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Separation: Optional or Essential?

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Separation is a very important issue. When I think about the ministry that I am in and about this issue in our day, I am reminded of the beginning of *The Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times." I think that is usually true regarding ministry, and it is certainly true concerning the issue of separation in our day. Follow as I read II Corinthians 6, verses 11 down through verse 18.

"O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged.

Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompense in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall by my people.

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you,

And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord God Almighty."

Sometimes when you are in a casual conversation with somebody, you can tell that there is really something else they want to talk to you about. There are changes. They get a little more nervous, maybe stutter a little bit, look nervously about. They start to wring their hands because it is time to dispense with the introductory formalities and really talk to you about what is on their heart. Well, Paul has been talking to these believers at Corinth about many things. Look in the immediate context (II Cor. 6:1-10). He was talking to them about their ministry and the ministry, what it involves, the costs and the context of it. He spoke to them about how important it was that they give no offense to the ministry. At Corinth and today every believer is a minister, and we all need to be highly concerned about our ministries. Paul challenged them and encouraged them with what ministry will involve.

At verse 11 it is obvious that a shift is taking place. It is as if he is "cruising right along" telling them what to do, then he says, "Okay, now I've got to talk to you about something else." He says, "My mouth is open unto you. I am going to open up and tell you the truth. I want to speak to you about what is really on my mind." He is going to be free, honest, and frank. He continues by saying, "My heart is enlarged." It is open wide, without secrets, without a hidden agenda. He is seeking a response; he is seeking an interaction. He wants them to be just as open with him.

Paul is saying that it is important for us to talk heart to heart about this matter. "This is a critical issue. I do not want to zip past it. I want to open up my heart, and I want you to open yours up." Let's not be intimidated to talk honestly about this subject. It is a problem, a problem that each of us must face. The problem is holy people, God's people, living in an unholy society. It is a problem that the Lord knew we would have to face, a problem that He knew would be most difficult for us. Jesus in His high priestly prayer prayed about this tension specifically. He said, "Now Father, I am not asking you to take these people out of this world. I am asking You to keep them. Keep Christians while they live in a Christless society."

That is no easy task. It is something that needs honest discussion. It is something that we as leaders of God's flock must have an honest opinion about. We must take the time to study and to wrestle with this issue. We must not let the false accusations of one extreme or the clichés of another extreme intimidate or move us. We need to stop and think and reason and pray. But we also need to allow our people the same opportunity, rather than expecting that we will stand in the pulpit and tell them who the good

guys are and who the bad guys are, and then expect them just to accept it and always be able to recognize it. Instead, we ought to sit down and deal with their honest questions, and discuss with them the issue of separation.

I do not know if the situation is getting worse. I know that the issue seems to be getting much more difficult, and that may be just because I am so much more personally affected by it. But it is not new. People deciding that they no longer want to hold certain positions -- that is nothing new. That has always been true. It was true in Paul's day. I suppose what makes it new for me is that these people are my friends. So, personally, the whole thing is much more difficult, much more challenging, much more painful, much more real. And so, for me, it seems it is much worse than it used to be; however, I am sure it is not, but it is as bad as it always was. I find myself wrestling with what my relationship should be to others who have taken different positions in their moral or doctrinal choices.

It is not going to be easy, but each one of us must personally understand and embrace the biblical teaching of separation; the Bible does teach it. Part of the current discussion is, "Well, we all believe in separation." And that is true; everybody does. Every believer will separate over something sooner or later. Separation is something that everyone practices. Those who practice more restrictive systems of separation are not the only people who are making judgments. Separation is basically a long series of personal judgments on who I am with and who I am not with. The more conservative approach is viewed as the one that is making judgments; the more open approach is viewed as not making judgments. But nothing could be farther from the truth. We all make those judgments.

Separation is a series of personal judgments on where I will go, who I will go with, what I will do, what I will not do, what the parameters of my ministry and my fellowship will be. Everybody makes those judgments, and we should not shrink from them. We tend automatically to shrink back when someone says, "Oh, that's a judgment." Frankly, if we are thinking correctly, when someone says that you are exercising judgment, in one sense they are saying you are exercising spiritual maturity, because we are all to judge. We should not shrink from the fact that we are making judgment calls on a regular basis. Everyone of us does, and that is not wrong. He that is spiritual judges; he discerneth all things.

