

Introduction

Starting in 6:14, the apostle transitions from his appeal for reconciliation with the believers to an appeal to separate themselves from unbelievers. The two sections are connected, it seems to this preacher, in that the Corinthian affections are restricted toward Paul precisely because of the sin in their midst—in their treatment of Paul at least, and also in their associations with unbelievers. Sin crowds out godly affections! There is no mystery here. Sin has an effect and cannot be ignored or glossed over as if it will have no effect on our love or practice of love toward other believers.

1. The Command to Practice Separation, v. 14a

This is a present tense imperative, meaning “do not be, nor become, unequally yoked with an unbeliever.” If you are, stop. If you are not, don’t start!

The three English words “unequally yoked together” translate a single Greek word that means differently yoked; it is used of draft animals that need a different kind of yoke because they are so different in size and shape; they would be mismatched or unevenly yoked. They simply do not belong together. It is not just that the animals don’t pull evenly together (that is true), but because of their different size, they do not even fit together at all. Unbelievers are really those without faith in Christ.

Good illustrations of this principle come in the areas of business partnerships or marriage. There is no excuse for you to be so impatient that you marry the first possibility that comes along without knowing with great certainty that he or she is a believer. You know ahead of time that you are a) supposed to be a believer yourself and b) you are supposed to marry a believer. So don’t get it messed up, or your whole life will turn into a mess!

2. Reason #1 for Separation: Non-Separation is Nonsense, vv. 14b-16

Basically what Paul gets across to his reader in this section is that believers have nothing in common with unbelievers. It doesn’t make sense to be unequally paired with them.

A. Five Questions

He does this by way of five rhetorical questions:

1. For what **fellowship** has righteousness with lawlessness?
2. And what **communion** has light with darkness?
3. And what **accord** has Christ with Belial?
4. Or what **part** has a believer with an unbeliever?
5. And what **agreement** has the temple of God with idols?

The answer to each of these questions is a resounding NONE! The words printed in boldface all share similar meanings (partaking, having something in common, sharing, participation; close association, having in common, unity; shared interests, agreement; share, portion; agreement, union) and indicate that there is absolutely nothing in common between the items listed.

If we consider the pairs themselves, we can see further how this is. They are complete opposites. **Light and darkness** bring back to mind themes from our study of John’s gospel, 1:4-9 and how darkness hates the light and does not comprehend it. Nothing is common between **Christ and Satan**. Consider that Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). Satan is a liar and the father of it (John 8:44). The same verse tells us that Satan is a murderer, but we know Jesus is the giver of eternal life (John 6:27, 10:28, 17:2). (The word Belial is used 16 times in the OT and once in the NT. Here it refers to Satan, the Devil. Many times the Bible talks about people who are sons of Belial, those who lead people astray to other gods, who are homosexuals, who are drunkards, who are unbelievers, who despise authority, who are foolish and stubborn, who are greedy, who are destined for destruction, who are liars, and who are worthless.) Should you put an **idol into the temple of God**? Obviously not. But, incredibly, it was done—Ezekiel 8:3-17 tells of many idols in the Jerusalem temple. How abominable!

When these things meet, there is a clash, and one has to win out over the other. The Bible tells us that ultimately each of the bad things in this list will be defeated. Consider Ps. 5:6, that God hates workers of iniquity (lawlessness or unrighteousness), or 36:12 that the workers of iniquity shall fall and not arise, or 45:7 that he hates wickedness. Consider Col. 1:13 that we are delivered out of the power of darkness, or 1 John 1:5-6 where God is light, He has no darkness, and we cannot say that we have fellowship with God if we walk in darkness without being liars! The Light of life has conquered the darkness of death. Consider John 12:31, 16:11, Rev. 12:9 where Satan is judged and finally cast out of heaven. Or consider how after using the ark as a good-luck-charm in 1 Samuel 4, Hophni and Phineas died, and their father died thereafter. 1 Samuel 5:1-7 tell of how the Philistines took the ark and put it in their temple. Their idol-god Dagon fell down flat before the ark two days in a row. The Philistines realized that God and his ark do not mix with idolatry

B. The Elaboration on the Temple Idea, v. 16

The fifth and final question is given a little more space than the others in that a short application is given. The temple of God and idols are not agreeable to one another, and this applies to the readers in that they (plural you) are corporately the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The apostle applies principles from Lev. 26:11-12, Jer. 31:9, 33, 32:38, and Ezekiel 36:26-27 to the church. While God still promises to accomplish these things for Israel, he has done similarly for the church now. What a blessing!

