

MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND

SCRIPTURE READING

We are about to read one of the most famous passages in Scripture. I want to take a few minutes to set it in the context most of you never hear about.

Saul, David, and Solomon were kings over a united Israel in its most prominent period in history. Abraham was the beginning of Judaism, about 2000 B.C. David reigned about 1000 B.C. Jesus came at the turn of the ages, as we count it – about halfway between Abraham and us. Start keeping the timeline in your head, and many things will start sticking in your memory instead of drifting on through.

At the death of Solomon, there was civil war, and Israel split into two kingdoms, north and south. (Knowing what happened to Israel as a result was part of why Abraham Lincoln was so determined to not let it happen to us.) Adding to the confusion, the Northern Kingdom was called “Israel” and the Southern Kingdom was called “Judah.”

Ahab was the seventh king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (*Moby Dick* came later). He reigned for twenty-two years (873-851 B.C.). As a political and military leader, Ahab was an outstanding king of the Divided Monarchy. But the Bible *hates* him because he came within a whisper of destroying Israel’s religion (that whisper we are going to read about in a minute). Ahab did this by forming an alliance with Ethbaal, king of Tyre (the Sidonian kingdom north of Israel; what you think of as Lebanon), and sealing the alliance by marrying Ethbaal’s daughter. Her name was Jezebel, one of the most religious ladies who ever lived. She was a fierce proponent for the religion of her people. Not only did she introduce the worship of Baal (and the Ashtoreth), but she instituted severe persecution against Yahweh worship and began killing off all the prophets and priests who tried to maintain Israel’s religion. Her two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, became kings after Ahab, thus extending her influence. Her daughter, Athaliah, married into the Southern Kingdom of Judah and, upon the death of her husband, became the Queen of Judah. She then killed off (or thought she had) all the male heirs who might return Judah to Yahweh worship.

So you see, Jezebel very nearly succeeded in replacing Judaism with Baal worship in both Israel and Judah. Had she succeeded, we would not be here. Essentially, one man stood in her way. His name was Elijah. (Now you know whether Elijah came before or after David.) His name means “YAHWEH is God!” (*Not Baal!!!*)

Jezebel had all the armies and all the resources of the nation at her beck and call. Elijah had only his feet and his God. He could run like the wind, and all day long if he had to. Elijah appeared and disappeared like smoke. They simply could not catch him.

Finally, in one of the most startling and dramatic stories in the entire Bible, there was a contest on Mount Carmel. Elijah and God won that contest, and Elijah killed all the priests of Baal that were there (about four hundred of them; Jezebel had killed, many times over, that number of priests and prophets of Yahweh). Nevertheless, Elijah knew that Jezebel would be utterly furious, and that his life wasn't worth zip anywhere in the nation. Messengers were sent by horse to Samaria, the capital city about thirty miles south of Mount Carmel, to tell Jezebel what had happened. Elijah outran the horses and, as Jezebel's men swarmed out of Samaria looking for Elijah to the north, Elijah was already past Samaria, going south.

He kept going south: clear out of Israel, clear through Judah, into the vast wastelands of the Sinai Peninsula, to the Mountain of God ... to where Moses and the newly freed slaves out of Egypt first made covenant with God – the Ten Commandments, the Torah. Where else *could* Elijah have gone? He went, as you can imagine, to report utter disaster: Your plans, Yahweh, have come to nothing. The Promised Land, the Chosen People, the Holy Nation – it is all in utter ruin, and Baal worship has overrun the land. *“I, and I only, am left of the whole dream of what would come to be.”* And God said, *“You ain't seen nothin' yet, kid.”*

HEAR, THEN, THE SCRIPTURE READING (I Kings 19:9-21):

*And there Elijah came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and God said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”*

*And God said, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” [Self-pity always tends to sound like a broken record.]*

*And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. [The bad news is, I have daring and difficult work for you that will make all your former tasks seem like child’s play. The good news is, you’re almost out of here. And Elijah says, “Thanks Lord, I can hang-in if it’s just for a little while longer.] And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. [In fact, Tyre, Israel, and Judah were in strong alliance, united in political interest and in the worship of Baal. The alliance was working, and doubtless most people thought the prosperity and security were more important than the god, or were the result of changing to a better god. But then Jehu killed off the Baal contingent, the kings, and all their successors in both Israel and Judah, thus splintering the alliance forever.] Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”*

*So Elijah departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing, with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his mantle upon him. And Elisha left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” [“Get lost; I didn’t do anything to you.” And if I did, you better start acting like it.] And Elisha turned, and took the yoke of oxen and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah, and ministered to him.*

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We are in the middle of a series of sermons on the basic commitments of the Christian Life. Before we were called “Christians,” we were known simply as “Followers of the WAY,” which meant followers of the Path or Way that Jesus showed us. Today, many people do not think of the church as a community of people who walk a special Way. That is, they do not see the church talking about or practicing any special Way of Life. They see Christians going to church, but they do not know why. And lots of Christians go so erratically that it doesn’t seem to make much difference to anything. If going to church makes no difference, then what difference does it make?