We are told to judge righteous judgment; so it is not something that we should shrink from. The real issue is not do we judge or not. Everybody does, and everybody should. The real issue is: "What is the basis of our judgment?" This is where the problem is. The subject of separation is so big that I am going to focus on this one aspect because I believe that it is foundational, that it is the most important issue.

I cannot give you a little secret decoder device where you can look at everybody and see who the bad guys and who the good guys are. That is not what this sermon is about. This is about grappling with foundational principles that will give you the ability to make those judgment calls in a proper way. You must make them. We all must make them, so we need to be making them on the right basis. That is really the heart and soul of these verses.

Paul here says, "Don't be in wrong associations." You see, separation is always a people issue. But some would say that we should not separate from people; we should just separate from wrong ideas. You cannot separate false teaching from false teachers. False teaching does not float around by itself; it is always carried around by a teacher. There are not any free floating independent influences. Influence is always exerted through a person, and so, it is a people issue. The two cannot be divided, and that makes it difficult.

How do we deal with all these difficulties? Well, Paul lays out this teaching and focuses on the importance of the issue. What I want to do is to look at verses 14-18 and develop the subject as Paul did in laying a foundation of understanding for the Corinthian believers about separation. This text answers three honest questions that naturally arise when we grapple with what my relationship should be to those who are spiritually different from me. Consequently, we will look at three questions and seek to find God's answers within the text.

What does it mean to be unequally yoked?

The first question, in verse 14, really is important, and we quote this verse all the time. We should not shrink from quoting it, because it is Bible. "Don't be unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Now what does that mean?

The answer is found, first, in the origin of the command. Paul is making reference to an Old Testament command found in Deuteronomy 22:10 and in Leviticus 19:19. When a Jewish farmer was plowing his field, he was never to use two different types of animals. He could plow with two oxen or he could plow with two donkeys. It did not matter which type of animal he used to plow with as long as they were not two different types. There was not to be an ox and an ass in the same harness. The obvious reason is that they possess two completely different natures, two completely different views of direction and pulling. These are two different types of animals with two different dispositions who obviously are not going to pull

in the same manner, so it is ridiculous and foolish to try to put them in the same harness.

What Paul is saying here is, do not be (actually stop being) in a mixed yoke or in a mixed relationship. Paul uses the word we get our word *heterogeneous* from, to be different in kind. Do not choose to be involved in binding relationships with people with conflicting values and natures. The rationale is that it is foolish and harmful because of two distinct natures.

A verse that helps clarify this is Amos 3:3. God says through the prophet Amos, "How can two walk together unless they be agreed?" God is saying to Israel, "How can you and I be together or walk together, unless we have a point of agreement." Two cannot walk together without having a common goal and a common direction. It is not that it is not permitted; it is impossible. It cannot be done because you just cannot do it. If you are driving to Florida and I am driving to New York, we cannot go in the same car. This is not a rule in somebody's list of regulations. It is a physical impossibility.

Paul is setting down a command based on a principle they were familiar with, that they should not be getting into an unequal yoke. Paul applies this command to two specific things. Number one, he applies this to intermarriages with the lost. These people at Corinth lived in a very worldly and wicked city, and were becoming intermarried with unbelievers. Paul says do not get involved in voluntary relationships with unbelievers, such as in a marriage. Number two, he was also making specific application to the false worship that was very attractive and very aggressive in Corinth. He reminded these believers that they were not to get mixed up in false worship. He was not worried that the believers would stop being attenders of God's house. As was the pattern in the Old Testament, the Israelites never gave up worship of God in the temple but added other deities; he was worried that they would visit other temples along the way. And so he told them, do not get into any relationship where you are mixing with false worship.

It is an unequal yoke where we voluntarily choose to get into mixed marriages or mixed ministries. Paul was not calling for isolation. He was not saying, pull out of your city, go up on the hill, build a little cloister, and isolate yourself from society. Living within society demands certain involuntary relationships. When you move into town, you have neighbors. You are born into a family; that is an involuntary relationship. You were born into a family by no choice or fault of your own, and within that family context there may be many unbelievers. There may be around you people with drastically different spiritual values. Paul is not saying isolate

yourselves from involuntary relationships. He is saying, do not make the choice to get into a spiritually mixed relationship.

