

Sermon II

"1 Kings 18:21"

by

Rev. Edward Wilson

"And Elijah came to all the people, and said, 'How long will you halt between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' But the people answered him not a word."

And why did they not answer him a word? Because they were the undecided characters Elijah had reproved them for being. Their conscience would not let them declare for Baal, and they had not courage to declare for God. So between their convictions and their fears they remained silent. Their tongue was tied by Elijah on the one hand and by Ahab on the other; and they were in the distressful and ashamed condition of men who had too much good feeling to act wrong and too little to act right.

Their embarrassed situation leads us to reflect on the *evil* of indecision in religion. Reflection on this point may, perhaps, neither be unnecessary nor useless for some here. Unhappily, indecision in religion was not confined to the time of Elijah but exists in a large number of professors in every age of the Church. Indeed I fear there are those present who up to this very hour have been "halting between two opinions" and are conscious at this moment of being ambiguous characters. To such of you I would now address myself; "and I beseech you suffer the word of exhortation," which is not designed to offend but to do you good.

I would first *describe* your undecided state, then point out to you the *evil* of it, and conclude with urging you to *make your decision* with all speed. May God command his blessing on what shall be said, for Jesus Christ's sake.

First let me endeavor to describe the state of some of you who are undecided in religion. In the first place, you are not decided against religion, which is a very important consideration and a very distinguishing feature of your case. Some are decided against religion. They are "in the gall of bitterness" against it. Bent on doing evil, they hate the light. They found it reproving their deeds, putting their consciences to pain and their faces to shame, and they have never forgiven it for this. It has "become their enemy because it told them the truth." And it has their confirmed dislike, and deadly opposition.

But such is not the case with you who are undecided. Because you are undecided, you are not decided *against* religion. It has not your hatred, it has not your aversion. On the contrary it has your attention. Nay more, it has your respect, perhaps even it has your

secret affection. In the bottom of your soul you approve of religion, and you could not be brought openly to renounce it. You would not, for the world, at this moment solemnly deny God, deny Christ, deny the work of the Spirit, shake off all religion and take your stand with avowedly infidel and profane persons. You would shrink from such daring impiety.

Your heart tells you that there is a God, your guilt reminds you that you want a Saviour, and your corruptions make you feel that you need a Sanctifier. You know enough of Christianity to know that it is the only religion for a sinful fallen worm like you, the only thing that will do you good. And yet you have not *decidedly* embraced Christianity. Like Agrippa, you are only "almost persuaded to be a Christian." What is it that prevents your decision? What is it that distracts your choice? What is it that you put in the balance against "pure and undefiled religion?"

What was it that embarrassed the Israelites whom Elijah addressed? It was Baal; it was idolatry. And it is idolatry that embarrasses you--spiritual idolatry. You have idols in your heart, and your heart goes after them. In plain words, your affections are divided. You have not *no regard* for God and Christ and the things of the Spirit; but then you have not a *supreme* regard for them. You regard them in part [of your life], and in part you regard things that are earthly and sensual. You respect religion, but you have your secret sins. You follow God sometimes, but then at other times you follow your idols. You have your seasons of prayer and your feelings of piety, but you have also your seasons of dissipation [self-indulgence] and your feelings of worldliness. On the Sunday you can come hither to worship God, but in the week you can resort to scenes where He is forgotten. You can keep company with saints, and you can keep company with sinners. You can alternately countenance [approve] what is good and what is evil; yea, you can alternately care for your soul and for "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life."

Thus you are undecided characters. There is a check upon your conscience and yet a wavering in your conduct. You are like those Samaritans of old, of whom it is said in Scripture, "They feared the Lord, and served their graven images." This is a description of the state of some, perhaps of some of you who hear me. If you know in your consciences that you are thus wavering between your convictions of what is right and your fondness for what is wrong, between religion and carelessness, between God and the world, [then] lend me your attention farther while, in the Second place, I endeavor to point out to you the evil of this undecided state.

It is evil on these two accounts: first, because it is *offensive to God*, and secondly, because it is *injurious to yourselves*.

First, your indecision is *offensive to God*. The same sin must always be viewed by him in the same light. And in what light did he view the indecision of the Israelites in the chapter before us? It so displeased him that he sent Elijah to rebuke it sharply. You,

then, are under the same displeasure of Almighty God, as many of you as are consciously "halting between two opinions." And why God is displeased with your indecision is manifest--because it proves that your affections are divided and distracted between Himself and some other object; whereas He says, "My son, give me your heart," "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart." You cannot be loving Him with entire affection while you hesitate to follow him.

Your hesitation must arise from your heart being entangled in some other direction--and in some other direction opposite to God. Your hesitation must arise from your being attached to something wrong, or wrongly attached to something right. Your desires after something worldly must be sinful, either in kind or in degree. In short, you dare to put some idol in competition with God, and for this reason he is displeased with you; and justly [so], for ought the creature to rival the Creator? Ought you to hesitate whether your God is the supreme good or not? Can he be otherwise than offended to see you doubt in your heart whether it is advisable to follow him fully?

