

IX. Bringing Holiness to Completion

January 20/21/22, 2015

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:1

Aim: To bring our holiness to completion through perseverance in the midst of trials and practicing purity by separating from unrighteousness.

A. Perseverance (2 Corinthians 6:3-13)

Paul knew that most of the Corinthians had been reconciled to God. But he knew that some were still rejecting him, and by rejecting him as the messenger of reconciliation, they were rejecting the message of reconciliation. And Paul knew why they were rejecting him. It was because they could not believe that he could be a true apostle and be subject to such weaknesses and extraordinary sufferings (cp. 1:3-11; 7:4-5). God's blessing, they reasoned, would be evidenced by peace and well-being. To their mind, his incessant troubles and miseries were *prima facie* evidence of God's displeasure. They could not accept Paul!

So now comes Paul's eloquent defense, in which he shows that his endurance through multiple troubles proves his authenticity and is reason for the Corinthians to open their hearts to his message.

1. Paul's Persistence (6:3-10)

a) Paul's Concern (6:3-4a)

³We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:

It is possible for a preacher to say, 'Come to Christ!' but for his life to say, 'Do not come!' Paul has shown concern earlier in the letter to ensure that his conduct would not be misunderstood by his Corinthian readers (1:12-18; 4:1-2). Such self-vindication was not palatable to Paul, but the circumstances apparently called for it.

The negative adjective *mēdemian* ('no') is a strong term and could be translated 'no, not at all.' It is followed by another strong negative term, *mēdeni*, which means, 'not anything.' Those two terms leave no room at all for an 'offense' (*proskopē*; 'cause of stumbling'). Paul would avoid anything that would bring disgrace on Christ or cause someone to find fault with the truth and purity of the gospel. His own integrity was protection for his people.

Paul's deep concern is for the good name of the 'ministry.' Since 'message' and 'ministry' are so closely connected (5:18-19), Paul was determined that nothing in his life should be a 'stumbling block in anyone's path.' In negative terms he so lived that none could blame him for unworthy behavior. Positively, as 'servants of God' he and his companions sought to commend themselves in every way. Paul made real efforts, therefore, to avoid behavior which would offend, while at the same time fulfilling a lifestyle which commended himself to others as a servant of God.

Paul not only sought negatively to avoid putting up barriers to faith in Christ, but positively to be 'in everything commending' himself as a 'servant of God.' A minister is not commended by his seminary degree, theology, popularity, personality, or success. His life is the only letter of commendation that matters; the only one that people will read.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

In what follows (vv. 7-8), Paul appears to be answering accusations that his opponents in Corinth were now making. They accuse him of employing untruthful speech, human power, and the weapons of unrighteousness. In his defense, Paul claims that his behavior, which is scrupulously honorable, is itself evidence that he is a true minister of God's authentic message.

Unconverted men and women often try to find excuses for not believing the gospel. A common excuse is the inconsistent behavior of those who profess to be Christians. Christians, too, may shrug off the plain teaching of the Bible if their teachers are not an example of what they teach. Being aware of this problem helps us to avoid it.

b) Paul's Circumstances (6:4b-10)

It seems that the newcomers in Corinth presented a triumphalist (2:14) or powerful image of ministry, as many have done to this present time. They sought commendation and recognition as ministers on the basis of ecstasy, visions, revelations, miracles, and other manifestations of power. Paul, by contrast, points to experiences of weakness in the exercise of his ministry (5:13; 12:7-10). It is therefore not power, but weakness, the weakness of the one who 'died for all,' as reproduced in the lifestyle of the minister, which authenticates it as true Christian ministry.

The list that follows contains some references from the earlier as well as the later sufferings-catalogues (4:8-9; 11:23-33; 12:10). The apostle Paul's experience of pain in the ministry represents an extreme case. Nevertheless all faithful ministry of reconciliation will involve, to some degree at least, a measure of suffering.

(1) Great Endurance (6:4b)

...by great endurance...

Paul's heading the list that follows in verses 4-10 with singular 'endurance' and qualifying it as 'great' in contrast to the unqualified plural descriptives that follow indicates that 'great endurance' is the heading for all that follows. As we take up Paul's lyrical record of endurance in its structure and rising intensity, we must note that it consists of twenty-eight descriptives (in the original Greek), of which the first eighteen are introduced by the word 'in,' the next three by the word 'through,' and the final seven by the word 'as.'

The list Paul gives here is well headed by the words, 'in great endurance.' No better commentary could be made on the words that follow than what Paul himself says in 11:23-29, where he spells out what is simply hinted at in our present passage.

Hupomonē ('endurance') is one of the most magnificent New Testament virtues. No single English word can fully express its rich meaning, which encompasses bearing up under hard labor, surviving the shock of battle, and remaining steadfast in the face of death. The word might be best rendered 'triumphant patience.' The list that follows in verses 4-7 defines the various elements of endurance. Verses 4 and 5 discuss the negative aspects, verses 6 and 7 the positive. In emotionally charged terms Paul defines the ministry of reconciliation not as one in which we make demands on God, but one in which He makes demands on us. Ambassadors of Jesus Christ do not seek greater comfort and prosperity but greater endurance. Both the negative and positive lists may be subdivided into three groups of three.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

(2) Great Endurance in Troubles (6:4c-5)

...in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

First, there is a trio of *general troubles*: ‘in afflictions, hardships, calamities.’ He begins with three general terms, ‘troubles,’ a word wide enough to include every difficult experience, ‘hardships’ and ‘distresses,’ which relate to external and internal pressures respectively. Jesus told His disciples, ‘In the world you will have tribulation’ (Jn. 16:33). The apostolic way was fraught with hardships and calamities that left Paul literally with no way out. All this went with the apostolic territory.

