

SERMON NOTES
I Kings 18:1-46
“Yahweh vs. Baal @ Mt. Carmel”

Intro:

- **All religions have their rules and commandments, and one of the chief commandments of the Religion of Tolerance in our day is: *Thou shalt not criticize, disrespect or condemn any other religious faith because all religions are equal and are simply different paths to the same God***
- Some of you may remember an article in the NS Press some time ago entitled “*A child will lead...*”
- In the story, the various religions of the world are likened to colors of the rainbow
- *And the followers of each color of light celebrate the beauty of their light and believe that their color is the best*
- Christians are followers of the purple light, Jews are followers of the blue light, and other religions are red or yellow or green
- *The hero of the story is a child of the blue light who wants to get blue and purple together with other colors to celebrate the beauty of each color – because after all – the source of light for all colors is one*
- *And the story’s happy ending is that eventually religious people become enlightened enough so that all the colors of the rainbow would come together to celebrate and see the beauty in every other color and forget why they ever argued that their color was the best – and then unity and harmony would rule the land and everyone would live happily ever after*
- That is the spirit of the age in which we live
- *Those who believe that their religion is the best – or the only true way to God -- are regarded as hateful, bigoted villains and the reason why we have conflicts and wars and suffering in the world*
- Please hear this carefully: *We Christians are not saying that purple light is better than the color blue – what we are saying is that **Jesus Christ is the Light of the world***

--Not just the color purple, but the Light of the world.

--*Not just one of many beautiful colors of the rainbow – but the Source of all light.*

This claim that Jesus Christ is the Light of the world – and not a mere color – was made by the Light Himself. Deliberately. Provocatively.

Scandalous, offensive claim, to be sure. Then and now.

- *In this day and age it is hard to stand tall for the truth that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life when nearly everyone around you is following the teachings of the Rainbow of Colors School of Theology*
- **The belief that there are many gods – or many different religious paths to the same Creator God – was prevalent in Canaan throughout much of Israel’s history**
- **The most popular god in the land of Canaan was the fertility god Baal**
- ***Even after Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land and driving out many of the pagan peoples living there – Baal worship practices continued – and many Israelites simply combined Baal worship practices with belief in Yahweh – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob***

I. BAAL WORSHIP IN ISRAEL

- The word “baal” was originally a common noun meaning “lord” or “owner”
- *Many tribal deities could be called “baals” if they were regarded as the “lord” or “owner” over a particular geographic region or people group*
- But eventually Baal became the name of the Canaanite fertility god – who was regarded both as the sun god and as the god over rain, water and nature
- The fertility of the land of Canaan depended on the seasonal autumn and winter rains which were often heralded by thunder and lightning
- *The Canaanites believed that these life-giving rains and storms were the activity of a god named Hadad, also called Baal – who was also nick-named “Rider of the Clouds”*
- Baal was thought to be the male principle of life and reproduction and therefore was celebrated with acts of extreme sensuality
- *The god Baal of the land of Canaan was believed to be the son of El, who was regarded as the most high God in the Canaanite pantheon*
- Baal contended with “El” and defeated him and took his wife as the victor’s prize
- *Her name was “Asherah” or “Ashtoreth” – the leading female deity and consort to Baal – the equivalent of the Greek goddess Aphrodite – the goddess of sexual love and fertility*
- She was worshiped both as the Queen of Heaven and as Mother Earth

- Many symbols were used to represent Baal and Asherah
- *Baal was sometimes represented with the image of a bull or calf*
- Baal was sometimes depicted as a man wearing bull horns on his head and throwing a thunderbolt from his hands
- *Since Baal was regarded as the sun god as well as the fertility and rain god, he was often represented by a disc or ball – which came to represent male virility and reproduction*
- Baal was also symbolized by a standing pillar called in Hebrew a “matzevah” – meaning “to stand upright or erect”
- *Today we would call it a phallic symbol*
- Asherah was represented by a hole or ring – representing female sexuality – sometimes attached to a wooden pole – commonly called in the OT an “Asherah pole”

I Kings 14:22-24 ²²During Rehoboam’s reign, the people of Judah did what was evil in the LORD’S sight, arousing his anger with their sin, for it was even worse than that of their ancestors. ²³They built pagan shrines (*for Baal worship*) and set up sacred pillars (*phallic symbols*) and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree. ²⁴There were even shrine prostitutes (*male and female; heterosexual and homosexual*) throughout the land. The people imitated the detestable practices of the pagan nations the LORD had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites.

