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Wesley Center Online

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 81

In What Sense We Are To Leave The World

"Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And I will be to you a Father, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." 2 Cor. 6:17, 18.

1. How exceeding few in the religious world have duly considered these solemn words! We have read them over and over, but never laid them to heart, or observed that they contain as plain and express a command as any in the whole Bible. And it is to be feared, there are still fewer that understand the genuine meaning of this direction. Numberless persons in England have interpreted it as a command to come out of the Established Church. And in the same sense it has been understood by thousands in the neighboring kingdoms. Abundance of sermons have been preached, and of books wrote, upon this supposition. And indeed many pious men have grounded their separation from the Church chiefly on this text. "God himself," say they, "commands us, `Come out from among them, and be ye separate.' And it is only upon this condition that he will receive us, and we "shall be the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty."

2. But this interpretation is totally foreign to the design of the Apostle, who is not here speaking of this or that church, but on quite another subject. Neither did the Apostle himself or any of his brethren draw any such inference from the words. Had they done so it would have been a flat contradiction both to the example and precept of their Master. For although the Jewish church was then full as unclean, as unholy, both inwardly and outwardly, as any Christian Church now upon earth, yet our Lord constantly attended the service of it. And he directed his followers in this, as in every other respect, to tread in his steps. This is clearly implied in that remarkable passage: "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: For they say and do not." (Matt. 23:2, 3.) Even though they themselves say and do not, though their lives contradict their doctrines, though they were ungodly men, yet our Lord here not only permits but requires his disciples to hear them. For he requires them to "observe and do what they say." But this could not be if they did not hear them. Accordingly the apostles, as long as they were at Jerusalem, constantly attended the public service. Therefore it is certain these words have no reference to a separation from the Established Church.

3. Neither have they any reference to the direction given by the Apostle in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. The whole passage runs thus: "I wrote unto you in an epistle, not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you, not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no not to eat." (1 Cor. 5:9-11.) This wholly relates to them that are members of the same Christian community. The Apostle tells them expressly, he does not give this direction, not to company with such and such persons, with regard to the Heathens, or to men in general; and adds this plain reason, "For then must ye needs go out of the world;" you could transact no business in it. "But if any man that is called a brother," -- that is connected with you in the same religious society, -- "be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no not to eat." How important a caution is this! But how little is it observed, even by those that are, in other respects, conscientious Christians! Indeed some parts of it are not easy to be observed, for a plain reason, -- they are not easy to be

understood. I mean, it is not easy to be understood to whom the characters belong. It is very difficult, for instance, to know, unless in some glaring cases, to whom the character of an extortioner or of a covetous man belongs. We can hardly know one or the other, without seeming at least to be "busy bodies in other men's matters." And yet the prohibition is as strong concerning converse with these, as with fornicators or adulterers. We can only act in the simplicity of our hearts, without setting up for infallible judges, (still willing to be better informed,) according to the best light we have.

4. But although this direction relates only to our Christian brethren (such, at least, by outward profession;) that in the text is of a far wider extent: it unquestionably relates to all mankind. It clearly requires us to keep at a distance, as far as is practicable, from all ungodly men. Indeed it seems the word which we render unclean thing, *tou akaqartou*, might rather be rendered unclean person; probably alluding to the ceremonial law which forbade touching one that was legally unclean. But even here, were we to understand the expression literally, were we to take the words in the strictest sense, the same absurdity would follow; we must needs, as the Apostle speaks, "go out of the world:" We should not be able to abide in those callings which the providence of God has assigned us. Were we not to converse at all with men of those characters, it would be impossible to transact our temporal business. So that every conscientious Christian would have nothing to do, but to flee into the desert. It would not suffice to turn recluses, to shut ourselves up in monasteries or nunneries; for even then we must have some intercourse with ungodly men, in order to procure the necessaries of life.

5. The words therefore, must necessarily be understood with considerable restriction. They do not prohibit our conversing with any man, good or bad, in the way of worldly business. A thousand occasions will occur, whereon we must converse with them in order to transact those affairs which cannot be done without them. And some of these may require us to have frequent intercourse with drunkards, or fornicators: Yea, sometimes it may be requisite for us to spend a considerable time in their company: Otherwise we should not be able to fulfil the duties of our several callings. Such conversation therefore with men, holy or unholy, is no way contrary to the Apostle's advice.