The first three negative elements are internal results of external pressures. ‘Afflictions’ translates *thlipsis*, which refers to spiritual, physical, or emotional suffering. ‘Hardships’ is a general word for the difficulties that attend life in a fallen world. It has the sense of inevitability and is sometimes translated ‘compulsion.’ *Stenochōria* (‘distresses’) literally refers to being confined in a narrow space. It describes trials and difficulties from which there is no escape.

The second trio of troubles was *troubles from others*: ‘beatings, imprisonments, riots.’ These terms are much more specific and can certainly be documented from what Luke tells us about Paul’s life and ministry in the period prior to his writing of this epistle (Acts 14:19; 16:19-24; 19:28-34). Paul stands alone in history in his record of long abuse from others. There is no one like him.

The second three elements are external threats. ‘Beatings’ can refer to blows from fists (Luke 10:30), rods (Acts 16:22-23), or whips (Luke 12:48). Paul was also no stranger to ‘imprisonments,’ nor to the ‘tumults’ that constantly attended his ministry.

It is clear that the good news of Christ had a harsh reception in many a place when it was first preached, and those who proclaimed it felt the sharp edge of that rejection. This came sometimes from the local authorities, who could order beatings and imprisonment, and sometimes from unruly crowds who could make life difficult for the evangelists.

Add to this the trio of his *self-inflicted troubles*: ‘labors, sleepless nights, hunger’ – troubles that came to him voluntarily as he willingly worked to exhaustion and went without sleep and skipped meals to do gospel work.

The third group involves self-inflicted trials. *Kopos* (‘labors’) refers to hard work to the point of exhaustion. The result of that long, hard labor was often ‘sleeplessness,’ as Paul tirelessly ministered to the churches under his care and worked to support himself financially. The demands of Paul’s ministry, especially his frequent travels, often resulted in ‘hunger.’

Then come three more phrases which describe oft-recurring conditions, not in any way imposed by others, but rather self-imposed in the sense that Paul and his fellow-evangelists refused to be turned back by the privations the work involved. Hard work by day, lack of sleep at night, and periods of hunger sound more like the reminiscences of an explorer, moving through uncharted territory, having to clear a way for himself, beset with mosquitoes through the night watches, and without adequate provisions for the journey. They show that being a missionary of the cross was anything but a soft option.

Put this triple trio of troubles all together and we have the picture of Paul’s life. It was truly a blizzard of troubles from every perspective, and Paul’s response was ‘great endurance’—more

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

exactly, patience endurance, fortitude, and great persistence under persecution. In point of fact, Paul's sufferings did not disqualify him. Rather, they proved the authenticity of his faith and commitment. The fact that he didn't quit or curse God for his miseries as so many have done but endured testified to his genuine faith. In effect, his endurance declared that the gospel is true and that Jesus is worth it.

(3) Great Endurance in Purity (6:6-7a)

⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷by truthful speech, and the power of God;

What Paul faced during his missionary travels required great character qualities. Hard experiences may also make a lasting impression on our characters, so that God may use the very afflictions we encounter to fit us to meet further trials. Having described the troubles he endured through the three sets of triple-troubles, Paul next references the inner graces from which he derived his great endurance.

Paul's remarkable endurance also manifested itself in nine positive qualities. 'Purity' (*hagnotēs*) rightly heads the list. It is a comprehensive word encompassing purity of life, thought, and motive.

'Purity' is rightly put first, for it suggests both holiness of life and a total commitment to the Lord's work unmixed with any allegiance that would pull the other way. Part of fundamental and elementary ethical teaching for new Christians is that God's will is that we should be sanctified. Practical purity demands purity of motive and intention.

The apostle's 'knowledge' of divine truth was unsurpassed, and he never wavered from a true understanding of sinful men, the strategies of Satan, false religious systems, God's redeeming love, and the principles of effective teaching, evangelism, and discipling. 'Understanding' for a Christian worker needs to be twofold, for he must understand God's truth to communicate it clearly and faithfully, and also understand the people with whom God brings him into contact. So then he must be a student of God's message in his word and also a student of people in the light of what Scripture says about human beings.

No comes 'patience.' *Makrothumia* ('patience') refers particularly to tolerance for people (cp. Eph. 4:2; 2 Tim. 4:2). There were many, not least the Corinthians themselves, who sorely tested Paul's endurance. Patience, along with some other qualities such as faithfulness, needs time to reveal itself and is all the more impressive because of this.

Paul also modeled the essential virtue of 'kindness,' which describes goodness in action. The Greek word translated 'kindness' suggests an outgoing compassion that finds it natural to consider the interests of the other person and act accordingly. No matter how people treated him, Paul responded by doing useful deeds for them. The Greek word translated 'kindness' suggests an outgoing compassion that finds it natural to consider the interests of the other person and act accordingly.

In a selfish world, such a quality will often stand out, provoking thought and causing comment.

Does 'the Holy Spirit' seem an intruder in this list? Without His work within us there would be no Christian life at all. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers endurance. None of the character qualities of the Christian is self-produced, the result simply of an intention to reform or a mighty

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

effort of the will. Every one of them is due to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's heart (cp. Gal. 5:22-23).

There is a surprise here because in the middle of these inner graces lies not a grace but the person of the Holy Spirit. Paul's great endurance had a Spirit-endowed sweetness. It is possible to endure in this life but to do it in a self-righteous, resentful survivor-spirit that is self-pitying and angry at those who do not shoulder the burden with you while being inwardly proud of your grit. Instead of the fruit of the Spirit, there is bitterness and joylessness. Paul endured with the inner graces of the Spirit. Sweet endurance is what the Scripture here enjoins.