- *Are you starting to get the picture of why Yahweh regarded Baal worship as an abomination?*
- There’s more
- Baal worship practices were conducted for the purpose of ensuring the life-giving rains necessary for both crops and livestock
- *These worship practices included the burning of incense, offering animal sacrifices, religious prostitution, bisexual orgies, and child sacrifice*
- Picture this kind of a scene: *Worshippers gather around the altar of Baal, offering grain, oil, and animal sacrifices to Baal to obtain his favor for bringing rain – and even offering children who would be burned alive as a sacrificial offering*
- *Near the rock altar was a sacred pillar – phallic symbol – and nearby were chambers maintained for sacred prostitution by both male prostitutes and sacred harlots*

- Meanwhile, the worshipers are drinking wine and engaging in sexual orgies – men with women, men with men, women with women – as a celebration of the fertility brought by Baal and Asherah
- **When the prophets denounced this unfaithfulness to Yahweh as “adultery” and as “whoring after idols” – it was more than just a figure of speech**
- Of course, these orgies in celebration of the fertility god and goddess would result in a number of “unplanned pregnancies”
- *There being no Planned Parenthood clinics at that time, the religion of Baal worship took care of that problem by means of child sacrifice*
- Archaeologists have found hundreds of urns containing the bones of children up to 12 years of age who had been burned alive in child sacrifices
- *Baal worship was most popular in the prosperous, well educated, sophisticated city states on the coastal planes of Phoenicia and Canaan– the New York Cities and San Francisco’s and Los Angeles’ and Boston’s and Washington, DC’s and Chicago’s of the day*
- *The younger generation of Israelites often pursued Baal worship so that they could be seen as cultured and educated people – not to mention so that they could practice sexual promiscuity with the blessing of their religion*

II. YAHWEH VS. BAAL @ MT. CARMEL

- During the reign of King Ahab, his wife Jezebel – a Phoenician princess – secured official status for the Baal worship as a state religion as well as promoting *the worship of the goddess Asherah*

I Kings 16:30-33 ³⁰Ahab son of Omri did even more open evil before GOD (*Yahweh*) than anyone yet—a new champion in evil! ³¹It wasn’t enough for him to copy the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat; no, he went all out, first by marrying Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and then by serving and worshiping the god Baal. ³²He built a temple for Baal in Samaria, and then furnished it with an altar for Baal. ³³Worse, he went on and built a shrine to the sacred whore Asherah. He made the GOD of Israel (*Yahweh*) angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together.

- Religion of Tolerance: *Thou shalt not criticize, disrespect or condemn any other religious faith because all religions are equal and are simply different paths to the same God*

Elijah the prophet was not an adherent of the Religion of Tolerance

- *He believed that some religious practices are to be snuffed out, not tolerated – such as bisexual orgies and burning children alive*
- *He refused to believe that Baal was the equal of Yahweh – or that Baal worship was merely a different shade of the color purple*
- *Elijah was not a graduate of the Rainbow of Colors School of Theology*
- *The Baal religion taught that the god Baal controlled the rains and the storms that watered the crops and the livestock*
- *The Israelites knew that Yahweh was the Creator of the heavens and the earth*
- *But in a year with not enough rain for the land to produce its crops, many anxious Israelites would turn to Baal worship in an effort to bring about the life-giving rains*
- *Who controls the rains? Baal? Or Yahweh?*
- *Just as Yahweh had defeated all the gods of Egypt during the plagues and the Exodus, now He was now going to take on Baal, the false god of Canaan*

1 Kings 17:1 (NIV) ¹Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD (*Yahweh*), the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

- *It was in the third year of the drought and famine that Elijah presented himself before King Ahab:*

1 Kings 18:16-21 ¹⁶So Obadiah went to tell Ahab that Elijah had come, and Ahab went out to meet him.

¹⁷“So it’s you, is it—Israel’s troublemaker?” Ahab asked when he saw him.

