

Biblical Separation – 1

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There is a teaching of the Bible that has fallen on hard times. Part of the reason is because the teaching has been badly executed, and people have been put off. Part of the reason is that many preachers shy away from it, so God's people do not have it before them as much as they should. Part of it is because the attitude of our culture, and of much in the believing Church today, rejects this teaching altogether. It is the teaching of separation

Separation. The Bible teaches that God's people are to practice separation: separation from sin and the world, from false teaching, and even from unrepentant believers. Now in a world where pluralism and relativism are rife, the idea of separation is met with considerable hostility. To the average man, if you practice separation, you are haughty, arrogant and stuck-up. The spirit of the age is unity, a coming together. To teach separation seems to be teaching war instead of peace, violence instead of kindness, divisiveness instead of co-operation. But to think of Biblical separation in those terms is a false caricature of the true thing. It is a misrepresentation of what God means when He calls for His people to practice separation.

So, the church, as with many issues, has ended up with two extremes when it comes to separation – those who ignore the doctrine altogether on the one extreme, and those who practice a cold, mean-spirited isolationism on the other. So, when people who are hostile to separation want some ammunition to support their argument, they enlist the example of someone or some church group that has practiced a very warped view of separation. But that just won't do. To argue from the bad example of another man is not a very good argument at all.

The fact is, Biblical separation is commanded. It's not an isolated theme belonging to some cultural nuance of Biblical days. Nor is it an idea that we are imposing on the Bible, and yanking some verses out of context here and there to support the doctrine. Biblical Separation is taught throughout Scripture. What we need is for God's people to honestly look at the texts, and then adjust their lives. We do not need people to look at their lives and then try and adjust the texts. We need a vibrant, authentic form of separation from something, combined with a passionate, wholehearted consecration to something else. To look at what we are to separate from, why we ought to do it, how we ought to do it, and what we ought to be consecrated to will be the aim of this 5 part series.

Let's begin by outlining what we might call

The Extremes of Separation

As we said, most doctrines find people going to one extreme or the other. In the case of separation, it is no different. On the one extreme, you have people who thought that separation meant to cut off all contact with the world, to go and live in seclusion. This was the thinking behind monasticism – the setting up of monasteries, where monks lived in seclusion from the world. Of course, what this did was cause the best scholars to be cut off from society, and society slipped into further darkness. In fact, it was

when one such monk – Martin Luther -- decided to share what he had learned instead of keeping it to himself in the monastery, that the Reformation began. And of course, today you have forms of this kind of thinking. We might call this there error of isolation. One becomes so separate as to no longer engage the world; no longer participate in a critical fashion. What happens here is that we have a clear message of the Gospel of a different life, but we have no audience. There is no one to preach to if we are so separate.

On the other extreme, we have people who think that there is no such thing as separation. So we mimic the world in all areas of life, and try to be so like them as to win their respect and friendship. But pretty soon, it is not that we have permeated the world with our message, but the world begins to permeate us with its message. This is the error of Contamination, or perhaps of Absorption. Here one becomes so part of the world as to have no light or salt bearing influence. What happens here is that we may have an audience, but we no longer have a message. We are so like the world, so with them, that the message of repentance will seem like Lot preaching to his sons-in-law – the world will laugh at us. “Repent from what?” You’re doing what we’re doing!”

So isolation retains the message but has no audience. Contamination has an audience but no message. Neither of these extremes is what God intended or what we should aim for. But let me say this – if we must choose for the lesser of two evils, it is obvious which side of the scale we should lean towards. When you have leaned towards contamination you have lost everything – your message, your testimony and more than likely – your own purity. At least in isolationism there is still the message; there is still the holiness; there is still the testimony. From isolationism, we can always open up more and engage more than we have been doing. But from contamination, there is nowhere to go- we have lost the message and the respect of the audience. So we should always lean toward separation before we lean toward being too buddy-buddy with the world. But having said that, we do not want either the extremes of contamination or isolation, we want the Biblical balance of authentic separation.

Now let’s begin with an explanation. Why should we want separation? Why should He call on us to do something that, on the surface, looks more negative than it is positive? The answers lie in the nature of God.

The Reasons for Separation

God is a Holy God. His holiness refers to His absolute uniqueness, as well as His moral purity and perfectness. God has always made it clear to man that He is separate from sin. God does not compromise with sin, or allow it into Himself at all. In fact, the first thing that God taught Adam and Eve was that if they sinned, they would be separated from Him. His holy nature would not and could not remain in intimate union with sin. Sin is whatever is contrary to the nature of God. God cannot be contrary to Himself, so sin is always put out of the presence of God. Jesus told His disciples that He beheld Satan fall like lightning. If this is a reference to his original fall, it shows that when he sinned, he was cast out immediately from his place before God.