The Spirit also produced in him the 'genuine' (without hypocrisy; Rom. 12:9) love. *Agapē* ('love') is the self-sacrificial love of the will, not of the senses or emotions. It may seem strange that Paul finds it necessary to say 'sincere love,' for it is often said that love cannot be counterfeited. Without doubt though Satan tries to imitate even this.

If people are to believe the testimony we give to the new covenant, they must be able to believe what we say about everything else. They will judge the truthfulness of the gospel by what they know already about our truthfulness. They will assess the honesty of God's promises by our honesty.

Christian work is concerned primarily with the communication of a message, which has one indispensable quality – it is true. How can we be trusted when we speak of God if we are known to be untruthful sometimes on other matters? To speak the truth should be completely habitual to the Christian witness.

The 'word of truth' is the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15; James 1:18). Specifically in this passage, Paul has in mind the gospel (Col. 1:5) message that God reconciles sinners to Himself through the substitutionary death of His Son. Paul preached the gospel 'in the power of God,' not his own cleverness.

We can achieve nothing of lasting worth without God's energy and strength. We cannot wage spiritual warfare with merely human resources. In this way the lips of Paul and his fellow-workers became vehicles of the power of God, for, as Paul himself declared (Rom. 1:16), the gospel is God's power for salvation for those who believe. Human words, no matter how true and good, are without impact for God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit.

(4) Great Endurance in Righteousness (6:7b-8a)

...with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.

Next we see that at the heart of Paul's great endurance is righteousness. 'Righteousness' here is most certainly righteous living, a holy life. The righteousness of God is both a declared status and a way of life—the way a righteous person lives. Moreover, the immediate context in verses 6-7 emphasizes that it is a righteous life. Whatever we do, without any possible exception, we must concentrate on doing what is right in God's sight. We are not to do simply what is humanly expedient or astute.

The word translated 'weapons' here is also employed in Romans 6:13, where it is rendered 'instruments.' Passages such as 1 Thessalonians 5:8 and Ephesians 6:10-18 underline the fact that we are engaged in spiritual warfare. Gospel communication is actually an attack on the enemy's territory and the Christian needs spiritual weapons for this. What are these weapons?

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

Paul does not actually say, choosing to characterize them rather than identify them. They are, he says, ‘weapons of righteousness.’ What does this mean? Possibly that they are given to us because of our new righteousness in Christ, through whose work for us on the cross God has declared us righteous in His sight. Alternatively the phrase may signify that godly character is itself a power weapon against the enemy, which it undoubtedly is.

Paul employs ‘the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left,’ meaning that righteousness thoroughly equips him to meet an attack from any quarter. The man or woman of God needs to be able to attack and repulse Satan on all sides, for an assault may come from any quarter of the spiritual battlefield. Perhaps these weapons are simply different aspects of God’s truth contained in His Word. Paul’s use of the plural, ‘weapons,’ may mean he is thinking of the varied material there is in Scripture, to be used for different purposes in the fight against Satan. In frankest terms the ministry is a character profession—righteous living must be at its heart. Those who lead God’s people bear an immense responsibility by virtue of their calling and knowledge of the Scriptures.

Great endurance rides on righteous living. Here we see in the following context that it will sustain Paul ‘through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.’ ‘Honor and dishonor’ refer to personal treatment of Paul; ‘slander and praise’ refer to what is said about him—especially behind his back. Righteous conduct effects a clear conscience and the power to withstand such things. Righteousness is at the heart of gospel endurance. That is how Christ endured the cross. And when it remains firm amidst the afflictions that shower upon God’s servants, Christ is exalted. Righteousness for the right hand and the left, for all of life, is a chief means of declaring the reality of Christ.

(5) Great Endurance in Paradox (6:8b-10)

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Paul expounds the paradoxical character of the ministry in a series of contrasts. There is something paradoxical about the life and work of the Christian in the world as it is. Paul concludes with a mounting song of triumphant endurance that rides on the down-up rhythm of paradox. The first half of each of the seven paradoxes, read together, is like a dirge; but the second half is a dance. Each of the seven paradoxes ends in triumph.

Paradox 1: The faithful preacher experiences both ‘glory and dishonor;’ he is praised and despised, exalted and maligned, flattered and criticized, cherished and vilified. Despite his critics’ dishonor and slander, Paul knows before God that his apostolic call and ministry are from God and true.

Paradox 2: Consequently, some will give an ‘evil report’ about him, and others a ‘good report.’ Those who are faithful to the truth cannot expect all people to speak well of them, and Paul was no exception. This Pharisee of the Pharisees had become a non-entity. However, though unacknowledged by the world, he is fully known by God.

Paradox 3: Paul was slowly dying through his repeated beatings and illnesses and stresses and dangers. But look, he is alive! He was filled with life indeed—vital animated, eternal, overflowing. As we are willing to die, to die to our ambitions, our plans, even our reputations, so a spiritual resurrection takes place.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

Paradox 4: ‘Beaten and yet not killed,’ was true of Paul. He had suffered much in the service of his Master, but he was still alive to carry through the commission God had given him to fulfill. Paul had undergone at times the remedial, chastening of God, but it hadn’t killed him. In fact, it had elevated his life. It is an encouragement to know that ‘we are immortal until our work is done,’ for God cares for His servants when they suffer in the course of their work for Him.

