

BE YE SEPARATE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 10, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Most men are made in such a way that they seek the approval of those about them. All of us like to be liked. In order to be accepted by those around us, we tend to conform to their pattern of life. This conforming is apparent in dress, in behavior, in thinking, and even in language. For example, we are all aware of the man who comes from some other section of the country to live here in the South. At first, he finds the southern drawl strange and even amusing. After he has stayed for a few months, and even more especially if he stays for a few years, when he returns to his original home all his friends tell him that he has taken on the "Southern drawl." Without intending to, and with no conscious effort on his part, he has come to pronounce his words in the way that they were pronounced by those about him. This same thing happens in many phases of our lives.

Much of this is good. It is certainly good for a person to fit into the environment in which he lives. No one would suggest that it is a virtue not to be able to adapt to one's surroundings, nor to work smoothly in a new situation and among new people. However, this conforming can also be dangerous--especially to the Christian. It can involve compromise of principle and lead to the loss of souls.

The Apostle Paul Writes

It was in this vein that the apostle Paul wrote, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness and iniquity? or what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement hath a temple of God with idols? for we are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore, Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, And touch no unclean thing; And I will receive you, And will be to you a Father, And ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." (II Cor. 6:14-7:1).

In this important passage, which the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, there are three key sentences: "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers," "Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate," and "Touch no unclean thing."

What This Does Not Mean

First of all, this text does not mean a withdrawal from all contact with the unbelieving and wicked people of the world. Some have thought that it did. Some have wrapped their skirts about them, so to speak, and in self-righteous piety have withdrawn from association with the world to be alone with their own goodness. This is not taught in this or any other passage of the scriptures. Nowhere do the scriptures teach that Christians should withdraw behind the high walls of the monastery and the convent.

Rather, Christians are to swim in the main current of life. Christ ate with publicans and sinners. He came to this earth in order that he might associate with evil people and through this association cause them to be better. Such was the pattern of life of all the early apostles and other Christians. They lived among the pagans in order that the pagans might become Christian.

In the night of his betrayal Jesus prayed, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them (the apostles) from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one." (John 17:15). In the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 9-13, the apostle Paul spoke of disciplining those who were unfaithful in the church, "I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators; not at all meaning with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters: for then must ye needs go out of the world: but as it is I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat. For what have I to do with judging them that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Put away the wicked man from among yourselves."

In this passage the apostle Paul plainly shows that while an evil person within the church must be severely disciplined, he is not advocating that Christians cease association with unbelievers, or even adulterers, extortioners, or idolaters, for it is the business of Christians to associate with such people in order that they may cease to be sinners. Certainly our text must not be understood as indicating a lack of concern on the part of Christians for the souls of others.

What This Text Does Mean

Having suggested what our text does not mean, let me suggest what it does mean. This passage of scripture means that any intimate association with others that hinders one spiritually must be discontinued. It is not primarily geographical, or physical, or even social separation that is intended, but rather it is separation from anything that will degrade the Christian morally and spiritually. Christ lived

and worked among the worst sinners that the world knew, in many respects, but always the stream of influence was flowing in his direction. When he went into the homes of publicans and sinners, he exerted the influence upward toward righteousness. Their wickedness was reduced, their motives were heightened, and their hope of salvation was increased by his having come among them. So must it be with us.

Charles Morgan wrote a play some years ago which he called "The Judge's Story." In this play at one point he puts into the mouth of the judge the following advice for his daughter, "Ask yourself in what work, in what company, what loyalty your own voice is clear, and in what muffled. By the answer, rule your life." That's it. If our voices can be clear and distinct, meaning that our influence is positive and real, we may continue a relationship, but in any relationship where our spiritual voices are muffled and indistinct, we are on dangerous ground.

Does This Include Marriage?

Often, concerning this passage, I am asked the question, "Does this mean marriage?" The answer is, "Of course," Since marriage is the most intimate relationship in life, surely the principle that is taught in this passage applies to marriage. If one should ask, "Does this apply to business?" the answer would be, "Of course." "Does it apply in education?" Again the answer would be, "Of course," The principle taught in this passage applies to everything and to everyone who strives to be a Christian.

Perhaps at this point it is good to survey God's teaching concerning marriage throughout the scriptures. Genesis 6:1-7 teaches us that when the "sons of God" married the "daughters of men" that the result was so sinful a state that God decided to destroy man, with the exception of Noah and his family, from the face of the earth. Alien marriage was forbidden in Israel, as taught in Exodus 34:16, and Deut. 7:3-4. The physically strong Samson fell into the pit of a foreign marriage and thereby met his downfall, as is taught in Judges 14:3. Even the wise man Solomon made this tragic mistake when he took unto himself many foreign wives, who continued to worship their own idolatrous gods. Ultimately, even though he himself would not have believed it possible in earlier years, Solomon built temples for these pagan non-existent gods. This is presented in I Kings 11:1-10. Still later, when Ezra led a great host of the captives back from Babylonian captivity, he taught again God's laws against the taking of foreign wives and demanded that the Jews put away the foreign wives they had taken. We find this in Ezra 9:10. It was difficult; there was much sorrow and suffering; but it had to be done because God disapproved of foreign entanglements.

In the New Testament we find a number of teachings that would seem to indicate that Christians should marry Christians, but nowhere do we find it more clearly stated than in I Cor. 7:39, where Paul wrote, "A wife is bound for so long time as her husband liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is free to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord." Notice that the Christian widow must marry "in the Lord." It is obvious, then, from the scriptures that God expects his people to marry people of like mind. What consistency could there be in a Christian entering into so intimate a relationship as marriage with one who does not share faith in God, in Christ, in the Bible, and in the church?

Principles That Enforce These Duties

Five times in this brief paragraph the apostle Paul asks a question. Each of these questions contrasts the disagreement between Christianity and heathenism. Notice each one in its emphasis: "What fellowship have righteousness and iniquity?" "What communion hath light with darkness?" "What concord hath Christ with Belial?" "What portion hath a believer with an unbeliever?" "What agreement hath a temple of God with idols?"

The Promises That Inspire and Motivate

Where does the Christian find the moral strength to cut the ties with those who would drag him down? Where does he find the spiritual stamina to separate himself from a business organization, or some other organization which is bad for him spiritually? Where does the Christian find the ability to break off a romantic relationship with one whose spiritual interests are so divergent from his own as to make marriage a dangerous venture?

The strength is found in the promises that God has given. "I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people ... I will receive you, and will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty ... Having therefore these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves of all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

We must live in the world, yet not be of the world. Christians are to be lights in the world, sending forth the reflected light of the Lord into the dark places of the earth and thereby brightening them. Christians are to be the salt of the earth, using the saving power of God to redeem the souls of men. Christians must not, on the other hand be overcome by evil, but by bringing the power of God into contact with their fellowmen they must overcome the evil. In short, the Christian ought to examine every association and relationship of life and make sure that there is no compromise with evil. Let each of us hear and seriously heed the admonition of the Lord, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers ... Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate ... and touch no unclean thing."