

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Called to be holy: Separation to Christ

Probably most people have heard about Greyfriars Bobby. The best known version of the story is that Bobby, a Terrier dog, belonged to John Gray, who worked for the Edinburgh City Police as a night watchman. When John Gray died he was buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard, the graveyard surrounding Greyfriars Kirk in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Bobby then became known locally, spending the rest of his life sitting on his master's grave. Bobby is said to have sat by the grave for 14 years. Bobby died in 1872 and was buried just inside the gate of Greyfriars Kirkyard, not far from John Gray's grave. Imagine that! After a lifetime together, the dog remained faithful to his absent master for a further 14 years.

This morning we will start a new series on the subject of separation. Very often, if we think about this, it will be in a negative way. We think of all the things we can't do, or the people we should not associate with. Now this is an important part of the subject and will be dealt with next week in particular, and to a lesser extent, in the subsequent two weeks. However, before we get to that point we must start by focusing on the positive aspects of separation, and what that means to us today.

That is what struck me about the story of Greyfriars Bobby. Here was a dog that teaches us exactly what separation to a person is all about. As Christians, we too have an absent Master, but He too deserves not just 14 years of obedient following, but a whole lifetime of faithful service. Sometimes the hymns that we sing do not quite capture the truth of what the Bible says. On this particular subject, however, the hymns get it exactly right. For instance, Reuben Morgan wrote:

*"This is my desire, to honour You:
Lord, with all my heart I worship You.
All I have within me, I give You praise:
All that I adore is in You.
Lord, I give You my heart, I give You my soul;
I live for You alone.
Every breath that I take, every moment I'm awake;
Lord, have Your way in me."*

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Or Judson Van de Venter (1855-1939) wrote:

*"All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.

I surrender all,
I surrender all,
All to Thee my blessed Saviour,
I surrender all."*

Excellent words that wonderfully express how He deserves all of our lives, and what a marvellous thing it would be if we could not only sing these songs with melody and gusto, but with genuine sincerity. You see, they may very well describe the desire of my heart, sometimes, but I have to confess that the words can in no way be said to accurately describe the reality of my life. Can you imagine what a radically different person I would be if Jesus really had his way with every breath that I took, or if truly everything I had was totally surrendered to Jesus? I know many fine Christ honouring believers, but I am not sure I know anyone who could literally say those words with no sense of guilt or shame. So, this morning, we need to look at how we can make the fine sentiments of those hymns, and others besides, match more fully the reality of our lives.

Let us start by challenging ourselves with the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, in Matthew 10:34-39: *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”*

Jesus clearly had very high standards for His disciples. It was not that He had come to deliberately sabotage family relationships. Indeed, Christianity provides the strongest glue to keep families together. However, my love for Jesus should be such that, by comparison, my love for my family seems like enmity. He should be the first person I speak to in the morning, and the last person I speak to at night. If I have a problem, He should be the first person I take that to, and He should be the first person who is thanked when things go well. My time and my energy should be directed to serving Him at all times. And very often He will then tell me to “go home” and show His love to those closest to me. So I ought to love my wife and my children, not because they are nice to me, but because it is a way of showing my love to God.

Now let us turn to what Paul says to the Christians in Rome, in Romans 12:1-2: *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

I think we get here a really good explanation of how we go about positively separating ourselves to Christ. Firstly, we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Now, for those early believers, particularly those who had been converted from Judaism, but also those with pagan roots, they would have been all too familiar with the idea of animal sacrifice. Here was a lamb or goat, or perhaps a bull, that would be brought to an altar and there it would lose its life, in the vain hope that it would do the offerer some good. Now Paul is strongly urging those he writes to to present their bodies, not as a dead sacrifice, in some macabre and senseless suicide pact, but in a willing, living offering. In effect, they were to reckon that their previous life had come to an end, and their life from then on was to be totally in the hands of the Lord Jesus. They were to be totally committed to serving Jesus, not just involved in the Christian family. And there is a world of difference between commitment and involvement. This is best illustrated by considering your full English breakfast. The hen has been involved, it laid the eggs but the pig was committed, as it had to die to provide the bacon. It really is not good enough to turn up to church now and again, or even every week, and feel that that is all that is required of me as a Christian. No! God wants the whole of my life, 168 hours a week. And we are to be the ones who present ourselves willingly. Those animals brought to sacrifice went unknowing and unwilling, but God calls each one of us to voluntarily, gladly give up all rights to our own lives, for the purpose of following Him. This act of presentation is a once and for all decision to make His service our purpose in life, although we do need to keep reminding ourselves of that commitment and ensuring that it is still a reality in our lives.

