

## Biblical Separation - 2

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We have begun a series in which we are looking at the topic of separation. We saw last week that separation is based on God's holiness, on the preservation of God's people and their purpose – to love God intimately. Separation from sin to God enables these things. We saw separation has some extremes on both ends – absorption on the one end, and isolation on the other. We saw why neither of these is Biblical separation. But today we wish to begin looking at the actual categories of separation.

The first and most obvious phase of separation must be that which is in opposition to God – sin. Sin does not glorify God, sin corrupts God's people and denies us intimate fellowship with God. Therefore, our priority is to separate from sin. Now, a key text in separating from sin is Ephesians 4:22-24:

*“to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph 4:22-24)*

Here we see how the Bible approaches separation from sin. We must put off the old, be renewed in our minds, and put in the new. That phrase – put off the old, is really the same thing as ‘separate from sin’. The actual path sin takes from a desire in the human heart to the eventual act is actually more than one phase. Therefore, we have the possibility of waging war on sin, of separating from it, at numerous points. Let us look at each one, to see how we can separate from sin in our lives:

The first phase of separation from sin we might call...

### The Detection Phase

The saying goes – ‘prevention is better than cure’. Well, that is very true of sin. If we are to prevent sin, then we need to know what we are dealing with. If we are to separate from sin, we must recognise it in the first place. Now, while we may think we are very good at identifying sin in our lives, the Bible says something else about us in Jeremiah 17:9 :

*“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer 17:9)*

The heart – its number one problem above all things is that it is deceitful. The human heart lies. It lies about itself; it lies to itself. It lies to others. So, it is clear we cannot rely on the human heart to do an unbiased, objective self-examination. We will need two things to clearly identify sin – the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Now the Word of God helps us tremendously because it takes the cover off sin. Jesus said of His ministry as the Living Word in John 15:22:

*“If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.” (Joh 15:22)*

His ministry exposed sin for what it was. The Bible does the same thing. It takes all the nice sugar-coating we put on our sin, all the excuses, all the blame-shifting and calls sin what it is: rebellion against God. It shows us our sin, and shows us we are culpable. Therefore, if you are never in the Word of God, it is certain you will not be separate from sin. All you have to guide you is your supposed personal sense of right and wrong, your own sense of morality. And if you think this is enough, I again point you to Jeremiah 17:9 – the heart is above all things – deceitful!

So, the Word of God is going to be like a mirror, which will show us the uncomfortable portrait of ourselves. Now, while this is uncomfortable, it does so because of the wonderful promise of becoming like Christ. We must know what is wrong to make it right.

How does the Bible do this? Well, in many instances, it gives us lists of sins. For example Mark 7:21-22:

*“For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.(Mar 7:21-22)*

Another list is found in Galatians 5:19-21

*“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

I Corinthians 6:9-10 is another list: *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1Co 6:9-10) “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. (Eph 4:31)*

There are many other lists in the Bible. The book of Proverbs calls sin what it is – over and over.

Not only does The Bible give us lists of sins, but it also gives us many positive commands. Things we are to do, which if omitted, constitute a sin – a sin of omission. Sin is not only that we do the wrong, it is when we neglect to do the right. That’s why David prayed:

*“Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. (Psa 19:12-13)*

David knew he was guilty of both known sins of transgression, but also hidden sins of omission.

The Bible also gives us many human examples of sin and obedience. From them we learn what sin looks like, and what righteousness looks like.

Finally, the Bible also gives us very clear principles for evaluating things which are not clearly outlined in Scripture. We can apply these to questionable issues, or what some call, non-moral issues. The Bible helps us to test or to discern if something is edifying, spiritually helpful, if it is something that we will become addicted to, if it is something I can do without harming another Christian, and if it glorified God. We can identify things, which might not be spelt out in Scripture – but clearly violate Biblical principles. This is how we identify sin.

But now we take it a step further. As we read Scripture and we see God identifying sin, we must now turn the spotlight inwardly and pray for God to show us how this sin looks in my life. This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. We are to prayerfully meditate, asking the Holy Spirit to show us how a particular sin He shows us in the Word looks in us. For example, you might skim over the words “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer”. Stop – ask God to show you how and where hatred exists in your life. It might be cold indifference toward a relative or colleague. It might be hardness and cruelty to someone you dislike. It might be raging anger at other drivers when in traffic. It might be seething jealousy at another’s promotion or reward. But this is where we need the heart of David, when he prayed:

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psa 139:23-24)*

This is where we go from seeing sin in the Bible either in the form of a list, a command, a negative example of sin in a Bible character, or a principle, and now we say – Lord show me my sin! Show me how this looks in me, that I might separate from it.

