

6:14-7:1 Be Separate

We now come to what is, at least in churches like ours, one of the most familiar passages in 2 Corinthians. This is a passage that we refer to often. Right now, in SS, we are studying the biblical doctrine of separation, and this passage is an important basis of that doctrine.

Further, this text is really profound in what it says and what it implies. The application of this passage—or lack of application—will have momentous results in your life personally and in the life of the church.

One of the things that distinguishes churches like ours from many other kinds of churches is the application of this passage. For our church and churches like ours, separation from unbelief and error is a significant commitment. Sadly, for many other churches, separation is a non-issue; many churches simply do not apply these verses in any meaningful way.

It's a shame that some people and some churches do not practice or apply the principles of separation taught in this passage. This text clearly teaches it, in fact, it commands separation.

We need to heed this warning about the dangers of improper alliances. This text is not merely a warning about such mismatched partnerships; it prohibits them. There are some people and things that we must separate from, have nothing to do with, and come out from. We must avoid linking up with evil and error as much as we can.

So let's consider this morning what this text tells us about separation.

- I. .14 Separation prohibits improper partnerships.
 - A. Here's the command: do not be unequally yoked (ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) together with unbelievers.
 1. A yoke is a shoulder harness that connects two animals together. A farmer would yoke two animals together and connect them to a plow or to a cart. So the yoke connects/harnesses two individuals together so they can cooperate in a task.

Deuteronomy 22:10 *You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.*

Why does the OT law prohibit yoking an ox and a donkey together? Because they are of unequal strength; there's no way a donkey could keep up with an ox. It would be unfair to the donkey to harness him together with an ox. It might even be dangerous for the donkey to be yoked up with an ox.

The word that Paul uses here (ἕτεροζυγοῦντες) means “to pull the yoke in a different direction.” That's what he's prohibiting—connecting two individuals who pull differently.

This command has nothing to do with farming. He's not talking about oxen being harnessed together with donkeys. He's talking about people and the alliances or partnerships that they have.

What's this passage prohibits is an unequal or improper partnership, a mismatched alliance between people. We are not harnessed together with a wooden yoke, but we do have alliances, partnerships, and associations with other people. We must be very careful about these partnerships.

2. Note that this prohibition applies to a partnership with “unbelievers” in particular. Unbelievers are different from believers in very important ways; they pull in a different direction. The entire worldview of an unbeliever is much different from the worldview of a Christian. Their values, beliefs, and practices are different—often opposite—from us. We must not harness ourselves together in cooperative spiritual efforts with unbelievers.

Quote: Paul has in mind an alliance with spiritual opposites, and the image of harnessing oneself to someone who is spiritually incompatible evokes images of spiritual disaster. Those who bear Christ's yoke (Matt 11:30) cannot share it with others who deny Christ. Those who harness themselves together with unbelievers will soon find themselves plowing Satan's fields.¹

Amos 3:3 *Can two walk together except they be agreed?*

2 Chronicles 19:2 *[the prophet said,] “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? ...*

¹ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 331.

Quote: What a picture: a believer with his neck under the unbeliever's yoke! What business has he in such an unnatural, self-contradictory association? What is he, the believer, doing by helping to pull the plow or the wagon of the unbeliever's unbelief? That yoke breaks the necks of those who bear it. God delivered us from it; can we possibly think of going back to that frightful yoke?²

- B. And the grammar here suggests the idea “stop becoming unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” This seems to be a command to stop something that was currently happening at the church. The people were apparently engaging in these partnerships carelessly, and it was damaging the church.
- C. I believe Paul is warning his readers not to link up with or associate themselves with the false teachers and apostates who had infiltrated the church. These people claimed to be Christians, but their false teaching and their ungodly living showed that they were not true Christians. Paul considered them to be unbelievers—in chapter 11, he calls them false apostles, deceitful workers, and servants of Satan.
- D. However, he's *not* prohibiting associations or relationships with unbelievers altogether. Elsewhere, Paul admits that a total exclusion from unbelievers would require that we go out of the world (1 Cor 5:10). So he's not advocating total isolation from unbelievers.

We can cooperate with unbelievers in lots of ways. We could help an unbelieving neighbor with a project. We can become partners with unbelievers in political or social movements.
- E. What he's prohibiting here is partnerships, linkages, and fellowship *in spiritual endeavors* with unbelievers—specifically, the false teachers and the apostates. We don't cooperate spiritually with such people. We don't want to pick up their values or be influenced by their sin. We have nothing in common on a spiritual level; we are not pulling in the same direction spiritually.
- F. And we should be aware that this is a command—don't do it, or stop doing it. We must avoid improper alliances, partnerships, and linkages.

² Lenski, 1078.

