

THE LIFE OF ELIJAH pt.5 6-20-10

The Battle of the Gods pt.2

(I Kings 18) We will read again today of the adventures of Elijah the prophet. And once again today we deal with a very serious subject, but I would like to begin on a lighter note. Involvement in the Christian ministry is not exactly the same as running a business, but there are certainly some similarities. We are marketing a world-view, a belief-system, a lifestyle that is in competition with all the other ones out there. We have the advantage of ours being true, but that does not diminish the importance of marketing. Even as Christians, we have to be smart about how we are seeking to advance our product. And we can learn things from smart businesses. That is why I read books on business like Jim Collins works, “Good To Great” and “Built to Last.” Lots of great lessons there from the business world. And here are some I got from the business world, thru Jay Leno, some lessons on advertising – how-to and how not-to. Okay? These are all real clippings from newspapers that were sent into Jay Leno. And this first one depicts a really wise marketing tactic. (Mexican Firm targets Hispanics) That is a smart focus. This next one is not so good. The picture makes you wonder what exactly you are getting. (ground chuck) These next four also give us really bad examples of how to present your product. Just the name you select can make a big difference. For example, here is an ad from the Lumpy Mattress Co. and you will notice they are going out of business. I wonder why. One of the boom industries of the last several years, is bottled water. And I am sure this company produces a fine product, but I just don’t find the name very appealing (Outhouse Springs). And finally, there is this. (Barfworld) I am told it stands for Biologically Appropriate Raw Food, but this is one acronym that just is not going to sell.

One form of marketing that has been popular over the years, is to directly compare your product with your competition’s in some kind of contest. In a blind taste test do people prefer Coke or Pepsi, the Whopper or the Champ? Which paper towel is more absorbent? Which cleaner gets out the stain? Those kind of ads, I find rather compelling. They appeal to my mind not my emotions and they have a certain boldness about them. Well, this is the marketing style that Elijah has chosen for his national renewal in Israel, 7th century BC. To set the stage for today's reading we need to remember that the nation of Israel, under the influence of wicked king Ahab had forsaken the commandments of God to follow after the pagan god, Baal. As a result, Elijah had prayed for a drought to come upon Israel until they repented. Three dry years later Elijah emerges from hiding and issues a public challenge to the prophets of Baal. He summons a great crowd to Mt. Carmel to

witness a showdown between himself and 450 prophets of Baal. When the false prophets and the people were gathered, Elijah issues his challenge. **21-24**

21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 23 "Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. 24 "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea."

The game is Burn the Ox, a game that should be well-suited for Baal since he was called the god of fire and the lord of the sun. The people approved of the challenge and the showdown began. **25-26**

*So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it. " 26 Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. So, here are these pagan priests doing their best to get a response from their idol. They were dancing a fire dance around the ox - but Baal wasn't coming through. **27***

It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." And the text doesn't say it but I bet he laughed as he said this. Elijah mocked these people. Now, that's not a very Christian thing to do is it? I mean, that's what I've been told - that sarcasm is an never an appropriate way of communicating; but I have to disagree. And I disagree for several reasons. Elijah's example is one. Isaiah's example is another. In Isaiah 44 and other places Isaiah speaks with utter scorn about idolaters. He jokes about these fools who take a piece of wood, carve it up and use half of it to cook a steak and the other half they set up as an idol, worship it and pray to it. In so many words Isaiah says such people are major bozos. He mocks them.

Jeremiah does the same thing in chapter 10 of his work. He says that these idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They are dumb and lame. They cannot move or speak. These are things that don't deserve any respect, only mockery and scorn. And I've noticed in my study of history that the use of satire and sarcasm has diminished over the years. It used to be a fairly common thing, even in church debates, but no more. And I find the comments of G.K. Chesterton very interesting. He writes: *Satire may be mad and anarchic, but it presupposes an admitted superiority in certain*

things over others; it presupposes a standard. And the curious disappearance of satire from our literature is an instance of the fierce things fading for want of any principle to be fierce about. (Orthodoxy p.42) I wonder if we have become a bit too civilized when civility means we have to respect Satanic lies and honor the ambassadors of hell. Are we too delicate, too gentle in contexts where gentleness is not fitting? And does it all come from losing the fierceness of conviction? For 15 years I read Christianity Today magazine and saw it get progressively more conviction- less until finally I cancelled my subscription. It seems nobody is really very wrong anymore, nobody is a heretic. There is so little anymore that gets us angry. I appreciate certain writers of previous centuries who wrote with an edge and were willing to confront with all the literary weapons, including sarcasm. And I believe that's okay - at times. Now, admittedly, you do have to carefully pick your times. As a rule sarcasm in your marital arguments is not a good idea. But in social commentary it has a place. Could it be that we are trying to be nicer than Jesus and His prophets?