Now, there is one more thing we need to know about the identification phase of sin. Anyone who has done gardening knows it is not good enough to simply pull part of the stem of a weed out. The whole thing must be uprooted. What we need to know about the various ways sin is manifesting itself in our lives – is that it has a root system deep in the heart. All sin is simply the leaves, the vegetation, the fruit of pride and unbelief. Within the heart is the sin principle that must be challenged. That principle says “God cannot be trusted, I will have my own way.” Unbelief believes that satisfaction is found outside of God, in me having what I want, my way. Pride then hardens itself against the law of God and says “I will have my way”. If you think about any sin in your life – what it comes back to is a desire to find joy apart from God your own way. And this must be repented of and confessed as evil.

If we only deal with the sins, and never the inner heart unbelief and pride, we will keep repeating the cycles of sin. Their needs to be a humility that declares –God is what I desire, His promises and Word are true. The promises of sin are lies, I will seek to please God first to find my joy. James shows this idea:

*James 1:13-15: “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*

We must go into the very heart and uproot the rebellious and evil heart of unbelief and pride. If we are able to identify sin in our own lives and identify the heart cause of it, we can separate from it at its earliest stages. The problem is, oftentimes we do not see sin for what it is until it is way too late.

The second stage of separation from sin we might call...

### **The Incubation Phase**

I get that idea from the verse we just read in James. Desire is in the heart. But if desire is stimulated, it conceives what will become a clear temptation. Many a Christian would find that their battle against sin would go a lot better if they were not exposing themselves to things that give sinful desire food to chew on. Anything that is starved will eventually die. Sinful desires die too, when they are not fed more thoughts to encourage them. So, here in the incubation phase, we are to separate from all things that will promote temptation later. It can be music, TV programmes, magazines, books, films, videos, the Internet, conversations, certain places, certain environments, certain leisure activities, certain forms of entertainment, certain company. This is what I believe Paul meant in Romans 6 when he wrote:

*“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.” (Rom 6:11-13)*

In other words – since you have died to sin in Jesus, act out that death, by no longer drinking in the things of death. Do not present your eyes, ears, mind, tongue, lips and body with things that are in opposition to God. Instead, fill them with things in agreement with God’s Word and nature. We are a product of our influences. If our influences are 90% ungodly and unspiritual, guess what kind of person we will be?

We must cut off sin in the incubation phase. The less sinful, worldly material we allow into our lives, the less temptation we have to deal with later. Christians need to separate from anything which is not consonant with God’s Word:

*“Abstain from every form of evil.” (1Th 5:22).*

In short – a Christian must seriously consider their spiritual diet. What are you taking in every day of your life?

But that leads us to the next way Christians must separate from sin, and that is...

### **The Temptation Phase**

Assuming we have done our best to identify sin and its roots, assuming we have avoided as much as possible material which would inflame our sinful desires and instead, filled our minds with God-pleasing material we will nevertheless at some point be faced with temptation. Now, notice Jesus told us to pray *“Lead us not into temptation”*. So, we are to pray we will not enter temptation. Moreover, we are to do our best to avoid tempting situations:

. *“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Rom 13:14)*

Make no allowances, no provision for the flesh. Do not toy with temptation. Proverbs 7 speaks of the foolish young man who deliberately went past the house of the adulterous woman. He made provision for the flesh and suffered the consequences. If we do not plan not to sin, we probably will sin, so plan not to sin.

But having done all we could to avoid temptation, at some point, we will face it. We must try to keep those situations to a minimum, but we will have to face some. And when we do, the Bible’s command could not be clearer: “Flee temptation!” Flee – there couldn’t be a more active way of expressing ‘separation’. Get away.

We read over and over: Flee sexual immorality”, “Flee idolatry” “Flee youthful lusts”. Now when you flee, you admit that you do not have the strength to fight the fight. And that is in fact, the humble position to take when it comes to sin. This approach will receive grace from God. When we have this comic-book idea of a devil and an angel on each of our shoulders one telling us to do good, and the other one evil – we have gone way too far. Temptation is not two nice choices that come to you, the neutral Judge. Temptation is a hunter, and you are the hunted. Get away from that situation.

How do we do this? Well firstly, we flee in our mind. The thoughts are where temptation rages. And in our minds, we must flee from the sin. We see Paul saying in 2 Cor 10:5:

*“and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ”*

Here is the idea. When it comes to our thoughts, we are not viewers, simply watching the screen. We are editors, choosing what is acceptable to Christ, and what is not. And to flee with the mind, is to turn our mind’s eye away from temptation. We are not to be sloppy in our thinking. Peter told us to gird up the loins of our mind – tighten them up, be ready and sharp. See, what usually happens is our minds behold a sin, and begin to imagine its pleasure, its value, its attractiveness. To flee with the mind is to avoid thoughts of the promise of sin, and replace those thoughts with the promises of God. We must know the lies of sin in our mind, and quickly, firmly, decisively turn from the promise of sin to the promise of God. We do not simply take thoughts captive, we actively think what is pleasing to God.

