

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

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2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 (NIV)

“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.’”

My message today asks a question, “Who wants to be holy? “Holy” is a word that has gotten very bad press. You ask a person, “What do you think of when you hear the word ‘holy’?” You might get words like “weird,” “odd,” “self-righteous,” “prudish.” Kind of an attitude of negativity arises out of this word, “holy.”

One idea, though, associated with the concept of holiness, is that which Paul presents here, the aspect of separation. There are some things that are good to be separated. For example, in a separated sense, my toothbrush is a holy toothbrush, because it is set aside for my use. I don’t want someone else using it. Separated for me. It’s for my pleasure and enjoyment and use and productivity and the like. And in a certain sense, when we speak of holiness, we talk about

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

someone or something or some place being separated unto God. It's for His exclusive use. We are for the praise of His glory. We are separated for God.

What is separated unto God is, at the same time, wholesome and healthy. A synonym I like to use for holiness is "healthiness." "Perfecting healthiness." "Perfecting holiness out of reverence or fear for God."

Paul's appeal for holy living here in 2 Corinthians 6 does not come from a rigid, uptight apostle who is stringing out a list of do-not's. It comes from one who, just prior to verse 14 of chapter 6, has made an appeal for love to the Corinthians and has said to them, "Open up your hearts" (2 Corinthians 6:13). We therefore best become holy ourselves when the appeal to holiness is made from the standpoint of openness, honesty, and loving care. I haven't yet found anybody that really gets holy as a result of being ordered into it. I really feel that, in a certain sense, we are loved into holiness as we see the richer life that comes by the cleanness of our heart and spirit. Paul, in regard to holiness, in this passage of Scripture, is talking about being unequally yoked with unbelievers. "Don't be yoked together with unbelievers" (verse 14). Since we're not farmers, maybe the word "yoke" doesn't strike all that much meaning for us. Paul's reference here is actually back to Deuteronomy 22:10, which forbade plowing the ox with the donkey, those two creatures don't mix together when they're plowing. I've never seen a donkey and an ox plow together. Ray Stedman, who's been in the Middle East, tells the story of how, one time, he saw a camel and a little donkey yoked together in a plow. The camel was taking great, long steps, it was really at ease. The poor little donkey was running like crazy to keep up with the camel, and the farmer was back there, whipping the donkey to catch up. Those two animals don't really mix.

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

Paul's saying the same kind of thing about being unequally yoked—the believer and the unbeliever. They're not made to mix in terms of a yoke. So Paul, when he says, "Don't be yoked together with unbelievers," has asked five rhetorical questions, which immediately cause one to say, "Obviously, it makes sense. When you answer those questions, you'll know why you shouldn't be unequally yoked."

He says, "What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?" (verse 14). The word for "wickedness" is the same word that is used in Thessalonians to describe the anti-Christ, the man of lawlessness. That's the whole idea—lawlessness.

It's used in Matthew 7 to describe charismatic prophets who do great wonders—heal the sick and cast out demons. But they don't live righteously. On that day, Jesus is going to say "Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23).

A lawless person is not some Jesse James type, who runs around shooting up banks and stuff like this. A lawless person, according to the scriptural definition, is one who simply says, "I live by my own rules. I live my own way. I don't believe there's a God. Or if there is a God, I don't believe He really cares how I live. I think every person can live by their own way." It's the idea of lawlessness. What does righteousness and "I'll do it my own way" have in common?

"What fellowship can light have with darkness?" (verse 14). The two can't coexist, because once you light even the smallest light in the darkness, the darkness has to yield to the presence of that light.

"What harmony is there between Christ and Belial" another word for the "devil"? (verse 15). The two simply do not coexist. "What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (verse 15). I'll talk in a moment or two about what that means. "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? We're the temple of God" (verse 16).

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

One of the concerns Paul is probably addressing to the Corinthians is the fact that many of them attended banquets in heathen temples. He has already told them, in 1 Corinthians, that they cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. What is there in common between communion and being in heathen temples; where celebrations are going on in our presence to heathen deities?

So the appeal is: Don't be yoked together with unbelievers. And come out and be separate and purify yourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.

This passage of Scripture has been quite abused over the years, by many different groups of Christians.

I. I want to talk for a moment about the mistaken interpretations of this view that you may have heard. There are four of them.

A. One: Some take this passage to say we are to break off all contact with unbelievers. Be kind of an evangelical or charismatic monastery. No contact. But Paul clearly rules this interpretation out when in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11 he tells them that he wrote to them in his previous letter “not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy or swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you 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” (NIV). Paul's saying, “No way can you avoid rubbing shoulders with people who are in the world—non-Christians—who have all kinds of different moral and ethical divergences from you, but if you have a Christian who says they're a Christian and proceeds to live an immoral life, continues being a drunkard, a swindler and steals stuff from people, then don't even sit down and eat with them. Don't give them the luxury of letting them lay claim to

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

the name of Christian by being even in your presence.” This passage is not telling us to break off all contact with non-Christians.

