

Manuscript Sermon on 1 Kings 18:21 [Long Version]¹

The voyage of the Wesley brothers from England to Georgia was delayed several weeks by bad weather, which kept them near the English coast. On November 20, 1735 John recorded that their ship had been forced to take refuge at the Isle of Wight, which “gave my brother an opportunity of complying with the desire of the minister of Cowes and preaching there three or four times.”²

This sermon on 1 Kings 18:21 was written by CW for his second appearance in the pulpit at Cowes, on November 30, 1735. The longhand manuscript copy survives at the Methodist Archive and Research Centre (MA 1977/597/4). On the inside of the cover, facing the first page of text, CW has noted: “Preach[e]d at Cows in ye Isle of Wight / Nov. 30. 1735.” On the exterior cover an unidentified hand has written “MS Sermon by C Wesley / preach[e]d Novr 30, 1735 Isle of Wight.” There is also the annotation, “Ex[amine?]d, W. P.”³

Kenneth Newport included a transcription of this manuscript in his *Sermons of Charles Wesley*,⁴ which shows all instances of CW’s ~~strikeouts~~, etc. (The 1816 collection of *Sermons* included a later shortened version—see next). The transcription of the longer version which follows was prepared independently (with a few silent corrections of Newport), focussing on the final text after CW’s revisions, and indicating the page transitions (in **red** font) of the original manuscript.

¹This document was produced by the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: Sept. 27, 2024.

²JW, *Journal*, Nov. 20, 1735, *Works*, 18:140. CW’s first time in the pulpit at Cowes, Nov. 23, 1735, he preached a sermon JW had written on Luke 10:42 (see JW, *Works*, 4:351–59). The only surviving text of this sermon is CW’s longhand copy of what he acknowledges was JW’s sermon (MARC, DDCW 8/13). CW’s notation of preaching on this date is on p. [34].

³The identity of this person apparently assisting in the 1816 publication is unknown.

⁴Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 110–122.

[p. 1]

You will find it written:

1 Kings 18:21

“And Elijah came unto all the people and said, How long will ye halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him.”

[1.] When the people of God the Jews had by their manifold transgressions provoked the Lord to anger and called down for his heavy judgments upon them, when their iniquities were increased and their wickedness multiplied, it pleased the good God to send the scourges of his vengeance upon them that so by the severity of his chastisement he might recall those to the right way who had despised his mercy and rejected his counsel. Thus when King Ahab by his abominable impiety had filled up the measure of his father’s iniquities, when he had led the people with him into idolatry, and like his predecessor Jeroboam had made Israel to sin, God was pleased in mercy to visit his people with the judgment of famine—which was so remarkably great that the heaven is said to be shut up for three years, so that there was neither rain nor dew upon the earth; the effects of which were so terrible that all the brooks and fountains of water were dried up and there remained not any longer food for man or beast.¹ Amidst the miseries of this severe calamity, it pleased the Lord still to remember mercy and to send his prophet Elijah to Ahab, and to his people, to see whether they were yet humbled by the things they had suffered, and whether the hand of vengeance which had [p. 2] lain so long upon them had at all disposed them to turn from the evil of their way and to serve the true and living God with all their mind, with all their soul, and with all their strength. Accordingly the prophet requesteth the king to gather all Israel to him unto Mount Carmel, together with Baal’s 450 prophets and all the prophets of the groves, that he might show the people the absurdity as well as abomination of that idol worship whereof they were guilty, and persuade them to follow the Lord their God in word and deed, and in uprightness and integrity. God’s judgments had indeed softened their hearts so far as to make them seek to him for a redress of them. But yet their hearts were² not sound, neither walked they steadfastly in his way; but while they worshipped the true God Jehovah with their lips, in their minds they went after idols. And though they sometimes poured out their prayer to the God of heaven and earth, yet did they also sometime[s] do sacrifice to Baal. The prophet therefore begins his exhortation with this pathetic exclamation: “How long will ye halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” An exclamation this, wherein Christians are no less concerned than those Jews to whom it was immediately spoken. For do we not most of us halt between two opinions? Do we not endeavour to do service to two masters? And is it not the constant care of the generality of Christians to compound matters between [p. 3] God and the world? To contrive how to serve God without renouncing the service of the world, the flesh, and the devil? Do we not see many Christians who make loud professions of zeal for religion, still anxious for the good things of this life? In short may we not truly say that while we all pretend to be true worshippers of God, we do everyone in

