

Seeing and Separating



Gary Wilkerson November 2, 2015

On the night before his crucifixion, at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples, “Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me” (John 14:19). What an interesting statement for Jesus to make, knowing the disciples wouldn’t grasp it. One of them asked, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” (14:22).

Of course, Jesus had a lesson in mind. He answered, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.... And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (14:23, 27, 29-31).

I have slightly abridged Jesus’ response here to bring into focus a theme he’s driving at throughout this passage. That theme is separation. In these few verses, Christ makes three clear distinctions between his kingdom and the world: “The world will see me no more, but you will see me” (14:19). “My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you” (14:27). “The ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me” (14:30).

Why did Jesus make these distinctions to his followers? It seemed important to him that we see the clear divisions between these things. The fact is, God makes such divisions throughout the Bible. At the Creation, he separated light from darkness and day from night. He separated Israel from all other nations. In the New Testament, he commands his church, “Come out from among them and be separate.” And at the Judgment, he will separate sheep from goats. Throughout his Word, God is constantly drawing lines of division that tell us very clearly, “This is one thing and this is another.”

Until the past few years, separation was a defining characteristic of Christ’s church. Being set apart was a clear command from God’s Word and a part of every Christian’s calling. But today there seems to be very little distinction between the church and the world. This is tragic, because God has set his people apart for his kingdom purposes, to be instruments of change—for the very aim of making a difference in the world.

Instead, a lot of churches today seek to appease the world. They compromise Christ’s gospel rather than stand on the gospel to impact the world. As a result, a lot of Christians have allowed themselves to conform to the world’s values and character rather than to Jesus’.

This can’t make God happy. When the lost souls of this world face serious life crises and are confused with no source of hope, Christ’s church is meant to embody the difference they’re looking for. Our lives are to be distinguished by hope, joy, peace, love and giving. But a lot of followers today have erased those distinctions by creeping toward a line of compromise and even crossing it. As a result, the lost and hurting see Christians’ lives as no different from their own.

Jesus addressed this when he said to his disciples, in essence, “The world sees me one way, but I have revealed myself to you in full. You’ve seen that the peace I offer isn’t received by the world. I’ve demonstrated to you the values of my kingdom—how to live, believe, walk and serve the Father. Those values are in stark contrast to the

world's—and you are to live out my kingdom values. If Satan has no part in me, he can have no part in your lives, either.”

When God speaks of separating from the world, he doesn't mean removing ourselves from it. The separation he desires takes place in the heart. It is reflected in our desires, our choices, our lifestyle. For an older generation of Christians, being separate meant not drinking, smoking or partying. Those are outward things, but God is addressing much more. He's asking, “Is your heart still linked to the world in a way that excludes me? Do you draw peace and self-worth from what the world says about you or from how I see you?”

The Lord is describing two very different conditions of the heart. According to Jesus, in the last days this difference will reveal itself in people. Revelation tells us the wicked will grow wicked and the holy will become holier. Of course, any Christian's holiness is based on his position in Christ. But holiness is also a pursuit as well as a position—it's a part of our relationship with Jesus. As we seek his holiness, the appeal of this world diminishes in us.

Why is there so little separation from the world by the church today? One reason is there's very little call for separation. When a pastor preaches holiness, he's seen as old school, negative, legalistic. But that shouldn't matter. Anyone whose teaching doesn't include the biblical concept of separation does his people a disservice because it falls short of Jesus' words.

Abraham's life provides an example of Christ's teaching on separation.

Abraham wasn't a Christian or a Jew. As far as we know, he didn't have any history with God at all. But one day he was commanded by God, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham packed up and left!

We all venerate Abraham as our forefather in the faith, but his story is actually sort of strange. Here's a guy who had everything—wealth and heritage, a wonderful wife and plenty of cattle and land. Incredibly, when a voice told him, “Get up and leave,” he heeded it. He willingly separated himself from everything he knew, even good things, to follow God.

