

SESSION 4

Serve with Loyalty



QUESTION 1:

Where do you see loyalty demonstrated in our culture?

THE POINT

God deserves our loyalty and service.

THE PASSAGES

1 Kings 18:20-26,31-39

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Semper Fidelis, Latin for “Always Faithful,” has been the U.S. Marine Corps motto since 1883. It expresses the Marines’ pledge to remain faithful always, no matter what.¹

Marine Corporal Matthew Bradford (Ret.) exemplifies this motto. Serving in Iraq in January 2007, Bradford was on patrol along the Euphrates River when he stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED). Shrapnel blew into Bradford’s eyes, took off one leg, severely mangled the other, damaged his left arm and right hand, and caused serious internal injuries. Three weeks later, he woke up from a coma to discover he was blind and had lost both legs.

Yet incredibly, in April 2010, Bradford reenlisted in the Marine Corps, becoming the first blind, double amputee ever to do so.² *Semper Fidelis*.

Marines engaged in battle understand the importance of unwavering loyalty. The prophet Elijah has shown us what unwavering loyalty to God looks like. In 1 Kings 18, we find Elijah embroiled in a battle of sorts. His loyalty to God was on display, and he challenged others to that same loyalty. His challenge confronts us still today.

1 Kings 18:20-21

20 So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel.

21 And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

Even after three and a half years of drought, Ahab, Jezebel, and the people of Israel still held to their Baal worship. Casting aside the evidence of Yahweh's supremacy displayed in the drought and resulting famine, they remained stubborn in their affection for the false god. But Yahweh was not done with them.

When God decided it was time, He informed Elijah the rain would return. He directed His prophet to give Ahab the news (18:1-2). Ahab greeted Elijah with an outburst of pent-up anger. Blaming Elijah for the drought, Ahab accused him of being "he that troubleth Israel." But Elijah countered that it was Ahab and Ahab's family who had destroyed Israel by abandoning God and worshiping false gods. And with that, Elijah proposed a contest to prove Yahweh's sovereignty once and for all (vv. 17-19).

Elijah invited the king to meet him on Mount Carmel and bring "all Israel" along with the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (v. 19). Mount Carmel was a significant location for this showdown. This natural landmark rose nearly 1,800 feet above sea level, and it was contested ground between Israel and Phoenicia. Because the Canaanites revered Mount Carmel as the dwelling place of their gods, it was the ideal place to show just how powerless their false gods were.

At Mount Carmel, Elijah stood alone for Yahweh against an overwhelming majority. The 450 prophets of Baal aligned with the king and queen alongside an additional 400 prophets for Asherah.

Israel flirted with the worship of both idols—gods of fertility—throughout much of its history (Num. 25:1-3; Judg. 2:11-13).

Ultimately, this enchantment with false gods would be the nation's undoing (2 Kings 17:6-20).

Throughout Scripture, God made it plain that He seeks our love, but He will not tolerate our divided loyalty. To love God is to love Him first and foremost, above all other allegiances. Loyalty to Him means surrendering any semblance of devotion to lesser gods. This was the choice Elijah set before God's people in verse 21. Too long they had been wavering between two opinions, wavering in their loyalty. The term for "halt" literally means limping along or limping between two twigs. The picture is of someone hobbling, using two sticks as crutches. Israel had not renounced their faith in God, but they hadn't let go of their idols either. They wanted to maintain these competing loyalties, as if God were just one among the multiple gods they served. Elijah insisted you cannot have it both ways.

QUESTION 2:

What does an unwavering loyalty to God look like?

God had clearly spoken. The first commandment is: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). Jesus upheld this command during His wilderness temptation: "It is written: Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Luke 4:8). I remember well a time in my own walk with God when I was serving Him in name but following my own heart, chasing idols of my own making. One day I happened across Moses' challenge to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 30. The Israelites were poised to enter the promised land, and Moses called them to renew their covenant with God. He offered a choice—between faithfulness to God or unfaithfulness. The first would result in blessing, the latter in destruction. Across the centuries, through Moses' words, God challenged me directly, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose

life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him” (Deut. 30:19-20). Time would prove the wisdom of choosing loyalty to God.

QUESTION 3:

How do you know when your loyalty to God is waning?

1 Kings 18:22-26

22 Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.

23 Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under:

24 And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.

25 And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under.

26 And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.

Elijah proposed a contest, one in which he would demonstrate who was the One, true God. Elijah alone challenged the 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah was not the only person still loyal to God (vv. 12-13), but he was the only one who showed up that day. He was the only one standing against the tide of popular opinion, publicly

denouncing false gods. Loyalty to God is often the *unpopular* position, but it is always the *right* position.

Elijah made it his mission to debunk the lie that Baal was a real god like Yahweh. The contest he proposed was fitting and fair. Each side would prepare a bull for sacrifice and place it on an altar. Baal's prophets would call on their god, and Elijah would call on the Lord. Whichever deity responded with fire to burn the sacrifice would be proven the true God. Baal was called the storm god, who could summon lightning at his command, while followers of Yahweh maintained He held power over nature (Ps. 29).

Confident in their idol, the prophets of Baal entered the contest with great determination and fervor. For hours they called on Baal to send fire. They tried dancing to entice him to take notice of their cries. The dancing may well have been limping, the result of self-inflicted injuries to show their devotion to Baal. In the end, it doesn't matter how sincere you are in your belief if you believe the wrong thing. A lie is still a lie. The myth that Baal was a powerful deity worthy of worship had been busted.

In modern America, we don't typically worship idols of wood and stone, but we still have our false gods. Pastor and author Timothy Keller wrote, "What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."³ Family and career can become idols. So can achievement, power, money, possessions, and sex. Even when we take something good and make it an idol, it never can compete with God and it becomes meaningless. Keller says, "If we look to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God Himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and will break our hearts."⁴

QUESTION 4:

Why are we so prone to make idols in our lives?

