

July 11, 2021

A CALL TO CLEANSING AND HOLINESS

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

*(15 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

Thirty years ago J. I. Packer wrote, “What do we Christians chiefly value in our leaders—our preachers, teachers, pastors, writers, . . . and other folk with key roles in our set-up? The answer seems to be not their holiness, but their gifts and skills and resources.”<sup>1</sup> I read that quote on the same day that I listened to a podcast about the fall of church leaders over the past number of years in which they were making the same point—that we prize charisma over character and giftedness over holiness. Now, perhaps someone could push back, noting that it is easy to highlight a few fallen celebrity pastors and draw sweeping judgments while ignoring the many faithful pastors who are walking and laboring in obscurity. But I think it’s fair to say that it is easy for us as believers to be captured by what the world says we should be impressed with rather than what the Bible says we should be impressed with. And have no doubt about it, the world prizes giftedness and charisma much more than character and holiness.

But you can also know that this temptation to align ourselves with what the world says we should be impressed with isn’t somehow new to our day. This isn’t a problem of recent history. This was the problem with the church at Corinth. As I’ve mentioned, the Corinthians were being tempted to value what the unbelievers around them were telling them to value, and when they evaluated the apostle Paul in light of those things, he didn’t measure up. Some men had come in that Paul mockingly calls “super-apostles” (11:5) and had told the Corinthians that the kind of men you should follow are those who are excellent speakers, with impressive credentials, and who charge large fees for their services. And what Paul came with was the opposite. He admitted he’s not an impressive speaker (11:6), he didn’t come with a list of recommendations, and he labored among the Corinthians for free.

Because of these things the Corinthians were tempted to dismiss Paul, and Paul has been arguing to show why they should listen to him. But in our text we’re looking at this morning Paul gets very pointed in his approach. He doesn’t defend himself or explain the rationale for his ministry. Rather, he calls out these people opposing him as being unbelievers, charges the Corinthians not to be aligned with them, and explains why holiness is an essential aspect of Christian living.

And for us, this kind of text is helpful and necessary. After all, if it’s true that we see around us the same kinds of trends and valuations that we see among the Corinthians, then we may well need a wakeup call to make sure that we’re not aligning our values with what the world says is valuable or counting as impressive what unbelievers tell us we should be impressed with. It may

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<sup>1</sup>J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1992), 33.

be that we need to ensure that we're valuing personal holiness in our own lives instead of pursuing those opposed to our Lord are telling us to chase after.

So, as we look at our text, let me note how I want to approach it. You can see that the text begins and ends with a very similar exhortation. In 6:14 Paul begins by saying, "Do not be unequally yoked with others believers." Then in 7:1 he ends by saying, "Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." Then, right in the middle, quoting from an OT text, Paul reiterates this basic exhortation, writing, "Go out from their midst, and be separate from them, . . . and touch no unclean thing" (6:17). Thus, you have one basic exhortation given to us at the beginning, middle, and end of our text. Then, interspersed throughout these verses (in the midst of the exhortations) are reasons why we should obey these commands Paul gives us. You can see the word "for" at the beginning of verse 14 and in the middle of verse 16 along with 7:1 beginning with the word "since." That shows us that he's saying "do these for these reasons," and "because these things are true, do this." And so what I want to do this morning is hold up for us the basic command this text gives us and then look at the reasons why we should obey this command. First, then we see the basic command.

### **Do not align ourselves with the values of the world but walk in holiness**

That statement is my attempt at summarizing these exhortations, but let's walk through them one-by-one in order to see what they're saying. First, Paul begins this exhortation saying, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (6:14). Now, most of the time we bring this verse out in order to exhort tell a believer not to marry an unbeliever. And though I think that is a fair implication of this verse, this verse isn't chiefly about marriage.<sup>2</sup> Paul is telling the Corinthians that they need to not bind themselves to these unbelievers who are against Paul. They don't need to begin thinking like them, valuing what they value, and living according to their standards.

The imagery that Paul uses is a yoke, which is a wooden cross bar that would be attached to two animals who were pulling something. It binds them together, ensures they're going in the same direction. It is a helpful image to suggest that believers don't need to align themselves in purpose and lifestyle with unbelievers, but I don't think that Paul is employing this image just because it's a helpful illustration. Rather, I think he's picking up on the imagery that Christ uses in reference to himself.

You may well remember Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30 as he says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Jesus had used this imagery of what it's like to follow him. When we become a follower of Christ, it is as if we are yoked to him, aligning our values, purposes, plans,

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<sup>2</sup>However, 1 Corinthians 7:39 is explicitly about marriage and commands believers only to marry "in the Lord," meaning that we should pursue marriage only to another who belongs to Christ.

and ways with his. Paul's point is that you can't be a believer and then yoke yourself to unbelievers, aligning your values, purposes, plans, and ways with them.