Paradox 5: Friends had failed him, converts had turned upon him, and his works were threatened by wicked men. But no sorrow, no disappointment, however severe, could ever interrupt, let alone extinguish, the joy of his salvation with its vision of unclouded glory to come, for this joy was founded upon the sovereign supremacy of God. We tend to think of sorrow and joy as opposites, but this is not always the case. Even in the deepest laments there is often a note of praise. Sorrow there must be, for we live in a sinful and painful world. We sorrow at the sins and pains both of others and of ourselves. Yet there is a song in our hearts because of all Christ has done for us.

Paradox 6: Everyone could see the ragged man he was, a figure to be pitied, they thought. But that is not how he thought of himself. He was rich toward God (cp. Lk. 12:21) and heir of all things (cp. Rom. 8:17), and he spent his time bestowing riches. This paradox is true, not just of the Christian, but supremely of Christ Himself (8:9). He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor so that through His poverty we might be rich.

Paradox 7: He knew he was the heir of all things. Paul was true, well-known, alive and not dead, always rejoicing, making many rich, possessing everything. He endured triumphantly! That is why his endurance was so great!

Christianity is often regarded as a world-denying faith, and there is truth in this, for there are some things a Christian will not do simply because he or she is a Christian and so accepts the standards of God and not of the society in which he or she lives. Yet this is balanced, as here, by some great affirmatives. Because we have Christ we have all, and we rejoice together in this.

Paul’s great endurance substantiated his ministry. He was the real thing, as seen by his endurance through a blizzard of troubles, by his endurance in the Spirit-given graces, by his endurance through righteousness, and by his endurance in triumph.

Paul has shown clearly that ministers of God can never be proud or self-serving. Sacrifice is at the heart of the gospel and also at the heart of ministry – whether it is in evangelizing unbelievers or providing pastoral care for the flock of Christ.

2. Paul’s Plea (6:11-13)

¹¹*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.* ¹²*You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.* ¹³*In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.*

Paul spoke ‘freely’ (candidly, straightforwardly) to the Corinthians because love holds back nothing that would be profitable for its objects. First, Paul spoke honestly about God. He was candid and truthful about God’s Word and God’s standards. Second, Paul spoke honestly about sin. He preached Christ crucified and all that that implied. He also confronted sin and called for their repentance. Finally, Paul spoke honestly about his affections toward the Corinthians. He loved them intensely, as the vocative expression, ‘O Corinthians,’ indicates. Paul’s heart was

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

‘opened wide’ (lit., ‘enlarged’ or ‘broadened’) to them; he had been open, candid, and vulnerable (cp. 4:2). The expression also means that there was plenty of room in his heart for them.

Paul refers to his readers by name only when he is deeply stirred – as by the bewitchment of the Galatians (Gal. 3:1), the kindness of the Philippians (Phil. 4:14), or, as here, by his own expression of deep affection for the Corinthians. At this point in 2 Corinthians, he hardly needs to tell his readers how wide open his heart is towards them, for the word ‘Corinthians’ here would reveal this. As the one through whom they had spiritually come to birth, Paul saw himself as their father. It is as their spiritual father that he now speaks to them affectionately.

These words are not without their pathos, coming as they do after the list of suffering involved in his ministry. Spiritually speaking, the Corinthians owed their all to the apostle. When with them in Corinth, he had not spared himself to bring them to birth in Christ. In his absence and for their nurture he had written four letters. The two which have survived are among his longest works. He had done much good to them and no harm (7:2). As a father loves his child, so the apostle loved the Corinthians.

Paul is not addressing the Corinthians as one whose feelings have been hurt, he is not trying to recover his ego, he has no need to bolster his self-esteem. Paul has spoken from his heart—that is, he has opened before them what makes him tick, his inner motives for ministry. His heart is seen in the depth of his endurance for the gospel. And here he is not attempting to get the Corinthians to like him but is calling them to respond to the heart-evidence before them. They must now understand that his endurance in suffering proves that his ministry is the real thing. His endurance amidst suffering has shown him to be living out the life of Christ in him.

His freedom in appealing to them is the manifestation of a heart that is opened wide in its affection for them. And yet – and here we may feel the pathos – the love that he has shown has been neither received nor reciprocated. So wide is the affection of the apostle that the Corinthians are present within his heart; so narrow the heart of the Corinthians that they have almost no place for him. For the newcomers who bring a false Christ and who take advantage of the Corinthians there is a warm welcome; for the genuine apostle who loves them there is only a cramped, begrudged response.

‘Restrained’ is from *stenochōreō*, which literally means ‘to make narrow’ or ‘to confine.’ Paul had not restrained the Corinthians; he had done nothing to cause any estrangement or hinder the relationship between them. On the contrary, they were self-restrained in their own affections toward him. A number of them had squeezed the apostle out of their lives and closed their hearts to him. They had believed lies about Paul and turned away from him to follow false teachers. As a result, they had left their affection for him. The Corinthians’ rejection hurt Paul deeply. Yet despite that, he never lost his affection for them, because genuine love ‘bears all things’ and ‘endures all things’ (1 Cor. 13:7).

Few things in life are more painful than unrequited love, because love longs for a response. Paul’s plaintive words express the penetrating sadness he felt over the Corinthians’ failure to return his love. Though they broke his heart, Paul’s love for the Corinthians would not allow him to abandon them. Instead, he pleaded with them, using the phrase ‘in a like exchange;’ literally, ‘in an exchange that is exact.’ Paul begged them to love him as he loved them—sacrificially, consistently, and permanently. He could speak to them ‘as to children’ because they were his spiritual children, which made their rejection of him all the more painful.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

B. Purity (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)

At this point there is such a change of tone that many scholars have felt that what follows cannot be part of the same letter but rather an interpolation. This section is not usually denied to Paul, but rather its unity with what has gone before and what follows it is seriously questioned. The change of tone is certainly very noticeable, but it is altogether consistent with Paul's assertion of his deep affection for the Corinthians. After all, real love, as distinct from its sentimentalized imitation, is always deeply concerned for the highest good of its beloved, and that good for God's people is holiness, likeness to Christ.

