrine of Discovery still exists within our legal system today and is used to manipulate native Americans and appropriate the very resources we so “graciously” allowed them to keep.

I promised this congregation from day one that I would not bring politics into this pulpit. I intend on keeping that promise. But I will say that many Americans allow their politics to shape their theology rather than allowing their theology to shape their politics. The truth is actually quite simple and is found in Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV) and we have talked about it before: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the**

first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Whenever we allow our politics to override these verses, we are allowing those same politics to shape our theology. We forget that God's law always trumps man's law. Man's law does not release us from our obligation to God's law. We are called to love one another, even as Jesus Christ has loved us. There are no excuses, legal statutes, or alibies that override what God expects of us. God is not asking us to choose between political parties. God is telling us that we need to choose righteousness over unrighteousness, no matter who we voted for. If you want to know who's side God is on, He is on the side of mankind, not on the side of any political agenda. If we fail in our love for each other, we have failed in our walk with God. The Bible tells us in many places that God favors the downtrodden, the underserved, the neglected, the sick, the poor, the compromised, the forgotten, the slighted, the disregarded, the scorned, the ignored, the ostracized, the victimized, the misunderstood, and the under-represented.

In today's passage, Elijah has the same problem. We have talked about how he lived during the time of Ahab, who was king of Israel. Ahab was an evil king to begin with, but then he married Jezebel through a political alignment with Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians. The Sidonians were worshippers of Baal and so was Jezebel. When Ahab married Jezebel, he too, began to worship Baal. He even built a temple to Baal in Samaria. He encouraged his people to also worship Baal. With the encouragement of Jezebel, he began killing of the prophets and

priests of Yahweh. The Israelites struggled with their religious traditions, often under threats of death. And so, they began to sit on the fence, afraid not to worship either Baal or Yahweh, but unable to worship either one.

Ahab has called Elijah a troublemaker, but hasn't been able to get rid of him. Elijah replies to Ahab: **"I have not made trouble for Israel,"** Elijah replied. **"But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."** Elijah has thrown down the gauntlet. You can almost hear his frustration and anger in his words. He is going to show the Israelites that they need to get off the fence and return to the God of their fathers, the God who rescued them from Egypt and brought them to the promised land.

Which brings us to today's scripture:

"So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

There they are. Sitting on the fence. Elijah must have still commanded a great deal of respect in order to bring about this event. It's high noon, and Elijah

is ready for gunfight with 950 radical priests. And yet, the people say nothing. They are going to stay on that fence until it is obvious which side of the fence they should be on. The problem is that they don't even understand what the contest is all about.

You see, the people see this as a political issue. They want to be on the side where they don't lose their heads when the dust clears. It's not about right and wrong to them at this moment. It's not about truth. It's not about righteousness. It's not about doing the right thing. It's about saving their skin.

So, as far as the people are concerned, Elijah's going into this fight alone. Because, if they enter the fight with Elijah and he loses, they probably will not live to tell the tale to their children. Sometimes, we are asked to lay it all on the line, but in this case, the Israelites simply buy a ticket and sit in the stands as spectators. Getting involved at this point could get them killed.

Now, I know everyone is anxious to get to the most talked about showdown of the Old Testament. But we are all going to have to wait. Today, we are talking about fence sitting, sitting on that top rail believing that not making a commitment is the best way to stay alive.

Most of the decisions we face are not life and death for us, but they do have their own consequences. It is one reason that I deplore human politics. Politics are often based on platforms, a collection of ideals, values, and principals. The problem with that is, most of us don't agree with everything on a platform. We like this, but we don't like that. We want this, but we don't want

that. We like this man but dislike this woman. When we vote, we lean towards the platform that best aligns with our personal goals and values. But, when we do that, we are forced to accept the things we do not like that are a part of the platform. Each platform has both good and bad to it.

But God's platform is pretty simple. I told you near the beginning of this message. **“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

This is God's way of telling us to get off the fence. Make a commitment. It's not about a denomination or a political organization. As much as men and women over the ages have tried to force religion on people, it has never worked. The reason why it doesn't work, is simple. Our relationship with God is a personal one. It is God's Spirit and our hearts entwined. You just can't force something like that. When the religion being forced on people doesn't include our Creator, then there is nothing to engage with. So, it fails. When the religion being forced on people IS about our Creator, it will still fail because it does not humans cannot mandate that joining of the heart and Spirit. It is only by our individual intentional engagement with our Creator, through his Son, that we are joined in heart and Spirit.

When we become one with the Spirit of God, we see man's laws as separate from the intentions and laws of God. But we have to choose to make that conscious choice to get off the fence. Even after we surrender our lives and

souls to our Creator, we must still choose to focus on remaining on the right side of the fence. We dare not let the world determine our obligations and commitments.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:2: **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”** When I read that, I hear Elijah saying: **“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”** We are all pretty stubborn when it comes to this matter. We lift one foot towards heaven while keeping one foot firmly planted in this world. That prevents us from making that final commitment and we wind up straddling the fence.

I want us all to take time this week and think about that fence. Where is our commitment? Is it to our comfort zone? Are we keeping one foot firmly planted on earth? Have we truly accepted God’s plan for us and stepped into his purpose for us? Or are we Fence Sitting, waiting to figure out if it is all true before we actually commit?

If we want the blessings, we must make the commitment. We must get down from the fence and claim our inheritance. Jesus sacrificed himself so that we could have that choice. He Himself made the ultimate commitment. We know, beyond doubt, which side of the fence He’s on. He is imploring us to join Him there.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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