B. The second thing this passage is not telling us is that we’re to withdraw from all social engagements with non-Christians. A social engagement is at a deeper level of contact. The early Christians face this whole matter of “Should a Christian eat in the home of an unbeliever?” How in the world are we going to reach those who don’t know the Lord if we don’t have some sort of social friendships with people who are not Christians? Otherwise, we just kind of become a private club. Nobody can get in and we don’t know anybody.

Paul, very obviously, approves social engagements between believers and unbelievers, because in 1 Corinthians 10, he lays down a rule that if an unbeliever invites you to a meal, go. Eat what’s set before you without raising questions. If the person who serves you the meal says “this meat that I’m serving you has been first dedicated to an idol,” then you know that in raising that question, he has problems with his own conscience in eating that meat, and probably with you as a Christian eating it. So if questions are raised, then don’t eat it. But never in the passage does Paul say, “Don’t even go to their home.” He just says, “If questions are raised that have to do with conscience, then respect that.” So we’re not to break off social contact with non-Christians.

C. A third misinterpretation of this verse is the idea that a Christian spouse can use this verse as a pretext for leaving an unbelieving spouse. “The man I’m married to is not a Christian and Paul says, ‘Don’t be unequally yoked, yoked together, with unbelievers.’ I sure am yoked together with an unbeliever. I’d better come out of that relationship and end that marriage now.” Can you imagine the situation? I’m sure this faced the Early Church. I’d like to draw a hypothetical situation that I’m sure has happened a number of times.

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

He writes on the specific issue in 1 Corinthians 7, and says, “If you as a believer are married to an unbeliever, don’t walk out of that relationship.” In fact, he only gives two grounds for ending that marriage. One is if there’s infidelity on the part of the unbeliever. The other is if the unbeliever absolutely refuses to live with you, because you’re a believer. He says if that spouse ultimately dies, the widow or widower is free to remarry anyone they wish, but that person must belong to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39). So this is not a pretext to break up marriages that have, spiritually speaking, split foundations.

D. A fourth mistaken interpretation of this passage is to use it as sort of a cover for all sorts of legalistic requirements. Some people feel that holiness can be reduced to a set of legalistic requirements. So they’ll use this phrase, “Touch no unclean thing” (2 Corinthians 6:17), and get all kinds of things out of it, that produce a lot of negative things in life.

Some of us have been brought up in churches where there was a great deal of stress on things you can’t do as a Christian. With some people, maybe it had such an adverse effect, that they maybe used that as an excuse for being away from the Lord today. Others, like myself, look back and say, “I’m glad I had all those experiences, because I’ve got a lot of stories to tell.” I’m actually old enough to remember when television was a sin. We came home from China, in 1949, and my dad started pastoring a church outside of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. It was forbidden at that time that pastors in our church fellowship have television sets—members too. It was wrong. My brother, who was five years older then, and I started going down to the pool hall to watch television. My dad said, “My son’s not going to the pool hall to watch television. He’s going to watch it right here at home. And I’m going to watch it with him!” So I think he became one of the first preachers, certainly in Pennsylvania—maybe one of the first in the whole Assemblies of God—to have television. I remember my dad pastoring a church where they

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

preached against television and he'd keep his hidden in the closet. We never had an outside antenna. We'd keep it on the TV. If somebody knocked on the door, the TV would be shoved in the closet! Terrible! Legalism does terrible things.

I'm so grateful for the example I had from my own parents, who didn't get hung up on a lot of negative rules that turn young people off to the gospel. Why is it that women generally are the ones picked on with negative rules? Have you noticed that? Preachers with five-hundred-dollar suits are telling women to look just as plain as they can be, without ever doing anything to enhance beauty and the like. That to me is a marvel.

There was a law passed in the eighteenth century by the English parliament. "All women of whatsoever rank or degree that shall seduce or betray into matrimony any of his majesty's subjects by scents, paints, cosmetic washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high heel shoes and bolstered hips, shall incur the law enforced against witchcraft and like demeanors. The marriage, upon conviction, shall stand null and void."

I came to realize, years later, that wearing cosmetics is actually justified by Scripture. John, in Revelation 21:2, said, "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride—'cosmeticized'—for her husband." That's heaven described as a bride. "Cosmeticized for her husband."

