

SEPARATION

Mark Grasso

Although we may often consider it to be a negative subject, God's word expressly connects the path of separation from evil with special blessing.

Before considering separation in detail, two points should be noted:

1. When we separate ourselves from something which the Lord cannot accept, or if we are walking in separation from such things, there should not be any thought that we are better than those from whom we have separated. We should also be careful not to give other believers the impression that we consider ourselves to be more faithful than them. If we have received light as to the path we should follow, we are obliged to walk according to that light (Phil. 3:16). Separation is therefore a matter of responsibility and obedience to God's word.
2. Separation should never simply be separation from what is wrong as that is not the object which God has in view in calling upon His people to be separate. Rather, there should also be separation to God. The former can often be achieved relatively easily, whereas the latter is much more challenging, is an ongoing matter and is not merely outward but also involves reality of heart.

The principle of separation is seen throughout the Bible. The first reference to it is in Genesis 1:4, which states that God 'divided the light from the darkness'. As light and darkness are the opposite of each other, it makes sense that they were divided from each other in creation. Of course, Genesis 1 provides much more than a historical account of the creation of the earth. In particular, it presents various things as types for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11). Light speaks of what is good or what is of God (see e.g. Eph. 5:8-9; 1 John 1:5). Darkness represents the opposite, namely what is evil (see e.g. John 3:19; Job 30:26; Isa. 5:20). Just as light and darkness are separate from each other, the things which they represent (i.e. what is good and what is evil) ought also to be separate as they are inherently opposed to each other. As God says in 2 Corinthians 6:14, 'what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?'

There is a good illustration of some of the principles associated with separation in God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-2. From Joshua 24:2-3, we know that

Abraham's family was involved in idolatry. Accordingly, God's command to Abraham to 'go out of [his] land, and from [his] kindred, and from [his] father's house (Gen. 12:1) was not simply a call to leave the land where he was living and his family but an appeal to separate himself from the evil taking place there, and, obviously, to keep from continuing in it himself. Separation from evil in our individual lives (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:8) is the starting point for any consideration of the subject of separation. The importance of such separation cannot be emphasised enough in an age in which sex, violence and other sinful practices are glamorised and even promoted in society and the availability of the Internet and mobile devices makes it easier than ever for an individual to get caught up in them. God's view of such things is plain: they are wrong, and His people should have absolutely nothing to do with them.

Returning to Genesis 12, we also see that separation:

- is to God (v. 1: 'to the land that I will shew thee' – Abraham was to go where God would lead Him); and

- leads to blessing (v. 2: ‘I will make of thee a great nation, and bless thee ...’). The principle of separation is seen in many other parts of the Old Testament.

The history of Israel is significant in this regard as it was God’s desire that the nation would be separate – both separated from the evil practices of the Gentile nations around them and separated to God, a peculiar people unto Himself. He also promised them that they would be blessed if they remained separate from the surrounding nations.

Separation was also one of the objects of the Lord in His work on the cross. In addition to saving us from our sins, the Lord’s death provided the foundation for Him to ‘gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad’ (John 11:51–52). The ‘one’ referred to in this verse is the assembly. The word translated ‘church’ or ‘assembly’ in the New Testament is the Greek work *ecclesia*, which means ‘called out’ – in particular, called out from the world. John 11:52 also shows that the calling out is a calling into one (i.e. to unity), a point which will be discussed further below.

The Lord ‘gave himself for our sins, so that he should deliver us out of the present evil world’ (Gal. 1:4), and we are responsible to live consistently with that. There are many examples of believers living in such a manner in the early days of the assembly, such as the following:

- in John 20:19, the disciples and others were assembled with the door shut to keep the world out (strictly speaking, John 20 does not involve the assembly as it was not formed until Pentecost, but it nevertheless provides a picture of the assembly);
- in Acts 1:14, they were all gathered together for prayer (i.e. separated to God);
- on the day of Pentecost, the pattern continued and they were ‘all with one accord in one place’ (Acts 2:1), demonstrating separation and unity; and
- this was followed by blessing (v. 4; see also 1 Cor. 12:13).

These and other examples bring out four key matters associated with separation: separation from evil and the world; separation to God; unity amongst those separated; and blessing from God as a result of having separated.

However, by the time of 2 Timothy, the state of things was no longer as it was at the beginning. Instead, in the Christian profession, there was or would shortly be:

- division and departure from the truth (1:15);
- promulgation of false doctrine (2:17–18);
- impure conduct (ch. 3); and
- a mixing of believers and unbelievers (3:8).

As we see the same things in the Christian profession today, the following question arises: what should a believer who wishes to be faithful to the Lord do? As a starting point, the faithful believer should not give up. They also should not point the finger at others but should remain humble, remembering Paul’s words: ‘let him that thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall’ (1 Cor. 10:12). Recognition of one’s part in the failings of the Christian profession and confession before God are also appropriate in light of the examples set by godly men such as Ezra and Daniel (see Ezra 9; Dan. 9).

Importantly, we also should not seek to put things right. Our natural feelings would suggest the contrary – that we must restore the Christian testimony to its condition at the beginning and re-establish unity as that is what the Lord wanted and must therefore be right. However, Scripture expressly states that we are not to do so. In Matthew 13:24–30, the Lord warned of the mixing of believers and unbelievers in the Christian profession. Then, in response to a question as to whether the unbelievers should be put out, He said that this was not to occur. (Among other things, it is the Lord who will put everything right in His own time.) Instead, we are to follow the instructions in 2 Timothy 2:19–22.

