

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

The earliest sermons that Charles Wesley wrote were long, and in a form more suited to an audience of his Oxford colleagues than a parish congregation. His emerging recognition of this is seen in a revision of his early sermon on 1 Kings 18:21, which CW penned in preparation for preaching it again in Savannah, Georgia on June 20, 1736. CW reduced the length of the sermon by more than a third, and rendered it a bit more accessible to a general audience. It is unclear whether Sarah Wesley Jr. delivered the longhand copy of *both* the longer and shorter versions of CW's sermon on this text to Joseph Benson. The shortened version was the one that appeared in the 1816 collection of *Sermons by the Late Rev. Charles Wesley*.²

The manuscript of the shortened version survives at the Methodist Archive and Research Centre (MA 1977/608/2). On its cover CW wrote the Scripture reference and text. In a later hand is added: "Preach[e]d Nov 30 1735 / Cows in the Isle of Wight." A third hand continued: "Preached in Georgia & Boston / June 20. Oct. 7. 1736." There is also the annotation, "Ex[amine?]d, W. P."³

On the inside of the cover CW recorded:

Preach[e]d at Savanna[h] in Georgia, in the M[orning?], June 20, 1736.

on board the *London Galley*, Sept. 12, 1736.

Dr [Timothy] Cutler's ch[urch] in Boston, N[ew] E[ngland], Oct. 17, 1736.

Mr [Roger] Price's [church] in in Boston, N[ew] E[ngland], Oct. 17, 1736.

While there is much repetition, we give the entire text of both versions (see previous), to illustrate some evolution in CW's preaching style. Our transcription focuses on the final text (after CW's deletions and revisions), 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.

²Sermon XII, in *Sermons by the Late Rev. Charles Wesley, A.M. Student of Christ Church, Oxford. With a Memoir of the Author by the Editor* (London: Thomas Blanshard, et al., 1816), 207–24.

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

[p. 1]

In the 18th chapter of the First book of Kings, at the 21st verse it is thus written:

“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.] An exclamation this, in which 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 God and the world? To contrive how to serve God without renouncing the service of the world, the flesh, and the devil?¹ 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 every one in particular set up his idol in his heart, and divide his religious worship between that, and the God of heaven and earth? To you therefore is this scripture given; and everyone is still concerned in this expostulation of the prophet, “How [p. 2] 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 conduct. And

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

[I.]

[I.1.] I am first² 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 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 [p. 3] of God and finish the work which he hath given you to do? Who among us can stand so severe a test as this? Or whom will not conscience condemn upon so strict a trial? 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, and an entire and absolute devotion of ourselves to God?⁴ 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. There are many rivals, who will dispute with him his right to absolute

¹See BCP, Litany.

²Orig., “am I. to show.”

³2 Sam. 12:7.

⁴See BCP, Collect for 18th Sunday after Trinity; Litany; and Baptism liturgy.

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.

[2.] Now while any of these things can be said of us, while we set our [p. 4] hearts upon the flesh and its gratifications, or fix our affections at all upon the world or the things thereof, it must be owned 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, strictly speaking, his servants, since we have offered a part of our service to other masters. Nor can we be called his faithful soldiers, since we are likewise listed under the banner of his enemy.

[3.] 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, 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 [p. 5] of influence over him; truly may that man be said to halt between two opinions.

[4.] The man of the world is often found to profess himself a strict and serious Christian. He will tell you he looks upon religion to be a matter of the utmost importance, and what by all men ought 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 he takes 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 [p. 6] halting Christian. He has two principles—the love of God, and the love of the world—from whence arises the inconsistency 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.

[5.] And thus it must be with all who are divided between God and the world. The good seed may even take root and spring up in their hearts. God may gain some footing in their souls, and be in possession of part of their affections. But if the cares of the world and the desire of riches, those spiritual thorns and briars, be not rooted out but still suffered to keep their ground in the heart, and spring up together with the good seed, the consequence will be that at last they will choke it, and hinder its ever bringing forth any fruit to perfection.⁵

[6.] There are still other sorts of persons whom the text accuseth of halting between two opinions. There are men that will renounce their vices, if they may do it with the *reserve* of one *favourite* sin. Now this is a plain instance of *insincerity*, while we [p. 7] are averse from sin in general, and countenance and encourage ourselves in the practice of some particular ones.

[7.] The sum of the matter is this. All they are concerned in this expostulation in the text, and stand condemned by the censure of it, who are not wholly devoted to God; who have not

⁵See Matt. 13, The Parable of the Sower.

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 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 loves anything, fears anything, or hopes 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. It is on this account that St. Paul calls the covetous man an idolater.⁶ Because he allows his desire [p. 8] 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 sensualist, the passionate, the proud, the ambitious man—each of them having some end of their actions besides God. In short, whoever pretends to be a Christian and yet 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, yet not paying him the worship and obedience due to him alone. The folly and danger of which state comes now to be considered under the

II General Head

[II.] Now the danger may sufficiently appear from the following considerations. First, that it is a state which God hath nowhere promised to reward; and secondly that it is a state against which he hath threatened the severest 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 [p. 9] that lies in our power to offer him? Hath he ever capitulated with us, and bought the dominion over us upon condition that it should be divided between him and his creatures? No! This can never be shown. The promise of heaven is 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.⁷ 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. And though, through the corruption of our nature, a state of perfection is not to be expected in this life; yet are we commanded to aim at it with all our might. And whosoever wilfully stops short of it, stops short of the mercy of God. For though God will, upon our true repentance, for Christ's sake pardon all those sins which through the frailty of our nature we have committed,⁸ yet will he never pardon those commissions of sin, and omissions of duty, 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. [p. 10]

[2.] 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. But there is still another argument for the danger of it, namely

⁶See Eph. 5:5.

