

Scripture

First Kings 18 verse 21:

...Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

And the people did not answer him a word.

Intro

Do you ever find it hard to make choices?

As an Englishman, one of the biggest challenges I've faced in America is automated call centers. You miss a package delivery from FedEx, and you have to call them to arrange a new delivery time.

The problem is that when you call, you aren't connected to a human being. You are connected to a talking robot, who gives you all these choices and you have to choose one.

Now. As you may know, the talking robot isn't programmed to recognize what you are saying in English. It can only understand AMERICAN English.

So every time I call FedEx, if I want to be understood, I have to conduct the entire conversation IN AN ACCENT LIKE THIS ONE. "TRACK MY PACKAGE". "TALK TO A CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVE".

For a Brit, it is absolutely humiliating. It's as if someone has implemented the whole system as payback for two hundred years of colonial rule.

The last time this happened to me, it occurred to me that this is how many of us feel on a daily basis. Having choices to make, but being unable to.

Choices of what to buy, what career to pursue, who to date, who to marry, what church to attend.

And perhaps it's not surprising it's hard, given how many options we're presented with in so many areas. You can't just go into Publix and buy Cheerios, you're confronted with literally dozens of different breakfast cereals.

I searched on the Publix website for cereals and granola - do you know how many options there are? 379. You could eat a different breakfast cereal every day for an entire year, and still have another 14 cereals left to try.

This multiplicity of choices can be paralyzing. I think it's one of the reasons Christians get into such weird habits where it comes to seeking God's guidance. We feel overwhelmed about what to choose, so we want God to do it for us.

Writing in the sky. A shiver in the liver. Feeling "a sense of peace". We need something weird and unexplained to happen to us, otherwise how else are we supposed to make choices?

But I want to suggest this morning that if you feel unable to make choices and commit, or perhaps even *unwilling* to make choices and commit, that may reveal a serious spiritual issue.

So let's turn to Scripture to get some clarity.

[1. Are we worshipping the God of Open Options?]
Let's look at this passage in First Kings chapter 18,
verse 21.

Here's the background. Elijah is one of the big-name prophets in the Old Testament. And what we're about to read is the final showdown between Elijah and God's people. He calls God's people to choose once and for all between YAHWEH, the God of Israel, and a false God by the name of Baal. And it doesn't go well.

“Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? [we might say two different CHOICES or OPTIONS]. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal [is God], then follow him.’

[And then the shocking line.] The people did not answer him a word.”

The people said nothing. Now on one level, they don't choose the false god Baal, or at least they say they don't - which I guess is good.

But they don't choose God either. They try to have it both ways. They sit on the fence.

And choosing not to choose is a choice, of course. And in choosing not to choose, the Israelites are in fact choosing another god for themselves. A god we might call The god of keeping their options open. The God of Open Options.

And my question is: Are WE any different?

If you're not sure whether you're like this, let me just ask some gentle diagnostic questions. Just try and answer as honestly as you can.

Question 1. Are you happy making iron-clad, no-turning-back choices, or would you always prefer a choice you could back out of if you needed to?

Question 2. When you're invited to an event on social media, rather than a straight yes or no, do you prefer to respond with "maybe"?

Question 3. When you're chatting with people after the Sunday service, do you actually focus exclusively on the person you're talking to, or will you be occasionally looking over their shoulder in case you miss a better conversation partner?

If so, it may be that you are being dangerously drawn to "the god of Open Options".

To be honest I think this is widespread. These days people wait years before declaring a college major; people only go to stores with a guaranteed return policy; and it's not unusual for a person to date someone for years before getting married—if they ever do get married.

From sex to spirituality, we reserve the right to keep our options open in every department of our lives.

Like the Israelites, we don't want to commit either because we're afraid of getting it wrong, afraid of regretting our decision, or we're afraid of missing out on something better.

It even has its own acronym doesn't it? FOMO. Fear of Missing Out.

The psychologist Barry Schwartz wrote a book called *The Paradox of Choice*, and he tries to explain this.