This passage begins with encouragement: ‘the firm foundation of God stands’. Whatever God has established (and the ‘foundation’ is not limited in this regard) will last. One example of this can be found in the Lord’s words in Matthew 16:18: ‘I will build my assembly, and hades’ gates shall not prevail against it’. Despite all of Satan’s efforts to destroy the assembly over the last 2,000 years and the measure of outward success which it may appear he has enjoyed, the reality of what the Lord has established – that all believers are saved forever, that they are all one in His sight, etc. – has never been marred.

There is then a ‘seal’ – that is, what one looks to in order to be sure that the statement that the ‘the firm foundation of God stands’ is true: ‘The Lord knows those that are his’. Notwithstanding the mixing of believers and unbelievers throughout almost the entire Christian profession, the Lord knows each of those who are His own.

However, there is another side of the seal, which brings in the responsibility of those who know that the firm foundation of God stands: ‘Let every one who

names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity’. This is a command and is clear in its terms. If we name the Lord Jesus as our Lord, we are obliged to depart from iniquity – or, more accurately, each of us is obliged to depart from iniquity as this is an individual matter.

The iniquity which a faithful believer is to depart from is not just the iniquity in the world but also that in the Christian profession, which is the context of Paul’s letter. Examples of such iniquity are moral evil (e.g. 1 Cor. 5, although it is worth noting that in that passage the command is that the assembly must put the wicked person out, whereas in 2 Timothy the position is reversed: evil is being accepted in the Christian profession, and the faithful believer must depart from wherever such evil is found or tolerated) and doctrinal evil (Gal. 5; 2 Tim. 2:16–18).

Verse 20 then uses the metaphor of a ‘great house’ to illustrate these matters. In this verse, ‘great’ does not mean something positive in God’s sight. Instead, it has a negative connotation, just as it does in Matthew 13:32, Revelation 18:2 and other verses. The gold and silver vessels which Paul refers to are a picture of those who belong to God (i.e. true believers) as the Bible associates gold with God (as seen in it being the most prominent material in Solomon’s temple) and uses it to show that an object is of great value (e.g. Ps. 119:127) while silver is associated with redemption (e.g. Ex. 30). Wood speaks of man (see Dan. 4:10, 20–22) and in particular, in this passage, the ‘first man Adam’ (see 1 Cor. 15:45), and the earthen vessels also speak of what is of the earth – that is, unbelievers. Putting the two pairs together, just as there may be both gold and silver vessels and vessels of wood or earth in a great house, there is a mix of believers and unbelievers in the Christian profession.

However, a distinction is then drawn between the use which is made of each vessel. Vessels speak of individuals (see e.g. Rom. 9:22–23; 2 Cor. 4:7). In addition, vessels were used in worship under the law, and they are also associated with service (2 Tim. 2:21). Taking these thoughts together, this passage shows that individuals in the Christian profession may be involved in what is honouring to the Lord or what is dishonouring to Him, including in connection with Christian meetings and

service, and that, in order to be a 'vessel to honour', the faithful believer must be separate from all that is dishonouring to the Lord, which would include meetings and service which are not in accordance with His word (sometimes described as 'ecclesiastical separation').

The Bible does not provide an exhaustive list of things which constitute 'iniquity' or 'dishonour'. In some situations, the position will be clear; in many others, we will need to bring the matter before the Lord and seek His mind.

In addition to being what the Lord has commanded, departing from iniquity is also necessary because of another principle found in the Bible, namely that association with evil defiles or, as Paul puts it, 'a little leaven leavens the whole lump' (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). If a person doing good is associated with one engaged

in evil, our natural minds might think that the former could improve the latter. However, God's word tells us that the opposite will always occur and that the latter will always defile the former – both in His sight and in practice. Lot's history provides a clear example of this

Verse 21 brings in separation to God as a separated vessel will be 'a vessel to honour, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work'. We should be encouraged when we see that no further qualification is required in order for the Lord to be able to use a believer in His service, or to use them in a remarkable way. We have an example of this in the life of J N Darby. Human wisdom would have questioned his decision to leave the Church of England at around 27 years of age as he had a promising future there and, many may have said, could have done a lot of good and brought a lot of blessing to many people. However, despite initially only having fellowship with a very small number of fellow-believers of similar convictions, the Lord went on to bless his ministry greatly, and continues to do so today in that many believers benefit, directly or indirectly, from the things which the Lord helped him to present from the Scriptures.

Finally, verse 22 shows that a faithful believer should not be isolated but should seek to have fellowship with like-minded believers. This should always be possible to at least some degree, even if regular weekly fellowship may not always be practicable. If we accept that pursuing righteousness, faith, love and peace with those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart is the Lord's command, we should also have faith that He will make it possible for us to put this command into practice as He would never ask us to do anything impossible.

As we do so, we will be walking in a manner which is consistent with the unity which the Lord has established in principle and which it was His wish that His people would enjoy in practice. We will also be able to take up the blessing of being separate from the religious world and going forth to the Lord Jesus (Heb. 13:13) and experiencing His presence as we are gathered to His name (Matt. 18:20).

(2462)