



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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Limping or Loyal? 1 Kings 18:17-24

Back in the 1770s, people living in the British colonies in America were faced with a decision. Would they remain loyal to the British crown and continue as English colonies, or would they declare their independence and fight to become a separate nation?

For many, the choice was easy.

Some chose to remain loyal to England. There was no desire to break ties, and any inconvenience that the lack of representation to the government might cause was well worth the price to them.

Others, though, dreamed of freedom, and were willing to put everything on the line to obtain independence from the crown.

But for some, the choice was not so easy. They loved their new land, but they loved their motherland as well. Maybe they still had relatives in Britain. Or maybe they could see the advantages both of remaining a colony and of gaining independence. Their loyalties were divided.

Now divided loyalties can be crippling. With some things, it really doesn't make that much difference. Pulling for two different college basketball teams, for instance, is not a life-defining issue—well, at least not for most folks. But when it comes to things like marriage, family, or service to country, there's absolutely *no room* for divided loyalties!

In his short letter in the New Testament, James put it very bluntly when he said that a double-minded (literally, a "double-souled") person is unstable in all his ways (James 1:8).

Nowhere is this truer than in religion! And nowhere is genuine, single-hearted loyalty more important than in our relationship with God! God has created us. And though we humans rebelled against Him, He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross and rise from the dead to save us. He is well worthy of our trust. And He has the *right* to demand absolute loyalty from us!

Yet there are so many people today who claim the name of Christ but have divided loyalties. They're like the Israelites in this story who were limping with divided loyalties, faltering between two opinions about whom they should really be worshiping and serving as their God. Sometimes they try to play it safe and serve both. Somehow they just can't make up their minds between the options.

Or maybe instead of "they" I should be saying "we."

The situation

You may remember from last week's sermon something of the situation of Israel in Elijah's day. Ahab, the king of the ten northern tribes of Israel, was already wicked enough. But then he

married Jezebel, a daughter of the king of the Sidonians.

Jezebel was a zealous missionary for the worship of Baal, the Canaanite agricultural god. As the pagan sky-god, Baal supposedly controlled the rains and the harvest. Elijah knew that it was really the LORD who was God. In fact, that was what his name meant—“Eli” meant “God” and “Jah” was the short form of God’s personal name “Yahweh”; thus Eli-jah, “Yahweh is God.”

To demonstrate this truth, Elijah had called for a drought, a drought that had now gone on for over three years. During that time, God had cared for Elijah first by the wadi Cherith, where the ravens brought him food in the morning and evening and he drank from the brook there, then by the hand of the widow of Zarephath in Sidon, as her bin of flour and her jar of oil never ran out until the drought was over.

Now the LORD was ready to send rain. He told Elijah to go and show himself to Ahab, and then He would send the rain. So Elijah obeyed.

In the meantime, Ahab had been searching for Elijah all this time. The drought had gotten worse, and Ahab and Obadiah, the manager of his household, were going throughout the land to try to find water and pasture for his animals.

As Obadiah was traveling through the land, Elijah came to him and told him to go tell Ahab that Elijah had come. Obadiah protested, telling Elijah that Ahab had looked everywhere for him, even making the leaders of other kingdoms or nations swear an oath that they hadn’t seen Elijah. Obadiah was afraid that as soon as he left to tell Ahab, the Spirit of the LORD would carry Elijah away, and Ahab would become angry and kill him. Obadiah reminded Elijah that when Jezebel was killing the LORD’s prophets, he had tried to help them, hiding a hundred of them in caves and providing food and water for them. But Elijah assured him that he would indeed show himself to Ahab. Obadiah went and told Ahab, and Ahab came to meet Elijah.

Elijah’s challenge

It was almost the same kind of tension you see in the old westerns when the main character and his nemesis meet at high noon for a showdown. Ahab accused Elijah of being the “**troubling of Israel.**” Elijah responded by saying,

“I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house *have*, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and have followed the Baals” (18:18).¹

And then Elijah threw down the gauntlet. He challenged Ahab to summon all Israel to Mount Carmel, a prominent ridge jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea—the place where the abundant autumn rains usually fell first as they came in off the sea. He also challenged him to bring with him the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah. A huge statue stands there today commemorating this event.

