

Unequally Yoked **2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1**

Have you ever wondered: What in the world is happening with churches in America? It's really disappointing to see what some churches are doing, even in our area. The core of what we believe and practice is the gospel of Jesus Christ – understanding from the Bible that people are sinners and need to be saved from their sins and reconciled to God and then need to live a life of obedience to Christ to honor him and spread his kingdom here on earth by making disciples. It's not hard to find these things in the Bible, but it seems like it would be hard to find them in a lot of churches and some might even oppose them.

What comes to mind are churches where the Bible has been set aside and replaced by some other book or by some leader's teaching that completely misses the mark on the central message of the Bible. The Bible just isn't being taught, or at least very little of it. It's some other collection of teachings, or just the musings and ideas of an individual pastor. There's no discernable biblical gospel message. The most important things are no longer redemption, salvation, and growing as Christ's disciples, they're church traditions or social issues. In some cases, there's actually no need for salvation because there's the assumption of universal salvation. Churches boast about tolerating and celebrating sexual immorality. Pride flags have popped up on their buildings and yards and are far more prominent than Christian symbols like the cross or Word of God.

What is happening? There are all kinds of details behind the downfall of every church, but I would assume all of them have one thing in common, which is what we're going to look at today. We're going to see a big piece of the puzzle that's probably a key factor in what's happening in most fallen churches, and something we need to watch out for here at East Lincoln.

The church of Corinth was in the middle of a prominent city that was full of immorality and temptation. It was a new church, so everyone still had close connections with unbelievers. It was also a church that was being targeted by false teachers trying to convince the people that Paul was a liar and not to believe his message. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul warned them to

not throw away the grace of God by listening to the false teachers instead of him, and now, as he continues, he warns them of another possible threat that could come from their connections with unbelievers.

What connections do you have with unbelievers? How much influence do they have in your life? Should we be friends with them? Should we welcome them into our church? This passage will give us the opportunity to think through these things.

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

¹ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Now, there are two ways you can apply this passage – I almost always hear people apply it personally, such as in dating, marriage, and business partnerships, and while I do think the principles can apply in those situations, I think Paul primarily had the negative influence of false teachers and unbelievers on the church in mind. That’s the context of this passage, and that’s how I believe Paul intended for it to be understood. It’s ok to think about the implications in our personal lives, but we first need to understand and apply its primary meaning.

It starts with a command: Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers... I think to some extent we all have a pretty good idea of what that means. A yoke is something a pair of oxen would wear around their necks to tie them together and it would have some kind of attachment to it so they could be

joined with other pairs of oxen or to pull a wagon or cart, or a plow. The yoke made it possible to harness the power of both beasts instead of just one. But in order for it to work right it was important that both oxen would be of similar size and strength. They needed to be equally yoked so that one wasn't dragging the other down or fighting against each other.

Paul is telling the Corinthian church to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. The Greek verbs here are plural, so again, he's talking to the church as a whole. He's saying, as a church, don't join together and partner with unbelievers, and based on the surrounding context and what he writes next, I think he has both false teachers and other unbelievers in Corinth in mind.

Why would he give this command? He gives his reasons in the rest of the verses. First he asks five rhetorical questions to highlight the reality that they are going in opposite directions:

- For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?
- Or what fellowship has light with darkness?
- What accord has Christ with Belial?
- Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?
- What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

The assumed answer for each of these is "None." Righteousness doesn't have any partnership with lawlessness. Light has no fellowship with darkness. Christ is not in accord with Belial, which is a name for Satan. A believer does not share any portion or have common ground with an unbeliever. And the temple of God has no agreement with idols.

We need to remember that in the city of Corinth there was a very strong presence of idol worship and the worship of pagan gods and goddesses. The NIV Study Bible says that "Corinth was also a center for open and unbridled immorality." There was rampant prostitution in the name of their religion, and the city was well-known for its sexual immorality. Those practices were contrary to the things of God and one of the problems the early Christians had was cutting ties with these practices and groups of people because they were so engrained in their former lifestyles and community. The church was

struggling with these problems and needed to cut their partnerships with those who continued to practice them.

As he continues his reasons for not being unequally yoked, he reminds them in verse 16 of who they are in Christ – they are the temple of the living God. The temple was a sacred place of worship where the presence of Yahweh came to dwell in the midst of the Israelite community in his holiness and glory. God gave many instructions to purify the temple, worshippers, and everything that was used in worship because of the consuming power of his holiness. Nothing that was defiled was allowed to remain in the temple; it had to be carefully purified.

To some degree, the believers in Corinth, whether Jews or Greeks, would have understood that concept when Paul told them that they were “the temple of the living God.” One of the truths of the gospel that he taught them is that God has reconciled his people to himself through Christ so that he would dwell in them, not in a temple made by human hands – the body of Christ is the temple that God dwells in. Paul says in Ephesians 2:19-22: “*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*”

Because the church community is the temple of the living God, the church, like the temple, is to be pure and free from defilement, not yoked together with unbelievers and their sinful practices.

Paul goes on in verses 16-18 to give further support for his command by reminding them that being set apart to him was always God’s desire for his people. Paul quotes several passages from the Old Testament: “*I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you,¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty*” (from Lev. 26:11-12; Is. 52:11; Ezek. 20:34).

