

“DO NOT BE UNEQUALLY YOKED”
(2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)

As we continue our study of 2 Corinthians, we come today to yet another well-known verse out of many we have found in this great book, and our passage today is in 2 Corinthians 6. After I graduated from college, I took part in a three-month study tour of biblical sites in Europe and Turkey. There were about 30 of us in the group and we traveled in four old vans. I’m not sure how these vans made it thousands of miles across Europe, but God’s hand was on them. A month or so into our trip we crossed into Turkey from northern Greece and stopped at a gas station to refuel the vans, and after filling up we headed east towards Istanbul.

A mile or so down the road the van I was driving started sputtering and losing power, and it wasn’t long before it came to a complete stop. Ut-oh. We had a guy on our team that was somewhat of a mechanic, but he couldn’t figure out what the problem was. So we pushed the van all the way back to the gas station – which seemed to take forever – and then tried to communicate with guys who only knew the Turkish language. After several minutes of communicating through hand gestures and pointing to things, someone figured out that diesel had been put into the van instead of gas. I didn’t know much about mechanics, but I knew that diesel and gas-powered engines do not go together, and diesel – because it is thicker and denser – clogs the fuel lines and will eventually destroy the engine. After we siphoned the diesel out, we refueled with gas and we were on our way.

There are many things in life that don’t go together – cats and dogs, so they say, don’t go together – credit cards and getting out of debt don’t go together, dieting and all-you-can-eat buffets don’t go together. Likewise, many places in the Bible speak about spiritual incompatibility, and the principle is summarized in the well-known verse that says: Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

What becomes evident as you read the New Testament is that becoming a Christian is a monumental sea-change in the way we think, belief, and act. These changes do not happen overnight, but there is without doubt a change. In chapter five the Apostle Paul referred to Christians as “new creations” – old things have passed away and all things have become new. Jesus referred to spiritual conversion as being born again. Everything about us changes – we have new thoughts, new values, new standards, new beliefs, new goals, new attitudes, new hopes, and... new relationships.

In chapter six of 2 Corinthians Paul addresses two relationship problems – the first being between himself and the Corinthians. They had allowed Paul’s opponents to drive a wedge between themselves and Paul, and he seeks to have their once-close relationship restored. We looked at this problem last week. In our passage today Paul addresses another relationship problem – this one between the Corinthians and the pagan city they lived in.

Corinth was a large, influential city located on a major trade route, and was known as sin city – it was a place where anything goes, and anything did. Above the city, on the acropolis, was the temple of Aphrodite – the Greek goddess of love. Historians tell us that there were a thousand priestesses that served as prostitutes, raising money for the temple. Every evening they would descend on the city and seek out men and they had no trouble finding them.

Corinth was also known for its rampant idolatry. Greek culture believed that certain gods such as Zeus and Neptune and Mercury, held great power and by making sacrifices to them, you could tap into their power and they would bless you, your business, and your family. If you made them happy, they might not send a fire or flood or hurricane your way.

If you were a farmer, you'd make a sacrifice to the Zeus – the rain god – to help your crops grow. If you were going to go on a trip on the sea, you'd make a sacrifice to Poseidon so you would get there safely. If you wanted to become pregnant, you'd sacrifice to Demeter – the fertility god. The people of the city would hold pagan feasts and offer part of the meat to the god of their choice, and then eat the rest in celebration of their god. The Corinthian believers had come straight out of this pagan culture, and had not entirely disentangled themselves from the Corinthian culture. Some still went to pagan festivals on Saturday night and then came to church the next day, and Paul says, “You can't mix the two worlds, and I'll tell you why.”

Beginning in 6:14 Paul writes... Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Therefore, “Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” And, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

In these verses there is a basic command is given and restated in three ways. 6:14 says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” 6:17 says, “Come out from them and be separate and touch no unclean thing.” 7:1 says, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.” The basic idea is that we are to separate ourselves from any relationship or activity that would spiritually or morally corrupt our faith, and around these commands Paul tells us why we are to do so.

