

Sermon for Sunday, April 24, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri, 63105

"PLAYING HOPSCOTCH WITH GOD"

I Kings 18:1-21

Text: "An Elijah came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.'"

--Kings 18:21

Let me begin this morning by giving you a bit of Old Testament history. The time was about 922 B.C. when Solomon, the Son of David, passed away. Upon his death, trouble which had been brewing under his harsh policies suddenly erupted and the nation split north and south. The southern kingdom became known as Judah and the northern kingdom as Israel. In the northern kingdom there was political instability for a number of years until a man named Omri came to the throne about 876 B.C. Omri proved to be a capable and powerful ruler with considerable political savvy. Recognizing that he needed an outlet to the sea in order to stabilize his commerce, he moved at once to establish relations with Phoenicians who controlled the lands along the Mediterranean coast. As was common in those times, the treaty he worked out with the king of the coastal city of Tyre included the marriage of his son, Ahab, to the king's daughter, a young lady named Jezebel.

By 869 B.C. Ahab had come to the throne of his father and he moved at once to make his bride feel at home in the city of Samaria, the capitol of Israel. One of the first things he did was to build a temple to her native god, who in this case was Baal-Melkart. Jezebel was a fanatical evangelist for her god and she imported a great number of Baal priests and supported them out of the public treasury. As a matter of fact, she was so zealous for her religion that she began an aggressive campaign to root out the religion of Israel and to destroy the Jewish priesthood. The Bible tells us that the altars of God were torn down, the prophets were killed, and the rest were driven underground. As all of this persecution was going on, a drought paralyzed the country. Now, it was at this point that the prophet Elijah made his dramatic appearance on the scene. He challenged the priests of Jezebel to a religious contest on the slopes of Mount Carmel to prove which god was really God. This contest between the numerous Baal prophets and the solitary prophet of God is one of the most dramatic accounts in the Bible. As the Jews gather to watch the contest, Elijah accuses the people of "limping with two different opinions." In the Hebrew language, the charge against the people is even more vivid than the translation suggests. Actually, a better translation would be, "how long will you keep hopping from one leg to another?" That is, "how long will you play hopscotch with God?" Someone has suggested that the image pictured is like a bird that hops along a branch until it comes to a fork in the limb and then tries to keep going by putting one foot on one branch and the other foot on the other branch. Elijah said the people were like that. They wanted to keep one foot in the faith of Israel and the other foot in the religion of Baal. They were playing hopscotch with God, first on one foot, then on the other. But now Israel had come to a fork in the road and Elijah put the issue squarely to them. If God is the Lord, then follow him. If Baal is the Lord, then follow him. That is, come down somewhere with both feet.

But that is always the decision that God confronts us with, isn't it? The Bible says God wants a man to love him with all his heart, his mind, his soul, and all his strength. God doesn't want a man who hops from one foot to the other.

But isn't this precisely the kind of trouble you and I have? We have trouble making up our minds - and keeping them made up - about who and what we will be. Some trouble comes along and we need God. So, we make up our minds to serve him. But then things get better and we decide maybe we have given up too much, so we change our minds and hop on the other foot. We are like the man who fell over the cliff

but managed to grasp a limb of a tree growing out of the cliff as he fell. He cried out, "can anybody hear me?" A voice spoke from the clouds and said, "I am God. I can hear you." "Help me" cried the desperate man. "If you have faith in me, let go the limb," said the voice. There came a moment of strained silence and then the man cried out, "Can anybody else hear me?" Yes, if God be god, follow him. If Baal is the Lord, then follow him." Its like the man working on the roof who slipped and began to slide off the roof. He cried out, "Save me Lord, and I'll serve you forever!" About that time his pants caught in a nail, "Never mind, Lord," he said, "A nail has got me." Yes, make up your mind - don't play hopscotch with God, jumping from one foot to the other.

The first observation I would like to make this morning is this: Spiritual indecision will make us betray the best in our lives. You and I are a strange mixture of good and bad. When the good in our lives dominates, we can rise to the heights of nobleness and self-sacrifice. But then we betray the best that is in us we can sink to the depths of depravation. One of the books of the New Testament is a letter - really just a note - from St. Paul to a man named Philemon. As he closes the letter he mentions some of the men who are working with him and he writes, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, send greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow worker." Yet, a little later, we come to the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy and we find this, "Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me..." (II Tim. 4:9-10) Demas was playing hopscotch with God. He wanted to serve the Lord, but he loved the world, too. In the end he betrayed the best in his life and betrayed the Lord and St. Paul. When the going got rough, his indecision spelled his downfall and he betrayed the very best in his life.

There will come a time in your life - as it does in the lives of all - when the going gets rough, when our passions are a hot flame in our veins, when our desire for the things of the world are great, when temptation confuses our thinking, and if there is spiritual indecision, if there is uncertain commitment in our hearts, we will betray the best that is in us. I have a friend who is a doctor and he was an Elder in the Presbyterian Church. He had many noble qualities, but he began to desire financial gain. He became deeply involved in his practice of surgery, began to miss church and Session meetings. Before long he had an affair with a nurse and as a result his marriage was destroyed. To my knowledge he no longer even attends church. Here was a man playing hopscotch with God; he had one foot in the church and one foot in the world. When greed and lust beset him, he betrayed the best in himself. No you cannot have the best of all worlds. God wants a commitment from us and we must decide who and what we will be. Hopscotch with God won't do.

