

# Separation

By Jim Davis

Separation is probably one of the most difficult issues in the Christian life. We are told to “love our neighbors” and then “we are told not to be unequally yoked.” How do Christian parents teach their children to love their neighbors? How are we to separate ourselves from the moral and cultural pollution of our times? How do we evangelize the lost effectively without compromising the call to holy living? Many Christian parents today are looking for a place of isolation to raise their children. They seek out a safe neighborhood. They join a like-minded church. If possible they send their children to Christian schools. We have not only withdrawn into our holy huddles but we have built impregnable walls for safety’s sake. I certainly would not discourage anyone from the care that should be taken to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord but there should be balance in the Christian life.

When we look in the New Testament we find that this is not a new problem. In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul corrected the believers when he wrote back to explain something he had stated earlier. When he said not to associate with immoral people he did not mean the immoral people of this world but any “so-called” immoral believer that is within the church (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). The indication is that this was not the first letter the apostle wrote to the Corinthians nor was it the first time he had addressed this particular problem. It was an ongoing problem. When we get to 2 Corinthians we find further confirmation that it is an ongoing problem when Paul instructs “Do not be bound together with unbelievers...but let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 6:14; 7:1).

The Apostle Paul maintained a balance and sought to impress it upon the church. A person would be hard pressed to prove that Paul did not love the unbeliever as he often risked life and limb to proclaim the gospel. He certainly gave us a good example of loving our neighbor and he also modeled what it means to perfect holiness in the fear of God. Jesus also was known to be the friend of sinners. Whatever we do in our churches and personal lives should not exclude relationships with unbelievers. But what are the guidelines?

**Love is essential.** It is the key to proper balance. Romans 13:8 says, “Owe no man anything except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.” The debt of love is universal and it is unceasing. By universal we mean it is to be expressed to the unbeliever as well as to the believer. Christ has extended it even to our enemies, to those who hate us, and to those who persecute us. We are to bless those who persecute us. We are never to pay back evil for evil or take vengeance but overcome evil with good. Christ gave a new commandment to the disciples before He departed for heaven. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love one for another” (John 13:34-35). This command to love the believer is never rescinded even when church discipline is exercised in cases of immorality or governmental judgment is necessary for unlawful deeds.

**We may associate with believers and unbelievers.** This principle is not only taught by Paul (1 Corinthians 5) but also exemplified by Jesus Christ and the apostles. Jesus was criticized for attending parties with unbelievers. We find that His first miracle was performed at a wedding (John 2). So we must conclude that perfecting holiness in the fear of God may, but does not necessarily, exclude association with unbelievers at public gatherings.

**We should not associate with believers that are immoral, unruly, or cause dissen-**

**sion.** We are instructed to withdraw association from those believers that are involved in immorality (1 Corinthians 5:11). They are to be removed from the fellowship of the church (1 Corinthians 5:2) and we are not to even have a meal with that person. Since Paul restricts us from keeping company with immoral persons that call themselves believers but not immoral people of this world it seems that the concern is the reputation of Christ. Jesus and the apostle's friendship with sinners were in no way an endorsement of their lifestyle. This was evidenced by the command to make judgement within the church but to let God judge those outside the church (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

We are also not to associate with an unruly brother. Among the Thessalonians there were those undisciplined persons who were not working but acting as busybodies within the church (2 Thessalonians 3:11). Association with the unruly was broken only if they refused to obey the Biblical instruction yet they were not to be treated as enemies.

In Romans Paul instructs believers to "keep their eyes on those who cause dissension and hindrances contrary to the teaching which they learned, and to turn away from them" (Romans 16:17). In each of these instances the debt of love is not revoked. We are exhorted to "admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). When we part company it is always for the purpose of restoring the brother to proper behavior and then complete fellowship.

**We should not be bound with unbelievers.** If we understand this principle it will help us to know where to draw the lines in our relationships with those outside the faith. Our association should cease with the slightest influence toward defilement of the flesh and spirit. God also cautions believers in 1 Corinthians 15:33 regarding associations. We need to have the proper balance in the amount of time we spend with believers versus unbelievers so that the evil one may not gain an advantage. When we address the issue of separation we must not be naïve. The pleasures of sin are seductive and no one is immune. Paul exhorts his young disciple Timothy to flee youthful lusts. Radical measures may be necessary for a new believer who has developed habitual patterns of sin associated with certain friends or places. Radical separation may be required even for old veterans of the faith who have stubborn tendencies toward fleshly defilement. If we are yoked with the unbeliever our course is interrupted. God's purpose for the direction of our lives is thwarted. Being yoked or bound would apply to personal relationships, marriage, business partnerships, unhealthy church associations, or any other association in life that compromises God's plan.

## **Conclusion**

The guidelines given in Scripture are by design without detail. Nevertheless the principles are solid and will not fail us when we apply them prayerfully with all humility into our lives. Remember that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paying the debt of love to our fellowman never violates our chief purpose in life, to glorify God. Next month we will consider a Scriptural example of a godly man in the Old Testament that violated this principle of not being unequally yoked. We will look at the consequences of the violation as it spans three generations.

**"And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13**

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