

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
Amen.

All right, before we go any farther, we have to address why these two passages are put together. I know for you, this is probably as confusing as it was for me, and I was a little frustrated because I listened to smarter men than me on the radio, at issues, et cetera, talk about this passage and this week, and they didn't address the issue.

And I read the commentary for Kings and for Luke and they didn't address the issue. I'm going, "Am I the only one that is confused by why these two passages were put together?" I hope not, because that's what, little bit of what my sermon's about.

So you have Elijah and he is at the end of his ministry. This is after he has had this "battle," quote-unquote, with the priests of Baal. All 450 on one side and him on the other, and they do all their wailing and gnashing of teeth, and cutting themselves and crying out to God. Their god, and he doesn't listen, because he's not real. So nothing happens.

And then Elijah says, "God, show your power," basically. The fire comes from heaven, literally. Burns the burnt offering, the wood that the burnt offering was on, the stones, that the wood that the burnt offering was on and the trough of water that was around it. With one simple prayer, God showed himself to be the one true God.

And then Israel said, "You know what? We're going to worship him," and they killed the prophets of Baal. That's what immediately follows this event. And what does Elijah do after this high, after this demonstration of the glory and might of God and he, his prophet. When the queen, who didn't participate in this, because she worshiped a different God, probably suspecting that she knew her god wasn't real, she didn't bring her priests to the party, she separated them out.

But she said, "Elijah's, I swear to my god that I'm going to kill you before the day is done." And Elijah runs away in fear and hides in the mountain, and is despondent and despairing like, "Woe is me. I'm going to die. I'm the only one around that worships the one, true God. I'm the only one left. What are you doing? Just let me die."

Now, if that sounds a little bit odd, it should. But think about your own life. Think about how many times you have seen God at work in your life. Now, I'm sure, well, pretty sure, that it's probably not as dramatic a bolt of lightning coming down from heaven and burning up the burn-off. Most of us probably haven't had that dramatic of an experience. But many of us have gone through trials and

tribulations in our life, have prayed to God to guide and direct us and to help us, and he has.

And we've seen how we didn't think it was going to work, how we had no clue what was going to happen. And yet, somehow, by the grace of God, it didn't turn out as bad as we thought, or we were able to walk through the trial, or we were able to deal with whatever it was that was going on. But we saw, looking, back God and action in our lives.

I can almost guarantee every single one of us has had something like that. And yet, having had an experience, like such, how many of you have also had periods of time where you felt like God didn't really care about you or you wondered why this was happening to you? "Why me, God, why? I don't get it. I don't like it."

See, Elijah was a prophet of God, and yet he still had moments of depression, despair, uncertainty, fear. So if Elijah, who spoke directly with God and God spoke directly with him, if he had moments of doubt, then maybe, maybe it's familiar to God and he expects it and he knows it, and he's not surprised by our own doubts.

But look at where Elijah finds God. God comes to Elijah, and at first, he comes in the wind that actually breaks up the rock. I mean, we're talking about hurricane force winds here. But God is not in the wind. And then there's a massive storm, but God is not in the storm. But then, Elijah hears a whisper. He hears God speak, and that is where God is found. In his word, God is found.

We tend to think, well, if everybody just saw these wonderful miracles or if God would just demonstrate his power, then everybody would come to believe. But God does not come in the power and might and force. He comes in a still, small voice. He comes through his word. His word is what strengthens us. His word is what nourishes us. His word is what gives us the Holy Spirit, and through the Spirit, gives us the ability to make it through this life and to serve him.

God is indeed all-powerful and almighty. That is true. But he has chosen, he has chosen to come to us through his word. Now, the sons of thunder, James and John, didn't fully understand this at this time either. I'm thinking that they may be called sons of thunder, because that's exactly what they wanted to happen. "God, should we call down thunder and lightning and destroy this emergent village?"

And Jesus is like, "No, I don't come in power. I don't come in might. I come quietly. I come through my word, because I am the word," and the word is moving towards Jerusalem. That's what the first part of this gospel lesson is all about. This is the transition between Jesus ministry here on earth and his final purpose, which is death on the cross.

Says, "In those days, drew near for Jesus to be taken up." Not taken up into heaven, but taken up on the cross. So this is the moment where he begins to move towards

Jerusalem, where he begins to move towards his death and our redemption. And so, he's going through Samaria and they don't believe in the worship in the temple, they believe it should be on Mount Gerizim.

