

SERMON TITLE- "A Separated People"

TEXT- John 17:8-16

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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This week we are closing off, for now, a series of sermons on our identity. It began, as you may recall, with the story "Are You My Mother?" about a young bird that has fallen from its nest without ever seeing its mother. It wanders about looking for its mother but can't tell who that might be.

We have all seen interesting pictures of young animals that have attached themselves to creatures and sometimes even other objects that are not their "mothers." It is comical in that context but there rarely is any future for such a mismatched arrangement. At the very least, even if a "friendship" is formed it is not a real "motherhood" relationship.

Who we actually are is an important question to sort out, as Christians. In my opinion there are many Christians who have an identity problem and in my opinion the identity problem has deep roots a lack of knowledge. The purpose of the series we have been on for the last number of weeks has been to try to fill in some very basic facts-

#1. We have a mother

#2. We are the People of the Book

#3. We are the People of the New Covenant

#4. We are "A People"

There have been a few side roads on this journey of discovering our "mother" but today we will close off with what I think caps the whole discussion off. It specifically builds forward from the matter of being "a people."

On Mother's Day we looked at a passage that I thought really fit well into the metaphor I used for this series- it was the "motherhood" prayer of Jesus in John 17. Jesus prays for His followers with all the pride and concern that a mother has for the children she loves. It is one of the most touching and beautiful prayers in the Bible.

We are "a people" and Jesus' motherly love for us is expressed in many beautiful pictures- few more powerful than that of a mother hen calling her chicks to take refuge under her wings.

Today we look at that prayer again to look at the last part of this series-

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word . . . I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. John 17:6-9

Jesus very specifically prays for HIS children just the way a mother prays for hers. It does not mean that no other children matter- but these are hers- the ones God has put her in charge of.

There is an extra level of pathos in the prayer. The natural order of things is for children to grow up and leave their childhood home but in this case- Jesus is leaving His children behind and all the anxiety of a mother watching her child leave the nest fells Jesus heart. In this case however, it is not the children that are leaving the nest- but rather the "mother" that has cared for them that must leave.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. John 17:10-11

The mother hen that has surrounded her flock with the protection of her wings must now leave. What a heart wrenching moment! It is in that context that Jesus comes before His own Father.

And what does Jesus ask for His children?

-He does not ask that He stay with His flock in the same manner that He has been to this point in time.

-He does not ask that His flock be removed from the world.

Instead He asks-

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. John 17:11-12

We Have The Promise Of Protection

Jesus asks that His children be protected in the same way that He protected His followers while He was with them. The power of this prayer is to be the knowledge that because we are members of this "people" we have the same protection that the disciples of Jesus had when Jesus was walking with them for those 3 years.

That is an incredible assurance.

And there is one more thing before we go to the main point for today-

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. John 17:13
We Have The Promise Of Joy

Just as we are assured that we have the protection of God, we are assured that we have access to the “full measure of joy within” ourselves. What a deal! We are not going to talk further on that- except to say that next week I want to begin a summer series of sermons entitled “The Secret of Joy.” I had begun to work on the series and under the title of “The Secret of Happiness” but when I read this passage it occurred to me that a better title might be replacing happiness with joy. So that is what we will do. We have been offered the promise of the greatest treasure imaginable.

These 2 great promises, given to us as the people of God lay the basis for the closing point of this series. It begins with this statement-

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. John 17:14
We Are Not Of This World

This is a critically important piece of information and part of the package of knowledge that I believe is often missing from the knowledge bank of modern Christians particularly those of us who live in Canada or the US. The world we live in is- for the most part pretty good. Frankly it looks after our needs at a level far beyond what any normal person in the course of history could imagine.

Not only this, but we tend to think we live in a country that is founded on Christian principles. So when we come across this kind of statement we put it into a category that lets us move right on without actually stopping to think what it is saying.

Maybe this is just a different way of saying things, right? There are some strange sayings in the Bible that need to be understood in context and their meaning is very different than what seems to be a literal reading. After all Jesus said,

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:26

From the larger context of Scripture we know that loving and respecting our parents is one of the highest values and so when Jesus says we must “hate” our parents He means something very different than a literal reading would indicate.

Is something like that going on with this with the “not of the world” statement?

Actually, as we look deeper we find that it is not. Jesus really means we are not of this world. He explains His statement-

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. John 17:15-16

It is pretty clear- as followers of Jesus we are part of an order that is different from the world order in some fundamental way. This prayer was made before Jesus was captured and crucified. That event did define a rejection but even as Jesus had been going around preaching and teaching He had been making it very clear that the Kingdom of God was not connected to the kingdom of the world that the people were familiar with.