There are other involuntary relationships. In 1 Corinthians 7 there is a problem when a husband gets saved and his wife does not. So, should he divorce her because it is an unequal yoke? Paul says, "No." Or maybe the newly saved husband would like to get rid of his lost wife and get a nice saved wife. God says, "No." God says you are to love your neighbor. You are to honor and respect your boss.

We are daily in many involuntary relationships with unbelievers or people with drastically different spiritual values. Paul is not saying we should reject and pull out of society. He is saying that separation ought to be of prime importance regarding voluntary choices, particularly when you are choosing a relationship of service to God, which a marriage is supposed to be. Marriage is not just a way to deal with physical needs. I should look at marriage as a relationship that will enhance my ministry and my life for Christ. By the same token, in the area of worship, I must not voluntarily get into the harness with someone with conflicting spiritual values; particularly, and most obviously, with those that are unbelievers. That is what Paul is talking about in an unequal yoke.

Why does God make this an issue?

In verses 14-16, there is a second question that is very important as we wrestle with what separation really means and how we are to practice it in our lives so that we are not unequally yoked.

Why does God make this an issue in our lives? Why do people make this an issue? A man says, I want to go this way, you want to go that way; so why is this an issue? To him, the only reason it is an issue is because somebody is being narrow-minded or unmovable, or just being stubborn, making a problem out of something that ought not to be a problem. There undoubtedly were people at Corinth who would say, "Well, what is the problem? So I want to marry her. I'm saved, she's not. What is the problem there really? Okay, so I am fellowshiping with people I should not be fellowshiping with, but I am saved and I have not changed, so what? Why are you making it such an issue?" Obviously, that is being short sighted; these were people who did not grasp the issue.

We do not make separation an issue; God makes it an issue. God is not going to say, "I want you to get out of this unequal yoke because it is embarrassing, because I don't like it, or because of what all the other brothers are going to say." Instead, Paul makes a direct reference to the nature of God. Separation is an issue because of God's unchangeable

nature. That is really what the discussion from the middle of verse 14 down through verse 16 is all about. "For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, what communion hath light with darkness, what concord hath Christ with Belial, what part hath he that believeth with an infidel, and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

Paul obviously presents five pairings and five rhetorical questions. The first part of the pairing in each set includes an identification of God or something pertaining to His nature -- the temple of God, righteousness, light, believing. On one side God says, now here is God and God's, that which belongs to Him. These are His traits, His characteristics, His people. On the other side you have an antithesis of God and Godlikeness.

Paul poses a question between the two contrasting elements. He makes comparisons, then goes through what fellowship, what communion, what concord, what part, what agreement are. There are five different words. The first one Paul used is what sharing or participation or partnership does righteousness have with unrighteousness? Next, what holding in common or sharing does light have with darkness? In verse 15, what harmony, symphony, fitting together does Christ have with Satan? In verse 15 also, what part, what share, what portion or common business? What common business hath he that believeth with an unbeliever or an infidel? And finally, what agreement, what approval, what basis of approval or union does God have with false gods or non-gods or idols?

What is important to understand is this, that Paul was saying that the problem here centers in who God is. God does not choose to be holy; God is holy. There is no choice; He cannot choose not to be holy because He does not choose to be holy. Holiness is who He is. God is light. He cannot choose not to be light, because He did not choose to be light. He is light. He is always light, and that cannot change. God is not being difficult or capricious or hard to get along with. God is not making restrictive choices just to make life difficult for us. This is who God is.

Should we believe or practice separation? We have to. Why? Because of who God is. God says not to be unequally yoked. There is a command for us to be discerning about relationships that involve spiritual mixing. It is a command, but apart from its being a command, there is a revelation of who God is, and who God is makes separation absolutely necessary.

We cannot compromise. There is no room for negotiation here. "Well, can't you give this up for me?" I can give you what is mine, but I cannot give you what is God's. I cannot give up God or who He is, or His truth. That is not mine to give. If it involves me and my ideas or my views, if they are choices that I have made, then I can unchoose them. If they are mine, then they are mine to give up. If you ask me, "Will you give up what you

want or what you think?" I can decide whether I will or not. But, I do not have the option to change who God is. God is without defilement. There is no commonality between light and darkness. It is not that it is not allowed; it is not possible. It cannot be done without God ceasing to be who He is. The problem centers on God being who He is.

