

## Biblical Separation -3

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We have begun a series in which we are looking at the topic of separation. We have looked at the reasons and the Rationale behind separation. Last week we began looking at the realm of separation, and we began with the topic of sin. We saw how we are to separate from sin and cleave to Christlikeness.

Today we will look at separation from the world and from unbelievers.

We read in Romans 12:2:

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...”*

*“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (1Jo 2:15-16)*

James says a similar thing in 4:4:

*“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (Jam 4:4)*

So, it is pretty clear that the Bible wants us separate from the world. First question to answer: what does the Bible mean by world here? The word for ‘world’ is used in different ways. Sometimes it means the human race, like in John 3:16, where Jesus said, *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son”*. Other times, it refers to the planet we live on, such as when Paul says believers were chosen before the foundation of the world.

But when the Bible speaks negatively about the world, like in the verses we have just quoted, it refers to a satanic system of belief and practice. By satanic, we do not mean the world is overtly devil-worshipping. We mean the Devil is the mastermind behind this belief system. He is the one scheming to get man to think this way. We see this both directly and indirectly. Directly, the Bible says:

*“In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” (2Co 4:4)*

But we also see it indirectly. John described the world as the ‘lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’. This was the three-pronged tempting strategy that we see Satan using with both Eve and with Christ. Satan’s goal is to blind people from seeing God’s glory, so that they will choose God’s gifts instead of Him. He wants people to reject the Gospel and remain unrelated to God and his system of belief and practise is dedicated to doing that. It keeps man busy, it keeps him entertained, self-satisfied, comfortable – always away from God.

So a believer's first task is to identify this world system of belief and practice, so that he or she may separate from it. That identification is given by John when he describes it as the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

Satan's world system is essentially a philosophy about where satisfaction in life lies. Worldliness is not primarily styles of dress or hairstyles, music genres, certain places, or certain forms of entertainment. But the beliefs of worldliness, the values of worldliness are often propagated and portrayed and fleshed out in those things. What are its values?

Well, pillar 1 is the lust of the flesh. That is the belief that satisfaction lies in the gratification of your senses. This is the most obvious aspect. It teaches that the entertainment of our eyes, of our ears, of our sense of smell, of our taste buds, and even of our other physical senses – this is the place of satisfaction. So worldliness emphasises everything that your physical senses can indulge in – to give them pleasure as an end in itself. This is supposed to be the meaning of life.

Pillar 2 is the lust of the eyes. That is the belief that satisfaction lies in the advancement of your appearance so as to attract admiration. This believes that the praise of man, whether it is by reluctant jealousy, or by positive compliments will satisfy the soul. So worldliness emphasises status through having certain cars, living in certain areas, wearing certain things, having certain positions in society. It emphasises physical appearance as more important than character. That man should admire you for what you appear to be – this is the second promise of satisfaction in worldliness.

Pillar 3 is the pride of life. That is the belief that satisfaction lies in the performance of your will. That is – real satisfaction lies when you can have what you want, when you want it, how you want it. Real life would be if you had the power to make everyone around you act exactly as it would please you.

Now, how does a believer remain separate from this system? Well, there is an inward attitude, and an external approach. The inward attitude is found in 1 John 2:15, where John says "*Love not the world*". James repeats this by essentially saying 'don't befriend the world'. Both of them state – God doesn't love this system. Therefore if you love it, you love what He hates- you are siding with the enemy. James goes so far as to call it adultery.

What does this mean? It means that believers are to be continually exposing the lie of worldliness in our minds. As we watch those advertisements, as we see unbelievers scurrying around to gain satisfaction in these things, we must mentally say: "This is not where satisfaction lies. These things don't last. These things are empty. Inwardly, we must disbelieve the promises of worldliness, and wholeheartedly believe the promises of God.

