

Question: If you do not burn with the zeal that you long for, are you willing to make some experiments with high-dosage, extended-time, prayer-driven Bible meditation? Very honestly, there is in my own life a close correspondence between the time and amount of prayerful Bible opening, and the depth and strength and warmth of my zeal for God. Without large and deep doses of God's Word, I am very vulnerable to worldly mind-sets. One church in Korea expects its members to read five chapters of the Bible a day and its pastors to read twenty chapters a day. The question is: If you want the flame of the Emmaus road and the flame of Brainerd, are you willing to make serious experiments?

I am praying that thousands who read this book will *burn* for the glory of God. And will pray with me: O Lord, grant me to make a difference for you utterly disproportionate to who I am. ☛

## WHEN TO SEPARATE AND WHEN NOT TO



*A Letter to an Earnest Inquirer*

Dear friend,

*Relating to unbelievers who make no profession of faith.*

Regarding how to relate to unbelievers, it seems to me that in the New Testament we have two commands that are in tension (not contradiction) with each other. One side is 2 Corinthians 6:14–15, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?”

On the other side is 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person.”

One seems to say that we must be very vigilant lest we be involved with unbelievers in wrong ways, and the other seems to say that you must not take that to an extreme. So we are confronted with the question, what sorts of “being bound together with unbelievers” is wrong? And what sorts are necessary and right? Marriage is clear because of 1 Corinthians 7:39. Marry only in the Lord. What about a business partnership? A bowling team? A neighborhood block club? A working relationship where the boss is an unbeliever?

My principle here would go something like this: *Avoid relations with unbelievers in which your relation endorses the unbelief or consequent sins, and avoid the kinds of relationships that involve the interweaving of deep personal values (like marriage).*

On the other side, don't avoid relationships where you can have clear testimony to the truth and are allowed to stand on Christian principles, even if you are sometimes criticized for getting too close. Jesus was criticized like that, and was called a “glutton and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34).

*Relating to those who profess faith in Christ but do not live holy lives or espouse biblical orthodoxy.*

With regard to professing believers who live in blatant sin or teach serious false doctrine (you hear some of the ambiguity already in the words “blatant” and “serious”) there seems to be a more vigorous ostracism. Thus 1 Corinthians 5:11 says, “But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” I take this to mean that if a person has been disciplined or warned in the appropriate way and presses on in his error, we are not to go on hobnobbing with him as if nothing were wrong. We are to say to the professing brother, “You know I love you and would love it if our lives could be woven together more closely, but as long as you live like this (perhaps sleep with your

boyfriend or sell drugs or lie on reports at work), I can't act as if things were normal. I don't think we should get together anymore until you change your ways. Otherwise it looks as if nothing is at stake.”

What is the principle here that we can apply to various kinds of relations? This person may be my boss at work. Or the person may be the husband of a faithful member of our church who must still live with her wayward husband. It doesn't quite work to say that Matthew 18:17 puts the unrepentant person in the same class as an unbeliever so that the same principle applies as to unbelievers (“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”). If that were true, then 1 Corinthians 5:9–13 would have no meaning when it says, don't separate from those outside, but from those inside. If the “insider” becomes identical to an “outsider” the moment you separate, then he also becomes one that you are not to separate from like that.

The principle seems to be: *If you can, seek for redemptive ways to be separate without writing a person off as an unbeliever.* I say this because of 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15, “And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (emphasis added). In other words, there is a difference between the “ostracism” of this person, and the person in 2 Corinthians 6:14 (“Do not be bound together with unbelievers”).

It is not clear to me what form this ostracism should take in each situation. “Do not even eat with such a one” (1 Corinthians 5:11) implies that there are some situations, at least, where the best way to act is to cut off all normal, casual relations. I assume this might still leave room for business contacts or other kinds of togetherness that do not imply that all is well between you.

Second John 9–11 may give a hint as to how to articulate the principle. It says, “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides

in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”

*This would suggest that we should avoid those kinds of gestures or relations that imply our participation in the error or evil of another.* Here I think we are going to have to learn to live with differences of opinions about what measures of interaction imply this kind of participation. Strong separatists see participation and endorsement implied earlier than others do. But the principle is there.

I know there is much for me to see. I wish I could give days to every issue that perplexes my mind and presses for decision.

Alas, only one life.

For the supremacy of God in all things,

John Piper ☞

## SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING A JOB



*Pondering Vocation as Service to Christ*

The freedom to choose your vocation is a historical novelty. Until recent times, if you were a son and your father was a farmer or a blacksmith or shoemaker or a baker, it was almost certain you would be too. If you were a daughter, you would almost certainly be a hardworking homemaker and partner in the home-based family business. Choices were few. And a reading like this one would have been almost unintelligible.

But today, very few sons assume that they will follow in their father's vocation. And daughters have a wide scope of career paths they can follow instead of, or alongside, a more traditional homemaking career. Not only that, mid-career changes are not unusual. Which means that the crisis of choosing a vocation happens not just once, but several times for many people.

One of the things I love to do as a pastor is sow seeds of kingdom restlessness. I picture my preaching as taking trees by the trunk and working them back and forth to loosen the roots. My idea is that this will result in the roots of people's lives going down deeper into God's will where they are, or it will result in the roots being plucked up and planted in a different calling for even greater kingdom fruitfulness. Whatever else, I don't want my