There was to be a separation and distinction between the Israelites and the wicked, idolatrous nations surrounding Canaan. They were to be set apart from evil and set apart to him. Whether it was the old covenant community back then or the new covenant community now, God wants his people to be set apart and holy unto him so that we reflect his glory as his sons and daughters.

Paul finishes this thought in the first verse of chapter 7: *“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”* That’s our goal and another reason we need to take care to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the scope of this command – does this mean that as a church we shouldn’t have any dealings or connections with unbelievers at all? Should we only interact with, befriend, and partner with believers? What about building contractors, or financial institutions, or snow removal companies, or utility companies, or other organizations like Boy Scouts or Girls Scouts or the Red Cross or a political party?

I think the application of this command in its original context had to do with the worship, practices, teachings, and life of the church community. They were not to join together with unbelievers when it came to these things. They should not listen to false teachers or intermingle Christian beliefs or teachings or traditions or worship with the immoral or idolatrous practices of unbelievers. In that culture, the biggest threats to this were from Judaism and Greek religion. We see that happening today. It’s called religious syncretism. Dr. Steven R. Cook, Professor at Tyndale Theological Seminary says: *“Religious syncretism is the blending of the doctrines and practices of two or more religions in order to come up with something new. Religious syncretism has been going on for millennia. Modern day examples include Christlam, New Age, Christian Science, and the Interfaith Movement.”*

I think Paul was warning the Corinthian Christians to not go that direction: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” I don’t think he was going so far as to say that we shouldn’t have any dealings or relationships at all with

unbelievers. In fact, that would make it impossible to carry out our mission on earth or to even live in it. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.”

One of the primary reasons we continue to live here on earth after becoming citizens of heaven is so that we can reach unbelievers. We live in a fallen world and can't escape that, nor should we. But we need to be wise with our interactions and relationships with unbelievers because they can influence us for evil, just as much as we can influence them for Christ. I think that was Paul's concern for the church in Corinth and for other churches and why he commanded them to not be yoked together with them.

Does that mean we shouldn't welcome unbelievers to Worship Services or other church activities? Or should we invite them and welcome them so they can hear the gospel? When I was younger, there was a push for churches to be more welcoming to unbelievers, especially on Sundays, called the “seeker sensitive movement.” Some thought it was great, others did not. How welcoming and accommodating should we be to unbelievers so they can hear the gospel?

I think Paul gives some good insight in 1 Corinthians 14 when he's giving instructions for orderly worship. One of the factors that influenced his instructions was the presence of unbelievers in worship. He writes this in 1 Cor. 14:23-25: *“If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”*

I think Paul wanted churches to be open to unbelievers for the sake of observation and conviction of the Holy Spirit. But that didn't mean they should hide their beliefs and practices to make them feel comfortable. I think he wanted churches to worship really well so that unbelievers could come

see and so that the Holy Spirit could move in their hearts. We can be welcoming without being unequally yoked.

I wonder how many churches that have strayed so far from Christian beliefs and practices have neglected to follow this command? I think this is a key factor in what we see happening. I have to believe that at some point the door was opened in these churches to allow unbelievers or false teachers to come in and partner with them – to be yoked together so that unbiblical and sinful beliefs and practices were tolerated and then welcomed in the church. And it's because of their influence that many churches are where they're at today.

I think we have to be careful about these things. It's easy to want to be wide open and welcoming to everyone in our community. We want people to hear the gospel, we want people to come to Christ, we want the church to grow and we don't want to be restrictive or exclusive or to turn people away. But if we go too far in that direction, we begin to open the door to compromise and falling away, and dishonoring Christ.

Now what about the implications for our personal lives? How should we apply these principles to our friendships, dating relationships, social engagements, education, community and political goals, business and financial dealings?

I think the same principles can be applied in most of these situations. If you go so far as to yoke yourself with unbelievers, you are setting up an unequally yoked situation – you are ultimately going in different directions and one is likely going to pull the other in their direction. We all think we're going to be the one that's going to be the good influence on the unbeliever, but it's very common for the opposite to happen, or for the Christian to eventually realize they're stuck in a partnership they don't want to be in. And those situations are often really hard and painful. We need to use wisdom and caution in any kind of partnership with unbelievers.

When it comes to dating and marriage, I think you can make a solid biblical case that God does not want you to willingly enter marriage with an unbeliever. In marriage, two become one flesh. How can that happen if you each are serving different masters, and heading in opposite directions? Sometimes two unbelievers get married and then one becomes a Christian –

the Bible never encourages the believer to divorce the unbeliever. But if you have a choice before getting married, I believe the most important reason to not get married is if the other person is an unbeliever. Don't even start going down that road.

When it comes to business and financial partnerships, I think we need to use wisdom and caution and pray for discernment in any situation so you don't get tied into something contrary to your beliefs and practices.

When it comes to politics, I think we need to be careful as well. I think a lot of Christians have yoked themselves to a political party or nominee. That's exactly what they want you to do, and I think we need to be careful. Though we may agree on policies and direction for our nation, we don't have the same ultimate goal. We aren't aiming for the same thing or heading in the same direction. We don't have the same master. We are citizens of heaven, not of earth, our master is Jesus and our mission is to make disciples. We want the freedom to be able to do that in our nation, but even that freedom isn't as important as faithfully carrying out our mission and calling. So we must be careful how far we go. I think it's fine to support a party or nominee, but not to be yoked together with them.

Psalm 1:1: *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers. ² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."*