

The Unequal Yoke
II Corinthians 6:14-18

INTRODUCTION

The Christian is to have a different relationship with fellow believers and the citizens of the world. Those who are fellow members of the family of God are to have a place in his heart. Those who are not members of the family of God are to be respected, prayed for, loved and served, but they are not to be brought into the same kind of intimacy with the believers. This is the purpose of the parenthetical paragraph in the letter of Paul. He sets the limits for the open heart in this passage.

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." This is the basic prohibition of the passage. Behind the prohibition is some unusual commandments in the Old Testament. "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together" (Deut. 22:10) was one of those commandments. There were others that forbade the mixing of unlike elements together. It was wrong to wear clothing made of two different kinds of material; to sow a field with two kinds of seed. Paul saw in these commandments a spiritual lesson. He urges upon us the truth that we must not yoke together a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and an unbeliever.

This is a principle that has been largely ignored in recent years. I believe that a careful study of the passage will reveal it to be important that we recover the truth of this passage and that we live in the light of it.

I. THIS PROHIBITION IS AGAINST A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNBELIEVER

When the ox and the ass were yoked together by the farmer, he was forming a partnership for the accomplishment of a goal. This was forbidden. Paul extends it to the believer linking his life into a partnership with an unbeliever. What kind of limits does this place on the believer?

Some have understood this to be a prohibition against almost all contacts with unbelievers. Since a primary mission of the believer is to evangelize the unbeliever through love, such an understanding must be wrong. Paul, himself, sought many meaningful contacts with such that he might win them to Christ.

Others have understood this to forbid all cooperation with the unbeliever on any kind of project. However, since the Lord urges upon us the duty of good citizenship, it is obvious that some cooperation with the world is necessary in seeking to build a better community. What Paul has in mind goes a little deeper than this.

One expositor has written, "The text prohibits every kind of union in which the separate character and interest of the Christian lose anything of their distinctiveness and integrity. There are several unions into which the Christian might enter in which this would be true.

Marriage is one of the more obvious partnerships in which this would be true. In the Old Testament, marriage was to always be within the covenant for the people of God. This has been interpreted to be a racial prohibition, but it was strictly religious. God was not concerned about race, but He was concerned about faith. He knew that those who were committed to other gods would draw his people away from Him if they were yoked together in marriage. While some of you have been successful at making a good marriage out of such a marriage, most of you would readily admit that it is far better when the yoke of marriage is between two people who are committed to the same God, who serve the same Lord. A first concern of every Christian young person should be the spiritual condition of the person they consider marrying.

Business partnerships can be an unequal yoke. More than one Christian has learned painfully what can happen when you are yoked to an unbeliever. The committed Christian wishes to make every area of His life a witness to his faith in Jesus Christ. How can he do this if he has an unbelieving partner without it becoming an offense to him?

Religious partnerships can be an unequal yoke. In this day of religious tolerance this must not be forgotten. While there are things that we can do in common with people from different religions, we must not enter into any union that will detract in any way from our commitment to Jesus Christ, or will hinder our giving witness to Him. This is the thing that has restrained Baptist from entering into union with those whose commitment to the Lord Jesus is in question. Paul was urging those early Christians to keep the line between them and the pagan religions of the community clear.

Special partnerships can be an unequal yoke. The Christian needs to be careful what he joins. If it will detract from his witness to Jesus Christ, he best be separate from it. His first priority in the world is to be a Christian. Nothing must ever detract from that.

We could spend more time expanding on this prohibition, but you must apply it to your life. If you are in doubt about some partnership, probably the best rule is to keep separate from it. Take only the yoke of the Lord Jesus Christ upon you. You do not need the unequal yoke that the world might seek from you.

II. THE PROHIBITION IS BASED ON AN IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE

He presents the principle immediately. "For what fellowship that righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ With Belial? or what part hath he that beliveth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God." The principle is that there is a basic difference between those who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ and those who have not. Paul graphically presents this difference with the series of questions. They are rhetorical questions to which the obvious answer in each case is "none"!