⁷See, for example, Matt. 10:34.

⁸Cf. *BCP*, Collect for 4th Sunday after Epiphany; Absolution in Communion Service.

second, the severe punishment which God has threatened against it.

[3.] 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 taught us. We are therein taught to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our mind, and to do him service with all our soul and with all our strength⁹—and that, under pain of being utterly excluded from God's presence if we fail in the performance of it.

[4.] 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 possibly be more plain than this text, the sense of which is clearly this, that unless we renounce [p. 11] everything in this world so far as that our affections may be placed wholly and solely upon God, we cannot be Christ's disciples. And if we be not his disciples, what will become of our claim to salvation by him? Certainly the 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 threatening against this divided piety cannot be conceived than that of this text.)

[5.] But who 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 (Rev. 3:15–16), "I know thy works that thou art neither hot or cold. I would thou wert cold or hot. So then 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 lukewarm Christian (if we will call him such) is debased even below him that has no religion at all? "I wish thou wert either cold or hot." [p. 12] So saith the Spirit, showing that coldness or an absolute neglect of religion was a more desirable state than lukewarmness or indifference. Add to all which the dreadful doom which attends 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 who maketh no better use of it than the lukewarm and indifferent man doth.

[6.] The folly of living in such a state of dividing our hearts between God and the world, may be easily collected from the danger of it. The service of God is the most honourable, easy, and profitable that we can be engaged in. It must therefore be the greatest folly to quit that service, and take up with a stern master upon the severest terms. But so 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 of necessity renounce the [p. 13] service either of God or of mammon.¹⁰ St. James says expressly the friendship of the world is enmity with God; and whosoever will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God.¹¹ Here we see that 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 else besides God any part of our love, in such proportion do we become the enemies of God.

[7.] And can there be a greater instance of folly than this? To lose the favour of God, and the recompense of all our services, for a small proportion of this world's good. For shame!

⁹See Luke 10:27; Matt. 22:37.

¹⁰See Matt. 6:24.

¹¹See James 4:4.

Follow the prophet's advice. If the Lord be God, serve him, and him only. 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 wholly renounce the service of God, and yet will not entirely devote himself to him, has taken the ready way to divest himself both of the pleasures of religion and of the world. He has just enough of religion to make himself uneasy; to poison all his delights, and hinder his soul from the enjoyment [p. 14] of whatsoever it lusteth after. Thus, he suffers 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 brings along with her.¹²

III.

I proceed thirdly and lastly to conclude with an earnest exhortation to an entire devotion of ourselves to God.

[1.] Ye have seen, brethren, the true nature of the crime of halting between two opinions, which has been shown to consist in dividing our affections between God and the things he has made, and placing only such a part of love upon our Creator as we can well spare from his creatures. Ye have likewise been shown the folly and danger of such a state—that God has nowhere promised to reward it; nay, that he has 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.¹³ Ye have seen that no less a degree of religion than this will profit you. That whoever wilfully [p. 15] falls short of this, falls short of the mercy of God. Be strong therefore, and quit yourselves like men.¹⁴ Be bold to assert your liberty, to shake off the bondage of corruption, and to behave yourselves as becomes the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

[2.] God, be assured, is infinitely worthy of our highest love, abundantly deserving of our best services. 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 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, he graciously accepts the poor and beggarly oblation of ourselves. Less than this, he will not accept.

[3.] And this sure no man [p. 16] will think too great a return for all the mighty obligations he hath received from God. For even while we serve God, we dignify our nature, increase 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 vouchsafes us. There may be other fancied happiness and honour, but in reality there is no happiness, no honour, no glory but in the service

¹²Someone other than CW has written in the left margin, “which always accompany genuine piety”; marking it as a replacement for CW’s “which virtue brings along with her.” This was likely the editor of the 1816 collection, as the marginal text is what appears there.

¹³See Col. 3:2.

¹⁴See 1 Cor. 16:13

of God. All the happiness the world can afford us is, at best, 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 [p. 17] that is nothing to us, mere superfluity, which brings neither pleasure nor profit. And who for such a reward as this would forfeit those exalted pleasures which flow so plentifully from the service of God. Pleasures they are which fade not in the enjoyment, which do not pall upon our senses nor destroy our palate, but increase the more, 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 scene of delights is his life who lives wholly devoted to God. 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 eternity, a foretaste of the blessedness of heaven!

[4.] Cast away [p. 18] from you therefore everything but this love of God. Divest yourselves of every pleasure but that of serving 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.¹⁵ Worship him in your body and in your spirit.¹⁶ 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 1977/608/2.

¹⁵See Luke 10:27; Matt. 22:37.

¹⁶See 1 Cor. 6:20.