There is real tension in our lives, not only because of God's nature, but because of His unwavering design. A holy, perfect God who is light without error wants us to fellowship with Him. It is God who wants -- "ye are the temple of the living God." Individually, I am the temple of the living God, and corporately the church, according to Ephesians, is the temple of the living God. So here is the problem. The unchanging, unaltering, holy God is in me and in the church of Jesus Christ, and this produces the tension. He cannot compromise. He cannot say, I will meet you half way.

God's commands make more sense in this light. For instance, in I Peter 1:16 and 17, "Be ye holy." Why? Because God just wants to see if we will do it? We tend to think God has rules to see if we will keep them. That is not who God is. God does not invent rules to see if we will keep them. God says here is the problem, I am the Lord; I change not; so, if we are going to get together, you are going to have to be holy. It cannot be done any other way. It is impossible to be otherwise. He wants to dwell in us, and He does dwell in us, but in order for Him to dwell in us with harmony and happiness, without being grieved or quenched, our lives and our relationships must be characterized by purity and holiness.

Turn with me to I John 1, verse 5, "This then is the message which we have heard of Him and declare unto you, that God is light." Boom, there it is: "And in Him is no darkness at all." What fellowship hath light with darkness? None! "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth. But, if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." God is light, and He wants to walk with us in light because He loves us. But that produces a problem, because He cannot compromise His holiness to walk with us. And so, if we are going to walk with God -- how can two walk together unless they be agreed -- if God and I are going to walk together, I am going to have to walk with Him, not He with me.

We have this walk with God backwards, as though we can run around and God has to follow us. God is not going to chase us around. We think God has to stay with us no matter where we go. Israel thought that no matter what she did, God would stay with her, but God divorced her. The prophet announced in II Chronicles 15, verse 2, "God says, I will be with you while you are with me." God will be with us today while we are with Him.

"Well, God would separate from unbelievers, but He would never separate from believers." Then why did the Shekinah glory of God leave the mercyseat and leave an empty, dead ark in the temple? Why? Because God is light, and He cannot compromise who He is. Still He wants a relationship with you and me; so, if I am going to have it, there is only one way to have it.

It is not that light and darkness are not allowed to fellowship together; it is that it is impossible. It is not that you are not allowed to be in a mixed yoke; it is impossible because God will not pull in the same yoke with unbelief, with error, with immorality, with darkness. God will not put up with moral sin in the sense of moral darkness or doctrinal darkness, the teaching of idols in false temples. We need to teach and help our people to see that error, whether in practice or in belief, is intolerable to an errorless God. He cannot compromise who He is. So we are told not to get into an unequal yoke and we are told why that is so critical. It is because separation is an issue that comes from who God is.

When I watch some drastic changes in people that I know and love, I realize that they were making the same decisions that I was making all along, but not for the same reasons. I do not know why they made the decisions they made to walk the way that we walked before, but, if they were making them for the right reasons, then they would not have changed, because God did not change.

So why do I, ultimately, need to separate? Because of who God is. I think that most of the errors in our life come from a deficient theology. We do not understand who God really is. If I knew who God was, I would not deliberately, voluntarily link up with moral or doctrinal error. To do that is to lose fellowship with the Father.

What does God expect us to do?

What does it mean to be unequally yoked? was the first question. Why does God make this an issue in our lives? Basically, because of who He is. His nature and His desire to be with us complicates things. Now, if God did not like us and did not want to be with us, it would be easy. He would just separate from us, and life would go on; but He loves us, and that produces a tension. So then, the third question, what exactly does God expect us to do? Look at verses 17-18. Wherefore because of this, because you are not supposed to be unequally yoked, and because God will not be, because God refuses to be in an unequal yoke; so, he says, what it boils down to is, you are going to have to move, folks. He says, "I love you, but I cannot come half way. Oh, I gave you My Son; but I could not even tolerate sin when it

was on My Son. When your sin was on My Son, I crushed Him. So you are going to have to move, folks." So begin coming away from spiritually mixed associations. Come out from among them. Begin drawing away from, backing out of, disengaging yourself from spiritually mixed associations. That is what He is telling us to do.

