

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**

**SERMON: Are We to Engage the Culture or Separate Ourselves from It? Yes!**

**SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1**

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We return this morning to our study of 2 Corinthians, which we started in September and interrupted with Advent. Our text for today is one of the most familiar passages in the book, but that doesn't mean it's one of the best understood. As a teenager growing up in a fundamentalist church, I probably heard 2 Cor. 6 quoted as often as any other passage in the NT: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers... Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing ..."

This passage was used for some very legitimate purposes (to warn against evangelistic dating, for example), but it was also used as a club in ways that appear to me today to be highly questionable. Did Paul really have in mind card playing or dancing or social drinking when he wrote these words? I personally think this is a powerful and profound portion of Scripture that we need to take very seriously, but I also think we need to handle it carefully, as we must all Scripture.

Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 6:14, and we will read to the end of the chapter, plus the first verse of chapter 7:

*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? 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."*

*"I will be a Father to you,*

*and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*

*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.*

I would suggest to you that the key principle of this passage is quite obvious. The application of the principle is, unfortunately, not a slam-dunk, but the principle is clear:

**The principle: Believers are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. (6:14)**

In Deuteronomy 22:10 the Israelites are forbidden to pull a plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. One's initial reaction to such a regulation might be, "Why does God take up precious space in His holy Word to address such a mundane issue?" But apparently God has significant concern for orderliness throughout His creation. Some things go together and some

don't. And among the things that don't go together are certain forms of collaboration between believers and unbelievers. But *which ones?* We're going to get to that question, but first we want to ask the "why?" question, because that's where Paul goes next as he moves from the principle to the rationale.

### **The rationale: Why can't believers be "yoked" with non-Christians?**

The Apostle offers five reasons. In a sense they are all really just the same reason stated five different ways. But in another sense they each add something to the argument. They come in the form of rhetorical questions, questions that aren't expected to be answered because the answer is so obvious. And in this case the answer to each question is supposed to be, "Nothing, or none!"

**1. What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?** Nothing! Righteousness and wickedness are direct opposites. Righteousness seeks to conform to the character and commands of God, while wickedness ignores His will or actively opposes it. There can be no compromise between these two, no middle ground. What happens if you put a rotten apple into a barrel of good apples? Does the rotten one become good? Of course not; the good ones become rotten. So, if a righteous person partakes in wickedness, he is no longer righteous but automatically becomes contaminated. Second question:

**2. What fellowship can light have with darkness?** None! The kind of light and darkness he is talking about is moral in nature, of course. Light refers to truth and holiness; darkness to error and evil. Christians are people who have made a transition from moral darkness to spiritual light, for as Col. 1:13 puts it, "God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." Jesus is the light of the world, and believers are drawn to Him like moths to a candle, but as for the rest of mankind, they "love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil" (John 3:19). Friends, there's a *reason* why certain places of entertainment are dark. Shameful things are done there, and followers of Christ cannot thrive there.

**3. What harmony is there between Christ and Satan?** Your text probably reads "Belial," one of the titles used in the NT for Satan. Paul is asking what Christ and the devil have in common, and the answer is more than obvious—none! Politics, you know, makes for some strange bedfellows. Last year Newt Gingrich and Hillary Clinton got together on some political proposal. In Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon recently formed a new party with his long-time nemesis Shimon Peres. Shawn Hannity and Alan Colmes host a television program together. However, there is not, and never can be, any common ground between Jesus and the devil—no common platform, no basis for agreement.

**4. What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?** This is a more difficult question, and the answer is not so immediately obvious, because we all have *some* things in common with unbelievers. We go to school with them, we may work with them, we all have relatives who are non-Christians; in fact, we cannot avoid them. But it seems clear, in light of the previous questions, that Paul intends for us to understand his question this way: "What does a

believer have in common *spiritually* with an unbeliever?” And the answer to that is clearly, “nothing.” The two have different parents (God and Satan), different motivation, different goals and objectives, and a different destination. The servants of Christ cannot enter into spiritual alliance with the servants of Satan, any more than Jesus can be in harmony with the devil.