They don't really care for Jesus, because he's a Jew, and they're sort of half breeds of Jew and other things, and so there's some animosity there. The disciples get offended when they don't welcome Jesus. But Jesus's focus is not upon demonstrating his power and authority through thunderbolt and lightning and brimstone, his goal is to show his power and authority through his death and his resurrection, so that his word might be fulfilled, the word that was given to all of the prophets and all the Old Testament authors before, that the Christ must come, suffer and die, and on the third day, rise from the dead.

And then we get to the point that is really confusing here. Elijah, was told to basically commission Elisha to take over his ministry. And so, he lays his cloak upon Elisha and Elisha says, "Can I go say goodbye to my family?" And then, he takes all the oxen and sacrifices them and gives them his food to the people, and then he follows Elijah.

But here, you've got another man saying, "Lord, I want to follow you." But Jesus says, "You can't do that." He says, "I want to go and say goodbye to my parents first." And he says, "You can't. If you've got one hand on the plow and one hand looking back, you can't follow me."

Now, first off, you got to understand farming in those days. The plow required both hands. You had to have your whole attention. Your whole body had to be on that plow, and you could not get distracted, otherwise it was not going to work. And so, you needed to be focused. It's a very practical thing. Jesus said, in essence, "You can't serve two masters. You can't serve me and whatever else it is that you're looking to serve."

But why in the world do we have here where it says Jesus is saying, "Look, you can't go back and say goodbye to your parents." But Elisha didn't go back and say goodbye to his parents. These two seem to be in contradiction to each other. But we have to look at the context of both of them.

First off, Elisha was not going to Elijah saying, "Look, I still got to take care of my parents. When they die, when I'm finally free the responsibility of taking care of them, then I'll come follow you, but I got to deal with my earthly things first. And when all of that's and done, then I'll follow you." Which seems to be kind of what this other man was saying.

As Jesus said, when he says that, "No man can put his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." So from Jesus' own words, we understand what's going on with these three men, one that says they're going to follow Jesus,

the other one that Jesus says, "Follow me," and the other one that he, again says, "I want to follow you, Jesus."

What seems to be going on with all three of these men in the gospel lesson is that they liked the concept of serving God, but when the reality of what it took faced them, they're like, "You know what? Let me rethink that." The guy who said, "Let me bury my father first," was, in essence, at least the understanding is from the scholars is, his dad wasn't dead yet.

He's like, "Let me take care of my family first. And when my dad dies, when I'm comfortable, when everything's going smoothly, then I'll come serve you, when everything's working out." And same thing with the man who says, "I will follow you, Lord. But first, let me say farewell to those in my home." The implication here is, what he's saying is, "I kind of want to follow you, but I'm not sure I want to do what it takes. Let me talk with my family again. Let's work this out. Let me see if we can make it work."

See, these are the implications here. It's not fully stated, but from what Jesus says, we get that understanding. The men that he talked to, these three men, they were not focused upon what it took to follow Christ. They were more concerned with the things of the flesh, and they allowed the things of the flesh to corrupt their desire to follow the spirit.

And so, they were intentioned. They allowed the things of the flesh, things of this world to overpower their desire to serve God. Now, that might make sense to some of us, and we definitely know it makes sense to a lot of people out there. How many people will say, "Well, I'd like to get to church, but..." How many excuses are there for not coming to church? How many excuses are there, "Well, I am spiritual but not religious," whatever the world that means.

But the idea is, I like the feeling, the good feeling, that comes from having a purpose and a God. I like the idea that God forgives me all my sins, but just don't let it inconvenience my life much. As long as I'm not called to do much of anything. I mean, God forbid, I actually talk to somebody about my faith or that I change my behavior because of my faith, or that maybe I don't laugh at that joke, or maybe I don't listen to that thing, or watch that movie, or do this thing.

Maybe I don't hoard all of my money, but I actually give it to God and seek his will rather than my own. Or maybe it's this nice laundry list of things that works of the flesh that Paul is talking about. Now, some of them, some of them just seem like, "Okay, that's not my issue. Those are just really big sins and I'm not there." Sexual impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery. I mean, come on. Yeah. Okay, those aren't my issues." Those are the big ones and those are the problematic ones.

But there's no semicolon saying, "Okay, there's these big ones that are really problematic, and then these little ones that are okay to play around with." There's no comma there, there's no semicolon. There's no pause, there's no explanation. They're all equal. So maybe those aren't your issues, but enmity, do you have problems with somebody? Are you mad at somebody right now? Are you irritated with somebody? Is there a rivalry going on here that is unhealthy? Okay? Same thing.

