

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

A Relational Restriction? Really??

(2 Corinthians 6:14--7:1)

Study #11

Introduction: Life is not a sitcom...

A sitcom is thirty minutes of fun.

Usually there's a little problem, a little conflict, a few laughs thrown in to help make a good story, capped off with a happy resolution. That's the story line whether you're talking about Cheers, Friends, Seinfeld, or The Office.

Well, as you well know, life is not a sitcom. Life presents us with weighty issues that can't always get resolved in a half an hour. And we won't pretend that the issue Scripture raises this morning will get all tied up in a nice, neat little bow before we leave, either. (Turns out that church isn't a sitcom, either, all appearances to the contrary, on occasion, notwithstanding.)

At Northwest, we champion the value of deep and genuine, transparent and vulnerable, bonded and intimate relationships.

Our church Mission Statement even affirms that we intend to be all about *"the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships."*

The Apostle Paul's teachings are filled with similar thoughts. He was clearly committed to the idea that God's life-changing power is unleashed in great relationships.

Today, though, the message I'm bringing revolves around a recommended relational restriction. You might find that curious...

Today we are dealing with the nature of the relationships believers in Jesus are to sustain with those who are not believers in Jesus. And Paul says some things that might strike you as funny, or as odd - or worse.

We're diving into the practical deep end of the Christian pool today. We're going to deal forthrightly with what the Bible teaches. I'm not going to stutter or apologize or try to explain away what the Bible says. I'll shoot straight with you.

And I'll ask you to join me in a heart and soul wrestling match with what it says and join me in thinking through a challenging passage that contains challenging content.

This morning, Scripture leads us down the unusual path of putting limits on certain relationships, and we'll explore the WHY's and the WHEREFORE's of those limitations together.

You just might find the words that launch our passage somewhat jarring.

The "Ties that Bind" Can Become Bonds that Tangle (6:14-16)

A Relational Line to NOT Cross (v.14a)

[14a] Do not be bound together with unbelievers¹

The agricultural practice

The word we translate here *"bound together"* referred to the arrangement of animals tasked with pulling a plow.

¹ So, why would Paul have spoken about the need for avoiding entangling and defiling relationships here? Some have suggested that these verses before us are nothing more than a digression. He spoke to the need of the Corinthians, knowing that they battled against this problem of being contaminated by the world. A better explanation, I believe, is that being free from "bonded" relationships with those who do not know Jesus actually frees the Christian to bring the message of reconciliation more powerfully.

The word picture Paul paints would have been familiar to people living in a first century agrarian society. Everyone knew what it was for two animals to work side by side under a double yoke as they plowed a field to prepare for planting.

However, everyone in Corinth might not have been familiar with what Moses had written in the Law about plowing with a mixed team.

[Deuteronomy 22:10] You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

A long time ago I read an account written by Ray Stedman about his travels through the Middle East. He watched as a farmer plowed a field with a team consisting of a donkey and a camel. Presumably, these were the animals he had on hand, so he used them to plow - but that's a sad pairing!

It was a bit tedious for the camel, who had to slow down a little bit while he was paired with the donkey. But the smaller donkey had to run frantically to keep up at all, or risk being dragged along. And all the while the donkey was being beaten by its owner because it wasn't ever quite able to maintain the camel's pace.

The problem, of course, was that an unequal pairing like this was a recipe for disaster.

Whenever there is unequal yoking in the world of animals, there are problems. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, tells believers in Jesus that they are not to be ***“bound together with”*** (literally ***“unequally yoked with”***) those who don't believe in Jesus.

What is a “yoked” relationship?

Now, before we go any farther, I'd like to suggest a couple of characteristics of a *yoked* relationship.

When two animals in the field are yoked behind a plow, neither one is free to leave the yoke, and neither one is free to do what they want to do or go where they want to go independent of their partner.

So, on the one hand, a yoked relationship is one that is not easily broken (maybe even permanent). And on the other hand, a yoked relationship is one that makes independent action difficult (if not impossible).

Whenever we see a human relationship with these two traits - permanent and dependent - we are looking at the kind of relationship Paul has in mind in 2 Corinthians 6.

