

Be Not Unequally Yoked Together

(An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 6: 14-18)
by Tami Jelinek

Often the most familiar passages in Scripture become commonly applied in the church without consideration for their contexts. One example of this is the phrase, "be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" from 2 Corinthians 6, which is widely used to forbid Christians from marrying outside of the Christian faith. While few of us would dispute the wisdom of a Christian marrying only another Christian; the purpose of this study is to examine the phrase "be not unequally yoked" in its context to discover its audience-relevant meaning, so that we may gain deeper insight into a biblical application of this familiar passage to our own lives.

2 Corinthians 6: 14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; 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. 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

A primary question to consider is what Paul means by "yoked together". This should remind us of his statement to the Galatians:

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia was a stern admonition that they not abandon the gospel of Christ for "another gospel" which was a perversion infiltrating their community (Galatians 1:7). This "other gospel" was being propagated by "false brethren" whose intent was to bring God's people into bondage:

Galatians 2:4 And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:

It is clear the yoke of bondage to which Paul refers is the bondage to which those who sought justification from the law subjected themselves:

Galatians 4: 9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

Paul's sternest warning against returning to this yoke of bondage is this statement that it is incompatible with Christ:

Galatians 5:2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall

profit you nothing. 3 For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. 4 Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

Isaiah, in a prophecy of the coming New Covenant Kingdom, contrasts self-righteous, Pharisaical Israel, which used its keeping of "fasts" to oppress, condemn and accuse others, with the "fast" God has chosen:

Isaiah 58:4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness:

Isaiah 58:6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

This yoke of bondage the self-righteous impose on God's people is accompanied by finger-pointing, and it is this condemnatory treatment of others which the Lord says is incompatible with His presence:

Isaiah 58:9 Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

It is this yoke, this oppression, and this bondage, which Isaiah prophesied would be broken by Christ:

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that those seeking justification from the law, the Judaizers who have not believed the gospel, and seek to impose their yoke of bondage on those who have believed, are the "unbelievers" to whom Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 6, when he warns against being "unequally yoked." It also becomes apparent that Paul is not warning against "mixed marriages" but against mixing the law of Christ (the gospel) with the law of sin and death from which Christ has made us free.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

This condemnation from which all in Christ are free, is the "bondage of corruption" from which the old covenant [creature/creation](#) was about to be delivered in the first century:

Romans 8:19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, 21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the

glorious liberty of the children of God.

It is no wonder that Paul warns so sternly in Galatians against any association with the yoke of bondage, and likewise in 2 Corinthians 6 against an "unequal yoke", as it is directly opposed to the gospel of Christ. In contrast to the yoke of bondage which oppresses and condemns, Christ's yoke is easy and his burden is light:

Matthew 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

In this context, Jesus is offering rest to those who are under oppression from those self-righteous ones He is about to judge. He offers rest to the "babes", the tender-hearted ones, who receive Him in meekness, and whom He contrasts to the worldly wise:

Matthew 11:24 But I say unto you [Pharisees], That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee. 25 At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

The yoke of Christ, in contrast to the yoke of bondage imposed by self-righteousness, is a rest from fruitless labor and striving, in favor of complete reliance upon the work of Christ:

Galatians 2: 19 For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. 20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Philippians 2: 13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Jeremiah 51:10 The LORD hath brought forth our righteousness: come, and let us declare in Zion the work of the LORD our God.

Returning to Paul's warning against being "unequally yoked" in 2 Corinthians 6, in addition to what we have seen in other passages about "the yoke of bondage," and the reasonable conclusion that they be paralleled, we will examine the immediate context to learn the identity of the "unbelievers" to whom Paul refers.

2 Corinthians 6: 14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; 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. 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you,

and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

Righteousness vs. Unrighteousness

"Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" The contrast here is between "righteous" believers and "unrighteous" unbelievers. Earlier in this same letter to the Corinthians, Paul says:

2 Corinthians 5: 21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

And in another place he says:

Philippians 3:9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

We know that as believers our righteousness is not our own, but Christ's, which is why His name is "The Lord our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16); and it is only by faith we have that righteousness. Conversely, the "unbeliever" pridefully trusts in his own righteousness, rather than Christ's:

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

Jesus tells this parable concerning those who think themselves righteous apart from Him:

Luke 18: 9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. 12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. 13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Notice that the Pharisee is using outward performance standards by which to declare himself "righteous", or justify himself, and yet he is rejected. The one who humbles himself, claiming no righteousness of his own, and trusts in God's mercy is justified (made the righteousness of God in Christ). For all of our own "righteousnesses" are viewed by God as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