3. Reason #2 for Separation: Separation Leads to Blessing, vv. 6:17-7:1

Actually the first reason (that believers have nothing in common with unbelievers) is the basis on which the conclusion is made that we should be separate from unbelievers. The conclusion is cast in the form of an OT quotation. Then God promises that separation will result in blessing, also expressed to us in an OT quotation.

A. Renewed Call for Separation, v. 17a

This is a quotation from Isaiah 52:11. The main idea is repeated three times: come out, be separate, do not touch the unclean. In other words, stay far away from sinful stuff!

B. Blessings Resulting from Separation, v. 17b-18

Various OT passages are loosely quoted here to demonstrate the blessing that comes from separating ourselves from sin. These blessings include that God has promised to dwell with us and be our God and allow us to be his people, and be our Father, and allow us to be received as his sons and daughters.

C. Application: Cleanse Ourselves, 7:1

The full realization of these blessings is contingent on our separation from evil. In an initial sense, we as Christians have become separated, but it behooves us to continue to continue and improve that separation from evil in our practice, for God cannot have fellowship with sin. And so, in light of that, we are told to do two related things:

1. To cleanse. As Christians, we still have sinful tendencies. They need to be continuously cleaned on to eliminate further filth from our flesh and spirit. This is a comprehensive statement. Whatever kind of sinful thing, inside or outside, tangible or intangible—whatever—has to be cleaned out!
2. To perfect holiness. We do this in the fear of God. We reverence God. We realize that we are not perfectly holy and can improve in this area.

Notice that the Bible gives the reason for us to do this cleaning and perfecting work: we should do so not in order to be saved, but because we have the promises!

Conclusion

The Bible very clearly teaches separation: from believers sometimes, but from unbelievers all the time. Check yourself out and make sure your associations are not wrong. If they are, stop them, because you are not making sense!

Outline of the Doctrine of Separation

When we categorize the teaching of this passage with other passages that refer to similar truths, we put it under the heading of “separation.” This idea comes from the very word for sanctification, which means to be set apart. We are set apart in a complete way as believers in Christ, so much so that we are called saints. We are also being set apart progressively as we grow in Christ such that we are “being sanctified.” This is sometimes referred to from a negative perspective as *personal separation* from doctrinal error and moral impurity.

This idea of separation is extended by the Bible to cover also the entire church body as a group, not just individually. Our passage in 2 Corinthians 6 speaks about separation from **unbelievers**. This seems relatively obvious, though we will take some time to think about the details in moment. Romans 15:17 and 2 John 9-11 urge believers to separate from false teachers and their teaching.

Other Bible passages speak (to some folks’ surprise) about separating ourselves from fellow (professing) **believers**. While some ignore this unpleasant part of Christian teaching, several clear passages in Scripture do affirm it, and we must heed them because they are given by inspiration of God. Some object that to follow this idea would be to break the unity of the Spirit, or would demonstrate a lack of Christian love, or would mean that everyone would be disciplined out of the church. Such are simply excuses for not following the clear revealed truth of God. Both separation and unity are taught in the Bible so they *must* be able to co-exist; both discipline and Christian love are taught as existing together. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is exercise discipline; sometimes the only way to maintain real truth-based unity is to separate from disobedience. And not everyone will end up being disciplined out of the church for the simple reason that a clear mechanism is in place to allow for repentance and restoration, and personal forgiveness and overlooking minor offenses go a long way toward avoiding problems.