Have you never read that he is "a jealous God"? And what can more directly touch his jealousy than to observe you questioning whether to give the preference to Him or to other objects. His anger is kindled that you should move [even consider] a question on such a point, that you should waver for a moment in your choice between Himself and any created good.

That you may be sure I do not overstate this matter, let me remind you of the explicit declaration of God our Saviour. "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who takes not his cross and follows after me is not worthy of me." Such plain declarations were frequently made by our Saviour on purpose [in order] to convince us that indecision in religion is offensive to God; and *how* offensive will appear to you from one more declaration of his which, because it is the strongest, I have reserved to the last. I mean his declaration to the church of the Laodiceans: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."

No words can more strongly express the offensiveness of indecision. And the quotation is exactly to the purport of the text where Elijah rebukes Israel precisely for this sin of halting; as if he had said, "I would you would make a decisive move one way or other. If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him. But follow one or the other, because this your vacillation is intolerable to the Lord, and he will endure it no longer. You must come to a decision either to give yourselves wholly to him or cease pretending to follow him at all."

Now what God said to Israel he says to all here present. Hence, if any of you, my friends, especially of you my young friends, are conscious of halting between religion and dissipation, between God and the world, between the care of your soul and the care of your

flesh, be assured that you are in a state of mind displeasing to your Maker and Redeemer. You may not be cold--you may not be open followers of Baal. You may not be thorough-paced men and women of the world, must less notorious evil doers. But put you at your best--suppose you are only ambiguous characters? Suppose you are only undecided? As such you are offensive to God.

This, then, is one evil of your undecided state; and the other evil is, that your state is *injurious to yourselves*. Indeed if it were not so God would not be angry with it. He is angry with nothing that tends to our welfare, because he is love. "His commandments are not grievous." And if he commands us to cease from indecision, it is because it is injurious to ourselves. And I appeal to your own *experience* whether it is not [so], you who are undecided. Have you been happy? Have you been comfortable in your thoughts? Have you enjoyed your manner of life and been at ease in your reflections?

You know you have not. You have had no pleasure in religion because your heart was not in it. You have had no delight in God because you knew you deserved to have none. You have had a bad conscience, and that has prevented your "going boldly to the throne of grace." You have not been able to pray with any confidence because "you have regarded iniquity in your heart." You have had no fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ because you would have fellowship with works of darkness. You have had no communion with the Holy Ghost because you would set up in his temple "an image provoking to jealousy," and therefore he forsook you. Thus you have had no pleasure in religion because you have not been hearty in it.

And, on the other hand, you have had no pleasure in irreligion because neither were you hearty in it. You have had too much light and knowledge to sin ignorantly, and conscience has restrained you from sinning willfully. Your clear understanding, your correct feelings, your good education and habits have made it impossible for you to enjoy a number of things which sinners around you enjoyed. And if you thought you could enjoy them, you found them apples of Sodom--promising fair but bitter on trial.

Thus your indecision has made you incapable of finding real gratification in anything. You have been too worldly to enjoy religion and too religious to enjoy the world, so by wavering you have marred your own happiness. And not only so, but you have brought yourselves into trouble, into suspicion, and perhaps into disrepute. Sometimes you have been so much on the Lord's side as to give umbrage [offense] to the world, and then shortly after you have been so much on the world's side as to give umbrage to the Church. Both good people and bad have alternately stood in doubt of you; and so you have shaken, if not lost, the confidence of each party in succession.

Thus I have endeavored to describe your undecided state and to point out the evil of it. Now, therefore, let me conclude with urging you *to make your decision* with all speed. You are convinced from your own experience that yours has been an unhappy state to you *so far*. Let me assure you it will be the same as long as you continue in it; for the causes of

your unhappiness will remain the same, and therefore they will produce the same effect. Scripture, as well as reason, forewarns you of this: "He who wavers," says St. James, "is like a wave of the sea, driven of the wind and tossed." There can be no peace, no tranquility in the bosom of one who is thus the sport of contradictory influences. I hope, then, it may have some weight in bringing you to a decision, if you are convinced that halting is unwise while it lasts.

But next I add that it cannot last *forever*. If you think you can always remain ambiguous characters, you deceive yourselves. The thing is impossible, for Christ says so: "No man can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon." Cease then from attempting to serve both. Throw off ambiguity of character before God strips you of disguise. Satan is willing enough that you should halt between two opinions. He "loves to have it so," because you are all but sure to become his prey.

But God hates to have it so, because he has compassion on your immortal soul. He wishes to rouse you out of your indifference, to undeceive you in thinking you are safe. He wishes to make you know yourself, and examine yourself, and declare yourself. He lets your indecision put you to pain that you may put yourself out of it by decision. Be sure, therefore, and put yourself out of it with all speed. Choose you this day whom you will serve--God or Satan.