¹⁸“I have made no trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “You and your family are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the LORD (*Yahweh*) and have worshiped the images of Baal instead. ¹⁹Now bring all the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, with all 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who are supported by Jezebel.”

²⁰So Ahab summoned all the people and the prophets to Mount Carmel. ²¹Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, “How long are you going to waver between two opinions? If the LORD (*Yahweh*) is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent.

- *By blaming Elijah for the drought, Ahab is unwittingly admitting that his god, Baal, is powerless to send rain and stop the drought*

- Ahab agrees to assemble the prophets of Baal and Asherah at Mt. Carmel, which was located near the Phoenician border where Jezebel was from
- The contest at Mt. Carmel shows that the God of Israel will tolerate no compromise or syncretism – *He will not tolerate His people mixing Baal worship with Yahweh worship*
- **The people must decide: If Yahweh is God – then follow Him wholeheartedly and exclusively // If Baal proves to be God – then go ahead and follow him**
- The contest Elijah proposes allows for no trickery or deception or confusion
- *This contest allows for no subjective interpretations of the outcome*

1 Kings 18:23 - 24 (NIV) ²³Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god (*Baal*), and I will call on the name of the LORD (*Yahweh*). The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

- **None of this truth is in the eye of the beholder nonsense – *The god who answers by fire – he is God***

1 Kings 18:26-29 ²⁶So they prepared one of the young bulls and placed it on the altar; and they called to Baal all morning, shouting, “O Baal, hear us!” But there was no reply of any kind. Then they began to dance around the altar.

²⁷About noontime, Elijah began mocking them.

“You’ll have to shout louder than that,” he scoffed, “to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!”

²⁸So they shouted louder and, as was their custom, cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. ²⁹They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but there was no reply, no voice, no answer.

- ***Baal was a popular god. He let his worshipers do whatever they wanted. They could even engage in sex orgies and call it worship. They could even get rid of their unwanted children in the name of religion. Baal’s religion promoted sexual freedom and reproductive freedom and nature worship. Baal’s religion was a very tolerant and inclusive and non-judgmental religion.***
- **Unlike Yahweh, Baal did not demand holiness of his followers, and Baal did not pass judgment on people for their sexual immorality – *when it comes to sex – anything goes!***
- ***Now that’s the kind of god many people like to believe in***

- **Only one problem: Baal wasn't real. He didn't actually exist. He was a literary delusion – a figment of people's imagination.**
- *There may have been demonic powers at work in his religion – but Baal himself did not actually exist as a real god*
- ***Baal was the kind of god that cultured and sophisticated and progressive people like to believe in***
- You know the sorts of things people like to say: *"I like to think of God as The god I believe in is ... The god I believe in would never ..."*
- ***Baal was the kind of god that people liked to believe in***
- ***But he wasn't real. When his followers called on his name – no matter how sincerely – no matter how persistently – no matter how passionately – there was no reply, no voice, no answer.***
- Then at the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah repaired the altar used for Israel's worship of Yahweh
- ***The animal sacrifice was prepared on the wood, and everything was drenched with water – three times – until the trench was filled***

1 Kings 18:36 - 39 (NIV) ³⁶At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD (*Yahweh*), 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. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD (*Yahweh*), answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD (*Yahweh*), are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." ³⁸Then 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. ³⁹When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD (*Yahweh*)—he is God! The LORD (*Yahweh*)—he is God!"

- **By the way, do you know what Elijah's name means?**
- **Eli – jah = My God is Yahweh**
- ***Yahweh – He is God! Yahweh – He is God!***
- ***Sooner or later, every man must decide: Do you want to believe in the God of your imagination and wishes – or do you want to know the God Who Is***
- **Yahweh means "I AM WHO I AM"**
- ***Not "I am who you want me to be" // Not "I am who you think I am" – but "I AM WHO I AM"***
- **He is the God who is there – the God who is real – the God who created the heavens and the earth – the God who answered by fire**

- *He is the one and only true and living God – and Jesus Christ is His Son*
- *Then, having proven decisively that He is the one true God, Yahweh sent the rain as promised by Elijah*
- **After sending down the fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice, there could be no doubt that it was Yahweh – and not Baal – who was now sending the rain after a 3-year drought**

