

What's the Message – Lesson 97

Our lesson today presents Jesus as the prophet speaking out against the distortion of the purpose of separation.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we pray that You would help us to understand that we are called to be in this world and be in mission to it according to Your will, but at the same time we are not to be of this world, not to be in partnership with those who have rejected You. This is truly a difficult task, and we cannot do it alone on our own, so we ask Your help and power to fulfill this part of our mission. Amen.

Teacher, this concept of being in this world, yet at the same time not a part of this world is difficult to comprehend. How can we live here, and yet not be a part of this time and place?

Yes, it is a challenging idea, but not a new one. Go back to our early lessons in Genesis, particularly lessons fourteen through nineteen.

There we presented God's command to Abraham that he and his descendants were to be a separated people, dedicated to Him and not contaminated by the pagan world around them. We saw that this separation would be a filtering process, and take place even within the same family. We saw that happen, for example, with Esau and Jacob. One brother was faithful and dedicated to Yahweh, the other was not.

But there was another aspect to this idea of separation. There was not only the aspect of separation from the evil of the world, there was the aspect of separation to accomplish a purpose. And what was that purpose? It was to be a blessing to this world and bring God's love to light this world. The ultimate purpose was to restore this world to God. But what had Israel done with this concept of separation?

The first thing I think of is when Ezra enforced the extreme practice of dissolving the mixed marriages of Israelites and gentiles, and sending their foreign wives and children away. But back much before that there were

times when we saw extreme acts by the Israelites to preserve their purity from the influence of paganism. So you are right, it is not a new idea.

But what had the practice of separation deteriorated to by the time Jesus came into our world?

Well, there was the practice that the Jews could not eat with a non-believer (that is, a Gentile), or even enter the home of a gentile. There was an arrogant attitude, one that viewed the Jew as superior to any Gentile, especially the Romans who held power over them. The Jews saw others as uncircumcised infidels, people beneath them in the eyes of Yahweh.

But they had forgotten something that God had spoken to them clearly through the words of Isaiah, particularly in chapter 42:6 and chapter 49:6. Would you read those for us Dale?

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles . . . then in chapter 49 he says: It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

But what was the reaction when Jesus cured the daughter of the Canaanite woman who was possessed by demons (Mt. 15:21-28), or when Jesus healed the servant of the Roman Centurion (Mt. 8:5-13), or when Jesus healed the man in the Gentile region of the Gerasenes that was possessed by a demon and allowed the demon to enter a herd of pigs (Lk. 8:26-39), or when He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well and told her He was the promised Messiah (Jn. 4:1-42)?

The Pharisees and other teachers of the Law complained that Jesus was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners (Mt. 9:9-13, Lk. 5:29-30, Lk. 15:1-2).

And how did Jesus rebut this attitude? Dale, please read Luke chapter 5, verse 31.

Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. And He warned them with these words: Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit (Mt. 21:43).

But even the disciples had trouble understanding that separation was not for the purpose of establishing an exclusive club. It was long after the Resurrection before they began to see that the promises given to Abraham belonged to Gentiles also.

Think of the time when Peter went to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in the city of Caesarea and preached to him, ate with him, and baptized him and his family. Peter was led to understand and to speak these words: *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.* This complete episode is recorded in Acts, chapter 10. Then note what happens in Acts, chapter 11. Peter has to defend his actions to the tradition-minded Jews !

Good points, Dale. What had happened is that the call to separation, a part of God's wondrous plan of salvation, had been turned into an end in itself, instead of being a means that would enable Israel to be a blessing to the world. The purpose of separation had been totally distorted, and Jesus had to speak out against this corruption of God's Word.

So what's the message for us today?

Simply this. Are we to be so separate that we ignore those who are not part of God's family? Do we turn away from those who need Jesus the most? Or do we realize that we, like the Israelites of old, are equal sinners with the non-believers before God? Do we understand, and practice, what it means to be a blessing to others?

Next time we will begin to learn more from Jesus as our Teacher of God.