A second thing we can learn from Elijah is this: spiritual indecision makes us lose our inner peace. A man totally committed to good has inner peace. And a man totally committed to self-satisfaction has a sort of peace for he is no longer troubled by conscience. But the man playing hopscotch with God, first on one foot and then on the other, loses his inner peace. Inner turmoil characterizes the lives of so many of us today. Look at what happened to Judas. First, he betrayed his Lord into the hands of those who hated Jesus. Yet, when the deed was done, when he had already betrayed the best in his life, his indecision began to eat away at him. As a consequence he lost his inner peace. He tried to go back and undo what he had done. With his inner peace destroyed, Judas could not face up to life and the Bible tells us he went and hanged himself.

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" asks the Psalmist. Then he answers his own question, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart..." (Psalm 24:3,4) Yes, clean hands and pure heart come from decisiveness - it brings us inner peace. Are you at peace this morning? Do you have an inner spiritual serenity? There are many of us who have lost our inner peace because of

spiritual indecision. We have dirty hands, our hearts are not pure, and we have no peace.

A third thing we can learn from Elijah is that spiritual indecision causes us to get our priorities out of order. Do you remember the incident where two men came to Jesus and wanted to follow him? To one of them Jesus said, "Follow me." But the Bible says he replied, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." The other man said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say fare well to those at my home." (St. Luke 9:59ff) Now, surely both of these requests are reasonable. The dead deserve the honor and esteem of a proper funeral and the living deserve the courtesy of a fond farewell. Yet, Jesus said to them "Let the dead bury the dead," and, "No man having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." That is, "you have your priorities out of order."

Dr. Louis Evans tells of a certain man who was a lighthouse keeper on a rugged coast. Many ships and countless lives were in his care out beyond his sight. Enough fuel to tend the lamps for a month was delivered to him every 30 days. One day there was a knock at his door and a woman pled for fuel for her stove to provide warmth for her children. A father came asking fuel for his lamp that his son might read. Another argued his need for fuel for his engine, and in seemingly worthwhile causes the lighthouse keeper parceled out his fuel. Toward the end of the month he turned the spigot, but to his dismay the tank was empty. That night the light went out. The next morning a government official knocked on his door and demanded an explanation of why there was no light. Immediately the keeper began to explain the darkness by telling of the important claims that had been made on his supply of fuel. "You were given one task above all others," said the official, "to keep the light burning and give guidance to ships passing along the coast. Other demands, no matter how good, were secondary to this. Your light went out. As a result, last night three ships went down and all lives were lost."

Is Jesus your first priority this morning? Many of us are putting other things ahead of God - our work, our family, our own needs. And it isn't that these things are not worthwhile, it is just that when we put them ahead of Jesus, our priorities are out of order. Only the man who has come down with both feet for God can have his priorities in order.

A fourth thing we can learn from Elijah is that spiritual indecision feeds on itself. The man who puts off making a decision may end up never deciding. Do you remember the story in the book of Acts of the Roman governor named Felix? Once when St. Paul was brought to trial before Felix the Bible records, "And as he argued about justice and self-control and future judgement, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summon you.'" Two years later Felix was removed as governor and someone else took his place. The Bible never mentions him again and as far as we know he never did find the opportunity to respond to Jesus. His spiritual indecision fed on itself and by putting off making a decision about Jesus he ended up never deciding.

Have you decided for Jesus? Have you come down with both feet for him? And if not, when do you plan to do it? When do you plan to really surrender your life, to really start living for him, to really be a Christian? You see, spiritual indecision feeds on itself and you may end up never deciding. No, you can't play hopscotch with God.

Yes, the undecided man will betray the best in him, he will lose his inner peace, he will get his priorities out of order, and his spiritual indecision will feed on itself when he plays hopscotch with God.

Most of us know who Johnny Cash is. At one time he was one of the top entertainers in America. But Johnny Cash began to drink and use drugs and before long he found himself in prison. It seemed that a fine career had gone down the drain. But something happened to Johnny Cash. He describes it this way, "My wife and I had been going to a little church near here. We were like most people, we had both been converted when we were children, but we hadn't lived for God, and for many years we'd really been going through hell....So we went down to the altar one night and gave ourselves to Jesus Christ. Totally. And we really meant business then, and we still do now. Everything in my life points to Christ; I've dedicated everything I've got to him." Here is a picture of a man who quit playing hopscotch with God and came down with both feet for Jesus. Elijah said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" That's a good question - how long will we?

Another man who had a similar experience was a man named... He described his experience in a similar way... He said that he had been going to a little church near here... He described it this way, "My wife and I had been going to a little church near here. We were like most people, we had both been converted when we were children, but we hadn't lived for God, and for many years we'd really been going through hell....So we went down to the altar one night and gave ourselves to Jesus Christ. Totally. And we really meant business then, and we still do now. Everything in my life points to Christ; I've dedicated everything I've got to him." Here is a picture of a man who quit playing hopscotch with God and came down with both feet for Jesus. Elijah said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" That's a good question - how long will we?

Is Jesus your first priority? Many of us are putting other things ahead of God - our work, our family, our health, and it isn't that these things are not worthwhile, it is just that when we put them ahead of Jesus, our priorities are out of order. Only the man who has come down with both feet for God can have his priorities in order.

A fourth thing we can learn from Elijah is that spiritual indecision leads to... The man who puts off making a decision may end up never deciding. In your experience, the story in the book of Acts of the man who was named Felix? How many of you were brought to jail before Felix the ruler's records, and as he argued about justice and self-interest and before judgment, Felix was afraid and said, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summon you." Two years later Felix was removed as governor and someone else took his place. The Bible never mentions him again and as far as we know he never did find the opportunity to respond to Jesus. His spiritual indecision led to a life of... He never decided up never deciding.

Have you decided to live for Jesus? Have you come down with both feet for Him? And if not, when do you plan to do it? When do you plan to really surrender your life, to really start living for Him, to really be a Christian? You see, spiritual indecision leads on itself and you may end up never deciding. Do you want to play hopscotch with God?