

All gods not created equal – 1 Kings 18:16-45 (select verses)

Pastor Colin Rieke – May 14, 2017

²¹ 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...³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. ³¹ Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” ³² With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD...³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. ³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

One show I enjoyed watching as a kid was *American Gladiators*. In that reality show, you had average-Joe and Jane contestants facing off against gladiators in a variety of different physical obstacles. The final obstacle was called the Eliminator, an obstacle course that finished with the two contestants having to select one of four ‘doors’ to go through before crossing the finish line. Behind three of those doors were gladiators who would stop or at very least hinder the contestant’s progress before crossing the finish line. If the contestant was lucky enough to pick the door without the gladiator, that made crossing the finish line much easier. All of those doors were not created equal.

As much as we like to advocate for equality for all, we also understand the concept that not all things are created equal. For instance, not all investments in the stock market are going to give equal returns. Not all rates while shopping for car insurance are going to be equal. Not all restaurants, even restaurants in the same chain will be of equal quality. Not all brands of clothing are going to be equal either. But when it comes to a god to worship, the popular thought today is that all gods are created equal.

But is that really the case? Is it really the case that all gods are created equal and they can be equally served with equal eternal results? Or does it make more sense that ALL GODS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL, and that it does make a difference which God you follow? It is this latter thought that the Bible reaffirms time and time again, that ALL GODS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL. One prime example of that is in the first lesson we read this morning, the account of Elijah facing off against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In this account, we see a stark difference between two gods, one was impotent, the other was omnipotent. In this account, we see a clear reminder of the fickle, wavering nature of the Israelites. In this account, we can see ourselves.

It was around 700BC that one of the most spectacular stories of the Bible happened. The main character was Elijah, a prophet of God sent to convey God's message to the people of Israel. The villain was a wicked king named Ahab, who blatantly worshiped a multitude of other gods. One of those gods was named Baal – a god of fertility, a god of the new growth, a god of fire, a god of the rain. In a display of power, God worked through the prophet Elijah to cause a drought to fall upon the land for three years, an “in your face” moment for the worshipers of Baal.

After three years of drought, you can imagine that king Ahab was ready to give anything a try, including a test against the Lord, which is what Elijah proposed in our story for this morning. So Ahab, along with 450 prophets of Baal, and many of the people of Israel trekked up a mountain called Carmel for a test. **“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.’** The test was simple, the god who could provide fire for the sacrifice would be considered the more powerful god. It was a way to prove that ALL GODS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL. In fact, even Elijah's question to them indicated as much. “How long will you waver between two opinions?” actually sounded like “how long will you limp between two opinions?” One of these opinions was clearly superior to the other, but which one?

If this was a test of power, there would have been no contest. 450 prophets of Baal vs. 1 prophet of the Lord. Surely, 450 prophets would be able to get their god's attention much quicker and in a much greater way than 1 prophet could. Elijah even let them go first. They built their altar, put the wood on top, and then the sacrifice, and then they began to pray. “Oh Baal, great god, send fire down on this sacrifice to prove who you are.” But there was no answer. As the morning wore into afternoon, the praying became more vivid, the rituals more frenzied, the acts of worship more bloody.

Elijah even got into the act by taunting the prophets of Baal, “Surely he is a god, perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy.” If Baal really is a god, and if he really is powerful, then the problem must be with you, not him. And so it went all day with Elijah continuing to taunt the prophets of Baal. After an entire day of trying to get Baal to light the fire, Elijah calls the people over to his altar. In fact, it was a broken down altar of the Lord which the Israelites had used in centuries past. He rebuilt it, using twelve stones to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel.

After placing the wood and the sacrifice on the altar, he ordered jars of water to be poured out over the sacrifice not once, not twice, but three times. This is significant not only because wood doused with water is harder to light on fire, but also because they were in the middle of a drought. But this was Elijah's way of not only showing the Lord's power, but also as a sign that pretty soon they wouldn't need to ration water like they've had to do for the last few years. Then Elijah stepped forward, **“Oh Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”** And with that simple prayer, Elijah accomplished what the 450 prophets of Baal had not been able to accomplish all day. His prayer was answered by the Lord. Immediately, fire came down from heaven and not only consumed the sacrifice, but the wood, the altar and even the damp ground around the altar. **“When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!’”**

This account is one of many in the Bible that shows that ALL GODS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL. One god was able to deliver and bring fire down from heaven, while the other was not. And it seemed at least for a time, the hearts of the Israelites were turned back to the Lord. What was true during the time of Elijah, is also true today regarding the equality of certain gods. And these various gods can range from actual deities worshiped by various religions, or they can also be as Martin Luther puts it, “whatever we set our heart on most.”

This is where we can find ourselves in a very similar situation as the Israelites on Mt. Carmel. It might be easy to surmise that since we come to church on Sunday mornings instead of a mosque on Friday evenings we don’t have any problems worshiping the Lord. But understand, it’s not that the Israelites had completely abandoned the Lord, it’s that they were putting him side-by-side, and sometimes even beneath the other gods they worshiped. And I think all too often that can be the case with us as well.

We may come to church to worship the Lord on a Sunday, but what about the rest of the week? Do we find ourselves worshiping the god of materialism – consumed by our desire for more stuff and more money? Do we find ourselves worshiping the god of family – consumed by what schools are best for our kids? Do we find ourselves worshiping the god of lust – consumed with our next high? Do we find ourselves worshiping the god of self – consumed only with what is good for you?

Each of these gods is popular, each of these gods claim to satisfy your longings. But really each of these gods are just as impotent as Baal was on Mt. Carmel. Each of these gods are nothing more than demons which mask the underlying problem they claim to solve. The god of materialism will never be satisfied, the god of family will never be satisfied, the god of family will never be satisfied, the god of lust will never be satisfied. And by our actions, the Lord, the God of the Bible is never satisfied with you either.

He is a righteous God who expects perfection, and anything short of it is not good enough. He is not satisfied with the way we have worshiped other gods besides him. He is not satisfied with the way we have even worshiped him. Nothing that we can do will satisfy him. And that’s a big problem. A problem that is out of our control. But the same God who had the power to bring down fire from heaven, has the power to satisfy his own righteousness. His own righteousness was satisfied by the living stone we heard about in 1 Peter, his own righteousness was satisfied by the way the truth and the life from our gospel, none other than his only son. Jesus was the only one who worshiped God and worshiped no other god. So not only are ALL GODS NOT CREATED EQUAL from a standpoint of power, but also from the standpoint of what our God was willing to do for us.

Jesus’ substitutionary life, death and resurrection, and God turning our hearts back again to him is what made us right with God. And what a God to be right with. He is a God who doesn’t demand your worship, as if somehow he is less without it. But he is a God who is well-deserving of your worship. He is well deserving of your worship not only for his almighty power, but he is well deserving of your worship because of his almighty love – a love for you and me. It is when we come to worship him that we are being built into a spiritual house, resting on the cornerstone of Jesus. And why have we been built into this house? It’s as Peter says in our second lesson from this morning, **“to declare the praises of him**

who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.” This isn’t just another one of many paths, it is the only path.

In the TV show *American Gladiators*, every contestant eventually crossed the finish line, even though some had to fight through gladiators to do it. The same cannot be said for heaven. It’s a well-known fact that everyone will die one day. But not everyone will go to heaven. Only those whose hearts have been turned to the Lord, only those who have laid their foundation on the living stone. Only those who have trusted in Jesus, the way the truth and the life, will find themselves in heaven. That’s because ALL GODS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL. Amen.