So, Elijah mocks the opposition. **28** *So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them.* Pagan religions, then and now, have been marked by wild practices of self-affliction. **29** *When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.* Isn't that sad? **30** *Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down.* He doesn't build a new altar but repairs an old one in order to remind the people of their heritage, of the days before the apostasy. **31** *Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name."* This too is symbolic, for the 12 stones symbolized the tribes of Israel whose unity had been broken years earlier when the northern 10 tribes cast off the rule of David's grandson, Rehoboam. Elijah was reminding them of the glory days when the nation was one and the Lord was worshipped. **32-35** *So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. 33 Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. 34 And he said, "Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. 35 The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water.* If Elijah had any tricks up his sleeve all this water was not going to help. He did it to increase the drama, to

prove the supernatural character of the fire from heaven. **36,37** *At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. 37 "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again."* Look at Elijah's prayer. He calls on God as the God of Abe, Isaac and Israel, again pointing his hearers back to where they had come from, reminding them of how far they had strayed. Elijah's heart and passion is revealed in his prayer. He wants God to answer him with fire for several reasons. He is concerned for the people, that their hearts would return to God. The prophet longs to see repentance and restoration. He wants God to drive the confusion and the doubt and the unbelief out of his land. And most of all, He wants to see the Lord honored and lifted up by his special people. As we have seen before, that is the heartbeat of this great man. Elijah was zealous for the glory of God. He wants God to show off just a little so that He might receive the honor He is due. This is a primary motive for the great men we meet in the Scriptures. They weren't just concerned for their people, they felt it deeply when God was ignored or blasphemed; and their prayer was consistently aimed at God's glory. This was the driving force behind our Savior as well, not just love for men, but love for the Father's glory. In John 12:28 this was his prayer, "Father, glorify thy name." (R) David said Ps.115:**1ab** *Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory.* And this is the first petition of the Lord's prayer isn't it? What do we ask for? Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. We pray that God's name would be treated and esteemed as holy. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. Christian prayer is essentially God-centered. Yes, we request things of God but the end in mind should be His glory and praise.

There is one other element of this brief prayer that I want you to ponder. Elijah says, "Let it be known that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at Thy word." Elijah does not ask glory for himself. After what he does here the fame of Elijah was sure to spread but he wants it understood that he is nothing but a servant of the Lord and that what he did was never his idea in the first place. He says, "I did **all** this at God's word." This wasn't the Elijah plan for national renewal. This was God's idea. Elijah was just following orders. Several lessons are here. For one, you shouldn't expect that you'll be able to call down fire from heaven whenever you like. A lot of people get embarrassed imitating Biblical characters because God never spoke to them. You need to step out only in confidence that God has spoken. Think about what Elijah is doing in this story.

Think about the risk he was taking. After going thru all this, what would it look like, what would people think of Elijah if he couldn't pull this off? To even attempt something like this would rate Elijah as a looney in most books. Imagine your little brother staging something like this. You would say he had lost his mind wouldn't you? You would say he's nuts, and Elijah would have been nuts wouldn't he? Except for one thing. God told him to do it. That is all that separates fruitcake from hero. God told him to do it. And when God tells you to do something no other reason is needed. To faith, a command of God justifies anything. But you must understand how it looks to others who lack that faith. To them it just looks stupid. Things that look bizarre to some only make sense if you realize God said to do it. For example, can you imagine the reaction among Joshua's military advisors when he announced that they were going to overthrow the mighty walled city of Jericho by marching around it and blowing horns? Pretty crazy huh? But it worked - why? Because God said to do it. No doubt many thought Moses crazy for going before mighty Pharaoh and saying, *let my people go*. Moses thought it crazy too but he did it only because God said to. Peter had fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus says "Put your net back in." Peter says, "Lord, we fished all night and caught nothing...Uh, but if you say so I'll do it." No reason to do it except the Lord said to. The disciples probably felt pretty silly the day they divided that little boys lunch and started to feed 5000 people with it -don't you think? That didn't make sense. They only did it because the Lord said to.