As for the passages that speak about separation from **believers**, there are several that rise to the surface:

1. Matthew 18:15-17. This passage speaks of a brother and the possibility that he might need to be treated as a heathen if he refuses to hear the church’s reproof.
2. 1 Cor. 5:5, 9-13. Some may argue that in verse 5 Paul is speaking of an unbeliever because of 6:9-10. But certainly it is the case that Paul is discussing a believer (one called a brother, at least a professing believer) in vv. 9-13. That passage tells us not even to *eat a meal* with one who is in this situation! Why is this separation necessary? 1 Cor. 15:33 gives us the general principle that bad company corrupts good habits.
3. 2 Thess. 3:6-13, 14-15. Here we are commanded to withdraw from fellowship from brothers who walk disorderly. This disorderly walk is a general thing, with a specific example of loafing and not working for a living. This is made even more general in vv. 14-15, where anyone who does not obey the word of God in the entire epistle is to be treated similarly, not as an enemy, but for purposes of admonishing him as a brother.

So that is a brief overview of the doctrine of separation. It should be quite easy to accept the need for this with respect to unbelievers. We do not want our doctrinal purity or moral integrity to be damaged. That is the purpose of distancing ourselves from unbelievers. Of course, we cannot be hermits or monks with the goal of not having any contact with unbelievers whatsoever, for Paul tells us then that we would need to exit the world (1 Cor. 5:10).
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- 14 Do not be¹ unequally yoked together² with unbelievers.³

For what fellowship⁴ has righteousness with lawlessness?⁵
And what communion⁶ has light with darkness?⁷

- 15 And what accord⁸ has Christ with Belial?
Or what part⁹ has a believer¹⁰ with an unbeliever?
16 And what agreement¹¹ has the temple of God with idols?

For you¹² are the temple¹³ of the living God.
As God has said:¹⁴

*“I will dwell in¹⁵ them
and walk among them.¹⁶
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people.”¹⁷*

- 17 Therefore

*“Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you.”¹⁸*

- 18 *“I will be a Father¹⁹ to you,
And you shall be My sons²⁰ and daughters,*

¹ Present tense, imperative. This is a general precept that has gnomic implications—it is not to be the case that a believer is associated with an unbeliever.

² This is classified as an adjectival predicate participle. With the “to be” helper, this is a present periphrastic participial construction, equivalent of a simple present imperative.

³ Here is a dative of association. Don’t be yoked in association with unbelievers.

⁴ partaking, having something in common, sharing, participation.

⁵ The answer to each of the five rhetorical questions is a resounding NONE!

⁶ The common koinonia, close association, having in common, unity.

⁷ Light and darkness bring back to mind themes from our study of John’s gospel, 1:4-9.

⁸ shared interests, agreement.

⁹ share, portion.

¹⁰ Here believer and unbeliever are adjectives that stand alone and act as substantives.

¹¹ agreement, union.

¹² This is plural, as in 1 Cor. 3:16. This is different than the individual indwelling of the Spirit taught in 1 Cor. 6:19-20, Rom. 8:9 (based on the individual physical body mentioned there). It is rather the fact that the Spirit lives in the corporate body—believers together. Collectively the Corinthians are a temple of the Spirit, and so it makes no sense to be having idolatrous practices in their midst.

¹³ Here is an example of a definite predicate nominative that does not have an article before it!

¹⁴ There is a direct discourse *hoti* here, untranslated in the NKJV, though it is indicated by the quote marks.

¹⁵ Prepositions with or among would be better here. This is not talking about indwelling, right?

¹⁶ Quote of Lev. 26:11-12.

¹⁷ Quote of Jer. 31:33, 32:38. Ezekiel 36:26-27 mostly reflects the second half of the verse, but the “tabernacle” part of that verse does correspond to the “I will dwell in them” part of v. 16.

¹⁸ Isaiah 52:11. The passage adds the thought that the ones who are addressed are they who carry the vessels of the Lord. Priests, it sounds like.

¹⁹ Here is *eis* + accusative for the predicate nominative, affected by the fact that it is an OT quotation. Way too technical for a sermon. The meaning is clear!

