

In the World, not of the World

A sermon by Rev. Jeff Smith

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What do you do if someone you know is making poor choices – do you run away, or do you stick around to support and possibly improve the situation? Now I'm going to tip my hand and tell you that your answer—one way or the other—isn't necessarily right or wrong, but it'll depend on something else. What I hope you'll take away from today's message is some tools for making these decisions yourself, and also some mercy and understanding for those who choose a different path. We aren't talking about politics today. We are talking about relationships and making good decisions in how we support each other on the path to heaven.

Allow me to start by offering some situation examples. 1) Your best friend of 20 years does something that really upsets you, and so you question your very friendship with them. Do you keep putting effort into the relationship, or do you just let it dissolve? 2) A family member makes life choices or simply has a different ideology that isn't just *different*, but runs contrary to your own beliefs. Stay in contact or cut them off? A larger social group or even your community seem to have diverged from the core values that you thought used to bind you together. Do you stay involved or find another community?

Let's talk about Obadiah now from today's story. Obadiah feared God, which in today's terms we would say that he loved the Lord. Obadiah was the head of the king's house, meaning he was kind of the manager and made sure things ran smoothly. So, Obadiah feared God, but his boss Ahab *really* didn't. In fact, Obadiah's boss was the worst king Israel had seen to that point—worshipping other gods and disregarding the Word of Jehovah. Despite how evil his boss was (not to mention Ahab's wicked wife Jezebel, who murdered all the prophets of Jehovah that she could find), Obadiah stayed in his position, and we saw him in today's story venturing out to find pasture for Ahab's animals.

Shouldn't Obadiah have left his position in the king's house? Was Obadiah supporting evil by sticking around and helping Ahab? Shouldn't he have left it to crumble? And how about you? If you were Obadiah, would you have stayed or left?

There are some other stories in the Lord's Word somewhat similar to Obadiah's. In Genesis, Joseph was a Hebrew who served under the Egyptian Pharaoh. Well, whom did Pharaoh worship? Not Jehovah! He worshipped a pantheon of gods. And another example is Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who served before kings Nebuchadnezzar and Darius in Babylon. Those kings had other gods, and tyrannically *forced* their people to worship those gods. Not to mention, Nebuchadnezzar was the one who took the Jew's captive in the first place. Imagine you are in a similar situation to Joseph, or Daniel and friends. Would you stay, or would you go?

You may remember that I tipped my hand at the beginning of the service—there isn't really one right answer, or in other words, your staying or going is not what makes it right or wrong. The real question is whether or not we are following the Lord, and loving others *in line* with His Commandments. As with pretty much everything we do in life, it's our intentions that really matter.

Let's take just a moment to talk about figuring out the right thing to do. What are some reasons that might make it a good idea to leave a situation? First of all, if you think you might be in any sort of danger by remaining in a friendship with someone, or by staying in a social or community group, you might

consider stepping away from those connections. Possible physical injury ... or emotional harm resulting from a manipulative or narcissistic relationship ... or situations that bring up spiritual temptations that would result in hurting someone else or your own path to heaven ... these are all good reasons to keep your distance from certain situations, people, or groups. But there are other reasons to stay away as well, for example, we may be concerned that staying might support the continuation of some evil or another.

So, what then are reasons we might choose to stay? In the story of Obadiah, he stuck around and was able to save alive 100 prophets of the Lord from the murderous hand of Ahab's wife. Joseph stuck around and listened to the Lord, and his actions preserved the lives of probably millions of innocent people. Daniel and Company stuck around and ended up serving as governors providing wisdom and fairness where corruption probably would have ruled.

Can we do something similar when we elect to remain in challenging circumstances? We can choose to keep and even foster connections with a friend, family member, or community groups that don't seem to us to be ideal, but we do it because we care about those people. By sticking around and staying connected, we have the chance to be a healthy support when it is needed. Instead of severing those connections, we might just be the lifeline the Lord uses to bring them to a better place. And in our community, we can choose to stay involved even when the odds seem stacked against us, and even when we disagree with the direction of the status quo because communities need good people in them.

As a prime example of showing up in challenging circumstances, when the Lord was walking around in this world, He spent a significant amount of time with sinners—the very people the Pharisees shunned like the plague. He wasn't loving the *person*, and He definitely wasn't loving their evil, He was supporting and loving their humanity and the goodness in them, helping them on their way to heaven. Keep in mind that our neighbor isn't the person, our neighbor is the goodness in the person that we want to love and support, and we can love and support goodness even in difficult situations.