This passage may have originally been a mini-sermon, which Paul now incorporates within the letter.

The structure of Paul's argument is easy to see and ever so powerful. The command 'Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers' is reiterated again in the middle of his argument in verse 17. And then again it is stated as a general principle in the conclusion (7:1). The call to unyoke ourselves from unbelieving aspirants reverberates with passionate nuance.

1. The Command (6:14a)

¹⁴*Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.*

The opening exhortation is the key to the whole section. All that follows relates back to this negative demand. 'Yoked' is a term associated with animals. It might be used of oxen as they plowed a field in harness. It speaks of a close association or involvement, a partnership of the closest kind. It is a simple metaphor based on Deuteronomy 22:10, which forbade the yoking of an ox and ass together, suggesting that the Christian is a different breed from the unbeliever and is forbidden an improper relationship with him.

First of all Paul gives a very general exhortation, which incorporates a graphic illustration based on Deuteronomy 22:10. At this point in Deuteronomy it forbade the yoking together of an ox and an ass for plowing. This unequal pairing would have been painful and perhaps injurious to the animals and moreover would have produced very poor furrowing. The illustration can hardly be applied to informal contacts not involving significant cooperation. It is sure the kind of relationship that inevitably leads to compromise that Paul has in mind.

'Bound together' translates a participial form of the verb *heterozugeō*, which means, 'to be unequally yoked.' Paul drew his analogy from Deuteronomy 22:10, where the Mosaic Law commanded the Israelites, 'You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.' Those two animals do not have the same nature, gait, or strength. Therefore, it would be impossible for such a mismatched pair to plow together effectively.

2. The Context

Because of our union with the Lord Jesus Christ, we do not belong to the world as we once did (Col. 2:20). We march to a different drum. We live our lives to another agenda. Nevertheless, we still continue to live in the world. If we are in the world and not of it, but committed to bearing testimony to Jesus Christ in it, how close should our relationship to the world be? That is the crucial question.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

a) Marriage and Business

The most obvious application, of course, is to marriage. Paul had already given the Corinthians practical guidance on this in his First Letter (1 Cor. 7), making it clear that any marriage after conversion should only be with a fellow-believer (1 Cor. 7:39). The exhortation here is so general, however, that it will cover other close associations likely to involve compromise.

The problem is the proper relationship of Christians to non-Christians, especially with regard to marriage and business partnerships. None of the Corinthians had been Christians for long. They were comparatively young in the faith. They probably all had unconverted family members. In daily work they rubbed shoulders with unbelieving colleagues. They lived among neighbors and friends who were not Christians. How close to them should their relationship be?

Traditionally, the main application of this passage has been to marriage. That is correct, since we find the same principles established elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:39). To be successful, marriage requires both partners to share their basic interests. For Christians, the most important part of life is their relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Not to be able to share the joys and privileges of that relationship with a marriage partner sows seeds of potential division rather than of unity. The application of ‘yoked,’ however, is wider than marriage. It is unfortunate and unhelpful that we have often limited it to that. We must apply the test to other binding partnerships such as in business and commerce.

a) Worship

There is no call here, as is often claimed, for Christian to separate from Christian for doctrinal or ethical reasons. Neither is Paul requiring a wholesale separation from unbelievers. If a Christian is married to an unbeliever, the believer should not ask for a divorce (1 Cor. 7:12-15). If invited to the home of an unbeliever, he is free to attend (1 Cor. 10:27). Unbelievers were not forbidden to attend the Christian meetings (1 Cor. 14:22-25). Rather, as the rhetorical expansion that follows makes clear, it is a specific and technical association with temple worship that the apostle forbids. For this reason it is doubtful that Paul would agree with Christians today attending inter-faith services with Muslims or Hindus, for example, since that would mean being mis-mated with believers.

b) Church

The command is not (as is commonly thought) an injunction against marrying unbelievers or entering into contractual relationships with non-Christians (though both actions are un-Biblical), but rather a command not to be yoked together with those in the church who oppose the truth—unbelievers in the church.

Nothing in the context would lead to the idea that Paul is referring to earthly issues of human endeavors. In Paul’s analogy, believers and unbelievers are two different breeds and cannot work tougher in the spiritual realm. He called for separation in matters of the work of God, since such cooperation for spiritual benefit is impossible. The false teachers were eager to blend the people of God with the pagan worshipers, because that hinders the gospel. That is what this text forbids.

The reason we must understand ‘unbelievers’ as opponents within the church is that in Paul’s long argument that precedes and follows this command he repeatedly references his opponents in the Corinthian church as to their slanderous attacks on his apostleship (cp., e.g., 2:17; 5:12) as well as their bogus devotion in worshiping health and wealth and in preaching another kind of

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

Jesus (cp. 11:1-4, 13-15, 20). In effect, they are unbelievers because they dis the gospel! Thus, those Corinthians who persist in siding with Paul's opponents will in effect renounce their own salvation, because it was through Paul that they received the message of grace and reconciliation. Therefore to be yoked together in the unbelieving viewpoint of Paul's opponents is in effect to reject the gospel of reconciliation and deny their own authenticity.