Quote: Do not form any relationship, whether temporary or permanent, with unbelievers that would lead to a compromise of Christian standards or jeopardize consistency of Christian witness. And why such separation? Because the unbeliever does not share the Christian's standards, sympathies, or goals.³

2 John 11 *for he who greets [the false teacher] shares in his evil deeds.*

App: So the primary application here is that we must avoid partnerships with false teachers and apostates. In spiritual endeavors, we do not align ourselves with those who are in error theologically or behaviorally. We don't cooperate with them or join in their groups.

Further, another application that we often draw from this text is that God forbids Christians from marrying non-Christians. I think that is a suitable application of this principle. Marriage certainly is a "yoke" that brings two people into partnership, fellowship, and alliance. There is probably no greater "yoke" that we experience, other than salvation. Thus, we certainly must avoid marriage with an unbeliever. I would recommend that Christians not even date unbelievers; dating often leads to marriage. If you would not marry an unbeliever, then don't date one.

But I think the principle of separation is even broader; it prohibits any kind of close, personal linkage or partnership with unbelievers. I would advise that you not become a partner in business with an unbeliever.

The principle in view here prohibits any kind of partnership in which linkage with another person would constitute an unequal yoke. If your commitment to biblical principles is not shared with your prospective partner, then it's probably not a good partnership to be in.

Likewise, *churches* have to be very careful with whom they are yoked together. We don't want to be engaged in Christian ministry with false teachers or false doctrine. We must avoid spiritual cooperation with any person or group that would associate us with spiritual error. We must not affiliate with any church, mission, or movement that compromises the word of God.

³ Murray J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 359.

Illus.: The SBC recently severed ties with Saddleback Church (Rick Warren was the founding pastor) because of female elders—good for them.

Quote: [We must] avoid any public or private relationship with unbelievers that [is] incompatible with or would compromise Christian standards, Christian adherence to monotheism, and Christian witness.⁴

One other implication of this is that believers *should* be yoked together with fellow believers. We link up with those who are pulling in the same direction. Those *of like faith and practice* should get in the harness together to do the work of the ministry and to live the Christian life together.

In fact, Paul uses the term “yokefellows” in Phil 4:3 to describe fellow believers pursuing Christian ministry together. As much as we can, we should join together with other believers *of like faith and practice* to pursue the Great Commission and other goals of the Christian life.

We must separate from error and spiritual compromise, but we should cooperate with those who are going the same direction we are.

Trans: The main command here is to avoid partnerships with unbelievers—particularly with false teachers and apostates. We don’t want to become partners with anyone who compromises the truth.

II. Separation recognizes distinctions/contrasts.

Paul next provides five contrasts that show why separation is reasonable and necessary. Each of these contrasts describes two ends of a spectrum or two opposite poles; these things have nothing in common—that’s the point. Just like these contrasting things have nothing in common, so we share nothing in common spiritually with unbelievers.

Each of these contrasts is in the form of a question, and the answer to each question is a resounding “none!” – there is no partnership possible between these things; they cannot be yoked together.

A. .14b Righteousness and lawlessness have no partnership.

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 501.

1. The word “fellowship” (μετοχή) here refers to a relationship involving shared purposes and activity—‘partnership, sharing.’⁵
2. Righteousness, of course, refers to upright or ethical conduct. The opposite of that is lawlessness (ἀνομία)—unethical, corrupt, unrighteous conduct.
3. Righteousness and lawlessness stand in extreme opposition and contradiction to one another; they don’t go together.
4. We don’t want to enter into any kind of partnership that would require unrighteous/lawless behavior.

Psalm 45:7 *You love righteousness and hate wickedness; ...*

B. Light and darkness have no fellowship (κοινωνία).

1. Light and darkness, of course, exclude one another. Where you have light, you have less darkness; one drives out the other.
2. Light in the Bible is often associated with God and all that is good. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).
3. Darkness often is associated with evil and sin. The Bible refers to “the power of darkness” and “the works of darkness.” Men love darkness rather than light....
4. Light and darkness are spiritual opposites; they have nothing in common.

Ephesians 5:8 *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.*

5. We must avoid fellowship or partnership with any form of sin or error. We must cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom 13:12).

C. .15 Christ and Belial have no harmony (συμφώνησις).

1. The word “belial” literally means “worthless/destruction,” but as a name it is applied to Satan.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 446.

2. Satan is the adversary, the accuser, the father of lies. He is opposed to everything God wants to do. He's opposed to everything that is good and righteous.
3. .15 Christ and Satan have nothing in common. The word here "accord" is *symphonesis*; it's the basis of the word symphony, or you could say "harmony, agreement, concord." There is no harmony between Jesus and the devil.

Jesus and Satan do not harmonize; they don't sound good together; they are dissonant, not harmonious.

1Jo 3:8 ... *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.*

4. We must avoid any kind of association with anything satanic or demonic.

Illus.: I'm sure none of us watched the Grammy Awards, but we perhaps heard that there was a satanic/demonic performance on that show. Our culture is becoming increasingly open to the satanic and demonic. We must absolutely avoid any kind of association with satanic materials or activities.