*Philippians 4:8 says: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

Having fled with our minds, we then flee with our members. Our eyes must flee looking at temptation. Our ears must flee listening. Our lips must cease from replying or continuing in ungodly speech. Our thoughts must flee evil thoughts, or emotions, or attitudes, or desires. Our bodies must flee a situation if necessary. This is graphically illustrated by Joseph, who literally ran away from Potiphar’s adulterous wife.

Here is where, with all the power of Calvary, we kill sin. Jesus died to sin once for all; we are joined with that death. We have all the power, by the Holy Spirit to say no to sin. Giving in to sin is no longer something which we must do habitually by nature. We mortify it – we put it to death by fleeing from it. It is not us who have the power in us to do it. We read in Romans 8:13:

*“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Rom 8:13)*

But it is nevertheless our human responsibility to put sin to death. Colossians 3:5 says:

*“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (Col 3:5)*

And here is the thing. If we are serious about separating from temptation, we should see the separation as quick, painful, even violent. This was the imagery Jesus used when describing temptation:

*“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Mat 5:29-30)*

Amputation is a quick, painful experience. But Jesus says that is how ruthless we must be with ourselves regarding sin. It is as if we find sin on ourselves, we would rather harm ourselves than keep the sin. Our allegiance here is to God, not to simply coast along and have a more comfortable life.

If we identify sin, separate from it in its incubation phase, do our best to avoid temptation, and then flee temptation in our minds and actions, we are doing what the Bible says when it says “Put sin to death”.

Here we must remember something as well. Paul made it very clear that no temptation you experience is greater than what you can bear. God gives us a way of escape in every temptation situation. If we will accept the way of escape He opens up, we will be able to flee successfully.

*“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1Co 10:13)*

But what if we sin? Fortunately, God has a remedy there too:  
This we can call the...

### **The Confession and Restitution Phase**

When we sin, we must respond to God’s conviction. When we do this, we glorify God, because we admit His way is right. We show His work in us is real, we now feel sorrow for things we did not feel sorrow for before. Our response is not to try and plead for forgiveness. That is already accomplished at Calvary. Our confession is simply when we stop hiding behind the trees of the Garden, and come out and claim

ownership for our sins. God does not hide. It is us who build walls between us and God. Confession is restoring the openness and intimacy of fellowship. I John 1:9 gives us great hope:

*“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1Jo 1:9)*

But our sins sometimes involve others. We must quickly go and make right with those we have harmed or feel have harmed us. Making restitution is a critical part of growing in holiness. Jesus specifically taught that not forgiving others and expecting God’s forgiveness is a contradiction. The two go hand in hand - confession to God, and restitution with man.

Finally, though, we go from the negative to the positive. This we might call...

### **The Imitation Phase**

But the Bible does not only want us to put off the old man – that is separate from sin, it also wants us to put on the new man. That means cleave to Christlikeness. All that we take out, we must replace with good. All that we uproot must have something replanted in its place. Do not simply purpose to kill sinful anger in your life; purpose to replace that with gentleness and kindness. Do not simply purpose to kill sexual immorality in your life; purpose to replace that with purity of mind and virtuous thoughts. Every sin can have a corresponding act of Christlikeness.

So where do we find what the new man looks like. The verse tells us:

*“And to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

The new man is created in the likeness of God Himself. It is as we behold God’s glory in the Word that we will increasingly seek to imitate and resemble Him. 2 Cor 3:18 certainly carries this idea:

*“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2Co 3:18)*

Where do we see who God is; we see it in the Word of God. This is why the verse sandwiched between put off the old self and put on the new self is *“and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds”* This renewal comes again from the Word of God. The Word of God shows us our sin; it shows us the root of our sin; it shows us how to separate from sin in all its phases, but it also shows us Christ. It shows us our Blessed Lord – the one we seek to imitate.

As we saturate our minds with it, we will find ourselves loving righteousness, not simply trying to do it. We will find ourselves admiring virtue, praising godliness, treasuring God’s Law. It’s at this point, that the Spirit of God is pleased to enable us to act out that which we have come to love.

Separate from sin, cleave to Christlikeness. There is no other way for God to be honoured, for our testimony to be preserved, and for our intimacy with God to be enhanced.

Next week, we will continue our study of Biblical Separation by looking at separation from the world and from unbelievers.

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