

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / May 22, 2022 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
2 Corinthians 5-7: The Rewards of Costly Service
Where We Walk (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)

A visit to ancient Corinth reveals its darkness

Good morning. It was great to see the Farmer's faces and hear of God's work through their family! As we come now to God's Word, let's pray...

A couple of weeks ago, I shared about backpacking through Italy and Greece with a few friends. One place we visited was ancient Corinth, where the Apostle Paul served for over a year and where his New Testament letters of 1st and 2nd Corinthians were sent.

It was cool to walk through the ancient ruins and think of the Apostle Paul, an early church leader, sharing the good news of Jesus where we stood. We learned that ancient Corinth was a wealthy city, on important trade routes, with impressive buildings and scenic gulf and mountain views.

But we also learned that while ancient Corinth looked good on the surface, it was a dark underneath. A city with human trafficking. A city with temples for many false gods, some of which had cult prostitutes for their worship, a city with similarities to parts of Vegas or Bangkok today.

Here's a pic I took of Apollo's temple, one of many places of idolatry in the city. Idolatry is the worship of man-made statues of false gods or the worship of anything other than the one true God. That's idolatry.

Even after believing in Jesus, the Corinthian church struggled with idolatry. They had friends and family encouraging them to worship idols, and they walked by the temples with cult prostitutes luring them to false worship, and if they stopped participating in the local worship feasts for the idols, they'd lose social status.¹ So the Corinthian church was being encouraged and pressured to walk in wrong ways.

Relevance: We are sometimes encouraged to walk in wrong ways

It doesn't look exactly the same, but we are also sometimes encouraged to walk wrongly. We might be in relationships with people who honestly, aren't good influences.

¹ Diehl, Judith, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 2 Corinthians*.

We might feel encouraged by our school, or workplace, or on social media to walk towards what is wrong and away from our loving God and His good ways.

If you're like the Corinthians, and me, you sometimes succumb to those negative influences, harming yourself and your walk with God. Also limiting our impact as we harm others, are a negative influence, and fail to represent Jesus well.

When we succumb to negative influences, we also limit our relationships here in the church. Paul says that full fellowship, wide-hearted affection together can only happen as we avoid things like immorality and idolatry. To say it positively, as Pastor Dave did last Sunday, the more we are all "all in" for Jesus, the richer our relationships will be.

Orienting to God's Word

Because of all this, Paul has much to say about harmful relationships and idolatry in his letter of 1st Corinthians. Since these issues continued to be a struggle for the church in Corinth, even after Paul's warnings, Paul says more in his letter of 2nd Corinthians. What Paul has to say there speaks to our lives and relationships today.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to 2nd Corinthians, chapter 6. Or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Teaching: Where to Walk

Away from corrupting relationships (6:14-16b) – This morning Paul will show us what to walk away from and what to walk in starting in verse 14 of 2nd Corinthians chapter 6. Here Paul says to the church: **(14a)**

¹⁴ Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

Here's a picture of a yoke, which is different from an egg yolk. A yoke is a harness, fitted around the necks of two animals, to allow them to pull together on a load. The Old Testament law commanded do not yoke two different kinds of animals together. For if you yoke an ox and a donkey together, it's bad news for the donkey. It'll be compelled to go where the ox leads, even when it's harmful.

Similarly, Paul commands Christians to not be yoked together with unbelievers. So there are some kinds of relationship that Christians should avoid because they're harmful.

If you read Paul's writings, Paul is not saying that Christians should avoid all relationships with those who do not identify as followers of Jesus. Paul says to lovingly serve and share about Jesus in relationships with all kinds of people.

Paul is also not saying that Christians are more important than other people or that Christians are always good influences. The command to not be yoked together is not about the value of each person or about Christians always living better, it's instead about the direction of one's life.

So then, what sorts of relationships is Paul talking about avoiding?

Well in 1st Corinthians, Paul wrote to this same church, warning them to avoid unequal partnerships like a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian, and to avoid taking any church disputes to secular courts, and to avoid idol worship, pagan feasts, and immoral sexual behavior, so those are possibilities.