As God gives the Law to Israel, the theme of separation is very clear. Firstly, God gave many offerings and sacrifices to teach Israel that their sin had separated them from God, and they required atonement to once again be right with Him. Secondly, God would command that if anyone was in some way ceremonially unclean, he or she was not to come near the Tabernacle of God. Again, God was underlining that He was holy and unique, not profane or common. Israel would continually be reminded that God is holy when for seemingly normal biological functions; they were not to enter the camp until they had been cleansed.

Thirdly, God gave them many different dietary and simply everyday laws that made a point of declaring things clean and unclean. God wanted Israel to know He was a holy, unique, distinct God.

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean,” (Lev 10:10)

The whole idea here was that God wanted Israel to know His character. He was unlike the gods of the Canaanites whom the Canaanites kept in their tents or houses. This was the Sovereign Creator of the world. Such that if He was dwelling in the camp and you were unclean, then YOU left the camp. God is holy.

“For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev 11:45)

Notice that God connects His nature with the actions of His people. He, in effect, says “My name is now inseparably bound up with yours. Since I am holy, if you are my people, you too must have an attitude toward sin”

All of this returns to the central theme of the Bible – God’s glory. God wants His reputation as the most lovely, wonderful, glorious Being of all to be preserved. Therefore, He will not allow His name to be mixed with what is contrary to His name.

Sin separates us from God. When God made atonement, He made union and reconciliation possible again. However, once God’s people are in union with Him, they must then act out and reflect the separateness that God has from sin. God continues to reveal Himself to the world. If God’s ambassadors do not show the same separateness from sin that God Himself has, then they are doing a poor job at reflecting Him. God must have His name hallowed. He must be shown to be the glorious, holy God that He is. Those who claim to be God’s, can then be nothing except separate from sin. That is exactly what we read:

“Be ye holy for I am holy”.

This is God’s logic. I am unlike sin, I am separate from it. If you want to proclaim my name and my glory, you must also be separate from sin. A salesman for Coke will not be very believable if you see him always drinking Pepsi. What good are God’s representatives if they suggest that sin is more satisfying than God?

This is the rationale behind Biblical Separation. God's nature is gloriously holy. Believers are His representatives, and must therefore imitate His nature before mankind.

But there are other reasons for separation. Another reason is what we might call the preservative reason. God knows the infectious and contagious nature of sin, worldliness and false teaching. So, He uses separation like a cutting operation that prevents a cancer from spreading, like a fire break which prevents a forest fire from going further. God told Israel that they were to separate from the surrounding nations because He did not want them to practise the things they did. Some of the laws were deliberate differences from the Canaanite practices. Israel was **in** the land, but they were not to be **of** the land. They were not to become Canaanitish.

As we enter the New Testament, we find the same theme. God wants His people not to be swept up into false teaching, so He instructs that we are to avoid and reject false teachers and teachings. He knows how glamorous and seductive the world is, so He instructs us to not be conformed to it, not love it or befriend it. He knows how impossible it is to remain pure to God if our most intimate relationships are with unbelievers. So He commands that we do not become yoked up together with them in binding, close relationships.

There is a final reason God wants His people separate, and it is a very positive reason. God wants His people to know fullness of joy. He knows that this fullness of joy is not found in sin, and it is not found in the lukewarm water halfway between sin and righteousness; halfway between the world and God's Word; halfway between self and Christ. He knows our sweetest joys, our deepest pleasures are found in the happiness of holiness. And that is why you find many commands to separate are couched in very positive language. Consider, for example Psalm 1:1-3:

"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."

"Blessed" is the first word. How very happy, is the one who doesn't walk, stand or sit in the counsel, the way or the seat of sinners, he practises separation. And this is not grievous to him, instead he flourishes. His roots, his true satisfaction are planted deep in God's Word. That's where his soul repouses; that's where his mind always returns; that's where His soul feeds. The Psalmist certainly does not suggest this is a sad, lonely life for the believer; instead He appears to be blooming all year round.

