

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 23 February 2014

No. T0821

Speaker: Mr. Anthony Brett

Called to be holy: Separation - not exclusion or segregation

The title for this week's talk is really quite a mouthful! "Separation - not exclusion or segregation" It forms part of the series of talks entitled "Called to be holy" which tries to deal with the Bible's teaching on the Christian's position living in an increasingly unholy environment and our relationship with churches who appear to ignore Bible teaching on many moral issues. I hope we can look at today's subject in a helpful and positive way as we review what the Bible says on this subject.

Just to set the scene, it might be helpful to read a story from the Old Testament concerning well-known Abram and his nephew Lot. Abram had been called by God as we read in Genesis 12: *"Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'"*, Genesis 12:1-3 In Genesis 12:4 we read of Abram's obedience *"So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him"* but the Spirit of God adds, *"and Lot went with him."* It is almost as if Lot just tagged along with his uncle, but without much conviction of being obedient to God's instruction.

The two men and their families continued together for some time and had various adventures, but also both prospered and grew rich. It was their prosperity that eventually led to friction between them. They were both rich in herds and cattle and there was concern that there wasn't sufficient grass and pasture to sustain both flocks. They agree to go their separate ways, and so the narrative continues. *"And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom"*, Genesis 13:10-12.

Abram graciously allowed Lot to choose first, saying he would be content to go off in the opposite direction. Lot made what was the obvious but selfish choice and headed towards the fertile plains of Jordan, pitching his tent near Sodom. Later we learn that Lot moved into the city of Sodom and even became a magistrate there. However yet again the Holy Spirit adds a brief comment to the story by saying *"But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD"*, Genesis 13:13.

You are probably wondering why I am telling this story! What relevance does it have to the subject matter? I think it actually shines a lot of light on our subject, and I'll explain why. Both Abram and Lot had a relationship with God, both were successful men, and men of influence. But there comes a point in their lives when they go in very different directions. Lot, as the Bible says, *"chose for himself"* (Genesis 13:11) and ends up living in the notorious city of Sodom. Abram is content to be guided by God who promises to richly bless him.

It is conjecture on my part, but it would seem from the Bible story that Lot quickly moves from living in a tent outside Sodom, to living in a house inside Sodom and because of his riches attains a position of influence there. The narrative would lead us to believe that Lot even became a magistrate in the city. Was Lot trying to influence the behaviour of the inhabitants of that city? To, as it were, raise the moral standards that governed the lives of the men of Sodom. If Lot was trying to do this, he signally failed! Not only was he not able to influence the behaviour of those around him, Lot even failed to influence those nearest and dearest to him!

Which of these two men were of most use to God and also which of these two men were of most help and benefit to those around him? Clearly Abraham! Lot associated himself with all the evils of Sodom, and ultimately failed to influence even his own family for good. His wife died in God's judgement of Sodom (see Genesis 19:12-29), and Lot himself ended his days living in a cave with his two daughters (see Genesis 19:30). Abraham, on the other hand, was guided by God and faithful to God and was a benefit to many, many people, not least his own family. Not that he didn't make mistakes! Abraham made plenty, but he always sought to avoid evil and stay close to the God Who had called him in the first place. I hope this story from the Bible will lay a foundation for our talk. These are the two sides to separation. One is negative, one is positive. But they are like two sides of the same coin and we need them both.

Abraham was separate from evil, but he was also separated to God. The first without the second is just cold legalism, but in practice the second, separation to God will lead to separation from evil.

If we have believed on the Lord Jesus we too discover that we have been called by God to leave the place of our natural birth and move towards the place where God ultimately wants us to be; in heaven with Himself! The question is, "How should we behave ourselves in the meantime?" There are two easy options and one very difficult option! One easy option would be to separate ourselves from all influences around us and only ever associate with those who have exactly the same beliefs as ourselves. To cut ourselves off from people around who do not believe in God and also to have nothing to do with other Christians or groups of Christians who behave differently from the way we believe they should behave!

At the other extreme, there is the option of continuing to live our lives in exactly the same way as we did before our conversion. Maybe going to all the places we used to go to regardless of what was going on there, using the language that we used to use, and valuing the things that we used to value. Clearly both of these attitudes are wrong, very wrong! Which leaves us with the third option, which is the very difficult option that lies in the middle between the other two!

We need to remind ourselves again that we have been called, like Abraham by God. We have been purchased and cleansed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Peter 1:18-19). We need constantly to remember that His death at Calvary should have been our death! Paul, writing to the Christians at Corinth, says *"For the love of Christ constrains us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again"*, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. We have a happy obligation to the Lord Jesus to live now entirely for His pleasure and purpose. Just as in the same way Jesus, when He lived here, conducted Himself always for the pleasure and purpose of God.