And so they all came. Imagine the scene. The multitudes have gathered to see the showdown. On one side are 850 pagan prophets. On the other side stands one lone prophet of the LORD. And that one lone prophet comes to the people and says: **“How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (18:21, NRSV).**

Then Elijah laid out the terms of the contest. They were to bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal would choose the one they wanted, Elijah would take the other one. They would slaughter and prepare the bulls for sacrifice and lay them on wood, but not set the wood on fire. The prophets of Baal would call on his name, and Elijah would call on the LORD. The deity who

answered by fire would demonstrate that He was really God.

Elijah let Baal's prophets go first. They prepared the bull and put it on the wood. Then they began to call on the name of Baal. And nothing happened. They prayed from morning until noon, but nothing happened. They danced around the altar with a sort of a limping ceremonial dance—no doubt this was what Elijah had in mind when he used the image of **"limping with two different opinions."** But still, there was no answer.

Finally, about noon, Elijah began to taunt them. He told them that maybe they needed to cry a little louder—maybe Baal was meditating, or had gone on a journey; or maybe he was asleep and needed to be awakened!

That only spurred Baal's prophets on. They began to cry louder. They cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood was gushing out on them, trying to get Baal's attention. Midday passed, and they kept on ranting and raving and doing their limping dance around the altar until it was nearing the time for the evening sacrifice. **But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention** (18:29).

Then Elijah called the people near. He repaired the altar of the LORD on Mount Carmel that had been torn down, using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. He dug a trench around the altar, then put the wood in order on the altar. He cut the bull in pieces and arranged it on the wood. Then he had the people to fill four water jars and pour them on the sacrifice and the wood to soak them. In fact, he had them to do this *three* times—*twelve* jars of water—to the point that the water soaked the sacrifice, the wood, the altar, and ran down around the altar, filling the trench.

Then at the time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah came near the altar and prayed a simple prayer (18:36-37):

"LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that you have turned their hearts back to You again."

After Elijah prayed, the fire of the LORD fell from the sky consuming the offering, the wood, the stones, even the dust, and licking up all the water in the trench. The people fell on their faces and cried out, **"The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!"** Then Elijah had them seize Baal's prophets, and he executed them.

Limping or loyal?

They had tried to play it safe, limping along trying to serve the LORD and Baal. It was a religious dance that wasn't acceptable to God. He calls for absolute loyalty. *Elijah called the limping Israelites to choose to be loyal either to the LORD or to Baal.*

The technical term for what they were attempting is *syncretism*. They were trying to mix the worship of Baal who supposedly controlled the rains and harvest with the worship of the LORD who had delivered them time and time again. But that could only result in divided loyalties. And the LORD would have none of that!

Is it really so very different today? Don't a lot of professing Christians try to play it safe, try to maintain a connection with God, while also trying to live according to the ways and values of the world? They want to worship God, but they limp back and forth from one leg to the other

trying to worship and serve both God and the gods of this world.

Jesus said it can't be done! **"No one can serve two masters,"** He said (Matthew 6:24). There must be a choice, a commitment, a single-hearted, *undivided loyalty*.

Through His dealings with Israel, and supremely in Jesus Christ His Son, God has revealed Himself, showing us who He is and what He's like. His revelation of Himself calls us to a full commitment to Him, to total, undivided loyalty.

On Mount Carmel that day, God graciously showed Himself and His power in order to turn the Israelites back to Himself.

But it didn't stop there. Go with me to another mountain, that hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha. There God revealed Himself and His grace, love, and power in a way never seen before, a way that was beyond what human beings could ever even begin to conceive!

There in the contest of the ages, God in His Son conquered sin and Satan and death, to set free anyone and everyone who would trust in Him. As He died on the cross, He died for you and me. It was God's gracious revealing of Himself, more fully than He had ever done before. By Jesus' death on the cross, God demonstrated His love for us. And through Jesus' resurrection, He demonstrated His power that He uses to deliver us.

So now, *rather than limping along with divided loyalties, God calls us to commit ourselves totally to Him*. To give ourselves up to Him completely. To be willing to die rather than desert Him. To be absolutely loyal to Him, no matter what.

The religious dance of divided loyalties just won't cut it. As James said in James 4:4, to be a friend of the world is to be God's enemy. We can't have it both ways. Anything less than absolute loyalty is *disloyalty*.

So what about you? Are you limping or loyal?

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.