Understanding this “otherness” has often been a problem and it is not hard to see why when the world we live in is scratching us where we itch.

Over the course of church history there have been 2 natural reactions to this- the one that gets most of us is really wanting to be part of the world order. It began quite early in church history- although it was after the NT was written. Over time the neighbours to the Christian families realized that they were actually nice people and didn’t treat them as enemies. This felt very good and soon Christians moved into every area of life. But this came with a price. The Christians not only went into the wholesome areas of society- they also were drawn to the unwholesome areas- most specifically the grand games in the coliseum. Soon the churches realized that they were losing their Godly values.

This caused the next reaction. Seeing what happens when we do that and being caught up in all the wrong things that are going on a group of Christians decided that it was

impossible to live in society as God's people and so they decided to leave.

In famously began in the late 2nd century as various individuals and groups decided that the only way to be true to this principle was to leave society and so they moved away into the caves around the cities to live as "not of this world" people.

But this is completely missing the point. Jesus was very clear that while we are not of the world- He specifically does not take us out of the world.

But We Are To Live In The World

Those who have decided to leave "the world" are admired in many ways and in fact during some very dark periods of history it was groups of men and women who had separated themselves from society that preserved especially the books and learning.

As much as that is admirable in some ways- it is not living by Jesus instruction. We are specifically placed in the world to live in the world.

And this is why understanding this principle is so important.

We Are A Separated People- Which Means . . .

From very early in His dealings with people God had a category He called a "separated" people. The reality of humanity was that most people did not want to live according to the principles of God.

#1. The Existing World Order Is Hopelessly Corrupt

The proto typical Biblical story of this principle is at the very beginning of the Bible. Soon after creation- once the people started to fill the earth we have this tragic commentary-

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. Genesis 6:5-8

It is blunt, it is tragic but in its judgment of the condition of the human heart- it remains definitive. It is repeated by Paul in Rom 3

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes." Romans 3:9-18

The picture is devastating but very clear. But what is the point? To let us know what the world described by this not working in any way. It is not about fixing a few details and making it work- the problem is so deep that God's first solution was to wipe the slate clean and start over.

To be clear- the whole point of the NT is that God has a completely different solution. But for now- the point is- things as they exist around us are not going to work.

#2. We Have Been Called Out Of This World Order

There is a very important Biblical fact to remember. In Genesis God wiped the slate clean but before He did that He called out Noah.

And in doing this God asked Noah to build an ark to separate him from the broken world. We too have been called out. When Jesus walked through Palestine- He called out to those He met. "Follow Me!" He said. It was in the following of Jesus that we have been called out of the world order.

Like Noah you and I have been called out, by God Himself. This specialness is a big part of the message of the NT to God's people.

When we take that first step- we are separating ourselves.

But as we have seen in John 17, the principle of the NT is that it is not the physical separation from the world that is to make a difference- but the knowledge of the reality of our separateness. That is why we need to keep this knowledge clearly understood. We are a separated people!

But what does being separated mean if we are still living in the world? It means living by the Laws of the Kingdom of God.

On the positive side the values of the Kingdom of God are pretty much well recognized as very good things. In Galatians 5 Paul juxtaposes the 2 types of values and ends with the directions for us-

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23

There it is- the standards of the Kingdom of God for His people- and guess what- there is no law against any of these!

So what's the down side? Unfortunately there is a down side. It means that we do at times need to separate ourselves from the values that society takes for granted. IN the early church the big defining challenge was the coliseum and I suspect that for most of us we will quickly see the parallels between that and our own entertainment industry.

We need to be prepared to turn things off and walk out- not in order to make a statement to those around us- but simply because what we are taking into our beings does not reflect the values of the Kingdom of God.

This is a tough challenge and it is no wonder that over the course of time preachers feel the need to visit and revisit the questions of how we live. It would make all the sense in the world that God's people would stand out in the crowd if they really lived by God's principles- but in reality- who wants to stand out like that?

As challenging as this is- for most of us the challenge is even more subtle and daily than that- it gets down to the challenge of knowing that the fruit of the Spirit is not just a nice suggestion- it really is the non-negotiable challenge for us.

But there is one more thing to remember before we close off. We are a separate people and that is a challenge that has overwhelmed Christians from the beginning. However- **#3. We Have Been Given The Tools To Live In The Existing World Order**

We introduced this topic with 2 treasures that God give those who commit themselves for follow Jesus- protection and joy. But those are part of a package to gifts- all of which are

specifically designed to help us live in the world- even when we are not part of it.