Next separation means to be holy. The idea in the Bible of holiness is “set apart” for a special purpose. The same word in the Greek language of the New Testament can also sometimes be translated as saint, or sanctified. My mum knew all about holy things. It was not that her husband and children were just perfect all the time, but she used to have a pair of really sharp, heavy duty scissors. With them she used to do quite a bit of dressmaking and the like. The problem was that they would also have been really useful for cutting the sprue that my Airfix models came attached to! But I knew that I would be in serious trouble if I dared use them for such base activity! Those scissors were only for cutting material. Had they been used on my plastic kits then they would have become blunted and so lost their effectiveness for their real purpose. They were set apart, or holy, for that purpose.

Now in just such a manner God wants me to be holy. I am not thinking here of never doing anything wrong, living like a hermit, with no interaction with the world. No, God wants me to be just for Him. Now that is going to be impossible if I have an attitude of “me first”. I want to get my golf handicap down, or climb all the peaks of The Lakes, or any one of so many activities, that may not be wrong in and of themselves, but if they take first place in my affections then I have lost my holiness. And like the blunted scissors, I will become less effective in my service for God. Sometimes we lament the poor spiritual state of things in this country, and wonder why it is so. Well, the reasons are complex and multi-factored, but I am sure that, in part at least, it may be that in my heart’s affections, I have lost that holiness that would lead me to set my life apart just for His use.

Next, this sacrifice is to be acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). I am reminded of an event in King Saul’s life. You can read about it for yourself in 1 Samuel 13:8-14. Saul was wanting to make an offering to God, which you might have thought was a commendable thing. However, the priest Samuel was delayed in coming to Saul, who became impatient, and so decided to make the offering himself. Now this was something that only a priest could do. For his disobedience, even in trying to do a good thing, Saul was told that he would lose his throne (1 Samuel 13:14). His sacrifice was unacceptable to God, because it was done in a human way, not in the way that God had described in His word. And that makes all the difference. If our living sacrifice is to please God, and if it is to be acceptable to Him,

then it must be done in obedience to His word. You see, it would be all too easy, in a sudden sweep of fervour, to decide that we were ready to sacrifice our lives for Him, and dropping everything to go off to some remote jungle and start preaching to the natives. But God may not have called me to go there. Or perhaps I decide that I am going to study His word much more, and in doing so neglect my wife and children, which is clearly not what His word tells me to do. Or then again I may decide that everyone where I work needs to be told the Gospel, and so spend so much time talking about the Gospel, that I don't actually do the job I was paid to do, and so become a thief. It is not for us to decide what we will do, but for God to call us to do what He wants us to do. We just need to listen and be ready! Acceptable to God implies that we do things His way, not ours. It is the great counterbalance to extremism. It is possible to go to excess in Christian things, losing a sense of balance. Such behaviour does not become the Gospel. We don't like it in others, and the world will certainly not like it in us. He may call me to enjoy a hobby, so that I can talk to someone who shares a similar interest. He may call me to go abroad as a missionary or He may call me to serve Him in the street where I currently live. The really important thing is that He directs me to what He wants me to do, and that I do it in a way that agrees with what He says in the Bible.

Then we learn that this living sacrifice is a reasonable thing to do (Romans 12:1). But is it? Is it reasonable to say that we are to live the whole of our lives in obedience to Him? That He has first call upon our love, our time, our money, our everything. I think so, and based upon two arguments. Firstly, based upon our proper understanding of who God is. There was a time when the only "thing" that existed was God. No space, no time, no heaven, just God. Then God made the space in which to make the whole of the creation that we are a part of (Genesis 1:3-2:3). Then He made man in His image (Genesis 1:27), and we have returned the compliment, by creating God in our image! It is so unreasonable for a tiny toddler to turn round to its parent and say "You can't make me!", for clearly if gentle persuasion does not work, then adult discipline will! And yet God is far, far greater than any adult, for He fills all, and is in all, and we are far more small than that rebellious child. God is so great that we dare not disobey Him. But secondly, we have the example and actions of the Lord Jesus, who gave Himself for me. If He gave up everything for me, and He did, then it is quite reasonable for Him to ask that I give up everything for Him. He does not ask us to do anything that He has not done already. And we should be encouraged, for look what happened when He sacrificed all, in obedience to His Father. Just consider all the good things that flow out of His sacrifice. We need not fear a wasted life, or a life that counts for nothing when we present our bodies a living sacrifice.