Add to this the fact that many people go to church looking for a spiritual path and cannot find it. That is, it is possible to go to many of our churches for months, or even years, and never find any description of or instruction in what it means to live the Christian Life. Of course, if the Christian Life were set forth in any discernible way, many people would reject it. On the other hand, at least that would make some choices available, and perhaps many who rejected it at first would return to choose it at a later time.

Let me say just a word about commitments. No authentic commitment can ever be forced on you from outside. If it is forced from outside, it is coercion, not commitment. We choose to make commitments when something is important enough to us that we begin to really want it. Today, people are fond of saying things like: “I’m really very spiritual, but I don’t much like religion.” And that statement often sums up the attitude of our time. But *religion* is what you DO about your spirituality. Everybody is *spiritual* – God made us. Some of us have learned that we cannot escape our spirituality, no matter how hard we try. But you become *religious* when you decide to do something about it: When you take steps. When you make commitments. When you let it make real changes – let it begin to make a difference – in how you live.

It is my belief (not my faith – my belief) that we start wanting to make commitments to walk the Christian Way when we start to love Jesus (that is, when it hits the heart). I suspect that it is mere theory or curiosity until we get “caught” – hooked – drawn by His purposes, and also drawn to what He Himself is like. None of the Christian commitments are worth the time or energy or risk ... until we start to like Jesus; until we start to want Him as our teacher and guide; until we begin to notice that He is more than

we can fit into normal, rational patterns of explanation. I keep trying to use a variety of phrases because all the usual ones have turned into formulas that have lost their meaning for the vast majority of people.

I know that some people here this morning do not have any strong or special link or bond with Jesus. I want you to be comfortable coming here. I want you to be comfortable saying that Jesus is not very important to you. All of us remember the feeling. Nobody starts out already in love with Jesus. If we cannot be honest and keep our integrity, no authentic search or path is possible. How else can you explore, learn, or find out if any such connection might be possible, if you cannot participate in the life of the church for a while? It must nevertheless be true, and stay true, that this is a Christian church – a community or fellowship of people who *do* love Jesus; who do, for that reason, make every earnest effort to walk His Way; and who therefore have serious commitments that keep them growing and learning in the Christian Life.

So I am in the midst of lining out seven of the basic commitments of the Christian Life. There are others. These seven are time-tested and built deeply into our experience and traditions, and they *do* work if we work them. Now, we are all constantly being told about endless activities and disciplines that somebody thinks we “should” do or which would make a big improvement in our lives: Read this book. Eat that food. Go to such-and-such a lecture, or concert, or spa, or weekend event. Get an astrology reading. Become a Rotarian. Join Habitat for Humanity. Give to the World Hunger Fund. You get the picture. You have been getting it for as far back as you can remember.

I am *not* saying there is no good in these things. Somebody believes they have found value in them or they would not be suggested. But you can do none of them and still walk the Christian Path. Just like you can do all of them and never even come close to knowing or following Jesus.

The seven basic commitments of the Christian Life are not guaranteed to bring you to Jesus. But if you already have a bond with Jesus, these commitments shape and form the Path, and bring you progress and excitement and joy in the walking. And if you have no commitments, you have no Path, no Way. It is mere play-acting. The biblical word for it is “hypocrite.” *Hypocrite*, in Greek, means “play-actor.”

First commitment: PRAY EVERY DAY.

Second commitment: READ AND STUDY THE BIBLE.

Third commitment: FIND AND FOLLOW YOUR VOCATIO.

It is, of course, hard to get anywhere with the third if you have not made and kept the first and second. And we could interplay that thread between all seven commitments.

The fourth of the seven commitments is the hardest to sell to a modern American. When I talk about the first three, not everybody makes the commitments or keeps them, but nearly every Christian knows they should. After I get through talking about the fourth commitment, lots of people respond: "Say what?! I didn't really get it. I heard what you said, but I'm sure it's not as important as you seem to think."

Well, I already told you that nobody gets into all the commitments all at once, and that nobody does them all well, all of the time. If so, we would have a perfect world, or at least a perfect church. Choose the commitments as they call to you. I just want you to know what they are. If you get to Heaven and you have not followed the Path, then you have a problem. If you get to Heaven and nobody ever told you there was a Path, then I have a problem.

The fourth commitment is to CHOOSE A MENTOR. I do not want to get lost in details here; there is obviously a great deal more to each of the commitments than I can put into one sermon. There are also many names for a Mentor, but Mentor will suffice. A Mentor is someone you choose, not someone who chooses you. Then you explain to them what you want from them, and ask if they are willing to be your Mentor. If they say yes, then every ten to fourteen days, you sit down with them for an hour or so and conscientiously review with them how you are doing on the Path. You share with them the issues you are facing, the decisions you are trying to make, the relationships you are struggling with, the mistakes you think you have made, and the delights and the progress.