III. MODERN VERSIONS OF BAAL WORSHIP

- *With its sexual orgies and child sacrifice and beliefs that offerings to an idol could bring rain – surely that kind of religious faith has long since passed from the human scene, right?*
- *Believe it or not – if you Google “Baal” or “Baal worship” – one of the websites that will come up is “Baal.com” – “Resurrecting Interest in the Ancient Deity*
- *You can learn about the god Baal // you can even buy a Baal idol*
- *There aren't many Baal worshipers around in that sense today, but when we dig a little deeper, we see that many aspects of Baal worship are alive and well in our sophisticated and well-educated culture*
- *What are the three main components of the Baal religion?*
- ***Material prosperity // sexual freedom // nature worship***
- ***Money // Sex // Nature– humanity has progressed far beyond those primitive objects of worship, hasn't it?***
- *And child sacrifice – no sexually irresponsible adults would ever contemplate killing their unwanted offspring in the pursuit of material prosperity today, would they?*
- *The Religion of Tolerance teaches that religious truth and moral standards do not exist outside of the human mind*
- *No one has the right to judge anyone else's religion or morality*
- *Everyone's opinion has equal weight*
- *To be consistent, the Religion of Tolerance cannot judge the practices of Baal worship as wrong – including the practice of burning children alive – after all, truth is in the eye of the beholder and Thou shalt not judge the sincerely held religious beliefs of others*

- The Baal religion was in essence a religion of materialism – with sexual license being a nice fringe benefit
- *The primary objective of Baal worship was to secure the blessing of the rains that bring wealth and prosperity*
- The religion of materialism was also alive and well in Jesus' day – Jesus used the term Mammon to describe the god of materialism
- Most people tend to view money as morally neutral – *not the least bit negative as long as we earn it honestly and use it responsibly*
--in fact, we'd like to have more money
--*the problem isn't money, we say – the problem is that we don't have enough of it -- or that somebody else has too much*
- *“Most people would be satisfied with enough – if others didn't have more”*
- Most of us regard money as a blessing, and we wish and pray that God would bless us with more of it
--*on the contrary, Jesus teaches that money is a temptation that seduces people's hearts away from God*
- **Jesus calls money by the Aramaic term “Mammon” and teaches that Mammon competes with God for the affections and loyalty of people just as surely as Baal once did**
--*Mammon is not merely a neutral object, but rather a spiritual power that acts as a rival god – seducing us, arousing our desires and lusts, enticing us to commit spiritual adultery against God*

Matthew 6:24 ²⁴**“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.**

The reality is that Mammon is a spiritual power that controls us and makes us its servants - dominating our minds, captivating our wills and capturing our hearts
--**Mammon is a spiritual power that seeks to take the place of God**

- When we look to money to do for us what God promises to do, that is idolatry:
- *For example, we look to money to give us contentment or security or peace of mind or happiness rather than trusting solely in our heavenly Father*

Mammon is good at making promises of happiness, contentment & security

--but what kind of Master is Mammon to those who serve Money?

Mammon says: *“Work a little harder; make a little more money; buy more; save more – then you’ll find contentment and security.”*

--so you work harder, make more money, buy more, save more – mostly spend more – but you still don’t feel content and secure

--so Mammon says: *“That’s still not quite enough. Work a little harder; make a little more money; buy more; save more – then you’ll find contentment and security.”*

--so you work even harder, make even more money, spend even more and maybe save more too – but you still don’t feel content and secure

--Mammon poses as an alluring seductress, but is actually a harsh taskmaster

- For centuries Mammon has used the same basic lies to deceive, seduce, dominate and enslave people:
 - (1) *Money gives security for the future*
 - (2) *A little more money would bring contentment*
 - (3) *An abundance of possessions means God’s favor*
 - (4) *Material success is the measure of personal worth*
 - (5) *Loving my children means giving them more material things*

--generation after generation, those same basic lies ensnare new victims
- Whether we call it Baal or Mammon or “The Market” or whatever – the love of money has always been a chief rival to the worship of Yahweh