D. .15b Faith and unbelief have no part/portion (μερίς).

1. Note the word "part" or "portion." You could translate it as "what share..." We could almost think of this idea in terms of a Venn diagrams. Believers and unbelievers are two mutually exclusive sets; they share nothing in common, at least not spiritually.
2. We admit that, in certain ways, believers and unbelievers have some things in common. We are all sinners; we have similar experiences; we endure many of the same troubles in this life. The author of Ecc laments that the same adversities happen to righteous people as what happens to wicked people.
3. However, in a spiritual sense, we are in two completely different kingdoms—the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, God's family or Satan's family.
 - a) Saved people have eternal life; unbelievers are dead in trespasses and sins.
 - b) Saved people are righteous in God's sight through faith in Christ; unbelievers are unrighteous in God's sight because they reject Jesus.

- c) Believers are not subject to the wrath/condemnation of God (Rom 8:1); unbelievers are under God's wrath (Jn 3:36)
- d) Believers have a home in heaven; unbelievers will spend eternity in hell.
- e) Believers live according to biblical values; unbelievers often have other values, many of them contradictory to biblical values.

We are not claiming that there are no similarities between believers and unbelievers, but that, on the most important things in life, and particularly on spiritual matters, there is no alignment, no agreement, no fellowship, and no common ground. This lack of common ground bars us from yoking up with unbelievers.

I wonder which of those categories you are in—faith or unbelief. If you are an unbeliever, then you have nothing in common spiritually with God; you are the enemy of God; you are under the wrath and condemnation of God. The only solution to that problem is repentance and faith.

E. .16 The temple of God and idols have no agreement/union/concord (συγκατάθεσις).

1. Corinth was well-known in Bible days as a center of idolatry. The city had many temples to false gods.
2. God's temple has nothing in common with idol temples. The word for "temple" here (ναός) often refers, not to the entire temple complex, but to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary, the very place of God's dwelling.
3. An idolatrous temple was the absolute opposite of the temple of God. It was full of false idols, deaf and dumb images that had no life.
4. The worship of the one and living God has nothing in common with idolatry or false religion. The lifestyle of an idolater was often corrupt, defiled, and morally filthy.
5. When an idol-worshipper became a Christian, his break with idolatry must be complete. You cannot carry on as an idolater and still worship the God of the Bible. In fact, Paul describes salvation as turning to God from idols (1 Thes 1:9).

6. Sinking back into idolatry was a great danger for the believers in the Roman Empire. Idolatry was everywhere in that world, and most people were involved in it.
7. Those who worship the true and living God would never cooperate with anything associated with an idol temple.

The answer to all of these questions is, “nothing.” These contrasting things have nothing in common.

Spiritually speaking, believers and unbelievers have nothing in common. And because of that, we should not form alliances, partnerships, or affiliations with unbelievers. We don’t cooperate with them in spiritual endeavors. Instead, we must be separate from them. We must avoid any kind of relationship that would amount to an unequal yoke.

Remember that he’s not talking about friendships with unbelievers here. He’s talking about a yoke—a partnership in cooperative spiritual efforts. Such partnerships are not appropriate; we cannot have spiritual cooperation with unbelievers.

It’s very sad that many Christians and churches today violate this clear principle. They include/tolerate both of these contrasts. I.e., they want both righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, and even Christ and Satan. They like religion, but they also tolerate sin. **E.g.**, churches are welcoming and affirming of the LGBT lifestyle, do same sex weddings, etc. **E.g.**, when churches import the ways of the world into the church, they are failing to separate from evil. **E.g.**, when churches tolerate false teachers and false doctrine they are rejecting what this text teaches.

Illus.: One of the biggest controversies in the evangelical world in the last 75 years centered around Billy Graham and his inclusion of RCs and theological liberals in his evangelistic campaigns. Graham and many others simply refused to apply this principle; they yoked up with unbelievers and false teachers; they tolerated spiritual compromise. That’s how he lost the support of churches like ours.

We can’t endorse/tolerate both sides of these contrasts. We have to choose whom we are going to serve. As Jesus said, we are either for him or against him. We love one master or another—God or mammon—but not both.

Ps 97:10 *You who love the LORD, hate evil! ...*

Am 5:15 *Hate evil, love good; ...*

Ro 12:9 *... Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.*

James 4:4 ... *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

These biblical principles lead us to the conclusion that we simply do not enter into partnerships with or cooperate with any person or any organization that is unbelieving, erroneous, or false. We don't tolerate false teachers or false doctrine. We have nothing in common with it and we separate from it.

Quote Earnest Pickering: [This] passage warns against unholy alliances wherever they may be found. As such, it rebukes those who would remain in league with nonorthodox persons. Paul is simply, yet profoundly, pleading for a complete break with every form of unhealthy compromise.⁶

May the Lord help us to apply these important principles of separation.

⁶ *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* (Regular Baptist Press, 1979), 179.