Then, in the middle of our text Paul gives us a list of OT texts (which we'll look at in more detail shortly), but in this specific text, he's drawing from Isaiah 52:11. In that chapter, the Lord is speaking of bringing his people out of oppression and exile, and he is calling them to come out of that place where they have been sent and to walk in holiness. He says, "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing" (6:17).

Now, Paul isn't saying here that as believers we don't associate with unbelievers. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5, in order not to associate with unbelievers, we'd have to leave this world. Of course we'll associate with unbelievers in this life. We'll interact with them at the market, do business deals with them, and even have friendships. But Paul is picking up on this exhortation from Isaiah 52:11 to remind us that we must not take on their unholy thoughts or ways. While remaining in the world we must not be characterized by the world—again in terms of aligning ourselves with their values, ways, purposes, and plans.

Then finally we see in 7:1 that Paul writes, "Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." Again, the idea is the same. We must walk in holiness and not be defiled by allowing ourselves to be characterized by the thoughts, ways, values, and practices of the world.

Again, this all makes sense in light of what the Corinthians were going through. There were literally unbelievers telling them to align themselves with their values, thoughts, ways, and practices and to reject Paul. And I'm somewhat confident that you and I may not be encountering precisely the same thing in our lives. But, in a sense, that makes our situation more dangerous. If indeed there were a group of people gathering with us on Sundays, telling us to reject the Scripture and those who teach the Scripture, then that would be somewhat easy to identify and reject. You might say, "I do not want to yoke myself with this person telling me to reject the teaching of God's Word." But, again, that's probably not the situation we find ourselves in. Rather, we find ourselves being bombarded by values, ways, thoughts, and practices from all kinds of angles and sources. Pictures on magazines in the grocery suggests what beauty is and what kinds of lifestyles we should lead. Movies and television shows that mock virginity suggest that sexual purity is more worthy of ridicule than praise. Power and prestige is praised and while humble perseverance is ignored. And it's constant. We're bombarded with it.

And here's the call to us. Separate yourself from those things. Cleanse yourself from all that would defile you. Do not yoke yourselves to what unbelievers tell us is good and right and acceptable. Remember that as a follower of Christ, you are yoked to Christ. As a young person, don't ask yourself what will make you "cool" or acceptable to your peers. Ask yourself what would honor the Lord. And as an older person, don't ask yourself what will impress or get applause from those around you. Ask what will please Christ, to whom you are yoked. But why? Why is our holiness so important?

## **We must walk in holiness because we are God's temple and his sons and daughters**

After exhorting the Corinthians to walk in holiness and not align themselves with the values, actions, and ways of unbelievers, Paul gives a list of reasons why we must not align with them. He begins his reasons by asking a series of questions. He writes in verses 14-16, "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 with idols?"

Now, in each of these cases, he's asking the question because the first item is descriptive of us if we belong to Christ. Here's what I mean. The second you and I placed our faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, God declared us righteous by crediting to us the perfect righteousness of Christ. Because he is our representative, his perfect righteousness is ours. Similarly, when the Lord gave us a new heart and put his Spirit in us, causing us to have desires that are good, causing us to walk in his ways (as the prophets declared he would do), we became lights in a world of darkness. We should be pictures to the world of how they should conduct themselves. Additionally, we are united to Christ by faith so that we become one with him. In fact, the church is called the body of Christ. This is why when Paul persecuted the church the Lord Jesus Christ declared, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" We are united with him so that we are his body. We are believers—those whose faith is resting in Christ alone for our salvation. And we are his temple because God's Spirit dwells in us both individually and as a body of believers. That's who we are.

With that in mind, then, we can see what Paul is doing with these questions. He's saying, "If we are righteous, why would we align our values, purposes, aims, and practices with those who are lawless? Why would we who are light yoke ourselves to those in darkness? How can we who are united to Christ walk as those who are following Satan (Belial is simply another name for the devil)? Why would we live or think like unbelievers? And how can the temple of God be characterized by devotion to idols? Do you see what Paul is saying? The fight to walk after Christ in our day may well have less to do with standing in front of the firing squad while we refusing to renounce our faith and more to do with what we evaluate as acceptable to watch on our computers or televisions. It may have less to do with our being imprisoned for the sake of Christ and more to do with being slow to speak, hoping and believing the best of others, and walking in gentleness and kindness in the midst of a world that is seeking to destroy. We must show that the values, aims, purposes, and practices of our lives do not mirror the unbelieving world but our Lord Jesus himself.