Now, if you're married, let me ask you: Would you think it strange if your spouse said a voice told him to give up his job, his 401(k), your home and possessions, and move your family to another state with no promise of support or income—because he thinks God told him to? Maybe you would be willing to go—but wouldn't you be tempted to call a psychiatrist first?

What compelled Abraham to do this? What empowered such clear separation? A look at the apostle Stephen provides some insight. He was clearly set apart for God's purposes, working miracles and wonders in Christ's name in the early church. Yet this got him in trouble with the religious leaders. As he stood before them on trial, he preached, “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia” (Acts 7:2).

Stephen was saying, in effect, “Are you offended by my faith? Well, it all started when our father Abraham left behind his dependency on the things of this world to follow God. Once he beheld the Lord's glory, he gladly separated himself from everything he knew!”

Many people reading this know what Stephen was talking about. When they first encountered Christ, they recognized, “I just tasted something I've never tasted before. I've never known this kind of joy. I've never experienced this awe. I know for sure I'm on holy ground.”

Whenever we lose sight of God's glory, things start to fall apart.

Abraham did amazing exploits as God led him into the fullness of his blessing. Later, though, when circumstances turned bad, Abraham lost his focus on God's glory. He turned instead to his own resources: “Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe” (Genesis 12:10).

The story makes clear that Egypt was the last place Abraham should have gone. Along the way he put his wife in jeopardy, he lost her to a hostile king for a season, and he lied and manipulated things to save himself. This man

had trusted God wholly up to that point. Why didn't he trust God to see him through his difficulty?

Maybe the same thing happens in your crises. When life gets hard—in your finances, your health, your family—do you keep your eyes fixed on God's glory through it all? If you've ever "gone to Egypt" for help in such times, you know how lifeless an effort it can be. Often it complicates the problem, adding shame and despair.

My point is this: Our separateness from the world doesn't happen through our efforts or abilities. It happens through a revelation of God—and his glory remains with us even in our hard times. Consider the prophet Isaiah. When he entered the temple, he saw the glory of God: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). That holy sight sent Isaiah face down on the floor in humble awe: "I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'" (6:5).

At that moment Isaiah recognized God's separateness. The Lord told him, "I have separated you for my holy purposes. I am sending you to preach my word to a corrupt people. They will resist you, but you'll be able to endure it because you have seen my glory. When they turn on you, you won't have to 'go to Egypt,' because you've seen the nature of the God who has called you."

When God's glory manifests, it reveals his separateness from us—his purity, holiness and almightiness. Even the celestial beings in his presence see him as separate and full of majesty. Right now multitudes of angels are in God's presence, and they never stop praising him day or night. Their nonstop song is, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12). That is the effect of God's holy nature: He invokes our praise at all times in all things.

Amazingly, this holy God tells us, "The world won't see me—but you will."

The Jewish leaders knew the separateness of God but they couldn't see his tenderness.

The religious leaders were outraged when Jesus called God his Father. They saw it as blasphemy and wanted to kill him for it. Yet Jesus took this audacious teaching a step further when he told the disciples, "Not only does your heavenly Father care for you, but he's going to make his home in you." "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

Picture yourself as one of the disciples in the Upper Room when Jesus said this. You were taught the same as your elders, that no one could see God and live. You knew that righteous Moses was only able to behold a small part of God and survive it. So when you heard Jesus' teaching you would have thought, "There's no way God can make his home in me. He's too holy, too awesome, too other. It can't be!" Yet Jesus has entrusted to us these incredible twin truths: God is indeed holy and pure—and he seeks to dwell in us, his creation.

Think about what Jesus taught his fledgling church that night. He began by saying he would leave to prepare a home for us. And he ended by saying he would make his home in us. There is the paradoxical beauty of our God—holy and pure, yet intimate and caring. He is above us and with us—and he gives us peace we could never find on our own. That is a God worthy of our confidence in and through all things!

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