Then we are not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2). The idea here will probably be developed in the further talks on separation. This world should not be allowed to force us into its mould (see JB Phillips Translation). For all its talk about encouraging diversity, I see a depressing uniformity amongst the people of this world. They all live to please themselves, and we are not to be pressured into being like that. I have a car that works perfectly well. It hasn't thankfully broken down in a long time, although the annual service is a bit of a daunting experience. But when I see the sleek new models on offer on the TV ads., or my old plates next to the latest ones in the car park, I think that maybe it would be nice just to change. When I see the lovely new conservatory on the house just down the road, and the lovely decoration, I think that I could afford that, even though I don't need the extra space. When I get agitated on the bus, as a little old lady takes forever and a day to find her bus pass, does she not realise I am very busy and my time is important. In so many ways, everyday, the world is pressurising me to behave just like it does. We need to be aware of the danger, and in His strength resist it.

Instead of succumbing to the relentless pressure which the Devil will apply to stop us from being like Christ, we need to transform our lives, by renewing our minds. So instead of spending time thinking about nice shiny cars, I need to spend time enjoying the fact that God loves me with a never ending forever love. Instead of wanting to buy things I don't need to make myself look good, I need to spend time considering what it means to be an heir of God. And instead of getting anxious when things don't go my way I need to spend time rejoicing that God, who has begun a great work in me, will complete it, in His time (see Philippians 1:6). Nothing that needs to be done will remain undone.

Have you ever noticed how, very often, the best bit of a holiday is the looking forward to it - thinking about it before you go. I never book a holiday and then just forget about it until the day of departure has arrived. I enjoy counting down the days and making plans. Now sometimes the holiday may be a bit of an anti-climax! In Christian things, we too should spend time thinking about the wonderful realities that are ours. We should rejoice in the fact that we are forgiven. We should thrill that we have been adopted by God. We should delight in all that awaits us when we are with Him. These are the things that ought to fill our minds. But unlike my holidays, the reality of what we are in Christ, and what we shall enjoy because of what He has done will never be an anti-climax. Safe to say that, like the Queen of Sheba, in 1 Kings 10:7, we will all one day exclaim in awe, *"However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard."*

So often in our Christian lives, we wonder whether it is right for us to do such and such, or watch such a programme, or go to such a place. So many choices to make, yet so many of them would cease to bother us, if we really had a sense of being separated to Christ. If our time was spent reading His word, and serving Him, if our money was given to His work, if our affections were really for Him, then so many other things would stop bothering us. Life would be

much simpler. I would not have time to do something I maybe should not be doing because it was already filled with something I should be doing. Our hymns have it right; we just need to live up to what we sing. He deserves that we surrender all to Him, but in doing so we might also find that it is for our own good also.

In many ways, we have a living parable of what separation to Christ is in our own marriages. The day I chose to marry Dawn was also the day that I gave up any romantic interest in any other woman in the world. From then until now, and until the day we die, there is a mutual exclusivity in our relationship. That is not to say that there are no other pretty women in the world, or that I have actively taken a dislike to any other woman. It is just that in choosing one particular woman, all others have no interest for me. And to pursue an interest in another would just be plain wrong, however I might try and dress it up. Perhaps we need to view our relationship with the Lord Jesus more in these terms. Having accepted Him as our Saviour, we ought now to willingly love and obey Him first of all. Perhaps, too, in just the same way that the biggest threat to my marriage is not the siren calls of other women, but my being so self absorbed that I fail to be the husband I ought to be, so my being concerned about pleasing myself is the biggest problem I need to overcome in separating myself to God.

In closing, I am reminded of a true story I once read. Florence Chadwick was an accomplished long distance swimmer. She was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. In 1952 she plunged into the Pacific Ocean from Catalina Island, determined to swim the 70 or so miles to the coast of California. For fifteen hours she swam, before hitting a cold coastal fog. Exhausted and defeated, she begged to be taken out, being hardly able to see the accompanying support boat. Once in the boat, she made for the shore, which she discovered was just 800 metres away. At a press conference she admitted she had no excuses for her failure, but said that she thought that if only she had been able to see the shore, she would have made it! Two months later she proved her point, when on a bright, clear day she completed the swim.

Maybe the thought of exclusively following and obeying Jesus scares you. It is too big a commitment, one you might not be able to keep. If only we could see that we stand on the threshold of eternity, then perhaps we, like Florence Chadwick, would be less easily discouraged as we seek to serve the Lord Jesus.

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