**5. What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?** None! The very concept is ludicrous! The temple in Jerusalem was unique among all the religious buildings in the ancient world in that it lacked any religious art whatever. There were no stained glass windows depicting the great scenes of the OT, no icons, no statues, nothing. The reason is grounded in the first two commandments and the fact that the God who rules heaven and earth is so glorious that as soon as you try to depict him with a picture or a statue, you actually belittle Him. In his great book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer speaks truth when he says,

*“All manmade images of God, whether molten or mental, are really borrowings from the stock-in-trade of a sinful and ungodly world, and are bound therefore to be out of accord with God’s own holy Word. To make an image of God is to take one’s thoughts of him from a human source, rather than from God himself; and this is precisely what is wrong with image-making.”*

To set up a man-made idol in the Temple would be the greatest possible sacrilege and blasphemy. But Paul is only using the Temple in Jerusalem as a symbol of another, more important, temple—the believer’s body. “For *we* are the temple of the living God,” he says in verse 16. God no longer makes His home in bricks and mortar, as He once did (though even in the OT He was in no way confined to that Temple); now He dwells in the hearts of His people. In a sense every believer is a little temple housing the Holy Spirit of God. And if that is true, every place we go and everything we do, we take God with us and involve Him.

Friends, the crux of these five reasons is that believers are not to be joined together in *inappropriate ways* with those who do not share our faith or loyalty to Christ. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is fast going to hell in a handbasket. Our society is becoming more secular by the hour, more blatantly pagan actually, and more like Corinth every day. The distinctions between the church and the world are being blurred, the edges are becoming fuzzy, and fewer and fewer people are standing up to the evils of the culture. So let’s go to the really hard question of application:

**The application: What kinds of activities are forbidden (by this text) between Christians and non-believers? (6:14-16)**

I want to try to answer this question first negatively, then positively.

**Negatively, this is *not* an outright ban on:**

**1. Social contact with unbelievers.** Christ has never called upon His followers to isolate themselves from society, even the wicked people in society. Jesus Himself set an example by constantly rubbing shoulders with the scumbags of His day. Monasteries and cloisters are the

invention of a corrupt medieval church, not a mandate from the NT. In 1 Cor. 5 the Apostle Paul is dealing with a member of the church who experienced serious moral failure, and in instructing the church about how to respond to him, Paul appeals to a previous letter he had written:

*“I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world (unbelievers) who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world (you would have to join a convent or a monastery!). But now I am writing you (i.e. I am clarifying my point) that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”*

The social contact we must be careful to avoid is that with professing Christians who are not living up to their profession! How will we ever impact unbelievers for Christ if we isolate ourselves from them? Frankly, I suspect the single biggest reason why evangelism is not taking place more than it is in the church today is probably that the vast majority of our social contact is with fellow-believers rather than the people of the world. Some of us go to school with Christians, work with Christians, worship with Christians, vacation with Christians, and then wonder why we’re not more effective in winning the lost!

**2. Working for unbelievers or secular institutions.** Throughout the Scriptures we see loyal believers working in the secular world, even for pagans, without any hint of criticism. In fact, two of the greatest spiritual heroes of the OT—Joseph and Daniel (about whom no evil is even hinted)—were powerful figures in thoroughly pagan governments and were praised for maintaining a strong testimony of integrity and honor.

Frankly, it’s a privilege to work for a truly Christian employer, as I do and as some of you do. But it’s certainly no blight on your character if you have to work for an employer who rejects your spiritual values. In fact, it may provide a unique opportunity to influence the boss or fellow-employees with the Gospel. (Nor do I believe this passage would forbid membership in a union).

**3. Adopting many of the customs of one’s culture.** Almost all of us are natural conformists; we hate to stand out in a crowd. We want to look like the rest, act like the rest, and have what the rest have. Interestingly, even the most notorious non-conformists all tend to look like each other! The bikers refuse to wear suits and ties and dress shoes, but they all wear the same jeans, jackets and do-rags. The goths try to make a statement that distinguishes them from the rest of us, but you can spot them a mile away. The body piercers and the tattoo freaks proclaim their individuality, but they go to insane lengths to compete with one another in jewelry and ink.

Be that as it may, much of this adoption of cultural customs is amoral—neither right nor wrong. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 9 the Apostle actually boasted of the degree to which he adopted the customs of the various cultures in which he worked:

*“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so*

*as to win those under the law... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).*

Is he talking about fashion, diet, humor, idioms? It’s not certain, but clearly Paul tried to fit in with the people he was evangelizing.

But clearly there is a danger point here. In fact, I don’t know any question more difficult for Christians to wrestle with today than *the extent* to which they should adopt the customs of their culture. There are some customs that positive and healthy and should be adopted, some that are blatantly evil and must be avoided, and others that are neither black nor white but must be evaluated cautiously. A very thoughtful young man who grew up in this church recently wrote to me to question whether we should be spending \$35,000 on new audio-visual equipment, as recommended in our end-of-the-year stewardship project. You see, he had recently gone on a mission trip to a third-world country, where the believers didn’t even have a P.A. system, much less expensive projectors and LCD screens. They were led in worship with one out-of-tune guitar, yet their worship was powerful.