Paul ends verse 16 declaring boldly, "For we are the temple of the living God" (6:16). Now, I want to pause here a second to remind us of the temple. The temple was the place where God manifested his presence among his people. It was the dwelling place of God. And holiness was essential. The high priest could only enter the most holy place once and a year and had to do so in a specific way and manner lest he die. The ark of the covenant was housed there, which represented God's presence. And we remember the importance of holiness with regard even to

that representation of God's presence as Uzzah reached up to steady the ark when they were transporting it in the days of David and the Lord killed him the second he touched it. In other words, holiness was no joke when it came to the temple. And now Paul is reminding us that we are God's temple. Could you imagine walking into the temple in order to practice a little sexual immorality? Of course not. It would be absurd, and if you had any sanity at all, that thought would have made you tremble. This is Paul's point. You and I are the temple of God. We must not be characterized by the things that Paul says characterize those who walk in darkness.

And if that bold declaration that we are God's temple isn't enough, then Paul doubles down. In verses 16-18, he gives us a combination of Old Testament texts, all tied together. He begins with Leviticus 26:11-12, but he ties in Ezekiel 37:27 at the end. Let me show you what I mean. Leviticus 26:11-12 says, "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." And Ezekiel 37:27 says, "My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And here's what Paul says in our text: "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Do you see how he starts in 6:16 with the language of Leviticus 26:11-12 but then finishes the quotation with the language of Ezekiel 37:27? Why? The reason why is because Paul is mixing two themes together. The first is the temple. This makes sense. Paul has just said we're God's temple, so he's utilizing quotations that deal with the temple (or tabernacle). But he's also reminding us (as we looked at a few weeks back) that you and I are the fulfillment of God's promises that he would gather his people after they'd been exiled. He would bring his children to himself. And that's what Ezekiel 37 is about. So by mixing these together, Paul is saying to us, "You're God's temple, and you're his gathered children."

Similarly, in verse 17 Paul writes, "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing." And here he's drawing from Isaiah 52:11, which is commanding those who handle the vessels that will go into the temple to be pure and touch no unclean thing. But then he adds, "Then I will welcome you," which is drawing from Ezekiel 20:34 where the text reads, "I will bring you out from the people and gather [this is the same word translated "welcome" in 6:17] you out of the countries where you are scattered." Again, he's combining the themes of temple and of God's children, delivered from exile.

Finally, he writes, "And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty" (6:18). The first part of this quotation is drawn from 2 Samuel 7:14 where David had wanted to build the temple for God to dwell in, and the Lord announces that he'll actually do something for David, giving him a line of kings who'll reign on his throne forever (i.e., a "house" for David, or dynasty). But notice the change in the quotation. In 2 Samuel 7:14 we read, "I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a son." However, when Paul quotes it he doesn't simply say "son" but "sons and daughters." And we could say, "Well, Paul is just adjusting the quotation to make it more appropriate." But I don't think that's what he's doing. I think he's using the language of Isaiah 43:6 where Isaiah is prophesying about the Lord bringing his children out of exile, and he says, "I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth." You see, once

more he is combining the temple theme with the theme that you and I are God's sons and daughters whom he has delivered out of exile.

But why tie these two themes of temple and God's children delivered from exile together? I think it's because Paul wants us to see the fullness of who we are. We have been called out of this world as God's very own sons and daughters. We are no longer to be characterized by the world. We once were, but we've been called out to belong to him, as his children. And, we are now his dwelling place, his temple. Therefore, we must be holy. In other words, you and I have become the recipients of the OT promises of what God would do for his people—delivering them and making them his dwelling place. And Paul's conclusion in 7:1, then, is, "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 the Lord." Since this is what we've received and this is who we are, we must be a people who walk in holiness.

And so, brothers and sisters, I want to say to us this morning: remember who you are. You are those who once walked according to this world, and God has delivered you. You are those who once were children of wrath, and God has made you his temple. Therefore, purify yourselves. Walk in holiness. Do not align yourselves with the values, ways, practices, and purposes of the world that you were called out of. But rather, living in this world, shine as lights in the midst of darkness.

I read a book about a month ago from a sociologist about how people interact concerning politics and religion. And the one observation that I found myself fully agreeing with is that there's a powerful desire in us to belong to and receive the approval of others. The author noted that if the camp you belong to is saying, "x" then there is a strong temptation for you to say "x" as well, even if you're not sure you believe it. As I mentioned, I think he's right. But I don't think that's a novel reality. Paul knew the Corinthians felt that pull as well. And so he reminded them of who they belonged to (to whom they were yoked). They didn't belong to this world and its ways. They're God's temple and his sons and daughters. Therefore, they must live accordingly. And as those justified by faith in the finished work of Christ, so must we. Let us then be zealous to give all of ourselves to the Lord as instruments of righteousness, and let us remember why we can indeed do that as we come to the table this morning. Amen.