Strife. Are you causing problems to somebody else? Because, well, you're not being Christ-like to them. Are you talking about somebody behind their backs and creating strife with other people? That's just as bad. Jealousy. Do you want what somebody else has? Are you jealous for what somebody else possesses or somebody else's life or somebody else's connections, or whatever the case might be? I mean, our entire television networks and everything that we watch on TV is designed to create jealousy. So it's a very easy one for us to fall into.

Fits of anger. What does Jesus say elsewhere? "Be angry but do not sin." What's the difference? You can be angry, but what are you angry about? Are you angry about the things that God's angry about? Or are you angry because somebody inconvenienced you? Or are you angry because somebody cut you off in line? Or are you angry because somebody seems to have something that you don't? Or they, their personality is one that you don't like, and so you're angry with them? Same thing.

Rivalries. Again, strife and enmity, same thing. Unhealthy. Dissensions. Are you sowing seeds of discord with the groups that you're with? Are you trying to get somebody else in trouble? Are you looking for that person to mess up so you can catch them in the act? Same thing.

Divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies. And if that doesn't cover anything that you've thought of or might be your issue, and things like these, which covers everything else. See, we are called by God, we are purchased with a price, and we are called to freedom, and we have that freedom. We are free in Christ. We do not need to be afraid of anything. Death itself is nothing to be afraid of.

But what do you use your freedom for? That's the question of the day. You have been saved by God, not because you earned it or deserved it, but because he loves you, because he set his face to Jerusalem so that he might die for you. He has forgiven you, all of your division, dissension, rivalries, fits of anger, jealousy, idolatry, sorcery, and all the rest of that stuff. He's forgiven you, all of that.

What do you do with that? How do you act as a Christian? Now, a lot of times, we really focus upon the gospel and the grace of God, and that's very important. But we need to recognize as well that the gospel should motivate us and is calling us to

exercise the freedom that we have for the glory of God, not just for our convenience.

Something that often goes on in churches is we want things the way they've always been. And yet, we're 10, 15, 20, 30 years from now, none of us are going to be here. Well, some of us might be, but a lot of us are going to be gone, so we need to be active in reaching out to the next generation. Even if they're the same age, the next generation, the people that are going to fill these pews after us.

It is our calling in the freedom of the gospel to use that freedom for his glory, to love our neighbor. And what is the greatest love that we have for our neighbor? Is to share the forgiveness of sins with them, to let them know that they are loved by God, to bear witness to the acts of our loving Father through his son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what we are called to do with that freedom.

So let us... Now, I'd spent a lot of time on all those negative things, and those are, we should examine ourselves and make sure that we seek to strive not to do those things. But let's spend more time focusing upon what we are called to do and how we are called to live and think and act.

It says the fruit of the spirit. One, it's a singular thing. The fruit, and it's of the spirit. It's not you. This is not me telling you, "You need to be more faithful by your own effort. Try harder, do better." This isn't the law speaking. This is the freedom. This is you relying upon the Holy Spirit to fill you with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things, there is no law.

You have this fruit in abundance, because it has been given to you by the almighty and all-powerful God, who could rain down fire and brimstone, but rather instead, rains down his spirit through his word so that we might be filled with him, for his glory and for our freedom. The freedom to love, the freedom to care, the freedom to serve. So let us ask God that this fruit that we have, that it might fill us, that it might strengthen us, that it might motivate us in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds.

What would this world be like if we lived focusing upon how, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can I love my neighbor today? How, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can I bring joy into this world and celebrate the joy that he has brought into it as well? How can I, through the power of the Holy Spirit, practice patience, remembering how much he has been patient with me?

Goodness. Nothing is good unless it is done unto the glory of God. Faithfulness. God, help me, guide me that I might know your word, that I might act according to your will, that I might walk the steps you have given me. Let me be gentle as you

have been gentle towards me. I'm going to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry.

Self-control. That is in short supply here in the world. What would it mean for the spirit to fill you so that you had self-control? Fill in the blank for what you need self-control for. But self-control. These are the things that we've been freed to do and freed to focus upon. Why? Because we, our sins are forgiven. Because that list of things, the works of the flesh are wiped out in Christ, because he has exercised all of those things, the fruit of the spirit, to us.

He has been gentle with us when he did not need to be. He has been self-controlled when you know his holiness hates what we have done. He is faithful when we are faithless. He is good when we are evil. He is kind when we are mean. He is patient when we lose it. He gives us peace when nothing else will. He brings the only joy that is everlasting, and he loves us as his dear children, because he has adopted us and made us his own.

May that grace, that mercy, that peace, and that love be and abide with you always now and forever more, and encourage you and strengthen you for the path ahead, that you might love your neighbor as yourself through the strength and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.