6. What is it then which the Apostle forbids First, the conversing with ungodly men when there is no necessity, no providential call, no business, that requires it: Secondly, the conversing with them more frequently than business necessarily requires: Thirdly, the spending more time in their company than is necessary to finish our business: Above all, Fourthly, the choosing ungodly persons, however ingenious or agreeable, to be our ordinary companions, or to be our familiar friends. If any instance of this kind will admit of less excuse than others, it is that which the Apostle expressly forbids elsewhere; the being "unequally yoked with an unbeliever" in marriage; with any person that has not the love of God in their heart, or at least the fear of God before their eyes. I do not know anything that can justify this; neither the sense, wit, or beauty of the person, nor temporal advantage, nor fear of want; no, nor even the command of a parent. For if any parent command what is contrary to the Word of God, the child ought to obey God rather than man.

7. The ground of this prohibition is laid down at large in the preceding verses: "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness What communion hath light with darkness And what concord hath Christ with Belial Or what part hath he that believeth with an unbeliever" (Taking that word in the extensive sense, for him that hath neither the love nor fear of God.) "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 be my people." It follows, "Wherefore, come out from among them;" the unrighteous, the children of darkness, the sons of Belial, the unbelievers; "and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing," or

person, "and I will receive you."

8. Here is the sum of this prohibition to have any more intercourse with unholy men than is absolutely necessary. There can be no profitable fellowship between the righteous and the unrighteous; as there can be no communion between light and darkness, -- whether you understand this of natural or of spiritual darkness. As Christ can have no concord with Belial; so a believer in him can have no concord with an unbeliever. It is absurd to imagine that any true union or concord should be between two persons, while one of them remains in darkness, and the other walks in the light. They are subjects, not only of two separate, but of two opposite kingdoms. They act upon quite different principles; they aim at quite different ends. It will necessarily follow, that frequently, if not always, they will walk in different paths. How can they walk together, till they are agreed -- until they both serve either Christ or Belial

9. And what are the consequences of our not obeying this direction Of our not coming out from among unholy men Of not being separate from them, but contracting or continuing a familiar intercourse with them It is probable it will not immediately have any apparent, visible ill consequences. It is hardly to be expected, that it will immediately lead us into any outward sin. Perhaps it may not presently occasion our neglect of any outward duty. It will first sap the foundations of our religion: It will, by little and little damp our zeal for God; it will gently cool that fervency of spirit which attended our first love. If they do not openly oppose anything we say or do, yet their very spirit will, by insensible degrees, affect our spirit, and transfuse into it the same lukewarmness and indifference toward God and the things of God. It will weaken all the springs of our soul, destroy the vigour of our spirit, and cause us more and more to slacken our pace in running the race that is set before us.

10. By the same degrees all needless intercourse with unholy men will weaken our divine evidence and conviction of things unseen: It will dim the eyes of the soul whereby we see Him that is invisible, and weaken our confidence in him. It will gradually abate our "taste of the powers of the world to come;" and deaden that hope which before made us "sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus." It will imperceptibly cool that flame of love which before enabled us to say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee!" Thus it strikes at the root of all vital religion; of our fellowship with the Father and with the Son.

11. By the same degrees, and in the same secret and unobserved manner, it will prepare us to "measure back our steps to earth again". It will lead us softly, to relapse into the love of the world from which we were clean escaped; to fall gently into the desire of the flesh; the seeking happiness in the pleasures of sense; -- the desire of the eye; the seeking happiness in the pleasure of imagination; -- and the pride of life; the seeking it in pomp, in riches, or in the praise of man. And all this may be done by the assistance of the spirit who "beguiled Eve through his subtlety," before we are sensible of his attack, or are conscious of any loss.

12. And it is not only the love of the world in all its branches which necessarily steals upon us, while we converse with men of a worldly spirit farther than duty requires, but every other evil passion and temper of which the human soul is capable; in particular pride, vanity, censoriousness, evil surmising, proneness to revenge: While, on the other hand levity, gaiety, and dissipation steal upon us and increase continually. We know how all these abound in the men that know not God. And it cannot be but they will insinuate themselves into all who frequently and freely converse with them: They insinuate most deeply into those who are not apprehensive of any danger; and most of all, if they have any particular affection, if they have more love than duty requires, for those who do not love God,

with whom they familiarly converse.