He says that someone who believes in Jesus is not to be in a “yoked” relationship with someone who does not believe in Jesus.

Getting Specific...

Somewhat maddeningly, Paul doesn't stop here to apply what he writes. He puts the comment out there and it just sort of reverberates in our minds.

He doesn't draw hard lines and tell us what constitutes a yoked relationship and what doesn't. This is one of those places where I would have loved for him to have given a bit more detailed set of instructions.

But if he was not completely specific here, we can find other places where he does clearly apply the idea of not being “unequally yoked.”

One *for instance* is found in 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul addressed himself to various marriage issues.

As part of a laundry list of marriage tips, he wrote, ***[1 Corinthians 7:39] A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.***

This - along with a few other comments elsewhere in the New Testament - lets us know that a believer in Jesus should only marry another believer in Jesus. If a believing man or woman marries someone who does not believe in Jesus, the believer is choosing an unequal yoke.

A marriage relationship is a permanent bond. In a marriage one simply cannot do whatever one wishes - marriage forces people to think like a couple.

So, marriage fits the definition of a bonded relationship. Other relationships - like a business partnership - could fit the definition, too. And you might be able to think of other types of relationships that match Paul's warning.

Upon hearing this restriction you might be tempted to wonder why...

Some people - maybe you - might hear this and think it sounds cold-hearted, superior, and prejudiced, to say nothing of old-fashioned and closed-minded!

OK. Paul follows up the command with a three-pronged set of reasons for this relational restriction, starting out with a series of rhetorical questions.

Why the Line? (vv. 14b-16)

Life in Jesus, or not (vv. 14b-15)

[14b] for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? [15] Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?²

In these four couplets we find pairs that don't mix. Like camels and donkeys or oil and water, light and darkness don't mix. Christ and Belial (the term refers to Satan) don't hold hands.

Paul's punch line is, "***what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?***"

To which any of us might say, "*Well, Paul, obviously, believers have a lot in common with unbelievers!*"

² Or, as Eugene Peterson has it in *The Message*, "*Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands?*"

We work the same jobs, use the same currency, eat the same kinds of food, wear the same styles of clothing, have similar haircuts, avail ourselves of the same media, breathe the same air, log on to the same Internet, live under the same government, get the same illnesses, and drive the same cars.

It's not as if we Christians and unbelievers live on different planets!

But these are not the things Paul has in mind when he draws attention to the distinctive between the believer and the non-believer.

No, he is referring to the things which are at the heart of life, not the things on the periphery. He's talking about those issues that touch the core of who we are, not the crust.

Things like the following...

- The believer in Jesus has been touched by the grace of God. So, he has a soft spot in his heart for Jesus, who lavished grace on him. Someone who hasn't put his trust in Jesus hasn't tasted God's grace and so has no such soft spot for Christ.
- The believer in Jesus is looking forward to Heaven and an eternity in the presence of God. The non-believer has no such hope.
- The believer is a child of God. The non-believer is not a child of God.
- And on and on and on we could go...

Paul is affirming that the ultimate division between people is not demographics. It is faith and spiritual realities.

The dividing line between those who believe in Jesus and those who don't is not one of moral superiority or having-it-all-togetherness or anything like that. It is simply and fundamentally that one is a child of God and the other isn't.

You may have read, as I have, Civil War stories in which brothers found themselves on opposite sides in the conflict, North and South.

Each brother was always fearful that he would run into his brother on the battlefield and would have to choose between loyalties.

That is the conflict a believer in Jesus faces every day when he or she is a “yoked” relationship with someone who doesn’t believe in Jesus.

There is always a gnawing, nagging fear that someday loyalties will clash. They walk a constant tightrope and there is no FREEDOM.

That is one reason why we should avoid yoked relationships with those who don’t know Jesus. But Paul isn’t done. Let’s listen as he continues to build a case for avoiding unequal yoking.

Temple of God, or not (v. 16)

[16] Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.”

Paul quotes the Jewish Bible here, what we call the Old Testament. The Jewish faith has always said that idolatry - the worship of anything other than God - is wrong. Don’t bring false gods into the true God’s Temple!