Let's read further now, starting in the middle of verse 14, to get more clarity. **(14b-16b)**

For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

Here Paul asks five rhetorical questions to bring some clarity and show the importance of not being yoked together. The first two questions, in verse 14, speak to morality. So followers of Jesus should not keep engaging with anyone of another faith or worldview if that relationship leads to moral compromise.

Sadly, Christians sometimes do not need others tempting us for us to fail morally. Sometimes we live wrongly all on our own; we all struggle with sin. But if the church is just the same as the world around it, then something is wrong with the church.

For we are to walk in the light. As Paul asks here, "what fellowship can light have with darkness?" So we should not be in relationships that pull us towards moral compromise.

For example, the flirty person who you once slept with, who now keeps trying to sleep with you is a yoke needing to be removed.

I know all this isn't the most politically correct thing to say in our culture, but Paul is warning us, if any relationship is morally corrupting, don't be yoked to it.

Paul will not shrug his shoulders at the church's sinful relationships because continuing in them is to walk into brokenness and bondage. So Paul loves the church enough to say, "Do not be yoked together" in those kinds of relationships.

The next three questions, in verses 15 and 16, point to relationships with wrong worship. Back in 1st Corinthians chapters 8 and 10, Paul warns the church that idol worship can lead to involvement with demons. It's not because the idol statues themselves are anything, but because demonic powers can be involved in that wrong worship.

So verses 15 and 16 make clear that there is no harmony between Christ and Belial, a name for Satan. And there is no agreement between the temple of God and idols. So Christians should not be in relationships that lead to participating in wrong worship. For we are the temple of the living God, not involved with lifeless idols.

So if a friend is strongly influencing you towards losing your faith in Jesus and participating in their faith instead, then that's a yoke that needs to be removed.

So looking at all five rhetorical questions, Paul says do not be yoked in corrupting relationships. As a donkey yoked to an ox will be pulled to harmful places, so followers of Jesus are to avoid relationships that pull us towards wrong living or wrong worship.

In some cases, this might require no longer spending time with a person. In others, it might involve just less time together, or avoiding certain activities, and we may need wisdom from God's Spirit, Word, and people as we make these decisions.

But whatever changes are needed, don't be bound to anyone of another faith in a way that encourages becoming unbound to worshipping and walking with Jesus.

So if your social circle is sucking you into a life that's all about appearances: buying expensive things to "keep up with the Joneses" and not feeling okay unless you've got the right hair, look, and Botox while looking down on people without your money or looks, then that's a yoke needing to be removed.

Sometimes there are relationships that are okay for one Christian but are a yoke for another. One Christian might be able to go to the bar with their old crew, while another might find those relationships are a yoke pulling them away from Jesus and towards drunkenness and one night stands.

One Christian might be able to spend time every day with a friend or radio host with strong political views. While another might find that association is a yoke pulling them towards to more passion for a political party than for Jesus and towards hating rather than loving those who disagree with their politics.

As we're chatting here, are any relationships coming to mind for you? Anyone pulling you, or me, towards what is wrong and away from Jesus?

Maybe an unwise romantic interest, a family member undermining your faith, a friend who's a bad influence, a racist neighbor, a coworker you're cutting corners with, a very gossipy social group, a self-help guru saying, "Depend on yourself"? Whoever it is, God's Word says to not be yoked together, it's not worth it.

In holiness with God's family (6:1-1) – As God's Word calls us to walk away, it also invites us to walk in something beautiful in the middle of verse 16. **(16c-18)**

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."

¹⁷ Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.

Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

¹⁸ And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

In these verses, Paul applies seven Old Testament promises to the church. Promises to encourage us to walk in holiness with God's family.

In verse 16, Paul quotes promises in Leviticus 26: of God living with us, walking with us, being our God, and making us His people. We're not called away from corrupting relationships and then into isolation, for we walk now with God Himself.

Verse 17 references the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Ezekiel.² Those passages call a generation living away from God's promised land to separate themselves from the immorality and idolatry around them and return home.