²⁰ This is said to be a quotation of 2 Sam. 7:14, but it seems quite a loose one, adding daughters and making the sons plural. Also quoted are Jer. 31:1, 9 and Rev. 21:7 for the father/son idea. Other passages that I found links to include those about the “sonship” idea, as in Phil. 2:15, 1 John 3:1, John 1:12, Rom. 8:14; Gal. 4:5-7.

7:1 Therefore, having these promises,²¹ beloved, let us cleanse²² ourselves from all filthiness²³ of the flesh and spirit,²⁴ perfecting²⁵ holiness in the fear of God.

These verses are viewed by Paul as several promises. There are one or two, depending on how you look at it, in verse 16. And then three related exhortations and a promise in verse 17, and one or two more promises in verse 18.

Introduction

The last time we looked at this section of Scripture, we saw that there is one primary command—to be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers. The Bible then gives two reasons why we should do this. **First**, to disobey this command is nonsense. There is nothing in common between belief and unbelief. They do not belong together, just as two mismatched animals do not fit a yoke for the farming implement that they are pulling.

The **second** reason that we should be separated from unbelief grows out of the first. If we follow what God has laid out logically in the Scriptures, and separate ourselves from unbelief, then blessing will follow. In light of this, it only makes sense to pursue holiness.

1. Separate from Unbelief

We discussed most of the text in 6:14-16 already. However, there are a few points that remain. First, one the five questions regarding fellowship and agreement of the good with the bad is about Christ with Belial. The question amounts to this: What does Christ have in common with the Devil? The answer is obviously nothing. Consider these contrasts:

| Christ | Satan |
|--|---|
| Truth – John 14:6 | Liar – John 8:44 |
| Giver of life – John 6:27, 10:28, 17:2 | Murderer – John 8:44 |
| Light – John 8:12 | King of darkness – Col. 1:13 |
| Without sin – 2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15, 7:26, 1 Peter 2:22 | With sin – Ezekiel 28:15; John 17:15 (the evil one) |
| Creator – John 1:3 | Destroyer – Rev. 9:11 (Apollyon) |

Yet at the same time that these vast differences prevail, Satan tries to make himself look like the Son of God by deceit and trickery (2 Cor. 11:4). He tries and will try to make himself a pseudo-Christ (Matt. 24:24).

Another point to remember is that Paul is talking about separation in the sense of maintenance of **doctrinal purity and moral integrity**. It has to do with complicity and conformity to evil. He is obviously not endorsing total non-interaction with unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:9), for then we would have to die, and we would not be able to witness to them.

A third point is the sticky one—people always ask, how does this work out? While all the possible scenarios cannot be outlined here, some instructive example situations can be given. For one, did you realize that you might **share a meal** with an unbeliever, hoping to be a testimony to that person (as did the Lord in Mark 2:16), while at the same time you would not share a meal with a professing but disobedient believer (1 Cor. 5:10)?

Consider the case of a **city-wide evangelistic outreach** sponsored by many churches in the region, including Catholics, who believe in a works-based salvation. Do you participate? The answer is no, because it seriously tarnishes your doctrinal purity. If you participate, you would yoking yourself with unbelief. Do your own outreach! “But the number of people we could reach is so large...” you might respond. Remember that just because something is big does not mean that God is blessing it! The number of people you help to deceive would also be large. Pragmatics does not drive ministry; Biblical principle does.

2. The Church-Temple

Some churches today believe in building large temples and/or having complicated priesthood arrangements. Biblical Christianity, however, teaches that the temple is the collective group of believers (1 Cor. 3:16), as well as individual believers (1 Cor. 6:19), and the believers are the priests. Buildings are not paramount.

Out of the fifth and final question about the temple of God having no agreement with idols, the apostle quotes Ezekiel 37:26-27 to prove show that God’s dwelling place is right among his people (notice the pronouns them, them, their, they). Since God has nothing in common with idols, neither should his temple have idols in it or any unbelief yoked to it.

The Ezekiel passage specifically refers to the millennial kingdom and the nation of Israel, but the church gets some similar benefits today. And this is where the Bible brings the

²¹ Interesting little thought regarding “every promise in the book is mine.” As dispensationalists we often take promises and make them strictly for one or another group. But here we see that we have these OT promises as well applying to us.