This is where the book of Ecclesiastes is so helpful. Solomon, the author, had tried all the things that the system of worldliness insists you must have to be satisfied. He had more wealth than probably any human ever. There was nothing he could not buy or hire or afford. He lived in the best of surroundings, wore the finest, and feasted on the best. The best of music greeted his ears; the best entertainment filled his palace. He

was well known for his huge number of wives and concubines. His fame was spread around the world. His possessions were the best, and he had the most. His power was unrivalled; all he wanted would be done at his command. He had, in a nutshell, the heart of what worldliness promises – the gratification of every physical sense, the admiration of all men, and the granting of his every wish and desire. But Solomon turned around and said that these things, in and of themselves were vanity – emptiness. Solomon found that apart from God, these things are actually bitter – they remind one of the emptiness of life apart from God. See, all the things the world thinks are the keys to satisfaction are simply gifts. But, as Jim Berg put it, you can gather all the toys you want, but God gives the batteries. All of life's gifts equal zero joy if not energised by God-given satisfaction. The equation is that God-given gifts multiplied by God-given satisfaction equals much joy. If God withholds satisfaction, then it does not matter how many earthly gifts you have, you will be multiplying by zero. And anything multiplied by zero is zero – there will be zero joy. And this is how we separate from the world inwardly. We see all the things they keep exalting as the key to satisfaction, and we remind ourselves of the truth - that God is the most satisfying, and grants satisfaction.

But secondly, believers need an external approach. This is seen in Romans 12:2.

*“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”*  
(Rom 12:2)

That literally means – do not be pressed into the mould, the shape of the world. Instead, be transformed, be metamorphosed into someone who knows and does the will of God. Paul contrasts being conformed to being transformed. People who are conformed are pressured from the outside to change. People who are transformed are changed from within. So notice, we must not be externally like the world, but we must be changed internally – by the renewing of our minds. This is what we have just shared. Our mindset, our understanding and approach to worldliness must change. We must reject its philosophy and instead, by testing, discern what is good and acceptable and perfect, and what the will of God is. We must always work from the inside out. Our minds must change before our outward behaviour changes.

But when our minds change – then there will be external results. There will be an external approach to worldliness that reflects our internal attitude which rejects their philosophy. So it means, in practise, when there are things which promote worldliness, we, as believers, will not partake in it. As we said, worldliness is not primarily dress, clothing, music, movies, although those things certainly propagate and reflect its values. So believers must discern each thing in life to decide if wearing this, by listening to this, by going to this place, by viewing this entertainment – am I essentially agreeing with the values of worldliness? Am I being pressed into their mould and shape, to where I outwardly seem to be pursuing satisfaction in the same way?

This is the heart of it, believers must be different in the way they approach life. James 1:27 says:

*“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world”.*

Pure and undefiled devotion to God comes from when we are unstained by the world. Some activities and places are simply wrong for a believer to indulge in. Forget all the pragmatic arguments about being like the world to win the world. When you are so like the world, you have been pressed into their mould, and you no longer have a message. So, believers should have a different approach to money. Believers should have a different approach to food, to sexuality, to music. Believers should have a different approach to clothing and modesty, to appropriate styles of appearance. Believers should have a different approach to status, and cars, and positions. Believers should have a different approach to entertainment, and fashion, and leisure time. Believers should have a different approach to the ‘I do it my way’ attitude of the world.

Are we saying believers should forsake joy? By no means! We are saying believers must passionately pursue meaning and joy and satisfaction **in God**! It is precisely this positive focus which will make us different, separate from the world. There will be things we simply do not do, places we do not go, things we do not wear, music we do not listen to, because they hinder, rather than help our pursuit of satisfaction in God. We simply do not buy into Satan’s system which is at its heart: a ‘leave God out the picture’ system. Instead, our inward attitude and external approach is a ‘see God at the centre’ system. This is separation from the world. It is obviously not a geographical separation. It is a separation of inward attitude and external approach. And of course, in practicality, it will mean that our fellowship with unbelievers who buy into the world system will be limited by our conformity to Christ. But overwhelmingly, it is an issue of belief and behaviour.