So we will be different! Not strange or peculiar, but different, living by principles that run contrary to the world's thinking and having goals and objectives that lay outside of this world. I think this talk needs to deal then with two issues. How do we relate to those people around us who do not share our belief, and then how do we relate to other Christians who share our belief in the Lord Jesus but live their lives and worship Him in a very different way.

It is well worth reading some verses from the first Psalm at this point. *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper"*, Psalm 1:1-3.

Here we have a picture of a person with a deep love of God and His Word and separates himself as much as possible from those whose behaviour will spoil his enjoyment of God and His Word. Peter makes a helpful comment about this in relation to Lot. *"Righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds."* 2 Peter 2:7-8. Peter makes it very clear that Lot by continuing to live among the inhabitants of Sodom oppressed or caused pain and torment to himself every single day! What a miserable existence! He had a choice in this matter but took no action and so he, Lot, *"tormented his righteous soul"*

For a period of some months I found myself working in a situation where on an almost daily basis I had a group of people just outside my office who would use the most foul and offensive language. It was incredible how it made me feel, I felt dirty and depressed. The Psalm we read said, *"Blessed [or happy] is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful"* (Psalm 1:1). My experience and Lot's experience is that if we regularly sit and listen to scornful unbelievers or witness their "filthy conduct" we will be very unhappy!

So is this a reason for shutting ourselves away in a cave and having no contact with unbelievers? As always we learn most from the Lord Jesus, the perfect example. We read about Him in Hebrews that He was, *"Holy, harmless [or guileless], undefiled, separate from sinners"*, Hebrews 7:26. But we also read that wonderful description of Him in Luke's Gospel, *"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"*, Luke 7:34. Or we could read the complaint of the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 15, *"This Man receives sinners and eats with them"*, Luke 15:2.

No one who has read the Gospel narrative in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John could have any doubt at all of the great care and compassion that the Lord Jesus had for the people around Him. Four times in Matthew's Gospel and Mark's Gospel we read the expression that Jesus was *"moved with compassion"* (Matthew 9:36, 14:14; Mark 1:41, 6:34) Jesus was deeply affected by the need of those He came into contact with. Sometimes it was a crowd of people who were weary and hungry and sometimes it was just an individual, like the leper in Mark 1:40-45. But Jesus wasn't just moved with compassion, he also helped and healed!

But while He was always ready to help, while He had the amazing reputation of being a friend to sinners (see Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34), he never condoned their sin. Jesus would speak words of comfort to an adulterous woman that the self-righteous religious leaders wanted to stone to death (John 8:1-12), but He would still tell her not to continue in her sin (John 8:11). He might accept the invitation of Simon the Pharisee to dine at his house (see Luke 7:36-50), but that didn't stop Jesus from highlighting the man's hypocrisy! Jesus was always gracious but never ever compromised on sinful behaviour. He lived in a world marked by sin and wickedness, but was always Himself personally sinless and pure. I believe He refreshed Himself daily with the Word of God and daily sought guidance from God as it says in Isaiah. *"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned, or disciple"*, Isaiah 50:4. We too have exactly the same resources; the Word of God and prayer! (See Ephesians 6:17-18).

However, clearly you and I don't have the miraculous power that Jesus did, but often I know I don't have His compassion either! One problem of the current age is that we almost have too much information. We can be overwhelmed by the need that exists in the world and feel that there is nothing that we can do that will make a difference. We should help where we can, but we should also make it clear why we are helping! The Lord Jesus said that even a cup of cold water given in His name will reap a reward! (See Matthew 10:42, Mark 9:41)

But if our ability to help in a material way is inevitably limited we do possess something that is not limited that we are required to share and that is the Gospel! At the beginning of Luke's Gospel we read that the Lord quoted *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD"*, Luke 4:18-19. We are not ever going to sort out all of this world's ills and we are not called to! But we have been commissioned to share God's glorious gospel concerning His Son. And we do this most effectively if we live lives separated from sin and separated to God, or as Paul wrote, *"Let your conduct [or manner of life] be worthy of the gospel of Christ"*, Philippians 1:27.

Certainly in this country it is true that it is difficult if not impossible to get unbelievers to step inside a church, but that doesn't excuse us from our responsibility to share the good news! Where we can we use children's work, coffee mornings, Carol services, and whatever other means we can think of to encourage people under the sound of God's Word. At the end of the day though hasn't it always been true that the most effective witness is to those we know and work with. Our Lord was called *"The friend of sinners"* (see Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34) and I am sure He was a true friend to them. He didn't do so by treating them with condescension, although He has shown the most amazing condescension by leaving heaven's glory and light and coming into this world of need and darkness (see Philippians 2:5-11). No, we read in Proverbs *"A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother"*, Proverbs 18:24.