This is one of the great lessons of Scripture isn't it? Don't worry about how it looks to others. Don't bother with how it seems to you. If God said it, you do it, and you'll never regret it. Is there anything in your life that you do or don't do for no other reason than obedience to God's word? I thought of all the things I wouldn't do or believe if God hadn't told me to - and the list got long in a hurry. I wouldn't believe that only men should be elders, or that wives should submit to their husbands. To your with- it American that is an absurd view, a reprehensible view. I only teach it for one reason - it's God's word. Same thing for the doctrine of eternal punishment. I wouldn't believe it or preach it except that God said to. Some may think we're crazy for believing such things but what you must realize is that all these peculiar convictions arise from one root conviction - that the Bible is the word of God. I saw an article in the paper some time back where this pea-brained writer (see I'm applying point one) assails the Catholic church for taking a hard-line against abortion? She says this was a bad decision of the church and as I read what she wrote it was obvious that she has a very bad misunderstanding of how churches arrive at their positions on such matters. The average

American apparently thinks churches develop positions like businesses. Men and women sit in board rooms and ask, "What should our view on issue Y be this month?" After a little discussion they take a vote and have their position. But that is not how the church operates. At least not any church under authority. We have been given a book by our King. We can discuss it and study it but we can't overrule it no matter how politically incorrect it may be and no matter how uncomfortable its implications. Many things I would not believe but for God's word. Many things I would not do but for God's word. I wouldn't witness except that God said to. I wouldn't give away my money, except God told me to. I wouldn't pay all my taxes except God told me to. I could go on and on. On some matters I can see other reasons for doing what God says, but often his word is the only reason but, get this, God's command is always a sufficient reason. If He said, "Do it" that's all I need to know. Obeying God sometimes puts you out on a limb. It seems risky to us. But our Commander n' chief will never, ever, let us down. That was Elijah's confidence and should be ours as well. When you move out at God's word - you have nothing to fear.

Back to our story, we have more story. Elijah prayed. We keep reading that don't we. Elijah prayed. **38** *Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.* Woah! This is one awesome fire. It's called the fire of the Lord. And our God is an awesome God. Hebrews 12:**29** *our God is a consuming fire.* And when the people saw what God's fire did they were blown away. Simultaneously and spontaneously they all dropped their jaws and said, "Wow!" They said it backwards. They said, "Wow!" Or the Hebrew equivalent. **39** *When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God."* They were convinced and they were impressed. They were probably also scared to death. And then the next verse is real interesting **40** *Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.* Now, to many of you that will sound even more unChristian than the sarcasm. You can choose to sit in judgment on this execution or you can choose to learn from it. Elijah said he was doing everything in response to God's orders and that would include the prompt execution of these pagan prophets. Question: Does God think its okay to be wrong about your religion as long as you are sincere? No, No, No. These prophets of Baal were so sincere they mutilated their bodies to gain Baal's favor but they were dead wrong. Elijah had them killed and in so doing he was carrying out the law of God as given to Moses. Now, in case you don't know, the Bible is undeniably supportive