But of course, this leads us to ask another question. How does separation deal with the fact that believers live in a world of unbelievers? We mentioned before that the two extremes of separation are isolation and contamination. We do not want to be isolated from unbelievers – for that is a violation of the command to evangelise. But we do not want to be absorbed by unbelievers, for that is a violation of the command to separate. How do we find the balance?

The first thing is to realise that, again, it is not a geographical separation. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians in chapter 5 verses 9 and 10:

*“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.”(1Co 5:9-10)*

So, Paul understood that separation, as far as unbelievers goes, did not mean refusing to company with them (which it does mean regarding believers, as the next verse shows, which we will deal with later on). But there are other commands which seem to indicate that the Bible does not want us to keep company with the unsaved, for example:

*“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 ;”(Psa 1:1)*

*“Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.””(1Co 15:33)*

*“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Eph 5:6-8)*

*Or in the book of Proverbs we read: “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.” (Pro 13:20)*

So, how do we harmonise these truths which seem to be pulling in different directions? We are not to be geographically separate from unbelievers; we are not to become recluses – hiding out in monasteries. But we are also not to associate with them, in the words of Ephesians 5:6-8. How do we resolve this apparent inconsistency?

I think the answer lies in the illustration Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 6. In verses 14 and following, he writes: *“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers..” (2Co 6:14)* Here Paul alludes to a part of the Mosaic Law, where God commanded Israel *“You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.” in Deut 22:10*. That was a text where God was teaching separation in many areas of life. Here Paul uses that illustration to teach that the difference between believers and unbelievers is not simply one of practise, it is one of nature. You are different spiritual animals. An ox and a donkey cannot plough together, because they are so different. Well, Paul underlines that by listing 5 groups of opposites, again underlining that we are different by nature.

And the point here is – not that you must avoid each other – but that you cannot plough together. In other words, you cannot form binding, intimate, permanent relationships, because you are not pulling in the same direction. And I think this goes a long way to explaining how we are to separate from the unbeliever. We are not to cut off contact with all unbelievers. Nor should we quit our jobs, or stop speaking to neighbours, colleagues or acquaintances. Rather, we must understand that we are so different in nature that our approach to them is to be **redemptive**, not **receptive**. What do I mean by that? We are, like Christ, to be on a mission to seek and to save those which are lost. So, as we approach the unbelievers, we must deal with them for the necessities of life, but we must see our intercourse with them to have a redemptive purpose. We want to be used by God to pull them out of a vain, empty life, headed for an eternity without Christ. So, we become ambassadors of reconciliation. We must see each unbeliever as a project – someone, who by our love and shrewd wisdom – we can present the Gospel to and allow God to work in their hearts.

On the other hand, our fellowship with them is not to be **receptive**. In other words, we are not to sit at the feet of the unbeliever to receive their worldly wisdom, we are not to receive the praise of the unbeliever; we are not to seek romantic love from the unbeliever. When we swap the redemptive approach for the receptive approach – that is when we are compromising. This is what Psalm 1 warns against – ‘walking in the counsel of the wicked, sitting in agreement and participation with the scoffers’ – that is compromise. Compromise is when you seek the friendship or approval of the unsaved before you seek their soul. You are actually on the defensive; you want what they have, rather than believing you have what they need. So again, it is very much an inward attitude. The inward attitude is not haughty, it is in fact servantlike. We want to help the unsaved come to the knowledge of Christ, and not waste their lives in

futile pursuits of things that don't satisfy, and probably destroy. We believe we have the answer for them, not the other way around. Our approach must be redemptive, not receptive.