¹See 1 Kings 17–18.

²Orig., “was.”

particular set up his idol in his heart, and divide his religious worship between the God of heaven and earth and the idolater's "god" to whom he hath devoted himself in a most special and extraordinary manner? To you therefore is this scripture given. And everyone is still concerned in this expostulation of the prophet, "How long will ye halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God, then follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."

[2.] In discoursing upon which words I shall:

First show who they are that come under this censure of halting between two opinions.

Secondly, I shall consider the folly and danger of such a state. And

Thirdly, conclude with an earnest exhortation to an entire devotion of ourselves to God.

[I.1.] I am first to show ... [who they are that come under this censure of halting between two opinions.] And here I doubt upon a serious and impartial examination of ourselves, we shall most of us find that we [p. 4] stand self-condemned in this point. And when we enquire who they are that halt between two opinions our conscience will reply to each of us, "Thou art the man."³ For judge I pray you, and judge impartially, everyone of himself. Hath God the entire possession of your souls? Are ye in heart and mind solely and wholly devoted to him? Have you no other end of all your actions, no other design in all your undertakings, but to perform the will of God and finish that work which he hath given you to do? Who among us can stand so severe a test as this? or whom will not conscience condemn⁴ [p. 5] upon so strict a trial? Well may we say with the royal psalmist that mankind are all corrupt and gone out of the way; that there is none that doth good, no not one.⁵ For who is there among us that may be termed holy in the strict sense of the word as it implies a total renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil; an entire and absolute devotion of ourselves to God.⁶ Alas we have all of us private views and secret ends of our own. God may perhaps have the chief place in some of our hearts, but I doubt he cannot be said to have them wholly at his disposal, or to reign solely in them.

[2.] There are, God knows, many rivals who will dispute with him his right to absolute and entire dominion. The world with her pomps and vanities, pleasures and delights, entertainments and diversions has monopolized a large share of our affections. The flesh too ruleth with almost uncontrolled sway in most of our souls. Nor is the devil without his share of power and influence over us.

[3.] Now whilst any of these things can be said and proved of us, whilst we set our hearts upon the flesh and its gratifications, or fix our affections at all upon the world or the things thereof, it must be said [p. 6] if God has any place at all in our hearts, that his empire is disputed, his claim to our obedience questioned, and his supreme authority oftentimes neglected. We are not in propriety of speaking his servants, since we have offered a part of our service to other masters. Nor can we be said to be listed under his banner, since we suffer ourselves to be led at all by others.

[4.] Thus then may they be said to halt between two opinions who are divided between God and the world, who suffer the Creator and the creature to share their affections between

³2 Sam. 12:7.

⁴The bottom half of page 4 is left blank.

⁵See Ps. 14:3.

⁶See *BCP*, Collect for 18th Sunday after Trinity; Litany; and Baptism liturgy.

them, and who allow only a portion of their heart and mind to the service of him that made them. Where God by his grace has taken root in any man's heart so far as to engage him to set himself in some degree about his service, and yet the cares of this world, the lust of the flesh, and temptations of the devil have still their share of influence over him; truly may that man be said to halt between two opinions. And happy it is for him if he do not stumble upon the worst of them.