1 Kings 18:31-39

31 And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name:

32 And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.

33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.

34 And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time.

35 And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

36 And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word.

37 Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.

When it came Elijah's turn, he offered no theatrics. No dancing, cutting himself, or crying out for hours. Elijah simply set the stage to let God show Himself and to offer absolute proof that the fire was from God. Inviting the people to come close, the prophet rebuilt a broken altar to Yahweh. In its deteriorated state, the altar

had become an artifact of the people's broken commitment to their covenant with God.

Elijah used twelve stones to signify the twelve tribes of Israel, God's people prior to their division into two kingdoms. Then, to remove any possibility of trickery on his part, Elijah dug a trench around the altar and ordered that the altar be completely soaked in water. When water ran around the altar and even filled the trench, it was plain to see only an act of God could cause the sacrifice to burn.

Relying on no skill or cunning of his own, the prophet simply called on God in prayer. He did not petition God to send fire or tell God how to do His job. Instead, he asked three things:

1. Prove you are God in Israel.
2. Confirm I am your prophet.
3. Turn back the hearts of your people.

On June 6, 2010, Apple CEO Steve Jobs was demonstrating his company's latest fantastic gadget, the iPhone 4. Using a huge theater screen showing two phones, Jobs' intent was to demonstrate live how the new retina display made the iPhone 4 screen much sharper than its predecessor. But when he got to his big "Ta-dah!" moment, only one phone's display loaded. The other remained blank, except for the blue progress bar that wouldn't complete. That rare but embarrassing fail for Steve Jobs and Apple proved the point that while technology can do amazing things, it isn't always reliable.⁵

When Elijah came to his big "Ta-dah!" moment on Mount Carmel, he had no reason to feel nervous or afraid. He stood with the God who never fails. He was relying on the only One in the universe who is 100 percent reliable. Elijah had learned to be loyal and faithful to God because God had always been faithful to him.

God's unwavering dependability sits at the very foundation of His character. That's why He assures us, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5). He will never fail to show, and He will always succeed in His purposes. Yes, God demands our undivided

loyalty, but He has earned it. Nothing and no one else we depend on is that reliable. God has no peer.

So when God sent fire from the skies to burn up the sacrifice Elijah had laid on the altar, He far surpassed what anyone could have anticipated. The fire consumed wood, stone, sacrifice, soil, and even the water. In the presence of such overwhelming evidence, the people were smitten. They could do nothing but acknowledge Yahweh as the One, true God. Then on the heels of the Mount Carmel showdown, God sent the rain just as He had promised (1 Kings 18:45). It was proof on top of proof that He is the embodiment of *Semper Fidelis*, always faithful, no matter what.

QUESTION 5:

How has God shown you that He is the one true God?

ENGAGE

Mark the good things listed below that have the potential to become idols in your life. In the second column, describe how they could do so.

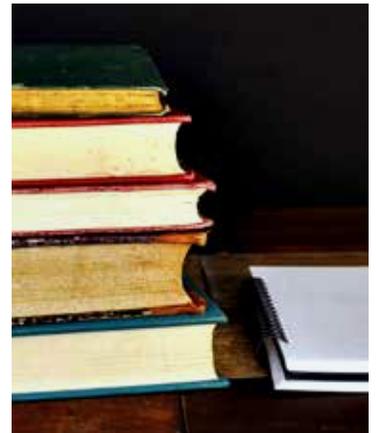
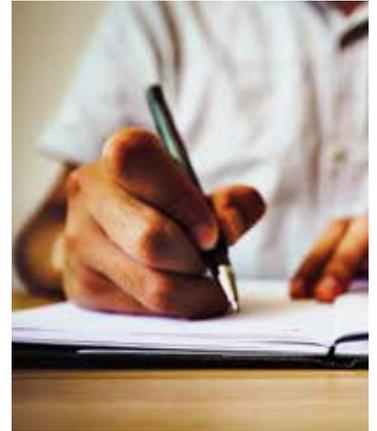
Potential Idols:

<input type="checkbox"/> Family	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Church	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Reputation	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Traditions	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Money	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Independence	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Health	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:	_____

LIVE IT OUT

How will you express your loyalty and service to God?

- ▶ **List.** What idols tempt you from making God your first allegiance? List them, and choose to relinquish them. Pray and ask God to help you turn from any idols.
- ▶ **Study.** Study further to defend your belief in God as the only true God. Books like *Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis; *Jesus Among Other Gods*, by Ravi Zacharias; or *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel are great resources to study.
- ▶ **Stand.** If there is a dividing issue in your church or community, determine to stand for God. This means standing on solid biblical teaching and principles even when it's not popular to do so.



END NOTES

1. "The Meaning of Semper Fidelis," *Marines*, <https://www.marines.com/who-we-are/Semper-Fidelis.html>.
2. Tom Archdeacon, "With no legs or sight, Marine finishes mission at Air Force Marathon," *Dayton Daily News*, September 22, 2019, [daytondailynews.com/sports/archdeacon-with-legs-sight-marine-finishes-mission-air-force-marathon/dXY4wX53G0iqHIT9Ewga7H](https://www.daytondailynews.com/sports/archdeacon-with-legs-sight-marine-finishes-mission-air-force-marathon/dXY4wX53G0iqHIT9Ewga7H).
3. Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 3.
4. Ibid.
5. Erica Ogg, "Even Steve Jobs has demo hiccups," *CNET*, June 7, 2010, [cnet.com/news/even-steve-jobs-has-demo-hiccups](https://www.cnet.com/news/even-steve-jobs-has-demo-hiccups).