But this will again work its way out into an external approach. Firstly, it will prohibit the most intimate of life's relationships. Because our goal is redemptive, there is no way that a believer will seek to court, date or marry an unbeliever. This is clear from 2 Corinthians 6 – we are not to be yoked together in these ways. People who say, "But I can win them to the Lord" are really being untruthful. They are in fact, taking the receptive role – wanting the love, the relationship of this unbeliever, and then trying to use the redemptive approach as an excuse to pursue the relationship. It is presumptuous. You do not marry someone as an act of redemption. You can only marry someone God allows you to – which would only be a believer. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that we are to marry "only in the Lord." That means we are to reserve the most intimate of our relationships for believers. An unbeliever is pulling in a different direction. They do not have the same goals, philosophies or beliefs. The inevitable result is a painful division in the marriage, or else a complete apostasy. God specifically warned Israel against intermarrying the other pagan nations because they would cause them to forsake God. Of course, this does not mean that if a couple are married, and one gets saved, that they should split up – 1 Cor 7 makes it clear they should stay together. I think we could also apply this to our closest friendships too. Are friendships not receptive relationships? Do we not spend time with our best friends to receive joy, laughter, encouragement, affirmations, and shared interests? I think we can have friendships with the unsaved, but they should have a redemptive purpose. Our closest and best friendships should be with like-minded believers.

The other way this will work its way out is when unbelievers invite us to join them in activities, conversation or pursuits which do not please God, we should not join them. We must seek to engage unbelievers lovingly, but not at the expense of our testimony and walk with God. If a place or activity would not allow you to maintain a redemptive role, then you ought not to join in. All fellowship with unbelievers, so far as it is in our control, must preserve the possibility of ministering the Gospel. Jesus ate and drank in the homes of sinners. But He did not become one. I believe there are definitely places Jesus did not and would not have gone, because in those places, the possibility of acting redemptively would be impossible. That is why we call into question the pragmatic evangelism of some who think that it does not matter what music you use, what method you use, where you are – so long as you have Gospel lyrics and Gospel words. The fact is there are some scenarios where your words take on a very different meaning because you have surrendered the redemptive advantage, and have entered the receptive role. When these are the situations, we ought not to be there or partake. 1 Peter 4:3-5 says:

*"The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.(1Pe 4:3-5)*

Clearly, Peter's writers did not join the unsaved in all they did to supposedly witness to them. Some situations compromise the message. Those are the ones we are to avoid.

Thirdly, this will work itself out in that we will not seek or follow the counsel of unbelievers unless it harmonises with God's Word. Separation from unbelievers means we must realise their mind is darkened, their understanding is corrupt, and their knowledge of reality, as it is, is extremely limited. The Bible calls them blinded. So, while there are certainly things which we can and must learn from unbelievers, when it comes to the main issues of life- the point of life, what to live for, why – these are the issues that we do not receive from the unsaved, we are to teach the unsaved. And that must cause us to often rule out our much humanistic psychology, philosophy and self-help motivational nonsense as we turn entirely to the Word of God.

One could look at it this way: If we are separate from the world with an inward attitude and an external approach, it will give us the authority to minister redemptively to a world needing Christ. It is when we are separate in how we live and what we live for, that we can reach out in love to minister redemptively to the lost, not sit receptively at their feet.

And again, you can see God's reasons for separation being made very sensible in terms of separation from the unbeliever. Since we carry His name, we must be different in our pursuits from the unsaved. In order to preserve this pursuit of God, we must not surrender our hearts and minds to them, but instead seek to win their hearts and minds to Christ. And once again, God promises to those who do separate – He will be especially close to them; He will be a Father to us. He will own us; He will be pleased to call us His children, since we walk in a manner pleasing to Him.

One more thing must be said. We mentioned that separation is from something to cleave to something else. Well, if we separate from the world in attitude and approach, and we separate from unbelievers in terms of not forming intimate relationships, and not seeking to receive love from them – what are we to cleave to? The answer is - we separate from the world to cleave to God's local church; we separate from unbelievers to cleave to believers. Whereas the world assaults us with a false view of life, in a Bible-believing local church we will receive truth. We will be encouraged to walk separately, to love God. Whereas unbelievers cannot provide love in the form of marriage or deep friendships, these we can find and enjoy amongst God's people. So, God's commands us to separate from the world and from unbelievers, commands rooted in His holiness, in our preservation, and in our walk with God. It's not a command to be isolated. Nor is it license to be contaminated. It is a wise approach to being authentic, redemptive ambassadors of Christ in a wicked world.

Next week, we will look at the issue of separation from false doctrine.

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