A few items (no time to explain much, just putting it out there):

1.) I know many of you do not think you need a Mentor. Actually, some of you do not. But if you make even the first three commitments, you will! If you seriously intend to walk the Christian Way, you will need

a Mentor. Every serious spiritual path in the world knows this to be true, and teaches it as necessary. The Christian Life is dangerous. If you walk it alone, you do not understand the nature of the Path itself, and you have already flunked Humility, which is the first prerequisite – the first beatitude – the first step of the Way.

2.) Your spouse does not count for this fourth commitment. Some spouses are excellent Mentors, I know. And it is wonderful to be able to share such things with a spouse from time to time. However, it is not good for a marriage to switch from a marital relationship to a mentor relationship on a regular basis. It is not possible for you or your spouse to maintain the necessary objective perspective on some of the most important items. Your children, by the way, are an even worse choice for a Mentor (terrible for them, I mean), though a surprising number of people try it, in many cases without even realizing that they are doing it.

3.) It often works well at first, but it is a very poor idea in the long run to make a reciprocal arrangement: “I’ll be your Mentor if you’ll be my Mentor.” It is fine to have a Mentor and to be a Mentor, but do not let it be with the same person.

4.) Do not choose a Mentor of the opposite sex. (Unless, of course, you are gay. Then by all means do so.)

5.) The fact that you choose someone as your Mentor does not mean they are superior to you or more advanced than you are. There are no perfect Mentors. But almost any thoughtful, listening person can see us and our patterns more clearly, at least in some ways, than we can see them ourselves. A Mentor *does* have to be someone you can be honest with – someone you trust – and they have to be someone who will listen, and who will be honest with you after they listen. The fact that you choose a Mentor does *not* mean you will always agree with their suggestions or perspective. It does *not* mean you have promised to do what they say. It *does* mean that you will consider their input thoughtfully and prayerfully.

We are talking about the priesthood of all believers here, not anything fancy or perfect.

The fact is, if you choose and use a Mentor, at the end of six months or a year (or any other time frame) your Path will be far clearer, and you will be a lot farther along on it, than if you do not have a Mentor.

Initially, the Christian church tried to respond to this category of the fourth commitment by setting up a priesthood whereby every Christian would talk to a Mentor (a priest) at least once a week – confess sins, set penance, receive absolution, get cleaned up from the residue of life that clings to all of us – every week before worship and taking communion. As I said, every serious spiritual path on earth has always known the necessity of this fourth commitment.

The trouble with the institutional answer is that it always turns into rote and ritual for a lot of people. By the way, there are still excellent priests who listen creatively and help their parishioners stay on a vital Christian Path. They assign meaningful penance, and those who use the system well reap deep and meaningful rewards. Even a priest who, swamped by the number of confessions, resorts to rote penance is still often helpful to Catholics who know their faith. Saying fifteen or twenty “Our Fathers” sounds pretty dumb to most Protestants. But a Catholic who remembers that the Lord’s Prayer is a summation of the very Path itself does not just rattle it off as an empty form, but meditates on it until their own life is realigned to God.

The trouble with the noninstitutional answer is that, while it has the potential to be far more vibrant and creative and tailor-made to each person, in reality it often ends up neglected, or even forgotten entirely. Then pretty soon, the Path itself may be forgotten.

In any case, you should know that one of the basic commitments of the Christian Life is a commitment to find a Mentor. If for any reason you lose one or it stops working with somebody, find another one! Forgiveness and new starts are the very essence of the Path.

If, in the course of time, the bonds of Christian love do not seem to be very strong in a church ... if the people do not seem to feel the power of the Christian Life flowing in their midst ... if sometimes it seems like the church is just another social organization or maybe another service club – sometimes it is because the people no longer remember that they each need a Mentor for the Way, and that one of their top reasons for existence is to embody the priesthood of all believers.

Just in case you paid attention to the Scripture reading: Controlling twelve yoke of oxen is quite a feat. Not many men could manage it. Elisha must have been in the heavy-hauling business. And he almost missed his calling by trying to act logical and normal when Elijah came by. “Give

me time to get all my affairs in order and say goodbye to folks.” Elijah had no time or sympathy for that.

Elijah’s dismissal awakened Elisha to the nature of the call, and he sacrificed all his earthly wealth on the spot. He gave all he had to the people and followed Elijah. It is also true that Elijah was casting his mantle. Elisha had an awesome Mentor, and soon the incredible spirit that had been guiding and inspiring Elijah’s life was flowing and directing the life of Elisha. Just wanted to remind you that this is not my idea – it is not some newfangled theory. It has always been part of the Path.

Could this really be true? That the heroes and leaders we honor had Mentors? What about Moses? Jethro. What about King David? Samuel / Nathan. What about Jeremiah, who, not from choice but from necessity, was the most isolated, lone-wolf character in the entire Bible? Baruch. If you are serious about the Path, you *need* a Mentor!

Somebody or something is always trying to destroy the worship of Yahweh – trying to interfere with or minimize our relationship to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. So it is not just a game or a pleasantry or a sideshow. It is a life of commitment – commitments made in dead earnest by those who mean to follow the Way. Take them on one at a time, as they call to you. All of them are meant for your benefit. Sooner or later you will want all of them to help shape and form your LIFE in Christ Jesus.