

Chapter 11: What Must We Renounce?

Antithesis

We saw that when Joshua accepts the service of the Lord for himself and his house, this acceptance is antithetical¹. In accepting the service of the Lord he rejects the service of idols, and he places before the people of his days the choice: either serve God, or serve idols.

God himself had pointed to this antithesis already in paradise, when he gave the promise to the woman in Genesis 3:15. The head of the serpent would be bruised, and God would put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

There will be an ongoing struggle between the followers of Satan and the children of God. Whoever is on God's side may never cross over to the side of Satan, and he may not join those who deny God and fight against him. Therefore, when you make profession of faith, you renounce something at the same time.

When you accept Christ as Lord of your life, you say: I no longer recognize Satan as lord and master of my life. The continuation of the third question deals with this renouncing (or forsaking). After you are asked if it is your heartfelt desire to love the Lord God and to serve him according to his Word, you are then asked if you desire to forsake the world and to crucify your old nature.

Lust of the flesh

What are worldly desires? The apostle John gives us a clear description when we read in his first letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

¹ Ed note: something is “antithetical” when it is opposed to or in direct contrast with something

The question is: what is it that we must forsake? After all, we live in this world, don't we, and we cannot simply step out of it. Surely we shouldn't withdraw into a monastery in order to escape the world? John is speaking antithetically in this verse. He sees two spheres of power: in one the will of God is done and the love of the Father reigns. In the other the opposing powers operate, and the lord of this world, Satan, wields his scepter.

God's children are *in* this world. They live and work where Satan also has his domain and where he tries to seduce people to him. But children of God are not of the world, they are not on Satan's side, and may not even seem to be on his side. There is much, however, that tries to seduce them: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life.

There are things considered quite normal by followers of Satan that are to be regarded as sin by God's children. The apostle Paul made that very clear in his epistle to the Galatians. He put the lusts of the flesh over against the desires of the Spirit. In that connection he speaks about the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. The former are: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, rivalries, a "party" spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. Those are all works of the flesh. Then the apostle commands: walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If we live by the Spirit, says the apostle, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us keep in the way of the Spirit. That means: those who do the works of the flesh and follow the desires of the flesh are on the wrong track. But those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:16-25)

Lust of the eyes

There is more than the lust of the flesh. John also speaks about the lust of the eyes. The Lord Jesus, first in the Sermon on the Mount, and later also in connection with temptation, speaks about the eye as the agent which causes you to sin. (Matthew 5:29; 18:9) In the Sermon on the Mount we find the Saviour's warning with regard to looking at a woman sinfully. (Matthew 5:28) And the apostle Peter in his second letter writes about "eyes full of adultery". (2 Peter 2: 14) This refers to sinful sexual desires.

We may not gratify these sinful sexual desires. More is involved in the "lust of the eye". In the Old Testament, the following message is sent to the king of Israel: "I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they

shall search your house and the houses of your servants and lay hands on whatever pleases you and take it away." (1 Kings 20:6) It doesn't just speak here about sexual lust, but also about greed. It speaks about "your wives and your children", but also about "your silver and gold". (vv. 3,5) Ecclesiastes also speaks about the things "my eyes desired" (Ecclesiastes 2:10) and about eyes not content with wealth. (Ecclesiastes 4:8)

Lust of the eyes – you cannot stop coveting and you cannot prevent yourself from taking. But a child of God may not gratify the lust of the eyes. The Lord demands that his children break with those sinful desires.

Pride of life

In the same passage the apostle John also speaks about "pride of life", that is: haughtiness.

This refers to the arrogant braggart, who boasts about many things in order to create the impression that he is on a higher level than others. This boasting leads to self-service and disrupts relationships with other people. James addresses such braggarts, who seem to have all of life and even the future at their disposal, "you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." (James 4:16) He who lets his earthly goods possess him and flaunts them, is *deluded*. This delusion prevents him from giving God the glory that is due him, and causes him to denigrate his fellow man or provoke him to bitterness and jealousy. We think of the tendency today of people trying to outdo their fellow man in property, fashion, and wealth. If the one owns something beautiful, the other needs to acquire it too. One wants to better the other. But the apostle says: don't take part in that pride of life!

The world passes away

You may not let your earthly goods dominate you, says the apostle John. "The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." (1 John 2:17)

John previously wrote, "the darkness is passing". (v.8) The people of this world have desires for the things of this world. They live for sex, for money, for possessions. They desire more and more of these things. They also desire other people's things. They are never satisfied.

But he who does the will of God does not live in darkness, but in the light. The darkness passes away, but the light remains. He himself remains, for his desires are not for passing things. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"For the present form of this world is passing away." (1 Corinthians 7:31)
The form (actually, it says the *scheme*, that is: the outline, shape, everything in the world, and everything the world has to offer) refers to many worldly things, also things that are beautiful and a delight to the eye.

