

I know that today's story is from the Old Testament, but I want to quickly discuss a couple stories in the New Testament for just a moment.

So, the stories of Satan tempting Jesus are in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, and in each story, Jesus says multiple times, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Do not, do not, do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Now, sometimes Jesus speaks in parables and in circular language and it can be hard to understand the exact point he's trying to make.

But this isn't one of those times.

He is being crystal clear, no need for interpretation.

Do not test God. Full stop.

I think what that also means is, trust God.

Have enough trust and faith such that you don't need to test God to see if God meets your standards, or to prove anything about God.

So that brings us to today's story.

Which, I think it's accurate to say that it's ALL about testing God.

It's about testing different gods and putting them to the test against each other.

The Prophet Elijah gathers up all the Israelites along with the 450 prophets of Ba'al and the 400 prophets of Asherah.

So, we've got a gathering of potentially thousands of people.

Once they're all together, Elijah doesn't offer any pleasantries, he doesn't start with, "thanks for being here today."

The first thing he says is, "*How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him*" (1 Kings 21).

In other words, get off the fence.

The reason he says this is because it was common for people to participate in multiple religions, and worship many gods, essentially to cover their bases.

Now, here comes the problem.

After he gives them the instructions, telling them to pick one or the other, the immediate next sentence is, "*The people did not answer him a word*" (1 Kings 21).

Apparently his question, "*How long will you go limping with two different opinions?*" was not rhetorical, and when he doesn't get any answers, that's when he begins his plan to test the gods.

But we have to give Elijah some credit, because he's pretty clever.

He creates a contest, pitting the Israelite God, Yahweh, the one true God that he believes in, against Ba'al, who was an ancient near-eastern deity, and Elijah creates the rules!

Everyone knows that in a contest, an impartial judge should make the rules, but not in this one.

Elijah says exactly how everything is going to work and whichever god answers by fire, that is the one true God.

Now, lots and lots of people worshipped Ba'al.

Everyone who lived in the ancient near-east, which is modern-day Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, and so on, those who weren't Israelite, they all practiced polytheistic religion and Ba'al was one of their gods.

He was specifically the god of fertility, weather, rain, wind, lightning, seasons and war.

He was very important, and many people considered him the king of the gods.

So Elijah creates the rules, they have the contest, and of course, we know who wins, according to Elijah's definition of winning and losing, the God of Israel does.

But if you were listening closely, you'll notice that the ending of the story is actually pretty sick and twisted.

After it was shown that the fire of the LORD consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, all the people, all several thousand gathered there,

*“saw it and fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord is indeed God” (1 Kings: 18-19).*

Now, you'd think this would have made Elijah happy because that's what he wanted, right?

He wanted them, as he said in the beginning, to make up their minds and decide which God to follow.

So, they all acknowledge that the Lord is the true God, Elijah is happy that things went according to his plan and all live happily ever after, right?

Wrong. All those who worship Ba'al, HE HAS THEM KILLED.

After professing their devotion to God, Elijah tells the Israelites to “Seize the prophets of Ba'al, do not let one of them escape.

Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon (the base of Mount Carmel), and killed them there” (1 Kings 18: 40).

God's representative killed 450 people!

I think the moral of the story is that just because you interpret the outcome of something as God having answered your prayers or responded to your test, does not mean that you are necessarily right.

This is the problem with testing God, you are the leader and God is the follower, rather than the other way around.

You decide what God has to do in order to be considered legitimate.

And while I'm at it, I think that asking God to answer specific prayers is akin to testing God as well.

You're basically saying, if you're there, if you love me, I need you to do this for me.

Asking God to behave in a certain way means that we are creating God in our image.

We're trying to manipulate God to do our will.

I am sure plenty of people have claimed belief in God and then experienced one too many unanswered prayers and lost their faith.

Well first of all, maybe God answered your prayer, just not in a way that you expected or wanted, so you didn't notice the answer, and second of all, your faith couldn't have been that strong to begin with if it was rooted in your need for proof.

When we need proof, we are creating a limited understanding of who God is and what God can do and we're asking God to conform to our limited understanding of who God is.

It is our job to follow God's will for us, to come to this relationship with space and openness, not expectations and demands.

We can't command God's presence or God's actions, because then we've created ourselves, what I call, a 'pocket God.'

This is a little God, smaller than you, that you take out of your pocket to help you whenever you need it.

It's quite convenient.

God always does your will, hates the people you hate, loves the people you love, makes the decisions you agree with, this God affirms everything you think.

But we know that's not how God works; it is our job to listen and to follow.

It's our job to be willing to receive answers we didn't expect or didn't want to receive.

Not only do I think it's unfaithful to ask God to do what we want, but it can be dangerous.

Elijah used God as a reason to kill 450 people.

You might have heard the oft-repeated opinion that "the God of the old testament is violent and destructive..."

Well I don't think that's necessarily the case, but the moral code that the people set up was that unfaithful people were to be killed, and they used their theology to justify that.

They created a violent and dangerous narrative about God.

Elijah probably thought God wanted those false prophets dead.

But I am not trying to just chastise the ancient Israelites.

We do the same thing, we decide whom God favors, the behaviors that God prefers.

We truly believe that God is unconditionally loving, but if we are being honest with ourselves, do we truly *know* this to be true, beyond a shadow of a doubt? No.

I believe it because that understanding of God fits within my larger worldview.

I believe that all people are created in the image of God, that we all have sacred worth and that we are all beloved by our God.

That's the narrative that I have chosen to believe but I could very well be wrong.

Maybe God does favor one type of people or one religion.

We don't know.

This is why it's critically important to really try to do our best to listen, to follow, to be flexible, to be willing to change our course and change our plans according to where we think God is calling us to go.

And underpinning all of that flexibility and faithfulness, we need to be humble, because at the end of the day, we don't know.

We could be wrong, which is why absolutism is so dangerous.

I really like the quote by physicist Richard Feynman who said, "*I'd rather have questions that can't be answered than answers that can't be questioned.*"

Elijah was so convinced he knew what God wanted and that he was doing God's will, that he killed 450 people in God's name.

And you'll notice that God does not speak at all in this story.

Yes, the altar with the stones caught fire, but Elijah was the one who said that the fire was a sign of God's presence.

See how he did that.

He determined how God would manifest God's self.

And when he killed the people, there's nothing in the text that tells us God told commanded him to.

Truthfully, we don't really know why he did it.

But Elijah's actions are an example of being so firmly and resolutely convinced of something, that you have to force God to fit into your framework.

This understanding of faith closes us off and prevents us from being open to the creative and unexpected ways that God works in our lives and in the world.

And when it comes to answering prayers, you're sort of setting God up for failure.

For example, if I said, "God, I need you to instantly make me 85 years old, so that I can be a wise elder, and if you don't then I know you don't exist."

Well that's just ridiculous because that's not going to happen.



And if that was the condition upon which my faith was based, then I'd probably lose my faith really quickly.

But, if I said, "God, I know that I am really young and quite inexperienced, so please give me the patience to listen to my elders so that I might glean some of the wisdom they've acquired throughout their lives,"

then maybe God would work with me to become a more patient listener.

You see the difference?

If we ask God for help, it leaves openness for God to work in the ways that God does, and it also holds us accountable for doing our part to make our prayer a reality.

Ask God to do everything, and put God to the test, you'll probably be disappointed.

So may you have the wisdom to follow Jesus' advice, and not put the Lord your God to the test,

but have the openness of heart, mind and spirit to listen to where God is calling you,

and then have the courage to follow,

even if it's different from the course you charted for yourself.

Amen.