[5.] The man of the world is oftentimes [p. 7] found to profess himself a strict and serious Christian. He will tell you gravely that he looks upon religion to be a matter of the utmost importance, and which next to the main chance—the making a fortune he means—is by all men to be carefully regarded. Such a man we see constant in all the external duties of religion, and abounding in all outward works of piety. He dares not omit the public service of the church, and scruples ever to turn his back upon the altar. He is constant in his private prayers, frequent in giving alms, and regular in observing the church's fasts. And yet, with all this seeming zeal, it may perhaps be found that the world has made a deeper impression upon him than religion; and that he taketh more pains to get an estate in the world than to lay up for himself a treasure in heaven. Else how should we see the same man conscientious in church and knavish behind his counter? How otherwise could we account for the public piety and secret villainy of this halting Christian? He has two principles of all his actions: the love of God and [p. 8] love of the world. And from this contrariety of his principles arises the inconsistency which is visible in his practice. He halteth between two opinions and therefore is sometimes found adoring and praising God, and at others paying his worship to mammon.

[6.] We know it was because the cares of this world and the desires of riches were not rooted out of the hearts of those that heard the gospel, but suffered to grow up with the good seed of the word which was sown in their hearts, that good seed brought forth no fruit to perfection. And indeed no wonder. For the same ground cannot produce thorns and grapes, figs and thistles. Indeed this part of the parable of the sower doth seem to have an immediate relation to the case in hand, and particularly to respect those who halt between two opinions, who are divided between God and the world. We there see that the good seed took root and sprung up in the hearts of them that heard it. God had gained some footing in their souls, and was in possession of a part of their affections. But yet as the cares of the world and the desires of riches, those spiritual thorns and briars, were not rooted [p. 9] out, but still suffered to keep their ground in the heart, they sprung up together with the good seed; the consequence of which was that at last they choked it and hindered it from ever bringing forth any fruit to perfection.⁷

[7.] There are still other *characters* of persons whom the text accuseth as halting between two opinions. There are men that will renounce their vices if they may do it with the reserve of one favourite sin. There is some darling iniquity generally left behind after the strictest reformation. Now this is a plain *instance* of double-mindedness and insincerity of heart. It is a manifest indication that we halt between two opinions; that we are averse from sin in general, whilst we countenance and encourage ourselves in the practice of some particular ones.

[8.] The sum of the matter is this: All they are concerned in this exhortation in the text, and stand condemned by the censure of it, who are not wholly devoted to God; who [p. 10] have not absolutely and entirely dedicated themselves to his service; who have not renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil; who do not abstract themselves as much as possible from the consideration of everything but God and divine things, in order to enable them the more

⁷See Matt. 13, The Parable of the Sower.

perfectly to perform that duty and service to him which they are convinced in their hearts they owe him. All they may be said to halt between two opinions who preserve any of that respect for any creature which is due only to God. Whosoever loveth anything, feareth anything, or hopeth for anything but God, he hath set up his idol in his heart. He is divided in himself and therefore cannot love, serve, and fear God as he ought. It is on this account that the blessed apostle St. Paul calleth the covetous man an idolater.⁸ Because such a one permitteth his gold to share in the love which is due only to God, and alloweth his desire of gain to share a part of those affections, which God and religion ought wholly to engross. And as the covetous man is an idolater, so also is the epicure, the sensualist, the proud, the passionate, and [the] ambitious man. Each of them having some other ultimate end of all their [p. 11] actions, besides God and religion. In short, whosoever pretendeth to be a Christian and yet at the same time suffers himself to be guided by anything but God, he is doubtless guilty of halting between two opinions; of owning the Lord to be God, and yet not paying him that worship and obedience which is only due unto him. The folly and danger of this state comes now to be considered in the

Second General Head

[II.] Now the dangerousness of such a state as this may sufficiently appear from the following considerations. First, that it is a state which God has nowhere promised to reward; and secondly, that it is a state against which he has threatened the most severe punishments.