Obviously, Scriptures don't throw away principles of moderation. Nor are we throwing them away. There are some things the Scriptures tell us "taste not, touch not, handle not." But this passage cannot be warped to support a point of view that supports a very legalistic, rules-oriented Christianity. We need to look at what it actually is saying.

II. What does it mean to be unequally yoked?

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

It seems to me that there are two characteristics of a yoke. When we learn what the characteristics are, then we can apply it across the board to other things.

A. Being in a yoke means being in a relationship that cannot be easily broken. If you're in a yoke, there's someone else besides you in that yoke, and neither of you can get out of it on your own. If it's an animal, it requires the farmer coming along and getting you out of the yoke. And being teamed up in a yoke means that there has to be some outside matter. It may mean that the law may have to come in, a decree needs to be signed. It may require outside intervention—being teamed up in such a way that the relationship cannot be easily broken.

B. The second characteristic of a yoke is that a yoke does not permit independent action. The person that you're yoked with and you are required to go the same direction. You don't have the latitude of being free to do whatever you want.

What category of things fall under these two principles? Principles of relationship cannot be easily broken and you don't have the independency to do whatever you want. What relationships fall under those categories? Obviously, right off, marriage falls under that relationship, doesn't it? I don't want anyone getting the mistaken view that I'm comparing marriage to a yoke. But it is very much team work—which is the concept the Scriptures are talking about here.

What's really important to a Christian single person, as they face the prospect of marriage—it would seem to me, if they're really putting the lordship of Jesus Christ first—is that the person with whom they're going to share their life with has the same governing principles. They want to marry someone who is a believer, who loves the Lord, who loves His people. If you marry an unbeliever, what it means is that the significant other person in your life would be someone who you never pray with, never read the Scriptures with, never go to church with. A different circle of

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

friends. Split conflicts in regard to children and what their responsibility should be spiritually.

It'll serve as a constant tug away from serving the Lord.

Sometimes, a young Christian will want to marry a non-Christian and maybe have a messiah complex about their marriage. "If I can just get him married, I'll get him saved after I get him married." I'll say there's a lot more incentive for him or her to get to be a Christian before you're married than after. Careful, too, of conversions that you force in a dating relationship or courtship relationship—they can turn out to not be from the heart.

They say, "But I'm so in love with this person!" But you're so in love with the Lord too. God calls us, in those difficult choices of life, to really honor Him by making Him Lord and by trusting Him, that He will provide for us and for our needs. And obey Him when it is difficult. If we don't, we're heaping up for ourselves grief that will occur down the road.

It's interesting, Paul says two different things to people who are already married, where there is a believer and an unbeliever. He says, "Stay married." But to people who have not yet made that choice of being yoked together it's, "Don't be yoked with an unbeliever." It's very clear.

If you disobey that, you are saying, basically, that you have a better way of going about this relationship than the Lord does. It's basically substituting the your judgment for the Lord's.

The second area where we might be unequally yoked together is in the area of work. In the early church, a mason had to decide whether he was going to join the union or not. Joining the union might mean burning incense to the deity of that union. We don't have that today. But burning incense to the deity of that union—can a Christian do that? Can a soldier burn a pinch of incense to the emperor in order to be signed up as a career soldier with Caesar's armed forces?

We as Christians face this, at various times, in our work employments. You may be involved in a work situation where things that are happening are dishonest, unethical, immoral. You have to

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

take your stand as a Christian and it's risky. A man came to Tertullian and said, "I must live!" and Tertullian asked the great question back, "Must you?"

A third area of the yoke is in social engagements: marriage, work, social engagements. How did this affect an early Christian? He might get an invitation to a dinner to give glory to the deity that family served. There was no problem with dining with the person, but dining at the table of their deity constituted the problem. There are places as Christians where we find it is impossible to go. Places that are impossible to be at, because of our stand with the Lord.

There are times when a Christian is called upon to be gracious, too, and not be one that raises the hackles on everybody's head. There's a difference between how a Christian looks at something compared to a person who really doesn't have a Christian persuasion. As Christians, we are different. There's no way to change that. We're different. Our values are different, our ethics are different, our morals are different, our commitments are different. Because we belong to one who has the power over all life and the power over death itself. And He's the only one in the place of authority to give us the key to living a wholesome, joyful, and eternal life.

In individual ways, we need to keep wrestling through this question of what it means to be unequally yoked and to abstain from being unequally yoked. Paul had asked five questions; there are four mistaken interpretations of this passage. We looked at what it does mean to be unequally yoked.