13. Hitherto I have supposed that the persons with whom you converse are such as we use to call good sort of people; such as are styled, in the cant term of the day, men of worthy characters; -- one of the silly, insignificant words, that ever came into fashion. I have supposed them to be free from cursing, swearing, profaneness; from Sabbath-breaking and drunkenness; from lewdness, either in word or action; from dishonesty, lying, and slandering: In a word, to be entirely clear from open vice of every kind. Otherwise, whoever has even the fear of God must in any wise keep at a distance from them. But I am afraid I have made a supposition which hardly can be admitted. I am afraid, some of the persons with whom you converse more than business necessarily requires, do not deserve even the character of good sort of men, -- are not worthy of anything but shame and contempt. Do not some of them live in open sin -- in cursing and swearing, drunkenness, or uncleanness You cannot long be ignorant of this; for they take little pains to hide it. Now, is it not certain, all vice is of an infectious nature for who can touch pitch and not be defiled From these, therefore, you ought undoubtedly to flee as from the face of a serpent. Otherwise how soon may "evil communications corrupt good manners!"

14. I have supposed, likewise, that those unholy persons with whom you frequently converse have no desire to communicate their own spirit to you, or to induce you to follow their example. But this also is a supposition which can hardly be admitted. In many cases their interest may be advanced by your being a partaker of their sins. But supposing interest to be out of the question, does not every man naturally desire, and more or less endeavour, to bring over his acquaintance to his own opinion or party So that, as all good men desire and endeavour to make others good, like themselves, in like manner all bad men desire and endeavour to make their companions as bad as themselves.

15. But if they do not, if we allow this almost impossible supposition, that they do not desire or use any endeavours to bring you over to their own temper and practice, still it is dangerous to converse with them. I speak not only of openly vicious men, but of all that do not love God, or at least fear him, and sincerely "seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Admit, such companions do not endeavour to make you like themselves; does this prove you are in no danger from them See that poor wretch that is ill of the plague! He does not desire, he does not use the least endeavour, to communicate his distemper to you. Yet have a care! Touch him not! Nay, go not near him, or you know not how soon you may be in just the same condition. To draw the parallel: Though we should suppose the man of the world does not desire, design, or endeavour to communicate his distemper to you, yet touch him not! Come not too near him; for it is not only his reasonings or persuasions that may infect your soul, but his very breath is infectious; particularly to those who are apprehensive of no danger.

16. If conversing freely with worldly-minded men has no other ill effect upon you, it will surely, by imperceptible degrees, make you less heavenly-minded. It will give a bias to your mind which will continually draw your soul to earth. It will incline you, without your being conscious of it, instead of being wholly transformed in the renewing of your mind, to be again conformed to this world in its spirit, in its maxims, and in its vain conversation. You will fall again into that levity and dissipation of spirit from which you had before clean escaped; into that superfluity of apparel, and into that foolish, frothy, unprofitable conversation, which was an abomination to you when your soul was alive to God. And you will daily decline from that simplicity both of speech and behaviour whereby you once adorned the doctrine of God our Saviour.

17. And if you go thus far in conformity to the world, it is hardly to be expected you will stop here. You will go farther in a short time: Having once lost your footing and begun to slide down, it is a thousand to one, you will not stop till you come to the bottom of the hill; till you fall yourself into some of those outward sins which your companions commit before your eyes or in your hearing. Hereby the dread and horror which struck you at first will gradually abate, till at length you are prevailed upon to follow their example. But suppose they do not lead you into outward sin, if they infect your spirit with pride, anger, or love of the world, it is enough: It is sufficient, without deep repentance, to drown your soul in everlasting perdition; seeing, (abstracted from all outward sin,) "to be carnally-minded is death."

18. But as dangerous as it is to converse familiarly with men that know not God, it is more dangerous still for men to converse with women of that character; as they are generally more insinuating than men, and have far greater power of persuasion; particularly if they are agreeable in their persons, or pleasing in their conversation. You must be more than man, if you can converse with such and not suffer any loss. If you do not feel any foolish or unholy desire; (and who can promise that you shall not) yet it is scarce possible that you should not feel more or less of an improper softness, which will make you less willing and less able to persist in that habit of denying yourself, and taking up your cross daily, which constitute the character of a good soldier of Jesus Christ. And we know that not only fornicators and adulterers, but even "the soft and effeminate," the delicate followers of a self-denying Master, "shall have no part in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

19. Such are the consequences which must surely, though perhaps slowly, follow the mixing of the children of God with the men of the world. And by this means, more than by any other, yea, than by all others put together, are the people called Methodists likely to lose their strength, and become like other men. It is indeed with a good design, and from a real desire of promoting the glory of God, that many of them admit of familiar conversation with men that know not God. You have a hope of awakening them out of sleep, and persuading them to seek the things that make for their peace. But if, after a competent time of trial, you can make no impression upon them, it will be your wisdom to give them up to God; otherwise you are more likely to receive hurt from them, than to do them any good. For if you do not raise their hearts up to heaven, they will draw yours down to earth. Therefore, retreat in time, "and come out from among them, and be ye separate."