For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? The Christian is committed to do what is right. in every circumstance if he can know what is right. The unbeliever has not bowed himself to the law of God. The word translated "unrighteousness" is literally "lawlessness". He will do what is right if it serves his interest to do what is right. He reserves the right to decide in the circumstance what he will do. The believer has already decided. His members are yielded to God to be the instruments of righteousness.

"What communion hath light with darkness?" The believer is "light in the Lord". The unbeliever is of the darkness and walks in the darkness. Surely you cannot yoke together light and darkness --- they are too different. '

"What concord hath Christ with Belial?" This is really the critical difference. Here we have the heads of the two orders of men. Christ is the head of one; Satan is the head of the other. "Belial" comes from the Hebrew and means "wickedness" or "Worthlessness". It is a name used for Satan in the Old Testament. The believer has Christ as the Lord of life, but the unbeliever is still under the lordship of Satan. He does what Satan bids. Can you not see the conflict when you have two lives yoked together and they are under the control of two different lords?

"What part hath he that believeth with an infidel. The believer knows God to be trustworthy and seeks to obey Him. The unbeliever does not believe God to be trustworthy--he rejects the whole idea of a trustworthy God who cannot lie. These two obviously live daily in a different world. How can they walk together in a common yoke? Surely any yoke will be an unequal yoke. They are just too different.

"What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" The believer is a part of God's new temple that he is constructing from redeemed humanity. He is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the living presence of God on earth. The unbeliever is a worshipper of some substitute for God, some kind of idol. This is true of all unbelievers. None are without a religious center for their lives. You cannot make a union between the living God and idols. Every attempt at this has been frustrated by God.

This principle must be understood. It does not affirm that we are to remain separate because we are superior. Rather, we are to remain separate because of our relationship with God. The only difference between us and others is the difference that God has made through His grace. But it is a tragic mistake to overlook the difference that the saving grace of God makes in men. It must always be considered when you are forming partnerships lest you get into an unequal yoke.

III. THE PROHIBITION IS ACCOMPANIED BY SOME PRECIOUS PROMISES

Paul turns to the Old Testament for a series of promises that will encourage this kind of spiritual separation. "As God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing: and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

Those who obey this prohibition will know the presence of God as a temple. "I will dwell in them, and walk in them". Paul is combining several statements from the Old Testament. The promise is that God will be in the midst of the people in a manifest way when they are yoked only to Him. When they look to Him alone to meet the needs of their lives, and they are committed to Him alone, they will know His presence. If you are not sensing the manifest presence of God, you might check your life. Have you been guilty of getting under some unequal yokes?

Those who obey this prohibition will know the protection of God as His people. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." This promise is given in the Old Testament in the context of protection. The different nations looked to their gods to give them protection. The Almighty God pledged to Israel that He would be their God, and they would be His people. This would mean that they would be constantly under His protection. This promise is now extended to His new covenant people who stay away from unequal yokes, and have a heart for Him alone!

Those who obey this prohibition will know the provisions of God as His children. "And I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." Do you notice the progression? We are a temple, then His people, but last His children. Obviously, the best is saved to the last. The Father is the Provider. We are given a clue to this when the Lord signs this promise, "The Lord Almighty." Men often make partnerships with unbelievers because they fell they need them for provisions in life. Nothing could be further from the truth. The person who has the Almighty God as a Father need not concern himself with any need. He is surely more than adequate to meet any need that we might have.

Keep in mind that these promises are given to encourage us to stay away from the unequal yoke, to refrain from involvement with anything that will jeopardize our witness for Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

Just how distinctive is your life and witness to Jesus Christ? Could it be that you have made too many compromises, have made too many partnerships, so that the integrity of your life has been lost. If so, wherever is it possible, it is time to break those partnerships. To come out from among them, to be separated unto the Lord alone. His yoke is the only yoke that you need.