Romans 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Galatians 2:16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

It is also apparent then, from the immediate context, that the "unequal yoke" against which Paul warns believers, when he asks "what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" is a warning against returning to the "yoke of bondage" which continues to oppress those who seek to be justified by works of the law, and which they continue to impose upon others. They remain unjustified, and being without the righteousness of Christ, they are unrighteous, though they believe themselves to be righteous. This is not an admonition, as some in today's church would suggest, to disassociate from people outside of the faith who don't live up to outward standards of morality. In fact, the "unrighteous unbelievers" in this context are a specific group of unbelievers, who are outwardly very religious, and use their religion for condemnation. It is this specific group of "unbelievers" with which Paul warns against being "unequally yoked."

The Temple of God vs. Idols

"What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" As with the rest of the contrasting pairs in this passage, the contrast here is between opposites. The opposite of the temple of God, then, is another kind of "temple". While some might reasonably conclude Paul is referencing the idolatry of polytheism which dominated the culture in Corinth at this time, we must keep in mind the context of the "yoke of bondage" and also remember who the enemies of the gospel, and the adversaries of God's people were. While the pagans clearly considered Christianity a threat to their economy (see Acts 19 and the account of the silversmith Demetrius' attack of Paul), we don't find examples of the apostles warning the churches about danger from them. In fact, quite the opposite is true. When Paul was in Athens speaking to the philosophers at Mars Hill, he respectfully acknowledged their altar "to the unknown god", found common ground with their poets, and used both to communicate the gospel. These were simply lost people, who worshipped sincerely but in ignorance (see Acts 17); they were not "false brethren" seeking to destroy the faith of Christians by subjecting them to a yoke of bondage. There is no call in Scripture to separate ourselves from lost people; in fact we are called to pursue relationship with them so that we may win them:

Colossians 4:5 Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. 6 Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, he warns against "the old leaven," in this passage which seems very akin to his later warning against the unequal yoke:

I Corinthians 5:7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and

wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

If malice and wickedness in the context of feast-keeping are not clear enough indicators as to whom and what "the old leaven" refers, we have this statement from Jesus defining the metaphor:

Luke 12:1 Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Paul goes on to clarify that purging out the old leaven does not refer to separating from lost people who don't claim to be Christians, or judging their behavior, as that would mean leaving the world altogether; but rather he is calling for separation from hypocrisy within the church:

1 Corinthians 5: 9 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person." (NKJV)

It should not be overlooked that in the same context as Paul's instruction to "purge out the old leaven" (the hypocrisy of the Pharisees), is his statement, "put away from yourselves the evil person." "The evil person" is the embodiment of "the old leaven." People in the church who self-righteously point the finger of condemnation at others are always guilty of the same things, and in passing judgment on others condemn themselves (Romans 2:1). The same measure of judgment will come back to them (Matthew 7:2), usually through exposure, because the works of "the flesh" (the works of one who subjects others and thereby himself to the condemnation of the law) are obvious (Galatians 5:19). It is the hypocrisy of a self-righteous, condemnatory attitude toward others, motivated by guilt (one who seeks to justify himself by the law remains under its condemnation), which Paul is calling the church to put away with his admonition to "put away the evil person."

Here Paul is describing the qualifications of an elder in the church and emphasizes the importance of a good reputation with unbelievers:

I Timothy 3:7 Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil

One can hardly enjoy a good reputation, and obtain a good report from unbelievers if he has nothing to do with them. Therefore it is not reasonable that Paul's forceful admonition against being unequally yoked with unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6 is a call for believers to separate themselves from anyone and everyone outside of the church (by neither marrying them nor entering into business partnerships with them); but instead is addressing a more specific group of people: those who truly represent "an unequal yoke." And the temple which still stood in Jerusalem at this time was representative of their idolatrous religious system, which held people in the

bondage of guilt, and in which the Levitical priesthood defiantly stood in place of God; hence Paul's contrast in this passage between "the temple of God" and "idols."

Ye are the temple of God

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers...for [because] ye are the temple of the living God."

2 Corinthians 6:16... for ye are the temple of the living God; 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. 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

It is significant to note that "ye" here is plural, and "temple" is singular. Paul is telling the church that they (corporately) are the temple of God: the temple He has chosen for His habitation:

Psalms 132:13 For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. 14 This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it. 15 I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread. 16 I will also clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy.

Here the prophet equates Zion with both the city of Jerusalem and an eternal tabernacle:

Isaiah 33:20 Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken.