Paul now teaches: you cannot step out of the world. Certainly, you may use the good things of the world. But you may not use the world perpetually, nor may you use *all* the things the world has to offer. That means: don't get so engrossed in the world that you can no longer do without it, that you would become addicted to it. For this world will pass away and disappear. Paul observed signs of the decline of this world. However he also observed something else. God is in the process of creating a new world, and God's child should already become familiar with it. Therefore, don't tie yourself to things which, however beautiful they may be, eventually must disappear. Concentrate on doing God's will: that never passes away!

World conformity

The world is part of the order that is passing away, and that makes room for the new world of God's kingdom. Similarly the apostle Paul concludes in the letter to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

Here we clearly see a parallel with what John wrote: the world and the lust by which it is possessed and which characterizes it will not remain. But he who does the will of God in this transitory world will remain; he will abide forever.

Not to be conformed to this world

When the apostle Paul writes this to the Romans, he first appeals to the mercies of God. (Romans 12:1) God the LORD in his great love removed us from the power of Satan. He rescued us from perdition, and now he wants us to present our bodies, that is: ourselves, as a living sacrifice. We may not be conformed to this world. That means: the style of God's redeemed children differs from the style of the children of this world. Our lifestyle, our way of living, must be different. Our thinking, our entire consciousness must be renewed. When we are renewed, this renewal permeates our way of life. So if you have chosen for Christ, the ungodly, unfaithful lifestyle is *dead* to you. You don't participate and you have nothing to do with it. It is out of bounds for you. It then becomes normal for you to avoid the hotbeds and breeding grounds of sin.

It also goes without saying that you don't spend your leisure time reading literature that attacks and mocks the service of God. And your evening is not "filled" with watching the movies that stress the evil and perverse side of life. For that is not using your time appropriately, as a faithful believer, but it shows a yawning void. Who is immune from the infectious threat of sin? Much worldly propaganda enters living rooms via television, capturing thousands. If anywhere thoughts and ideas are twisted, in a bad sense and in the wrong direction, it is through this medium.

If we at home and outside the home surrender more and more to various stimulants – addiction to nicotine, abuse of alcohol and/or drugs – then we as God's children must ask also in this regard what is the will of God, which is constant. Also in this respect we must offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God!

But are we no longer permitted anything? Listen to the apostle Paul, who writes to the Corinthians *four times*: "Everything is permissible for me". (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23, NIV1984) That means: as a child of God you are *free*. You are not enslaved, not bound, not forced. But at the same time the apostle puts three limitations upon that freedom: not all things are beneficial, not all things are constructive, and you may not be mastered by anything. That means: you may not take part in that which is senseless, useless, and worthless. Besides, you must ask yourself: is what I do for the good of myself or others? And finally: nothing may become such a passion with you that you cannot free yourself. Nothing may dominate you. Neither may you let your life be controlled by anything which you think is not actually forbidden.

Therefore, the point is not a number of do's and don'ts, but the point is that God's children must have a godly lifestyle. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "But that is not the way you learned Christ!" (Ephesians 4:20) In this preaching of Paul the warning is given that we must not walk in the ways of those who do not know Christ. They walk in the futility of their minds, alienated from life with God. They have, in their hard-heartedness, given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. (Ephesians 4:17-19) Paul says you may never walk this way. You are in a completely different situation; you have learned Christ. Then you forsake your former walk, which was not in Christ!

Crucify your old nature

When in the third question you are asked to forsake the world, it also meant that you are to crucify your old nature. Especially in the framework of: “that is not the way you learned Christ” the apostle Paul speaks to the Ephesians about that old nature,

Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:21-24)

The old nature is your depraved, sinful nature; it is your impure, ugly, revolting existence. The old nature is you, in Adam, with your entire sinful being. This old nature must go! It must be "put off", that is: taken off, as you take off an old coat and throw it out. And you must be renewed, that is, rejuvenated in your entire outlook, thinking, and desires. As you put off that old nature, you put on the new. It is not enough to take off the old coat that must be thrown out. No, you must also put on that new coat. Your entire way of life changes, becomes totally new. It becomes a God-fearing walk: you ask for what is right and what is pleasing to the LORD.

It has been said that this part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians was part of the apostle's baptismal instruction. Before one was baptized and thus professed one's faith, one first had to be instructed about the old nature, which had to be mortified, and the new nature which had to be raised. In any case, the expressions used by the apostle are very closely linked to the thought that we are a new creation in Christ Jesus. If we want to belong to him and live a God-fearing life, then we must renounce the old, the worldly life. For aren't we sealed in the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption? (Ephesians 4:30) In his power we can relinquish all things which don't belong to the newness of life!

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