

"Which God do You Worship?"

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – 1 Kings 18:20-26 New Testament Lesson – Matthew 6:19-24

Yale University Prof. Nicholas Wolterstorff is one of the top philosophers in the world today. In his book "Divine Discourse,"¹ Wolterstorff undertakes some "philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks." His book asks the question, "What does it mean that God speaks?"

After 326 dense pages, the main point Wolterstorff makes is this: The Bible is the primary place where God speaks. We kind of knew that already. The real question is, are we listening when God speaks, whether it's through the Bible or some secondary source.

There was a time when the Bible was not the primary place where God spoke. There was a time when God primarily spoke through the words and the actions of the prophets. And Elijah was one of the biggies. When Elijah spoke, the people listened – rulers listened, nations listened.

But they didn't always listen at first. Sometimes it took a little something for the people to hear the voice of God – a sign or symbol of some sort. That was the case at the time when 1 Kings was written, nearly 600 years before Jesus.

King Ahab was ruler of the Israelites and all the peoples of Judah, and as was the custom back then, the ruler set the tone when it came to religious beliefs. Often, religion had more to do with politics than with prophetic, divine truth. The religion Ahab supported was Ba'al-worship, over and above Yahweh, the God of Israel. Ba'al-worship was so prevalent under Ahab's rule that worship of Yahweh was in effect banned.

So it's no wonder we hear Elijah say in 1 Kings, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Ba'al's prophets number 450." It's no wonder Elijah cries out to the people of Judah, saying, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Ba'al, then follow him." And 1 Kings records the people's response: "The people did not answer him."

¹ Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1995.

Today's Old Testament lesson is about crying out for answers, divine answers, specifically. It's about tapping into God's wisdom and understanding, over and above worldly wisdom and understanding.

Elijah, as the one true prophet against 450 Ba'al prophets, had his work cut out for him. He had trouble getting the people to listen to him and to pay attention to God's word. So he makes a deal with them, saying, "Let two bulls be given to us; let them (the Ba'al prophets) choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." And this time, "all the people answered, 'Well spoken!'"

Elijah's challenge to the Israelites is to see which God answers by fire. Hearing this, the Israelites would immediately be transported back in their minds to the time when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the time God led them by a pillar of fire through the darkness of a desert escape from Egypt, and even the time God tested Abraham's faith, in the near sacrifice of his son Isaac on an altar, not unlike the altars built by Elijah and the Ba'al prophets, the altars on which lay their bull sacrifices.

The question is, which god will come through for them, the God of Israel or Ba'al, the false god everyone bowed down to in that misplaced and ill-advised devotion?

And that's our question, too. Whether we know it or not, our lives are a constant challenge to see which god holds the answer for us, among all the many gods that society bows down to as if in worship. Just look at all the daily rituals, practices and habits that consume our time and energy, damage our bodies, break down our families, and otherwise distract us from God's word and God's work. And then ask yourself, which god do you worship, looking at where we spend all our time and energy? Think about that – what do we worship most in society? You've got some things in mind, don't you? Me, too.

A begging bowl. A begging bowl is a bowl carried by a beggar, especially a Franciscan friar or Buddhist monk, to receive food or alms. Alms are gifts from God that people give to those in need to sustain them body and soul. I tell you this because of what I ran across last week in thinking about the various "gods" we worship in society.

In a poem by the English poet Philip Gross, he says our satellite dishes of today can be compared to "begging bowls," because both are held up to the sky to receive what we crave most – simple sustenance for

friars and monks, and an onslaught of mindless entertainment for most Americans."²

And it's not just TV or surfing the Web that distracts us from hearing God's word. It's anything that we let consume our lives at the expense of prayer, Bible study, worship, service work, and Christian fellowship. If the stories of Abraham and Moses and the wilderness kept the ancient Israelites mindful of God, it's our practices and traditions as Christians that do the same for us. By incorporating spiritual practices and symbols into our daily lives, we too can remain mindful of God at all times.

The challenge for us is finding a way to take God's word with us into our daily rituals, practices and habits, so that they aren't consuming all our time and energy, so they aren't damaging our bodies, aren't breaking down our families, and aren't distracting us from God.

Though it is true, as Prof. Wolterstorff concluded, that the Bible is the primary place where God speaks, what we need to learn and remember is that the Bible is portable. We can take God's word with us into our lives! God's word is pervasive, invasive, all-encompassing, and persistent. The word of the Lord is there for us, and all we have to do is call upon it.

In our Old Testament lesson, Elijah calls upon God to protect him and the nation of Israel from losing sight of God amid the many gods of Ba'al, the many false gods that consumed the people's time and energy.

So Elijah issues his challenge to the prophets of Baal. And, "they (take) the bull that was given them, prepared it, and (call) on the name of Ba'al from morning until noon, crying, 'O Ba'al, answer us!' But there (is) no voice, and no answer."