IV. HOW LONG WILL YOU WAVER BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS?

- There were some exclusive Baal worshipers in Israel // and there were some exclusive Yahweh worshipers in Israel – about 7,000 to be exact – ***but most Israelites were both***
- They believed in Yahweh, but they also participated in Baal worship practices
- That is the temptation for many of us today as well: ***we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – but we also trust in Mammon for our security and happiness***
- Or – we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – ***but we also are willing to do whatever it takes to give our kids a competitive edge to succeed in sports and pursue that highly treasured college scholarship – even if it means missing 10 or 20 Sunday morning worship services a year***

- **Or – we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – but we also want to make our own moral choices regarding our sexual relationships and living arrangements**
- **We have accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior – but we do not Treasure Him above all else – instead we waste our lives pursuing lesser treasures and pleasures**
- C.S. Lewis: *“The NT has a lot to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and take up our cross in order to follow Christ – and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.*
- *Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.*
- *“We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy has been offered to us. We are far too easily pleased, like an ignorant child who goes on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea.”*
- Christ does not call us to deny self for the sake of ending up with nothing – *we deny self for the sake of exchanging lesser treasures for greater treasures // lesser pleasures for greater pleasures // lesser rewards for greater rewards – and ending up with abundant life and infinite joy*
- **During my freshman year at the University of Iowa, I had experienced Jesus as Life’s Ultimate Treasure – and I didn’t want anything else hindering the joy of knowing and following and serving Jesus**
- So I gave up the chance to play for a championship baseball team – with no regrets – *it didn’t even feel like a sacrifice – it was simply a matter of trading in a lesser treasure in order to gain a greater Treasure*
- *I had decided to follow Jesus – and there was no turning back*
- *Not playing baseball freed me up the fall of my sophomore year to attend a Campus Crusade for Christ retreat the first weekend of October at Pine Lake Camp – which is when and where Beth and I began our relationship*
- It was during that sophomore year that I fell in love with Beth, and we became engaged that next fall
- *And it was during that sophomore year that I began to sense God’s call into ministry and seminary rather than into med school*

- My sophomore year in college was one of the most decisive years of my life in terms of charting the long-term direction of my life
- *There's no way I would trade what God did in my life that year for a Big 10 championship – I simply exchanged a lesser treasure for a greater treasure*
- **Jesus Himself is our Ultimate Treasure**
- *No matter how great the value of earthly fortune, it will be worthless in eternity*
- No matter how much earthly fame or career success or athletic success or academic success one achieves in this life, it will be worthless in eternity
- **There is nothing wrong with these things – it's just that they don't last – their value is strictly temporary and therefore vastly inferior to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ and receiving the eternal treasures of the kingdom of heaven**
- **Fathers: are you teaching that to your sons and daughters – with your example and with your priorities and with your words?**
- *Will your children remember you primarily as a Provider and Money Man or as a Spiritual Leader and fully devoted follower of Jesus?*
- **Are you teaching your sons that manhood is all about money and power and success and sports and sexual prowess and accumulating lots of stuff?**
- *Or are you teaching your sons that manhood is all about becoming like Jesus Christ?*
- **Are you showing them what it means to Treasure Jesus above all else?**
- **Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life / He is our Righteousness / He is our Physician, Counselor, Captain, Head, Warrior / He is our High Priest / Our Husband, Our Friend, our Brother /**
- *He is the image of the invisible God / the firstborn over all creation / All things were created by him and for him / He is before all things, and in him all things hold together / He is the head of the body, the church / He is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy / In him all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form*
- *If you have to choose between Christ and earthly treasure – **choose Christ***
- *If you have to choose between Christ and a relationship with a non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend – **choose Christ***
- *If you have to choose between Christ and a career promotion – **choose Christ***
- *If you have to choose between Christ and acceptance by a group of friends – **choose Christ***

- *If you have to choose between Christ and baseball – or playing golf or softball or soccer on Sunday mornings – **choose Christ***
- *If you have to choose between Christ and life itself – **choose Christ***
- ***In all of the universe – there is no greater treasure than the Lord Jesus Christ***

Prayer // Hymn # 517 “I’d Rather Have Jesus”