Paul was concerned about the enemy within—the unbelieving in the church. And his warning command echoes down the centuries to us: do not be allied with unbelievers as to their teaching or way of life or false worship. This is not a call to split theological hairs, seeing those who disagree with you as 'unbelievers.' But in the context here, we are to dissociate ourselves from complicity with those who would attempt to propagate a false gospel within the church. Specifically, it means to sever the yoke with those who insinuate that reconciliation is not all of God and that we can make peace with God, that the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross is not enough, but rather there are rituals and experiences and works that will make our salvation secure. Today, it means to reject liberal, moralizing theories of the atonement. It means to reject a bootstrap sentimentality that if we do our best we will make it and that good people will find a way. And within the church, it demands that we never allow those who hold such doctrines to be yoked with us in ministry.

This is not a call to give those who would presume to lead and teach the church a pass because they are nice or theologically educated or gifted or related to us or have grown up in the church. Countless churches have fallen from within because godly leaderships have yoked themselves and their congregation with an unbelieving pastor.

3. The Questions (6:14b-16a)

Paul now gives a series of five questions. The presence of so many rhetorical questions in the Bible clearly shows that God addresses us as thinking persons. He challenges us to think through important spiritual issues in the light of His Word.

Five rhetorical questions, set out in balanced pairs, and each requiring a negative reply, are now asked. The point of each question is that God's people are to be distinct and separate from the characteristic beliefs and practices of unbelievers.

For believers to join with unbelievers in a common spiritual effort makes no sense. To demonstrate that reality, Paul makes five rhetorical common-sense contrasts, each in the form of a question that assumes a negative answer.

a) *First Question (6:14b)*

For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?

Intimate partnership with men and women of the world is impossible because of five inevitable tensions. *First*, there is the tension between righteousness and lawlessness. *Metochē* ('partnership') appears only here in the New Testament and is a synonym for the word *koinōnia* ('fellowship'), which appears in the next question. Obviously 'righteousness' and 'lawlessness' (*anomia*) are opposites. Righteousness is obedience to the law of God; lawlessness is rebellion against His holy law. Righteousness characterizes believers because Christ's righteousness has been imputed to them. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are characterized by lawlessness, since that is the nature of unredeemed sinners. The practical outcome of Christians' relationship to the one true and righteous God is that they must be committed to doing what is right, whatever the

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

cost and without argument. Christians are ‘righteousness’ in that they have become ‘the righteousness of God in Christ’ (5:21).

b) Second Question (6:14c)

Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Second, there is a tension between light and darkness. It is self-evident that ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ are mutually exclusive. The first two pairs are very close synonyms, for light and darkness are often used to symbolize righteousness and wickedness (cp. 1 Jn. 1:5-9). Born into God’s family, Christians find God’s light cast upon their path. We see clearly the way God wants us to go if we are to live in harmony with Him. If not born again, however, men and women’s minds are darkened by sin and dominated by the rule of darkness, the devil, as once we were. To expect children of light to work together with the children of darkness is as foolish as to expect it to be both light and dark in the same place at the same time.

c) Third Question (6:15a)

¹⁵*What accord has Christ with Belial?*

Third, there is tension between Christ and Belial. ‘Belial’ is a word found frequently in the Old Testament. Its original meaning was either worthlessness or hopeless ruin. In the period between the Old and New Testaments it became a name for Satan, the devil. Christians, having been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God’s Son (Col. 1:3), are plainly on Christ’s side and opposed to Satan’s works. Men and women of the world, without their knowing it, are under Satan’s dominion.

The first two rhetorical questions focused on the radically different nature possessed by believers (righteousness, light), and unbelievers (lawlessness, darkness). Paul’s third rhetorical question showing mutual exclusivity deals with the leaders of the respective kingdoms. Obviously, there is a fundamental and eternal antagonism between Christ, the ruler of the kingdom of light and righteousness, and Belial, (an ancient name for Satan), the ruler of the kingdom of darkness and lawlessness. ‘Belial’ (*Beliar* in the Greek text) is used only here in the New Testament. The Hebrew phrase ‘sons of Belial’ appears more than a dozen times in the Old Testament. Since ‘harmony’ (*sumphōnēsis*, ‘to agree with’), from which the English word ‘symphony’ derives, between Christ and Satan is impossible, so also is cooperation in spiritual matters between his children and God’s.

Next come Christ and Belial, and this shows us that it is not only character qualities but personal allegiance Paul has in view. To whom do we belong? In the Old Testament, the expression ‘children of Belial’ occurs a number of times (e.g., Dt. 13:13; 1 Sam. 1:16; 2:12; 1 Kgs. 21:10). A study of these passages clearly shows the term to be pejorative, although its exact meaning is uncertain. The most usual view is that ‘Belial’ simply means ‘worthlessness.’ After the end of the Old Testament period the Jews came to employ it as a name for Satan, the supremely worthless one. When a word is given a new application, of course, something of its original sense clings to it still, so Belial was really not a synonym for Satan but a character designation of him.

d) Fourth Question (6:15b)

Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

If ‘Belial’ still had connotations of ‘worthlessness,’ it is no surprise that Paul now refers to a believer and an unbeliever. ‘Wickedness,’ ‘darkness,’ and ‘worthlessness’ might all seem to his readers to be inapplicable to an unbeliever of good character, so it was most important for Paul to go this one step further. An unbeliever, no matter how attractive in character or how upright, is nevertheless on the wrong side of the fence as far as God as concerned.