The basic command is stated in verse 14... “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” The idea of being “yoked together” goes back to an Old Testament law stated in Deuteronomy 22:10 that said, “Do not plow with an ox and donkey yoked together.” Oxen and donkeys do not go together – an ox is clean animal, and a donkey is unclean. They have two different natures – one is hard-working and cooperative, the other is stubborn and independent. On top of that, they are different sizes – one is bigger and stronger, the other is shorter and weaker – one moves more slowly, the other more quickly. It's a mismatch, and if you yoke them together, you're going to have all kinds of trouble and not get any work done.

In the same way, Paul says, do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers – do not partner yourself with those who do not share your faith in Christ. He doesn't detail exactly what being yoked with unbelievers means, but we know from other scriptures what it doesn't mean – it doesn't mean separating yourself physically from the world and avoiding all contact with non-Christians.

Doing so defeats the whole purpose for why God has left us in the world – to be ambassadors for Christ, spreading the good news of the gospel. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus said, “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). God's will is that we be in the world, but not of the world. We are to go into the world as ambassadors for Christ and be a salt and a light to the world, but we are not to become like the world in our values, goals, and affections.

Not being yoked with unbelievers doesn't mean that we are not to be friends with or not associate with unbelievers. Jesus was called the friend of sinners and ate with them – not because He enjoyed what they were doing – but because He came to seek and to save those who were lost.

The question is not: Should I have relationships with unbelievers, but what should those relationships look like? How close should I be with them? My pastoral advice, after observing people for many years, is that it depends on where you are in your walk with the Lord and your maturity as a Christian. For example, if you are a new Christian and you are trying to establish new habits and patterns, it's wise to separate yourself from the old gang and the old influences so that you're not dragged back into your former life of sin. The book of Proverbs gives many such warnings about being around the wrong people who will lead you down the wrong path.

On the other hand, for a lot us who've been in church for a long time and have solid Christian relationships, our challenge is to make sure don't isolate ourselves from world, but to be a friend to sinners – to enter their world and their turf – so we might win them to Christ.

Not being yoked together with unbelievers means that you don't enter into relationships, or form bonds with, or participate in activities with those who are not aligned with your values and morals. Paul doesn't give any specifics or rules as to how this is carried out, but the most common and natural application of this command is not being unequally yoked in marriage. There is no closer bond on earth than marriage, so it makes no sense to be yoked with someone who does not share your faith and is not headed the same direction as you. King Solomon is a prime example of why God gave this command. He married hundreds of foreign wives, and over time his wives turned his heart to other gods. The Bible states very clearly in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that believers are to marry only those who belong to the Lord. In the same passage Paul says that if you are already married to an unbeliever, to stay in that marriage and display to your unbelieving spouse what a Christ-like life looks like.

But what about other relationships and associations? What about business partnerships? What about sharing mutually similar interests with an unbeliever? What about socializing and hanging out with those who don't know the Lord? How close is to close? There are no hard and fast rules, but scripture does give us wisdom to guide us in the form of three questions...

Question number one is: **Will this relationship cause me to compromise my values or morals?** In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul quoted the well-known saying, "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). One of the main concerns every parent has is who their kid's friends are, because peer friendships have a huge influence during the adolescent years and beyond – and the need for acceptance and approval causes more than a few to give into negative peer pressure. Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers." When we associate with or take delight in the company of people with worldly morals, we run the risk of mimicking their behaviors, their language, and their lifestyle.

The reality is that if you follow Jesus there are times you might have to stand alone. I remember Greg Laurie, whose life is portrayed in the *Jesus Revolution* movie, say that when he accepted Christ, he lost all his friends overnight – he didn't abandon them, but once he stopped doing what they were doing, they didn't want him around. So, he says, he started developing new friendships with like-minded believers who were headed in the same direction as him, and realized that his former friends weren't really friends in the first place. Jesus said that our closest relationships on earth – even beyond our earthly family – are with our spiritual family of fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. When you're traveling somewhere and get talking to someone and find out they are believers, there's an instant bond with them – even though you've just met them – they are your kin in Christ.