He is not telling us to find every bad influence out there and destroy it. He is not saying picket or have a campaign against every evil influence or wrong relationship out there. He is saying, just get out of it. The issue is not to be damning everybody else. The issue is getting out of that relationship that is spiritually mixed. Begin backing out; begin being separate, set apart, excluded from and by these influences; and stop touching, stop clinging to, stop holding onto impure and unclean activities and influences, people, and places. Paul is not being short or caustic here. He understands that what makes separation really hard is that it is a people thing, it is a relationship thing. Relationships involve love and friendship and time investment, and so we naturally hold onto them. And we will tend to overlook sin, because love does cover a multitude of sins. We will begin to overlook sin because we love the person. God is saying, do not hold onto those relationships. Obviously, as in II Thessalonians 3, verse 6, even when it is a brother, we are not to delay. God Himself commands, withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.

We are not to flaunt or rejoice in separation. Separation is an exceedingly painful choice that we are willing to make for God. If you delight in separation, you are a sick person. It is an excruciating choice to withdraw from a brother. When that brother walks disorderly, as with a deficient eschatology in II Thessalonians 3, separation is to occur. Because they had a deficient eschatology, they were making wrong moral and personal choices in their lives day by day. A person believes wrong; therefore, he acts wrong.

God says, you are to withdraw, you are to have no company. That is really hard if you love the person. But, you are not to treat him as an enemy; you are to admonish him. Again, this is not isolation; there has to be some contact if there is going to be admonishment. But as for getting into voluntary relationships of mutual ministry and fellowship, He is saying, you cannot do that. You may think, "I can do that. I can be with error and be with God." Not to be sarcastic, but -- only in your dreams, not in reality. So He expects us to be backing out of wrong friendships.

God gave strong warning to a godly king, to Hezekiah. In II Chronicles 19:2, Jehoshaphat held onto spiritually mixed relationships, and he did so with very lofty motives. He felt that he could do that. It was the spiritual thing to do, just like the Corinthian church thought it was the

spiritual thing to tolerate a sinning brother. You see, church discipline is separation. Can we tolerate this divergence from truth within the body? Paul says, "Not a chance!" That error is not inert; it is not innocuous and harmless. It is an aggressive agent that is destructive. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. We forget that.

Jehoshaphat forgot that, but Jehu, the son of Hanani, the seer went to meet him and said to King Jehoshaphat, "Shouldest thou help the ungodly and love them that hate the Lord? Therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord." He was saying, "Jehoshaphat you cannot. It is not that you are not allowed, but you cannot have it both ways."

God expects us to obey clear commands. He expects us to trust His motives. Certainly, your motives will always be in view when you decide to change fellowship. But the motive here is very clear: "And I will receive you." It is not that you are choosing between me and your friends, or between me and approval, or between me and your cronies. No, God says when you choose you are choosing between them or Me.

The motive for practicing separation is, "I will receive you. We can be friends. We can have fellowship. I will have a close personal relationship to you, and I will be a father unto you." He is already your father, but if you will separate to Him, to truth and to purity, morally and doctrinally, He can act like a father unto you. God will receive you with favor. There is a difference between having a father and experiencing a father. Every believer has God as father; yet not every believer is experiencing a close father-son relationship with the Father.

The benefits of fatherhood were lost when the prodigal son left. He always had a father, but his father's love was lost to him because he had left. It was not that he was not allowed; it was impossible for him to have it both ways. If he would return, the father could be a father unto him again. And that is also what Paul is saying. The reason we practice separation is because it brings us into a father-son relationship functionally with God. His motive is love. "I will be your father, you will be my sons, you will be my daughters," saith the Lord God Almighty.

Separation is "Sweetheart, I love you, but if you are going to be with me, you can't be with him. I will take you back, but I will only take you back if it is only me." That seems cruel. That seems unreasonable. No, that is love. We really are not separating *from*, although that is the result. The real motive for separation is love of truth. Love of the One who is Truth makes it absolutely impossible to fellowship deliberately with error.

Conclusion

Separation is a very difficult issue. It is a difficult issue particularly where it touches our lives. And it does touch our lives as a series of judgment calls that we are going to have to make. It will always involve people. "I don't want it to involve people." Wake up! It will always involve people. It is unavoidable. "Well, I would like to move to a different position where I won't have to deal with separation." The only place you will not have to deal with separation is in the grave. You will always have to wrestle with, who will I be with, and who will I not be with, and why?

We should not break fellowship over ludicrous things. We should not pass judgment on how things appear. Gentlemen, God expects you to judge righteous judgment. Do not run from it. Do not rejoice in it. Just do it, out of love of God and love for the Truth.