I do believe our Lord was the most genuine of friends to so many while He was here on this earth. And He proved His friendship; *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"*, John 15:13 and He went on to add in speaking to His disciples, *"You are My friends..."* (John 15:14). He shared their meals, He gave of His time and interest and in turn they would share their concerns with Him. This type of evangelism takes time, love and consistency; things that often are in short supply! But it is effective, and it follows in the footsteps of our Lord. I should be ready to show an interest and concern for my neighbour's family, for my work colleagues interests and worries. To share their meal and for them to share mine, but I must also never forget that ultimately I *"serve the Lord Christ"* (see Colossians 3:24) and His interests and honour are paramount, and I must never do anything to compromise His great Name.

When Jesus turned to His disciples and said *"You are My friends..."* (John 15:14), He qualified it by adding *"if you do whatever I command you."* It is unthinkable that the Lord Jesus, in being a friend to the despised tax-collectors for the Roman authorities and sinners in general ever compromised His own personal holiness or condoned their behaviour. Quite the contrary, on many occasions He spelt out what was righteous and proper, and yet still He was known as the friend of sinners! This is a real challenge to me! I don't make friends easily, maybe because I'm not very friendly! But am I losing opportunities to win people's confidence and consequently the opportunity to share God's good news with them?

The other aspect of this week's talk though has to do with how we relate to other believers. It is readily obvious that one of the great weaknesses of Christian witness is the almost innumerable sects and groups that Christians have divided into. In the early chapters of the book of Acts this was not the case and the unity and love of Christians for each other was in itself a powerful witness. Sadly, through the centuries, there have been so many little groups form with so many different names and objectives. What should my attitude be in the face of this great difficulty?

Well it is always easy to exclude everyone who isn't in our little circle or group! A very helpful incident happened to the disciples which is relevant to our talk. In Luke 9:46, the disciples had been arguing as to who should be the greatest! The Scripture says *"And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.'" (Luke 9:47-48).* I am sure this made the disciples very uncomfortable so John immediately changes the subject, but in doing so, demonstrates that he hadn't learnt the lesson of being childlike. *"Now John answered and said, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side'"*, Luke 9:49-50.

"He does not follow with us!" How easily we can adopt this sort of attitude, focusing only on the work of the Lord among "our" particular group of Christians, forgetting entirely that it is not "our" group at all. The church is not ours but His! Jesus said *"I will build MY church"*, Matthew 16:18. He is the One Who purchased it with His own precious blood, and He alone will take it to glory to be with Himself for ever. *"Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it"* Ephesians 5:25. Our Lord loves each and every member of His church, and so should we, so should I! When the shepherd in Luke 15:1-7 found his lost sheep, he *"called together his friends and neighbours and said rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep that was lost"* (Luke 15:6). Jesus calls us to share His joy at the rescuing of the lost! One day we will perhaps understand just how many saints played a part in winning a soul for Christ. The many links in a chain, the consistent Christian witness, sometimes over several years that eventually lead a soul to the Saviour. Paul, writing in his letter to the Corinthians said *"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase."* 1 Corinthians 3:6. God gave the increase! We must never forget that.

But whilst we should be interested in, and praying for the work of the Lord in our area regardless of which group of Christians the Lord is using to do that work, it is also sadly true that we cannot always have active fellowship with all other Christians. It would be lovely to wind back the clock, to remove all differences and barriers and live together as one big happy family. Sadly that cannot happen as it is true that there are practices and beliefs held by some that run contrary to what is written in the divinely inspired Word of God. Again I am quoting from Paul's letter to the Corinthians; *"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.' Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'"*, 2 Corinthians 6:14-17. Paul in turn was quoting the words of God through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah.

These verses make it very clear that there must be a limit on the extent of our relationship with unbelievers, we cannot be *"yoked together"* with them in marriage or business. I think the expression *"yoked together"* implies shared interests and responsibilities that are not easy or sometimes not even possible to escape from. I do believe a similar principle applies as well to our relationship with other Christians. If practices are allowed that are dishonouring to God and clearly contrary to His Word I cannot associate myself with them, because if I do I share in the responsibility for allowing them. The same is true if doctrine is held and taught that is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. I am not talking about small differences of interpretation about particular verses of Scripture, but about teaching that deliberately or otherwise dishonours the Lord Jesus and sets aside clearly taught Scriptural values and principles. This is something that will become an increasing problem as matters like Christian marriage are attacked by the present government. Faithful believers are finding it harder and harder to live according to their beliefs in this increasingly secular society.

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 are not negative verses though. God is making a promise, and He always keeps His promises! He says. *"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you...'"*, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18. On our part He calls us to be separate from what is unclean, on His part He promises to receive us and be a father to us. And that has got to be worthwhile!

God give us the compassion to be a true friend to those around us, not afraid to speak the truth in love, and redeem the time left to us to share God's good news concerning His glorious Son our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.