20. But how may this be done What is the most easy and effectual method of separating ourselves from unholy men Perhaps a few advices will make this plain to those that desire to know and do the will of God.

First: Invite no unholy person to your house, unless on some very particular occasion. You may say, "But civility requires this, and sure, religion is no enemy to civility. Nay, the Apostle himself directs us to be courteous, as well as to be pitiful." I answer, You may be civil, sufficiently civil, and yet keep them at a proper distance. You may be courteous in a thousand instances, and yet stand aloof from them. And it was never the design of the Apostle to recommend any such courtesy as must necessarily prove a snare to the soul.

21. Secondly: On no account accept any invitation from an unholy person. Never be prevailed upon to pay a visit, unless you wish it to be repaid. It may be, a person desirous of your acquaintance will repeat the visit twice or thrice. But if you steadily refrain from returning it, the visitant will soon be tired. It is not improbable, he will be disobliged; and perhaps he will show marks of resentment. Lay your account with this, that when anything of the kind occurs you may neither be surprised nor

discouraged. It is better to please God and displease man, than to please man and displease God.

22. Thirdly: it is probable, you were acquainted with men of the world before you yourself knew God. What is best to be done with regard to these How may you most easily drop their acquaintance First, allow a sufficient time to try whether you cannot by argument and persuasion, applied at the soft times of address, induce them to choose the better part. Spare no pains! Exert all your faith and love, and wrestle with God in their behalf. If, after all, you cannot perceive that any impression is made upon them, it is your duty gently to withdraw from them, that you be not entangled with them. This may be done in a short time, easily and quietly, by not returning their visits. But you must expect they will upbraid you with haughtiness and unkindness, if not to your face, yet behind your back. And this you can suffer for a good conscience. It is, properly, the reproach of Christ.

23. When it pleased God to give me a settled resolution to be, not a nominal, but a real Christian, (being then about twenty-two years of age,) my acquaintance were as ignorant of God as myself. But there was this difference: I knew my own ignorance; they did not know theirs. I faintly endeavoured to help them; but in vain. Meantime I found, by sad experience, that even their harmless conversation, so called, damped all my good resolutions. But how to get rid of them was the question, which I resolved in my mind again and again. I saw no possible way, unless it should please God to remove me to another College. He did so, in a manner utterly contrary to all human probability. I was elected Fellow of a College where I knew not one person. I foresaw, abundance of people would come to see me, either out of friendship, civility, or curiosity; and that I should have offers of acquaintance new and old: But I had now fixed my plan. Entering now, as it were, into a new world, I resolved to have no acquaintance by chance, but by choice; and to choose such only as I had reason to believe would help me on in my way to heaven. In consequence of this, I narrowly observed the temper and behaviour of all that visited me. I saw no reason to think that the greater part of these truly loved or feared God. Such acquaintance, therefore, I did not choose: I could not expect they would do me any good. Therefore, when any of these came to see me, I behaved as courteously as I could. But to the question, "When will you come to see me" I returned no answer. When they had come a few times, and found I still declined returning the visit, I saw them no more. And I bless God, this has been my invariable rule for about threescore years. I knew many reflections would follow: But that did not move me; as I knew full well, it was my calling to go "through evil report and good report".

24. I earnestly advise all of you who resolve to be, not almost, but altogether Christians, to adopt the same plan, however contrary it may be to flesh and blood. Narrowly observe, which of those that fall in your way are like-minded with yourself: Who among them have you reason to believe fears God and works righteousness. Set them down as worthy of your acquaintance: Gladly and freely converse with them at all opportunities. As to all who do not answer that character, gently and quietly let them drop. However good-natured and sensible they may be, they will do you no real service. Nay, if they did not lead you into outward sin, yet they would be a continual clog to your soul, and would hinder your running with vigour and cheerfulness the race that is set before you. And if any of your friends that did once run well "turn back from the holy commandment once delivered to them", first use every method that prudence can suggest, to bring them again into the good way. But if you cannot prevail, let them go, only still commending them unto God in prayer. Drop all familiar intercourse with them, and save your own soul.

25. I advise you, Fourthly, walk circumspectly with regard to your relations. With your parents, whether religious or not, you must certainly converse, if they desire it; and with your brothers and

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