Sadly, and despite the command, idolatry was a recurring problem for the Jews throughout much of their history. But, when Paul mentions the “temple of God” here, he is not thinking of the Temple at Jerusalem.

By definition, a “temple” is a place in which God dwells. And one of the wonders of life in Christ is that we, believers in Jesus, are temples. God dwells in us! You - a believer in Jesus - are God’s holy Temple!³

God Himself dwells in the life of the individual believer. But what happens when there is an unequal yoking between a believer and an unbeliever?

Let’s take marriage as an example.

When two believers are yoked in marriage, God is brought powerfully into the middle of that one-flesh relationship. In fact, one of the glorious things about Christian marriage is that they can truly have a home where Jesus is Lord. They can experience intimacy at every level - the physical and sexual, the emotional, and the spiritual.

However, when a believer in Jesus marries someone who does not believe in Jesus, God is in the life of one partner, but not in the life of the other.

God doesn’t for one moment withdraw Himself from the life of the Christian. But He can’t be in the middle of the marriage, because the unbelieving spouse hasn’t tasted Christ’s love and forgiveness.

And let’s make no mistake about it. God intends to be at the heart of every marriage into which His son or daughter enters! In fact, He intends to be at the heart of every **BONDED** relationship we enter.

And that is reason #2 for not entering into an unequal yoke. God will not be the center of the relationship. He can’t be if He is not in the lives of both partners.

Paul offers yet one more reason to avoid the unequal yoke as he brings in another quote from the Old Testament.

Intimacy with God, or not (vv. 17-18)

[17] Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,” says the Lord.

“AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.”⁴

[18] “And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” Says the Lord Almighty.

³ Peter calls us, individually, “*living stones*” who make up God’s temple (see 1 Peter 2:5ff; also Ephesians 2:20ff).

⁴ Note that in the previous passage (6:11-13), Paul has urged the Corinthians to welcome him (“open wide to us”). Now he assures us that if we will pursue holiness we will find God welcoming us.

These words are a rough paraphrase of God's words to His people, recorded in Isaiah 52:11. The Lord was speaking to the Jewish priests as they prepared to leave the land of Babylon at the end of the seventy years of captivity.

He is inviting them to leave Babylon and all it represented - idolatry, immorality, violence - and as they returned to the land of Palestine also return to Him with all their hearts.

The promise was that leaving all of that would free Him, the Lord, to welcome them with open arms. They would experience spiritual intimacy with God as they separated themselves from the evil stuff of Babylon.

The message to the Corinthians (and to us) is not that people who don't know Jesus are unclean! Let's be real clear about that!!

The message is that the society in which we live is "Babylon-ish". There is just as much moral pollution - idolatry, immorality, violence - in our culture as there was in the land those Old Testament Jews were leaving.

And we need to do everything we can to avoid the pollution of our culture. Paul's point is that entering into bonded/yoked relationships with people who don't believe in Jesus will not help, but will actually hinder, our attempts to lead holy lives.

The bonded/yoked relationships to nurture if you want to lead the kind of life God is thrilled with are the ones with others who believe in Jesus!

That is because a fellow believer will encourage you and admonish you and support you and pray for you and help you in your pursuit of holiness. And the promise God made to the ancient Jews - intimacy with Himself - is the same promise God makes to us, His children today.

It is certainly NOT that we become more or less His children by our behavior.

Once anyone places trust in Jesus, that person becomes a child of God and can no more become anything other than His child than your child could become anything other than your child!

BUT, if we give to God our unalloyed loyalty and separate ourselves from the pollution that is all around us, we will experience intimacy with God - in the same way that our relationships with our children are enriched when they live as we direct them.

And Paul's final word is a summary call to a grace-motivated, God-honoring life.

Freed to the Passionate Pursuit of Holiness (7:1)⁵

*[7:1] Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*⁶

Affirming his love for them and highlighting the logical side, ("*Therefore*") Paul says that we should make a clean break with every form of defilement. That defilement might have to do with unequal yoking and it might not.