of capital punishment and prescribes it for much more than rape and murder. Deuteronomy 18:20 says that if a prophet speaks in the name of another god that prophet should die. Deuteronomy 13:5 says that anyone who leads the people away from the only true God shall be stoned to death. Exodus 22:20 says that anyone caught offering sacrifice to a false god shall be killed. You have a problem with that? Talk to God about it. What I've got a problem with is the manby-pamby way we treat lying prophets in our day. We are so wimpy about the truth that all we can do is say, "everybody is entitled to their own opinion." I remember the foolish comment I heard so often as a kid, "*I can say what I want, its a free country.*" If we protect some imagined right to lie we will die as a nation. A society that tolerates proven liars is asking for trouble. They are asking for drought or economic collapse or an AIDS epidemic. Honestly, the prophets of "free love," the Hugh Hefners and other pornographers of our day ought to be stoned, beaten and hung for all the devastation and disease their lies have wrought. But we continue to tolerate them - proven liars. Proverbs 17:**15** *He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.* We are all against condemning the righteous but don't forget the other half. The one who justifies the wicked is an abomination to God just the same. I go back to the thoughts we shared at the beginning when we talked about sarcasm. It seems that when it comes to handling false teachers that we have gotten far too gentle. Is it, possibly, that we are afraid to be sure anymore? Have we lost our convictions. Allan Bloom in his best-seller, "The Closing of the American Mind" said *The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all. It was not necessarily the best of times in America when Catholic and Protestants were suspicious of and hated one another; but at least they were taking their beliefs seriously, and the more or less satisfactory accomodations they worked out were not simply the result of apathy about the state of their souls.* (pg.26,35) His point is that there was a day when we took our beliefs seriously but that now we hold every ideal loosely lest it cause some discomfort. We look down on the execution of false prophets largely because we no longer believe there is any conviction worth dying for and therefore certainly nothing worth killing for. But Elijah was a different breed of man. He knew that nothing sickens a people more than lies and that the only way to deal with spiritual cancer is to cut it off. Cut it off. A little leaven leavens the whole, so you remove the wicked man from yourselves. That is from I Corinthians 5 in the New Testament. And

that is the response of Elijah and the people to these Baaliwick prophets. The fire of God came down. It vindicated Elijah, it condemned the false prophets, and it awed the people. Elijah invited them to turn their awe into action and cleanse the land of its deceivers. It is always a good idea to transform your religious emotions into a fight against sin. You understand what I mean? Some folks think the soft glow of a music-induced Jesus-feeling is the end all of religion. That can't be. You must transform your spiritual emotion into a practical fight against sin. And frankly, when you fail to do that your emotional encounter with God will do you no lasting good. Had the people said, "The Lord is God" and allowed the prophets of Baal to continue their trade they would be no better off. Your religious emotion, your adoration of the Holy One, must be turned against all that is unholy. That can be done on a social level or an individual level. This excision of false prophets from Israel is a great illustration of how each of us should deal with our own personal sin. You don't entertain it. You don't tolerate it. You viciously, decisively kill it. That's what it means to take up your cross. A cross is an instrument of death. Jesus says to deny yourself, to put to death the old man of sin. Consider this application of what we read: Just as a nation must cut out the voices of deceit within it, so must individuals. You shut out of your mind the lies of Satan and you do that, in part, by tuning out his advertisements. Don't open your mind to impure magazines or books or TV shows. The world-view they present is not only false - it is deadly. The point is to deal aggressively with deceit.

When you do that, when an individual or a people deal viciously and decisively with sin, great blessing will follow. So we read in **41** *Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower.* There had not been rain there for 3 and a half years. There was not a cloud in the sky when Elijah said this. So strong was his faith that he said he could hear the rain coming in the death moans of God's enemies. **42** *So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees.* What do you think Elijah is going to do now? (P) You guessed it. He is about to pray again. He gets in the position of humility and he looks to God in prayer. When you experience a great success or when you experience a great defeat the place to go is to your knees. There, in God's presence, you are reminded of who you are. You cannot be proud there. You cannot be self-degrading there. On your knees you are always God's little lamb -even if you are a mighty prophet. **43-46** *He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times. 44 It came about at the seventh time,*

that he said, "Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.' 45 In a little while the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. 46 Then the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel. What a great story! After all he had been through, God strengthens Elijah to outrun the king down the mountain. But let's look at Elijah's prayer for a few moments before we close. We spoke two weeks ago about persistence in prayer and here we see it again. Seven times Elijah prayed and checked - before he got his answer. Seven times. In addition to that, notice today the prayer principle of expectancy. Elijah prayed for rain with expectancy. He kept checking to see if God had answered him yet. He wasn't just praying because Christians are supposed to pray. He was praying to get results, and boy did he ever. So, when you pray - look for the results. Watch to see what God is going to do. David said in Psalm 5:3 *In the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.* You pray, and then look to see what God does. Optimism, hope instead of fear, is the legitimate possession of those who pray. So, let's do that together now. .