

Sermon: No unequal yoke
2 Corinthians 6:11-7:1
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We must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, Paul writes to the church in Corinth. I have heard this verse very often quoted in regard to finding the right marriage partner, and that in itself is not a bad thing.

But is that what Paul is speaking about here in this passage?

1 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers

‘Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers’.

Those words by themselves can mean whatever you like it to mean. Does it mean we should not relate to non-Christians? Does it mean we should not start a company with unbelievers? Does it mean no marriage to a non-Christian?

After his opening statement, after this headline ‘do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers’, Paul explains what he means. The people of God he describes with the words righteousness, light, Christ, the temple of God.

And the opposite of the Christian life is described as lawlessness, darkness, idols, and as Belial - a word used in Jewish literature for satan.

Paul does not mean these awful descriptions as personal description of every non-Christian, that would be so out of sink with how he speaks about the need to love our neighbors and to serve in this world. And Paul had kind relationships with Jews and Greeks and Romans. He did not mind to eat in their homes for instance.

Paul was actually focussing on the fact that as Christians we should not participate in pagan temple feasts.

Many a heathen, pagan feast was held in the temple of a god. The invitation would run, "I invite you to dine with me at the table of our god Zeus", or any other god.

And every pagan feast would begin and end with the pouring of a libation, a cup of wine, to the gods. Could a Christian share in that? Or must he get out and say good-

bye to the social fellowship which used to mean so much to him before he became a Christian?

This same issue is also discussed in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. [...] What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

So Paul speaks about us not participating in pagan religious rituals. In the rest of that chapter he says that the food sacrificed to the gods can be eaten, no problem, it is just food - but do not eat it in the context of the temple worship itself.

Because of these words in 1 Corinthians, most biblical scholars believe that Paul in 2 Corinthians is speaking about the same issue. You are the temple of God, so do not be involved at all in the temple of idols. Do not support the religions of others and do not involve yourself.

And this was complicated in a Roman society that was so drenched in religion.

In antiquity, this did not only mean that people should not eat in pagan temples. It also meant you sometimes had to give up profitable work.

Suppose you are a stone mason. What to do when you could have a contract to build a heathen shrine? Suppose you were a tailor. What if you can make garments for priests of the heathen gods?

Suppose you were a soldier. At the gate of every camp burned the light upon the altar for the godhead of the Emperor. What if you had to fling your pinch of incense on that altar in token of his worship?

Time and time again in the early Church the Christians had to choose between the security of their job and their loyalty to Jesus Christ.

For Paul, some people in the church in Corinth were too comfortable with the society they lived in. Just as we can be so satisfied with our life in this world - even though we are surrounded by another religion. Even though we may be surrounded by secularism. Even though we are surrounded by corruption, by wrong-doing, by liberalism in sexual affairs.

What are we watching on TV? If we look at the history of the websites we have visited, what do we find? What do we eat and drink? Who are our friends? What do we allow to fill our minds?

Do not be yoked with unbelievers. Paul refers actually to a law in the old testament that explicitly forbade farmers to have two different animals under one yoke. Because both animals will be hurt in that process.

And we hurt ourselves if we try to walk under the same yoke as people who are too different from us.

So we must not participate in religious ceremonies that are part of other religions. But we also do not participate in the lawlessness and the immorality of our society.

2 because we are God's temple

We do not participate in the immorality and the religions of our world - because we as a church are the temple of the living God. That is the motive for our holiness, for our different lifestyle.

Paul unpacks what it means that we are the temple of God. He combines many verses from the Old Testament - promises to Israel that God would one day restore the nation.

They will be again like Adam in paradise - "I will live in them and walk among them."

"I will be their God, they shall be my people."

"I will be your father; you shall be my sons and daughters."

Of all these things, Paul says: this is already a fact. You are all God's children. These promises have been fulfilled in your midst. You are God's temple.

Paul tells the whole church in Corinth that together, as one community, they are the temple of the Lord. All of them are God's sons and daughters. The Lord is in their midst.

God is a Father, full of tenderness; call him Father many times a day and tell him that you love him that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his son, his daughter.

God is our Father; this is very encouraging for the people in Corinth, - and for all of us. Paul has been having serious disagreements with people in that church; he had serious problems with the morality of some; he had serious issues with individuals in that congregation.

But he does not have a sort of separation in his mind between good and bad members; they are one temple; one body of Christ; one flock of sheep of the Good Shepherd; one people; one family of the Father; all of them are sons and daughters of God - and brothers and sisters of each other.

"But God, why are some of those brothers and sisters so difficult!?"

Even those people that are sometimes so dead wrong by going to eat in an idolatrous temple; even people who are way to comfortable in this world; even people who still have to learn very much about the Christian life - they are part of the one body of Christ.

But! As children of God we must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. We must stop going to those parties in the pagan temples. We must live a life for Jesus Christ.

In this regard Paul also quotes verses from the Old Testament that say that we must separate from the world we live in; we must not touch anything unclean. Of course we must not - as we are God's Temple.

3 Paul gives strong pastoral advise

And sometimes we must tell other people to change. Sometime we must help them to adapt their behavior. That is exactly what Paul did in his letter. He was clear about right and wrong. Sometimes people need to be told in their face. And sometimes, if they refuse to listen after having been told once and again, maybe some further steps must be taken.

But we must be so careful. We are not Jesus. We are not the apostles. We are all sinners. None of us is perfect. And it is so easy to see bad things in others - because we have a speck in our own eye.

That is why I believe we must always focus on God's welcoming arms. The attitude of Jesus and the apostles was to love first, always to love first.

We are the temple of the living God - with all the nice people and the not so nice people. With saints and sinners. And if God loves his temple, his people, so should we.

And as long as I lack in love, and of course I do, as long as I am not God's perfect servant, I must be very careful not to think that I know exactly what other people are doing wrong. I must always be very slow in my judgment.

To always love is hard. Because loving people is painful. Some people will always disappoint you. It is so much easier to simply not love. But be careful.

CS Lewis in his book *The Four Loves*, says this about the pain of love:

To love [...] is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - your love will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and anxieties of love is Hell.

Paul had the right to be sharp sometimes to those people in Corinth; he had the right to point his finger at the wrongs people did. He had earned this right by his love. And he felt wounded by their sins because of his affection for them.

See how he opened the passage we read today. Paul writes,

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. There is no restriction in our affections. 2 Cor 6:11-12:

Our heart is wide open. He means there is no favoritism; he includes the whole congregation. He did not merely love the "nice people" among them. He loved them all: the difficult ones, the ones who were struggling, and the hard-to-get-along-with ones as well.

There were no preconditions that he demanded before he would love somebody in the congregation. He accepted them as the people of God. Though he knew their struggles, their weaknesses, their heartaches, their failures, and their resistance, he loved them.

May we all learn to love others to such an extent. Would that not be heaven on earth? To love and to be loved?

Conclusion

And finally, Paul concludes in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God."

Paul - as the mouthpiece of God, gives us this homework: To live as children of the Father, and to not let unholiness, or the comforts of our world, or a lack of love, create problems in our relationship with God our Father and with each other.

Let us eat the food that God presents to us - the body and blood of Jesus Christ - and let us not feed on those aspects of the world-we-live-in, that only damage us. And this time of lent is a good time to ponder where we have to make some changes.