But, anything in our lives that is inconsistent with the presence of God is to be one away with. Any relationship that nourishes the growth of something other than what we are - a son or a daughter of God - is to be gone. Whatever is dirty in our lives is to be cleaned up.

Again, why? Because God has given us such great promises. In light of all that God has promised us - and done for us! - we give ourselves to become what He calls us to become: HOLY!

⁵ And that thought brings us to one of the least appropriate chapter divisions in Scripture! It occurs after 6:18 but is actually a conclusion to the thought of vv. 14-18. You should know that the chapters and verse divisions were not part of the original writings, but were added later by helpful scribes. In this case, it wasn't quite so helpful.

⁶ For similar thoughts, see Romans 6:13; Hebrews 6:1; especially Romans 8:13 where Paul says that if we are putting to death the deeds of the body, we will live.

Conclusion:

Now, the point of what Paul has written is pretty clear. Believers in Jesus are to refrain from entering into “bonded” relationships with people who don’t believe in Jesus.

BUT, applying this teaching could go in a very dangerous direction. So please consider the following as supplemental ideas to consider alongside what we have seen in this passage so far today.

First, what do these words say to us about relating to those without Christ, generally?

“Friending” the people Jesus misses most

There can be no question about this. Paul wanted all believers in Jesus to have good and healthy relationships with people who don’t believe in Jesus (Take a look at 1 Corinthians 5:9ff).

Since “friend” has recently become a verb as well as a noun, we who know Jesus are to “friend” those who don’t.

Paul certainly had non-stop, personal contact with the un-believing world, and so did Jesus! And they both hung with people who were far from God because they loved them.

However, in the church’s past, this particular passage has been one of the most abused, misunderstood and mis-applied texts in the whole New Testament (so Ray Stedman). It has been used to justify a kind of evangelical monasticism and an isolation from the world God so loves.

We who believe in Jesus must live in close contact with folks outside of Christ because that is the only way we can ever hope to introduce them to our Jesus.⁷

⁷ [1 Corinthians 5:9] I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; [10] I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. [11] But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called

This morning I’d like for us each to ask ourselves a couple of potentially challenging questions:

- Am I guilty of retreating so far into a Christian sub-culture that I have few unbelieving friends?
- Have I gotten so wrapped up in Christian things or church stuff that I’m not available to be salt and light to those Jesus misses the most?

If you said yes to either of those two questions, then change is in order. If you are so busy that you can’t or haven’t taken the time and energy to develop relationships with those outside, what steps will you take THIS WEEK to make room for healthy, God-honoring relationships with people for whom Christ died?

As we wrap up this morning, I want to highlight that there is a tremendous redemptive rationale for all that Paul has to say here about avoiding yoked relationships with those outside the faith.

“Unyoking” to REALLY Love⁸

Please notice that in the context in which this passage occurs Paul has been talking about the glory of “*the ministry of reconciliation.*”

Far from being a cold hard statement of rejection of those who don’t know Christ, Paul’s words are better understood as marking out the road to travel IF we would most effectively bring the message of the Gospel to them.

We might be tempted to think that it is a matter of no consequence, spiritually speaking, who we link up with in the most intimate of life’s relationships, be it dating, marriage, business, etc...

brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

⁸ The passage only explicitly mentions personal holiness as the rationale for avoiding unequal yoking. However, in the broader context of the book as a whole, it seems reasonable to include the thought that holiness makes us more powerful messengers of the New Covenant.

The Bible says, “*It does so, too, matter!*” Paul says that our relationships either help or hinder our efforts to follow Christ and to become sharp, effective tools in His service.

So, his counsel to us here is not to put a restraint on us, but to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. (1 Cor. 7:35) And so, as a part of becoming the sharpest tool we possibly can be, he urges us to avoid being “bonded” with the people we are trying to reach for Jesus.

“Friending” while at the same time wisely “unyoking” frees us up to:

- be wholly devoted to the Lord;
- enjoy the richness of God’s blessings; and
- most powerfully impact people with the life-changing message of the Gospel.

Bottom line: Growing in undistracted devotion to the Lord by avoiding “bonded” relationships that could derail our focus on Jesus actually equips us to better serve the very people we long to see enter into a relationship with Him!