[1.] First, heaven is the free gift of God, and therefore not to be attained but upon such terms only as he has appointed. Now where has he promised to reward such a half piety as we have before described? Can it be shown that he has anywhere bound himself to accept of any service which falls short of all that lies in our power, to offer him? Hath he ever capitulated with us, [p. 12] and bought the dominion over us upon conditions that the empire should be divided between him and his creatures? No! This can never be shown. The promises of heaven are only made to those who take the utmost pains to attain it. It is a holy violence which is preached in the gospel as necessary to introduce us into the peaceable possession of the kingdom of God. The utmost labour, the greatest pains and most constant diligence, will be but barely sufficient to entitle us to the reward of good soldiers of Christ, and faithful servants of God. The gospel informs us that to be disciples of Christ we must forsake father and mother, houses and land, and everything else which the world counts dear to us.⁹ And it is to the due fulfilling of these conditions of salvation that the promise of entering into rest is made us.

We know by the covenant that God made with us at our creation sinless obedience was indispensably required of us. And though the rigours of this covenant are now abated, and God through his tender mercy, in consideration of the manifold frailties and infirmities of our natures, hath been graciously pleased [p. 13] to propose heaven to us on other terms, and to accept of repentance in lieu of perfect obedience. Yet should we greatly deceive ourselves, did we imagine that there was less to do than ever before was required of men in order to their attainment of heaven and happiness. No! The case is far otherwise with us. For though God hath been pleased to enter into a new and more gracious covenant with his children, yet the terms of it are no less rigorous, considering the change of nature that was wrought in us by the fall, than those of the

⁸See Eph. 5:5.

⁹See Matt. 10:34.

first covenant were. For as absolute sinless obedience was required then, so is absolute obedience to the utmost of our power required of us now. Were we able, we should be obliged to be spotless and without sin. And though, through the corruption of our nature, a state of perfection is not to be expected in this world, yet are we commanded to aim at it with all our might. And whosoever voluntarily stops short of it, for aught¹⁰ he knows to the contrary, stops short of the mercy of God. For though God will in consideration of the merits of Christ, and upon our own true repentance pardon all those sins which through the frailty and corruption of our nature [p. 14] we have committed,¹¹ yet will he never pardon those omissions of duty and commissions of sin which men wilfully live in, through a fond and vain persuasion that it is not required of them to be as holy as possibly they can.

We say then that a state of voluntary imperfection, a half course of piety, a life divided between God and the world, is a state which God has nowhere promised to accept nor yet assured us of a reward for it. And this alone is sufficient to show the dangerousness of such a state—since as was before observed, heaven is the free gift of God and therefore may only be expected upon such terms as he has proposed it to us upon. But there is still another argument whereby we may prove the danger of this state, and that is

[2.] Secondly, the severe punishment which God hath threatened against it. Many and obvious are the texts of scripture, wherein God threateneth the pains of hell to all those who fulfill not his will. And how God's will may be fulfilled without this entire devotion of ourselves to his service is more than in Holy Scriptures God hath thought proper to teach us. We are therein taught to love the Lord [p. 15] our God with all our heart and with all our mind, and to do him service with all our soul and all our strength.¹² And the sanction annexed to this divine law is the penalty of being utterly excluded from the sweetest comforts of God's presence if we fail in the performance of it.

We are expressly told (Luke 14:33) that whosoever he be that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be Christ's disciple. Now what can be possibly more plain than this text, the sense of which is clearly this. That unless we renounce everything in this world so far as that our affections may be placed wholly and solely upon God and religion, we cannot be disciples of Christ. And if we be not his disciples, what will become of our claim to salvation by him? Certainly being excluded from the name of a disciple of Christ is an exclusion from the heaven which he died to purchase for us. And therefore a severer threat against this divided piety cannot possibly be conceived than what the doctrine of this text plainly sets before us.