III. We might look, just a moment, at "Why live a holy life?"

Paul tells us two reasons why we need to live a holy life. One is so that God may live with us and walk among us. "I will live with them and walk among them" (2 Corinthians 6:16). Sin does separate us from the Lord. We know that goes all the way back to the progenitors of the human race—Adam and Eve. Before they sinned, they walked with God in the Garden, in the cool of the

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

day. We recognize, as Christians, there's a difference between being justified, which puts us in right standing with God, and, at the same time, having close fellowship with the Lord. I'm convinced that there are many justified Christians whose fellowship with the Lord is not where it ought to be. And when the fellowship is not where it could be, it's generally because we've allowed something to stain our body or our spirit. That means God is not living and walking among us to the degree that He desires. But when we have that communion with Him restored through confession and repentance, our communion will enable us to relate to Him as our Father. We live a holy life so that the Lord might live and walk among us, and we live a holy life, Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 7:1, that our bodies and spirits might be purified. The word for "purified" is a word that comes straight over into the English language—*catharsis*. We know how important catharsis is psychologically. If you've had grief in your life, you need the *catharsis* of working through that, talking about it. That's why it's so important, when you have a death in your family, that you talk about the person. Often we don't know what to do when someone we love has died, and we come to comfort somebody and we don't know what to do. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is just say, "What do you remember?" *Catharsis*—talking about it. Weeping it out, so the tears don't get dammed up.

Anger is the same way. It's important to have a *catharsis* in anger, not just let it build and build and build, but to work it through, to find ways of expressing it that God can approve and we can approve. But to release it, to go through *catharsis*. It's a purification process. You know you feel better when you have a good cry. It's *catharsis*.

Paul is telling us that we need to apply that word here, *catharsis*, to the things that contaminate our body and spirit. There are Christians who, in their negative rules, all they're concerned about is what their body does. "Don't do this, don't do that." But their spirit may also get corroded

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

with anger and bitterness and self-righteousness and hypocrisy and all these things. *Catharsis*—be cleansed in body and in spirit. A process is involved—“perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” That means an ongoing process. It’s not something you can do all at once and you forget about it. It’s an ongoing process. Continuing to see ourselves cleansed from the pollution, from the stain that occurs in body and spirit.

Who is it that calls us to live this life? The Lord Almighty (verse 18). The Lord Almighty calls us to live a separate life. That’s the only time in all of Paul’s writings that he uses that word “almighty”, which the Book of Revelation uses quite a bit. It means “all strength, might or toughness.” The word is carried over into the English language in words like “democracy”—“people power,” “people strength.” “Theocracy” is one who believes in “God power,” “God strength” and not government.

This is the God who calls us to live a holy life. Strength in the New Testament is never something that human beings have or can even obtain. It is that which belongs to God. Satan only one time is described as having strength. That one time, his strength is over death. Hebrews 2 tells us that Jesus, on His cross, destroyed him who held the strength of death. So even the Lord has strength over death.

In all the other New Testament uses, the word refers to God. In this election year in America, God is not up for election. God’s values are not up for election. God’s morals are not up for election. God’s integrity is not up for election. The Lord God omnipotent reigns. Part of holiness is reverencing God, understanding who He is. Responding to Him out of reverence and love.

Who wants to be holy? I do. Do you?

Closing Prayer

WHO WANTS TO BE HOLY?

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

Our Father, there are people here who have heard this message in different ways today. Some have heard it like a drowning person at sea, who grabs a log that's thrown to them. They're in the throes of a life decision, being yoked with someone who is not a believer, wrestling with the demands of their work, their standards as a Christian. Your Word has come to us as a clear, straight shot. You seek holiness in our life, Lord—not because You're on some kind of sadistic kick and want to punish us by making us weird. But You seek holiness because You know that's the only way we have of coming to emotional health, psychological strength, spiritual vitality. It is that in our life which really seeks to honor You and be made after Your character, that You identify with and walk among. You seek for Your children to live in the joy and the love and the peace that You Yourself have. So draw us, Lord, to holiness. Draw us to perfecting holiness, out of reverence for You. Where there may be things which are contaminating our body and spirit, as You the Holy Spirit show these to us, Lord, through confession and obedience, may we indeed have a *catharsis* of cleansing, so that we can walk before You—not with heads down or feelings of inadequacy—but with a light step and a joyful step, knowing we're God's redeemed children, and we're free. Free in our spirit, from the pollution of this world. Help us, Lord, in the midst of an unbelieving world and unbelieving friends and even unbelieving family, to live the kind of holy life, in a winsome way. Not to live holy as some sort of critic who sits in judgment upon others, not to live in a holy way as though we were better than people and communicated in some kind of superior attitude. But help us, Lord, to have holiness that is lived under the protection of humility, that our holiness might be gentle and winsome. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who has always shown us what true holiness is—to be separated for God to do His will and to do His work. In Jesus' name, we pray this prayer. Amen.