How many times do we call out to the false gods that society sets before us, crying, 'O Ba'al, answer me; O TV, entertain me; O WEBSITE, enlighten me; O SPORTS TEAM, validate me; O MIGHT DOLLAR, enrich me; O FAST FOOD, comfort me! And there is no voice, and no answer. And we come away all the poorer, in body and soul.

Not that there's anything inherently wrong with TV or the Internet, or eating, or sports, or money. Each of these things and all of life can be a blessing to us and to those around us. But only if we view them and use them, partake of them and spend them with God in mind. And this is often as simple as just not letting such things crowd God out.

² "Wind Farm and Sky Dishes," in I.D. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 24.

There are lots of ways to keep God in mind around the TV or Computer, when eating meals, getting into sports, and spending our money. A picture or framed Bible verse displayed in sight of the TV or your computer can help keep God in mind. Praying before meals can help keep God in mind. Finding joy and camaraderie among your teammates or simply in a healthy rivalry against the opposing team can help us to keep God in mind.

And as for money, well it's written right there isn't it – "In God We Trust" – brilliant, and pervasive, invasive, all-encompassing, and persistent. It's not that hard to let God's word come through in life.

And yet, we often fail to even try. We fail to give our Christian values a second thought in the face of peer pressure, workplace practices, grocery-store temptations, and the unrealistic demand to be the best or the cutest or strongest or richest or most popular or just the slickest person on the face of the earth.

Speaking of being real slick, a Charlotte, North Carolina, man bought a case of very expensive and rare cigars. So he insured them against ... get this ... fire. Within a month, having smoked his entire stockpile of fabulous cigars, and having yet to make a single payment on his insurance policy, the man filed a claim.

He stated that he lost the cigars in a series of "small fires." The insurance company refused to pay, citing the obvious reason that the man had consumed the cigars in a normal fashion. The man took them to court ... and won.

The judge, in delivering his ruling, said that since the man held a policy saying the cigars were insurable, and guaranteeing they would be insured against fire, then the insurance company was obligated to cover the loss. It paid the man \$15,000.

Obviously, this guy was relying on nothing but greed and deception to get a leg up in life, to be the slickest guy on the face of the earth. And in doing so, he obviously displayed no moral or Christian values whatsoever. Now, here's the funny part:

After the man cashed his check, the insurance company had him arrested on 24 counts of arson. Using the man's own insurance claim and testimony as evidence against him, the judge convicted him of burning the rare cigars and sentenced him to 24 consecutive one-year terms in prison.³

³ From Homiletics Online, Fred Lyon, via e-mail.

Now where is God in that fire? Certainly not in the money and status, which the man valued more than his integrity.

But it didn't have to be that way for him. The man would never have become an arson jailbird had he simply kept four little words in mind above and beyond his love of money – In God We Trust. It was written right there for him.

It's not that hard to keep God in mind as we go through life. And it might just be the thing that keeps us from getting burned. It's not too hard for any one of us to position ourselves to encounter God's word more and more on a daily basis; it's not too hard for you and me to take the word of the Lord with us into our lives.

It's not that hard for us to kindle the spark of God's word in our hearts, to allow God's word to light up our lives – just like a burning bush or a pillar of fire – and to purify our lives, to purify our words and actions like an altar sacrifice that we set ablaze for God and all the world to see.

It's not too hard, and yet it is. If you think of all the ways we manage to ignore God, all the ways we defy God's will, all the ways we succumb to temptation and do spiritual if not physical injury to ourselves and others, encountering God's word in our day-to-day lives can be one of the hardest struggles we could ever undertake.

The good news is, finding a way to be mindful of God is also one of the most rewarding things we can do.

The next time you – or I – feel tempted to turn away from God, we could stick a Post-It Note right there in our lives, in that spot of distraction, put a picture or Bible verse on the table, wear a cross around the neck.

The next time you or I feel drawn to indulge by having too much of this or not enough of that, we could find a way to be mindful of God instead, through a simple prayer, by talking about it to a friend or confidant, by journaling or by lighting a candle.

The list of ways we can be more mindful of God's word in our day-to-day lives is endless. It's as endless as God's reach, from the pages of this Holy Bible into the thoughts and actions and events of your life, our lives. What could you do this week to be more mindful of God's word, in your life?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and beautiful God, you are higher than our thoughts can go, deeper than our imaginations can take us, more connected to us and to our world than we could ever believe.

Your glory radiates across the heavens, your majesty rises above the most magnificent mountain, and yet you know every breath we take before we take it.

Indeed, we draw breath only because your breath, your Spirit, fills us.

We ask that you send your spirit of healing to those who are sick, comfort for those who are dying, and peace of heart for those who grieve.

Be with all who are overcoming difficulties in their lives, whether by tragedy or by misguided choices. Lead us all to seek your way forward.

O God, you are the Creator, and we are the creatures. Thank you for your love which sustains us, for your grace which renews us, and for your daily presence which gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

Help us be ever mindful of you in each moment of our lives, taking with us into our lives your Divine word as our strength and our guide. We pray all this and more, as we join together in the prayer that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.