He says that the reason we want more options is because we imagine that more options means more freedom and more freedom means more happiness. And he makes the point that's actually not true, for a number of reasons. One is that when we have more choices, we realize that we have more chances to make **THE WRONG** choice. Or at least, a less good choice.

And if we DO actually make a choice, our hyper-awareness of the options we've REJECTED often keeps us from enjoying the option we HAVE chosen.

He says:

“a large array of options may diminish the attractiveness of what people actually choose, the reason being that thinking about the attractions of some of the unchosen options detracts from the pleasure derived from the chosen one.”

Have you ever felt that? You know, you agonize for ages about whether you should get a particular phone, you do weeks of research, and then almost as soon as you buy it, something newer comes out, and you can't fully enjoy the phone you've actually got. WHICH IS A PERFECTLY GOOD PHONE.

I was in a well-known coffee shop a few years back, and the person in front of me said, “I would like a decaf Grande Sugar-Free Vanilla Non-Fat Latte

please, with extra foam, And with the milk heated to 140 degrees.”

Now most of those were choices I didn't even realise you could MAKE.

So as I stood in line behind this man, I started to think... Maybe I want 140 degree milk too. Maybe, all this time, my choice of milk temperature has been catastrophically NAIVE.

Knowing I had all these other options didn't make me happy, it actually made me dissatisfied with the choice I thought I'd already made.

Now that's a silly example. But what if you take that same multiplicity of options that you get in Starbucks, and apply it to questions like, “Where should I live.... What should I study... where should I work.... what should I do with my life.... who should I date... who should I marry...”

And as we saw in Second Kings, it can very easily tip into “who should I worship?”

We’ve got so used to this way of thinking that subconsciously we can start holding out on God. Because what if a better offer comes along? What if my commitment to God messes up other things I could be doing?

What if there is more happiness to be found somewhere else?

[2. The Cost of Following the GOO]

So the words of Elijah are very haunting I think.

Verse 21:

Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

“Limping between two opinions.” See, this failure to commit cripples us.

So the god of open options cripples our love for others, because he tells us it's better not to become too involved.

He cripples our service to others because he tells us it might be better to keep our spare time to ourselves.

He cripples our giving, because he tells us these are uncertain times and you never know what you might need that money for.

He cripples our joy in Christ, because he tells us it's better not to get TOO serious about spiritual things.

And what is most frightening of all about the god of Open Options is that you may not even KNOW that you are worshiping him. Because he pretends not to be a god at all.

In fact, he promises you freedom from all gods, all responsibilities. “Keep your options open,” he says. “You don’t have to serve anything or anyone.”

But of course that’s a lie. Because you end up serving the god of open options. And you now have every option open to you except the one option you need if you’re going to enjoy any of them: namely, the power to choose. And it’s a kind of prison. It’s hellish. You’re like a man sitting in front of an all-you-can-eat buffet, starving to death simply because he cannot choose between the chicken or the shrimp.

You remember the movie Heat? Robert De Niro and Al Pacino. De Niro plays this professional thief. Pacino is the cop trying to take him down.

And they have this famous scene, sitting across the table from each other in a diner. It’s apparently the first time those two great actors had appeared on screen together.

And De Niro has this line that's become kind of a classic. And actually it's true for both men in the film.

He says: "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you're not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds."

And in the film you see what that has done to both men. A string of failed marriages. Estranged children. Profound loneliness.

And if I can speak personally for a moment, I relate to that loneliness. For many years, this was a real issue for me. It was one of the reasons I was afraid to commit to marriage for so long.

Because the god of open options hates the marriage service. He knows that during it, I would have to promise to "forsake all others", and that means forsaking all other options.

So the God of Open Options demanded I let people go rather than committing to them. He will not let anyone get too close.

But he won't let anyone get too far away either. Because that would mean they are no longer an option. So you string people along, and people get badly hurt.

On and on it went for years, exhausting and frustrating and confusing and endless, this restless pulling people towards you and then pushing them away, like the tide on a beach, never finally committing one way or the other.