This question sums up the first three, reinforcing the obvious truth that a believer has no common spiritual ground with an unbeliever. All those who follow in the train of those who rested their trust in God are called ‘believers.’

e) Fifth Question (6:16a)

¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

Finally, there is the tension between God’s temple and idols. Devotion to a divinity in the first century expressed itself in loyalty to the temple or shrine of the god where people worshipped. In First Corinthians, Paul had made it clear that he regarded any compromise with idolatry as quite unacceptable. Indeed, it was unthinkable, for the Christian (1 Cor. 10:14-22). The understanding Christians have of worship is different from that possessed by unconverted men and women.

Paul’s fifth rhetorical question introduces a second reason for believers not to be bound together with unbelievers. All false religion is in the final analysis ‘doctrine of demons’ (1 Tim. 4:1; cp. Dt. 32:17; Rev. 9:20). There can be no agreement between the temple of God and idols. Christianity is incompatible with every form of false religion.

The fifth question is the most critical and it indicates that there is no agreement between the locally gathered church and ‘idols.’ These verses, of themselves do not call either for total separation from the world or for withdrawal from Christians with whom doctrinal differences exist. They all relate to the specific exhortation not to engage in idolatrous meals or services, which apparently (some of) the Corinthians had continued to do.

The five tensions hang together, since they are all aspects of the difference between the once-born and the twice-born. While as Christians we share many things with unbelievers, the things we do not and cannot share make ‘partnership’ impossible without compromise.

4. The Quotations (6:16b-18)

Next, in order to further encourage the Corinthian church to separate from those who opposed Paul, Paul emphasizes two promises that were made as part of Israel’s promised deliverance from bondage (or their second exodus). The two promise were a promise of personal *intimacy* and a promise of personal *adoption*. These promises are bookends and reinforce Paul’s call to separation in verse 17.

Paul follows up on this important thought by giving a catena (a connected selection of passages) from the Old Testament to give extra support to his exhortation.

What looks like a single quotation in verses 16-18 really consists of six single, mutually interpreting Old Testament quotations. Almost without exception, the six generally agreed Old Testament references refer in their respective contexts to God’s promise to restore exiled Israel to their land. While Paul would allow this restoration began its fulfillment with the nation’s return from Babylon, the escalated fulfillment occurred at Christ’s death and resurrection. The

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

point is: The Corinthians were full beneficiaries of the new covenant's deliverance and restoration. And as such, they should pursue separation and holiness.

a) Intimacy (6:16b)

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.*

Having spotlighted the problem, Paul reminds the Corinthians of our new identity as God's temple. The unique privilege and glory of God's temple is His presence. ‘The Lord is there’ (Ez. 48:35). Today believers, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and collectively (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:22) ‘are the temple of the living God.’ The phrase ‘the living God,’ appearing more than two dozen times in Scripture, contrasts Him with the dead idols of false religion. The church, both in regard to individual members and to its life together, is the place of God's presence in the world.

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-17, Paul describes the church of Christ as a temple (cp. Eph. 2:20-22), while later, in 1 Corinthians 6:19, he uses the term ‘temple’ of the individual Christian's body. We can see therefore that this was for him an important illustration related to the Christian lifestyle. He must have regarded worship as a way of life, not simply something Christians did on particular days and at particular times. To worship aright is to orientate my whole life towards God and His glory.

The key exhortation is now undergirded with Old Testament ‘promises’ (see 7:1). God lives in the temple or congregation (1 Cor. 3:16) ‘of the living God’ and ‘walks among’ His people as their God (see Lev. 26:11-12; Hos. 1:10).

In verse 16 Paul argues that the original covenant promise of intimacy with God is now being fulfilled in the Corinthian church. This promise is made up of two promises of intimacy, one from Leviticus 26:11-12 (the Sinai covenant of the first exodus) and one from Ezekiel 37:27 (the new covenant of the second exodus). Thus the Corinthians were direct beneficiaries of intimacy with God that converged on them from the flood of biblical history. The realization of their incredible blessings as heirs of the covenant formula was meant to drive them to separation from sin and to holiness.

The first passage of this catena is very important, for it is a great divine affirmation, expressing the essence of God's special covenant relationship with His people Israel. It looks as if it is a quotation from Leviticus 26:11-12, although various parts of it appear in quite a number of passages, including Exodus 6:7; 25:8; 29:45; 1 Kings 6:13; Jeremiah 32:28; and Ezekiel 37:27. Its frequency suggests that it must have come to mean a great deal to God's people in the Old Testament. It could almost be regarded as a brief summary of Old Testament theology.

b) Separation (6:17a-c)

*¹⁷Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;*

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

Therefore, Paul exhorts, ‘come out from them’ (i.e., the idolaters), ‘be separate,’ and ‘touch no unclean thing’ (i.e., the idols and temples). On the basis of this understanding that God’s people are His temple, Paul issues God’s call to us to be separate. This call to be separate is the call to be different as a result of our new relationship to God. He is holy, and His call to us is to be holy (1 Pe. 1:16). We must recognize what this means regarding marriage, business, and associations. A distinction is to be made between our actions in those situations and in which we find ourselves when we are brought to faith in Christ, and those we enter into once we have become believers. 1 Corinthians 7 makes it plain that if we are already married to a non-Christian when we are converted, we have no grounds for separation from that partner. Rather, we are to aim at winning him or her to the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems right to apply the principle to business too.

The fact that the Corinthians have been graced with the fulfillment of the covenantal promises of personal *intimacy* with God and personal *adoption* by God demands full threefold separation prophetically voice in the restoration text of Isaiah 52:11.

Paul’s next quotation from Isaiah 52:11 (with a short addition from Ezekiel 20:41), is an exhortation to be separate. In its Isaiah context this is generally taken to be a call to leave Babylon and the Ezekiel passage is on the same general theme.