But whosoever desires to see the terrible condemnation which awaiteth this state more fully represented, let him hear what the Spirit of God saith to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans in the third chapter of Revelation, verses 15–16, “I know thy works that thou art neither cold nor hot. I would thou wert cold or hot. So then [p. 16] because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” O dreadful doom of the lukewarm and indifferent in religion! See we not here that the indifferent man is debased even below him that has no religion at all. “I wish thou wert either cold or hot.” So saith the Spirit, showing that coldness or an absolute negligence of religion was a more eligible state than lukewarmness or

¹⁰Orig., “ought.”

¹¹Cf. *BCP*, Collect for 4th Sunday after Epiphany; Absolution in Communion Service.

¹²See Luke 10:27; Matt. 22:37.

indifferency. Add to all which the dreadful doom that attendeth this state: “Because thou art neither hot nor cold, saith God, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” I will cast thee from me with zeal and indignation, and withdraw my grace from everyone that maketh no better a use of it than the lukewarm and indifferent man doth.

I need not add farther proofs to show you the dangerousness of pretending to be a Christian and yet not being wholly devoted to God. I have fully proved it to be a state which God has nowhere promised to reward, and likewise a state against which he has denounced the severest woes and judgments. And this proof to a Christian congregation must be acknowledged a sufficient demonstration of the *point*. [p. 17]

I therefore proceed farther to consider the folly of such a state. The folly of living in such a state as this, of dividing our hearts between God and the world, may be easily collected from the danger attending such a state. For is it not the greatest madness in nature to continue in such a course of life as we are sure we shall never be rewarded for? Doth not reason plainly teach us that the service of God is the most honourable, easy, and profitable that we can possibly be engaged in? The consequence of which must be that it is the highest folly for anyone to quit that service, and take up with a more stern master, and that too upon more severe terms. But thus does everyone who seeks to compound matters between God and the world, and to divide his service between religion and pleasure. For no man can serve two masters, we must therefore of necessity either renounce the service of mammon or of God.¹³ The blessed apostle St. James saith expressly (James 4:4) that the friendship of the world is enmity with God; and whosoever will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. Here we see that [p. 18] there is no such thing as dividing our love. The love of the world is absolutely inconsistent with the love of God. So that if we afford the world, or anything besides God any part of our love, in such proportion do we become the enemies of God.

And can there be a greater instance of folly than this—to lose the favour of God, and the recompense of all the services we do him, for the sake of a little self-love, a small proportion of affection for the world, and the god thereof. For shame! Follow the prophet’s advice in my text. If the Lord be God, serve him and him alone; but if not, serve whomsoever you do serve heartily, that so ye may have the reward of your services. For the man that is religious by halves—that dares not totally renounce the service of God, and yet will not entirely devote himself to him—has taken the ready way wholly to divest himself both of the pleasures of religion and of the world. He has just got religion enough to make him uneasy. He has got so much of the fear of God, as will serve to poison all his delights, to give him qualms amidst his entertainments, [p. 19] and to hinder his soul from the enjoyment of whatsoever it lusteth after. Thus he suffereth all the pains, nay ten times more, than the truly religious man endures; and yet at the same time has none of those pleasures which virtue bringeth along with her whereby ample retribution is made for those worldly delights which are given up.

And how there can be a greater pitch of folly and madness than this is more than I am able to determine. Nor doth the point need farther illustration. It being sufficiently plain that the man who halteth between two opinions, who endeavours to serve God and mammon, who divides his heart between the Creator and the creature, liveth in a state of the utmost danger and utmost folly that can well be imagined. I therefore proceed

¹³See Matt. 6:24.

Third and Lastly

[III.] To conclude with an earnest exhortation to an entire devotion of yourselves to God.