A second question to ask is: **Will this relationship hinder my growth in holiness?** We'll look closer at 7:1 in a moment, but the last part of the verse says, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." When God saved us, He set us apart from sin to be holy as He is holy – and part of being holy is not being around those who will contaminate us morally and spiritually.

It's just common sense. If you are recovering from an addiction, you don't want to be hanging out at a party house or bar. If you want to be sexually pure, as we are called to do, you don't want to hang out with people who watch porn or live promiscuously. If you're a Corinthian that's trying to put idolatry in your past, you don't want to be going to pagan feasts on Saturday night. It's incompatible with living a holy life. Colossians 3:5 says very straightforwardly, "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature." You used to live a certain way, but you're a new creation, and you can't have close fellowship with those who are still indulging in a sinful lifestyle.

The third question would be: **Will this relationship hinder my witness?** Earlier in chapter six Paul said, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited" (6:3). As ambassadors for Christ our number one goal should be to represent Christ well, and not give the world any reason to reject the gospel by the way we conduct ourselves. If we blend into the world and act no differently than the world, we lose our influence and effectiveness as ambassadors.

What's more, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says we are to avoid all appearances of evil. There are many relationships and activities that would fall under the category of gray areas where God gives us the freedom to decide what to do. But we are not to let our freedom become a stumbling block to others and give them the wrong impression. Paul was willing to sacrifice any freedom he had for the sake of the gospel because winning people for the Lord was his highest goal.

We've spent a lot of time talking about the command, so let's move on to the reasons behind the command – why is separating ourselves spiritually and morally from unbelievers such a big deal? To start with, as new creations in Christ we are radically different – night and day – from those who have not been transformed by Christ. In verses 14b-16a Paul asks a series of questions to drive this point home... "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God."

The answer to each of these questions is... in a spiritual sense... nothing. There is a radical difference between people who are saved and those who aren't... Righteousness and wickedness have nothing in common – becoming a Christian puts you in a right standing before God and a desire to live right, while the wicked are enemies of God and indulge in sinful behavior.

What fellowship can light have with darkness? Light and darkness cannot coexist. Light represents truth and holiness, and darkness represents ignorance and evil. According to the Bible, you're either living in light or living in darkness – there is no middle ground.

What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Belial was a well-known name for Satan, and means "worthless" or "lawless." Believers belong to Christ and belong to His kingdom, while unbelievers are controlled by Satan and belong to the kingdom of darkness. There is no harmony between the two.

What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? On one level, we have a lot in common – we shop at the same grocery store, we fish on the same river, we share similar interests, we root for the same team, and may share similar politics – but on a spiritual level, we have nothing in common. One commentator put it this way: “The unbeliever’s life is centered on self, the believer’s on Christ; the treasure of the one is here on earth, of the other in heaven; the values of the one are those of this world, of the other those of the world to come; the believer seeks the glory of God, the unbeliever the glory of men.”

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? In the Old Testament the temple was where the glory and presence of God resided, and to bring an idol into the temple of the living God was an abomination. It’s even worse to bring idolatry into the life of a believer where the Holy Spirit of God resides. The last part of verse 16 goes on to say, “For we are the temple of the living God.” This is an amazing phrase, and full of meaning of which we only have time to touch on. The word temple means “house,” and in the Old Testament God told Israel to build a temple or house where He would manifest His glory. The temple, however, was temporary and was designed to point us to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. John 1:14 says that Jesus – the Word – became flesh and made His dwelling among us. The glory and presence of God resided in Jesus, and now, instead of going to a building to meet God and talk to God and worship God, you came to Jesus.

Before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He talked about building a new temple – a temple not made by hands or by stone, but a spiritual temple where the presence of God would dwell in those He redeemed. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul said, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” This means that wherever you go, the Holy Spirit goes with you. When my dad was saved at age 17, shortly after he was saved, he was getting ready to go out one night, and his dad – who had also recently accepted Christ – caught him at the door and said, “Where are you going?” “Just out,” he said. “Is it the kind of place Jesus would go, because you’re taking Jesus with you.” My dad said after that comment he changed his plans. With the Holy Spirit living in you, you will have an awareness and a conviction of where you ought to go and who you ought to be with – and you’ll feel a level of discomfort being around those who do not acknowledge God or live according to His ways.