When I visited a holocaust museum, one of the exhibits had excerpts from journals and diaries of some of the victims. One of them mentioned observing one person sharing bread with another in those horrible circumstances. This has stuck with me all these years that, no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we can always choose to act like a human and treat other people like humans.

No matter what happens within our families, our community, or our country, our one job is still to act like a human and treat other people like humans. And what does it mean to treat a person like a human? Of course we don't support bad or evil habits. But when we stick around, with the Lord's help, we might just have an opportunity to support something good.

Whatever decision we make, whether it's to leave the situation or to stay, either one of them can be done in charity, and the decision I make might be very different from the one you make. But when confronted with these circumstances, we ought to pray for the Lord to inspire us with the right decision. Leaving a toxic or dangerous situation can be the right thing to do, but today I am banging the drum for *STAY and help*.

The title of today's message is "In the World, not of the World", with the idea that we don't necessarily have to renounce the world, cancel relationships with people with whom we disagree, or run away from our communities that seem to turn a different direction. In John 17, we earlier read this verse in which the Lord said: *I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them*

from the evil one. To the degree that we are able, we are supposed to interact with this messy world, but with prudence. Well, to what degree *do* we interact and get involved in the messy-ness, and to what extent should we be careful?

Let's compare it to the immune system. The body has a line of defense that is active all day every day in fending off diseases. Right now your body is fighting a cold virus, or taking care of bacteria that shouldn't be there, and a thousand or million other things. Some people's immune systems work better than others, and some people's immune systems are compromised. With a relatively healthy body, I'm willing to spend time with someone with a common cold, but I'm not willing to make contact with the Ebola virus.

We also have a spiritual immune system. It's constantly fighting off the influences of hell. Some people are more resistant to certain evils, and others are more susceptible. And if you are aware of your spiritual immunity weaknesses, you stay away from those. For example, someone who struggles with any kind of addiction should seriously think twice about spending time with other people who actively and openly engage in those addictions.

And in a similar way that a healthy diet, good sleep, and vitamins can help improve your body's immune system, there is a way to improve your spiritual immune system as well. Again, in John 17, just after He says, "keep them from the evil one", Jesus says, "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth*" The Lord's truth can strengthen our spiritual immune systems to make us stronger to resist hell's influence. The more we stay away from the Lord's Word and His truth, the more the ways of the world that go against the Lord's Word seem acceptable to us, and the more susceptible we are to engaging in worldly activities in unhealthy ways.

So, here are some closing thoughts. To the extent that it will not endanger you, stay connected with friends, and family, and stay engaged in your community because you might just be the support or help that someone needs. Keep reading (or *start* reading) the Lord's Word to keep your spiritual immunity up so that you can be there for people in their difficult situations. Over the years, I have heard stories of people who weren't living their best life, and they got through to a better life thanks to other people who were there for them, sometimes with an abundance of kindness and understanding, and sometimes with some corrective instruction, and sometimes both. What mattered though, is that someone was there for them during their dark time. And finally, if you're not sure whether it's a good idea to stay in a situation or flee from it, try praying to the Lord, and then listen for His response.

So, let us now end with these words of Jesus: I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

Amen.

Readings

1Kings 16

Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

1Kings 18

And Ahab had called Obadiah, who was in charge of his house. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly. For so it was, while Jezebel massacred the prophets of the Lord, that Obadiah had taken one hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty to a cave, and had fed them with bread and water.) And Ahab had said to Obadiah, “Go into the land to all the springs of water and to all the brooks; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, so that we will not have to kill any livestock.” So they divided the land between them to explore it; Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself.

John 17

Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is [g]lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

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As for renunciation of the world, many believe that renouncing the world and living for the spirit and not for the flesh is a matter of casting aside worldly things (primarily wealth and status), going around in constant devout meditation concerning God, salvation, and eternal life, and spending our lives in prayer and in reading the Word and devotional literature, not to mention self-affliction. This, though, is not at all what renouncing the world means; it means loving God and loving our neighbor. We love God when we live by his commandments, and we love our neighbor when we do things that are useful. If we wish to receive the life of heaven, we must by all means live in this world and be involved in its responsibilities and dealings. A life withdrawn from worldly concerns is a life of thought and faith, and yet is completely separate from a life of love and caring.