[1.] Ye have seen, brethren, the true nature of the crime of halting between two opinions exclaimed against in my text; which has been shown to consist in dividing our affections between God and the things he hath made, and placing only such a part of our love [p. 20] upon our Creator as we can well spare from his creatures. Ye have likewise been shown how full such a course of life is of folly and impertinence, of weakness and contempt. Nay, moreover ye have been told of the many and great dangers wherewith it is attended. That it is a state of life which God hath nowhere promised to reward. Nay farther, that he hath expressly denounced his vengeance upon it. Now surely all this will be abundantly sufficient to persuade you totally to renounce the world, and to set your affections on things above, not on things that are below.¹⁴ Ye have seen that no less a degree of religion than this will profit you. That whosoever wittingly falls short of this does, for aught¹⁵ he knows, fall short of the mercy of God. Be strong therefore and quit yourselves like men.¹⁶ Be bold to assert your liberty, to vindicate the dignity of your nature, to shake off the bondage of corruption, and to behave yourselves as becometh the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. God, be assured, is infinitely worthy of our highest love, abundantly deserving of our best services. He has done far more for our salvation than ever we shall be [p. 21] able to¹⁷ make sufficient returns for. He hath created and preserved us, and therefore has a right to all that we can do in return for such blessings. Nay, moreover he has redeemed us from sin, and delivered us from the bondage of corruption. And therefore, were it possible, he has a just demand to more than we are able to pay. But his mercy is pleased in consideration of our weakness, and of the poor corrupted state of our nature, to content himself with such services as we are able to do for him. And since we have nothing else to return for all those favours and mercies he hath vouchsafed to confer upon us, he is pleased graciously to accept the poor and beggarly oblation of ourselves. Less than this he will not accept, had we the conscience to offer it. And this sure no man will think too great a return for all the mighty obligations which he hath received from God. For even whilst we serve God we dignify our nature, augment the perfection of our being, and partake of his honour and glory. To be admitted to worship his God is doubtless the highest honour wherewith a creature can be blest. And to devote ourselves entirely to his service is only to be secured of our title to this dignity and preeminence which the King of heaven and earth allows us. There may be other fancied happiness, honour, and renown. But in truth and reality, there is no happiness, no honour, no glory, but in the service of God. All the [p. 22] happiness the world can afford us at the best is but a suspension of misery. What can riches do for us, but only keep us from the evil of want, we can enjoy no more than we want, and a very little is sufficient to supply us with that. All beyond this is nothing to us, mere superfluity which bringeth neither pleasure nor profit. And who, for such a reward as this, would forfeit those exalted pleasures, those refined delights,

¹⁴See Col. 3:2.

¹⁵Orig., “ought.”

¹⁶See 1 Cor. 16:13.

¹⁷The material from this point through “But his mercy w...” appears in the middle of p. 23; marked for insertion here.

which flow so plentifully from the service of God. Delights they are which fade not in the enjoyment, which do not pall upon our senses nor destroy our palate, which increase the more we partake of them! Pleasures which extend our faculties of enjoyment, which furnish us with new senses, as they bring us new matter of fruition. Such a season of delights is his life who lives wholly devoted to God,¹⁸ who suffers not the world to take any hold upon him, whose heart is fixed on heaven alone, and whose soul is void of all cares but that of serving and pleasing God. O glorious task, O blissful employment! It is the delight of angels, a forestalling of the joys of futurity, and a foretaste of the blessedness of heaven. Cast away from you therefore everything but this love of God. Divest yourselves of every pleasure but that of serving [p. 23] him. Halt no longer between two opinions. But since ye own the Lord to be God, follow him, and him alone. Serve him truly and faithfully with all your strength. Love him with all your heart and mind.¹⁹ Worship him in your body and in your spirit.²⁰ Be perfect in the love and fear of God, that so your happiness may be perfected in the enjoyment of his heavenly kingdom throughout all ages world without end.

Source: Methodist Archive and Research Centre, MA 1977/597/4.

¹⁸The remainder of this sentence appears at the bottom of p. 23; marked for insertion here.

¹⁹See Luke 10:27; Matt. 22:37.

²⁰See 1 Cor. 6:20.