Separation from sin allows us to be fully and totally consecrated to God. When this is true we know the pleasure of God, like at no other time. We experience a closeness to God, unparalleled by those who hover, who limp between two opinions. The double-minded man, the lukewarm Christian wants the best of both worlds, and receives neither. The Christian who separates from sin, cleaves to the Lord, and is richly rewarded for doing so. Indeed, God makes this promise in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Listen to the promises following the command:

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them,” says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me,” says the Lord Almighty.” (2Co 6:14-18)

God promises special joys to believers who are serious enough about Him to separate. So we have seen the Bible’s reasons for Biblical separation. The main reason is to preserve God’s glory and name in the world, since we carry His name as believers. The second reason is to protect us from the contagious effects of sin and false teaching. The third reason is that separation allows us to know and experience God like never before. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. When we separate, we can truly know and see God.

So, we see the wonderful beauty and design in God commanding separation. It is for both God’s glory and our good. But that leads us to the next main question. From what are we to separate, and what does that mean?

The Realm of Separation

If God’s desire is to preserve His name and glory in the sight of men through the lives of believers; if He wishes to preserve believers from falling, and give us a greater walk with Him, then obviously His calls to separate will be to separate from things that are in conflict with these goals.

So firstly, God calls us to separate from sin itself. Sin is any word thought or deed that is unlike God. God calls believers to put off the old, to be renewed in our minds and to put on the new. Sin is to be cut off and denied. It is to be denied in the incubation phase. It is to be denied in the temptation phase. It is to be denied in the indulgence phase. As we turn from sin, we turn to God’s righteousness, imputed to us in Christ, and now fleshed out by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A second area where believers are to separate from is the world. The world, not meaning our planet, but as a system of godless belief and practice. This is a satanic system designed to distract men from God and the Gospel. Believers are to shun this system in our minds, and embrace God’s philosophy. Furthermore, when there are practices in our culture that promote this system, believers are not to indulge in those things. We are to remain ‘other-worldly’ in our pursuits, goals and focus. We are to cleave to God’s church – which is the place where we find our refreshment, philosophy and goals.

A third area where believers are told to separate is from unbelievers. As we will see when we deal with this in more detail, this does not mean that we are cut ourselves off from the unsaved, and try and create a little islet of Christendom. It means we are to be separate in practice and in belief. We are to engage them redemptively, not sit at their feet receptively. It also means we will not join in the most intimate of

relationships with them. When we separate in this way, we cleave to other believers as our source of love and joy and true fellowship.

A fourth area of separation is false doctrine. God takes very seriously the transmission and preservation of His truth. When false doctrine appears, believers are to separate from it. False doctrine will appear in two realms, to be dealt with in different ways. It will appear in the church. This false doctrine is to be separated from by disciplining such false teachers and denying them further platforms to teach. If false doctrine creeps into the main leaders, then, after following a Biblical process, believers need to remove themselves from that church to find a place where the truth is still taught.

The other realm where false doctrine will appear is in the body of Christ at large. The church worldwide is connected in different ways. Heresies seldom stay in one church. They spread through entire denominations, and go into others as well. The very presence of multitudes of denominations is testament to the fact that false doctrine arises and Christians separate from each other when they believe others are in error. This is what is known as ecclesiastical separation. It is not always wrong for churches to separate from other churches; in fact, it is part of Biblical separation. And in turning from false doctrine, we consecrate ourselves wholly to the truth, as it is preached in a Bible-believing church.

The final area of separation involves true believers that remain in unrepentant sin. Both Matthew 18 and 2 Thessalonians 3 tells us that a Biblical procedure must be begun, so as to rescue believers from destroying themselves. I Corinthians 5 mentions this as well. So there is to be a practice of separation from believers, when they are in unrepentant sin, so as to cause them to return to God and walk correctly.

It might sound on the surface like we are separate from everyone then – our own sin, the world, unbelievers; false doctrine in our church; false doctrine in other churches and even believers. But the truth is this: we are in a fallen world. Sin and false teaching are everywhere. We do not throw up our hands and give up the fight simply because the battle rages on all sides. Instead, we bravely face each day depending on God and obeying His Word. Separation is not a negative thing. Nor does it cause cold, dark isolation. Jesus Christ was the most separate man that ever lived. He was separate from sin, since He could not sin. He was separate from the world – Satan's temptations could not take hold on Him. He was separate from unbelievers. Being amongst sinners, He could yet turn to His enemies and ask, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?"

Clearly, His fellowship with sinners did not mean His partaking in sin. He was separate from false teaching. Though brought up in the synagogue, He knew the doctrines of the Pharisees were deadly to eternal life and battled them openly and privately. He taught the very principles of church discipline which we use today. And when you think of Christ, do you think of a cold, aloof, irrelevant man? No, you think of a wonderful, brilliant, tireless servant of God, engaging all men in appropriate ways, but always fully pleasing to God. That's Biblical separation.