And here we see that same city and tabernacle equated with the church, wherein God dwells with His people:

Revelation 21:2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Revelation 21:9...Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. 10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

Revelation 21:14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Compare John's picture of the foundations of the city, with Paul's description of the church:

Ephesians 2:19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but

fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

The temple which stood in Jerusalem when Paul made this distinction between "the temple of the living God" (God's people) and "idols" was a symbol of the then present evil age which was about to come to an end:

Galatians 1: 3 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age (NKJV)

Hebrews 9: 8...the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). (RSV)

It was not just the age which was about to come to an end, but the "rulers" of the age:

1 Corinthians 2: 6 However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. (NKJV)

These rulers are plainly identified as those who crucified Christ:

1 Corinthians 2: 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (NKJV).

Remembering our context, Paul's admonition to those first century Christians in Corinth was that because they were the temple of God, they were not to become yoked together with those who remained in bondage to guilt (as evidenced by their self-righteousness) and idolatry (as evidenced by their anti-Christ religious system). What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? This was not addressing the ignorance of pagan idolatry; this was addressing the blasphemous rejection of God's own Son by those who masqueraded as His own people. That is how they were able to slither into the churches "privily" to "spy out" the liberty of those in Christ, in order to bring them into bondage (Galatians 2:4). These were of the synagogue of Satan:

Revelation 2:9 I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

It was in Corinth that Paul identified the Jews' rejection of Christ as blasphemy:

Acts 18:5 When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. 6 But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (NKJV)

It was after this that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and warned them against being “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” and to “come out from among them” and “touch not the unclean thing.”

Separating from what is “unclean”

Jesus identified the Pharisees as unclean, because by believing themselves to be clean of their own volition, they would not be cleansed, and sought to keep others under the same condemnation:

Matthew 23:13 But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

Matthew 23: 25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

It is also significant to notice the texts from which Paul may be quoting when he says “touch not the unclean thing.” In the following lengthy context which deserves a study of its own, Isaiah speaks of “rulers” in Jerusalem who oppress her people even worse than her foreign captors had, and who daily blaspheme the name of the Lord in the process. (Sound familiar?) Then he says, “in that day,” God’s people will know it is Him who speaks, because He will comfort them and redeem them from their captivity (a captivity which they endured at the hands of their own religious leaders). Notice especially the command from Isaiah to “loose thyself from the bands of thy neck,” and compare it to Paul’s admonishment to “be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1):

Isaiah 52: 1 Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. 2 Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion. 3 For thus saith the LORD, Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money. 4 For thus saith the Lord GOD, My people went down aforetime into Egypt to sojourn there; and the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. 5 Now therefore, what have I here, saith the LORD, that my people is taken away for nought? they that rule over them make them to howl, saith the LORD; and my name continually every day is blasphemed. 6 Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I.

7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation;

that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! 8 Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion. 9 Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. 11 Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD. 12 For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the LORD will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your reward.

There can be no doubt that in the above context, separating from what is "unclean" is equated with leaving the blasphemy, idolatry, and bondage of apostate Judaism and becoming the temple of the living God: "come out...be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord...be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers...for what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

Identifying the "unequal yoke" today

We have seen clearly from Scripture that the "unequal yoke" against which Paul warned the Corinthian church was not referring to "mixed marriages" or business partnerships with unbelievers; or sharing a meal, or even a cocktail with a close friend who is not a Christian. It is clear from the immediate context, as well as the other contexts we've studied, that the "unequal yoke" referred to a perversion of the yoke of Christ, our very salvation through His grace alone, by a return to the bondage of condemnation: a bondage of inescapable corruption for anyone who seeks to justify himself by his own works. This perversion of the gospel was so severe that Paul even said it made the cross of Christ of no effect (Galatians 5:4).

We also have seen from a variety of contexts that those who willfully, in self-righteousness, rejected Christ and His gospel, and who sought to pervert it for those who had believed, did so through judgment and condemnation toward those believers. In those times, it was the Pharisees who accused and condemned by saying, "Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou," when all the while the wickedness in their hearts rose up as smoke in God's nose (Isaiah 65:5). They would have identified the "unequal yoke" as fellowshiping with those who fell into some outwardly visible vice, instead of the leaven of their own hypocrisy identified by Christ. While the office of "Pharisee" no longer exists to day, the self-righteous pharisaical spirit certainly does; and sadly it is often disseminated throughout the church, and in view of the world, by quoting this familiar passage, "be not unequally yoked together unbelievers." By using this to judge those outside, or even to judge those inside who fail morally, many Christians place themselves right back under condemnation. For the same measure of judgment will always come back, and it is this yoke of bondage against which Scripture still warns us:

"...be not entangled...For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty...But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another (Galatians 5:1f).

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