Paul applies this to the Corinthian Christians, calling them not to move, but to separate themselves from the immorality and idolatry in Corinth as they walk in God's ways.

As they do this, even as there are costs and struggles, they can find hope that it's worth it, because God will receive them, as verse 17 says.

Then in verse 18 Paul applies promises to King David to the church. These promises from 2nd Samuel 7 emphasize the privilege of being in God's family together.

A commentary I read describes this by saying, "What greater incentive is there to abandon all idolatrous practices than knowing there is a welcome from the Lord Almighty who treats us as his children?"³

So verses 16-18 show that walking away from the wrong relationships and ways of living is also the choice to walk back into the arms of our heavenly Father.

My pastor back in Dallas, Pastor Gary, talked about how if you're walking into the wind on a really windy day, you might say, "man, the wind is against me." But if you turn around and start walking the opposite direction, you say, "ah, now the wind is for me."

But the wind hasn't changed. You've changed to move in the direction the wind is moving. So if you're walking in corrupting relationships, it'll feel like the wind of God's Spirit is blowing against you. Because of God's loving concern, you'll experience conviction, warning, discipline, and some natural consequences for your actions.

Our heavenly Father always loves His children, no matter how we're walking, because of what Jesus has done for us. But if you repent, turning away from corrupting relationships and instead walk in holiness with God's family, the wind of God's Spirit will carry you along. You'll sense more of God's presence and love and over time experience more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in your life.

² Isaiah 52:11, Ezekiel 20:34.

³ Kruse, Colin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 2 Corinthians* (Revised Edition), 185. Quote slightly altered.

And you can also experience richer relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters, supporting each other, bonding as fellow sons and daughters, as verse 18 describes us. God did not design you to walk towards holiness alone.

Jesus-followers have the immense privilege of belonging and supporting and growing together with your brothers and sisters. On Sunday mornings, over meals, in prayer, as we serve together in the church and with outreaches, in classes and small groups and our recovery ministry, and more as we spend time together.

In light of these awesome promises in verses 16-18, Paul shares some closing advice in verse 1 of chapter 7: **(7:1)**

7 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.

Corrupting relationships that lead to immorality or idolatry are relationships that contaminate our body and spirit. Our body and our internal world can be defiled by these kinds of relationships, so the stakes are high here.

So Paul challenges himself and the church to instead live in holiness, walking closely with God, together as brothers and sisters, just as God designed.

We do so in reverence for our holy God Who is intolerant of sin. And yet Who is filled with love for us.

It's because He sent His Son Jesus to walk among us, showing us how to walk in holiness with God's family. Then Jesus opened His arms wide to us in a holy embrace, choosing for them to be nailed to the cross for us.

To take the penalty for all our sins and then rise from the dead so that one day He can end all corrupting relationships without having to end us. Through faith in Jesus, we can never lose the love of God and one day will no longer struggle with sin.

Next Step

This morning we've seen to walk away from corrupting relationships, instead walk in holiness with God's family.

Is anyone leading you away from worshipping and walking with Jesus? If so, it's time to break the yoke of that relationship and walk in holiness with God's family.

That's our next step, walk in holiness with God's family. That's how we can apply this passage to our lives. Walk away from any corrupting relationships and walk in holiness with God's family.

To help us in this, I'd like to invite Thomas & CJ Howard up front. They'll share about yoked relationships and how God has worked in their lives as we think about applying this passage to ours. Give us a sec as we get things set up for Thomas & CJ...

Thanks for sharing with us Thomas & CJ. Share how you were in yoked in bad relationships and how God helped you out of that.

[Thomas & CJ sharing here]

Would you join me in giving glory to God and thanking the Thomas & CJ? Praise the Lord!

I'm going to now read part of the passage again. Notice how it fits Thomas & CJ's story, and if you're where they used to be, hear it as God's invitation to you this morning...

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."

¹⁷ Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.

Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

¹⁸ And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

⁷ 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.

Amen. If you've been struggling in corrupting relationships, we've been praying for you this week, and Thomas and I want to pray for you now. Thomas, will you start us...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.