I admire this young man’s thoughtfulness and his willingness to ask the question. But I don’t think there is an easy answer. We all have to live within our culture. If we tried to start a church in northeast Wichita in an un-airconditioned building with dirt floors, pine boards for benches, and an untuned guitar for a band, we would not get very far. And I doubt if God expects that. I think we should strive for quality without luxury, and for excellence without extravagance. Have I reached that balance in my own personal life? Have we achieved it as a church? Probably not, but I challenge us to work at it continually.

Even harder are the questions that arise concerning our engagement with the culture in moral areas. What about fashion? If girls’ jeans are cut lower and lower, and if “everyone” is wearing them, and if that’s all the stores carry, should Christian girls cave? What about movies? If four-letter words and sexually suggestive content are found in all but G-rated movies, and if “everyone” is going to see the R-rated ones, should the Christian cave and try to rationalize it as “engaging the culture”? Christians should not live in isolation from the culture, nor must they reject all of its customs, but they must be very cautious here.

**4. Continuing in a marriage to an unbeliever upon conversion.** In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul wrestles with a lot of tough issues relative to marriage. One of those is the question of whether a new convert to Christ should leave his or her pagan spouse so that they can remarry and thus enjoy the great value of a Christian marriage with a true believer. His response is unequivocal:

*“If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him... Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him.” (1 Cor. 7:12-13, 17).*

Paul’s principal rationale is that the believer in a mixed marriage has the unique opportunity to influence the unbeliever and to impact the children of the marriage. “Coming out from among them” does not justify leaving one’s spouse.

So far we have seen four things that the unequal yoke does not forbid; but more importantly, what *does* it forbid?

**Positively, it *does* seem to forbid a Christian from:**

**1. *Marrying an unbeliever.*** While a new Christian should not divorce an unbeliever to whom he or she is already married, a Christian should never *initiate* a marriage to an unbeliever. In 1 Cor. 7:39 Paul makes the point that a widow has freedom to marry “anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.” This is not just a wise piece of advice—it constitutes an absolute prohibition against intermarriage between a believer and an unbeliever.

All of us know someone who married an unbeliever who later became a convert, but that is totally irrelevant. We all also know people who have driven insanely at some point in their youth and survived, but that doesn’t justify the behavior. Survival of unsafe driving or survival of a disobedient marriage is a sign of God’s grace, not a justification for disobedience. The wise approach is to never allow a relationship to reach the level of intensity where marriage might even be considered.

Now I can’t prove that Paul has marriage specifically in mind in this passage, but I am confident that if he were asked whether the principle of the unequal yoke applies to marriage, he would affirm that it does. After all, what relationship in life is closer than marriage?

**2. *Becoming a 50/50 partner with an unbeliever.*** Again, I am not sure this was specifically in Paul’s mind, but the application seems to fit. Partnerships are tricky relationships, and many Christians have found themselves in compromising situations because of an unequal yoke in a business partnership. Please understand that I am not suggesting that Christians should limit their business dealings to the Christian yellow pages. Nor do I think believers are forbidden to own stock in secular companies (though I do believe in ethical investing; i.e. there are certain kinds of business in which I would not buy stock—no matter how much money I thought I could make). But when a believer gets into a 50/50 business relationship with an unbeliever he faces the grave potential of being forced into decisions that are contrary to his own spiritual values.

I have a friend who faced this very issue last year. He and a partner owned a piece of property that was being sought for a business use with which he was morally uncomfortable. He didn’t want to sell to this business, but his unbelieving partner was eager to sell because the price was great. Fortunately, God intervened and the deal evaporated, but the situation illustrates the potential danger.

**3. *Engaging in multi-faith worship.*** I put this last but it is definitely not the least important. In fact, I think this is the principal focus of Paul’s concern in this passage: Christians should not compromise their faith by joining together with unbelievers in ecumenical worship. I do not mean that we should not welcome unbelievers into truly Christian worship; rather we must not adopt a spirit of tolerance in respect to worship that waters down the uniqueness of Christ or the

Christian Gospel.

Tolerance is a wonderful thing when it is understood in the traditional sense of accepting people as individuals with value (because they were created in the image of God) but without necessarily agreeing with or sharing their beliefs or their lifestyle choices. But when tolerance demands that every individual's beliefs, values, lifestyle and truth claims be treated as of equal value, that is completely unacceptable to a Christian worldview.

And unfortunately that is what tolerance means today in our secular culture. Even in the ecclesiastical world there is a huge push to treat all truth claims as equal, except, of course, the claim that Jesus is the only way to God! Many of the mainline denominations are devoting major resources to watering down and removing the doctrinal distinctions between themselves, Catholics, Orthodox, and even Muslims.