Paul goes on in the rest of chapter six to quote parts of several Old Testament verses to show that just as God called Israel into a special covenant relationship with Him, He is now doing the same in the lives of the Corinthians. In 16b God says, “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” And in verse 18 He says, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” These verses highlight the fact that we belong exclusively to God and share the deepest possible relationship with Him – that of Father and children. Where we were once alienated from God, we have been reconciled to Him through Christ and adopted into His eternal family.

Paul is driving home the point that our lives, our nature, our identity, and our personal, intimate relationship with God is on an altogether different trajectory than those without Christ. “Therefore,” verse 17 says... “Therefore, ‘Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’” These Corinthian believers needed to make a clean break with their former life of sin and idolatry – they needed to separate themselves from unbelievers immersed in the morals and values of the world. Again, he’s not telling them to avoid all non-Christians, but their new allegiance was with their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to be in the world, but not of the world.

Throughout the Bible God has always called His people, those who belong to Him, to be different – to go against the grain of the world’s values and standards. In the Old Testament God called His Chosen People, Israel, to be His own, and every area of life was to be governed by the fact that they belonged to God – including what they ate, what they wore, who they married, and how they worshipped. Likewise, we are commanded in the New Testament, as God’s people, to be fully devoted to God and march to the beat of a different drum.

In 7:1 Paul gives another “therefore”... “Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” Paul says, “Since we have these promises of God – that of indwelling us by His Spirit and adopting us into His family – stay away from anything that would contaminate your body and spirit.” In the Old Testament God gave His people hundreds of laws regarding clean and unclean things. Unclean things could be animals, objects, food, and even people – and to touch them would contaminate you. These laws were designed to teach them on a spiritual level that God wanted them to live pure and undefiled lives and not be tainted by the impurity of the world.

In the New Testament, Jesus used the idea of being “clean” to speak of being holy. To be holy is to be set apart from sin and to live lives that reflect the holiness of God. As God’s children we bear His DNA, and we are to be holy because God is holy. The process of becoming holy begins the moment we are born again and continues until the day we are with Christ in heaven and our holiness is perfected. Until then, as children of God who bear His nature, to live in a habitual pattern of sin is incompatible with who we are.

Our passage today is one of many, many passages in the Bible to exhort us to live a holy life, and we can’t do that if we are yoked with unbelievers and still part of the world opposed to God. Unless we move out to the desert and live in a monastery – which God doesn’t want us to do – we live in an ever-increasingly corrupt, sinful, pagan world. We are in the world, but we don’t have to let the world be a part of us. As Martin Luther said, “You can’t keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” As you separate yourself from the world and bond to fellow brothers and sisters in Christ – as you immerse yourself in the daily disciplines of prayer and Bible study – you will create new patterns and habits that will foster holiness – and will be ready to go back into the world as Christ’s ambassador.

Maybe this message has prompted something within by the Holy Spirit, and you sense the need to make a spiritual or moral separation – it may be from a person or a group or an activity that is causing you to compromise your morals or values, that is hindering your growth in holiness, and hurting your testimony as a Christian. If so, the Lord says, “Separate yourself, touch no unclean thing, and purify yourself from everything that contaminates body and spirit. Recommit yourself to the pursuit of holiness out of reverence to God.”

Many of you may hear this message and say, “I don’t really have all that many non-Christian friends and I don’t go to pagan feasts or hang out with the world.” The challenge for you is to not isolate yourself from the world, but to go into the world as Christ’s ambassador and be a friend to sinners.

Regardless of how the Lord may be speaking to you today, remember that you belong exclusively to Him – you are the temple of the living God – and you are a child of God. With such a great identity and relationship with God, giving yourself fully to Him is a privilege and the pathway to many blessings.