By the way, as well as being a cruel god, he's also a liar. The promise is that by keeping your options open, you can have everything and everyone. But in the end, you get nothing and no-one.

[3. So how do we fight this god of open options?]

So how do we fight this “god of open options”?

I’m not saying we should recklessly or unwisely choose things. It’s right to seek the counsel of Scripture and wise friends when we want to make a significant choice. To pray. And the bigger the choice is, the more careful we should be.

But then, once you’ve done that, choose! Take courage. Commit. Don’t put it off endlessly.

And I want briefly to give three reasons why you should reject the god of open options and choose.

Firstly, he won’t make you happy.

C S Lewis said, “God cannot give us... happiness and peace apart from himself, because... there is no such thing.”

You must come to learn that there is no superior “happiness” that you can get from serving a different God, or any source other than God.

You hear this in this Psalm 16:

“I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good APART from you.’”

Psalm 73 says, “Whom have I in heaven but YOU? And there is NOTHING ON EARTH that I desire besides you.”

James in the New Testament says, “EVERY good gift and EVERY perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”

Do you realise that the happiness you’re hoping to find in sex or marriage or career or academic success or popularity can ONLY be found in CHOOSING Christ wholeheartedly? If you believe that, then the god of Open Options will lose his grip on you.

Secondly, you should reject him because of the reality of God's Providence.

Providence is literally God's "provide- ence" for you.

God knows everything you will choose before you choose it, and whatever you choose, He will work out the results of those choices, for your good and his glory.

If you really believe that God always brings the greatest possible good even from your worst decisions, then you'll be liberated to choose.

Again, I'm not saying "try to make unwise choices" - I think you know not to do that. Why make life harder for yourself?

But it's just to acknowledge that we can NEVER know exactly the outcome of our choices before we make them, and Christians should not let that fear or uncertainty keep them from committing.

Here's the third reason we should choose. Because we're made in the image of a God who chooses.

Ephesians 1: “[God] CHOSE us in him before the creation of the world... In him we were also CHOSEN...”

First Corinthians 1: “God CHOSE the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world...”

Second Thessalonians 2: “from the beginning God CHOSE you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”

We're made in God's image. That means we were designed to choose, to commit. If God were as fond of keeping his options open as we are, we'd be in big trouble.

How extraordinary that the God of infinite options narrowed his options to down as He did. Became a

man. In a particular time, a particular place.
Committed himself to a particular death - the death
of a slave as we'll hear in a few weeks' time.

And why? He did it for the sake of one bride - you
and me. We're not much to look at, are we? We're a
mess, quite frankly. We know we're ridden with
uncleanness of one kind or another. Hypocrisy. Lack
of love. Sexual immorality. It's not as if he didn't see
it all before he committed to us.

He chose to love the very people who wanted to
keep their options open - those who look at God and
say, you know what, I'm going to see if a better offer
comes along.

He committed to THAT adulterous bride.

Conclusion

So let me ask you as we close, in what area of your life are you still fluttering your eyelids at the god of open options? Where are you refusing to commit? Where do you feel yourself “limping” between two options?

Maybe you're not fully committed at church. You've grown addicted to the thought that you ought to be able to walk away in 30 seconds flat, find another church or another set of friends which suits your preferences better. And it's keeping you from loving your brothers and sisters here.

Or maybe you're refusing to commit to a particular relationship? Keeping your eyes on constant alert for something or someone better.

Or you're refusing to let someone else get on with their life, stringing them along so you can keep your relational options open.

Let me encourage you to choose the God who chose the narrow way.

Let's choose the God of infinite options who chose to limit himself to a particular time and a particular place and a particular people and a particular body.

Let's choose the God of infinite freedom who used that freedom to have his hands and feet nailed to a cross.

Let's choose the God who closed off all other options, in order to pursue one bride.

Let's pray.

Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 30.

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the

LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...”

Father, in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Please open our eyes to see your incomparable beauty; and then choose You freely and joyfully.

In Jesus' name. Amen.