The thought in this verse hearkens back to Isaiah 52 (v. 11). Christians, like Israel at the time of her salvation (cp. Is. 52:7-10), must make a clean break with all false religion to avoid its contaminating influence. It has always been God’s will for His people to be distinct from unbelievers (cp. Lev. 20:24, 26). Strengthening the point that failing to separate from unbelievers is disobedience is the third command in this verse, ‘Do not touch what is unclean.’ ‘Touch’ is from *haptō* and refers to a harmful touch, as in 1 John 5:18. Believers are not to be involved with unclean, false teaching.

c) Adoption (6:17d-18)

...then I will welcome you
¹⁸and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.”

The promise of personal adoption is composed of four separate Old Testament snippets from 2 Samuel 7:14, Isaiah 52:11, Ezekiel 20:34, and Isaiah 43:6—all of which come from contexts freighted with the promise of restoration. Indeed, ‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters’ is the ‘adoption’ formula that is used in Scripture to indicate the covenant relationship between God and His people.

Now comes a wonderful promise, apparently from 2 Samuel 7:14, but interpreted in the light of the verse that precedes it there. Paul probably saw the promise of a house to David as fulfilled in the church, which, through Christ, becomes God’s family (Gal. 3:26-29).

Eisdechomai (‘welcome’), used only here in the New Testament, means ‘to receive,’ or ‘to admit in one’s favor.’ In the Septuagint rendering of Ezekiel 20:34, *eisdechomai* is used to speak of God’s gathering Israel to Himself out of the nations. The idea is that those who separate from unbelievers will find God’s arms open wide to receive them. They will also enjoy the full range of blessings bestowed by their heavenly Father on His ‘sons and daughters.’ Paul probably had in mind 2 Sam. 7:14, where God promised David that He would bless his son Solomon.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

The point is crystal clear: The Corinthians, having been adopted, are heirs of all the promises of the covenant and as such must separate themselves from impurity. As God's children they must separate from those ostensibly yoked to them within the covenant who actually do not belong and are making it unclean.

God calls us to enter fully into our privileges as His children. As we honestly separate ourselves from what we know displeases Him, He promises, 'I will be a father to you.' In other words, we will know the enjoyment of the present benefits of that relationship that is ours in Christ.

5. The Consequence (7:1)

¹Since 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.

To be members of the people of God and even of God's family – here are two wonders of grace to inspire our praise and to lead us to holiness through gratitude! So we are not surprised when the first verse of chapter 7 sums up what Paul has been saying and presses home its challenge.

Having God's 'promises' provides powerful motivation for believers to separate from unbelievers. Paul's use of the word 'therefore' is a call for action based on what he has previously written. Those 'promises' should elicit love, gratitude, and thankfulness for His overwhelming generosity. The endearing 'beloved' defines who God's promises apply to.

By 'promises' Paul means these Old Testament texts as quoted which teach that God lives among His people and that He is their Father. Paul says that we have these promises. This is thought provoking, for all he quotes here were originally made to Israel, not to the Christian church, yet Paul's use of this pronoun must be in reference to the church. So he appears to be assuming that the church inherits promises made to Israel.

Paul defined the appropriate act of gratitude in both negative and positive terms. Negatively, believers must cleanse themselves 'from all defilement of flesh and spirit.' The reflexive pronoun *heatous* ('ourselves') indicates that though the cleansing work is God's, it does not happen apart from believers effort (cp. Phil. 2:12-13). *Molusmos* ('defilement') appears only here in the New Testament. In all three of its Septuagint uses, however, it refers to religious defilement. Paul calls believers not only to cleanse themselves from sin and immorality but especially in this context, from all associations with false religion. That complete cleansing is to be both 'of flesh and spirit;' that is, both inward and outward.

After dealing with the specific issue of ungodly liaisons, he makes an even broader appeal. He calls his readers to general purification, to wholehearted holiness, rather as he was to do a few months later with the Romans (cp. Rom. 12:1-2). The phrase, 'body and spirit,' suggests both outward conduct and inner thought and attitude.

Now having hammered the Corinthians both by the logic of the opening rhetorical questions and then with the covenantal promises of Scripture, Paul drives home his demand. His demand is personal and comprehensive. 'Body and spirit' means everything that impacts the believer's life. The demand is also moral—for progressive moral transformation—'bringing holiness to completion.'

Positively, cleansing oneself from false religion involves 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God.' Perfecting is from *epiteleō*, which means 'to finish,' 'to complete,' or 'to fulfill.' Believers are to pursue the goal of holiness (Lev. 20:26; Mt. 5:48; 1 Pe. 1:16) by separating from all the lies

2 Corinthians – Lesson 9

and deceptions that would defile them, encouraged by the hope that the goal will someday be achieved. Motivating believers' pursuit of holiness is the reverential 'fear of God.'

The word translated 'reverence' is literally 'fear.' This word is perfectly apt in this context. The Christian no longer has fear of condemnation, but he or she reverences God as Father and this motivates them in doing His holy will.

The church as the temple of God, in which He lives, is to be cleansed from any contact with the worship of other gods; the members are to perfect their 'holiness out of reverence to God.' In the first letter Paul taught that, although there are no other gods, nevertheless to engage in the pagan meals is to share in worship of demons. It is separation and purification from this that Paul is calling for here.

Paul's opening command to refuse to be yoked to unbelievers who would lead the church, along with his closing stress upon holiness, comes because he knew that the greatest danger to the church is from within.

Paul's words of encouragement to us stimulate us to perform our duty. Our proper response to God's holiness and promises is to 'cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit.' When we live lives of holiness – of honest and total commitment to God – we demonstrate that we have not received God's grace in vain (6:1)!

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 7:2-16.