²² hortatory subjunctive.

²³ defilement.

²⁴ Flesh and spirit are comprehensive. It is not like “soul” is left out of the equation here. Anything external or internal that is defiling has to be removed. Tangible or intangible. Whatever defiles us defiles in one or both of these two areas.

²⁵ Here is a word that indicates bringing about a state of completion. Our holiness has some ways to go yet. Let no one claim “I am holy and have no sin!” Everyone has to make their holiness more perfect, more in line with God’s perfect standard.

application to us—the temple of God should obviously have nothing to do with idols, and **YOU ARE THE TEMPLE!** So, follow the command to be separate! Not only that, but you are supposed to be slaves of righteousness, children of light, and in Christ, not given to lawlessness, walking in darkness, and acting as a child of Satan. Quit that stuff.

3. Blessings that Follow Separation

The **blessings that the Bible outlines for us are not the health-and-wealth kind**—neither here nor anywhere else are we promised material blessings or health if we just do this or that. Those kinds of promises might gather a crowd of unbelievers to hear motivational speeches about having your best life now or seeing God’s favor poured out upon you in some carnal way. But very faithful believers have all kinds of problems—they have financial problems, congenital health problems, etc. These do not mean they lack faith or are necessarily disobeying God. The **blessings here are spiritual in nature**—having to do with our relationship to God, not our relationship to this world’s goods.

A. Three Commands: Come Out, Be Separate, and Do not Touch the Unclean Thing

These phrases are quoted from Isaiah 52:11. In their context, they are a call to God’s people to leave the nations and go back to Jerusalem in the kingdom. His people are rescued, so they can leave behind the pagan nations in which they find themselves and head home. Similarly for believers, we have been delivered from the power of darkness. We must by necessity depart from sin and live righteously (Rom. 6:2).

May I say, however, that the person who is living in unconstrained fellowship with darkness has no right to call themselves a believer. When one becomes a believer, he repents of the wickedness in which he was formerly held. They “come out, separate the selves, and stop touching the unclean stuff.” In principle, a complete break with sin has occurred. In practice, of course, this must improve over time. So these verses certainly apply to unbelievers just as well as to you Christians. Is there some fellowship you share with unclean things? Get rid of it!

Touching of unclean things, by the way, was an important notion for those who “bear the vessels of the Lord” (Isaiah 52:11). Uncleanness is transferable in God’s sight (Haggai 3:11-14). That is why we don’t want to fellowship with unbelief and sin.

B. Three Blessings: God will Receive and be a Father to Us, His Sons and Daughters

This would be easy to understand if the quote from Isaiah were directed to unbelievers. When one repents and trusts Christ, then he is received into God’s family. For a believer, however, the full blessing of God’s fatherhood is somewhat muted when sin is present. This sin hinders fellowship with God. Remember, though we have been made accepted (shown favor) in the beloved Son (Eph. 1:6), we can still draw nearer (James 4:8).

4. Cleansing and Perfecting - Conclusion

No better conclusion can be written than the one given in 2 Corinthians 7:1. The point of this verse is to say that since we have such wonderful promises about a close relationship with God, we need to keep moving in the direction of purity and away from dirtiness so we can fully enjoy those provisions.

On the negative side, we must cleanse ourselves from sinful things. And not just sinful things, but ALL sinful things. This touches the realm of the flesh and the spirit—it is comprehensive. Internal or external, tangible or intangible, sinful things must be rooted out. We must by the Spirit mortify (kill) the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13).

On the positive side, we must perfect holiness. Don’t kid yourself that you are already perfectly holy as a believer. Not one person reading these notes or sitting under the sound of the preaching of this passage is perfectly holy in their conduct. If you think you are, you are deceiving yourself and making God out to be a liar (1 John 1:8, 10). You are not being humble by any stretch of the imagination, nor submitting to the truth of God. What you are as a saved person is one treated by God under Christ’s righteousness. Gradually our practice should be brought into line with what is expected for a child of God.

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