Consider well what each party has to advance in support of his claim upon you. "If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And is Satan (is Baal) God? Are you prepared to worship Satan? He is "the god of this world," and he has various favors to confer upon you if you will openly do him homage. Are you willing, then, to have from him first "the pleasures of sin for a season" and then "the wages of sin, which is death?" Are you willing to gain more or less of the world by iniquitous practices and then "lose your soul?" In a word, are you willing, like Ahab, to "sell yourselves to do evil?"

If you are, why do you not at once "give yourselves over to work all uncleanness with greediness?" Why do you not launch out into the depths of wickedness and take your fill of guilty pleasures? If you have devoted yourselves to the service of Satan, why not serve him with all your might? Because you are *afraid* to do so. Because there is a check upon your spirit when you think of doing so. And who makes you fear? Who puts this check upon your spirit? It is God. He restrains you, His Spirit strives with you, he keeps back your soul from the pit. He sends you pain to warn you of your danger. He would not have you perish but rather that you should come to repentance.

He has sent you his word this morning, to call you to repentance--repentance for having trifled with him so long, to repentance for having dishonored him so long by putting other objects in competition with him. Now therefore "if the Lord be God, follow him." And is he not God? You know there is a supreme Being "in whom you live, and move, and have your being," and "he is not far from every one of you." All creation speaks his existence,

and all Scripture is given by his inspiration. The Bible, like the sun, proclaims itself the depository of light. Nature shows that there is a God. What sort of a God He is may be gathered from his revelation of himself in his word. There he discloses himself as our Creator and lays claim to us as the work of his hands. There too he discloses himself as our Lawgiver, our King, our Observer, and our Judge.

And what Scripture says our conscience ratifies. The law written in our Bibles corresponds with the law written on our hearts. We cannot read the Scriptures without finding a response to them in our own bosoms. They speak to us with authority--an authority we find it impossible to shake off. They set God before us and make us hear his voice. And we feel that his laws are holy and his commandments holy and just and good. And yet they are death unto us. They make us sensible of our sinfulness and adjudge us to eternal punishment for our conscious criminality.

Under one aspect, then, they set God before us in an awful and alarming point of view--as a consuming fire. But again they set him before us in another point of view--as a merciful God "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; but who will by no means clear the guilty." Hence, they also set him before us providing an atonement for our guilt, laying on Christ the iniquity of us all, and opening for us in his blood a way of pardon, holiness, and peace. In a word, they set him before us as "God our Saviour," redeeming us from punishment by his Son, and hallowing us from pollution by his Spirit.

And our conscience bears witness with the Scriptures that such a merciful, redeeming, sanctifying God is the God we sinners need. Our heart loudly tells us that "*this* God is our God," the *only* God in whom we fallen worms can find comfort. There is not a vacillator, a waverer here but feels that *this* God must be his only hope, as He is the only Being suited to his wants [needs].

Then if this Lord be God, upon you who may hitherto have been double-minded persons it becomes incumbent to follow him. Your heart tells you that He demands and deserves your reverence, your love, and your service. Then be faithful to your convictions and give the Lord the honor due unto his name. Made by his hands, obey him as your Creator. Bought by his blood, love him as your Saviour. Taught by his Spirit, yield yourselves to his holy influences. Be the Christians you were designed to be. Let Christ see in you of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

This you will never prove, so as to know it by your own experience, while you continue conforming to the world. But become "transformed by the renewing of your mind." Be in earnest and decided in religion. Give yourselves to the Lord, to follow Him, like Caleb,

"fully," and you will soon prove that "his ways are ways of pleasantness, and that all his paths are peace." "The secret of the Lord is with them who fear him, and He will show them his covenant." When the heart is sincerely yielded to the divine will and opened to the divine influence, all heaven soon descends into that heart, and a kingdom is set up in it which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. . . .

When therefore I urge you to be decided for or against religion, do not maintain the dead silence and heavy indifference of Israel of old. Either do good or do evil. Either be on the Lord's side or on Satan's. You cannot be on the side of both at the same time. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. You cannot be partakers of the table of the Lord and of the table of devils." There is no concord between Christ and Belial. Christianity and sin will not amalgamate. Save yourselves therefore the pain and the loss of attempting to make them do so. . . .

Recollect [that] while you are undecided whom to serve now, death may decide for you whom you shall serve forever. When you are transported into the next world you will not halt between two opinions there. Therefore halt not here, lest you endanger your final salvation. "In the midst of life you may be in death." Today, therefore, "yield yourselves unto God as those who are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." Put not off your decision till tomorrow. Should you live till tomorrow, you will be less disposed to goodness then than you are now. Come, therefore, and join yourselves to the Lord "today, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

Now the command of God your Saviour is distinct and urgent--"Follow me." Arise and follow him, and you will never repent your decision. You may leave much, you may leave all to follow him; but he will recompense it to you abundantly. "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time," in mental satisfaction and spiritual enjoyment, "and in the age to come, eternal life."

This is Sermon II in *Sermons, Preached in the Parish Church of St. Michael's, Bath*, by Rev. Edward Wilson (London: Seeley & Sons, 1833). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided. The NKJV has been used for some Scripture.