But this is not really new. In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 we are told that some of the members of the church in Corinth were, for the sake of good neighborliness, attending feasts in pagan temples. The problem, in Paul's mind, was not the friendliness but the choice of venue. These banquets took place in the presence of idols, and some of the participants were giving thanks to the gods behind those idols, who were really demons! How can a follower of Jesus, he asks, eat the Lord's supper on Sunday, and then eat and drink in a place where demons are worshiped the next day? It makes no sense!

What should we do about the ecumenical emphasis in the Christian church today? On the one hand, there are isolationists who hardly fellowship with anyone except those who dot all their i's and cross all their t's the exact way they do. At the other extreme are those who seem quite comfortable worshiping with Muslims, wiccans, Hindus, or anyone who claims a religious faith. I don't think Paul would approve of either of these extremes. But figuring out where to draw the line is not easy.

On September 23, 2001, less than two weeks after the terrorist attack on New York City, Oprah Winfrey hosted a gathering in Yankee Stadium called "Prayer for America." It was a meeting of New Yorkers of all faiths (or none) and was simulcast on large television screens at stadiums in Staten Island and Brooklyn. It was televised on four national networks as the nation was still trying to come to terms with the tragedy of 911.

Participating were the Roman Catholic archbishop, a number of rabbis, the priest of a Sikh Temple, a Muslim imam, a Hindu leader, an archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church, and at least six Protestant clergymen. One of those was Rev. Dr. David Benke of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, who prayed an uncompromising prayer, including the following words: "Those of us who bear the Name of Christ understand that your towering love found its ultimate strength when you stooped to send your Son to die and live again in order to bring the world back together." He closed his prayer this way: "In Jesus' Precious Name. Amen."

I want to ask you, "Was it right for Dr. Benke to participate in this ecumenical prayer service?" I

personally don't think it's an easy question to answer. As far as I know Dr. Benke was the only clergymen to face heresy charges from his denomination for his involvement in this prayer meeting, for the LCMS (Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod) does not generally allow its clergy to be involved in ecumenical services even with other evangelical denominations, to say nothing of non-Christians religions.

A more important question is this: "Would Paul have participated?" And I suspect the answer is "No." He didn't mind debating philosophers on Mar's Hill, but we never find him entering pagan temples and using their venues to promote his faith in God. I don't think I could follow a Muslim or Hindu cleric to the platform and pretend that we were all doing the same thing—appealing to the Deity to comfort His people. I have joined with non-believers to promote certain values—like the prolife position or abstinence or anti-pornography crusades—but I see that as different from worshipping with them or praying with them.

**The reward: God responds to faithfulness in biblical separation. (6:17, 18)**

We turn quickly to the end of chapter 6: "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." These are quotations from Isaiah 52 and 2 Samuel 7—OT passages that stress the importance of obedience on the part of God's people. The Isaiah passage speaks prophetically to the exiles returning from Assyria and Babylon, urging them to leave paganism behind as they return to the Promised Land. I think the message for us is that God rewards those who are obedient in truly biblical separation by dealing with them as a loving Father. The problem is when we separate ourselves from the world we sometimes lose important relationships—friends, co-workers, fellow-students, sometimes even family. But God promises to make up for those lost relationships by treating us as His spiritual sons and daughters.

You may have to give up a relationship you hoped would end in marriage, but what is more important—marriage to an unbeliever (a marriage that promises to be filled with spiritual tension) or an eternal relationship with God?

You may have to give up a partnership that could make you a lot of money. But what is more important—a killing in a business deal or the approval of your heavenly Father?

You may end up offending someone by declining an invitation to their temple of worship, but what is worse—offending that person or offending your heavenly Father?

**Conclusion:** Look at the first verse of chapter 7: "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." Based upon God's promise of responding to our loyalty with Fatherly love, there is an obligation on all of us to eliminate all the spiritual contamination in our lives—not just intermarriage, business partnerships, and ecumenical compromises, but also dress, entertainment, speech, or any commitment, relationship, or practice that adversely impacts our identity as members of God's family. I want to close with a quote from Scott Hafemann:

*We must not create churches that preach the glory of Christ while at the same time cultivate lifestyles that focus on attaining the pleasures of this world. We cannot declare the sovereignty of God and at the same time promote looking to the self-help strategies of our culture as the pathway to salvation. We cannot preach the power of God and wink at sin. The arrogant exaltation of our human egos and the love of money are the twin pillars of the wickedness and darkness that the opponent of God is using today to bring the idols of the health and wealth gospel into the church. May God grant us the strength to be his people alone.*

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... Come out from them and be separate... Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.”

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Note: I found J. Philip Arthur's book, *Strength in Weakness*, particularly helpful with this passage and borrowed a number of his insights.